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# Politics In a Period of Uncertainty: Gambia's December 2021 Elections

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Occasional Paper 47  
October , 2022

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**Design and Typesetting: KAIPTC Design and Production Unit.**

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## Introduction

After over two decades of authoritarian rule, characterized by increasingly violent and repressive dictats, Gambians headed to what was perceived by most voters as the usual routinized form of electoral manipulation and prefabricated results on 1 December 2016. However, multiple dynamics had shifted dramatically, both domestically in terms of Gambian socio-economic and political variables, but also within the context of the wider sub-regional space within which the Gambia is located. For the incumbent President, there was no basis for uncertainty about what could be the eventual outcome of this contest. Since the Gambia's independence from British colonial rule in 1960, there had not been a single transfer of power from one elected government to the other. Yahya Jammeh was convinced of assured victory. Despite these background details, this paper argues that what has been characterized as a 'watershed in the political history' of Gambia resulted from a combination of the shifting sands of domestic issues and wider external dynamics within the larger Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) that what has been termed as Gambia's 'second independence' occurred. Fundamentally, these shifts had created such tectonic changes in the country and sub-region as a whole that, when the cataclysmic electoral results were announced, the opportunity costs for changing the results of the ballot, though attempted were eventually deemed to be too high by the incumbent regime and its supporting infrastructures.

This paper seeks to capture these dynamics and the structure of the election results by locating them within the broader context of the post-Yahya Jammeh Gambian politics, in which we argue that political dynamics had shifted dramatically that contributed to the shocking electoral defeat of the incumbent President. In attaining the objective above, the paper argues that the political parties and activities that formed a coalition that managed to attain the electoral victory, has in the post-victory period become fractured and factionalised resulting in the establishment of a multiplicity of parties, as of April 2021 comprising 18 parties and still counting. To

manage the political situation, the paper subsequently assesses the performance of democratic institutions during the transition period and their effectiveness and levels of preparedness to manage and run the country's forthcoming elections in December 2021. Subsequently, an analysis is undertaken of the processes of these contentious elections in terms of the preparations, contestations, and misunderstandings surrounding the drawing up of a draft constitution, the voter registration process, and the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC).<sup>1</sup> In the aftermath of the change in leadership, there are two cross-cutting issues that the paper posits are critical for any understanding of what we perceive to be the tectonic shifts in Gambian politics, namely: the role and impact of Youth and Gender undercurrents. Holding an election during a pandemic brings particular challenges to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and other electoral management bodies (EMBs) and security agencies who will patrol the voting areas and ensure security, and not least the electorate. We appraise the levels of preparedness and public information to prepare the electorate. Finally, the paper provides a set of recommendations to the: (a) EC, (b) Political parties, (c) youth and gender groups, and finally to civil society organisations (CSOs). The paper is the result of a field study undertaken in the Gambia in February 2021.

## From Coalition To Factionalised Politics

In 1994, Sir Dauda Jawara<sup>2</sup>, then Gambian President was overthrown by Yahya Jammeh through a coup d'état that proscribed the constitution, banned all political parties and activities, and established an Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council (AFPRC). Jammeh, who quickly promoted himself as Chair of the AFPRC, was one of the four junior Army officers comprising Sana Sabally, Sadibou Hydera, and Edward Singhateh, who made up the top hierarchy of the new ruling team. He ruled as a military leader from 1994 to 1996 and subsequently as President of the Gambia from 1996 to 2017, under the auspices of The Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC).

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<sup>1</sup> see [www.trrc.gm](http://www.trrc.gm). Here, under the banner headline The Truth Shall Set Us Free, it states that, 'The TRRC is established to acknowledge the truth of what happened from 1994 to 2016 during the regime of President Yahya Jammeh, to ensure justice and reparations for the victims affected during this period, to promote national reconciliation and healing, and to ensure that what happened in our country never again happens.' [italics our emphasis]

<sup>2</sup>. During the fieldwork in February and March, there were interesting insights into the processes through which the 'outsider' Jawara, first, changed his identity and name from a Christian to a Muslim, and second, how this individual who has a minor and peripheral role in Gambian pre-independence politics was thrust into the limelight and eventually became a consensus candidate and won elections.

