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THE ROLE OF UNPREDICTABILITY IN MAINTAINING CONTROL OF THE SECURITY FORCES IN THE GAMBIA

MAGGIE DWYER^{*}

ABSTRACT

This research explores a classic predicament of authoritarian leaders—the need for a strong security force to deter opposition alongside a fear of the threats that a strong force could pose. By providing a unique view into the security services in The Gambia under President Jammeh (1994–2017), it argues that fostering uncertainty was the key tool in maintaining control of the armed forces. It situates this approach in the context of wider theories of institutional arbitrariness. The research demonstrates how unpredictability was operationalized through multiple, overlapping practices targeting both the structural level and routine aspects of military life. It also looks at international opportunities as an avenue to mitigate some of the negative effects of pervasive uncertainty in the forces. The research provides new insights into the internal dynamics of state security forces by drawing on data newly available after The Gambia’s democratic political transition of 2017. This includes interviews with members of the forces, testimonies from the Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparation Commission (TRRC), court martial transcripts, and other government reports.

After President Jammeh of The Gambia refused to accept his defeat in the general elections of December 2016, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sent a 4,000 troop intervention to pressure Jammeh to step down and end his 22-year rule. There was heavy attention on The Gambian Armed Forces to see how far they would go to back their commander-in-chief. It was only when Jammeh’s Chief of Defense Staff

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publicly stated that he would not order the army to counter the ECOWAS forces that it became clear that the president's time in power was up and he soon agreed to step down.¹ Despite over two decades during which the security services were key to Jammeh's ability to hold onto power, many within the forces seemed indifferent if not pleased that his rule had come to an end. Even some of his closest allies in the armed forces were seen celebrating in the streets in the hours following Jammeh's departure.² While Jammeh presented himself as the archetypical 'Big Man' backed by loyal armed forces, the final weeks of his rule belied what had long been a much more tenuous relationship.

Using the case of The Gambia under Jammeh, this research examines how authoritarian leaders manage the security services—the sector of the state they are often most reliant on as well as the group most feared due to a history of military interventions in many countries. Exploring how leaders respond to this common double bind helps further explain how such leaders maintain and extend their power. This article argues that fostering uncertainty was the cornerstone to maintaining control of the armed forces under Jammeh. Arbitrariness and unpredictability were key tools within the internal workings of the security sector. It will show how the strategy of unpredictability was operationalized in practice, both at the structural level and within more routine aspects of military life.

The persistence of coups in Africa has led scholars to map various strategies heads of state employ to build loyalty and insulate themselves from a military intervention, particularly in contexts where political legitimacy is lacking. Commonly used 'mechanisms of control' of armed forces in African states include structural, personnel, and material approaches. Structural approaches include expanding or restructuring the armed forces often to create specialized units or units to counter each other. Other strategies focus on personnel through preferential recruitment of groups known to be loyal to the regime, appointment of family members or co-ethnics to key leadership positions, or employment of foreign officers within the ranks. Political and military leadership has also tried to manage risks from the armed forces through more material means such as direct pay-offs to the armed forces or providing access to financial opportunities. Material approaches can also be about denying resources, rather than providing

1. *AFP*, 'Gambia army chief says troops will not fight intervention', 19 January 2017, <<https://www.news24.com/News24/gambia-army-chief-says-troops-will-not-fight-intervention-20170119>> (20 July 2020).

2. *BBC*, 'Gambian army chief joins in President Barrow celebrations', 20 January 2017, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-africa-38688794/gambian-army-chief-joins-in-president-barrow-celebrations>> (20 July 2020).

them such as denying soldiers weapons and/or ammunition to avoid a revolt.³

In addition to actions taken to shape the structure, personnel, or material conditions of the armed forces, other country-specific research has emphasized the importance of ideology in building military loyalty, especially in contexts where a liberation struggle has been central to the history and identity of the armed forces such as in Zimbabwe, Rwanda, and Uganda.⁴ Finally, scholars have noted that a less manipulative and longer-term route is to build sufficient legitimacy around political leadership and institutions to avoid power grabs.⁵ Studies have found that political liberalization reduces the chance of a military intervention in African countries.⁶ Collectively, these studies demonstrate that there is no single formula that authoritarians employ to develop loyalty and deter threats. Our understanding of strategies and their effects can benefit from empirical work into how leaders combine various practices, incorporate country-specific contexts, and revise or maintain tactics to align with shifting domestic and international political landscapes.⁷

This research takes a holistic look at the various strategies of control implemented within the Gambian security services and shows that the overarching trait to these practices was the creation of a constant state of uncertainty in the security forces. It involved consistently limiting the ability to predict who would be significant, what rules would be applied, and when violence would be used within the forces. Jammeh did not invent this strategy; rather unpredictability has been a feature of other long-term authoritarian leaders for their engagements with the civilian population and armed forces alike. Still, this approach has received limited attention in the various lists of strategies to control the armed forces, potentially because it is an approach that can be difficult to identify, especially from

3. Overviews of such approaches can be found in Samuel Decalo, *The stable minority: Civilian rule in Africa* (Florida Academic Press, Gainesville, FL, 1998), pp. 19–29, and Herbert Howe, *Ambiguous order: Military forces in African states* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, CO, 2001), p. 50. For more on the ethnic aspect, see Kristen A. Harkness, ‘The ethnic stacking in Africa dataset: When leaders use ascriptive identity to build military loyalty’, *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 39, 5 (2022), pp. 609–632.

