

Culture, Religion, & Democracy in The Gambia: Perspectives from Before and After the 2016 Gambian Presidential Election

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The Gambia is the smallest country in West Africa, surrounded on three sides of its territory by Senegal. In the West, the River Gambia, which ultimately serves as the map of the country, joins the Atlantic Ocean. The Gambia was once a colony of Great Britain. The British founded the capital, Banjul, in 1816 as a strategic base point for the abolition of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The country has a total area of 4,363 square miles (11,300 square kilometers) and a population of 1.8 million people. The Gambia obtained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1965 with Dawda Kairaba Jawarra as the nation's first president. His regime lasted for twenty-two years, until Yahya Jammeh overthrew him in a coup on July 22, 1994. By any measure, the 2016 presidential election in The Gambia was historic; President Jammeh lost the popular election, and by January 21, 2017, he stepped down and went into exile. In this essay, I will first lay out my thinking before the unthinkable happened, before Gambians used the voting booth to oust a sitting dictator, and the dictator let it happen.

THE PERSPECTIVE BEFORE THE ELECTION

Religion has always been an important component of Gambian people's lives. Ninety percent of the population practices Islam, 8% Christianity, and 2% indigenous beliefs (those worshipping gods).¹ However, even though the majority of Gambians are Muslims, there has always been a history of religious tolerance in The Gambia, and ethnic and inter-cultural harmony have been the strongest unifying forces for The Gambian people.

Near the end of 2015, Gambian President Yahya Jammeh declared on state television, "In line with the country's religious identity and values, I proclaim Gambia as an Islamic state. . . . As Muslims are the majority of the country, The Gambia cannot afford to continue the colonial legacy."² This statement by President Jammeh gained attention around the world. Many Americans asked me if this meant that The Gambia would become a fundamentalist country like Iran. My aim is to convince you that any politically motivated strategy whose agenda is to transform moderate Gambian Islamic principles and

beliefs towards extremism is likely to fail, even if such a policy is backed by political threats and intimidation. Gambians would hold on to their moderate Islamic beliefs separate from politics and distance themselves from religious extremism. They would also safeguard religious tolerance with other minority Christian groups.

Two important concepts, religion and culture, will form the basis of this analysis. For the purpose of clarity, I define religion as a spiritual obligation, characterized by a connection of faith and beliefs carried out through prayers or offering services to seek God's blessing. Culture, on the other hand, is a people's way of life and provides mechanisms in which individual beliefs, values, and identities are learned and transferred from one generation to another. Culture is the primary bedrock upon which the foundation of a society is formed, and for any religion to thrive, its characteristics must be derived from practices that are acceptable within the popular culture. Hence, culture and religion reinforce and strengthen one another in the formation of an ideal society. The dilemma faced by people of the newly declared Islamic State of The Gambia is the struggle to protect the unique cultural identity, which holds moderate Islamic beliefs, amidst massive pressure from the politicians and other Islamist groups to transform the country into an Islamic state.

This provokes the question as to whether a religion can exist side by side with a pre-existing culture, especially if the fundamental principles of that religion significantly contradict the cultural beliefs and values of the people, in this case The Gambians. Is Islam tolerant of local beliefs that are not Islamic? My answer is no, but what is true is that religious extremism and violence do not occur in a tolerant society whose people do not subscribe to or uphold a culture of violent behavior. The Gambia has demonstrated an intricate pattern of blending cultural practices with Islamic religious beliefs, and that will make it difficult for extremist groups to flourish.

Following the government announcement of The Gambia as an Islamic state, questions were raised, like what would be the nature of the Islamic state, and under what jurisdiction would The Gambia be governed? Islamic states are for the most part ruled by theocracy, where Sharia law has replaced the conventional judicial system. The declaration of the Islamic state in The Gambia has raised questions about the protection of the rights of minorities, such as the Christian population whose religion is not Islam. Moreover, similar concerns were echoed by human rights groups, such as Amnesty International and Human Right Watch, warning that this could be another politically motivated strategy of using Islam to justify arbitrary detention and killings of opponents to President Jammeh's regime, as we have seen happen before. Arguably, there has been a growing pattern of political influence in the Islamic development of The Gambia since the current Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction regime came into power in 1994. This policy has been implemented from one stage to another, and the

declaration of the Islamic state, even though surprising, was the final call as an attempt to forcefully transform Gambia into a theocratic state purposely for political gains.