Through multiple manipulative electoral processes, Jammeh managed to hold on to power until January 2017 when he was forced to flee into exile in disgrace after losing the 2016 parliamentary and presidential elections. But the journey to winning the elections and the subsequent humiliation of the president was a long journey fraught with violence, death, theft, and intimidation<sup>3</sup>. In an opinion piece that captures the historical dynamics of Gambian alliance politics, K. M. Bayo argues that:

Before the 1962 parliamentary elections, the PPP and DCA also formed a mutual support pact, with the results confirming the growing PPP influence, especially in the protectorate, winning a total of 18 seats out of the 32 seats for the House while the DCA could only manage to retain its single Bathurst ward of Jollof/Portuguese Town. Realizing the unshakable strength of the UP in Bathurst, Jahumpa renamed his party the Congress Party, perhaps after having realized that the religious implications that the previous party (Gambia Muslim Congress) carried were not helpful. After this adjustment, he turned to P. S. Njie in a United Party/Congress Party alliance for the 1966 election. This time [I. M. Garba] Jahumpa was able to win his Bathurst seat before breaking away from the UP, dissolving his party, and joining the PPP in 1968. This move earned him important cabinet positions in the PPP administration, first as Minister of Health and later as Minister of Finance. [E]ven the PPP and UP formed a short-lived alliance shortly before independence and [formed] the temporary United Party and National Liberation Party pact of 1977 and the National Convention Party and UP alliance of 1987. [A]ll of these alliance efforts were inconsequential as they had all failed to make any significant impact on electoral outcomes. *Fundamentally, the pattern of alliance or coalition politics before independence up to the 1980s centered on transient and near-informal relationship building, without any long-term strategic considerations or binding agreements.* During this period, most of the smaller or weaker parties found themselves in a quandary and were looking for any opportunities to enhance their electoral fortunes such as joining forces with bigger and stronger parties in the decidedly asymmetric partnership.

The above captures the nature of coalition politics in Gambia’s pre-independence and post-independence contestation for power. Thus, in the preparations for the 2016 elections, a coalition was finally agreed upon among several parties.<sup>4</sup> controversy surrounds the processes towards the legalization of this coalition, the arrangements for the selection of its leadership, and the terms of engagement among the coalition leaders. According to Janneh: ‘Yahya Jammeh could have banned the coalition from contesting the 2016 presidential elections on constitutional grounds’. For inexplicable reasons that Janneh does not provide, this possibility of the proscription of the coalition did not happen. In the end, different parties contested the elections<sup>5</sup> by forming a credible coalition against the monolithic APRC. Such was the tense existing situation when Gambians went to the polls on 1 December.

Table 1: History of Presidential election results in the Gambia

Election	Party candidate	Votes	%	Results
1996		220,011	55.8%	Elected
2001	Yahya Jammeh	242,302	52.8%	Elected
2006		264,404	67.3%	Elected
2011		470,550	71.5%	Elected
2016		208,487	39.6%	Lost

Voting calmly proceeded on 1 December with no reported incidents of violence or electoral malpractices. Because of the nature of the coalition and the choice of a non-professional businessman, Adama Barrow, as a consensus candidate, there was uncertainty about what the outcomes could be. What subsequently occurred on 2 December did not only come as a shock, but the ensuing developments demonstrated the shifting sands of politics in all jurisdictions. On 2 December, the election results were announced by the Electoral Commission with the opposition leader, Adama Barrow winning 43.3 per cent and the incumbent, Yayah Jammeh having 39.6 per cent. According to the Independent Electoral Commission, a third candidate got 17 per cent. While the results themselves came as a surprise, the real unexpected turn of events was when the long-

<sup>3</sup>. See for example, OPINION: Alliance and coalition politics in The Gambia 1960-2016: A preliminary analytical survey’, Jan 8, 2020 at [OPINION: Alliance and coalition politics in The Gambia 1960-2016: A preliminary analytical survey - The Point](#) accessed 19 March 2021. Emphasis in italics ours; see also, D. Perfect and A. Hughes, “Gambian Electoral Politics”, in A. Saine et al eds., *State and Society in The Gambia*, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press) 2012.

<sup>4</sup>. Omar Janneh. 2019. ‘The coalition 2016 agreement of three years...’, at [The coalition 2016 agreement of three years – for Gambia News](#); accessed 20 March 2021.