4. For examples, see Godfrey Maringira, ‘Politics, privileges, and loyalty in the Zimbabwe National Army’, *African Studies Review* 60, 2 (2017), pp. 93–113; Anna Reuss, ‘Forever vanguards of the revolution: The Uganda People’s Defence Forces’ liberation legacy, 30 years on’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 14, 2 (2020), pp. 250–269; Marco Jowell, ‘Cohesion through socialization: Liberation, tradition and modernity in the forging of the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF)’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8, 2 (2014), pp. 278–293; Blessing-Miles Tendi, ‘Ideology, civilian authority and the Zimbabwean Military’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39, 4 (2013), pp. 829–843.

5. Decalo, *The Stable Minority*.

6. Staffan I. Lindberg and John F. Clark, ‘Does democratization reduce the risk of military interventions in politics in Africa?’ *Democratization* 15, 1 (2008), pp. 86–105.

7. Kristen Harkness, ‘Military’, in Gabrielle Lynch and Peter VonDoepp (eds), *Handbook of Democratization in Africa* (Routledge, New York, 2019), p. 169.

an outside perspective. This article treats unpredictability as a strategy that binds many practices, and in The Gambia, it was continually reinforced across time. Understanding how unpredictability permeated the security services requires a view from inside the forces, which in The Gambia has only recently become more available following the democratic transition in 2017.

The Gambia differs from some other cases in which uncertainty within the military is partially linked to an overall neglect in payment or provisions and units fending for themselves or with limited interference from the central command.⁸ In The Gambia, the armed forces were regularly paid and not left to their own devices, rather it was a closely monitored environment. Security personnel were punished for minor infractions as well as violations of the military code of conduct. These punishments were conducted officially through court martials as well as more informally through the personal discretion of military leaders. However, these disciplinary measures were not consistent and were regularly arbitrary and violent, further fostering the sense of uncertainty. This close observation of the forces and claims that the president micromanaged the forces was likely more extreme in The Gambia than in many other contexts, given the comparatively small size and population of the country.⁹ Additionally, there is limited geographic distribution of the armed forces.¹⁰

While these are aspects that make The Gambia unique, this research views the state of uncertainty within the armed forces as related to broader governing models associated with a new wave of competitive authoritarians. It will draw on the theory of institutional arbitrariness as a central tenant of contemporary authoritarianism. Developed around the case of Museveni's rule in Uganda, it refers to arbitrariness as a ruler's unchecked and unaccountable power, exercised in a way that cannot be predicted.¹¹ While the theory focuses on how authoritarians project power over the civilian population and weaken political opposition, this research will show its applicability within the state armed forces. It will demonstrate how the regular volatility within the armed forces counterintuitively led to a level of stability for Jammeh's rule. As will be elaborated on, the practices of unpredictability within the forces 'worked' primarily because it limited the ability of alternative centres of power to form and led to self-policing.

8. For examples of some of these traits in Zaire, see Michael Schatzberg, *The dialectics of oppression in Zaire* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 1988), pp. 59–70.

9. The Gambia population was estimated at around 2.2 million in 2017, with a population of less than 2 million for much of Jammeh's rule.

10. The World Bank Group, 'The Gambia Public Expenditure Review' (2018) shows 79 per cent of the military was based in close proximity to the capital or in Jammeh's home region.

11. Rebecca Tapscott, *Arbitrary states: Social control and modern authoritarianism in Museveni's Uganda* (Oxford University Press, London, 2021).

The article will first address the research methodology and highlight new resources available for the study of the country's armed forces. From there, the article looks at Jammeh in the context of the scholarship on competitive authoritarians and discusses the strategy of institutional arbitrariness within these political systems. The final half of the article shows how unpredictability is operationalized, both through building it into the structure of the armed forces and enforcing uncertainty at various parts of the routine aspects of military life. It concludes by discussing how international opportunities were a counterbalance to the negative costs of pervasive uncertainty.

Methodology

A challenge to understanding the complex ways leaders combine practices to manage and control their armed forces is the general lack of transparency in security sectors. This is even more so in authoritarian regimes, which tend to be especially secretive and hostile towards journalists, non-governmental organizations, and researchers.¹² This research contributes to this gap in our understanding of these internal dynamics using a range of sources related to The Gambia's more open political environment following the 2017 democratic transition. These include sources from the Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparation Commission (TRRC), interviews, court martial transcripts, and government documents. These sources allow for a broad overview of patterns across time as well as how practices were experienced by those within the force.

The TRRC was mandated to create a record of human rights abuses committed under Jammeh's regime and to consider reparations for victims. Since the abuses in The Gambia did not occur within the context of a wider civil war, the TRRC was almost solely focused on crimes committed by state agents, most of these in the security forces. Furthermore, many of the 392 witnesses were members of the security forces, some of whom were also accused as perpetrators. This research focused primarily on these witness statements from members in the armed forces, using transcripts and summaries of their testimonies as well as the final TRRC reports released in December 2021.¹³ Witnesses were not offered amnesty for their participation in the TRRC and some may have been unwilling to

12. Charles G. Thomas and Roy Doron, 'Out of Africa: The challenges, evolution, and opportunities of African military history', *Journal of African Military History* 1 (2017), pp. 7–8.

13. Detailed summaries of all witness statements can be found in the African Network Against Extrajudicial Killings and Enforced Disappearances (ANEKED) TRRC digests available at <https://www.aneked.org/trrc-digest>. The full TRRC final reports are available on The Government of The Gambia Attorney General's Chambers and Ministry of Justice website <<https://www.moj.gm/downloads>> (22 December 2022).

provide a full account of events or even incentivized to shift blame. However, this analysis is interested in the information that comes more at the 'sidelines' of the testimonies such as details of career trajectories and statements about the professional atmosphere in the armed forces, which are likely less contentious than details about crimes. Many of the broad patterns about everyday life in the armed forces have also been confirmed through interviews and in some of the government assessments done after the transition.

