An interview with his excellency President Macky Sall of Senegal
The Dakar-Abuja axis forms a central pivot around which major articulations of the ECOWAS integration process radiate. The 2019 Tony Elumelu Foundation, entrepreneurship forum themed Empowering African Entrepreneurs, which held in Abuja last week gathered over 5000, policymakers, and business leaders and diplomatic agencies.

On this rare occasion, the foundation hosted 4 African presidents to a dialogue moderated by CNN’s Fareed Zakaria. In this exclusive interview with his excellency, President Macky Sall of Senegal, Patrick Atuanya Editor of BusinessDay and Lehle Balde Senior Associate BusinessDay had the opportunity to chat with the president of Senegal and ECOWAS member state, on the ACFTA, financial inclusion, youth empowerment, Senegal-Nigeria relations, the economic relationship many French colonies have with France, the newly discovered oil and gas reserves and much more.
Q: The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) will cover a market of 1.2 billion people and a gross domestic product (GDP) of $2.5 trillion, across all 55-member States of the African Union. In terms of numbers of participating countries, AfCFTA will be the world’s largest free trade area since the formation of the World Trade Organization. What has Senegal’s role been in this monumental trade agreement?

A: Senegal has held its place during the processes leading to the advent of this historic act, thus confirming our commitment to the achievement of African integration. The Continental Free Trade Area will give, as I recalled at the Niamey Summit, a new impetus to intra-African trade in terms of business opportunities and investment for the private sector and job creation for African youth. Already, during the Dakar Regional Forum on the AfCFTA-West and Central Africa, the Government of Senegal, in collaboration with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UN/ECA), the Commission of the African Union and the European Union, has worked to create a space for regional and multi-stakeholder dialogue on all the issues related to the implementation of the zone in the French-speaking States of ECOWAS and CEEAC. I must commend the leadership of President Paul Kagame of Rwanda in leading the African Union's important reform agenda to ensure that it responds better to its missions. Similarly, President Mahamadou Issoufou of Niger successfully led negotiations for the creation of the African Continental Free Trade Area, which gives new impetus to the objective of African integration through investment trade and which was launched at the beginning of July this year. Today, it is time to move forward with the implementation of this Agreement and its additional protocols, and Senegal will not be left behind in this regard.

Q: You were re-elected in 2019. Congratulations! We are now 3 months into your second term. In what state would you say Senegal is currently and what can the Senegalese people expect in the next 5 years?

A: My re-election in the first round with more than 58% of the votes cast, on 24 February 2019, bears the stamp of a record rich in achievements throughout the country that the Senegalese people have positively sanctioned. It is also an expression of hope, a call to consolidate Senegal's transformation and to amplify the good performances achieved between 2012 and 2019. For seven years, we have worked to restore our country, to restore socio-economic balances, territorial equity and social justice; thus, reflecting my ambition of a Senegal of all, a Senegal for all. Today, Senegal is in a better state than it was in 2012, thanks to the implementation of the Emerging Senegal Plan, a unique public policy framework.
Naturally, beyond the strengthening of governance achievements, the reforms and strategic choices implemented aim to broaden and strengthen Senegal's productive capacities and universal access for populations to water, sanitation, electrification, collective mobility, health, sports, culture and education. Moreover, in its Phase II, the Emerging Senegal Plan is being implemented through 5 major initiatives that will enable us to better prepare Senegal for the future, all of which are responses to the challenges of our time and the challenges of human modernity. I am referring to the employment of young Senegalese through the promotion and development of entrepreneurship, the social and solidarity economy for the empowerment of Senegalese women, the strengthening of human capital with a view to the trade skills and competences of the future, the reforestation of the territory to face climate change and improve the living conditions of Senegalese people, industrialization with greater involvement of the national and international private sector in terms of productive investment.

Q: Since 2012 you have managed to attract billions of dollars in investment, including from China, for your Emerging Senegal Plan and overseen average annual growth of about 6 percent? In your view, what is the key to effective governance?

A: It is the choice of transparency and my determination to promote a new culture, that of sober and virtuous governance driven by the fight against corruption and all the scourges that could compromise the business environment. It is also an illustration of Senegal's great tradition of cooperation, marked by the security of transactions and the stability of relations. My vision of an emerging Senegal is supported and shared by the partners who support us in achieving our ambition. It is implemented through projects that contain all the guarantees in terms of diligent execution, economic profitability, and social utility. The first generation of reforms of the ESP has supported the growth of more than 6% of the Senegalese economy for more than three consecutive years. The effectiveness of our governance, the stability of our democratic system and the massive investment in infrastructures are real "magnets" for foreign direct investment, which is now very diversified, with a breakthrough by the People's Republic of China, which has chosen to make Senegal a reference partner, given its comparative advantages and its geographical position.
Q: What have been the biggest challenges in developing your emerging Senegal vision and executing the Emerging Senegal Plan (ESP)?

