

# GAMBIA'S 'BILLION YEAR' PRESIDENT

## *The End of an Era and the Ensuing Political Impasse*

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### ABSTRACT

*The Gambia's presidential election in December 2016 marked the end of an era for Yahya Jammeh, the man who had vowed to rule the country for 'one billion years if Allah says so'. The resulting political impasse following Jammeh's rejection of the results 'in its entirety' and his refusal to step down plunged the country into political uncertainty. This paper explores the end of Jammeh's 22-year rule in Africa's smallest mainland country, focussing on the 2016 polls which he lost to former realtor, Adama Barrow. The election offers relevant lessons to students of political transitions and contemporary election discourse in Africa and provides an analysis of some of the factors that accounted for his defeat.*

**Keywords:** dictatorship, Gambia's 2016 presidential election, opposition coalition, Yahya Jammeh

### INTRODUCTION

The third-wave of democratisation is manifestly undergoing a contrary undercurrent as transitional democracies experience a degree of backsliding. While many countries have transitioned to democracy through elections, a good number of non-democratic regimes continue to exist around the world (Snyder 2006). Countries experiencing democratic transition always have multi-party elections which are considered competitive, at least at the outset. This results in ousting incumbents, as was seen in the 1993 elections in the Republic of Congo that led to the removal of Denis Sassou Nguesso (Abbink 2017).

The Gambia under Yahya Jammeh was characterised by gross violations of human rights directed against journalists, opposition figures and Gambian dissidents living in the diaspora. For over a decade Jammeh's party, the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC), dominated a political landscape characterised equally by political intimidation, repression and the politicisation of the security forces clamping down on the opposition (Sanyang & Camara 2017). Jammeh won four presidential elections: in 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2011, and by heading the 2016 polls he was one of the most long-standing rulers in post-Cold War Africa. Any attempt to prevent Jammeh from running for a fifth term would be met with stiff resistance; not even the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) could do so, with their attempt to convince West African leaders to introduce a term limit in their national constitutions.

On 1 December 2016, 525 867 out of the 886 578 registered Gambian voters headed to the polls with two options: change or continuity of leadership. Ceesay (2016) notes that The Gambia's 2016 election and its political consequences resemble the fall of the Berlin Wall, the eventual disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and collapse of apartheid in South Africa. Defeat of 'strong man' Jammeh by an opposition coalition took many by surprise, as it was generally believed that dictators of his calibre do not organise elections if they know are likely to lose (*ibid.*).

Cognisant of the advantages of incumbency in Africa and Jammeh's own success record in previous elections, many political analysts expected him to secure another five-year mandate. Yet the combined effects of a historic merger of seven opposition political parties, unprecedented selection of an independent candidate, the jailing of key opposition figures, outrageous statements against ethnic Mandingos, and finally Jammeh's continued ruthlessness, indicated that his presidency was close to being over.

Jammeh, however, remained confident ahead of the polls when he told BBC's Umaru Fofana that he was not even campaigning. 'By the grace of the Almighty Allah, this (December 1 election) will be my biggest landslide victory in the history of my elections in this country' (BBC 2016). Instead, this turned out to be his only defeat in the history of his 22 years of dictatorial rule in a country of little more than 800 000 voters.

While Jammeh's defeat was a surprise to many, a bigger surprise was yet to come: he magnanimously conceded defeat just a few hours after the official results were announced. This was truly remarkable, especially for an incumbent African dictator who had vowed never to vacate the presidency, not through the gun, ballot-box or western interference, and who maintained that he owned the country. The biggest surprise was a week later, when Jammeh reversed this position to unilaterally reject and unconstitutionally annul the 2016 presidential election results, which was to have drastic political consequences for The Gambia and its newly won democracy.

This paper provides an account of both the pre-and post-electoral events in the country's 2016 elections, including the buildup to the polls, election day, Jammeh's concession and subsequent rejection of the results, and his exile to Equatorial Guinea. Finally, it provides an analysis of the factors that accounted for his electoral defeat.

### REGIONAL FRAMEWORK

The Gambia's 2016 elections offer a lesson for African countries with long-standing rulers and where elections have lacked transparency and credibility. After defying all odds, Gambians showed the world the power of democracy. Jammeh's ruthlessness and other reasons that accounted for his defeat were not unique in the country's December 2016 elections. The Gambia's 2016 elections support the theoretical and empirical argument that a unified opposition can defeat incumbents in Africa. Although, in the Gambian case, one opposition party did not join the coalition, the accord among the other major opposition parties contributed to Jammeh's defeat.

Division among opposition parties in the wake of dominant party systems in Africa allows incumbents to register electoral success and maintain their hegemonic control of political power (Asingo 2002). Opposition fragmentation in Kenya's 1992 and 1997 elections, Gabon's 1993 and 1998 elections and Tanzania's 1995 and 2000 elections were responsible for incumbents maintaining power in these countries (Tordoff 2002). In Zimbabwe, opposition disintegration and incredibility has been cited as a factor in Robert Mugabe's continued electoral success during his presidency (Thomson 2010).

Just as Kenya removed the government of Daniel Arap Moi in 2002 through the National Rainbow Coalition, and Senegal through the United in Hope Coalition, The Gambia's Coalition 2016 renewed hope that a united opposition can defeat an incumbent. The Gambian experience corroborates the theoretical argument that a unified opposition may bring about the alternation of political power. However, it is important to note that a unified opposition alone may not be enough to defeat incumbents; a more transparent method of counting votes is essential in ensuring credible and fair elections that have the potential to remove long-standing incumbents. The introduction of on-the-spot counting by the country's IEC was one of the most decisive factors in Jammeh's defeat, and is a new way to organise transparent elections and remove long-standing rulers in Africa. Lesson can be learnt from The Gambia's 2016 elections with the adoption of on-the-spot counting by electoral commissions in Africa and a unified opposition.