First Wave of Islamization

Consequently, in order to make sense of how Islam and Islamic ideology came to The Gambia and become rooted in society, I must make a connection to historical factors, namely the Soninke-Marabou wars of the eighteenth century. The first waves of Islamization were led by extremist Islamic clerics who used force to convert Gambian people to Islam through the principle of jihad. Prominent individuals like Foday Sillah, Foday Kaba Dumbuya, Musa Mollah, Alpha Moloche, and Ma-Ba Jah waged holy wars in The Gambia and were successful in converting large segments of The Gambian population from their traditional beliefs into Islam.

The Soninke-Marabou Wars began in the 1850s and resulted in over a decade of civil war between the Marabou Islamists and the Soninke (traditional religious believers). The jihad was in part caused by ongoing resistance of the Soninke kings and their people to accepting the beliefs of Islam.³ As a matter of fact, the war that took place during this era brought tremendous loss of lives on both sides and led to massive suffering and displacement of a large segment of the population. Although the jihad was fought for religious purposes, there were tremendous political and economic components worth mentioning. The Islamists benefited from taxes and the sale of slaves in the territories they had controlled. Therefore, the impacts of the Soninke Marabou War in The Gambia resulted in the conversion of the majority of the people into Islam. However, when Islamists threatened those beliefs, the people resisted in defense of their traditional beliefs. A historical account that supports this claim is a story told about the resistance by the people of Jagneer (a local village in The Gambia). The Jagneer fought the jihadists, and when overpowered they committed suicide by dropping themselves into a well, preferring to die in defense of their cultural beliefs than allow capture or to surrender to the ways of Islam.

This display of bravery, resilience, and strength reinforces my argument that Gambian people have a history of rejecting externally induced social changes. Perhaps the Jagneer incident may have happened a long time ago, as critics may argue, but there are similar instances in which people have resisted foreign imported Islamic ideology, which has made this historical account much more relevant in The Gambian society today.

Second Wave of Islamization

The second wave of Islamization in The Gambia was the emergence of Islamic sectarian groups, which had dominated religious discourse in The Gambia over the course of several decades. Although support for sectarian Islam appears to be very low in The Gambia compared to other parts of the world,

the majority of Gambians do not identify themselves as followers of any particular Islamic sect. However, groups such as Tijania, Quadria, Mouride, and Ahmadya have managed over the years to mobilize significant followings in The Gambia, with an outstanding number of their disciples found among Senegalese immigrants. This is in part due to the geographic location of The Gambia inside the larger borders of Senegal, where these groups originated and had been institutionalized into the Senegalese culture. Therefore, the primary reason sectarian Islam was able to thrive in The Gambia without facing resistance by the people is because they preach and promote a moderate Islam. This allowed traditional customs, norms, and values to be blended within their sectarian identity and The Gambian popular culture.

Third Wave of Islamization

The third wave of Islamization in The Gambia came through a group of Islamists called the Markass movement. This group consisted mainly of people who, by virtue of obtaining scholarships, had studied Islam in Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Middle East. Their aim was to implement a strict and puritanical form of Islam whose ideologies reject traditional beliefs. They were to a larger extent influenced by the Wahhabi movement in Islam, which prohibited all cultural norms and values in The Gambia. The premise of this new, narrow ideology was to discard traditional scholars and common traditional practices under the guise of “reviving the true tenets of Islam” and protecting the concept of monotheism.⁴ This branch of Islam encouraged their followers to interpret the holy books for themselves and act on their interpretations in light of their own understanding. Anyone who did not profess to this new ideology was considered outside of the realm of Islam, an apostate, disbeliever or idolater, which thus made the shedding of their blood and confiscation of their wealth permissible. It is from this faction of Islam that the Markass drew their allegiance, and their enthusiasm enabled them to travel from village to village, town to town, and house to house to spread the message and promote this puritanic Islamic belief.

