

The Gambia: 1994 – present

Mr. Alieu Darboe*

February 2010

Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance
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*Mr. Alieu Darboe is a Freelance Consultant and Pro Democracy Activist living in Detroit, Michigan. He also attended ICNC's Fletcher Summer Institute for the Advanced Study of Nonviolent Conflict in 2006 at Tufts University, Boston, MA.

Conflict Summary:

Long before its ouster in 1994, the government of Sir Dawda Jawara had served too long and had grown increasingly inept and out of touch with the daily struggles of ordinary Gambians. Jawara led the country since independence on February 18, 1965, and his People's Progressive Party (PPP) had since dominated electoral politics in The Gambia. As IMF and World Bank-induced structural adjustment programs led to job losses and disgruntlement among many Gambians, political opposition began to resonate even louder among them.

When then lieutenant Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh and his military collaborators toppled the Jawara administration on July 22, 1994, street jubilations ensued based on the hope that this is the change—the revolution (as it was called)—that the country had been waiting for. Soon after the coup, a provisional ruling council was established to return the country to civilian democratic rule after two years in 1996. At the elections, the military leadership retired from the army and formed the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC) party and swept the polls. However, the election was highly controversial and largely viewed as rigged by opposition groups and international observers, including the US State Department and the European Union. Some politicians and political parties had also been banned from participating in the election.

After the 1996 election, it did not take long for the former junta leaders to start renegeing on their promise to stamp out corruption, nepotism and the flamboyant lifestyles of public servants at the expense of ordinary people. As civilian leaders, they became like their predecessors; in fact, many analysts and observers believe they are more corrupt and inept than the Jawara administration they toppled. The once-popular change of government became increasingly unpopular. Arbitrary arrests, press censorship, seizure of private properties without requisite court orders, harassment of former public servants and ordinary citizens have increased since the transition from military rule and this has galvanized many Gambians against Jammeh's regime.

In April 2000, a peaceful student demonstration was violently crushed, with several students killed and several others maimed by the country's military and police forces. Although the Jammeh government has remained popular, due mainly to high citizen illiteracy, political ignorance and fear, many citizens continue to challenge the administration's flagrant violation of human rights and the subversion of the independence of the judiciary. The political struggle has also now taken an international dimension with several important activists living in exile in Europe, neighboring Senegal and the USA. Due to heightened fear and intimidation, the regime's opponents have often resorted to seeking international condemnation of the regime. Citizens have largely been cowed and it seems only a few believe that they could eventually remove Mr. Jammeh from office democratically.

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Political History:

The Gambia is impoverished and it is the smallest country on mainland Africa. It was declared a British protectorate in 1888, and after prolonged struggles for greater suffrage and independence, it eventually gained internal self rule in 1965 and Sir Dawda Jawara became its first premier. The country became a full republic on April 24, 1970, with Jawara again as the republic's first president. By the mid-1970s, internal rifts began to develop within the ruling People's Progressive Party (PPP) and very soon, two parties, whose leaders were once cabinet ministers, splintered from the party. The first was the National Convention Party (NCP) of Sheriff Mustapha Dibba; the second was The Gambia People's Party (GPP) of Assan Musa Camara. There were a few other minor parties between 1975 and 1985, including Pap Cheyassin Secka's National Liberation Party founded in 1977. For the ensuing two decades, with the addition of a few other minor parties on the political landscape, NCP was the only party that posed any credible threat to PPP rule.

By the end of the second five-year development period of the new republic, many citizens became disillusioned and felt that the hope that independence once portended was gradually being dashed. Poverty deepened to levels that were worse than the pre-independence era while nepotism and corruption took root in higher up places in government. In 1981, this disgruntlement led to a violent attempted coup d'état led by KuKoi Samba Sanyang, allegedly assisted by some politicians such as Pap Cheyassin Secka of the NLP. The country had no standing army then, and so the president, who was stranded in London, acquired help from neighboring Senegal to quell the rebellion. Many hundreds were reportedly killed, several arrested and a few jailed for years. The Gambia and Senegal entered into a confederal agreement in 1982, which was dissolved less than ten years later. Gambians think that the confederation diminished the independence of their country because of perceived Senegalese domination of the treaty.