While popular uprisings have recently become the means to unseat long-standing dictators on the African continent, with military interludes resurfacing

in African politics, Gambians used the polls to remove Jammeh. The Gambian case defies the logic that elections cannot remove incumbents when they have succeeded in entrenching themselves in power.

### BUILDUP TO THE POLLS

Yahya Jammeh's rise to power in 1994 marked a regression in Gambia's democratic endeavour. Although elections were organised in 1996 which Jammeh himself contested and won, the free, fair and transparent nature of these polls was highly questionable. The United Democratic Party (UDP), the main opposition party at the time, claimed many irregularities before and during the elections (Hughes 2000). There was no unity among the opposition parties in the run-up to the polls. Five years later in 2001, the same disunity existed in the opposition camp, paving the way for Jammeh to secure another victory. The incidents of April 10 and 11 that led to the killing of 14 student demonstrators, coupled with many other irregularities in the country's governance structure, should have been determining factors in the election, but Jammeh had his way out in the polls. While international observers declared the election 'free and fair', there were subsequent allegations that between 40 000 and 75 000 non-Gambians, mainly from Casamance, voted in this election. These cross-border voters, allegedly supporters of Jammeh, were believed to have voted for him. Jammeh's strategy to create disunity within the ranks of the opposition helped him to secure victory (Saine 2009). Political co-optation later became his strategy to disunite the opposition.

In a bid to oust Jammeh in the 2006 presidential elections, the six opposition parties formed the National Alliance for Democracy and Development (NADD). To the disappointment of many Gambians, NADD would splinter into two weaker alliances due, in part, to irreconcilable political and personality differences, and contest against Jammeh. The first camp was constituted by the UDP, National Reconciliation Party (NRP), and The Gambia Party for Democracy and Progress, headed by Ousainou Darboe. The second camp, a much-weakened NADD, consisted of the People's Progressive Party (PPP), People's Democratic Organisation for Independence and Socialism (PDOIS), and the National Democratic Action Movement (NDAM), headed by Halifa Sallah (Saine 2008).

Yet, despite their best efforts, these two camps were no match for Jammeh's war chest and apparent popularity. This time, he took 67.33% of the vote, an increase of 14.37% from the 2001 presidential polls. UDP/NRP/GPDP secured 26.69%, while NADD trailed behind with a 5.29% of the votes (IEC 2006). The 2006 presidential polls did not move The Gambia closer to a more democratic culture, but only led to the consolidation of authoritarian rule under Jammeh.

The disunity within the opposition camp clearly led to its unpopularity, resulting in Jammeh's success at the polls (Saine 2008).

The 2011 polls saw the formation of yet another alliance; this time, Hamat Bah of the NRP separated from Darboe to join Sallah as a United Front. With 83% voter turnout, Jammeh's APRC secured 72%, Darboe's UDP alliance with the Gambia Moral Congress received 17%, and Bah's United Front obtained only 11% (IEC 2011).

Growing domestic discontent and concerns among Gambia's diaspora over failed efforts to build a strong opposition alliance coupled with poor performance at the 2006 and 2011 polls were enough to drive the message home: the only way out in 2016 was to form a united coalition against Jammeh.

Consequently, seven opposition political parties (UDP, PPP, PDOIS, NRP, GMC, GPDP, and NCP) and an Independent aspirant (Dr Isatou Touray) set aside their political differences to form the Coalition 2016. It proved to be the most formidable opposition coalition Jammeh would face in his entire political career. With Adama Barrow as realtor-turned-presidential candidate (which technically led to his resignation from the UDP), the coalition members agreed on a three-year transitional government followed by fresh presidential elections among coalition partners. Jammeh's poor human rights record, the deteriorating economy, and endemic poverty were ammunition enough to deliver a shocking defeat against the incumbent, thus breaking 22 years of iron-fist rule in the tiny West African nation.

#### ELECTION DAY AND JAMMEH CONCEDES DEFEAT

Jammeh cast his ballot on election day, Thursday 1 December, at the former McCarthy Square, a few metres from his residence in State House, Banjul, remaining confident that victory was his. Former London security guard, Barrow, his closest contender, was equally confident and remarked: 'I am very confident and the spirit is very high and I know I am winning. We hope that everything continues like this and we wait for the results' (*Jollof news* 2016).

After human rights groups expressed concerns that poll results were doctored, Jammeh responded that the country's elections could not be rigged. Nonetheless, Al-Jazeera was refused access to cover the election and was forced to report it from Karang, a border town in nearby Senegal. The European Union (EU) and ECOWAS were also refused entry to observe the polls. Only one African Union observer was granted observer status for 1 400 polling stations. Borders were closed and internet service turned off 'to thwart political unrest' and in the unlikely event that poll results did not favour the incumbent, they could be manipulated to do so (Al-Jazeera 2016).

Addressing public fears about stealing the presidential elections, Jammeh introduced a more transparent, on-the-spot counting system. This meant that votes were counted and confirmed at each polling station before being relayed for official announcement by the chairman of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) on national television. By 20:00, it was apparent that Jammeh was trailing Barrow in the polls. Civil society organisation (CSO) analysts and observers also captured this trend in reports sent from around the country. With only half the results announced, it was evident that Jammeh trailed Barrow, with Mamma Kandeh in third position. Concerned Jammeh cabinet ministers gathered in the cabinet-room to monitor election results as Jammeh prayed fervently for a reversal of his looming defeat; it was the biggest challenge to his 22-year autocratic rule.