<sup>5</sup>. Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction; National Reconciliation Party; People’s Democratic Organisation for Independence and Socialism; People’s Progressive Party; United Democratic Party; Gambia Party for Democracy and Progress; National Convention Party; Gambia Democratic Congress; Gambia Moral Congress; Citizens’ Alliance; Gambia Action Party; All Peoples Party; National Alliance for Democracy and Development; National Democratic Action Movement; Gambia Socialist Revolutionary Party (GSRP); and Gambian People’s Party (GPP)

serving Jammeh uncharacteristically accepted the results and called the incoming President-elect to offer his congratulations after the shock result. Because of this unexpected turn of events and behaviour, Jammeh was characterized as ‘... a rare dictator [who] accept[ed] defeat in a democratic election, [and] agreeing to hand power to [his] challenger’, in what was considered a mature statement: ‘... Congratulations. I’m the outgoing president; you’re the incoming president.’<sup>6</sup> . A further analysis of the transcripts of the Jammeh’s message and a longer version of the congratulatory message contains possible vignettes that might point to what occurred later. In the said congratulatory message, Jammeh states:

“I wish you all the best. The country will be in your hands in January. You are assured of my guidance. You have to work with me. You are the elected president of The Gambia. I have no ill will and I wish you all the best.”<sup>7</sup>

This was not vintage Jammeh and his concession speech was seen by others as ‘perplexing’.<sup>8</sup> However, less than a week after what on the surface sounded like a gracious concession statement, but with the ominous undertones that we have highlighted above started to play out. However, On 9 December, Jammeh rescinded his original decision to accept the results<sup>9</sup>. In a broadcast, the defeated president rejected the results and called for fresh elections and spouted accusations of voter irregularities, transposing numbers in tabulations to missing numbers. Blaming a range of electoral procedural factors and inaccuracies, the President’s arguments left the veracity of the election results in question. Though not providing any evidence, he declared his intention ‘[to] reject the results in totality ... I will not accept the results.’ Ominously, he concluded by warning the nation that, ‘... [the] security forces were on full alert,’<sup>10</sup> after he had earlier in the day promoted 40 military officers<sup>11</sup>

As a result of the president’s reversals and his preparedness to use the security forces to create

instability, The Gambia was plunged into what at the onset had the makings of a protracted political crisis from late 2016 until early 2017.

## ECOWAS And The Restoration Of Democracy

Jammeh’s volte-face in respecting the electoral results and his previous concessionary statements resulted in widespread condemnation by several multilateral institutions including: The African Union (AU), the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the European Union (EU), the United States and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), who collectively and individually admonished Jammeh to honor the will of the Gambian people and facilitate a smooth transition. In this section, we focus on the role of ECOWAS, the sub-regional supranational organisation to which the Gambia is a signatory.

ECOWAS, as part of its mediatory role, decided to send a peer mediation team of other Heads of State and Government (HSG) comprising leaders from Ghana, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Liberia to Banjul, the capital to admonish Jammeh to willingly hand over power. In his usual rumbustious and dismissive style, Jammeh questioned the authority of the ECOWAS team to help defuse the seething and volatile political situation and convince him to step down immediately. Characteristically, his response to these mediatory overtures came in a retort to these measures:

“They want me to leave my country?” “Who are they to tell me to leave my country?”<sup>12</sup>

Jammeh’s response to ECOWAS’s peer mediatory role demonstrates his lack of understanding and appreciation of the conventions, protocols, and regulations that the Gambia was a signatory.

argument, it may be necessary to recap the critical portions of these documents that enjoins ECOWAS to take preventive, precautionary action in member states if it so deems fit.<sup>13</sup>

Due to Jammeh’s recalcitrance and unwillingness

<sup>6</sup> ‘The Gambia’s President Jammeh concedes defeat in election’ at [The Gambia’s President Jammeh concedes defeat in election | The Gambia | The Guardian](#) accessed 19 March 2021. Italics are our emphasis

<sup>7</sup>ibid

<sup>8</sup>Thurston, Alex. 2016. ‘What’s Behind Jammeh’s Perplexing Decision to Accept Gambia’s Election Results?’, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/20619/what-s-behind-jammeh-s-perplexing-decision-to-accept-gambia-s-election-results> December 6. Accessed 28 March 2021

<sup>9</sup> Dionne Searcey and Jaime Yaya Barry. 2016. ‘Yahya Jammeh, Gambian President, Now Refuses to Accept Election Defeat’, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/09/world/africa/yahya-jammeh-gambia-rejects-vote-defeat-adama-barrow.html> 9 December, accessed 22 March 2021

