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# The Politics of Gambia

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## Introduction

The Gambia, a sliver of land following the meandering path of the Gambia River, is unique not only in its geography but also in its political trajectory. As Africa's smallest mainland country, The Gambia occupies a distinct place in the tapestry of West African politics—a place shaped by colonial encounters, a long democratic experiment, periods of authoritarian rule, and a recent resurgence of multiparty democracy. To understand the politics of The Gambia is to explore a nation continuously negotiating its past, present, and future amid changing political realities.

Since gaining independence from Britain in 1965, The Gambia's political journey has been marked by both stability and turbulence. The early years exemplified a peaceful transition to self-rule, its leadership intent on building durable democratic institutions. Under Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara, the country achieved notable political stability and a reputation for tolerance. However, this era was interrupted in 1994 by a military coup that heralded 22 years of increasingly authoritarian rule under Yahya Jammeh, whose regime left deep institutional and societal scars.

The restoration of democracy following the surprising 2016 presidential election was a watershed moment. Defying doubts, Gambians successfully asserted the primacy of the ballot box, propelling Adama Barrow to power through a coalition of opposition forces. This pivotal episode represented not only a dramatic transfer of power but also reinvigorated civic consciousness and demands for reform. Yet, the return to democracy has exposed enduring challenges—from institutional weaknesses and political fragmentation to concerns over human rights, justice, and the specter of renewed authoritarianism.

This book, "The Politics of Gambia: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Gambia," offers a comprehensive exploration of the nation's political life. It delves into the constitutional architecture that underpins governance, the evolution and functioning of parties and elections, the power dynamics among branches of government, and the unique Gambian voting system. The book also examines the impact of customary law, local authority, religion, ethnicity, and economic realities on the nation's political landscape.

By tracing major historical milestones, unpacking contemporary developments, and analyzing both achievements and obstacles, this guide seeks to provide nuanced insights into the complexities of Gambian politics. Whether you are a student, researcher, policymaker, or an interested observer, you will find herein a resource for understanding not just the institutions and processes of government, but also the living and ever-changing fabric of Gambian public life.

The Gambia continues on its journey of democratic consolidation, balancing hopes for progress with the responsibilities and risks inherent to any vibrant political system. In shedding light on this ongoing experiment, the following chapters aim to deepen appreciation for the realities and possibilities of politics in The Gambia.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Origins of Gambian Politics

Long before the arrival of European traders and colonial administrators, the area that would become The Gambia was a dynamic landscape of interacting kingdoms and communities, each with its own forms of social organization and political authority. The sinuous Gambia River, a vital artery of trade and communication, shaped the settlement patterns and political contours of the region. Various ethnic groups, primarily the Mandinka, Wolof, Fula, and Jola, established complex societies along its banks, developing systems of governance that reflected their unique histories, social structures, and economic activities.

The Mandinka people, among the dominant groups in the region, traced their ancestry to the ancient Mali Empire, which held sway over vast swathes of West Africa during the medieval period. Oral traditions speak of migrations from the heartland of the Mali Empire, bringing with them not only people but also political traditions and structures. These Mandinka communities along the Gambia River were often organized into smaller kingdoms, each with its own ruling elite and a system of governance that, while varying in specifics, generally involved a hierarchy of authority from the village level up to the king, or *mansa*.

Village-level politics were often centered around the *alkalo*, typically the eldest male descendant of the village's founding family. The *alkalo*, often assisted by a council of village elders, held responsibility for maintaining peace, settling local disputes, and managing communal land. In villages where Islam had taken root, the religious leader, the *alimamo*, would often share some of these leadership responsibilities, reflecting the growing influence of Islamic principles on social and political life.

Above the village level, these Mandinka kingdoms had their own systems of selecting rulers. The position of *mansa* was often held by the leader of an important family, with different families sometimes taking turns in the selection process. The *mansa* held the right to collect taxes and fees from trade, which contributed to their wealth and influence. However, their power was not absolute; they often had to share resources with village leaders, indicating a degree of shared authority within these pre-colonial political structures.

The Wolof, another prominent ethnic group, also had a sophisticated pre-colonial political organization. Their history is closely intertwined with that of the larger Wolof Empire, which encompassed parts of modern-day Senegal and The Gambia. Within The Gambia, Wolof communities were organized into kingdoms that, while owing some allegiance to the broader empire, maintained a degree of autonomy. Their political system, like that of the Mandinka, involved a social hierarchy and a structure of

governance that extended from the village to the kingdom level.

At the apex of the Wolof Empire was an emperor, the *Burba Wolof*, selected by a college of electors that included the rulers of the constituent kingdoms. Within the Gambian kingdoms, rulers were typically male descendants of the kingdom's founder. Village chiefs, usually male descendants of the village founder, were responsible for maintaining order, collecting taxes, and were assisted by a council appointed from among the village nobility. This hierarchical structure, with clear lines of authority and established methods of selecting leaders, demonstrates the developed nature of pre-colonial political systems in the region.

The Fula and Jola peoples also had their own distinct forms of political organization, though perhaps less centralized than the larger Mandinka or Wolof kingdoms. Fula communities, often pastoralists, might have more decentralized leadership structures based on clans and lineage, while Jola societies in the south were traditionally organized around age-sets and spiritual leaders, with decision-making often more communal. These diverse political arrangements reflected the varied lifestyles and social customs of the different ethnic groups inhabiting the Gambia River basin.

Trade played a significant role in shaping the political landscape of the pre-colonial era. The Gambia River was a crucial part of the trans-Saharan trade routes, connecting the interior to the Atlantic coast. Arab traders were present in the region as early as the 9th and 10th centuries, and their presence influenced the development of trade networks and the emergence of Islamic kingdoms. Control over these trade routes and the wealth generated from them became a source of power and contention among the various kingdoms and leaders.

The arrival of Europeans in the 15th century, beginning with the Portuguese, marked a turning point in the history of the Gambia River region. Initially interested in trade, particularly in gold and slaves, European powers gradually increased their presence and influence. The Portuguese established trading posts, though significant settlements didn't immediately materialize. Later, other European powers, including the English, French, Dutch, Swedish, and Courlanders, also sought to establish a foothold in the lucrative West African trade.

This increasing European interest led to competition and conflict, primarily between the English and French, for dominance over the Gambia and Senegal rivers. This struggle for control extended over a century and a half, with possessions changing hands multiple times. While trade remained a primary motivation, the European presence began to subtly alter the existing political dynamics, as local rulers engaged with or resisted the foreign traders and their growing power.

The transatlantic slave trade, tragically, became a major component of this interaction, profoundly impacting the social and political structures of the region.

European demand for slaves fueled conflicts and altered existing forms of servitude within African societies. Control over the capture and sale of captives became another source of power and wealth for some local leaders, while devastating communities and disrupting traditional life for others.

The pre-colonial political landscape of The Gambia was, therefore, a complex mosaic of indigenous kingdoms, each with its own internal organization and external relationships. These polities were shaped by factors such as geography, ethnicity, trade, and the growing influence of Islam. While the arrival of Europeans and the subsequent transatlantic slave trade introduced new elements of power and disruption, the foundations of political authority and social organization had been laid by the people who had inhabited the banks of the Gambia River for centuries, setting the stage for the transformations that would follow with the advent of formal colonial rule.

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