However, hopes of Barrow's victory were temporarily dashed when results from Foni, an area predominantly inhabited by Jammeh's co-ethnic Jola, came in the early hours of Friday. Jammeh won in all five constituencies, sending shockwaves among coalition supporters who feared that Jammeh would once more succeed at the polls. With Kiang, Jarra, Badibu and the Kombos safely in a coalition, Jammeh and his supporters were left dumbfounded. Both his party heavyweights and the rank and file sympathisers lost confidence in achieving victory.

There was a tense and disquieting moment as results were announced to the nation: announcements were abruptly halted for an hour or so, and instead of the IEC Conference Room there was a young boy reciting verses from the Muslim holy Quran. This cliff-hanger appeared interminable as Gambians keenly awaited the final verdict and feared the worst. To many, it was Jammeh's last ditch-effort to steal the election. These fears were not groundless, as evidence would later surface that Jammeh had both pleaded with and threatened IEC Chairman Njie to stop the announcements and change the results in his favour. In Njie's words 'It was after that intense pressure on me to change the results that I heard that I would have been a target of lethal injection if I did not do their bidding' (*Standard Newspaper* 2018).

Once all the results were in and announced, Chairman Njie finally declared Barrow the duly-elected president of The Gambia, which meant a change of government. As many prepared for the Jumma (Friday prayers), Jammeh went on state television to publicly concede defeat. He congratulated Barrow and assured him of his co-operation in handing over power while he would 'prepare to go back to Kanilai (his birth village) as a farmer'. In publicly conceding defeat, Jammeh said:

Our system is unique, and we have decided to go to the polls for you the Gambian people to decide who you want to lead you. Today, 2 of

December, 2016, you, Gambians have decided that I should take the backseat. You have voted for somebody to lead our country and I wish you all the best.

*(Jollof news 2016)*

## ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS: ETHNO-REGIONAL DYNAMICS

Coalition team campaigns to the Kombos from provincial Gambia had sent a message of hope to many voters that change was inevitable. However, as results streamed in, ethnic factions became evident. Although ethnicity could be used as a major tool of analysis, regionalism could also be identified in the election results to extend the basis of our analysis.

Incumbents rely on election results to identify the regions in which their support base lies and where the opposition has a stronghold (Gandhi & Lust-Okar 2009). This information is sometimes used to punish regions by ignoring the provision of development projects such as education, healthcare and road infrastructure. In The Gambia, one such area is Kiang where the incumbent lost heavily to the coalition. The area remained underdeveloped compared to other regions, especially in terms of road infrastructure; but through intimidation and by withholding development, Jammeh was able to win in this area in the 2011 elections. However, his unfulfilled election promise, coupled with the unwarranted statement against ethnic Mandingo (the dominant tribe in the area), resulted in Jammeh failing to secure victory in both Kiang as a district and the entire Lower River Region.

Foni, Jammeh's birthplace and a Jola-dominated area, comprised five constituencies. In the district, Jammeh secured 19 691 votes to Barrow's 2 874, while Kandeh could garner only 1 485 votes. By constituency, Jammeh easily secured 69% in Foni Jarrol, 74% in Brefet, 84% in Bintang, 81%, Bondali and 92% in Foni Kansala. Barrow, in contrast, secured 16% in Jarrol, 19% in Brefet, 12% in Bintang, 7% in Bondali and 6% in Kansala, while Kandeh secured 15% in Jarrol, 7% in Brefet, 4% in Bintang, 12% in Bondali, and 2% in Kansala (IEC 2016). This indicates the trend of ethno-regional dynamic in the distribution of votes among the three candidates.

In Badibu (a Mandingo-dominated settlement) and elsewhere, Barrow, though a Mandingo, used a strategy of shifting identity/ethnic-card politics. Fluent in Mandingo, Fula, Wolof and Sarehule (Soninke), Barrow tailored his speeches to the majority language spoken in each area; a highly successful ploy which succeeded in wooing ethnic-conscious votes and winning with huge margins. In all three constituencies (Lower Badibu, Central Badibu and Illiassa), Barrow secured 12 657, compared to Jammeh's 5 829, and Kandeh's 5 569 (IEC 2016). In

Lower Badibu with more Mandingo villages, Barrow secured a comfortable victory of 66%, compared to Jammeh's 15% and Kandeh's 19%. In Central Badibu, also with more Mandingo settlements, Barrow again secured victory with 50%, Jammeh 25% and Kandeh 25% (ibid.).

However, in Illiassa, Badibu's third constituency and with a mixture of Mandingo and Wolof settlements, Barrow scored his lowest in the Badibu region with 47%, Jammeh 29% (his highest), while Kandeh scored 24%, his second highest. In Jokadu Constituency, a multi-ethnic-Wolof, Fula and Mandingo area, Mamma Kandeh (a Fula) won with 50%, Jammeh had 29% with Barrow trailing at only 21% (IEC 2016). In Kiang, another Mandingo dominated area, Barrow won comfortably in all the three constituencies with 73% in Kiang West (the highest across the country), 54% in Kiang East, and 50% in Kiang Central (IEC 2016).

The final region in this analysis of vote distribution among the candidates is the Upper River Region, birthplace of both Barrow and Kandeh. This region had been one of Jammeh's strongholds in previous elections, but not when he contested Barrow and Kandeh in a three-way race. The region had better road infrastructure than Kiang; however, the fact that Barrow and other key members of the coalition (Seedia Jatta of the PDOIS and Mai Ahmad Fatty of the GMC) all hailed from the region, together with a strong campaign strategy, guaranteed Barrow and the coalition a victory. Barrow secured 44%, Jammeh 38% while Kandeh trailed behind with 18% (IEC 2016).

