



Updated June 10, 2019

The Gambia

The Gambia (“Gambia”) is a small West African country almost entirely surrounded by Senegal. It underwent a historic transition of power after longtime authoritarian leader Yahya Jammeh unexpectedly lost an election in December 2016. A brief political crisis over Jammeh’s refusal to step down was resolved when a regional military intervention forced Jammeh into exile, enabling President-elect Adama Barrow to take office. Barrow’s inauguration in early 2017 furthered a trend in which West African heads of state are increasingly chosen through elections.

A political newcomer who once worked as a security guard in London, President Barrow has overseen a broad increase in political freedom and improved relations with the international community. Analysts warn that Gambia’s progress remains fragile, however. Efforts to advance governance reforms and prosecute abuses committed under the former regime have been slow to advance and could stoke tensions, particularly within the security forces.

U.S.-Gambia ties have warmed under President Barrow. Bilateral ties were previously strained due to Gambia’s poor human rights record, and worsened after U.S. nationals of Gambian descent attempted a coup against Jammeh in 2014. (U.S. prosecutors subsequently brought charges against several of the coup plotters.) The Trump Administration has launched new health and governance assistance programs in the country, though Gambia remains a minor aid recipient within Africa. The Administration also has imposed targeted sanctions on Jammeh and his immediate family, citing authorities granted by Congress.

Background and the 2016 Elections

President Barrow’s surprise election transformed Gambian politics, which Jammeh had dominated since seizing power in a 1994 coup d’état. Jammeh won elections in 1996 and was re-elected three times—most recently in 2011, in polls that international observers described as neither free nor fair. An authoritarian and erratic leader, Jammeh sharply curtailed civil liberties and suppressed dissent.

Repression and a crackdown on protests further marred the electoral environment ahead of the 2016 polls. With top figures in prison, Gambia’s fractious opposition ultimately coalesced around Barrow, a businessman who had held a low-profile post in the opposition United Democratic Party (UDP). Barrow unexpectedly secured a narrow victory. Jammeh at first conceded defeat, but then rejected the results. Mediation by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) failed to resolve the impasse.

In January 2017, troops from Senegal, Ghana, and Nigeria entered Gambia under an ECOWAS mandate, at which point Jammeh agreed to resign and accept exile in Equatorial Guinea. Barrow, who had fled to Senegal out of concern for his personal safety, returned to take office in late January 2017.

Gambia at a Glance

Size: slightly less than twice the size of Delaware
Population: 2.1 million
GDP Growth: 6.6%
GDP Per Capita: \$745
Religions: Muslim 95.7%, Christian 4.2%, other 0.2% (2013)
Median Age: 21 years
Key Exports: peanut products, fish, cotton lint, palm kernels
Key Imports: foodstuffs, manufactures, fuel, machinery and transport equipment



Source: CRS. Data from CIA World Factbook and the International Monetary Fund (IMF); 2018 estimates unless otherwise indicated.

The Barrow Administration

Barrow has taken steps to improve governance and mend ties with the region and donor community. He has pardoned scores of political prisoners and appointed an expert committee to revise the constitution. He also has launched a Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparations Commission tasked with uncovering abuses by the former regime, awarding reparations, and recommending perpetrators for amnesty or prosecution. His government has sought to identify and repatriate wealth that Jammeh allegedly hid overseas. In early 2019, the nongovernmental Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project estimated that Jammeh had “orchestrated the embezzlement” of nearly \$1 billion in public funds and illicit revenues, although Gambian government public estimates have been far lower.

Legal reforms that could help ensure greater freedom of expression, assembly, and association have been slow to advance, however, amid signs that Barrow will not uphold his campaign pledge to serve only a three-year transitional term (which would mean leaving office at the end of 2019). Instead, he appears intent on serving a full five-year term and has suggested he will run for reelection in 2021. The coalition that brought Barrow to power has fractured over whether to continue to back him, particularly after the president in March 2019 fired his Vice President, Ousainou Darboe, who leads the UDP. Darboe was unable to run for president in 2016 because he was in jail; the UDP was the largest component of Barrow’s 2016 coalition and won large pluralities in 2017 legislative and 2018 local elections.

Police have arrested several members of the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), a tool of repression under the former regime, for the 2016 murder of an opposition figure. In 2017, a notorious former Interior Minister was arrested in Switzerland, where he faces trial for allegedly facilitating torture. Gambian authorities also have prosecuted military personnel accused of plotting to overthrow Barrow.

Broader security sector reforms have largely stalled, however. Restructuring and accountability efforts could stir unrest—particularly if they are construed as targeting the Jola ethnic group (roughly 10% of the population), which formed Jammeh’s political base and reportedly constitutes a large proportion of the military. Meanwhile, ECOWAS troops remain in the country and ensure key functions, such as protection of the presidential palace.