According to the Markass in The Gambia, women and men should not be allowed to shake hands if they are not close relatives. Women should follow a special dress code to cover their heads and prevent their bodies from being exposed. All forms of social gatherings involving men and women, where music is played, were heavily criticized and regarded as sinful. Cultural traditions, such as naming ceremonies, festivals, or initiations commonly practiced in The Gambia, were regarded as *Haram* (an Arabic word meaning sinful). Any form of romantic premarital relationship involving boys and girls, or men and women, has been regarded as improper and leading to hell in a handbasket.

The extremist Islamic ideology advanced by the Markass has not only challenged fundamental Gambian moderate Islamic beliefs, but has also deliberately attempted to remove the traditional norms

and values of The Gambian people altogether and replace it with Islamic extremism. The clashes of ideological orientation that emerged between Markass and Gambian elites succeeded in changing public opinion against the Markass. These efforts, combined with the concerns of mainstream Islamic organizations that encouraged their followers to distance themselves from the hatred and division promoted by the Markass, succeeded in stamping out Islamic extremism in The Gambia.

These consolidated efforts of Gambian elites, in collaboration with local religious leaders (*imam*), shifted public discourse against the Markass, which made it difficult for them to operate. Although they are still relevant in The Gambia and continue to function in isolation, their popularity has significantly dropped and many of their followers left the organization due to social pressure.

Fourth Wave of Islamization

The fourth wave of Islamization in The Gambia was the formation of the Supreme Islamic Council by the government to serve as an umbrella body that coordinates all Islamic related organizations in the nation.⁵ Even though The Gambia constitutionally is a secular state, this institution was created and given tremendous powers to regulate all activities regarding Islamic education and special holy prayers in the country. The establishment of the Supreme Islamic Council was the beginning of politically motivated strategy by the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction government to transform The Gambia into some sort of theocratic state in which the council was used as the regime's propaganda mouthpiece to implement domestic policy. In a country where the majority of people are Muslims, Islam was significantly used to justify persecution of political opponents to attract public consensus around it in support of government actions. A case in point was the arbitrary execution of nine prison inmates by the government in 2012, which was supported by the Supreme Islamic Council as a practice acceptable to Islam, even though these victims were never tried under Islamic law.

A similar instance, in which the government pursued its political agenda by using the Council's powers, was on national prayers marking the end of Ramadan (the Muslim holy month of fasting). The government-controlled Council came up with a single day to be observed for such national prayers, and opposed other people praying on different dates as they chose. Compliance with this policy was strictly enforced and Muslim religious leaders (Imams) who had failed to adhere to these government-imposed directives, enforced through the Supreme Islamic Council, were rounded up and jailed. In some instances those who managed to escape ended up in exile.

Similarly, in 2013, The Gambian government changed the working week to four days, from Monday to Thursday, citing Friday as an important day to be reserved for prayer. This decision was consistent with the working days in most Muslim countries and goes to show a pattern of gradual transformation of The Gambia from secular values to Islamic rule. Therefore, the above-mentioned

political influences in Islamic development of The Gambia for the past twenty years are clear indications of government desire for the establishment of the fearful Islamic state. Hence, the decision that followed, leading to the declaration of the “Gambia as an Islamic state,” should therefore not be surprising.

The problem with The Gambia is not that the country needs Islamic laws to bring effective governance. Any argument presented in support of this claim would be a tangent from the main problem that is affecting the country. The Gambia is an example of a country that has so much potential to transform into an enviable modern state, but it is locked up in a leadership crisis. For the country to develop, it will need strong leadership that will uphold the principles of democracy and constitutionalism, as well as guaranteeing the freedom of expression to its people. Where independent reasoning is stifled, human imagination and creativity cannot be assured. This leads to massive ignorance by the populace and creates a fertile breeding ground for extremist and radical ideologies to thrive. Henceforth, the idea of an Islamic state in The Gambia will be a politically divisive strategy that could provide ways for extremist groups to operate. This is likely to create violence and chaos in the society, as we have seen happen in other parts of the world.