In addition to the TRRC testimonies, this research also draws on 24 interviews I conducted with members of the army (from rank and file up to Generals) in 2019. These interviews were focused on training and assistance to the armed forces post political transition, including peacekeeping preparation and deployments. In the context of the need for training and reform of the forces in the new democratic era, some interviewees detailed aspects of the internal workings under Jammeh, including how their own careers and lives were affected. Despite the more open public discussions about the security forces, the past atmosphere of secrecy still loomed over some of the interviews. Many soldiers preferred to discuss their hopes for the forces in the future, rather than detail events in the past. All interviewees are anonymous in this article, and in many cases, I have summarized patterns seen across the interviewees so as not to identify any individuals.

The TRRC testimonies and the interviews cover a wide range of ranks but are skewed towards those in more prominent positions in the armed forces. For example, many of the security personnel testifying at the TRRC were in a position that placed them close enough to the president to have knowledge or involvement in abuses linked to regime protection. It is possible that the volatility shown in this research most impacted those in more prestigious positions. Still, in relatively small armed forces, many would have been aware of the patterns and likely seen them as warnings even if not directly impacted. The research focuses primarily on units that fell under the Ministry of Defense (military) and those that reported to the president (intelligence service and paramilitary units) due to their central role in regime protection.

Lastly, the research benefits from a range of reports produced by the new government or conducted in collaboration with external partners that look into practices and policies under the Jammeh regime. Additionally, through past research on The Gambia's armed forces, I was provided access to a sample of court martial transcripts, which help demonstrate how indiscipline was addressed. These government reports provide more technical details, while the TRRC testimonies, interviews, and court martial transcripts give qualitative details and the perspectives from those within the forces.

The Gambia under competitive authoritarianism

When Yahya Jammeh overthrew then President Jawara in July 1994, he was a 29-year-old Lieutenant. At the time of the coup, Jawara had been in power since the country's independence in 1964. Although the country was often applauded internationally for its respect for human rights and adherence to democratic principles, by the 1990s, many Gambians were frustrated with the country's underdevelopment, and Jawara's administration had increasingly been accused of corruption.¹⁴

Jammeh can be considered part of a wave of 'new' authoritarians who emerged following the end of the Cold War. The post-Cold War international environment created strong incentives for leaders to adopt or, in the case of The Gambia, maintain formal democratic institutions and processes. Yet, in many cases, leaders found ways to 'balance democratic institutions and repressive tendencies to project power over their populations'.¹⁵ Jammeh followed the mould of what Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way classify as 'competitive authoritarians'. In this type of regime, 'formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the principle means of obtaining and exercising political authority. Incumbents violate those rules so often and to such an extent, however that the regime fails to meet conventional minimum standards for democracy'.¹⁶

In The Gambia under Jammeh, democratic institutions existed but were manipulated and served to maintain Jammeh's rule. Jammeh claimed legitimacy through defeating opposition parties in popular elections in 1996, 2001, 2006, and 2011. However, the electoral process was manipulated in ways that significantly disadvantaged any opposition. For example, exceptionally high party registration fees were required, significant state resources were used to support Jammeh's campaign efforts, and restrictions on media meant coverage was uneven and highly favoured the president.¹⁷ Additionally, opposition candidates and supporters were at times arrested and intimidated by state security forces. The National Assembly was generally ineffective in instigating debates or critical discussions and instead rubber-stamped Jammeh's policies.¹⁸ While the constitution

14. Momodou Loum, 'Bad governance and democratic failure: A look at Gambia's 1994 coup', *Civil Wars* 5, 1 (2002), pp. 145–174.

15. Tapscott, *Arbitrary states*, pp. 5.

16. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, 'The rise of competitive authoritarianism', *Journal of Democracy* 13, 2 (2002), p. 52.

17. Sait Matty Jaw, Biran Gai, and Nyimasatta Sillah, 'The Cost of Parliamentary Politics in The Gambia', *Westminster Foundation for Democracy*, October 2022, <<https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/cost-parliamentary-politics-gambia>> (8 January 2023); David Perfect, 'The Gambia under Yahya Jammeh: An assessment', *The Round Table* 99, 403 (2010), pp. 53–63.

18. Abdoulaye Saine, *Paradox of third-wave democratization in Africa: The Gambia under AFPRC-APRC rule 1994–2008* (Lexington Books, Plymouth, UK, 2009), p. 64.

gave the judiciary independence, judges were frequently unconstitutionally sacked by Jammeh.¹⁹ Independent media technically existed under Jammeh, but there was an increasingly hostile attitude towards the media, resulting in the closures of numerous independent newspapers/radio stations and the surveillance, arrest, torture and murder of independent journalists.²⁰

The heavy-handed and often violent responses to any perceived threat to the president came from the state security forces. As such, they were crucial to his ability to stay in power for 22 years. Jammeh substantially expanded the armed forces. By the time he left office, the military was nearly nine times the size of when he took power.²¹ Yet, Jammeh had a turbulent relationship with the armed forces from the very beginning of his time in power. Less than 4 months after the coup he orchestrated, a plot to oust him emerged and was violently thwarted. At least 10 soldiers who were suspected of having led the plans were executed on the night of the planned event with many more detained.²² The turbulence in the early months of Jammeh's rule set the stage for the rest of his time in power. He was preoccupied with the issue of loyalty and continually developed the armed forces around detecting and avoiding disloyalty.

The value of uncertainty

A central element to Jammeh's attempt to balance the perceived threat from within the forces while also maintaining the military as a functional force was incorporating unpredictability into the operation of the armed forces. The importance of unpredictability in modern authoritarian regimes is emphasized by Rebecca Tapscott's theory of institutionalized arbitrariness.²³ She argues that the state in this type of governance model becomes 'unpredictably present and absent, at times intervening in matters and

19. David Perfect, *Historic dictionary of The Gambia*, 5th ed. (Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2016), pp. 251–252.