This period of political turmoil was also punctuated by massive economic hardships, especially during the years between 1984 and 1987. Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and their successor Economic Recovery Programs (ERPs) induced by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have caused havoc in the country. The civil service shed hundreds of jobs; without a vibrant private sector and the fact that the government is the single largest employer, the social costs of such a retrenchment exercise were grave and enormous. In 1987, the People's Organization for Independence and Socialism (PDOIS) formed. Although this was proportionally the smallest party at the time, they had a great impact, especially on the youthful and educated populations. Their *Foroyya* (a Mandinka term that translates as *being one's own master; a non-slave*) newspaper became a conduit for startling information about official corruption. Other newspapers like the *Point* (whose co-owner was killed in 2005), the *Daily Observer* (once owned by a Liberian Kenneth Best), and *The Gambia News and Report* all

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helped educate the citizens. Mr. Best was later deported to his war-torn country because his paper was deemed critical of the military government of Yahya Jammeh. This period, until the military coup of July 22, 1994 has been termed the period of awakening.

The awakening led some young military lieutenants led by Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh to topple Sir Dawda's 30 year-old government. The coup plotters suspended the 1970 republican constitution and banned all political activities and their Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council (AFPRC) ruled by military decree. Because the country under Dawda Jawara had been one of the most stable and democratic in the sub-region, the coup was unpopular internationally. Economic aid was suspended and this led to severe economic hardship. This greatly influenced the subsequent foreign policy of the regime established by the coup leaders. The traditional EU and USA friendships were kept cold for some time, with the regime often branding them as imperialists. Instead, the regime courted and made friendships with regimes such as that of Muammar Qaddafi of Libya, Fidel Castro of Cuba, Chavez of Venezuela, and Ahmedinejad of Iran.

During the two years transition to civilian administration, economic hardship increased and prices of basic commodities skyrocketed. The once-popular coup was becoming unpopular, and the aid withdrawal by certain EU countries and the United States increased pressure on the administration. Arbitrary arrests, press censorship, seizure of private properties without requisite court orders, and so-called commissions of enquiry to investigate former administration officials fueled anger against the military dictatorship. A National Consultative Committee constituted of the military council recommended that power be handed over to a democratically elected government in two years. In 1996, the coup leaders retired from the military and formed the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC) party to contest the September 1996 election. Having banned the pre-coup political parties with the exception of the People's Organization for Independence and Socialism (PDOIS), two new opposition parties were immediately formed to challenge the military junta officials: the United Democratic Party (UDP) of lawyer Ousainou Darboe and The National Reconciliation Party (NRP) of Hamat NK Bah, a hotelier. The election was close and tense, with accusations of rigging from both domestic and international observers, but Jammeh's party was declared the winner of the presidency and a supermajority on the legislative seats.

The ban on the PPP and NCP political parties were lifted when the notorious decree 89 was abrogated after intense domestic and international pressure. The NCP allied with President Jammeh and the former ruling PPP joined other opposition forces to challenge Jammeh's rule. The period after the 1996 and 2001 elections (which were also won by the incumbent regime) witnessed the creation of a new political class; and very soon it became clear that the corruption and economic hardships that were the publicly stated reason for the 1994 military coup had re-emerged in the ranks of the Jammeh administration. Fleets of fancy cars and extravagant lifestyles began to turn citizens away from supporting the administration. The government

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became increasingly dictatorial and hostile to any form of criticism. Rampant arrests and abduction of political opponents and independent journalists became commonplace. Even some religious leaders who spoke against the government's corrupt and repressive measures have tasted its wrath. Police and military brutality was widely reported and soon NGOs, private legal practitioners, journalists and some students began to form all manners of organizations devoted to promoting democracy. However, the main opposition party, the UDP, boycotted the 2001 elections on grounds that the elections would not be free and fair.

In the third general election (2006) after the coup, with support and encouragement from diaspora Gambians, the political opposition in The Gambia realized that they needed to unite in order to pose any credible challenge to President Jammeh. This culminated in the formation of the National Democratic Alliance (NADD). However, the alliance partially collapsed over disagreements about who should lead the alliance and term limits if the alliance leader wins. The two main opposition parties UDP and NRP left NADD and formed their own coalition; while Jammeh won again amidst opposition rancor. In the election of 2006, fewer than half of all eligible voters voted, which was attributed to voter apathy, as well as inducements and intimidations of the ruling APRC party.

