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The Gambia

The Gambia (“Gambia”) is a small West African country almost entirely surrounded by Senegal. It underwent a historic transition of power after longtime authoritarian leader Yahya Jammeh unexpectedly lost an election in December 2016. A brief political crisis over Jammeh’s refusal to step down was resolved when a regional military intervention forced Jammeh into exile, enabling President-elect Adama Barrow to take office. Barrow’s inauguration contributed to a trend in West Africa in which heads of state are increasingly chosen through elections.

A political outsider who once worked as a security guard in London, President Barrow has overseen a significant improvement in Gambia’s governance and relations with the international community. Analysts warn that Gambia’s progress remains fragile, and that moves to enact reforms and prosecute abuses committed under the former regime could stoke tensions, particularly within the military.

U.S.-Gambia relations have warmed under President Barrow. Bilateral ties were previously strained due to U.S. criticism of Gambia’s poor human rights record and the involvement of U.S. nationals in a failed coup attempt against Jammeh in 2014. The Trump Administration has pledged new health and governance aid—though Gambia remains a minor aid recipient within Africa—and has invoked legislation enacted by Congress to impose targeted sanctions on Jammeh and his immediate family members.

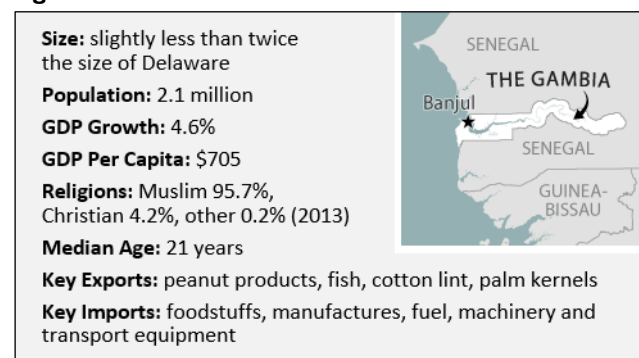
Background and the 2016 Elections

President Barrow’s surprise election transformed Gambian politics, which Jammeh had dominated since seizing power in a 1994 coup d’état. Jammeh won elections in 1996 and was re-elected three times—most recently in 2011, in polls that international observers described as neither free nor fair. An authoritarian and erratic leader, Jammeh sharply curtailed civil liberties and suppressed dissent.

Restrictions and a crackdown on protests marred the electoral environment in advance of the 2016 polls. With top figures in prison, Gambia’s fractious opposition ultimately coalesced around Barrow, a businessman and political newcomer. Barrow secured a narrow victory in polls that international bodies endorsed as fair and credible. Jammeh initially conceded defeat, but later rejected the results. Mediation by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) failed to resolve the impasse.

In January 2017, troops from Senegal, Ghana, and Nigeria entered Gambia under an ECOWAS mandate, at which point Jammeh agreed to resign and accept exile in Equatorial Guinea. Barrow, who had fled to Senegal out of concern for his personal safety, returned to take office in late January 2017.

Figure 1. Gambia at a Glance



Source: CRS. Data from CIA World Factbook and the International Monetary Fund (IMF); 2017 estimates unless otherwise indicated.

The Barrow Administration

Barrow’s agenda has centered on improving governance and human rights conditions and mending ties with the international community. He has pardoned scores of political prisoners and appointed a committee to revise the constitution. He also has sought to repatriate wealth that Jammeh allegedly hid overseas. With support from ECOWAS, the European Union (EU), and U.N. agencies, Barrow also has embarked on security sector reforms intended to curb impunity and reduce the size of the army. In late 2018, Barrow launched a Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparations Commission (TRRC), tasked with uncovering abuses by the former regime, awarding reparations, and recommending perpetrators for amnesty or prosecution.

Justice and reform initiatives could stir discontent or unrest—particularly if they are construed as targeting the Jola ethnic group (roughly 10% of the population), which formed Jammeh’s political base and constitutes a large proportion of the military. Police have arrested several members of the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), a tool of repression under the former regime, for the 2016 murder of an opposition figure. In 2017, a notorious former Interior Minister was arrested in Switzerland; he could face trial in Gambia or Switzerland. Gambian authorities also have brought charges against several military personnel, including soldiers accused of plotting to overthrow Barrow.

Jammeh has eluded prosecution despite calls from civil society that he face trial. Barrow has reportedly expressed readiness to demand Jammeh’s extradition, but officials in Equatorial Guinea, where he lives in exile, have pledged to reject such a request. Polling by Afrobarometer, a survey group, suggests that Gambians are divided about whether the government should pursue his prosecution. Jammeh could also face charges outside Gambia. In 2018, officials in Ghana agreed to consider new evidence concerning his alleged involvement in the 2005 killing of dozens of West African migrants, including Ghanaians, in Gambia.

