

Senegal Overview

- [Environment](#)
- [Peoples](#)
- [History](#)
- [Governance](#)
- [Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples](#)

Environment

Senegal, continental Africa's western-most country, has a 600-kilometre long coastline on the Atlantic Ocean. It borders Guinea-Bissau and Guinea in the south, Mali in the east, and Mauritania in the north. The thin sliver of The Gambia follows the river of the same name, nearly dividing Senegal the northern two-thirds of Senegal from its southern third. Tropical forests and mangroves in southern Senegal transition to savanna grasslands and then arid Sahel in the north. Senegal is an exporter of peanuts and other agricultural products, and has some mineral resources, notably phosphates.

Peoples

Main languages: French (official), Wolof, Serer, Pulaar, Diola (Jola), Mandinka, Soninké.

Main religions: Islam (94%), Christianity, mostly Roman Catholicism (4%), traditional beliefs (2%).

Main minority groups: Peulh and Toucouleur 3 million (23.8%), Serer 1.8 million (14.7%), Diola (Jola) 463,000 (3.7%), Mandinka 375,000 (3%), Soninke 137,500 (1.1%), European and Lebanese 125,000 (1%), other 1.2 million (9.4%).

[Note: Data on religious demography comes from US CIRF, 2007. Data on ethnicity comes from the CIA World Factbook, 2007, with exception of that for Bassari, which comes from Ethnologue, 2002. Percentages are converted to numbers using the CIA's 2007 estimate for total population: 12.5 million.]

The majority ethnic group is the Wolof, comprising nearly 44 per cent of the total population. Although French is the official language, it is generally only spoken by the educated elite. Wolof is the language most widely spoken, even by non-Wolof. Traditionally, Wolof are sedentary farmers, perhaps the descendants of people dispersed after the fall of the Ghana Empire (centred in present-day Mali) in the 11th century. They are concentrated along the coast in the northern part of Senegal. Most are Muslim.

Serer are concentrated in western Senegal and traditionally have farmed millet, rice and other agricultural products. Beyond their own language, many Serer also speak Wolof. Many are Roman Catholic.

The Peulh are concentrated in the more arid north and are traditionally pastoralists. A sub-group, the Toucouleur, are settled agriculturalists living primarily in the Senegal River valley of the north. Both

groups speak Pulaar, although the Toucouleur speak a distinct dialect. Most Peulh and Toucouleur are Muslim, but some practice traditional beliefs or a syncretic mix of the two.

The [Diola](#) (Jola) are concentrated in the southern, forested Senegalese region of Casamance.

The Bassari are a numerically small ethnic group of around 8,800 concentrated in south-eastern Senegal, in addition to populations across the border in north-eastern Guinea, Bassari are more closely linked to groups in Guinea's rainforest than with Muslims of the savanna. They are primarily hunters and gatherers with only limited cultivation and no pastoralism. Due to the isolation of their villages, Bassari were generally afforded protection from slave raiders, mainly the Peulh. Until recently Bassari maintained their traditional religious and decentralized political systems, with an isolationist attitude towards their stronger, centralized Muslim neighbours.

Lebanese make up less than one per cent of the population. Migrants from Lebanon and Syria (both are called Lebanese locally) began to arrive in West Africa, including Senegal, in the late nineteenth century. This flow grew rapidly between the two World Wars when Lebanon was under French domination, and there was another influx beginning in 1975 due to Lebanon's civil war. They established themselves as merchants and later diversified into real estate, transportation and light industry. Lebanese have historically preferred to export their earnings rather than invest in Senegal, causing friction between the government and the Lebanese community. Unlike some West African countries, Senegal allows Lebanese to obtain citizenship.

History

Senegal has been inhabited by humans for many thousands of years. In around 800 C.E., there was an influx of Peuhl nobility from the east who established the kingdom of Tekrour. Almoravids entered the region from the north in the 11th century and converted the Tekrour king to Islam. The Tekrour kingdom was a rival to the Soninké based Ghana Empire to its east, centred in today's Mali. The Tekrour and Almoravids joined forces to hobble the Ghana Empire, but the Almoravids withdrew and the Tekrour kingdom went into decline. The Mandinka-based Mali Empire flourished in the 13th and 14th centuries. A former vassal state of the Mali Empire, Waalo, expanded into the Jolof Empire in the 13th century. It encompassed Wolof and Serer lands in today's western Senegal and Gambia, developing an intricate caste-based political system.