However, while the Jammeh administration has continued to perform poorly in the areas of human rights, good governance and democracy; the government achieved a lot in the areas of education and health care. They started well on agriculture and tourism (the two biggest sectors of The Gambian economy), but progress has halted or slid backwards, and Gambians farmers are now poorer than ever. While the economy grew due mainly to re-export trade, massive construction projects by the government and through banking services that have mushroomed in the country, actual poverty has increased since 1998. The cost of living is higher while average incomes have not risen in comparison to inflation.

The government under President Jammeh has never been stable and regular firing of ministers and civil servants are normal occurrences. There are reports that the president has hired or fired over 120 ministers since he came to power. Political patronage, corruption and mismanagement have become common too. With a weakened national opposition, Gambians look to their brethren abroad to help fuel change in the country. Online newspapers devoted to The Gambian predicament have grown in number and readership and reveal discontentment about the Jammeh regime. However, opposition to Jammeh and his APRC government has remained scattered, largely uncoordinated and in exile. The regime formed a parallel students union to countervail the once-active Gambia Students' Union (GAMSU), which led student protests in 2000. The government-controlled student union is called the National Patriotic Students' Association (NAPSA) and it was led by a sitting nominated member of the Gambian legislature, Mr. Seedy Njie. He (Mr. Njie) now acts as an adviser/mentor for the young leaders of NAPSA and still wields considerable influence over the group. GAMSU is now a ghost of its former self. The

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next round of elections is due in 2011 and 2012. While many continue to hope that the opposition will unite, the signs are not yet encouraging, and the country for now continues to live under the semi-authoritarian rule of President Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh.

Strategic Actions:

The Gambia is not new to nonviolent strategies to wrestle political power. In the early twentieth century, after the scramble for and partition of Africa, and the subsequent declaration of The Gambia as a British Crown colony in 1888, a handful of Gambians began to challenge colonial authority and fight for equal rights for Gambians. By this time, the pro-independence movement was strong in the other British-held colonies of the Gold Coast (Ghana), Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Educated Gambians had built links with leaders of independence struggles in these countries and soon established chapters of Pan-African organizations in The Gambia to fight for representation and eventual independence. They formed a branch of J.E. Casely Hayford's National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA) in The Gambia by forming a Representative Committee (GRC) in 1926. The GRC though, fell short of demanding the full suffrage as was being advocated by the congress in the Gold Coast. In 1927, under the leadership of Edward Francis Small, Gambians also became members of the League Against Imperialism (LAI) and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUC-NW). By this time, E. F. Small had also formed the Native Defensive Union in 1917, and then subsequently formed the Bathurst Trade Union, as well as spearheaded other political organizations and activities.

Trade unions and civic activist groups that are indigenous to The Gambia, like E.F. Small's Native Defensive Union and the Bathurst Trade Union originated from craft societies established as friendly and burial societies. But in 1921, the Carpenters' and Shipwrights' Society conducted the first recorded strike. After subsequent strikes by Small and his group in the late 1920s, union activities went into obscurity, until in 1937 when the Gambia Teachers Union was formed by M.E. Jallow. The Teachers' Union was more or less a bargaining organization for teachers' benefits and rights and so had no specific national political agenda. However, their insistence on certain rights for teachers influenced other civil society to advocate for and pursue some of their rights too. One very important achievement of these unions under the leadership of M.E. Jallow was when they assisted the opposition in 1965 in demanding a republican referendum. Britain had only granted partial independence in February 1965, as the British monarch retained the title of head of State. The opposition won the referendum but failed to build on their new momentum.

However, from the early- to mid-1970s, these unions became more militant and partisan in outlook. They organized several strikes, but the two most successful ones were held in July 1975 by the Gambia Workers Union and then in November 1976 by a group of workers at The Gambia Utilities Corporation. These later strikes were for wages and other worker-related

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economic incentives. In 1985, The Gambia Worker's Confederation was founded, and to a great extent remained the only union that demands political and economic justice for workers and citizens. It has since then been headed by Pa Modou Faal.