<sup>10</sup> ibid

<sup>11</sup> Interview, Banjul, 22 March 2021

<sup>12</sup> ‘Jammeh defies ECOWAS: ‘Who are they to tell me to leave my country?’ at <https://africatimes.com/2016/12/21/jammeh-dismisses-ecowas-efforts-demands-new-vote-in-late-night-address/> 21 December 2021 accessed 29 March 2021

<sup>13</sup>. Protocol A/SPI/12/01 on Democracy and Good Governance Supplementary to the Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security Executive Secretariat Dakar, December 2001



to accede to the mediation team's requests, an ECOWAS military intervention in the Gambia took place under an ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (abbreviated ECOMIG) in an operation codenamed *Operation Restore Democracy*. ECOMIG was an expeditionary intervention force in 2017 comprising several West African countries to resolve a breakdown of internal order in the government of the Gambia due to a constitutional crisis in a dispute over the country's presidency. It comprised naval, air, and land forces from Senegal, Nigeria, and Ghana and has generated heated debates about issues of legality and legitimacy.<sup>14</sup> For Babatunde, ' [t]he ECOWAS intervention in the Gambia is undoubtedly illegal: there is no treaty or customary international law which permits this intervention.' Helal presents a more sympathetic and nuanced argument for the intervention<sup>15</sup>, that '...it potentially signifies an increasing acceptance of the right of democratically elected governments to lawfully invite intervention'. This supports Hartmann's argument that 'ECOWAS [is] a seemingly decisive regional actor in restoring democracy'.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the 22 years of rule by Jammeh, he and his cohorts had decimated Gambian institutions and undermined them to serve his narrow personal and in some instances clique interests. In the aftermath of his overthrow, rebuilding and strengthening institutions is critical to democratic consolidation and responsible and effective security sector performance.

The next sections discuss briefly, a few of the critical institutions whose role and actions in the coming years will be critical to the success and deepening of the Gambia's democratic transition, which will be tested at the elections in December 2021.

### Strengthening Democratic Institutional Processes And Mechanisms

Since early 2017, following the resolution of the political impasse and the swearing-in of Adama Barrow as President, there has been ongoing dialogue between the members of the Gambia Coalition 2016, who now form the incumbent government, as well as facilitating

inter-party dialogue among the country's seventeen registered political parties, under the auspices of the Inter- Party Committee (IPC).

Institutional reforms as a component of the post-Jammeh period have been fraught with suspicion due to ethnic imbalances in the public sector. But there is no doubt that a successful post-transition phase will need to be underpinned by functional institutions. In this section, we discuss a few of these institutions whose roles are critical to the forthcoming elections in December 2021. These include: The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC); Security sector actors; the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG)

### Independent Electoral Commission

The IEC is one critical institution, that in the aftermath of the 2016 elections has been putting in place the structures to strengthen its systems and processes to ensure more transparency and stakeholder buy-in. For a start, preparations are ongoing for a voter registration exercise that seeks to register about 1.2 million voters<sup>17</sup> including new registrants. The voter registration is expected to start in late May of 2021, providing the IEC time to offer voter education especially to new entrants. Earlier discussions about replacing the marble system of voting have been put on hold due to cost and logistical reasons.<sup>18</sup> A critical component of the preparatory stages involves an

Access to Information in elections program. According to the IEC Chair, Alieu Momar Njai: "The Commission recognises that providing timely and accurate information promotes the credibility of elections and the electoral process in general,"<sup>19</sup> Though the voter registration exercise has been delayed, a new timetable has been announced for a general voter registration starting from 29th May, and the 44-day exercise is expected to end on Sunday, 11th July 2021. During the period, the process will commence at 8:00 am and end at 5:00 pm daily. Another innovative introduction to the 2021 elections is the out-of-country diaspora voter registration that is scheduled to begin in July 2021.<sup>20</sup> Diaspora voters in

<sup>14</sup>. Elkanah Babatunde Elkanah Babatunde . 2017. 'ECOWAS Intervention in Gambia: A Case Study of International Law on the Use of Force', UCL Journal of Law and Jurisprudence, DOI: 10.14324/111.2052-1871.088, January, p. 70

<sup>15</sup> Mohamed Helal, 2017. 'The ECOWAS Intervention in the Gambia', In Tom Ruys and Oliver Corten Eds., 2017 *International Law on the Use of Force: A Case Based Approach* , *Ohio State Public Law Working Paper No. 414* 11 Sept, p. 932

