

A decorative graphic consisting of a grid of grey dots of varying sizes, with several dots highlighted in red. The dots are arranged in a pattern that roughly outlines the map of West Africa.

# The role of the regional forces in Gambia and what their presence will mean in 2021 elections

**DR. ISMAILA CEESAY**

December 2020

## About the analysis

In December 2016, The Gambia underwent a major political change, which of course had an impact at all levels. Indeed, after 22 years of dictatorial rule, Yahya JAMMEH had to relinquish power. Adama BARROW, then a businessman, became The Gambia's third president, ushering in a new era of hope and democracy. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) played a very important role in this transition. Subsequently, the ECOWAS Military Stabilization Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG) was launched in January 2017 to ensure the stability of the country during the democratic transition and to protect the country's still fragile democracy. After several extensions of its mandate since the original expiration date of May 21, 2017, the ECOMIG mission was scheduled to end in August 2019, but President BARROW announced that the security force would remain stationed in The Gambia until 2021 and beyond. However, a few months before the next presidential elections, the continued presence of foreign troops on Gambian soil has been quite controversial mainly by the population who question its real role.

## CONTEXT

On 1 December 2016, The Gambia experienced a political rupture when the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) announced the victory of an unassuming businessman, Adama Barrow, over the incumbent strongman Yahya Jammeh. Jammeh had promised to rule the small West African nation for a billion years. However, the election victory abruptly ended Jammeh's 22 years of dominance, ushering a new era of hope and democracy. After initially calling president-elect Barrow to concede defeat and promising to peacefully transfer power, Yaya Jammeh, to the surprise of both Gambians and the international community, announced seven days later that he was rejecting the election result in its totality. Branding the results as fraudulent and characterised by unacceptable errors on the part of the electoral authorities, Jammeh declared them 'null and void' and refused to step down and promising to hold fresh elections.

Jammeh's rejection of the election results and subsequent refusal to step down almost plunged the country into turmoil, sparking a political impasse that lasted for almost six weeks. Eventually under regional and international diplomatic pressure and with the threat of military intervention by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the defeated Jammeh negotiated his exit from office on conditions that are still unclear to the Gambian people. On 21 January 2017 Jammeh waved to his supporters as he boarded his private jet and left the country, together with his family, for Equatorial Guinea. The legacy he left behind was one of a collapsed economy, weak institutions and a nation divided along ethno-political lines.

On 18 February 2017, Adama Barrow was, for the second time, sworn-in as president, this time on home soil, becoming The Gambia's third president. His initial swearing in having taken place in The Gambia's embassy in Senegal prior to Jammeh's departure. And for the first time since gaining independence from Britain in 1965, the country experienced democratic change of leadership.

## ECOMIG MANDATE

Political transitions, generally, are always complex and tenuous. In the case of The Gambia, the transition from autocracy to democracy was going to be critically daunting as new democracies are more prone to political violence than consolidated democracies. As part of the country's broad transition agenda and to provide stability for the post-transition political environment, The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Military Stabilization Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG) was launched in January 2017 to ensure the stability of the country during the democratic transition and to protect the country's fragile democracy. Composed of 500 troops from Senegal, Nigeria and Ghana, ECOMIG was primarily tasked with training and assisting the army and police in protecting the country from external

threats and maintaining internal security. They were also to engage in providing close protection and patrolling services to the president and the members of the government, as well as key locations such as the international airport in Yundum and the waterway terminal in Bara, an important crossing point to neighbouring Senegal.

After repeated extensions to its mandate since the initial expiration date of 21 May 2017, the ECOMIG mission was expected to end in August 2019 but President Barrow has announced that the security force would remain stationed in the Gambia until 2021 and beyond. The latest in the line of requests by Barrow to extend the ECOMIGs mission happened during the 57<sup>th</sup> ordinary session of the Authority of Heads of States and Government of ECOWAS in Niger, Niamey, on 7 September 2020 when he argued that 'given the reforms underway and the need to protect the fragile democracy in The Gambia, I avail myself this privilege to request for the extension of the mandate of ECOMIG in The Gambia'. This means that ECOMIG will be in the Gambia during the presidential elections in 2021 and even beyond.