The Gambia may be at a crossroad, considering the serious political rhetoric coming out of it. Against all odds, we are confident that Gambian people will apply their objective wisdom in ensuring that any politically motivated plan to divide the country along religious lines is rejected. The pressure the people exerted on the government over the issue of women civil servants wearing veils to work resulted in the cancellation of this policy and provides strong evidence in support of such rationality. Thus, the plan to transform The Gambia into an Islamic State will operate in principle but not in practice.

THE PERSPECTIVE AFTER THE ELECTION

In the history of the country, there has never been a democratic transfer of power brought on by the ballot box. For the people of The Gambia it was the rebirth of democracy, like the cleansing of the morning sun, when Jammeh’s tyranny was surprisingly ended.

On December 1, 2016, Gambians went to the polls to elect a new president. I had lost interest in the election, believing that it was just a way for the incumbent to consolidate his rule. Knowing how weak the opposition parties were, the possibility of a regime change through the ballot was unthinkable. Considering the surprising outcome of the electoral results, I must admit that my predictions were inaccurate. Jammeh’s party lost the election to the opposition coalition. This was the biggest surprise in Gambian political history since independence. The following day, December 2, the story became a major headline and The Gambian election results were the focus of the international media. After many years of controversy, I felt a sense of pride that my country was in the limelight for the right reasons this time. The victory of the opposition has not only ushered in a regime change, but it will reshape the political

landscape of The Gambia forever. Jammeh, who was surprised by his loss in the election, initially mustered the courage to phone the opposition candidate, Adama Barrow, to congratulate him for his victory. He also promised to facilitate the transfer of power according to the Constitution, dismissing all speculations that he would not step down. This happened amidst fears of post-electoral violence that could lead to civil war, as happened in Ivory Coast and some other parts Africa.

However, the excitement of these political developments was short lived. After one week, all hell broke loose and reality started to set in. Jammeh, who had previously accepted defeat, suddenly retracted his statement and went on national television to publicly reject the results of the election. He argued that the official body mandated to organize elections in The Gambia, the independent electoral council, had rigged it against him. He called for a new election. As my friend clearly expressed on her social media page, “all of a sudden the mask went off, and the man has shown us his true colors.” I may have been wrong in my first prediction, but I never believed that Jammeh would step down peacefully and transfer power without any means of coercion. Most dictators will only agree to organize elections when they are confident they will win. Therefore, it is a complete anomaly to think that Jammeh would surrender. The idea of a peaceful transfer of power never occurred to me, and I prepared for the worst to come.

Government, as Rousseau argued, is a social contract between the people and those in the position of power.⁶ National sovereignty lies in the hands of the people, who through democratic means have the capacity to choose their leaders in a free and fair election. Jammeh had served in this capacity as president of The Gambia because his legitimacy to govern emanated from the people. Although Jammeh always claimed that devils, called *gins*, voted for him, it was truly The Gambian people. Arguably, even if there was a possibility that *gins* had voted for Jammeh’s party (the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction) in the past, this time around it was evident that those *gins* had failed because Mr. Barrow was elected President. Hence, Jammeh’s mystification of the position of power shows a clear ignorance of the principle of the social contract as the source of his political legitimacy.

The result of the December election not only showed the weakness of Jammeh’s perceived mysticism of his position of authority, but also powerfully demonstrated that politics in its basic form is a social contract. Only through the people can a regime change be affected. The mystification of the presidency has played out in Jammeh’s favor because it made Gambians believe that elections will never succeed in affecting a regime change. The paradox, however, is that his agreement to conduct a free and fair election in The Gambia backfired, and ultimately led to his downfall.

