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Freedom in the World 2011 - Gambia, The

Capital: Banjul

Population: 1,609,000

Political Rights Score: 5 *

Civil Liberties Score: 5 *

Status: Partly Free

Overview

President Yahya Jammeh sought to maintain personal control over the government in 2010 by publically threatening those in opposition to his rule. Gambian security forces, who continued to harass and intimidate journalists throughout the year, were implicated in a torture case against a newspaper editor in late 2010. A number of dissenters were sentenced to death in July for their alleged involvement in a coup plot against Jammeh in 2009.

After gaining independence from Britain in 1965, The Gambia functioned for almost 30 years as an electoral democracy under President Dawda Jawara and his People's Progressive Party. A 1981 coup by leftist soldiers was reversed by intervention from Senegal, which borders The Gambia on three sides. The two countries formed the Confederation of Senegambia a year later, but it was dissolved in 1989.

Lieutenant Yahya Jammeh deposed Jawara in a 1994 military coup. The junior officers who led the coup quickly issued draconian decrees curtailing civil and political rights. A new constitution, adopted in a closely controlled 1996 referendum, allowed Jammeh to transform his military dictatorship into a nominally civilian administration.

Jammeh defeated human rights lawyer Ousainou Darboe in the 2001 presidential election, and the ruling Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC) won all but three seats in the 2002 National Assembly elections, thanks to a widespread boycott by opposition parties.

The government announced in March 2006 that it had foiled an attempted coup, leading to the arrest of dozens of people, including several prominent journalists and senior intelligence and defense personnel. Ten military officers were sentenced to lengthy prison terms in April 2007. Jammeh won a new five-year term in the September 2006

presidential election, taking 67 percent of the vote, and the APRC swept legislative elections in January 2007.

Jammeh has drawn criticism for erratic statements and behavior. He has claimed that he can personally cure HIV/AIDS using traditional herbs, and in 2008, the president threatened decapitation for any homosexuals who remained in the country. In 2009, he publicly warned against causing instability through human rights activism. Eight individuals, most of whom belonged to the military, were arrested in late 2009 on suspicion of planning a coup to overthrow Jammeh. In July 2010, all of the accused were found guilty of treason and conspiracy, among other charges, and received death sentences.

Throughout 2010, Jammeh sought to tighten his grip on power ahead of the 2011 presidential elections. In a tour of the country in July 2010, the president threatened to withhold government services to voters who fail to support him in the 2011 elections. In a July celebration of the 1994 coup that brought him to power, Jammeh declared that he would rule The Gambia for as long as he wished.

Although The Gambia is a poor, agrarian country, it has experienced modest economic growth thanks to its tourism industry and the government's increased emphasis on economic development. According to the International Monetary Fund, the economic outlook for The Gambia was positive, with a projected 5.7 percent real GDP growth in 2010.

The Gambia has increasingly become a transit point for drug shipments from South and Central America due to pervasive corruption among Gambian officials and growing demand in Europe. In May 2010, 12 foreign nationals were arrested in connection with a drug trafficking ring, leading to the confiscation in June of over two tons of cocaine valued at U.S. \$1 billion in one of the largest drug seizures in West Africa. In October, the National Assembly voted to introduce the death penalty for possession of more than 250 grams of cocaine or heroin.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

The Gambia is not an electoral democracy. The 2006 presidential election was marred by serious government repression of the media and the opposition. The ruling party swept the 2007 legislative elections, taking 42 of 46 seats. The president is elected by popular vote for unlimited five-year terms. Of the 53 members of the unicameral National Assembly, 48 are elected by popular vote and the remainder are appointed by the president; members serve five-year terms. The president and the ruling APRC are in clear control, and opposition involvement is largely symbolic.

Official corruption remains a serious problem, although President Yahya Jammeh's recent focus on economic development policies has led to increased anticorruption efforts, including the establishment of an Anti-Corruption Commission. In March 2010, the government prosecuted and dismissed several high ranking security officials for corruption and drug-related charges. The Gambia was ranked 91 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The government does not respect freedom of the press. Laws on sedition give the authorities great discretion in silencing dissent, and independent media outlets and journalists are subject to arrests, harassment, and violence. The 2004 assassination of journalist and press freedom activist Deyda Hydara is still unsolved, and the whereabouts of *Daily Observer* journalist, Ebrima Manneh, have remained unknown since he was arrested in 2006 for publishing a report critical of Jammeh. The government runs Radio Gambia as well as the sole television channel and the *Gambia Daily* newspaper. There are several private radio stations and newspapers, and foreign broadcasts are available. While the state generally does not restrict internet usage, some websites have been blocked. In June 2010, the government blocked in-country access to the website of U.S.-based newspaper *Gambia Echo*.

Freedom of religion is legally guaranteed and generally upheld by the government. Academic freedom is respected on the surface, but the broader limitations on freedom of speech are thought to encourage self-censorship among scholars. Private discussion is limited by fears of surveillance, searches, and arrest by the National Intelligence Agency (NIA).

Freedoms of assembly and association are provided by law, though in practice they are constrained by state intimidation. Gambians, except for civil servants and members of the security forces, have the right to form unions, strike, and bargain for wages. However, the climate of fear generated by the state and the NIA reportedly dissuades workers from taking action.

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but the courts are hampered by corruption and executive influence. The president has the authority to appoint and dismiss judges. The judicial system recognizes customary law and Sharia (Islamic law), primarily with regard to personal status and family matters.

Impunity for the country's security forces, particularly the NIA, is a problem. A 1995 decree allows the NIA to search, arrest, or seize any person or property without a warrant in the name of state security. Individuals are often arrested without warrant, including journalists, and some individuals are held incommunicado by the government for their political views or associations.

Prison conditions are poor, with overcrowded, poorly ventilated, and unsanitary cells. Inmates suffer from inadequate nutrition and lack of medical attention. Torture of prisoners, including political prisoners, has been also reported. Musa Saidykhan, newspaper editor for the *Independent*, alleges that he was detained without trial and tortured by presidential security agents in March of 2006. An Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) court ruled in Saidykhan's favor in December 2010, awarding him damages to be paid by the Gambian government.

The Gambia's various ethnic groups coexist in relative harmony, though critics have accused Jammeh of privileging members of the Jola ethnic group in the military and other positions of power. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion, language, ethnicity, gender, and other factors.

The government has encouraged female education by waiving primary school fees for girls, but women have fewer opportunities for higher education and employment than men. While the vice president and several cabinet ministers are women, there are just four women in the 53-seat National Assembly. Spousal rape and domestic violence are problematic, as many do not consider these crimes, and social stigma results in underreporting. Sharia provisions regarding family law and inheritance restrict women's rights, and female genital mutilation remains legal and widely practiced. Women and children are routinely subject to trafficking for sexual exploitation and domestic servitude, and The Gambia does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking. However, the government revised anti-trafficking laws are included the death penalty as punishment in October 2010.

** Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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