<sup>16</sup> Hartmann, op cit. p. 87

<sup>17</sup> Interview, Banjul, 23 March 2021

<sup>18</sup>. Interview with IEC officials in Banjul. The marble-in-drum voting system was first introduced in the run up to the 1960 general elections. This system also comes with its own logistical hurdles. With over 1,422 polling stations across the country, and 18 parties as of April 2021, the IEC Chair posits that, '...', these drums are not just expensive



the Gambia are an important segment of the electorate and thus their designation as the Eighth Region of the country.<sup>21</sup> to the ensure transparency and general stakeholder buy-in, the IEC has specified the types of documents that should be presented at registration centers to acquire the new voter's card. They include among others: a Birth Certificate, National Identity Card, and a document called attestation certified by a local chief or *Alkalo*. Finally, registrants must be eighteen years of age and above to acquire the voter's card.

### Security Sector Actors: Armed Forces, Police, Parliament

One of the critical sectors, that supported and ensured that the Jammeh regime kept its iron grip on the society where the security forces, especially through the actions of former members of the *Junglers* (also known sometimes as *Jungulars*) who served as Jammeh's elite hit squad. Ethnicised in a manner in which his Jola ethnic affiliates made up to 70 percent of the uniformed forces, these forces perceived their support of the president as part of their group survival.<sup>22</sup> Several respondents argued that, ethnic consciousness:

'... has affected politics.... When Yahya Jammeh came to power all changed. Jammeh's tribe is looked down upon, Jola's are domestic workers and have always had an inferiority complex. Their names are a depiction of their servitude and Jammeh tried to change the fabric of society. Jola's seized the public space. With Barrow, there is a bigger problem of identity. No one knows what is happening so there is a competition for space among different linguistic groups.'<sup>23</sup>

To better understand the challenges inherent in any SSR process, one needs to appreciate the nature of ethno-political and security dynamics. Any oversight of these underlying dynamics that have impacted recruitment,

retention, and promotions will undermine the stability of the state. Already, these tensions have started to manifest in the security forces as there are rising tensions and uncertainty about restructuring processes. For example, in May 2017, eight former soldiers were convicted of treason and mutiny for plotting to overthrow the Barrow government. According to court documents, these uniformed forces "prepared or endeavoured to overthrow the democratically elected government of The Gambia by unlawful means and thereby committed an offence"<sup>24</sup> the coup plotters, it was alleged were in communication with former president Jammeh and were led by one of Jammeh's former military aides.<sup>25</sup> yet, another case that run concurrently with this coup trial was the civilian trial of the so-called "NIA Nine", which involved former spy chief, Yankuba Badjie, who ran the notorious National Intelligence Agency (NIA), and eight of his subordinates.

From the above, it is obvious that the need for defence and a wider security sector reform in the Gambia in the aftermath of the electoral change is crucial to the stability and ethnic harmony of the state. There are several critical issues that need urgent consideration, but sensitive treatment.

- (a) The Jola ethnic minority is totally over-represented in the armed forces, comprising by some estimates to be over 70 percent of the total force and in other state sectors. This is not just a question of ethnic realignment, but rather the potential for a wider inter-state conflict system as the Jola are the predominant group in the Casamance group *Mouvement de forces democratiques de Casamance* fighting for secession from Senegal;
- (b) In an audit of the Gambian army, to ensure that foreign individuals, including Casamance rebels, had not infiltrated the army to undermine the present regime, the Audit uncovered 'soldiers who could not read, write or speak English, the official language of

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to make, but you have to paint them with party colours and where you have independent candidates, you have to give each a colour. And that's before talk of transporting them'.

<sup>19</sup> Jara Cham. 2021. 'IEC urges Gambians to participate in voter registration', Mar 26. At <https://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/headlines/iec-urges-gambians-to-participate-in-voter-registration> accessed 1 April 2021

<sup>20</sup> Interview, Banjul, 21 March 2021

<sup>21</sup> Interview, Banjul, 23 March 2021

<sup>22</sup> Interview, Banjul, 25 March 2021

<sup>23</sup> Interview, Banjul, 23 March 2021

<sup>24</sup> See, Yvonne Rarieya. 2017. 'Gambia court charges soldiers for alleged coup plot', November 28. At <https://africa.cgtn.com/2017/11/28/gambia-court-charges-soldiers-for-alleged-coup-plot/> accessed 17 March 2021

<sup>25</sup> David Ochieng Mbewa. 2019. 'Gambian military court jails 8 soldiers for attempted coup',

May 28, <https://africa.cgtn.com/2019/05/28/gambian-military-court-jails-8-soldiers-for-attempted-coup/> accessed 17 March 2021;

the Gambia were listed'.<sup>26</sup> However, Thomas Serna is concerned about the findings characterizing them as 'inaccurate' and expressing the concern '... if the current reform of the Gambian defence sector could materialize into ethnic cleansing'.<sup>27</sup>

The critical issues that need to be dealt with include: recruitment, training, logistics, promotions, the general welfare of the officers and men, the tensions between the Gambian Armed Forces (GAF) and other security services, and the role or continuous role and changed the mandate of ECOMIG.