### JAMMEH REJECTS THE RESULTS

On Friday 9 December, a week after the elections, Jammeh reversed his position and illegally annulled the election results. In a recorded television statement, he accused the IEC of bias. Jammeh had initially claimed, while conceding defeat, that he would never question the 'will of Almighty Allah' and that of the Gambian people because he trusted the country's electoral system. However, aware of the potential risk of arrest and prosecution, the defeated presidential candidate seized a counting error issued by the IEC on Monday 5 December to claim he had been cheated. The commission chair admitted that while an error had indeed occurred, it had no effect on the final outcome. The error reportedly occurred in the Basse Administrative Area where the total number of votes acquired by all three candidates were added to their votes nationally, swelling their total votes as revealed in the first results. Jammeh claimed his party representative at the rectification meeting did not sign the rectified results, and further alluded that some 25 000 of 'his voters' were not allowed to vote because the opposition had already won. In addition, Jammeh claimed that his party agents were not allowed access to some polling stations, and he thus rejected the outcome of the 2016 presidential election results:

I hereby announce to you Gambians my total rejection of the election results and thereby annulling the election in its entirety until we go back to the polls; we will go back to the polls because I want to make sure that every Gambian has voted.

(GRIS 2016)

A visibly shaken Jammeh warned citizens against engaging in any form of political protest. To add insult to injury, he claimed that elections would only be organised if there was money, implying that he was ready to stay in power.

### THE POLITICAL IMPASSE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

An important reason for Jammeh's reversal was the correction of the vote count error in which president-elect Barrow's margin of victory over President Jammeh fell from 9% to 4%. While this did not alter the presidential election outcome, it did not sit well with Jammeh who subsequently used it as a pretext to discredit the election results. More important perhaps were threats of prosecution issued by NRP leader Hamat Bah and Fatoumata Jallow-Tambajang, both of whom said Jammeh would face prosecution if he were guilty of human rights violations (*Jollof news* 2016). Jallow-Tambajang, who was instrumental in the coalition's formation and would later serve as Barrow's vice-president, issued a strong statement on Monday 5 December 2016:

He can't leave. If he leaves, he's going to escape us. We are stopping him from leaving. We are negotiating. He said he wants to go to Kanilai. Any day he tells us he wants to go abroad, then we say no. It's the presidential prerogative. He will be prosecuted. I'm saying a year but it could be less than that. This is my personal opinion – it might have taken three months because we really want to really work fast.

(Maclean 2016)

These statements clearly upset Jammeh and jeopardised his plans to retire to his farm. In another sense, his unorthodox and surprising reversal became a political ploy, a bargaining and exit strategy with which to shelter himself from a prolonged jail term, or prosecution, perhaps both. For the first time in his 22-year (mis) rule, Jammeh felt vulnerable and powerless. Jammeh used fresh elections as his last political card to extract concessions, possibly clemency from Barrow's government in exchange for stepping down.

The international community did not take the matter lightly. International media outlets covered the news, and at the request of Senegal and ECOWAS an

emergency United Nations Security Council (UNSC) meeting was summoned to discuss the matter and find a solution. The 15 members of the UNSC called on Jammeh to 'respect the choice of the sovereign people of The Gambia' (BBC 2016). Other international bodies such as the African Union (AU), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and some Western powers (in particular the US and France) agreed to the UNSC position (Onuoha & Ngwu 2017). Senegal's Macky Sall finally had the opportunity to punish Jammeh for meddling in the Casamance conflict and insisted that Jammeh must go.

### *Petition and Injunction*

Realising that the power to annul the election results resided in the Supreme Court, Jammeh decided to go through legal process, an irony lost to no one. His APRC party filed a petition to the country's apex court demanding that Jammeh be declared winner of the December 1 election. But Jammeh had already sacked some judges from this court and therefore needed a quorum to decide the matter. Nigerian-born Chief Justice Emmanuel Fagbenle asked the party to resolve the matter through other means as the required number of judges was not available and would probably not be until May or November 2017. No other Gambian judge was willing to take up an appointment to the Supreme Court at this time.

As Adama Barrow's inauguration on January 19 drew closer, Jammeh filed a Supreme Court injunction to block it. Unfortunately for Jammeh the court was scheduled to sit in May, November or when judges were available, and Fagbenle had recused himself from hearing the case (*Foroyaa Newspaper* 2017). Time was running out for Jammeh and with looming threats of an ECOMIG force stationed at the border, the pressure for him to step down intensified.

### *Meeting with Mediators*

In response to the crisis, ECOWAS sent a mediation team comprising Nigeria's President Muhammadou Buhari (Mediator for The Gambia), former Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (ECOWAS Chairperson), former Ghanaian President John Mahama (co-mediator) and former Sierra Leonean President Ernest Bai Koroma. The first meeting apparently failed, as the embattled Jammeh stood his ground.

As the crisis deepened, the ECOWAS team flew into Banjul for a second time. Talks were held with all parties: Jammeh, Barrow and the IEC. The peaceful transfer of power was the priority. Jammeh considered ECOWAS to be partial, and accused them and the international community of meddling in the internal affairs of The Gambia. He went on to appoint his own mediator, the newly appointed

Secretary-General and Head of Civil Service of his sinking government as 'mediator general', a strange diplomatic term used by Jammeh whose role was to 'promote a peaceful resolution of the crisis'. However, Jammeh's efforts to resolve the crisis through the mediator-general did not stop the sub-regional body from pursuing its own means of finding a lasting solution to what could have resulted in a bloodbath in one of Africa's poorest countries. Although Jammeh and his government failed to authorise ECOWAS to monitor these elections, ECOWAS pronounced on the scenario in The Gambia, cognisant of the fact that the Gambian situation was a threat not only to national security but also to the sub-region.