Students are the other most active civic group after the trade unions. The Gambia Students Unions (GAMSU)¹ and the National Union of Gambian Students (NUGS) led this charge. On April 10-11, 2000 GAMSU organized a large scale protest that threatened the Jammeh administration. The students demonstrated on April 10, 2000 to protest the alleged beating to death of Ebrima Barry at the hand of fire service officers in Brikama, Western Region. Barry was a secondary school student, whose teacher had told the fire service officers to intervene in disciplining him. Ebrima was reportedly beaten, tortured and later died. Apart from the outrageousness of the fact that fire service officers were asked to discipline a student, the government failed to properly investigate the matter. The GAMSU student leadership made demands and an autopsy report (which was widely believed to be a cover up) stated that Ebrima died of natural causes. A spontaneous student protest ensued at the Gambia College, where a Gambia Students' Union (GAMSU) sub-union existed.

While that was being discussed, a thirteen-year old school girl was allegedly raped by a uniformed paramilitary (intervention police) officer at the Independence Stadium, where an annual inter-schools sports competition was taking place. A doctor's examination confirmed the girl was raped and again, GAMSU pressed for answers. After a long delay to bring the paramilitary officers who were on duty at the stadium for the victim to identify her assailant, GAMSU requested a police permit to hold a public protest. This request was denied. Realizing it was their constitutional right to protest, the student leadership called its members to peacefully march toward the capital city of Banjul. They were viciously crushed by a mixture of police and military officers. Sixteen people died, including a Red Cross volunteer/radio journalist and a three-year old child (who was killed by what was reported to be a stray bullet). Fourteen students were killed and several others were injured. GAMSU, which at the time had branches all over the country, did not back down. Upon viewing the violent response of government to the protest of their colleagues in the city, students in the country's only boarding high school and several other rural towns launched their own protests on April 11; and like their colleagues, they were violently quashed and several hundreds of students were detained country wide.

Prior to the activities leading to the student massacre of 2000, GAMSU had stood for justice for students and society since its founding in 1967. In general, most student protests in The Gambia had been issue-focused on rising prices, teacher retrenchments, and political rights, but were not a broad based political challenge for greater democracy. Until 2000, GAMSU's biggest protest was held in 1977 by Gambia College students, but there were no reported killings. However, student leaders were expelled from school and many could not find employment with the government. But the GAMSU protests of April 10-11, 2000 took a different track. After being

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violently crushed in the streets, GAMSU continued to fight by taking its case to the courts to secure the release of its arbitrarily detained members and to further secure an injunction from the High Court against further government harassment. It also marked a high point in the partnership among private lawyers and human rights activists in The Gambia. Concerned citizens and professionals came together to put up a legal defense team for the students and soon these defense lawyers and their colleagues in the human rights activist groups, such as Amnesty International-Gambia, formed a group called the Coalition of Human Rights Defenders. Although some members of this group are now in voluntary exile, especially after one of its leaders was shot and nearly killed in front of his house, members of this group continue to be active defenders of human right in their individual professional capacities. However, the Coalition has been weakened by arrests and detentions of its members.

Apart from the unions, there used to be *vous* that demanded citizen rights and challenged government corruption. These were mainly neighborhood and social clubs that sometimes discussed and stood up for political issues. Members of such *vous*, like the Kent Street Vous, founded in Banjul in 1967, were disillusioned with the post-independence crop of Gambian leaders and were determined to make their own mark on the political landscape. Some even produced their own newsletters to spread their influence and one of its members, Momodou Momar Taal, was elected to the legislature.

The later stages of the independence struggle against the British were led by political parties formed and led by Gambians. By this time, so many workers rights had been won by E.F. Small's organizations and collaborators that people began to clamor for rights beyond just workers' rights. They began calling for total independence. Political Parties like The Gambia Muslim Congress, the United Party, and the Protectorate People's Society (which later became PPP), continued the works began by E.F. Small, M.E. Jallow and Momodou Garba Jahumpa. However, while benefiting from the works of Small and various labor organizations, the emergent politicians leading these political parties were resentful of Small's approaches; and soon after they gained political power, they tried to crush these unions.

The 1929 workers' strike led by E.F. Small and the Bathurst Trade Union, and his establishment of newspapers as voices for Africans against the colonial apparatus, marked watersheds in the Gambian nonviolent struggles for freedom and democracy. Although these struggles were tetchy and rancorous between the colonizers and Gambian activists, they were always nonviolent. The activities of these doyens and other compatriots are studied in Gambian history and social studies classes; and so the younger generation looks up to their legacy in awe and admiration. They think similar defiance could be held against the regime of Yahya Jammeh.