The Portuguese explorers were the first Europeans to make contact with Senegal in the 15th century, soon followed by Portuguese, Dutch and French traders. An extensive slave trade ensued, and imported European guns sharpened conflicts between rival kingdoms; food production suffered, resulting in occasional famines. France sent most slaves from Senegambia to its Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti) in the 18th century. Although slavery was banned in 1848, France continued to pursue domination of Senegal and its exploitation for such cash crops as peanuts. It consciously sought to destroy the north-south trade that supported the African kingdoms, and toppled the Wolof and Serer states in the mid-19th century.

France established the political centre of French West Africa at Dakar and began building rail links that would make it the commercial hub of the French territories in the region. Many Senegalese took positions in the civil service of the French colonies, and some were granted French citizenship. Nevertheless, French rule faced strong resistance throughout Senegal, particularly in the southern Casamance region, where rebellions continued into the 1920s. Paris granted large peanut plantations to Islamic clerics, the leaders of Islamic Brotherhoods, in order to secure their loyalty.

In 1959 Senegal was joined with the République Soudannaise (present-day Mali) to form the Mali Federation, and it is this entity that became independent from France on 20 June 1960. Senegal seceded from the Federation exactly two months later and Léopold Sédar Senghor was elected president.

Senghor, a Serer and a Catholic, was one of the most acclaimed poets in the French language in the 20th century. He espoused African socialism and maintained close relationships with the powerful Islamic Brotherhoods and with France. Senghor was slow to transfer civil service jobs from French to African administrators, and the French population in Senegal actually increased after independence. Senghor instituted a one-party state under his Socialist Party, but was able to maintain political stability, in large measure through economic stability. Until 1967, France bought Senegal's entire peanut crop at fixed prices. Discontent rose when the subsidies were curtailed, drought hit the Sahel in the late 1960s and into the 1970s, and world oil prices climbed. Senghor's popularity waned as he opposed land reform that would threaten the peanut plantations of his backers in the Islamic Brotherhoods. His brilliance as a poet did not extend to economics, and various development schemes resulted in failure and mounting debt. As dissent to his government grew in the early 1970s, Senghor became increasingly authoritarian. However, in 1976 he changed course and established a new, limited multi-party system. He then resigned in 1980, the first leader in Africa's era of independence to yield power voluntarily.

Senghor's hand-picked successor was Abdou Diouf, of Serer and Peulh descent. Diouf liberalized the economy and introduced a full multi-party system. He was elected in his own right in 1983, then re-elected in fraudulent elections in 1988 and 1993. In 1994 he devalued the currency by 50 per cent, leading to economic pain for many Senegalese and unrest.

In 2000, longtime opposition leader and presidential candidate Abdoulaye Wade, a Wolof, defeated Diouf in free and fair elections. Diouf accepted his defeat and Wade and his Senegalese Democratic Party ended 40 years of rule by the Socialist Party.

Governance

Under its new president, Abdoulaye Wade, Senegal passed a new constitution by referendum in January 2001. The presidential term was shortened from seven to five years (effective 2007) and a maximum limit of two terms established. For the first time, women were also allowed to own land. Senegal has a bicameral parliament consisting of a 150-seat National Assembly and a 100-seat Senate. In the latter, the 35 members are elected and 65 are appointed by the president.

Wade was re-elected in February 2007 with 56 per cent of the vote in the first round. He defeated Idrissa Seck, among others. Seck was Wade's prime minister until he was dismissed in 2004 amid corruption allegations. In 2005 Senegal's High Court of Justice dismissed additional charges that Seck had threatened national security. In 2006, Wade attempted to disqualify Seck from the presidential race due to the remaining corruption charges. In Senegal it is widely believed that the charges were politically motivated, as Seck was Wade's greatest political rival.

Generally, Senegal's political stability has continued. It is one of the few country's in sub-Saharan Africa that has avoided coups and military dictatorships. The Sufi clerics of the Muslim Brotherhoods retain deep influence over Senegalese politics and the economy.

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

With exception of the long-running, low-level conflict in Casamance, Senegal remains a country largely devoid of ethnic or religious tension ([see page on Diola in Casamance](#)).