The most significant role played by ECOWAS in the Gambian election was the restoration of democracy, using the threat of force rather than any actual physical force (Hartmann 2017). Such a restoration was unique in the Gambian case since it was not a post-conflict situation where regional arrangements could have been used for international administration, or a coup d'état that would have required suspending the regime or forcefully removing it from power (*ibid.*).

The 2010/11 constitutional crisis in Cote d'Ivoire was similar to the Gambian case in that ECOWAS threatened to intervene against Laurent Gbagbo for his 'attempt to go against the will of the Ivorian people' (Hartmann 2017, p. 92). However, the ensuing military action was carried out by French and UN forces. What distinguished the Gambian from the Ivorian case is that despite the Supreme Court declaring Gbagbo as the winner of the elections, ECOWAS recognised Alasana Quattara as the legitimate president of Cote d'Ivoire, making the issue more contested and subject to a more complex dispute.

The Gambian constitution, however, recognises the Independent Electoral Commission as the only body entitled to declare results in an election. Jammeh's decision to 'annul the result in its entirety' was considered a violation of the constitution. Even the country's Supreme Court may not declare him the winner in line with the constitutional provision that empowers the apex court to hear cases on disputed election results. His claims that the elections were rigged by the opposition were considered weak, without any legitimate or legal basis to restore his power (Hartmann 2017). This gave more impetus to ECOWAS to intervene and forced Jammeh out without any UN intervention, as had happened in Cote d'Ivoire. The Gambian case could provide lessons for regional bodies in their quest to restore democracy in member countries with authoritarian regimes.

Jammeh also met leaders of both the Muslim and Christian faiths and called on them to preach peace. A master manipulator of Islamic symbols for 22 years, he failed to garner the support he needed from Muslims. Already upset by his Islamic State declaration, Christian clergy at the meeting did not mince their words, forcefully blaming him for the ongoing crisis and demanding that he step down.

A Nigerian-based group entitled the Africa Bar Association offered a lifeline to Jammeh; their platitudinous speeches describing him as a 'peace-loving person' gave him some comfort that a 'continental legal association' was on his side. The team also met with Barrow. However, the meeting with Jammeh did not go down well with many Gambians, including the Gambia Bar Association which felt it exhibited solidarity with Jammeh.

### *Appeal to ECOWAS through Madam Sirleaf*

Jammeh's frequent anti-western rhetoric included the phrase 'I will never bow down before any human being'. This time he did, not to a westerner but in a direct appeal to former Liberian president and chairperson of ECOWAS, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, in a telephone conversation aired on national television. Jammeh's appeal was for ECOWAS, through Madam Sirleaf, to facilitate judges from Nigeria and Sierra Leone to deliberate on the petition, which he believed was the only way to resolve the crisis. He greeted Madam Sirleaf with the Islamic 'Asalamu Alaikum' and 'Walaikum Salam', literally pleading for help. Madam Sirleaf expressed anger and disappointment over Jammeh's decision to televise the conversation (SMBC 2017), maintaining that the position of ECOWAS remained unchanged, and that Jammeh had to leave power (GNN Liberia 2017).

ECOWAS remained resolute that Jammeh must respect the constitution and the will of the Gambian people by handing over power when his term ended. The trend of ECOWAS interventions in political crises in members states (Guinea, Mali and particularly Cote d'Ivoire), was to take a firm stance on removing Jammeh through military intervention. The Gambian army was small (approximately 1 200 personnel) compared to Nigerian and Senegalese forces on standby to pursue the ECOWAS mandate (Hartmann 2017). However, the restoration of democracy was achieved through the threat of force rather than physical force.

Barrow was already in neighbouring Senegal where preparations were being made for his inauguration at the Gambia Embassy in Dakar. He had earlier attended the France-Africa Summit in Mali where discussion was being held on the crisis in the country, and was rushed to Dakar when Jammeh's fall from grace was imminent. Barrow's inauguration in Dakar was most unusual for a president who had won an election. This may have been the first presidential inauguration both in Africa and beyond, where an elected president was sworn in on foreign soil, albeit in the national, in this case Gambian, embassy.

### *Declaration of a State of Emergency*

After exhausting all measures to stay in power, Jammeh's rubber-stamped National Assembly offered him a last-minute lifeline. Side meetings were reportedly held

before taking the matter to chambers. A motion for a State of Emergency was swiftly passed in parliament by his party members and Jammeh himself made the declaration on state television.

The ‘unwarranted external meddling’ in The Gambia’s domestic affairs was cited as the reason for the state of emergency. This was a desperate effort to extend his grip on power until May when judges from Nigeria and Sierra Leone were due to rule on his petition at the Supreme Court. Paradoxically, before the presidential vote Jammeh had willfully delayed filling Supreme Court vacancies in a calculated bid to block likely coalition appeals contesting the election outcome. This plan backfired, and in the end Jammeh was responsible for his own political demise.

### *The ‘Billion-Year’ Leader Finally says Goodbye*

Public statements issued by civil society organisations and public institutions uniformly condemned Jammeh’s attempts to thwart the will of the people, urging him to peacefully hand over power. The culture of fear and silence that had characterised Jammeh’s 22-year rule had ended and people could now speak openly without fear of retribution.

Cabinet ministers added their voices to further deepen his isolation. First to abandon the camp was his Information minister and government spokesperson, Sheriff Bojang, who resigned and fled to neighbouring Senegal in ‘protest against Jammeh’s refusal to accept defeat’ (BBC 2017). But state television announced that Bojang had ‘absconded’, and as a result he was relieved of his cabinet appointment and replaced by Seedy Njie, a nine-day-minister.

