
BOOK REVIEW

Delayed Democracy: How Press Freedom Collapsed in the Gambia

by Alagi Yorro Jallow Author House: Bloomington, 2013

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This book is written by the Gambian journalist and human rights campaigner Alagi Yorro Jallow. It is dedicated to the memory of all those who have died and/or suffered in the struggle for freedom and democracy in the African continent. And, in accordance with such a heart-felt dedication, *Delayed Democracy* duly examines the critical role played by the muzzling and manipulation of the media in the development of autocratic rule in Gambia, the smallest state of Africa.

Professor Jallow currently lectures at Assumption University of Thailand, after having lived for a while in the United States. Previously he was the managing editor and co-proprietor of the Gambian newspaper “*The Independent*”. For his activity as editor and journalist, he has won many prizes, and international recognition. His newspaper, “*The Independent*”, has now been banned by the government. For a while, in 1999, he also served as a correspondent for the BBC.

He understands freedom of expression as being more than a mere theoretical assumption, it is also a practical undertaking at the service of the community, and a life commitment. Accordingly, he has always been ready to uncompromisingly stand up for his professional integrity as a journalist, and for the fundamental principles of human freedom and dignity. Because of his support for these noble ideals, he was targeted for death by supporters of the government. In December 2004, these supporters assassinated another editor of *The Independent*, and destroyed

in an arson attack the office of the newspaper. All this, together with the circumstances leading to this brutal escalation, is well documented in *Delayed Democracy*.

The events examined by Jallow may eerily be seen by many as unveiling the new face of a rising more general, widespread and multiform authoritarianism. It could be argued that this writer is dealing with an example of a relatively new type of autocratic or partially autocratic rule, which pays some lip service to a notion of democracy. Academics have variously defined this type of political system as “guided”, “managed”, “partial” or “semi-democracy”. Thus, *Delayed Democracy* examines the unfolding of its defining feature, i.e. the muzzling of critical voices.

The Gambia (or simply Gambia) is a tiny country of about 2 million inhabitants, predominantly poor, 90% Muslim (mostly Sunni), located in West Africa, along the Gambia river, and surrounded on all sides other than the sea by the larger Senegal. Col. Jammeh has governed since a military coup in 1994. At the beginning of December 2015 he declared that the country is now governed by Sharia law, thus effectively becoming an Islamic State, even though assuring that the rights of religious minorities will continue to be maintained. This delirium is supposed to shed away the historical legacy of the area as an outpost of the slave trade, and as a British colony. This declaration with all its implications, which are difficult to reconcile with the values of liberal democracy, may be seen as the culmination of the process described in Jallow’s book.

Jallow’s book provides ample historical and theoretical background in order to help the reader understand the events leading to the current situation. However, it does much more than that. It is about how press freedom collapsed in the Gambia, and an accomplished case study of the mechanisms by which military power has managed to consolidate its rule over a small but significant West-African country. It shows how they were able to claim – with some credibility – to have legally and rightfully acquired the explicit consent of the majority of the local population. These manipulated elections gave the ruling party, the Patriotic Front, 72% of the votes. For his part, Jallow undertakes to make clear all the mechanisms,

and their theoretical underpinnings, that made the ruler's manipulations such an apparent success. Therefore, by successfully disclosing, the large numbers of skeletons (not only figuratively) in the closet of the powers that be, this book directly and indirectly provides the discerning readers with many helpful, more general and practical suggestions about how to arrange an alternative political system, with more genuine democratic credentials. This points to the necessity of connecting liberalism and democracy, if political legitimacy is to be not vulnerable to manipulation, but dedicated to effectively improving the human rights of the people in Africa, as well as in other parts of the world.

In regard to this, the book boldly argues that the role of the free press, independent journalists, and more generally freedom of speech, are essential for creating a durable political system based on authentic liberal and democratic values. More specifically, the right to challenge conventional wisdom is a necessary tool not only in order to avoid economic stagnation and ensure intellectual progress, but also in order to expose and propose remedies to all sorts of human rights abuses, corruption, and other wrongs. Having made clear the importance of the free media in order to ensure transparency and accountability, nevertheless, Prof Jallow also points out that this critical role must be played out carefully, taking into account the existing sensitivities.

Jallow's examination is the anatomy of a tragic involution or reversal of democracy. How an autocracy has been able to successfully undermine, and all but entirely curtail the role and importance that independent journalists and mass-media are supposed to have in the maintenance and development of a free and vibrant civil society. He argues that there must be a synergy and a reciprocal underpinning between democratic rule and governance on the one side and a free and vibrant civil society in which the media together with other forces play a fundamental role on the other side. That such a regression has taken place in Gambia is even more dramatic as we are reminded in the book that Gambia once had one of the freest and most resilient presses of the African continent. So, in order to explain how this regressive process took place, Jallow carefully

and with deep sorrow, analyzes how the 1994 post-coup government applied its own version of Antonio Gramsci's theory of the acquisition of political hegemony.

