

Gambia's longtime dictator isn't going anywhere any time soon

Jeffrey Smith and Alexander Noyes look at how failed coup attempts in the Gambia are leading to a more repressive regime in the West African country.

Just over a month ago, on 30 December, a coup **attempt** was launched in the small West African nation of Gambia to unseat long-time dictator Yahya Jammeh, who himself seized control of the country two decades earlier via a military coup. In Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaoré, president since 1987, **resigned** in October amid nationwide protests, with the military siding with protesters and **assuming** control in the power vacuum. These events have **again** stirred **debates** over whether some coups and coup attempts can actually be “good.” That is to say: can coup attempts — which are, by definition, undemocratic — help to foster transitions towards democracy in authoritarian regimes?

Recent academic research on the topic departs from conventional understandings of coups and coup attempts as always bad. In a 2014 **study**, political scientists Clayton Thyne and Jonathan Powell argue that while coups are always harmful to democracies, only about 17 percent of all coups and coup attempts from 1950 through 2008 occurred under democratic rule; the rest happened under semi-authoritarian or deeply authoritarian regimes, with evidence suggesting that coups often led to democratic transitions. The authors also posit, perhaps over-optimistically, that even failed coup attempts help foster democratic transitions, albeit by means of a different process: “We view failed coups as credible signals that leaders must enact meaningful reforms to remain in power.”



President Jammeh used this photo on Welcome Home t-shirts after attending the US-African Leaders Summit in 2014 Credit: Office of the White House (Amanda Lucidon)

Does this theory hold when applied to Jammeh's deeply authoritarian Gambia, which has seen a handful of coup attempts since 1994? The answer, thus far, seems to be a resounding no. Sitting in his presidential palace after the failed coup attempt on 30 December, Jammeh promised to hunt down his opponents, **saying**, “I am going to set an example. The last time I said it and people begged me to have mercy, this time it is going to be an eye for an eye. And I am going to get rid of these elements one by one until the last person.”

Accurately identifying coup attempts in authoritarian countries is quite difficult. But by the count of African security scholar Maggie Dwyer, Jammeh has “endured **at least eight alleged coup attempts**

during his 20 years in office.” Instead of instituting reforms or helping to promote political pluralism, Jammeh has presided over an increasingly brutal and repressive regime, earning the moniker of the “North Korea of Africa.” Each attempt to remove Jammeh from power has inevitably been followed by “cabinet reshuffles,” purges in the military and security forces, arbitrary and incommunicado detentions, disappearances, and mass executions, often without trial or due process.

The events following the most recent coup attempt have been no different, with the Jammeh regime arresting and arbitrarily detaining dozens of civilians. The latest figures we have compiled based on information from Gambian civil society groups is that at least 27 civilians are currently detained — and potentially more — with one as young as 14 and as old as 84. These individuals have been held incommunicado in Gambia’s notoriously awful prison cells for weeks, despite a constitution that limits detention without charge to 72 hours. Jammeh has additionally shut down Taranga FM, the only independent radio station in the country that covers political affairs. Even before the latest onslaught against Gambia’s already beleaguered media profession, the country routinely registered as one of the world’s worst environments for journalists, with multiple unsolved cases of murder, targeted intimidation, abuse, and harassment.

Citing human rights concerns, the European Union suspended a \$186 million aid package to Gambia, in part over a harsh anti-homosexuality law signed in October. Similarly, in late December, the United States removed Gambia from eligibility for the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) — a trade preference program that provides duty-free treatment to U.S. imports from sub-Saharan Africa — joining Swaziland and South Sudan as the only other nations to lose eligibility as a result of failure to make progress on basic human rights benchmarks.

Following the 30 December shootout in Banjul, Gambia’s capital, Jammeh’s military demonstrated their loyalty by marching with banners, proclaiming “Gambians [sic] soldiers are behind you President Jammeh” and “Long live the president.” Gambia’s army chief, a close Jammeh ally and chronic human rights abuser, also announced, “We love you, Your Excellency, and this bond of love and leadership is eternal.” These public declarations were prompt and the rallies enthusiastically attended for good reason: it is alleged that 160 military personnel, including senior officials, were suspected of being involved in planning the coup attempt.

The arrest in the United States of two dual U.S.-Gambian citizens and one American citizen for their alleged role in the coup attempt has emboldened Jammeh further. These arrests have been referenced and covered repeatedly by Gambia’s national broadcaster, the Gambia Radio and Television Service, to show citizens that President Obama and the United States stand behind him. A similar tactic was used in the aftermath of the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit (during which Jammeh’s security guards physically assaulted U.S. citizens who were protesting outside his 5-star hotel in Washington, D.C.). The official White House photograph of a smiling Obama standing with Yahya Jammeh was printed on t-shirts for his “Welcome Home” rally.

So can coup attempts lead to democratic transitions or similar reforms? Perhaps. But in the case of Gambia, successive failed coups may actually be making Gambia more authoritarian. In the aftermath of 30 December, Jammeh warned any other would-be plotters: “No force can take this place and nobody can destabilize this country...Anybody who plans to attack this country, be ready, because you are going to die.” Jammeh’s two-decade record in office shows he does not make idle threats. While the longer-term effects of Gambia’s latest coup attempt remain to be seen, it is clear that the plot has prompted a severe crackdown in an already repressive country, a development that does not bode well for prospects of democratization.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the authors and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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