



Gambia elections: Adama Barrow's performance on the ballot

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The transition program of the coalition government led by Mr Adama Barrow has faced several agenda setbacks, resulting in various failed promises. However, the democratic space created by the December 2016 to January 2017 regime change resulted in the registration of more political parties, many more media houses – 40 radio stations, six television stations and multiple web-based outlets – all contributing to expanding the civil space for an active, greatly enhanced participation of the Gambian population in governance processes.

All indications point to this presidential election already being the most closely contested in the history of the Gambia. The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) has already registered 18 political parties and seven political figures are expressing interest in running as independent candidates against the incumbent.

This Policy paper looks at the various variables of the political developments that occurred in The Gambia's, along with the issues at stake in the Presidential Elections slated for 4 December 2021

BACKGROUND

On 18 February 2017, President Adama Barrow was formally sworn in as third President of The Gambia, at a fully packed national Independence Stadium in Banjul. The euphoria was deafening as the country, for the first time in five decades, had all political forces united in support of a new democratic transition. The occasion was graced by a high-profile ECOWAS delegation, and several other heads of states. Also attending the historic inauguration of President Adama Barrow was the founding father of Gambia's independent republic, Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara, whose People's Progressive Party (PPP) led the country for thirty years.

Supporters travelled from across the country to participate in the inauguration. Thousands spent the night at the stadium, waking to the drumbeats and songs that set the tone for the celebration. By 9am on 18 February 2017, the stadium was already electrifying and full to capacity with people. Security guards struggled to contain the tens of thousands who gathered around the perimeter to access the venue. Overenthusiastic



youths scaled the fences to force their way into the grounds, while other climbed roof tops of tall buildings nearby, just to have a glimpse of the ceremony.

This was the first time a democratic change of government happened in The Gambia and the population eagerly looked forward to a new transition under a civilian government led by Adama Barrow. Expectations were high, but people were simply delighted that dictator Yahya Jammeh was defeated and chased out of the country without any bloodshed. The forces of the ECOWAS Military Intervention in the Gambia (ECOMIG) were put in charge of the President's security and were to stay for a year to enable a reform of the security sector and the establishment of a stable transition government. They were to work with the Gambian army and security service while the political transition focused on undoing the damage caused by a 20-year dictatorship that gripped West Africa's smallest country.

In his inauguration speech, Barrow promised a three-year transition period marked by reforms and institution building to empower the population through sound democratic governance and guaranteed public freedoms. He emphasized that the sovereignty of the country resided in the people and only they can decide what to do with it.

THE TRANSITION AGENDA

The issue of Cabinet appointments and the Vice-President were the subject of heated debates. Despite Jammeh's departure, his butchered 1997 Constitution (amended over 50 times in 19 years) still remained the legal document by which the country would be governed. This Constitution outlawed the appointment into public office of people of more than 65 years of age – ruling out the possibility of appointing major coalition leaders into office as Vice-President. The Coalition agreed to have the only civil society representative in the coalition, Fatoumatta Jallow-Tambajang, as Vice-President. The said law was amended to give way to her appointment but in essence, leaders of the People's Democratic Organisation for Independence and Socialism (PDOIS), the United Democratic Party (UDP), the People's Progressive Party (PPP), among others, would have lost the chance to contest the 2021 elec-

tions because they would have been over 65 by now. The Chief Justice and other members of the formerly non-Gambian (Nigerian) -dominated Bench would have been unable to serve and help with leading the judicial reform and strengthening processes now in place in the country.

Other items on the agenda of the transition led by Barrow and Tambajang within the first year in office included:

1. Reform of the security sector
2. Judicial reform
3. Civil service reform
4. Electoral reform
5. Inquiry into Jammeh's financial dealings and assets recovery
6. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission
7. The Anti-corruption and Human Rights Commission
8. Reconnecting The Gambia with its bilateral and multilateral partners like the International Criminal Court (ICC); the Commonwealth, the United Nations and the European Union.
9. Enhancing the civic space for freedom of the press, the media and universal political participation, etc.

However, less than half of the above agenda items have been fully implemented to the expectations of the population. President Barrow, driven by political expediency or other reasons, has failed to act on the recommendations made by several established commissions, and some highly unpopular former officials were even reappointed to their old positions after testifying before the Commission.