## ECOMIG

After the failure of the international community, led by the ECOWAS, to mediate the electoral impasse, ECOWAS issued an ultimatum to Jammeh after he refused to accept the results of the December 2016 elections. ECOWAS, in a joint statement with the African Union (AU), expressed the 'deep concern' of the President of the ECOWAS Commission, the Chairperson of the AU Commission, and the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General to West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS). As a result, they called on the government of The Gambia to abide by its constitutional responsibilities and international obligations and respect the verdict of the ballots. More importantly, they emphasised the need to protect the security of president-elect Adama Barrow, and all Gambian citizens<sup>28</sup> Failure to comply would lead to an intervention to reinstate the legitimately elected leader.

Subsequently, at the Franco-Africa Summit in Bamako, Mali in January 2017, the Head of UNOWAS, Mohammed Ibn Chambas intimated ECOWAS's intention to seek UNSC support to deploy troops to the Gambia if Jammeh refused to modify his behaviour. With ECOWAS security chiefs meeting in Abuja, Nigeria in mid-January, plans were far advanced and on the 18th of January, troops from the ECOWAS Military Intervention in The Gambia (ECOMIG) deployed towards the border. With the support of the UN through UNSC Resolution 2337, it backed ECOWAS's decision to 'ensure, by political means first, [that] the will of the people of the Gambia as expressed in the results of 1st December elections' are upheld.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Resolution 2337 'call[ed] upon the countries in the region and the relevant

regional organisation to cooperate with President Barrow in his efforts to realize the transition of power'<sup>30</sup>. Hartmann, in his assessment of ECOWAS's actions, used the word 'nevertheless'<sup>31</sup>, creating the impression that ECOWAS did not exhaust all the available political means first. Under ECOWAS's democracy regime captured through its documents on: (a) *the Political Principles*; (b) *Revised ECOWAS Treaty of 1993*; (c) *Protocol on the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention (1999)*; (d) *and the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001)*, we argue that, these documents that provided the normative frameworks, principles, and values that provide ECOWAS with the foundational basis for intervention.

Hostilities under this intervention, codenamed *Operation Restore Hope*, were minimal as the praetorian guard around Jammeh that had supported his autocratic regime collapsed and some pledged allegiance to the new president and Jammeh himself departed into an ignominious exile. ECOMIG was mandated to: 'facilitate the exit of Yahya Jammeh, restore the popular will of the Gambian people as expressed in the December 1 elections, and create conditions for normalizing the political and humanitarian situation in the Gambia'. Subsequent, to the fulfillment of this specific mandate, President Barrow has requested for the extension of ECOMIG's stay. Subsequently, the ECOWAS Heads of State and Government held their 58th Ordinary Session on 23 January 2021 where they decided to extend the mandate of ECOMIG for a period of 12 months from 1 January 2021 and transform it into a police mission after the December 2021 elections. Comprising mainly of police units from La Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Senegal, and Togo, this decision has generated several critical and intense debates and responses that are overwhelmingly suspicious of the intentions of the Barrow government. Such criticisms of the change in ECOMIG's mission has occurred without a broader consultative process with either Parliament, political parties, or civil society organisations (CSOs) who were previously Barrow's allies.<sup>32</sup>

According to the APRC, this decision was an 'indication of power abuse and a sign of dictatorship'.<sup>33</sup> Mai Ahmed Fatty, the leader of the Gambia Moral Congress (GMC) posited that:

'Extending ECOMIG to a police mission is an

<sup>26</sup> Interview. Banjul 26 March 2021

<sup>27</sup> See Thomas Serna. 2017. 'Armed peace in the Gambia: the role of ECOWAS', at [www.peaceinsight.org](http://www.peaceinsight.org) accessed 27 March 2021