20. Niklas Hultin, Baba Jallow, Benjamin N. Lawrence, and Assan Sarr, 'Autocracy, migration, and The Gambia's "unprecedented" 2016 election', *African Affairs* 116, 463 (2017), pp. 321–340.

21. Maggie Dwyer, 'Security force assistance to The Gambia following the 2017 political transition: A recipe for further fragmentation?', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 15, 5 (2021), pp. 634–635. Multiple sources including, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 'The Military Balance', 100, 1 (2000), p.271, estimate that in the 1990s the armed forces included 800 personnel. The World Bank Group, 'The Gambia Public Expenditure Review' (2018), noted that the size of The Gambian Armed Forces at the time of Jammeh's departure in 2017 was 6,896 personnel.

22. *APA Banjul*, 'Coups mass grave found in Gambian barracks', 17 April 2019, <<http://apanews.net/en/news/mass-grave-uncovered-in-gambian-military-barracks>> (15 December 2022).

23. Tapscott, *Arbitrary states*; Rebecca Tapscott, 'The government has long hands: Institutionalized arbitrariness and local security initiatives in northern Uganda', *Development and Change* 48, 2 (2017), pp.263–285.

disputes to determine an outcome, at other times abjuring responsibility and refusing to enforce decisions'.²⁴ The arbitrariness is institutionalized in that it becomes a regular part of how the regime functions. The governing style 'makes it difficult for citizens and local authorities to calculate and assess the risks of possible intervention, which causes them to self-police'.²⁵ Authorities then must constantly adjust their actions to respond to the state's unpredictable actions. Ultimately, it fragments and weakens opposition and alternative authority.

While the theory of institutionalized arbitrariness explains how the state projects its authority to the civilian population, this article extends its application to the internal dynamics within the armed forces in The Gambia. The uncertainty that was instilled into the operation of the armed forces is contradictory to key aspects of most militaries such as predictable routines, regulations, and hierarchical structures. As the following section will expand on, the unpredictability was operationalized by forming overlapping security organizations, appointing individuals to multiple roles, allowing inconsistencies in the application of rules and punishments, and fostering a constant state of uncertainty about job security. Crucially, the intersecting modes of uncertainty were reinforced with violence within the security services. While the armed forces used violence against civilians deemed a threat to the president, they too were key victims of the violence. The TRRC concluding report found state agents responsible for 240 murders during Jammeh's rule.²⁶ Dozens of the murder victims were members of the security services.²⁷ Unlawful detention, torture, and forced disappearances were also used extensively by and on the security forces. Therefore, the unpredictability that permeated many of the practices in the armed forces was not merely a frustration of not knowing what to expect, and it was also tied to fear of arbitrary violence.

Similar to the way that arbitrary governance models led public authorities to continually reconfigure their roles, a comparable dynamic is seen within the security services in The Gambia.²⁸ The regular ad-hoc leadership changes and arbitrary arrests constantly shifted centres of influence and power within the armed forces. It disrupted patronage networks in which those in powerful positions provided privileges or material benefits in exchange for loyalty. Investigations found that the most senior members of The Gambian Armed Forces had access to large amounts of state funds,

24. Tapscott, *Arbitrary states*, p. 203.

25. *Ibid.*, 3.

26. Mustapha K. Darboe, 'TRRC Final Report: Gambia Between Prosecutions and Amnesties', *JusticeInfo.net*, 7 January 2022, <<https://www.justiceinfo.net/en/86069-trrc-final-report-gambia-between-prosecutions-and-amnesties.html>> (22 February 2022).

27. TRRC Final Report, Volume 1, 2021. Available at <<https://www.justiceinfo.net/wp-content/uploads/Volume-1-Compendium-Part-A.pdf>> (22 December 2022).

28. Tapscott, *Arbitrary states*, 3.

some of which were likely distributed lower down the ranks. For example, at the TRRC, security personnel in the more 'elite' units described extra pay for completing tasks or operations for their bosses and free off-base housing.²⁹ The patronage extended beyond direct material benefits. In an environment where rules and regulations were irregularly applied, as explained later, personal discretion of leaders was often key to many of the decisions that affected the daily life of the ranks. Interviewees explained that knowing the 'right people' was key to career advancements and other advantages such as mission selection, housing assignments, educational opportunities, etc. Yet the regular rotation of military patrons made many of the patronage relationships tenuous. As a general pattern across other African militaries and governments shows, the breaking of such networks often aims to limit the ability of individuals to gain a sustained independent following that could challenge the president.³⁰

The unpredictability of procedures around dismissals and discipline led many to err on the extreme side of caution. For example, during an interview with a Corporal, he described a time when part of his pay was deducted unexpectedly. It had happened several years prior to our interview, and he was still upset about it, so I asked him if he asked his superior about the reason for the deduction. He looked at me incredulously and replied, 'In the army you don't ask questions...I told a friend and he said not to ask [the officer] or it can cause offense. It can cost you your job. You can be charged'.³¹ The example reflects a perspective expressed by other soldiers with whom I spoke; they were uncertain about processes and seemed fearful that any issue could lead to dismissal or disciplinary action. Court martials were not applied consistently and alleged offences from years past could be 'resurrected', further leading to a sense of uncertainty in the armed forces over when and how rules would be applied.³² The unpredictability also limited shared expectations as soldiers were often left guessing about what action the government would take or how the hierarchy would respond. This likely deterred collective action.

29. Khadija Sharife and Mark Anderson, 'How Yahya Jammeh Stole a Country', *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, 27 March 2019. For a full report on government inquiry, see 'The Gambia Government White Paper on the Report of the Commission on Inquiry into the Financial Activities of Public Bodies, Enterprises and Offices as Regards Their Dealing with Former President Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh and Connected Matters', (2019) available at <<https://www.moj.gm/downloads>> (22 December 2022).

