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Freedom of the Press 2017 - Gambia, The

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Press Freedom Status: Not Free

Total Score: 87/100 (↑1) (0 = Most Free, 100 = Least Free)

Legal Environment: 29/30

Political Environment: 35/40 (↑1)

Economic Environment: 23/30

Quick Facts

Population: 2,100,000

Freedom in the World Status: Not Free

Net Freedom Status: Not Free

Internet Penetration Rate: 17.1%

Key Developments in 2016:

- A number of journalists were arrested, and some were held without charge, ahead of December's presidential election. Longtime president Yahya Jammeh was defeated by

opposition candidate Adama Barrow, but at year's end had indicated that he would refuse to step down.

- Just ahead of the election, authorities shut down internet access and manipulated telecommunications infrastructure to prevent outgoing and incoming international phone calls. The blackout lasted several days.
- Two journalists from Qatar's Al-Jazeera satellite television channel were denied accreditation ahead of the election, and were deported when they entered the country anyway. They managed to interview Barrow during their short time in Gambia.

Executive Summary

Gambia's constitution guarantees freedom of speech and of the press, but these rights are not respected in practice. Jammeh's government has used numerous legal mechanisms and repressive laws to aggressively thwart critical reporting by journalists and media houses. Journalists continue to face harassment and intimidation, mainly from members of the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), which has operated under the command of President Jammeh since 1994. An increasingly difficult economic situation has made it difficult for many media outfits to operate.

In December 2016, opposition candidate Adama Barrow won a surprise victory in the country's presidential election; Jammeh accepted the results before rescinding his concession days later, and the impasse had yet to be resolved by year's end. While local and international outlets were generally able to produce news about the campaign; authorities harassed, arrested, and detained journalists as a result of their reporting on the election, and held some without charge. In April, Mamour Mbenga of the opposition-aligned *Foroyaa* newspaper was arrested while covering an opposition protest; the arresting officers reportedly beat him severely and destroyed his video camera and other equipment before releasing him without charge. Additionally, Mbenga said *Foroyaa* edited descriptions of his treatment by police out of the story he filed about the demonstration.

A number of journalists were arrested as the elections drew closer, including some who worked at the government-controlled public broadcaster and at government-aligned outlets. Momodou Sabally, director of the state-run Gambia Radio and Television Service (GRTS), and GRTS journalist Bakary Fatty, were arrested in early November after the broadcaster preempted a piece on an event hosted by the first lady, with a story on how opposition factions had united behind Barrow ahead of the election. Sabally was charged with financial offenses allegedly committed while he had worked in Jammeh's administration – charges that had already been filed against him once and had been dismissed in 2015; he was detained for just over two weeks, and the case against him was ongoing at year's end, according to the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), an advocacy group. Fatty, who was not charged with a crime, remained in detention at year's end, and had been denied access to his family and to a lawyer. Also in November, Yunus Salieu, a reporter at the government-controlled *Daily Observer*, was arrested, as was Alhagie Manka, a freelance photographer; both were detained for several days for taking photos of Jammeh's supporters without authorization.

While a number of international outlets covered the election, authorities denied accreditation to two journalists from Qatar's satellite television channel Al-Jazeera ahead of the poll. The journalists entered Gambia anyway, and were promptly deported after security agents discovered their presence in the country; they managed to interview Barrow before their expulsion. And, one day before the election, the government blocked access to the internet and manipulated the country's telecommunications network to prevent mobile users from making and receiving international phone calls. The blockage remained in place for several days.

Separately, Alagie Abdoulie Ceesay, the managing director of the private Teranga FM radio station, was convicted in absentia in November 2016 of sedition and spreading false information for privately sharing an image of Jammeh with a gun pointed at his head. He was sentenced to two years and issued a fine of 200,000 dalasi (\$4,700). Ceesay was not in Gambia at the time – in April it was reported that Ceesay, who was initially detained in 2015, escaped from custody during a check-up at a military hospital, and had fled to Senegal.

Explanatory Note

This country report has been abridged for *Freedom of the Press 2017*. For background information on press freedom in The Gambia, see [Freedom of the Press 2016](#).

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