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The Politics of The Gambia

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Historical Roots of Gambian Politics
- **Chapter 2** Colonial Legacy and the Path to Independence
- **Chapter 3** The First Republic: Dawda Jawara's Era
- **Chapter 4** The 1981 Coup Attempt and Senegambia Confederation
- **Chapter 5** The 1994 Coup and the Rise of Yahya Jammeh
- **Chapter 6** Authoritarian Consolidation: Jammeh's Rule and Its Impact
- **Chapter 7** The Political System: Republic, Constitution, and Governance
- **Chapter 8** The Executive: Powers and Responsibilities of the Presidency
- **Chapter 9** Legislative Structures: The National Assembly and Law-Making
- **Chapter 10** The Judiciary: Courts, Justice, and Legal Pluralism
- **Chapter 11** Electoral Framework: Processes, Reforms, and Challenges
- **Chapter 12** Political Parties: Evolution and Multiparty Dynamics
- **Chapter 13** Major Political Organizations and Their Influence
- **Chapter 14** Ethnicity, Identity, and Political Competition
- **Chapter 15** The Role of Civil Society in Democracy and Reform
- **Chapter 16** Human Rights: Progress, Setbacks, and the TRRC
- **Chapter 17** Constitutional Reform: Debates, Drafts, and Outcomes
- **Chapter 18** The Structure and Functions of Local Government
- **Chapter 19** Traditional Authority and Customary Governance
- **Chapter 20** The Media Landscape: Freedom, Censorship, and Developments
- **Chapter 21** Security Forces and Civil-Military Relations
- **Chapter 22** Women and Marginalized Groups in Gambian Politics
- **Chapter 23** Foreign Policy, ECOWAS, and International Relations
- **Chapter 24** Contemporary Political Challenges and Recent Developments
- **Chapter 25** The Future of Democracy in The Gambia

Introduction

The Gambia, renowned for its narrow stretch along the Gambia River and its rich cultural tapestry, occupies a unique place in Africa's political landscape. Despite being the smallest mainland country on the continent, The Gambia's political history provides profound insights into the trajectories of post-colonial states, marked by a shifting interplay between democratic aspirations and the realities of authoritarian rule. For both students of African politics and observers concerned with global democratic trends, The Gambia offers a significant case study in resilience, transition, and the complex process of political reform.

From its independence from British colonial rule in 1965, The Gambia embarked on a journey characterized by remarkable stability under Sir Dawda Jawara and the People's Progressive Party. This era, lasting nearly three decades, stood out for its regular elections and relative peace, earning The Gambia the distinction of being a democratic beacon in West Africa. Yet, this period was not without tension, as exemplified by the 1981 coup attempt and the brief experiment in union with neighboring Senegal.

The seismic shift in the country's political trajectory came with the bloodless coup of 1994, propelling Yahya Jammeh and the Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council to power. Jammeh's long tenure was marked by authoritarianism, repression, and the erosion of democratic institutions, casting a shadow over the civil liberties and rights of many Gambians. The end of his rule in 2016—after a dramatic electoral upset and a tense political impasse—symbolized a new dawn for The Gambia, as the country wrestled to reclaim and redefine its democratic institutions under President Adama Barrow.

Today, The Gambia's political environment is dynamic and multi-layered, reflecting ongoing debates over constitutional reforms, the legacy of Jammeh's rule, and the challenges of forging a truly inclusive and accountable state. Political parties, once dominated by singular personalities, are now in competition, while a revitalized civil society and independent press play increasingly pivotal roles. The search for justice, reconciliation, and a more balanced separation of powers remains at the heart of the nation's political discourse, exemplified by initiatives such as the Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparations Commission.