Other ministers – those for Youth and Sports, Finance and Economic Affairs, Tourism and Culture, Health and Social Welfare, Trade, Environment as well as Foreign Affairs – all resigned within a period of two weeks (*The Point* 2017). Last to leave were the Higher Education minister and vice president whose resignations came only hours before Jammeh’s mandate ended (Akwei 2017). Fatou Lamin Faye, a Jammeh loyalist and minister of Basic and Secondary Education remained to the end, earning her the title of ‘enabler’. Jammeh’s isolation was again boosted when Gambian ambassadors added their support to the growing demand for him to step aside. First to urge him to step down was then ambassador to the United States, Sheikh Omar Faye, whose call had a snowball effect as Jammeh recalled these diplomats (SMBC 2017).

Jammeh had initially promoted several military officers. Of these, Chief of Defence Staff Ousman Badjie first expressed support for Barrow when Jammeh conceded defeat but later shifted allegiance when he rejected the results. From the capital Banjul to Serrekunda, the streets were barricaded with military hardware designed to intimidate civilians, which it did. Jammeh was ready to fight but his

ill-equipped, poorly trained and numerically inferior troops were no match for ECOMIG forces already on standby for such an eventuality. Thousands of civilians had already left the country for neighbouring Senegal and Guinea for fear of a deadly intervention with uncertain consequences.

Alpha Conde and Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz of Guinea and Mauritania respectively, intervened in a last bid to persuade Jammeh to step down by Friday 20 January 2017, 12:00 GMT, or face a regional military intervention to flush him out. As the deadline approached, Jammeh reportedly requested a four-hour extension which was granted (16:00 GMT). An exile destination was finally secured for him in Equatorial Guinea, home of another despot, Teodore Obiang Nguema Mbasogo. In the end, Jammeh made his final address to the nation and agreed to step down in the 'interest of peace and love for country'. This was precisely the outcome Jammeh had anticipated and the reason for a manufactured or induced political crisis. Jammeh precipitated the crisis to save his skin and momentarily elude prosecution.

On Saturday 21 January ex-President Jammeh together with his wife, son and probably his daughter, his mother (since deceased), and military cronies, left in a heavily guarded motorcade for the Banjul International Airport where they boarded a plane into exile. The airport was already crowded with two camps: his sympathisers and opponents. His emotional supporters could not contain their tears when a ceremonial parade was observed and Jammeh boarded the plane, clutching a copy of the *Quran* which he kissed, waving to the crowd. Finally, the 'billion year' despot headed to Equatorial Guinea – but not before fleeing with a fleet of luxurious cars and fleecing the state and Gambians of millions of dollars.

### WHY DID JAMMEH LOSE THE ELECTIONS?

The Gambia's unprecedented 2016 elections prove that a determined voter population can unseat incumbents on the continent. It reveals that polls instead of popular uprisings and military coups can be used to replace long-standing dictators who intend to rule 'for a billion years'. Several important factors contribute to the sudden and surprising presidential election result which abruptly ended Jammeh's political career.

#### *Persistent Human Rights Violations*

A blood-tainted human rights record that included killings, torture, enforced disappearances of dissidents and those suspected of opposition to his rule ranked highest among factors that led to Jammeh's political unpopularity and ultimate demise. This is probably an influential factor in the unification of the opposition,

given what was at stake should Jammeh secure another term. He systematically made The Gambia hell for journalists, human rights defenders and intellectuals who might expose the brutal nature of his rule. In contrast to Jawara, whose regime has been praised for its good human rights record, Jammeh has been accused of substantial human rights abuses which were directed not only against media critics and other professionals, but even dissidents within the security forces (Perfect 2010). Similarly, civil and political rights were routinely breached, with hundreds jailed, disappeared, or killed. Political detainees and critics of the president and the regime were often subjected to murder, torture and other inhumane and degrading treatments carried out by a death-squad known as the Junglers (Human Rights Watch 2015).

Jammeh's brazen misuse and abuse of the constitution further signalled that the country was heading in the wrong direction. His greatest mistake was when he threatened to kill anyone who opposed his rule by voting for him in 2016. As his rule continued, Jammeh became complacent, claiming that he was loved by Gambians. Undoubtedly, the grave human rights violations that took place during his 22-year rule significantly contributed to his political undoing.

### *Attack on the Mandingos*

Leading theoretical viewpoints on African politics suggest ethnic allegiance as an underpinning factor for political behaviour, with elections as forums for ethnic censuses (Batty 2010). Ethnicity has been widely considered a hinderance to political and economic development in post-colonial African states, a view advanced by nationalist arguments (Thomson 2010) as political leaders have used ethnicity as a tool to garner political support, by playing one group against another. Accordingly, ethnic politics has been considered a threat to democratic consolidation in Africa with victory for one group seen as a defeat for another (ibid.).

Although Jammeh had played the ethnic card in previous elections, it was widely manifested in the 2016 presidential elections, especially before and during the campaign period. In a political rally in Tallinding on 3 June 2016, Jammeh threatened to kill the Mandingos one-by-one and place them 'where even a fly cannot see them', referring to them as 'enemies' and 'foreigners' (Hultin, Jallow, Lawrence & Sarr, 2017 p. 4). Jammeh singled out Mandingos for ridicule and insults out of fear that they were his biggest enemy bent on 'opposing his rule and destabilizing the country'. In a country where the Mandingos constitute close to 35% of the populace, he may have committed his biggest political blunder. An elderly Mandingo man in his 70s said he had been voting for Jammeh since 1996, but could not wait to deny him his vote in December (personal conversation 2017).