<sup>28</sup> 'ECOWAS, African Union and UN statement on the political developments in the Gambia' at <https://reliefweb.int/report/gambia/ecowas-african-union-and-un-statement-political-developments-gambia>

<sup>29</sup> <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2337> S/RES/2337 (2017) 19 January 2017 and entitled Peace Consolidation in West Africa accessed 29 March 2021

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Hartmann, op cit, p. 90

unnecessary, ill-advised and unwise decision. It is woefully unfortunate, against our national security interest, and undermines our sovereignty'.<sup>34</sup>

## **Towards The December 2021 Elections: Issues, Processes, And Challenges**

### **Judiciary**

The findings of an official commission established to look into the corruption of the Jammeh regime were released in September 2019 and documented extensive financial misconduct and waste by the former president and his close allies. The Barrow government has indicated that they will pursue legal means to recoup the lost monies. The former ruling party, the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC), rejected the findings.

### **Draft Constitution**

In November, the Constitutional Review Commission released a draft of a new constitution. While the draft was praised for instituting term limits for the office of the president, the omission of a statement that the Gambia is to remain a secular country prompted concern among civil society.

### **The Truth, Reconciliation And Reparations Commission**

Established in the aftermath of the democratic transition, its mandate was to conduct research and investigations into the human rights violations committed under the previous regime and to prevent their repetition. Established by an Act of the National Assembly in 2017, it has been sitting and hearing depositions from a wide variety of Gambians. Since its establishment, taken statements, investigations, reporting and making recommendations, reparations, recommendations for amnesties and prosecutions, and handling issues of reconciliation.<sup>35</sup>

### **Youth and Gender Youth Migration**

On an annual basis, frustrated youth in the Gambia explore ways and means of leaving the country. These youth referred to as 'backway' boys risk their lives using illegal routes to find their way to Europe. They are lured by the promise of a better life. This trend of irregular migration was at its peak during the

reign of Yahya Jammeh. Between the years 2000 and 2010, the number of Gambians domiciled abroad leaped to approximately 65,000 from 35,000<sup>36</sup>. This was attributed to the lack of jobs and opportunities for the youth coupled with widespread claims of human rights abuses.

In the post-Jammeh era, there has been a significant return of Gambians to the country through both voluntary and forced means. The IOM<sup>37</sup> has assisted over 5000 Gambians to return home since 2017 through its Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration program (AVRR)<sup>38</sup>. However there is still a lack of opportunities for returnees as they do not receive any assistance beyond those provided by organizations such as the IOM. The economic situation they 'escaped' from is usually the same or even worse upon their return.

### **Youth Participation In National Politics**

In general, post-Jammeh, youth participation in national politics and decision-making has seen a major boost. In 2019, the government out doored the National Youth Policy (NYP) for 2019-2028. Although being the fourth of such a policy since 1988, the current policy has been touted as recognizing the youth "...as the single most important and valuable natural resource that the Gambia has".<sup>39</sup> Since 2017, the Barrow government has made efforts to involve the youth in the Transitional Justice and Security Sector Reforms (TJSSR) processes of the country.

The euphoria that came with the change of government in 2017, however, seems to have been lost. The youth are of the perception that the expected socioeconomic improvements in the Gambia are too slow or non-existent. There is still a ban on employment in the public sector and the anticipated industrialization boom in the Gambia has not taken place.

### **Women's Participation in Politics**

The Gambia currently has only six women in the National assembly out of 58 members. The Gambia's cabinet also has only four women out of 23 ministers. At the local level, the situation is similar; out of 120 councilors in the country, only eight are women. Women's representation in political parties is also very low. Out of 18 registered parties<sup>40</sup> as of April

<sup>32</sup>Several interviews in Banjul, Gambia in February 2021

<sup>33</sup>. Yusupha Jobe. 2021. 'Barrow's ECOMIG decision generates condemnation', Feb 1. At <https://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/headlines/barrows-ecomig-decision-generates-condemnation> accessed on 15

<sup>34</sup>. Adama Makasuba. 2021.26 January. <https://gambiana.com/mai-fatty-condemns-decision-to-transform-ecomig-to-police-mission/> accessed 15 March

<sup>35</sup>For further details, see [www.trrc.gm](http://www.trrc.gm) accessed 20 March 2021