This book, "The Politics of The Gambia: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in The Gambia," seeks not only to chart the events and actors that have shaped the nation's history, but also to explain the structures, institutions, and ongoing reforms driving contemporary Gambian politics. By providing an accessible and comprehensive

overview, this guide aims to support readers in grasping both the challenges and opportunities that define The Gambia's political journey. It is a resource for understanding how a country, small in size yet immense in complexity, continues to navigate the turbulent waters of political change, aspiring toward democracy, justice, and sustainable governance.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Roots of Gambian Politics

To truly understand the political currents that have shaped The Gambia, one must venture back in time, far beyond the arrival of the first European ships or the drawing of colonial boundaries. The roots of Gambian politics are deeply embedded in the complex social structures, trading networks, and interactions of the diverse ethnic groups who settled along the life-giving artery of the Gambia River. This waterway, a natural highway into the interior, facilitated not only trade but also the movement of people and ideas, contributing to a rich tapestry of pre-colonial political organization.

Before the arrival of Europeans, the area that would become The Gambia was not a single political entity but rather a collection of various kingdoms and communities, each with its own system of governance. Oral traditions, the primary means of preserving history in this era, speak of migrations and the rise and fall of powerful entities that held sway over different parts of the Senegambia region. The Mandinka people, for instance, trace their origins back to the Mali Empire, which flourished from the 13th to 16th centuries. As descendants of this vast empire, Mandinka communities established numerous small kingdoms along the Gambia River.

These Mandinka kingdoms, often numbering around twenty, were typically composed of multiple villages. Political authority within these states rested with a chief, often referred to as a "mansa," who held significant power. However, the mansa's authority wasn't absolute. They were expected to share taxes and resources with village leaders, and important decisions, such as going to war, required approval from a council of elders drawn from leading families. This system, while centralized around the mansa, incorporated elements of shared decision-making, a theme that would, in various guises, reappear throughout Gambian political history.

The Wolof people also played a significant role in the pre-colonial political landscape, particularly in the northern parts of the Senegambia region. They were part of the larger Wolof Empire, which at its height extended its influence southwards towards the Gambia River. The Wolof social structure was hierarchical, involving a caste system. While the Wolof Empire eventually fragmented, Wolof communities and their distinct social organization remained an important part of the political mosaic along the river.

Other ethnic groups, such as the Serer and the Jola, also had their own forms of political and social organization. The Serer, believed to be among the oldest inhabitants of the region, had a history intertwined with the Wolof, with whom they shared some cultural and ancestral ties. The Jola, primarily concentrated in the Foni

region in the southwest, were characterized by more decentralized and fragmented communities. Unlike the Mandinka or Wolof, the Jola traditionally lacked a paramount chief, with rule primarily exercised at the village level by the eldest man of the founding lineage, whose authority was often more ritualistic and mediatory than purely executive.

The arrival of Arab traders from the 9th and 10th centuries introduced Islam to the region, and its influence gradually spread, initially among rulers and elites, and later among the wider population. Islamic scholars and clerics played an increasingly important role, offering counsel and contributing to the development of legal and educational systems. This introduction of a new religious and legal framework added another layer of complexity to the existing political structures.

The pre-colonial era was not static; it was marked by internal dynamics, migrations, and conflicts. The pursuit of resources, territorial control, and the impact of external forces like the burgeoning transatlantic slave trade all contributed to shifts in power and alliances. The slave trade, in particular, had a profound and devastating impact on the social and political fabric of the region, fueling conflicts and altering existing power dynamics as some rulers grew wealthy by participating in the trade.

Despite the diversity of political organization, certain commonalities existed. Land ownership and access to resources were fundamental to power, and social structures often involved distinctions between free individuals, artisans, and those in various forms of servitude. Oral traditions served as vital historical records, passed down through generations by griots, who were often integral members of the political and social hierarchy.

The political landscape on the eve of significant European intervention was therefore a patchwork of Mandinka kingdoms with their mansas and councils, Wolof communities with their hierarchical structures, and decentralized Jola villages, among others. These various groups, while distinct, were interconnected through trade, intermarriage, and the increasing influence of Islam. The foundations of Gambian political identity and interaction were being laid in this era, a complex inheritance that would continue to shape the region for centuries to come.

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