

Gambia continues to defy existing political norms on the African continent

Ismaila Ceesay analyses the surprise defeat of President Yahya Jammeh of Gambia by Adama Barrow in the recent elections.

This article is part of our **African Elections series**.

Nestled inside Senegal like a ‘hotdog in a roll’, the Gambia is surrounded on all sides by its larger neighbour, except for its short Atlantic coastline. A micro-state, the Gambia is considered to be one of mainland Africa’s smallest and ‘least important countries’ with no strategic resources. However, since gaining independence from Britain in February 1965, the country has made up for its ‘insignificant status’ by demonstrating time and again its propensity to defy existing conventional political norms in the African continent.

In the immediate aftermath of its creation as an independent sovereign state, the Gambia’s largely poor colonial legacy, combined with being poorly endowed with strategic natural and human capital resources, triggered a wave of pessimism among observers of the post-colonial African theatre. Amid the independence euphoria, some sceptics were apprehensive about the country’s survivability and long-term viability as an independent state, a sentiment aptly expressed by Berkeley Rice’s **proclamation of ‘the birth of an improbable nation’**, suggesting that the ex-British colony could not exist as an independent reality, and that the Gambia might sooner or later be co-opted by Senegal.



Gambian President Yahya Jammeh attends a meeting of the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) in Dakar, April 2, 2012. (Joe Penney / Reuters)

Despite all the gloomy forecasts, the Gambia survived as an independent nation. Except for a brief period in July 1981 when a group of leftist rebels made a failed attempt to overthrow the government of President Dawda Jawara and replace it with what they proclaimed to be a “dictatorship of the proletariat” under the leadership of the Libya-trained Marxist-Leninist Kukoi Samba Sanyang, the Gambia became a symbol of peace and stability in an unstable African sub-region. In addition, the country was distinguished as one of sub-Saharan Africa’s longest standing multi-party democracies. This was perceived to be an exception on a continent where military

dictators held sway and one-party rule and authoritarianism the norm, making the country a deviant case.

The Gambia was once again perceived as a deviant case when a military coup in July 1994, led by a 29-year-old lieutenant Yahya Jammeh, toppled the Jawara government thereby defying the post-1989 sub-Saharan African trend away from authoritarianism towards pluralism and multi-party politics. This sweep of democratic impulses through Africa, also referred to as 'Africa's springtime', the 'second independence' or 'third-wave democratization', saw mass movements against authoritarian rule by a resurgent civil society demanding the end of one-party dictatorships and the liberalisation of political spaces.

The recently-concluded elections in the Gambia and its political ramifications, to some extent, is reminiscent of political earthquakes of the same magnitude as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1989-1991 and the end of Apartheid rule in South Africa in 1994. The December 1 2016 polls saw the defeat of incumbent strong man Yahya Jammeh by a united coalition in an election whose outcome defied logic that incumbents in Africa hardly lose elections and took many by surprise. What was more unfathomable was Jammeh's decision to concede defeat to Adama Barrow, the coalition candidate, even before all the results were published. It has always been the belief that dictators of Jammeh's ilk will never preside over elections that they know they will lose or easily concede defeat without first attempting to subvert the will of the people.

In a continent where the few standing brutal 'dictators-cum-big men' of the likes of Robert Mugabe, Yoweri Museveni, Paul Kagame, Omar Al Bashir, Paul Biya, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, José Eduardo dos Santos, Idriss Deby, Joseph Kabila and Pierre Nkurunziza are using a combination of tactics to consolidate their grip on power and extend their already lengthy rule, the Gambia, once again, became a deviant case by democratically voting out an eccentric dictator who had promised to rule for a 'billion years' and who has consolidated his 22-year rule through a potent mix of fear, intimidation and mysticism. In its show of deviance, what is happening in the Gambia is the first time in post-colonial Africa's political history that a 'military-turned-civilian' dictator, whose rule has been so entrenched, has conceded defeat in a generally free and fair elections and is ready to peacefully hand over power.

Jammeh's defeat in the polls is not only due to a unified and emboldened opposition, a massive social media campaign by Gambian dissidents in the Diaspora as well as a disgruntled and youthful population. It is also the result of Jammeh's attempts, partly because of complacency, to minimally reform the electoral system by introducing 'on the spot counting'. The transparent and efficient nature of this system inhibited any attempts of electoral malpractice that would have led to a different outcome. I could not agree more with the French political thinker, Alexis de Tocqueville's assertion that the most dangerous moment for a bad government is when it begins to reform.

Ismaila Ceesay is a Lecturer in Political Science at the University of the Gambia. He has just finished his PhD in African studies at the University of Edinburgh's Centre of African Studies.

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