Jammeh's policies, constitute a brutal, manipulative and reactionary hijacking of the original forward-looking, popular and authentically democratic intentions of Gramsci's both tactical and strategic recommendations for achieving progressive (or revolutionary) social change. Allegedly, according to the Italian political philosopher, progressive (or revolutionary) social change should be the result of making one particular ideology (in Gramsci's case Marxism) become dominant. This means that the hegemony acquired by Marxist ideology should lead to a positive change within civil society, since the oppressed will increasingly acquire a consciousness of their own individual and collective rights. That is to say, it is true that Gramsci pointed out that coercion is always important, and the capacity to exercise it defines the state as a political institution. Moreover, he saw that the role of the ability to use agencies of socialization, especially the press, to foster values and beliefs in the population is absolutely crucial to gain legitimacy. However in Gramsci's time this hegemony, state power and legitimacy were to be sought after by the masses only in order to free majorities from reactionary regimes, driven by privileged minorities. In other words, Gramsci had highlighted the importance of acquiring ideological domination within civil society in order to develop the consciousness and liberate the oppressed majority of the population of Italy (and beyond) from the forerunners of fascism, and then from fascism itself. However, *Delayed Democracy* tells us that freeing the oppressed is obviously not what Jammeh has done (except by occasionally paying some lip service to the idea, when expedient to himself and his cronies). And this should not be surprising.

Paradoxically, and also as it frequently happens ironically, the principle that the press can be used to advance ideological aims has often been applied, including lately in Gambia, in order to make people compliant with the existing political order. This obviously runs against the original intention of Gramsci who had formulated his theory of

hegemony in order to change the existing social and political order, and thus liberate the people from political oppression and economic exploitation. It follows from what I have said so far that Jallow's writing highlights how the regime of President Jammeh has very successfully applied from its inception to power, up to the present, a version of Gramsci's theory of hegemony which though turns it upside down, thereby changing it completely for the worst.

Ideological hegemony was pursued and then achieved by the supporters of the present Gambian regime through a media campaign against corruption. Jammeh first used the pretext of the need to fight corruption, as a reason for overthrowing the democratic government of then President Dawda Jawara. Jawara had ruled the country since independence from Britain in 1965 up to 1994. During his time in power, Gambia maintained its cherished tradition of freedom of expression. Moreover, because Jawara was a man of relatively humble origins who managed to become President, he made himself an avatar of the progress of the lower caste people. Quite cunningly, Jammeh in order to acquire ideological hegemony, first tolerated, and even wooed the press in order to highlight the shortcomings of the previous supposedly more corrupt government. He thus consolidated his power over civil society, and arguably gained legitimacy in the eyes of the majority. Once this consolidation was achieved and legitimacy secured, he has clamped down on the free media, and its policy has been to dominate, intimidate and punish any dissent or opposition. Supposedly, in this way, the continuation of political and ideological hegemony can be indefinitely maintained.

This book also indicates some possible ways out of Gambia's human rights and democracy predicaments or "delays". In Jallow's view, the internal civil society consciousness brought about by new social medias such as Facebook, Twitter, and other networking sites, combined with the external pressure from international public opinion and human rights organizations offers the best hope for the necessary political change in Gambia, and elsewhere. Perhaps, here, I may add my own suggestion that Gramsci is still of value, but with some revisions more in tune with

liberal democratic principles.

All in all, Jallow's writing clearly points out to the reader the role and importance of a free, independent press, as well as more generally free media, in order to clarify issues, and to propose solutions to the most intractable problems affecting the African continent, and many other areas of the world. These problems include: widespread corruption; weak or non-existent nation states; poverty; overlapping tribal rivalries; gaps between urban elites and the rest of the population; persistent illiteracy in some areas; draughts, natural and man-made disasters and epidemics; still incomplete infrastructures; cults of seniority and lack of competition; foreign interference and exploitation; lack of reliable and time honored mechanisms for transferring institutional power, and for ensuring alternation of different governments, thus providing peaceful avenues, through free and fair competitive politics, for different interests and identities to express themselves

The fundamental lesson to be inferred by reading *Delayed Democracy*, is that only the civic, intellectual resources of a free and vibrant civil society can ultimately tackle the obstacles to good governance in Africa, and beyond. Top down approaches without corresponding bottom up synergies from civil society will not work. Therefore, civil society must be underpinned, nurtured and advanced by the exercise of freedom of speech and expression (particularly, though not exclusively, embodied by the so called 4th power - the media). Time and again, it has proven to be the most fruitful way to determine the path or alternative ways by which to address obstacles to good governance and developmental issues. Autocratic, military and elitist rule more often than not constitute part of the problem rather than of the solution. This is because by claiming to maintain an apparent superficial peace of sorts, in the long run autocracies, mostly in the guise of bringing about one sided, top down, manipulative, only apparent reconciliations, in fact increase grievances, thus aggravating conditions later leading to heightened civil strife, and in the worst case scenario even civil war. Solutions to problems, as *Delayed Democracy* points out, require the honest work of brave and engaged journalists like

Jallow, but also of social scientists, philosophers, teachers, the various experts, etc., and not the least also of ordinary citizens.

Reviewed by: Giuseppe Mario Saccone
Assumption University of Thailand