Inquiry into Jammeh's Assets

A government commission identified some 281 properties as assets of the former president. More than 100 private bank accounts were associated with Yaya Jammeh directly, or through companies or foundations in which he had shares or interests. What became of these bank accounts, assets is now the subject of public irony in The Gambian. The Ministry of Justice said they were able to raise GMD 50 million (equivalent of \$1million) towards the reparations fund for victims of human rights violations. The public did not receive any clear explanation as to how these assets were handled by the Barrow government.



Donor partners, despite expectations for the government to follow through with the recommendations of the Commission, were disappointed that it was set aside and selectively implemented by the president.

"We urge the Gambian public and civil society to invest the time to understand fully the complexities of the investigation and report, referencing the original Act that established the Commission of Inquiry, and the legal thresholds required to establish facts meeting evidentiary standards under Gambian law," the US envoy to The Gambia said.

Security Sector Reform

The Security Sector Reform has been subject to snail-paced implementation. The security sector in the Gambia was, to a great extent, besieged by poor management, ineffective regulation and an appalling record of statutory oversight. The Ministry of Defence was, for a long period of our post-independence history, embedded under the Office of the President where the President operated as the prospective holder of the Minister of Defence portfolio, said the National Security Agency strategic policy paper.

Several cases of a poor and ineffective management system today can be cited as evidence of little or no reform in the security sector. For example, a whistleblower who worked as legal adviser for the National Intelligence Agency got arrested and detained when he exposed the role played by the agency to conceal evidence of torture and other crimes committed within its premises, even before the Truth Commission began its work.

The National Security Adviser considers security sector management under Jammeh until 2017 as an "*illogical and unorthodox*" approach to oversight. The former regime bequeathed a security sector that was ill-managed, highly polarized and conveniently used as a tool for oppressing those considered to be political foes of the former President¹.

After two years of ups and downs in a vicious cycle and spending millions in Euros of donor funds, a National Security Agency, for the first time in history, was created under the Office of the President. The National Security Policy was launched in 2019, providing "*a robust, coherent and strategic approach*

to respond collectively to national security threats" through swift decision-making processes, clear lines of accountability and responsibility, prompt execution of action and commitment to building the nation's resilience to crime.

This is now considered among the "*key milestone achievements*" of the reform. A National Security Strategy (NSS) and Security Sector Reform Strategy were adopted in 2020 – just as the President was abandoning the transition program to throw his weight into the political ring for a re-run, announcing his intentions to form his own party and run.

Constitutional Review Commission (CRC)

Committing to promoting national reconciliation and rebuilding the foundations for good governance and democracy in the country were key agendas of the transitional government of Adama Barrow. A key part of that effort was the formulation of a National Transitional Justice Program to help restore democratic governance in the country.

The Government resolved to review the 1997 Constitution and draft a new Constitution to address the wishes and aspirations of Gambian people. In May 2017, a National Stakeholders Conference on Justice and Human Rights called for the preparation of a new Constitution to replace the 1997 Constitution. The National Assembly passed the CRC Act in December 2017. In January 2018, President Barrow assented to the Constitutional Review Commission Act. The objective of the CRC Act 2017 is "*to provide for the establishment of a Constitutional Review Commission to draft and guide the process of promulgating a new Constitution for The Gambia*".

A lot of comments point to its costs (about GMD200 million) and to the numerous countrywide and diaspora tours conducted just to produce a draft. This is considered a "*very expensive and hectic process*", yet quite necessary for the purpose of laying the foundations for a robust, democratic governance system, along with a sound checks and balances system, strong institutions that address the democratic in-

¹ <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/NSSD-WORKING-DRAFT-GAMBIA-EN.pdf>



adequacies of the past two governments, which is a prerequisite in fulfilling the aspirations of a modern, exemplary, Gambian society.

It came as a very big disappointment that the Constitution was voted down... “*Almost 70 percent of Gambians supported this; [in fact] not only Gambians, but international partners [are] concerned,*” decried Mr Sidi Sanneh, former Gambian diplomat and economist.

“The transition was financed almost entirely by the European Union and other development partners who are not happy with this,” he added, charging that the parliamentarians did not think seriously of the ramifications of voting the national document down. But that was what Gambians got in return when Barrow began sleeping in the same political bed with former Jammeh officials, keeping them close as key advisers, rather than the traditional coalition partners, with whom he presented and secured approval for the government’s National development Plan.

During his 21-year rule, Jammeh amended the Constitution over 50 times – removed term limits and changed the requirement for electoral victory from an absolute majority to a plurality – in order to consolidate his power. It was therefore a national priority when President Adama Barrow came to office in 2017 to replace what many referred to as “Jammeh’s Constitution”.