Jammeh has eluded prosecution despite calls from Gambian civil society groups that he face trial. Ghanaian authorities also decided in 2018 to consider new evidence of Jammeh’s potential involvement in the 2005 killings of dozens of West African migrants, including Ghanaians, in Gambia. Officials in Equatorial Guinea, where Jammeh lives in exile, have pledged to reject extradition requests.

Human Rights

During Jammeh’s tenure, annual State Department human rights reports documented widespread abuses against citizens, including torture, arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearances, and indefinite detention. The regime targeted journalists, dissidents, and other critics. The international community expressed particular concern over discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons, including laws criminalizing homosexuality and abuses against individuals arrested on suspicion of being gay. One law imposed a life sentence for “aggravated homosexuality,” a category that included engaging in same-sex relations while having HIV/AIDS.

President Barrow has overseen a substantial opening of political and social space. Journalists have returned from exile, and private media have burgeoned. Human rights challenges persist, however, including episodic abuses by security forces, harsh prison conditions, and trafficking in persons. Repressive Jammeh-era laws remain in effect, including the anti-LGBT law. Underscoring the fragility of gains since 2017, in May 2019 the government pursued “public order” charges against reportedly peaceful protesters calling on Barrow to serve only a three-year term.

The Economy

Gambia is one of the world’s poorest countries, with per capita gross domestic product (GDP) estimated at \$745. Three-quarters of the labor force engage in agriculture; the formal economy is highly dependent on regional re-exports of manufactured and consumer goods, peanut and seafood exports, beach tourism, and diaspora remittances. The economy has experienced alternating growth and contraction in recent years, with a sharp slowdown in 2016 widely attributed to a poor harvest and drop in tourism during the political crisis. Growth rebounded to 6.6% in 2018, per the International Monetary Fund (IMF), but is likely insufficient to alleviate poverty given high population growth, or to raise government revenues substantially. The government’s 2018-2021 National Development Plan seeks to stabilize the economy, enhance agricultural production, develop infrastructure, boost tourism, and foster regulatory reform. Key challenges include public debt valued at 87% of GDP in 2019, a level the World Bank considers “unsustainable.” Gambia’s top bilateral creditors are Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and India. The country is pursuing debt relief and restructuring with key creditors.

Foreign Relations and Donor Assistance

Gambia’s foreign relations under Jammeh were often tense, though relations with China warmed after Jammeh broke ties with Taiwan in 2013. Jammeh pulled Gambia out of the Commonwealth and International Criminal Court (ICC), and alienated donors by claiming to have discovered a cure for AIDS. The European Union (EU) halted development aid in 2014 due to human rights concerns, including Gambia’s persecution of LGBT individuals. Within the region, Jammeh’s support for separatist rebels in Senegal strained ties with Gambia’s only neighbor.

Under Barrow, Gambia has rejoined the Commonwealth and the ICC. Donors have resumed funding, with the EU, World Bank, IMF, and others pledging new assistance. EU interests partly center on stemming the disproportionately high numbers of Gambians seeking to migrate to Europe via the Mediterranean. Regional ties also have improved. Senegal’s President Macky Sall hosted Barrow during the tense political stand-off with Jammeh and visited Gambia in early 2018. In early 2019, the two countries inaugurated a new donor-backed bridge connecting Gambia’s capital, Banjul, to northern Senegal’s road network.

U.S. Relations and Assistance

U.S.-Gambia relations have markedly improved since Barrow’s inauguration. In 2017, President Trump reinstated Gambia’s eligibility for trade benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA; Title I, P.L. 106-200, as amended), which President Obama suspended in 2014. The Millennium Challenge Corporation, which suspended Gambia from consideration in 2006, has now deemed it eligible for a Threshold program. The State Department has lifted a suspension on visas for Gambian officials imposed in 2016 due to lack of cooperation with U.S. deportations. Gambia could be affected, however, by President Trump’s April 2019 directive to crack down on countries, such as Gambia, whose citizens overstay U.S. visas at a high rate.

In 2017, the Administration imposed targeted sanctions on ex-President Jammeh and associated entities under an Executive Order (E.O.) pertaining to global corruption and human rights abuses. The E.O. is premised, in part, on authority granted by Congress under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (§1261 of P.L. 114-328). Separately, in late 2018, the State Department imposed a visa ban on Jammeh and his immediate family under §7031(c) of the FY2018 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 115-141), pertaining to foreign kleptocrats and human rights abusers. The Treasury Department has sanctioned several Gambia-based individuals and entities in connection with illicit financing activities tied to Lebanese Hezbollah, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization.

U.S. bilateral aid is limited to International Military Education and Training (IMET), with \$197,000 appropriated in FY2018. Drawing on regionally and centrally managed funds, the State Department and USAID also have initiated small programs to promote health, economic development, anti-corruption efforts, and good governance. Gambia also hosts a Peace Corps program.

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