The Soldiers of Allah Must Protect the President of Allah

In Jammeh, The Gambians had created a monster that they could not get rid of. This is why the country found itself in a post-electoral crisis. Jammeh solidified his rule using Allah as the source of

political authority, rather than the people. This spiritualization was aided by the ignorance of the poorly educated Gambian masses. With spiritualization and smart tactics of political framing using Islamic beliefs, Jammeh succeeded in convincing the people that Allah sanctioned his presidency. His argument that Allah alone would determine whether he would win or lose an election indicates in clear terms that he did not have any regard for a democratic process of free elections, much less for what the Constitution says about the peaceful transfer of power. As a dictator, these tactics worked out well for Jammeh in consolidating the political dominance of his party.

An important fact often ignored is that Jammeh did not assume power through elections; he came to power through a military coup d'état. In the previous election, his party's success was regarded as luck, and symbolized Allah's approval of his leadership rather than a mandate given to him by the people. This belief is strongly reinforced by religious leaders in The Gambia, and particularly the Supreme Islamic Council. In their sermons, the Council drove home the idea that leaders derive their authority to rule the people from Allah. Jammeh relied heavily on political Islam and deliberately weakened democratic institutions that would present a check on his leadership. He exercised a firm grip on all governmental agencies, thereby having a total monopoly on public policy. He was a classic example of a ruler like Louis XVI of France, and assumed the role of "I am the state, and the state is me."

Jammeh's claims that he was the president of Allah resonated well among many religious zealots as well as the majority of The Gambian people. Gambians are highly religious, and aside from the fear of retribution for criticizing Jammeh, they would not dare question some of his policies for fear of sounding as if they were going against their faiths. Jammeh got away with many insane and controversial policies his government instituted. In other words, his reliance on political Islam for the two decades of his leadership worked to his advantage in some respects, but also further distanced him from understanding and upholding constitutional rule in The Gambia.

Jammeh introduced laws to tighten his control over the electoral process. These measures were like chopping the branches of a tree but sparing the roots. Jammeh believed that he would always win elections. With the help of his rubber stamp national assembly, a series of laws were enacted to set the age limits for a presidential candidate and to require a deposit of one million Dalasi for any newly registered political party. These laws were carefully designed to target and cripple the opposition parties before going to the polls. The root of the "tree," which is the voting process, was not tampered. Jammeh was confident that his party would do what it has always done: win nationwide. However, the political pendulum had shifted in favor of the opposition candidates, who after many years of trials and failures succeeded for the first time in forming a coalition government. The victory for the opposition took not only Gambians by surprise, but the international community as a whole.

A Crisis in the Jola Hegemony: The Kanilai Big Tree Has Fallen

Why did Jammeh lose the election? What factors cost Jammeh his spiritual presidency? Did Jammeh and his team underestimate the strength of the opposition? How was it possible that they did not see this coming? While these questions have no easy answers, one obvious fact is that even if Jammeh's campaign advisers saw this coming, they would not have changed their strategy. If his advisers had faced him with advice on a change of strategy, they would have risked being jailed. Does this mean that Jammeh's tough-man approach to leadership was a contributing factor in his electoral defeat? Or perhaps, are there questions of policy issues that persuaded dissatisfied Gambians to get rid of him for Mr. Barrow? These answers are difficult to determine without conducting a survey of voters in The Gambia to statistically examine the most important issue the electorate attached to their voting preferences. This will be an interesting research project I intend to explore shortly.

One interesting fact from the campaign is that Mr. Barrow's victory was not an issue-based one because he did not offer any enticing or concrete policies he wanted to implement. He mentioned several priorities of his government, such as the economy, agriculture, and education, but never specified how he intended to achieve his goals in these sectors. To be fair to the opposition, they probably never dreamt of winning the election, much less of having coherent policy objectives to implement if they did win. The result of the political game had always been a zero sum in their disadvantage.

Why Did Jammeh Change His Mind after Initially Accepting Defeat?

This brings me to the big question that caused sleepless nights for everybody in The Gambia. Why did Jammeh refuse to step down after initially accepting defeat? There are several factors that can explain Jammeh's unwillingness to relinquish power. Key among those are the rationality approach, the alleged gross human rights abuses, Jammeh's inner circles, and the fear of post-presidency life.