The process to re-write the Constitution by the Constitutional Review Commission took two years. With elections slated for 4 December 2021, there was not much time for the bill to be re-written, passed in the National Assembly, and then put to a referendum. Therefore, the Assembly failed to reach a two-third majority of members, dashing the hopes for fundamental reforms for transition in The Gambia .

Truth Reconciliations and Reparations Commission (TRRC)

After two and a half years of deliberations, over 2,000 victims of human rights violations were registered in The Gambia. The Gambia’s TRRC confirmed the killing of 204 people and 392 witnesses testified in public. Even before the reports and recommendations are formally submitted, the victims, whom the inquiry was supposed to heal and lead to closure, are

already losing hopes of justice from the government. There are perpetrators of torture, disappearances and sexual violence still walking the streets and individuals accused of crimes who continue to show public indifference by posing in public with the President. If anything, past inquiry commissions would serve as lessons that this cannot be any different.

In fact, even as the government was awaiting the final TRRC report and recommendations, Barrow was forging alliance with President Jammeh’s party. The Lead Counsel of the TRRC, Mr Essa Faal, also launched his bid for the presidency on an independent ticket. Faal said the Barrow government had no intention of implementing the TRRC recommendations, as amnesty for, and return of the key perpetrator of murders, disappearances, rape and extrajudicial killings was at the center of the alliance agreement between the two parties.

He said it was an act of political desperation for the President to forge an alliance with the APRC. Without such an alliance, he expressed optimism that Barrow would lose elections against the opposition in December 2021.

FALL OUT BETWEEN MEMBERS OF THE COALITION AND JAMMEH’S SUPPORTERS

There have been rumours about the relationship between the President and his Vice-President, especially after the UDP 2019 Congress, where the Vice-President was selected as candidate for the 2021 presidential election. A lot of people were talking about an imminent fallout between the two, or bad blood between them.

On December 18th, 2018, President Barrow returned from a foreign trip and was interviewed by journalists at the airport. QTV’s Aliou Ceesay asked the President to comment on these rumours in order to clear the air to the population: “*I think the issue is just about politics*” he said.

Yet, politics it has been from the beginning. Barrow had made several public boasts that Senegalese President Macky Sall was his political mentor, espe-



cially after falling out with his political godfather and the UDP. The two Presidents met to inaugurate the SeneGambia Bridge as Macky Sall ran for office in 2019. This was seen as one of the biggest political accomplishments by the government of Senegal, after several past Senegalese Presidents since independence failed to build a bridge over a crucial river crossing in The Gambia that connects North with South Senegal inside The Gambia.

Barrow's strategists suggested he would win the hearts and minds of the Gambian people in December, if he effectively starts implementing series of landmark infrastructure projects across the country, fire UDP members from his government and bring in former Jammeh loyalists as allies. By doing this, Barrow is surely paving the way for an alliance with APRC loyalists who would never endorse a UDP government in the county. From the onset, the strategy to win the minds of the Jammeh political base of Foni was part of the plan.

First to be sacked from the coalition cabinet was the Minister of Information and Agriculture. Although Mr Demba Jawo was a technocrat, Omar Jallow (OJ) was leader of the People's Progressive Party who played a key role in advocating against Jammeh since 1994. Many of the PPP government ministers remained inactive in the political area but not him. He faced several arrests and torture for this stance. Next, Mr Ahmed Mai Fatty, leader of the Gambia Moral Congress and Coalition's Minister of Interior, was sacked for unexplained reasons. Mr Fatty later on served again as special Strategic Policy adviser to the President but the relationship was short-lived and he exited the second time from Barrow's government.

Thema major break out occurred with the UDP, his original party that he left to contest as coalition independent candidate. Barrow intended to take over the party either as leader or candidate in 2021 elections. Rumours had begun to spread in the country about his political intentions to ditch the coalition agreement and make a U-turn for a new leadership. But the UDP would not change their party leader for Barrow.

Also in 2018, vice president Fatoumatta Jallow Tambajang was removed from office after she was alleged to have sent a letter to the UN Secretary General

regarding Barrow's political promise of stepping down in three years, which leaves her as next-in-line for the presidency, so she could lead the country to fresh presidential elections as promised to the country. It got her kicked out of Barrow's government. However, she denied any wrong doing and claimed she was being framed by her political competitors.