30. Jean-Francois Bayart, *The state in Africa: The politics of the belly*, 2nd ed. (Polity Press, Cambridge, 2009); Judith Verweijen, 'Soldiers without an army? Patronage networks and cohesion in the armed forces of the DR Congo', *Armed Forces & Society* 44, 4 (2018), pp. 626–646.

31. Author interview with Gambian Corporal, 20 November 2019.

32. The arrest of General Lang Tombong Tamba on accusations of treason three years after the alleged event is one such example.

Operationalizing unpredictability

The uncertainty that became central to the armed forces was not a single action; instead, it was prevalent across many elements of the security sector. The following sections demonstrate how it was built into the structure of the expanded forces and a part of routine practices.

Structural unpredictability

When Jammeh came into power, the army had only existed for 9 years—indeed, the country had no military for its first several decades after independence.³³ He quickly began to expand the forces by adding personnel and creating new services. Additionally, Jammeh passed decrees, which gave the security forces increased powers such as search and seizure.³⁴ The expansion of the armed forces and their remit was not in response to growing external threats, as the country has never experienced significant foreign threats to its territory. Instead, it became an organization focused on regime protection. The expansion also served as a way to increase employment opportunities, especially for individuals from Jammeh's home area and ethnic group, the Jola.

While an army, national guard, and police force were already in existence, Jammeh added the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), a navy, a state guard and a (non-operational) air force. Developing even a basic line-and-block organizational chart for the state security organizations is a challenge because the organizations had 'multiple reporting lines'.³⁵ Technically, the army, navy, and national guards fall under the Ministry of Defense, the police fall under the Ministry of Interior, and the intelligence service reports directly to the Office of the President. Yet, there are also state guards who have direct reporting lines to all three—the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior, and Office of the President. As the public expenditure review auditors noted, the structure 'created confusion with respect to the role and function of the respective forces...[and has] created considerable overlap in the execution of functions'.³⁶ The technical language of the report demonstrates the effects of this structure, yet stops short of pointing to a motivation for it. But this 'confusion' within the structure should not be seen as merely poor planning; instead, the confusion suggests a strategy to create parallel structures that counterbalance each other.

Parallel structures are a traditional coup-proofing strategy, which aims to develop units within armed forces that will warn of or counter attempts to

33. Dwyer, 'Fragmented forces'.

34. Abdoulaye Saine, 'The Gambia's elected autocrat: Poverty, peripherality, and political instability, 1994–2006', *Armed Forces & Society* 34, 3 (2008), p. 456.

35. The World Bank, 'Gambia Public Expenditure Review', (2018), p. ix.

36. *Ibid.*, ix–x.

overthrow the leader.³⁷ The strategy intentionally divides the security forces into overlapping structures, which report to key officials through different chains of command.³⁸ The parallel security services spy on each other and compete to show their allegiance to the regime.³⁹ While a common strategy of authoritarian leaders, it is also a risky one. As Erica De Bruin shows, counterbalancing does not reduce the chances of a coup attempt but rather reduces the chance that it will succeed.⁴⁰ Counterbalancing makes it difficult for plotters to coordinate across multiple divided organizations, some of which may be rivals, with different chains of command. Where there exist parallel structures, organizations within the security sector are kept in the dark about operation of other units, adding risks to any attempt to instigate a revolt.

Studies on parallel structures and counterbalancing have largely focused on the organizational level, but it is also important to look at how individuals move *within* the structures. In the Gambian security services, I identify a pattern of individuals moving between different sectors of the forces. This was not a matter of applying to change career paths but rather individuals being unexpectedly informed that they were being moved from, for example, the police to the army. Some individuals who had been moved explained at the TRRC that they did not want to change organizations, having had many years of experience in the original one and having had no say in the matter.⁴¹ These types of movements appeared most common for positions within the units closest to Jammeh. Those that were moved to the army were simply given a rank. Some complained that when entering the new force, their colleagues saw them as spies.⁴² Collecting information about members of the unit or suspicions of disloyalty may have been one purpose of this strategy. It was also likely meant to create uncertainty as colleagues grew suspicious of each other as they did not know their backgrounds and assumed these rotations meant the individual had personal connections to senior members of the regime (and many did). It fostered distrust and limited the type of cohesion or factions that Jammeh feared could lead to threats to his position.

While the official organizational structure was confusing, the picture becomes increasingly complex when one considers 'off-the-books' units. The most notorious of these under Jammeh was the Junglers. This secretive,

37. James T. Quinlivan, 'Coup-proofing: Its practice and consequences in the Middle East', *International Security* 24, 2 (1999), p. 141.

38. Erica De Bruin, 'Preventing coups d'état: How counterbalancing works', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, 7 (2018), pp. 1437.

39. Sebastiano Rwengabo, 'Regime stability in post-1986 Uganda: Counting the benefits of coup-proofing', *Armed Forces & Society* 39, 3 (2012), p. 536.

40. De Bruin, 'Preventing coups d'état'.

41. For example, see TRRC testimony from Lamin Badjie, 6 August 2019.

42. *Ibid.*

elite unit worked directly for the president, even though it is not listed on any official organizational charts. The unit was formed in 2003–2004 and included individuals who were part of the police or army before being assigned into the unit, many having spent a decade or longer in the ‘regular’ security services. These individuals would know the armed forces very well, which was likely seen as an advantage as well as a warning to those not in the unit. Many individuals invited to be in the unit were close contacts or direct relatives of the unit’s leaders or Jammeh.⁴³ Members of the Junglers patrolled the areas around State House and Jammeh’s home in Kanilai and were also expected to go on ‘operations’ when asked to do so by their superiors. Testimonials from members of the Junglers at the TRRC provide harrowing details of these missions, which include (but are not limited to) executions of prisoners, targeted murders of individuals deemed a threat to Jammeh, mass killings of civilians, and torture of detainees.⁴⁴ The Junglers worked closely with the NIA, and both units were often plain clothed and did not identify their role in the organization, publicly or to others in the forces.