2021, none has a female as a leader. The only woman aspiring to contest the 2021 Presidential Elections plans to do so as an independent candidate.<sup>41</sup> Before 2016, there was no female presidential candidate in Gambia's political history. In 2016, the current vice president, Dr. Isatou Touray announced her intention to run for the presidency she, however, shelved her intentions and instead supported the coalition candidate Adama Barrow.<sup>42</sup> Efforts have been made to advance the course of women in the Draft constitution of 2019. The draft constitution has guaranteed women's participation in national politics by stating specific quotas for the representation of women on the national assembly service commission, membership of the national assembly, and the commission for the implementation of the constitution.<sup>43</sup>

### Elections In An Era Of Pandemics

Before COVID-19, electoral processes such as voter registration, voting on election day, tabulation and transmission of votes cast, and announcement of results among others came with a myriad of challenges. Factoring COVID-19 safety protocols into the above processes is a major challenge for electoral management bodies financially.<sup>44</sup>

The uncertainties surrounding the 2021 Gambian Elections are compounded by the yet-to-be- passed Proposed Elections Bill 2020. Many Gambians believe that the proposed bill may suffer the same fate as the draft constitution, which was rejected in the National Assembly.<sup>45</sup> The proposed bill contains key changes to the format of Elections in the Gambia and with the polls drawing closer it is not likely that the changes if passed will take effect in 2021.

### Recommendations

Security Sector Reform (SSR) initiatives by external state and non-state actors in partnership with the Gambian government should be carried out to completion for maximum impact. Various donors should consider working together to reduce duplication of effort.

- The Gambian government must commit to supporting Parliament to pass the proposed

Elections Bill and the new Constitution within a reasonable time to enable the rebuilding of critical institutions and mechanisms for governance in the Gambia.

- Change in government created an impression of settling scores around political land conflicts. Land issues must be resolved through the rule of law provisions to reduce the spectre of renewed ethnic rivalries and conflicts;
- To deal with age-old inter- and intra-group conflicts, the contest between different segments of the caste system that creates tensions and divisions between free-born and slaves must be tackled head-on. The increasing discourses around ethno-nationalism through the idea of the Sarahulay (Soninkara – mainly from Mali, Guinea, Bissau, and the Gambia) which has morphed into an international campaign entitled Gambani (we are all equal) to bring about equity in society.
- Efforts must be made by the government to expand women and youth participation in governance. Women and youth should be encouraged and supported to vie political positions where they can make a positive impact on issues in the Gambia

### Conclusion

The outcome of the 2016 elections in the Gambia ushered Gambians into an era of new-found freedoms that there were not prepared for. The damage done to key institutions over the 22-year reign of Mr. Jammeh will require even more time to fix. Tensions will continue to build up as the 2021 Presidential Elections approach. The uncertainties surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic add to the mix as countries across the world grapple with second and third waves of the virus. The IEC's role in Gambia post-election day will be crucial to the future of the country.

<sup>39</sup> Ministry of Youth and Sports, The Gambia (2019). National Youth Policy of the Gambia 2019-2028. Available at <https://nyc.gm/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/National-Youth-Policy-of-The-Gambia-2019-2028-Final.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Independent Electoral Commission, The Gambia. <https://iec.gm/political-parties/registered-parties/> accessed 20 April 2021

<sup>41</sup> Gambia 2021 Elections: Female Candidate Unveils Interest in Top Job. Available at <https://panafricanvisions.com/2020/05/gambia-2021-elections-female-candidate-unveils-interest-in-top-job/> accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>42</sup> The Plot to Sideline Gambia's First Female Presidential Candidate. Available at <https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/womenandgirls/articles/2016/11/30/plot-sideline-gambias-first-female-presidential-candidate> accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Draft Constitution 2019. Available at [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Gambia\\_2019D.pdf](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Gambia_2019D.pdf) accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>44</sup> The Commonwealth (2021). COVID-19 and Election Management in Africa: Challenges, Innovations and Opportunities. Commonwealth Elections and COVID-19 Briefing Paper. Issue 1.

<sup>45</sup> Elections Bill 2020 Puts IEC On The Spotlight <https://www.chronicle.gm/elections-bill-2020-puts-iec-on-the-spotlight/> accessed 21 April 2021

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### How to cite this Publication

Ankah, P.M., & Aning K. (2022). Politics in a Period of Uncertainty: Gambia's December 2021 Elections. *Occasional Paper 47*, Accra:KAIPTC.

### About the Project

This paper was written as part of a project-Emerging Security Complexities in West Africa. This was conducted by the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Center and funded by the Government of Norway.

### About the Centre

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