In their 2018 congress, the United Democratic Party formally elected Mr Ousainou Darboe as party leader and Secretary General. This was too disappointing for Barrow, especially when the party made it clear in a statement that Barrow had sent a letter of resignation to the party as a member, in order to contest as coalition candidate back in 2016. They said that Barrow would be welcomed back into the party when he chooses to resign as coalition candidate to return as party member. UDP's leader was already serving the coalition as Foreign Minister first, then as Vice-President prior to this announcement. Shortly afterwards, what everyone expected happened and Barrow fired all the three UDP members of his coalition cabinet, replacing them with some more Jammeh officials.

New members of President Barrow's Cabinet from Jammeh's party now include Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mamadou Tangara, Minister of Defence Sheikh Omar Faye, Minister of Interior, Yankuba Sonko, and Minister of Finance, Mamboury Njie. This leaves Jammeh's party with the biggest representation in the Barrow Cabinet.

END OF THE THREE-YEAR TRANSITION PERIOD

President Adama Barrow, justifying his failure uphold the three-year transition agreement described the said agreement as "wrong" because it was hastily drafted and several provisions that make up the content were not actually carefully thought through. The agreement stated that the President is to resign after three years and conduct elections. *"If the President resigns, it is finished, he is not president anymore... How can he conduct election? Can I conduct elections after resigning as president? It is not possible!"* Barrow said.

He also thinks it was not fair that he should leave office for the Vice-President to take over from him after three years. The President may have been affected by



the coalition agreement but the vice President has not. The National Assembly (Parliament) or local councils (Mayors) are not affected by the same law either. This entire agreement sounded like a big set up in President Barrow's view – one that he had no hand in and was eager to sign in 2016 just for his contesting convenience. He never argued against the agreement but now looks like he had no intention of respecting it.

So now he is saying the entire arrangement was not well organized and that it is now history for him, arguing that the Gambian people should trust him and elect him for another mandate.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE 2021 ELECTIONS

With only about seven political parties active in 2016, the national electoral body (Independent Electoral Commission) has so far registered 18 political parties. The question now is, will all of them contest and even if they do, who will be the outstanding performer who will give Adama Barrow a run for his money?

The United Democratic Party currently controls 31 out of 53 of the seats at the National Assembly. At the mayoral/regional elections, they won six out of seven regional administrative regions in the country. This means there is no bigger contender for the next presidential elections than between the UDP and President Barrow's NPP.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Several newspaper reports by civil society and political leaders argue that the ECOMIG's stay in the country is no longer warranted, that it only served Barrow's and Senegal's interest and not The Gambia's. If anything, it requires extra costs and slows down much needed reforms when even the State House's security falls outside the purview of the national army and security institutions.
2. The ECOMIG Forces should be withdrawn after the December 2021 Presidential elections. This would allow Gambian security and defence forces to implement much needed reforms with strong politi-

cal backing, using knowledge learned from several years of peace keeping and transitional support in many African countries through ECOWAS, the African Union and the United Nations.

3. The draft Constitution should be re-introduced to the national assembly in order to form the basis for the country's general reforms and usher in a third republic that captures the wishes and aspirations of the population. Failing this, every efforts aimed at reforms would be meaningless.
4. The National Development Plan (NDP 2018-2021) should be reviewed and updated as a national document that captures the country's medium- and short-term development aspirations. It represents a very comprehensive plan that could help steer the country to new heights based on the continuation of post-Jammeh transition programs.
5. The pledges made at the 2018 Brussels Conference should be followed up and harnessed to strengthen a democratic example and multilateral support for The Gambia. This would give The Gambian people a second chance at transitioning from a dark two-decade of history followed an impotent Barrow administration and to a more progressive national focus.
6. There should be an inquiry into the contracts awarded by the Barrow government since 2017 – from public procurement and single sourcing, and flawed tender processes in order to establish which individuals or groups were benefitting from these contracts and to what extent corruption has been involved in the processes.

² <https://www.dcaf.ch/ssad/the-gambia>



About the author

Sanna CAMARA has 20 years' experience as a journalist covering The Gambia. He worked extensively as editor and reporter for several Gambian newspapers, and contributed to international media platforms like Bloomberg News, The African Banker, The Africa Report, Paris-based Internet Sans Frontières and Washington-based The World Policy Journal. He helped set up a number of news organisations in The Gambia and co-authored "*Gambia After Elections: Implications for Peace and Security in West Africa*" (2017), published by FES. Sanna was a Staff Journalism Trainer at the Gambia Press Union, worked as Media Officer and Senior Communications Officer Office of The President (Adama BARROW) in Banjul, before quitting government to return to private media practice. He currently works as an independent media and communications consultant in Banjul, The Gambia.

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