Certainly, many other Mandingos were inspired to vote against Jammeh for fear of persecution if he were to win another term. Jammeh swore there would never be a Mandingo-led government in The Gambia, a statement which equally angered many Mandingo voters. Some jubilant supporters in Tallinding after the coalition victory were heard singing, '*Yahya Jammeh Mandinkolu mankeh ifulango ti*' (Yahya Jammeh Mandingos are not your age-mates), implying that he could not insult them and get away with it. This time Jammeh had played the ethnic card unsuccessfully. The Gambia is no exception to the fact that ethnicity can determine election outcomes in Africa.

### *Migration*

The mass movement of Gambian youth to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea also had an effect on the election. Many mothers felt that the lack of economic opportunity in the country was a push factor for the often perilous 'back way', as it was known locally.

Economic hardship was not the only factor in this movement of young people; so too was the unfavourable political climate. Embiricos (2016, p. 1) argues that it is difficult to maintain the difference between a refugee and other irregular migrants who come from The Gambia 'where a lack of democracy is accompanied by governance failures impacting the entire country on a political as well as economic level'. The large number of young Gambians leaving the country is illustrated by these facts: Gambian asylum applications reportedly rose by 198% between 2013 and 2014. Equally, Gambian nationals made up 5% of the total 153, 850 migrants who arrived in Italy by sea and 10% of Italy's asylum applications in 2015 alone (ibid.).

Mass youth movement was a motivating factor for the candidature of Dr Isatou Touray. Aside from the brutal treatment of the opposition and the authoritarian nature of Jammeh's rule, 'the massive rise in migration by desperate citizens' concerned Touray (Hultin et al. 2017, p. 5), observing:

Horrorifying personal testimonies by asylum-seekers fleeing politically motivated prosecutions, ethnic persecution, gender-based violence, and state-sanctioned homophobia, became a source of national embarrassment. While migrant success stories were once a source of pride, many voters recognized that only Jammeh's departure could stem the exodus.

Touray called for opposition parties to support her in order to end dictatorship in The Gambia (Foroyaa 2016). The mass movement of young Gambians across

the Mediterranean was motivated by both economic and political factors. This supports the theory that unstable political environments can be a push factor in migration and a decisive factor in African elections, which could dislodge incumbents from power.

### *Jailing the UDP Leadership*

Throughout Jammeh's rule the opposition was a target. On 16 April 2016, Ousainou Darboe and other executive members of the UDP were arrested following the killing of the party's youth leader, Solo Sandeng, allegedly by state security agents. The armed/paramilitary wing of the police, the Police Intervention Unit (PIU), arrested him, together with the party leadership, on the streets of Kairaba Avenue as they left his compound. In September 2013, three years prior to Darboe's arrest and incarceration, Amadou Sanneh, Alhaje Sambou Fatty and Malang Fatty of the UDP, together with Bakary Baldeh, a commissioner of oaths, were arrested and detained incommunicado for a month at the NIA Headquarters in Banjul. Sanneh was the party's treasurer at the time and would later become finance minister in the Barrow government. The four were accused of sedition because of their involvement in writing a letter supporting the political asylum application of Malang Fatty, which had the letterhead of the UDP (Human Rights Watch 2015).

Darboe was sentenced to a three-year prison term with 19 others. Jammeh had hoped this would finally silence him and reduce the party's chances of victory in the forthcoming presidential election. Instead, it triggered a mounting wave of discontent both within the opposition camp and among voters, especially the youth. It was arguably a catalyst in the formation of the seven-party coalition and a blessing, in that Darboe was excluded from the inter-party talks. This legal manoeuvre made the inter-party talks and unification less acrimonious, unlike NADD's disintegration in 2006 for which Darboe was arguably responsible.

By 2016, Darboe could not reject the formation of the coalition on legalistic grounds. As leader of the UDP, Darboe was often dictatorial and would countenance no one other than himself, and certainly not his arch-opponents Omar Amadou Jallow (OJ) or Halifa Sallah to lead the 2016 coalition. With Darboe in prison, the opposition found it less of a burden to strike a deal for a united front (BBC 2016).

### *Declaration of an Islamic State*

African leaders started to use Islam as a political tool as far back as the medieval period. After the decolonisation of the continent, the new version of manipulating

Islam and Islamic symbols became widely known; in the case of The Gambia, it began with the formation of a political party, the Gambia Muslim Congress (Nyang 1984). President Dawda Jawara was a Muslim who converted to Christianity and reconverted to Islam, mainly to appeal to the majority Muslim voters (Darboe 2004). Yahya Jammeh has been described as the ‘master monopoliser of Islamic symbols’ throughout his rule. He started by building a mosque in the grounds of State House and developed cordial relations with Saudi-trained scholars who preached the Wahabbi version of Islam. Always appearing in a white Muslim dress with a long prayer beads in his hands, Jammeh branded himself a pious Muslim (ibid.).

In a December 2015 meeting in the coastal town of Brufut, Jammeh declared The Gambia an Islamic State, a decision he said was in line with the country’s religious and cultural values. This was political suicide. In a multi-religious society such as The Gambia, declaring it an Islamic State a year into the polls was both unpopular and imprudent. Though Christians constitute only about 10% of The Gambia’s population and are less dominant politically and socially than they were immediately before and after independence, they nonetheless continue to wield considerable influence. Jammeh’s decision was all the more bizarre because he had enjoyed considerable support among voters. The political backlash from within the country and abroad was immediate and this move was unequivocally condemned. Whether the country would practice the strict version of *Sh’aria* or a moderate one remained unclear at the time of his declaration. He back-pedalled on his rhetoric when he urged people of other religions, specifically Christians, to practice their faith.