President Barrow, who has pledged to serve a three-year transitional term and step down in late 2019, appears popular among Gambians. A Gallup poll released in August 2018 found that 72% of respondents approved of his leadership. Strong showings in 2017 legislative and 2018 local elections by the United Democratic Party (UDP)—the ruling coalition’s largest constituent party, which Barrow headed until resigning to run as a coalition candidate—suggest support for his government’s agenda. Nonetheless, some analysts warn that the ruling coalition could fracture amid criticism that Barrow has favored the UDP over other coalition partners. Barrow has reshuffled his cabinet, elevating UDP leader Ousainou Darboe to the vice presidency and stripping posts from other parties.

Human Rights Conditions

Barrow has overseen a substantial opening of political and social space. During Jammeh’s tenure, annual State Department human rights reports documented widespread abuses against citizens, including torture, arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearances, and indefinite detention. The regime targeted journalists, dissidents, and other critics. The international community expressed particular concern over discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons, including laws criminalizing homosexuality and abuses against individuals arrested on suspicion of being gay. One law imposed a life sentence for “aggravated homosexuality,” a category that included engaging in same-sex relations while having HIV/AIDS.

Under Barrow, journalists have returned from exile, and private media have burgeoned. Human rights challenges persist, however, including episodic abuses by security forces, harsh prison conditions, and trafficking in persons.

The Economy

Gambia is one of the world’s poorest states. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), per capita gross domestic product (GDP) was \$704 in 2017. Three-quarters of the labor force are engaged in agriculture, and Gambia is highly dependent on regional re-exports of manufactured and consumer goods, peanut and seafood exports, beach tourism, and remittances. The economy has experienced alternating growth and contraction in recent years, with a sharp slowdown in 2016 widely attributed to a poor harvest and drop in tourism during the political crisis. The IMF projects growth to exceed 5.4% in 2018 owing to a surge in public investment backed by increased donor engagement.

The government’s 2018-2021 National Development Plan prioritizes measures to stabilize the economy, enhance agricultural production, develop infrastructure, boost tourism, and foster private sector growth through regulatory reform. Key challenges include public debt valued at over 120% of GDP as of mid-2018, according to the IMF.

Foreign Relations and Donor Assistance

Gambia’s foreign relations under Jammeh were often tense. He pulled Gambia out of the Commonwealth in 2013, and alienated donors by claiming to have discovered a cure for AIDS. The EU halted development aid to Gambia in 2014 due to concerns over anti-LGBT legislation. Meanwhile,

ties with Senegal were strained due to Jammeh’s alleged support for Senegalese separatist rebels.

Barrow has reversed Jammeh’s decisions to withdraw from the International Criminal Court and the Commonwealth. Donors have resumed funding, with the EU, the World Bank, the IMF, and others pledging tens of millions of dollars in new aid and loans. EU interests partly focus on stemming the disproportionately high numbers of Gambians seeking to migrate to Europe via the Mediterranean. Gambia’s regional ties also have improved. Senegalese President Macky Sall visited Gambia in March 2018, and the two countries have signed several cooperative agreements. ECOWAS troops (most of them Senegalese) remained deployed in the country as of late 2018.

U.S. Relations and Assistance

U.S.-Gambian relations have markedly improved since Barrow’s election. In late 2017, President Trump reinstated Gambia’s eligibility for preferential trade benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA; Title I, P.L. 106-200, as amended), which President Obama terminated in 2014. Also in late 2017, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), which suspended Gambia from consideration in 2006 due to governance and human rights concerns, selected Gambia for an MCC Threshold program. The State Department also has lifted a suspension on visa issuances to Gambian state officials imposed in 2016 due to Gambia’s failure to issue passports to a reported 1,800 Gambians awaiting deportation from the United States; the Department cited progress toward accepting the deportees.

In 2017, the Administration imposed targeted financial and travel sanctions on former President Jammeh and associated businesses under an Executive Order (E.O.) pertaining to global corruption and human rights abuses. The E.O. is premised, in part, on authority granted by Congress under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (§1261 of P.L. 114-328). Separately, pursuant to §7031(c) of the FY2018 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 115-141) pertaining to foreign kleptocrats and human rights abusers, the State Department in late 2018 imposed a visa ban on Jammeh and his immediate family.

U.S. bilateral aid is limited to a small annual provision for International Military Education and Training (IMET). Gambia also has received periodic emergency humanitarian aid. State Department assistance totaled \$26,000 in FY2017, with \$150,000 annually requested for IMET in FY2018 and FY2019 to support security sector reform. The State Department and USAID, whose Administrator Mark Green visited Gambia in May 2018, also have initiated several small programs to promote health system strengthening, economic development, anti-corruption efforts, and civil society capacity, drawing on regionally- and centrally-managed funds. As of late 2018, Gambia hosted 91 Peace Corps Volunteers who implement projects related to agriculture, education, and health.

Tomas F. Husted, Analyst in African Affairs
Alexis Arieff, Specialist in African Affairs

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