A: The first challenge was consensus. The ESP addressed that challenge by taking into account all the strategic documents whose objective was to propose a logical framework for building Senegal’s development and drew a rich and useful synthesis. Then the other challenge is the pursuit of good governance, governance that is both sober and virtuous, which puts the interests of our country first. At the same time, we also needed to build confidence among Senegalese people about our ability and determination to reform Senegal with them, to enable it to regain productivity and competitiveness, and to restore confidence among technical, financial and private sector partners. We have rationalized public spending by increasing its efficiency. Thus, beyond economic imperatives, my vision of an emerging Senegal is supported by programs with a strong social impact, such as the Emergency Community Development Programme (PUDC), the national family security scholarship program, which has enabled 400,000 households to benefit from a quarterly allocation of CFAF 25,000 (approximately USD 50), universal health coverage (CMU) and the emergency program for the modernization of Senegalese access borders (PUMA). This territorial approach to public policies remains, in my opinion, for Senegal and Africa, a development model for creating the conditions for shared economic prosperity, collective development and social justice in both rural and urban areas. Today, this is an approach that Senegalese have made their own and from which they expect a lot, given their impatient demands.

Q: With the discovery of oil and gas reserves in Senegal, how prepared is Senegal for this potentially game-changing new revenue-generating economy that could also be disruptive for the Senegalese people? Do you have any concerns?

A: The Government of Senegal, under my leadership, has been proactive and diligent in this regard. Today, Senegal has the advantage of having taken, well before the discoveries were announced, the useful and relevant measures to make the oil sector a reference model in terms of governance and transparency by joining, on my decision, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. In Senegal, natural resources belong to the people and not to the State. I had it enshrined in the Senegalese Constitution following the referendum in March 2016. I have also created a Strategic Orientation Committee on Oil and Gas Issues (COS-Petrogaz) composed of representatives of all the institutions of the Republic, actors in the sector and which will welcome members of the opposition and civil society.
I proposed a law which was passed to allow national companies to benefit from the exploitation phase. The oil code has been revised to adapt it to the new Senegalese context with new provisions that better protect the country's interests. The resources derived from oil and gas will be used to finance Senegal's socio-economic development and a significant part of those resources will be reserved for future generations, within the framework of an income distribution law. This is the integrity and governance framework for the sector. I have given the Government of Senegal all the instructions required to build a well-functioning oil economy and a viable ecosystem that will be based on the National Oil and Gas Institute that I have created. Best practices are being tested and the first results promise good prospects for leading us to emergence before 2035. I am also very pleased with the cooperation between Senegal and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. With these discoveries, on both sides of our border, we have been able, based on good neighbor relations and the shared destiny of our two peoples, to build an intelligent partnership for the exploitation of these resources. Everyone knows that in Africa, border and resource exploitation issues are essential sources of conflict. Our two countries have joined forces, in partnership with BP, to ensure that the resources straddling this area are an additional link, in addition to the multifaceted and centuries-old relations that unite us, since Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, and Guinea have been jointly exploiting the Senegal River basin for several years through the Organization for the Development of the Senegal River. These examples of partnerships in Africa are to be welcomed.

Q: Senegal is widely considered to have always had a stable democracy in a region plagued by military coups, civil wars, and ethnic conflicts. It's been considered an “exception” in West Africa. Can you speak to how this has been achieved? What can other African neighbors adopt from this unique Senegalese democracy?

A: Senegal is an old democracy. We have been voting since 1848 under colonial rule, particularly in the municipalities of Gorée, Dakar, Rufisque, and Saint-Louis whose citizens were considered French nationals. The integral multiparty system is a living reality in Senegal since 1974, with its virtues and excesses. We are one and the same people. Senegal has experienced two peaceful democratic changes thanks to the maturity of the people, in a calm and transparent manner. Democratic expression is plural; there is no threat to individual freedoms and institutions function democratically. Our experience is based on the acceptance of the rules of the democratic game, electoral competition and the quality of our electoral system, which can certainly be improved, but has proven its worth. In addition, Senegal is a country of dialogue and I have established dialogue and consultation as a mode of governance to prevent conflicts and to keep together the democratic promise alive.
Q: Senegal features a broad and diverse financial landscape, in which people tend to use a combination of different financial institutions, both formal and informal, digital and non-digital. What is your plan to bridge the financial inclusion gap in Senegal?