First, the rationality approach theory focuses on the way Jammeh and his inner circles think and respond to political phenomena. The argument relies on the idea that people are rational actors in the way they make decisions. The assumption of rational behavior is that it is not just an intelligent behavior, but behavior motivated by a calculation of the advantages involved. It is consistent with Allison and Zelikow's findings in their 1999 analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis. They argued that, while rationality is important to understanding the behavior of individual political actors, it is also crucial that one can put himself in the shoes of another to examine his/her logic of reasoning.⁷

In other words, given all the possible alternatives available to him and his team, understanding what courses of action they would settle for requires an examination of the way Jammeh thinks. Politics is a zero-sum game, and the ultimate goal is winning. This means that any strategy that will yield a better payoff will ultimately guide the types of moves a political actor makes. Mathematically, Jammeh's party

lost in the game, but the changing tactics were an attempt to rewrite the rules and argue on the basis of the spirituality of his leadership. This was an intelligent approach: to deliberately create a fog in the midst of any logical explanation and to secure the best possible outcome for him and his supporters. It was an outcome that would guarantee Jammeh and his henchmen immunity from prosecutions for the alleged crimes committed during his twenty-two years in power.

When that failed, he shifted strategies and focused on his interpretation of the Constitution, which became the battleground for both parties as they interpreted the provisions of the law in ways that favored their political advantages. The situation became a constitutional crisis. One should not expect to teach an old dog new tricks of a game and become disappointed when the dog does not get it. The argument that Jammeh should understand the provisions of the Constitution and step down is refuted by the fact that the twenty-two years of Jammeh's rule in The Gambia had not been marked by constitutionalism. He ruled the country primarily by official pronouncements, which were transformed into law by his rubber-stamp national assembly, where his party had a comfortable majority.

Secondly, Jammeh's government is alleged to have committed serious human rights abuses. These alleged abuses include torture, imprisonment without due process of the law, and the disappearance of suspects under the regime's custody. He ruled The Gambia with an iron fist. Any dissenting view was mercilessly purged, resulting in many people fleeing from The Gambia. In April 2016, during a peaceful demonstration conducted by the supporters of the opposition who were demanding electoral reforms in The Gambia, security forces arrested and detained several United Democracy Party militants. The arrests resulted in the death of Solo Sandeng, a party activist, under government custody. These alleged crimes are one of the many reasons why Jammeh refused to step down. He was worried that the incoming administration would investigate and prosecute him for these crimes.

The third reason that Jammeh did not step down is because of the pressure from his inner circles. Jammeh's leadership in The Gambia was characterized by turning garbage into gold. This is the idea of bringing someone from nowhere, with no qualifications, and giving him/her a higher position of responsibility in the government. This was a smart system of political patronage in which Jammeh appointed people to ministerial positions as a way of buying loyalty in return for their willingness to shower him with praises of grandeur. In the security forces and the army, support for Jammeh came with hefty remuneration in the form of promotion to a higher military rank. Membership in the Green Boys, Jammeh's youth-wing military organization, served as an entry point into the army as a reward for support of his party. The various groups that have benefited economically under his administration were fearful of facing a life of economic uncertainty with the end of Jammeh's regime. They comprise a latent force, encouraging him to hang on and negotiate a better way out of this political situation so they can continue to have their share of the national cake.

Finally, Jammeh probably fears life after his presidency more than even death itself. Jammeh managed to grab the political jackpot in 1994 when he was twenty-nine years old. He comes from a humble family background, and for twenty-two years Jammeh found himself in a pool of wealth at a young age. This lifestyle is all that he knows. It is like the story of a homeless man who wakes up from sleep and finds himself covered with a pile of gold. To expect Jammeh to surrender power peacefully without a fight, knowing the kind of lifestyle he lived before, is unrealistic. Moreover, Jammeh is only a high school graduate. He does not have the financial security to support the kind of lifestyle he lived at the end of his presidency. In a telephone conversation with a Gambian media source, Jammeh's close business partner, Mr. Samba, disclosed that all of Jammeh's foreign assets are under the name of his wife and his children.⁸ There is no guarantee that he would be able to access these funds, or his properties in The Gambia that he acquired illegally, because they could be forfeited to the state by the new government. This alone is a strong determinant as to why Jammeh was not willing to step aside and allow the incoming administration to assume the office of the president. This refusal resulted in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) intervening militarily in The Gambia.