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A lot of the recent opposition to the Jammeh administration inside The Gambia comes from the UDP and some individual politicians like Halifa Sallah, who led NADD into the 2006 elections, and Omar A. Jallow, a former PPP minister, as well as a few other outspoken critics. These critics and the UDP occasionally defy undemocratic government orders, which often lead to their persecution. Opposition to the Jammeh regime is fiercest among diaspora Gambians, due mainly to the difficulties in political organizing within the country. The opposition is reviled by the Jammeh administration and it is vehemently suppressed. In addition, many recent diaspora Gambians are political refugees who live in voluntary or forced exile in Europe and the United States. These exiled journalists and politicians and former military personnel, are indeed fiercely loud critics of the regime in Banjul. Those back in the country risk arbitrary arrests, intimidation and sometimes torture, should they openly criticize the government.

These political refugees have helped to form several Gambian or Gambia democracy support groups to galvanize international opinion against the Jammeh regime. Bold protests have been staged in the US and the UK especially, as recently as October 2009, when seven journalists were detained, one of them nursing a seven month-old baby. The focus of these groups remains to discredit the Jammeh administration and embolden the citizens to stand up to him. There are several online discussion forums utilized to foment challenge against the regime in Banjul, but they remain too little and too divided to bring about any quick change in governance in The Gambia. Meanwhile, there is not yet a single mass movement opposition to the Jammeh administration and the focus of existing civil society groups continues to be skewed and issue-based. A culture of democracy and political literacy have not fully taken root in The Gambia, and that has made the already difficult challenge of restoring democracy even more cumbersome.

Ensuing Events:

The Gambia continues to be a very poor country and the governance situation remains unresponsive to people's needs. In fact, as recently as this year, supporters of the ruling APRC are suggesting that the 2011 elections be cancelled and Jammeh be declared a life president. Some faint voices in the ruling party even talk about establishing a constitutional monarchy. There is no evidence Jammeh or his government would want to follow such reported campaigns. In the face of all these, the opposition has still not carved out any consistent and united opposition to Jammeh. Journalists, lawyers and opposition party politicians have not closed their ranks; they continue to speak with different voices.

At present, The Gambia remains 'tensely stable'. The president enjoys unlimited powers. He and his associates control most of the wealth and businesses in The Gambia, including some once-publicly held services and facilities. Corruption and abuse of power continue to exist and even grow. Numerous constitutional amendments have given untold powers to the president. In fact any member of his party who defies him in the legislature gets sacked and automatically loses his

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or her seat in the parliament. So there are hardly any formal political channels open to challenge Jammeh's rule, although other forms of pressure such as nonviolent civil resistance could potentially help to change that. However, in a recent modest victory for the opposition, the Supreme Court overturned the ruling of the former chief justice in favor of the Opposition UDP and NRP regarding local government elections in 2007. Although this happened too late in the game to influence the outcome (elections had been held over two years ago), it was nonetheless an incremental movement towards rule of law in a court whose members are handpicked by the president and dismissed willy-nilly. The court's ruling has given the opposition new impetus. The UDP, whose leader is a leading lawyer, has often sought court rulings to curtail some government actions, but he is largely viewed as too mild to successfully challenge Jammeh.

The opposition still does not have any credible access to state media and some have censored themselves to remain safe and free. Already, some have lost their lives and/or freedoms in this cause to restore genuine democracy in The Gambia. Because of this, The Gambia's democracy movement is a work in progress, although the potentials for success remain huge. However, lack of unity, fear, intimidation, patronage, political ignorance and poverty have not made the work any easier. The nonviolent movement has not fully developed yet in The Gambia and democratic space continues to be highly constricted.

Endnotes:

1. It is important to note that the author of this summary, Alieu Darboe, was the President of the University Students' Union in The Gambia from 1999-2001. He was also at one time the Secretary General of GAMSU and a member of the GAMSU leadership that led the April 10, 2000 student protests. He was also the deponent to the suit against the state that eventually freed all detained students. See this link for details of the affidavit Alieu swore to in the high court of Banjul: <http://www.allgambian.net/NewsDetails.aspx?id=383>.
2. For this summary I have also read *February 18 – A False Independence* (unpublished) by Madi Jobarteh of The Gambia.

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