A: Financial inclusion is a political imperative as part of my vision of a Senegal of all and a Senegal for all. It is at the heart of our economic system and from this point of view, there can be no Senegalese excluded from the traditional financing system. Senegal’s development integrates all components of society and more particularly rural populations. And I have chosen to focus on the social and solidarity economy by creating decentralized financing mechanisms that have made it possible to completely change the national economy. Today, in Senegal, we are talking about solidarity economy and innovative financing to support economic activity through the Delegation for the Rapid Entrepreneurship of Women and Youth. Through the combination of the development of digital technologies and access to finance for young people and women, Senegal is winning the battle for its development through entrepreneurship, which is recognized as essential to the dynamics of growth and job creation.

Q: How can Senegal and Nigeria work together and expand the trade, economic relations and investment in roads, transports, agriculture’s, energy and high-tech education within the member states?

The Dakar-Abuja axis forms a central pivot around which major articulations of the community integration process radiate. Strengthening our cooperation in all areas and integrating our major infrastructure, education, health, energy, and other projects is an absolute necessity, especially in the perspective of the African common market. The competitiveness of our sub-region in the wider Africa region requires a convergence of our priorities and economic choices.

Q: France has been holding a great percentage of the national reserves of fourteen African countries since 1961: Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon. Many find this to be a cause for concern. What are your thoughts on this?

We have a long tradition of partnership with France and, in view of these historical ties, some people have the impression that France is taking over the Senegalese economy. This is not the case. France is a privileged partner. There is no French exclusivity in Senegal. Our country is open to all partnerships if they are mutually beneficial. China, Turkey, India, Malaysia, Brazil and the United States of America are all partners with whom we maintain friendly cooperation with quite a few concrete achievements. And this cooperation has not affected our relationship with France.
Q: ECOWAS Heads of State have agreed to adopt the “ECO” as the new common currency from 2020. Some critics say that it is still the “CFA” under a different name! Would you enlighten our readers on what will be the real advantages of this new currency?

In the context of globalization, African economies are expected to undergo extremely important changes. In the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) region, the coexistence of several currencies could constitute an obstacle to the development of intra-country trade. The CFA (Communauté Financière d’Afrique) currency has a singular history, as a link between France and its former colonies in West and Central Africa. The regional integration process can easily be accommodated in a common currency in accordance with the convergence criteria. It is not about creating a currency just because it must be created. The CFA, its fixed parity and convertibility are parameters to be considered in order to move to a common currency in a wider area, as we are already doing within WAEMU (West African Economic and Monetary Union) with bold policies to meet the convergence criteria and deadlines, which I consider essential.

Q: Finally, what is your vision and hope for the Senegalese youth who constitute the majority of the population

As part of the political initiative called Emerging Senegal Plan / Youth Priority 2035, I have chosen to invest in the future through education and training, employment and entrepreneurship, health and sport as mechanisms for social inclusion, creativity, culture, and citizenship. This means that the Senegalese youth is an absolute priority in the implementation of public policies. As such, education, vocational training and employment are the markers of my youth policy. Between 2012 and 2018, the Public Administration and the private sector created more than 491,000 jobs, not counting the jobs created in the agricultural and informal sectors. I am aware of the opportunities that self-employment offers both in the fight against unemployment and underemployment. I have therefore created, in December 2017, the General Delegation for Rapid Entrepreneurship of Women and Youth (Der/fj) with a budget of 30 billion CFA francs. The mission of the DER is to help women and young people aged 20 to 40 to find financing throughout the country, to enable them to access decent and sustainable employment. In addition, as part of the employability of young people, I plan to implement, in the next two years, a CFA franc 80 billion program to promote their professional integration by strengthening the availability of training infrastructures through the upgrading and construction of technical and vocational high schools, the establishment of clusters, vocational training and the construction of business training centers. In this same dynamic, I do not forget the young Senegalese engaged in non-formal learning and will support them with a 20 billion CFA francs program.
It is about giving them scholarships to help them be trained in their chosen field. My ambition is to ensure, in the medium term, the training of 100,000 young Senegalese to provide our companies with quality human resources that are qualified enough to support them in their investment and job creation programs. From the perspective of the oil and gas exploitation, young Senegalese people will be at the heart of the development of our local content. In addition, an intergenerational fund has been set up to address concerns related to the needs of young people.