The Junglers were small in number but central to the climate of fear under Jammeh. Yet, the secretive nature of the unit meant that many knew *of* them but not necessarily who was in the unit. There were at least a half dozen different names for the unit, creating confusion during TRRC questioning. Furthermore, members of the unit explained that they also held positions within an ‘official’ unit within the security sector although often not reporting to that unit for weeks or longer.⁴⁵ When questioned about their long absences from their official duties, some suggested that their superiors knew not to question them about it.⁴⁶ The image that anyone could be a Jungler created uncertainty for those in the security services. Security personnel were less likely to express dissatisfaction for fear that they may be unknowingly speaking with a member of Jammeh’s closest units.

Routine uncertainty

The parallel structures, ‘unofficial’ units, and movement of individuals across the organizations intentionally divided the forces and created a strong sense of suspicion within the security services. It created an opaque

43. Several examples include Amadou Badjie (grew up in same compound as Jammeh), Ismailia Jammeh (brother to Jammeh), and Malick Jatta (brother of the former Chief of Defense Staff Baboucarr Jatta).

44. TRRC Final Report, Volume 8, 2021. Available at <<https://www.justiceinfo.net/wp-content/uploads/Volume-8-The-Junglers-Unlawful-Killings-Tortures-and-Other-Human-Rights-Violations.pdf>> (22 December 2022).

45. For example, see TRRC testimony by Ismailia Jammeh, 5 August 2019.

46. One such example in TRRC testimony by Lamin Badjie, 6 August 2019.

environment in which even basic chains of command within the structure were unclear. Yet the unpredictability for those within the forces was also advanced through a manipulation of the more routine aspects of life in the forces.

In The Gambia, the job security that is often seen as a perk to military service compared to the large informal job sector was regularly undermined through arbitrary firings of security personnel, including mass dismissals. At times, soldiers found out that they were relieved of service from public radio announcements, with little to no explanation for the reason.⁴⁷ While it was technically possible to appeal these decisions, those that attempted to found it difficult to find any support, as even legal professionals did not want to present a case against the armed forces.⁴⁸

Being fired generally sends a clear signal that an individual is no longer part of the organization. Yet, in The Gambia, it was not always straightforward, as those relieved from duty, often for arbitrary reasons, were regularly reinstated years later. In some cases, they received their same position, and in other instances, individuals were brought back at a higher rank. As one former officer in the armed forces explains, Jammeh would regularly 'sack [soldiers] from their jobs for no explained reason and later rehire them back to special positions just to retire them prematurely or fire them again for no reason'.⁴⁹ Abdoulaye Saine explains that this created a 'Stockholm syndrome' in which those fired remained loyal in hopes of being reinstated and those who were allowed back in were thankful to the hierarchy.⁵⁰ The strategy also took advantage of the country's weak economy in which there are very few salaried jobs, especially for those with limited education, creating a desire for those who were dismissed to return to the services. While some may have been thankful to be given (back) their position, a former senior officer also described the process as 'humiliating' and 'only tolerated because of the desperate need to hold onto jobs'.⁵¹

This practice also responds to the political risk of large dismissals from the armed forces, which could lead to rebellions against the state. Likely to counter this threat, dismissals from the armed forces were often viewed as temporary. Finally, this rotation of individuals back into the forces meant that the organizations were not drained of their knowledge and professional experience. Mass dismissals would have left large knowledge gaps within the forces and potentially limited external engagements. However, this approach perpetuated a sense of uncertainty while also maintaining

47. TRRC testimony by Lamin Fatty, 10 April 2019.

48. TRRC testimony by Alagie Kebbeh, 9 April 2019.

49. Samsundeen Sarr, *Coup d'état by the Gambian National Army* (Xlibris, Blomington, IN, 2007), p. 12.

50. TRRC testimony by Professor Abdoulaye Saine, 20–21 January 2020.

51. Sarr, *Coup d'état by the Gambian National Army*, p. 11.

some of the experience that benefited the forces' everyday functioning and deployment potential.

In addition to the movement of personnel in and out of the forces, there were also regular changes to senior leadership. One of the most extreme places where this occurred was in the NIA. The organization had at least 13 changes of leadership between its creation in 1995 and Jammeh's departure in 2017. Several of the directors only served several months (and in one case just weeks), with little public explanation for the changes.⁵² These regular changes limited senior leadership's ability to build an independent following, which could threaten the president. The changes also affected the middle and junior ranks, as the changes disrupted patronage networks and furthered uncertainty around the many aspects of daily life and career progression that relied on the personal discretion of individual officers.

Much as Jammeh was concerned about the effects of mass dismissals, he likely also knew the potential negative effect of resentful senior officers. Rather than dismiss senior security personnel, he regularly assigned them into diplomatic civilian positions abroad. This strategy to co-opt potential rivals was also used in the civilian sector by Jammeh and is a familiar political tactic in Africa.⁵³ As Philip Roessler explains, a key aspect to the regular reshuffling while minimizing risks to a leader is for a ruler to signal that the 'revolving door to power always remains open'.⁵⁴ Much like the more junior ranks, the senior ranks were also often brought back into service years after having left the armed forces for civilian roles.⁵⁵

Just as security personnel could be fired at whim, so too could they be unexpectedly promoted. Whereas typical advancements in professional armed forces involve incremental increases to the next rank, in these promotions, some individuals advanced several ranks even from enlisted ranks to officers. This pattern was identified in TRRC testimonies and was also noticeable in interviews when individuals explained their career milestones.⁵⁶ Testimonies at the TRRC noted that promotions were often based on favouritism and had very negative impact on morale for many. Yet one of the same individuals commenting on this unfair practice also expressed his frustration that the promotion he received was not high enough.⁵⁷

52. Maggie Dwyer, 'The Gambia: Uses and abuses of state intelligence agencies', in Ryan Shaffer (ed.), *The Handbook of African Intelligence Cultures* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, Maryland USA, forthcoming 2023).