“The Senegalese are coming” was a widespread expression among Gambians during the looming ECOWAS military intervention, which aimed to restore democracy in The Gambia. Senegal, with its strategic location, was chosen to lead the ECOWAS mission. It was backed by the United Nations Security Council's resolution to enforce the December 1 election results. Just as the saying goes, a house divided cannot stand. This is also true for a divided military, which was not able to present a united force to confront the common enemy. As the intervention forces rolled their tanks into The Gambia, a faction within The Gambian army fled to the border and defected to join the ECOWAS forces. It became obvious that the soldiers of Allah were not ready to protect the president of Allah. When this news got to their commanders, it was apparent that any resistance would amount to committing suicide. All military barracks were instructed to surrender, and no bullets were fired. Jammeh was issued an ultimatum to vacate the state house. He finally went into exile in Equatorial Guinea, where he is currently residing.

A Polarizing Legacy of the Jammeh Regime in The Gambia

Jammeh's leadership legacy in The Gambia is subject to polarizing individual interpretations. While some regard Jammeh as a hero, others see him as a tyrant who suppressed and brutalized his people, showing no tolerance to dissenting or critical views. Politics, as Aristotle argued, is a master's art. Jammeh perfected this art by demonstrating the characteristics of a typical African leader, one who values the idea of a strong man more than strong institutions. Aside from all the obvious flaws during his twenty-two years of leadership, there were also some positive developments that his government successfully implemented.

During his term in office, Jammeh's government carried out massive infrastructure projects, building hospitals across all the regional centers in the country and bringing in Cuban medical doctors to assist in the delivery of health services in The Gambia. Jammeh's government established the first university in the country, constructed schools, and facilitated the people's access to education. He made girls' education a priority and instituted a government scholarship program that provided women with free access to secondary education. He also built roads and bridges across the country, connecting the city and metropolitan areas to facilitate the movement of the people from rural to urban areas. As a result of this project, he earned the name Babili-Mansa, meaning "bridge builder." These achievements make it more logical for Jammeh to have had a large support base among many Gambians.

Perhaps the retraction of his initial acceptance of defeat and challenging the credibility of the election results were fatal miscalculations that ruined his reputation. I have no doubt that Jammeh would have been praised as a hero and would have earned the respect of many, assuming he had stood by his initial acceptance of defeat. He missed this opportunity when he refused to respect the verdict of the people because of greed for power. He created a political crisis that led to a refugee crisis in The Gambia. His actions could hurt his party in future elections.

Democracy at the Rise of the Dawn: Will Gambia Succeed in This Direction?

Consequently, the clarion call is for a democratic Gambia, and all hopes are high for the opposition to deliver on these promises. Democratic values are not only about conducting elections and successfully voting out a dictator. Democracy is a way of life, and the most challenging aspect of The Gambian democratization process will be incorporating the nation's culture, beliefs, and values. Doing so will require questioning core Gambian beliefs and ways of life that are incompatible with the values of freedom.

Moreover, the majority of Gambians are Muslims. Many Islamic values contradict the principles of democracy. Whether The Gambia will reconcile such opposing ideological foundations will determine their success in democratization. My obvious concern, however, is that The Gambia will become another classic African democracy that is riddled with corruption, nepotism, and a breakdown of law and order. To put it more cynically, democracy as a system of government has now become a loosely defined concept used by states that practice the opposite of what it means to be a real democracy. Nevertheless, for The Gambia to succeed in this direction, pressing social, cultural, and political reform must be put in place to reconcile core Gambian beliefs. Until that is done, the attainment of democracy will be only a far-off dream.

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