The prolongation of the ECOMIG mission and the continued presence of foreign troops in Gambian soil has been quite contentious and controversial with implications for sovereignty and for instability in the long term. It risks undermining the security sector reform and further alienating and demoralising The Gambian army as many consider these extensions as Barrow's lack of trust of The Gambian army. Be that as it may, and for all intents and purposes, there is no justification for the continued presence of ECOMIG in the country and the extension of their mission to 2021 is more for political reasons rather than supporting the transition agenda. It could further be argued that the continued presence of ECOMIG has jeopardised the Security Sector Reform (SSR), a significant agenda launched in September 2017 with the aim of establishing an effective, professional and accountable security sector.

## ECOMIG AND THE 2021 ELECTIONS

As the Gambia heads towards the 2021 elections, the role of ECOMIG will be the subject of intense focus and scrutiny. The political stakes will be high in this election as it is going to be the Gambia's first presidential elections in post-dictatorship amidst and within the context of a fragile democracy, failed institutional and constitutional reforms and reconciliation process, deepening ethno-political and religious divisions, a high sense of betrayal, corruption, lack of accountability and the lack of basic services. Moreover, a growing youth population and high levels of unemployment pose a serious and pressing challenge. The median age of the country is 17 years old, with 64% of the population under the age of 25. A 2017 International Labour Organisation report estimated youth unemployment to be 38%; a potential source of future unrest and protest.

With these dynamics at play and with rising political rivalries as manifested in toxic rhetoric and propaganda between the United Democratic Party (UDP), President Barrow's former political home and The National People's Party (NPP), his newly formed party, pre-election political tensions could simmer beneath the surface as the 2021 elections looms. This is particularly prevailing as The Gambia's Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) plans to abandon the more secure, transparent and easy to use ballot systems known as the Marble and the Drum, unique only to The Gambia, to the never tested paper ballot system. With high illiteracy rates and the potential registration of new voters, mostly young people, this change can have far reaching ramifications for post-election stability, especially if there are indications of electoral malpractice.

The presence of the ECOMIG forces in these great schemes of things will be quite precarious as they could find themselves in a complex and difficult situation where every decision can have far reaching consequences. Their presence in a

potentially fragile and volatile situation and the level at which they chose to engage could either serve as a guarantee for post-election stability or trigger reactions that can lead to the erosion of stability. History teaches us that it is always dangerous for foreign forces to get themselves entangled in domestic political situations. No having confidence in the army to do his bidding if things go awry, President Barrow hopes to get protection and support from the ECOMIG forces should the situation escalate to the extent that the threat of him losing grip on power becomes imminent. Perhaps, that is the primary reason why he and his government are stalling on the much-needed SSR that will trigger ECOMIG's exit and there is no political will for an exit strategy. Could this be a miscalculation? Only time and President Barrow's resolve to hold on to power at any cost will be the ultimate judge.

The Gambia is at the crossroads and to ensure peace and stability and safeguard national security, the Government of The Gambia should consider the following:

- Expedite the SSR process by working with stakeholders to implement the validated national documents such as the National Security Policy, the National security Strategy and the Security Sector Reform Strategy.
- Immediately unveil a clear strategy and a way forward towards a new constitutional order and a new legal framework for the 2021 elections.
- Ratify all legal instruments relating to human rights.
- Develop an inclusive process with key stakeholder to support the implementation of the African Union (AU) instruments relating to elections, democracy and good governance, with a view to preparing the ground for holding credible, free and transparent elections in 2021.



### About the author

Dr. Ismaila CEESAY is a senior lecturer and the head of Political Science department at the University of The GAMBIA (UTG), where he has taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses since 2010. He is the founder and current director of the MSc program in International Relations and Diplomacy at University of The Gambia. He has taught many courses in this program and supervised the Masters dissertation of many students. Dr. CEESAY's research interests include African politics, information and communications technology and the intersection of security and youth issues. He holds a PhD in African Studies from the University of Edinburgh (SCOTLAND).

### Imprint

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Peace and Security  
Centre of Competence Sub-Saharan Africa  
Point E | boulevard de l'Est | Villa n°30  
P.O. Box 15416 Dakar-Fann | Senegal

Tel.: +221 33 859 20 02 | Fax: +221 33 864 49 31  
Email: [info@fes-pscc.org](mailto:info@fes-pscc.org) | [www.fes-pscc.org](http://www.fes-pscc.org)  
©Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2020

Layout: Green Eyez Design SARL,  
[www.greeneyezdesign.com](http://www.greeneyezdesign.com)

Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES. The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