53. Leonardo R. Arriola, Jed Devaro and Anne Meng, 'Democratic subversion: Elite co-optation and opposition fragmentation', *American Political Science Review* 115, 4 (2021), pp. 1358–1372.

54. Philip Roessler, 'The enemy within: Personal rule, coups, and civil war in Africa', *World Politics* 63, 2 (2011), p. 309.

55. Both the previous Chief of Defense Staff, Masaneh Kinteh, and current CDS Yankuba Drammeh fit this pattern.

56. Author interviews with Gambian military personnel, November 2019.

57. TRRC testimony by Malick Jatta, 22 July 2019.

It further emphasized the belief by many in the security services that it was possible to be assigned any rank, rather than to progress meritoriously.

The unpredictable promotions demonstrate that the system was advantageous to some. Additionally, the rapid promotions were not limited to those working in the units closest to Jammeh. Some of the interviewed individuals who fit this pattern were in administrative positions seemingly removed from the more 'elite' units. The wider distribution of these types of rewards likely gave the sense that anyone could benefit from the system. However, equally the advancements could also be stripped in an environment of constantly shifting leadership, alliances, and arbitrary decisions.

The inconsistency seen in hiring and promotion practices was also apparent in disciplinary measures. The Gambian security forces were expected to follow codes of conduct and could be disciplined for violating those. This included unauthorized violence or harm to civilians. Yet, as noted, there were also many cases in which serious violations were overlooked, especially within the units closest to the president. Cases of indiscipline within the armed forces were addressed through court martials. These could include offences related to The Gambia Armed Forces Act or the regular criminal code of the country. A full record of all court martials is not publicly available, but a sample of eight court martial cases held at Yundum Barracks between 2001 and 2003 seen by the author show a mixed picture. For example, there was a range of various offences, including several cases of theft of military-owned materials (car engine, batteries, etc.), loss of a rifle, and rape. These court martials followed a standard procedure, with a judge, a panel of six officers, and a defence team for the accused. They are conducted as one might expect a trial to be conducted, with evidence submitted and witnesses called. Transcripts were recorded, and they show what appear to be in-depth discussions and considerations. For example, the cases of theft involved 11 witnesses and over 50 pages of transcripts, while the case of rape included 8 witnesses and over 100 pages of transcripts. The court martials also involved a range of convictions as well as acquittals.

It is possible that there were underlying political motivations within these court martials, yet, overall, they suggest that soldiers could and did face consequences, including jail sentences, for violating military and criminal codes. Yet, this was applied in an inconsistent manner, with cases of small-scale theft going to trial while other incidents of violence did not. For example, the TRRC uncovered many cases of gender-based violence and sexual violence by members of the forces, which were never investigated under the Jammeh regime.⁵⁸ Acts of violence by security personnel that

58. Mustapha K. Darboe, 'Gambia's TRRC hears about sexual violence and torture against women', *JusticeInfo.Net*, 28 October 2019, <<https://www.justiceinfo.net/en/42738-gambia-trrc-sexual-violence-torture-against-women.html>> (15 December 2022).

aimed to counter perceived political threats to Jammeh were also not brought to trial.

The court martials likely served a role that extended beyond discipline for violations. They served as important rituals to reinforce the authority of the military hierarchy and ultimately the commander-in-chief, President Jammeh. The court martials were not public but involved many security personnel beyond the accused because other soldiers were regularly called as witnesses or questioned as part of the investigations. As such, the proceedings would likely have been well known within the relatively small Gambian armed forces. By bringing forward select cases of indiscipline, the military hierarchy demonstrated its ability to detect and punish acts of misbehaviour. Yet, when rules would be applied was uncertain. Importantly, the arbitrariness around enforcing discipline did not exclude elite units or those closest to the president, as demonstrated at the TRRC.

Countering the negative effects

The pervasive uncertainty, enhanced by threats of arbitrary violence, led to those within the forces referring to the environment as ‘demoralizing’, ‘toxic’, and ‘treacherous’.⁵⁹ As Mai Hassan notes, it is crucial to explore how authoritarian leaders mitigate these negative effects.⁶⁰ As noted, the uncertainty within the Gambian forces did provide a sense of possibility in which unexpected promotions or assignment could occur and new patronage networks could develop through regularly shifting leadership. But equally these could be removed. Another important factor that served to counter some of the morale issues was international opportunity. Jammeh’s rule coincided with two important international trends for African armed forces: the rise in peacekeeping participation and the increase in international partnerships through the global war on terrorism. The Gambian Armed Forces were active in both realms. The Gambia was a consistent contributor to the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) and the United Nations–African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), ultimately sending 23 company-sized units to these missions between 2004 and 2021.⁶¹ It was also active in counterterrorism partnerships, regularly participating in U.S.

59. Author’s interviews 2019; Mustapha K. Darboe, ‘Gambia truth commission: Darboe, the faithful silent agent of the NIA’, *JusticeInfo.Net*, 9 February 2021, <<https://www.justiceinfo.net/en/73502-gambia-truth-commission-darboe-faithful-silent-agent-nia.html>> (15 December 2020).

60. Mai Hassan, ‘New insights on Africa’s autocratic past’, *African Affairs* 121, 483 (2022), p. 329.

61. Adama Tine, ‘GAF welcomes Gamcoy 23 back home’, *The Point*, 18 March 2021, <<https://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/headlines/gaf-welcomes-gamcoy-23-back-home>>; A company in the Gambian military is between 100 and 150 personnel, 22 December 2022.