Jammeh later issued an executive directive that all female civil servants must cover their heads while at work, a directive that was unpopular with many Christians in the country. It became clear that he might have been serious in his attempt to transform The Gambia into a fully-fledged Islamic State. Such pronouncements only deepened the rift between Jammeh and members of the Christian community who were furious about this declaration (*Evangelical Focus* 2016). The only way to secure their faith and presence in the country was, they felt, to deny Jammeh their votes and support.

### *Attack on Women*

Jammeh’s use of vulgar statements was directed not only to Mandingos, but also to women. In one meeting in the capital Banjul, Jammeh apparently advised them to desist from skin bleaching. He claimed women could bleach their entire body ‘except one part’ which both he and the women knew, meant their genitals (GRTS 2016). Clearly, this statement did not go down well with many women who showed their displeasure by voting against him.

### *Opposition Unification*

In their article on 'Elections under Authoritarianism', Ghandi and Lust-Okar (2009) argue that opposition parties cannot compete with the incumbent in offering material incentives to voters. The fundamental question they ask, is if material inducement cannot sway voters to vote for the incumbent, what factor(s) must compel them to vote for the opposition without expecting material incentives? They argue that ideological underpinnings could be a factor. However, a shift from the status quo and the expectation that a united opposition could bring about the much-needed change by putting an end to a dominant-authoritarian system could be factor for opposition victory in authoritarian regimes. Perhaps the biggest factor in Jammeh's electoral defeat was the makeshift unity of opposition parties. Having experienced numerous failures in the past, the leadership finally grasped the urgency to put aside party and personality differences and work toward unseating Jammeh through the ballot box. At a seven-party convention on 16 October 2016, an agreement was reached and a standard-bearer elected to face what became arguably the most highly contested post-coup elections in the country's election cycle. Undoubtedly this sign of unity was a landmark achievement in the struggle to unseat Jammeh and his APRC government.

However, behind opposition unification there were reports that Jammeh's personal body guards had turned against him. Barely four months before the elections, they entered his party's headquarters and burnt 300 000 or more fake voter's cards said to be illegally acquired for his supporters from Casamance, southern Senegal. Jammeh's APRC party national mobiliser at the time and former mayor of the Kanifing Municipality, Yankuba Colley, was said to have been involved in acquiring these cards and had a secret meeting with Jammeh to report to him (BBC Documentary 2019). Little did Jammeh and his political cabal know that a trap had been set for them. There was no way that Jammeh could replace these cards as the IEC had already concluded the replacement of voters' cards. Any attempt to do so would raise the alarm about his plan. Indeed, he was complacent enough to show the world that he could not be removed from power through elections.

### *Social Media and the Diaspora*

The massive and intense social media campaign launched by diasporan Gambians significantly contributed to the outcome of the December 1 election. In Facebook pages, WhatsApp groups, online radios and newspapers, they launched a relentless campaign to expose the ever-increasing human rights violations in the country. The use of these platforms also challenged and disrupted APRC

campaign narratives that saturated state-controlled media outlets. Fadera (2016, p. 45) observes:

While the ruling APRC enjoyed limitless unfettered access to public media, the nation's only television broadcaster (*Gambia Radio and Television Services*) and the biggest daily newspaper (*Daily Observer*), essentially a propaganda tool for the regime, other parties didn't have any option but to make the most out of digital platforms.

The role of conventional media, including online radio stations and newspapers run by Gambian dissidents in the diaspora, was momentous. They set up an online crowd-funding project, *GoFundMe*, and within 24 days raised over \$50 000 in support of the opposition campaign to unseat Jammeh. The need to raise funds was emphasised by an ECOWAS pre-election assessment mission as a means to equal the 'vast resource imbalance' between the incumbent President Jammeh and the opposition. This proved decisive in the 2016 presidential election outcome (Sanyang & Camara 2017).

### *On the Spot Counting*

This was probably the most crucial factor in avoiding a rigged election on voting day. It could have been an attempt by Jammeh to demonstrate to the world that, contrary to numerous allegations of fraud, elections throughout his presidency were free and fair; but instead turned out to be another political error on his part. Ceesay (2016, p. 2) sums it up thus:

Jammeh's defeat in the polls is not only due to a unified and emboldened opposition, a massive social media campaign by Gambian dissidents in the Diaspora as well as a disgruntled and youthful population. It is also the result of Jammeh's attempts, partly because of complacency, to minimally reform the electoral system by introducing 'on the spot counting'. The transparent and efficient nature of this system inhibited any attempts of electoral malpractice that would have led to a different outcome.

### CONCLUSION

Yahya Jammeh's departure from power was a milestone achievement in the struggle to end dictatorship in Africa. It is a shining example as well as a textbook case study of how a brutal dictator was shown the door without a drop of blood being spilled. Despite death threats against IEC officials, the chairman Alieu Momar Njie ensured that the December 2016 presidential poll was executed with

utmost professionalism. The conduct of the elections speaks to the bravery and tenacity of Gambians in ending 22 years of a military-turned-civilian dictatorship in this tiny West African nation, confirming that Jammeh's blatant disregard for human rights and constitutional order was untenable. Opposition unification and especially diaspora involvement at the most crucial junctures were indispensable factors for Jammeh's exit from The Gambia's political scene. A determined ECOWAS and Senegal's resolve were also crucial factors in Jammeh's ousting, endorsing the significance of international, regional and state cooperation in averting chaos. The December 2016 polls and preceding political organisation offer valuable lessons to other countries in a continent still mired in dictatorship and political transitions.

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