Africa Command-led training and events, even hosting a large-scale joint exercise between the USA, ECOWAS, and the African Union (AU).⁶²

These international engagements were heavily publicized by the government, likely to provide a public image of prestige around the forces. Peacekeeping was viewed with pride within the forces according to numerous interviews with Gambian military personnel. One Lieutenant explained that it gave him ‘a sense of purpose as a military officer’,⁶³ while another explained being selected for peacekeeping as ‘honour and a privilege’.⁶⁴ However, the benefits extended far beyond the abstract. The financial benefits of peacekeeping deployments were life-changing experiences. Deployed peacekeepers earned an amount equivalent to multiple years of their regular salary; this enabled soldiers to buy land for the first time, begin construction on a house, or set up small businesses (usually through their spouse or other family members).⁶⁵ Counterintuitively, some soldiers explained that peacekeeping was a way *out* of the armed forces. For example, a Corporal who spoke negatively about the environment under Jammeh explained that he hoped the skills developed in peacekeeping would boost his resumé for jobs outside the armed forces.⁶⁶ Others explained that the purchasing land or investing in a small business gave them independence from the armed forces and a way to be ‘prepared’ in an uncertain environment.

Much like the way competitive authoritarians use democratic institutions to project power, within the armed forces, Jammeh also used the opportunities to take part in global security initiatives—some with the stated aim of liberal peace—to maintain support and legitimacy within the military. International military engagements served as a counterweight to some of the negative morale and image issues in the forces. Peacekeeping in particular served as an important motivator, with some soldiers noting that it was a reason they were initially drawn to joining the forces. However, the process was intertwined with other contentious aspects within the forces such as patronage networks with individual selecting officers, given much discretion as to who was selected for peacekeeping missions. Still, there was also a selection process based on length of service that worked alongside assignments by selection officers. Furthermore, the regular rotation of these more senior officers alongside the long length of The Gambia’s peacekeeping involvement meant that many over time had the opportunity and associated benefits of peacekeeping.

62. Deborah Robin Croft, ‘Gambia links to ECOWAS and the AU during Cammo exercise’, *United States Africa Command*, 15 July 2011, <<https://www.africom.mil/article/8466/gambia-links-to-ecowas-and-the-au-during-commo-exc>> (22 December 2022).

63. Author interview with Gambian Lieutenant, 19 November 2019.

64. Author interview with Gambian Lieutenant, 20 November 2019.

65. Author interviews 2019.

66. Author interview with Gambian Corporal, 11 November 2019.

Conclusion

This research explores a classic predicament of authoritarian leaders: the need for a strong security force to deter opposition alongside a fear of the threats that a strong force could pose. By providing a unique view into the security services in The Gambia, the article demonstrates the way uncertainty can be a powerful tool that is reinforced through multiple, overlapping practices. These include both structural approaches, involving the establishment of an opaque organization with parallel units and unofficial units, and unpredictability in more routine aspects, such as rank, career progression, and enforcement of codes of conduct. The uncertainty created by arbitrary decisions and violence led many to self-police for fear that a small infraction, misinterpreted comment, or rumour could result in dismissal, detention, or worse. The regularly changing command positions created volatility in the armed forces and limited individual leaders from amassing a following while disrupting patronage networks. It was a system in which some benefited from for a period, but few were secure in the longer term.

The patterns within the Gambian security service can be seen as part of a broader form of authoritarian governance in which unpredictability and arbitrariness are key to projecting and maintaining power. Still, more comparative work across countries could help identify commonalities in the ways different regimes operationalize unpredictability within the security services or alternatively explain particularities that are country specific. For example, there are some traits of The Gambia that likely enhanced Jammeh's ability to make unpredictability 'work' in his favour. The very small size of the country, population, and armed forces allowed leadership to have an easier oversight. The president's background in the armed forces gave him personal insights into the operation of the forces, and the newness of the forces may have made practices and procedures easier to manipulate. The country also had limited external threats, allowing more focus on regime protection. These factors may have made the level of uncertainty more extreme in The Gambia than in other countries, especially those that must balance the need for operational efficiency to counter insurgencies or other threats to the state.

The research highlights the need for further attention to the ways internal military practices focused on regime protection intersect with international security engagements. Many of the practices used within the security services in The Gambia ran counter to broader professionalization aims that accompany many of the international engagements and partnerships that have grown in recent decades across the continent. However, the turbulent and often unpredictable internal practices within the forces did not appear to jeopardize these engagements. Rather the international opportunities,

such as peacekeeping, served as a way to mitigate some of the negative outcomes of the uncertain environment by providing a sense of pride as well as material benefits.

Further research on modes of control of the armed forces may benefit from different methodological approaches, such as social network analysis. For example, this approach could add precision to the understanding of where individuals move within the broader pattern of regular reshuffling and reassignments. Josef Woldense's work on mapping personnel transfers in Ethiopia under Haile Selassie demonstrates the ways that social network analysis may uncover clusters of movements aimed to maintain expertise within the government while simultaneously breaking cliques that could form alternative centres of power and challenge a ruler.⁶⁷ A widescale mapping of personnel shifts over time for a case like The Gambia may also help demonstrate the scale of movement out of the armed forces. Many interviewees commented that there was a high rate of individuals leaving the security services due to the volatile environment, with some commenting that over half of their original recruitment class had left the service after just one or two reenlistments. More detailed information on these types of patterns could help further understand the costs and broader effects of strategies of unpredictability.

67. Josef Woldense, 'The ruler's game of musical chairs: Shuffling during the reign of Ethiopia's last Emperor', *Social Networks* 52 (2018), pp. 154–166.