

Ethno-Regionalism And Political Party Loyalty In The Gambia: A Fracture In The Newly-Found-Democracy

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ABSTRACT

This article interrogates what inspires the resurgence of ethno-regional political party loyalty in contemporary Gambian politics. It explores the relationship between ethnicity/regionalism and political party affiliation and the possible impact of ethnic politics on ideal democratic ethos and development in the small West African state. The article demonstrates how people sought security to reduce the uncertainty they face in a seemingly competitive and hostile world through the invocation of firm lost values as a way to rebuild a life in which they can achieve emotional and perhaps, physical safety. The study adopts a qualitative method of data collection, using a purposive sampling technique to select a sample size of 30; it relied extensively, inter alia, on the use of primary data obtained from the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) The Gambia, and as well as secondary data sources. The study reveals that ethno-regionalism continues to influence partisan loyalty and thus electoral outcomes in The Gambia. It further reveals that the turbulent pre and immediate post-2016 Presidential election of The Gambia resulted in ethnic motivated political party loyalty, fear of violent reprisals, and accusatory rhetoric. This in a way, resulted from political elites' exploit of people's ethnic consciousness in an attempt to oust President Jammeh in 2016. The split-over effect of this continues to jeopardise the corporate existence of various identities in the country and strain efforts to build a peaceful, harmonious, and prosperous Gambia.

1. Introduction

Ethnic politics and identity contestations are recurrent trends across many countries, particularly in modern African states, which are known to be largely heterogeneous. Contestations linked to ethnocultural identity in the continent are not recent and could be traced from the formation of these states, many of which stemmed from wars of expansion or colonial manipulations. Ensuing this was the monopoly of the political and economic power by favoured groups, excluding the rest, thereby entrenching inequality. This brought considerable mistrust between the various identities in the recently formed states and between the state and the masses (Etefa, 2019). The attainment of political independence in the 1960s brought some degree of changes to the composition of state managers, its character, however, remained

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much as it was in the colonial era (Ake, 1996). It continued to be, Ake (1996) posits, 'totalistic in scope, constituting a statist economy' characterised by the state capture, marginalisation, deception, and exploitation of the majority of the citizens. It presented itself as an apparatus of violence, had a narrow social base, and relied for compliance on coercion rather than legitimate authority (Ake, 1996). With these trademarks carried on from the colonial epoch, postcolonial Africa was quickly plunged into violence. According to Ake (1996);

What changed over time was the proliferation and intensification of conflict within the nationalist coalition. Class conflict became more salient with the indigenization of the political elite and matured rapidly. It was deepened by the inevitable depoliticization of the nationalist movement to contain frustrations arising from the failure to effect the societal transformation that many had hoped for and fought for (Ake, 1996).

With this, people began to organise themselves according to their respective ethnic groups in fighting for equality, justice and freedom; whilst the newly established governments rigorously focused on regime survival and political and economic dominance rather than providing security and protection to the people (Etefa, 2019). To this end, mistrust deepened between state managers and the masses; and between the various ethnic identities resulting to the intensification of ethnic hostilities in almost all regions of the world in the late twentieth century. This was the case in Yugoslavia, the Republics of the former Soviet Union, India, Srilanka, Algeria, Rwanda, etc. (DasGupta, 1995). And in most of Africa, like Nigeria, Kenya, Guinea Conakry, Congo, Egypt, etc., ethnicity became a social movement that yielded political and communal alliances in the struggle for power and survival of individuals and groups, 'with elections becoming forums for ethnic censuses' (Njie & Saine, 2019).

Ethnic mobilisation in multi-ethnic nations has thus been so efficient that 'ethnicity became the preferred form of devotion as opposed to loyalty to the nation-state. These trends have created tension among ethnic groups and reconfigured social relations from a state of security, social interaction, and peaceful coexistence to that of mutual suspicion and fear (Ugbem, 2019). In countries like Nigeria, according to Ugbem (2019), ethnicity has eaten so deep into the fabric of the society, so much that at every level, ethnicity determines access to positions, rights, and responsibilities; from a selection of prefects in primary and secondary schools to the election of the political office holders, ethnic consideration is usually paramount. It is important to note that The Gambia's experience is notably far from this reality, however, ethnicity, and to a greater extent regionalism, have had a greater influence on political loyalty and electoral outcomes since the earlier days of political independence in 1965.

In the contemporary Gambian democratic dispensation, ethnicity, more profoundly, continue to be a huge socio-political movement that seems to be gaining in weight and strength. With the opening up of the democratic space after the departure of President Jammeh in January 2017, new tensions linked to ethnic discontent play out in new ways and via new spaces of expression. These divisions are fuelled in the country mostly by public debates and ill-rhetoric in the media and via the new social media spaces (Hultin et al., 2017). There exists significant mistrust amongst ethnolinguistic groups, which understandably have been fostered and engineered by the state through intentionally unequal access to goods and services (WANEP, 2018). The tension between various ethnicities, especially between Jammeh's Jola group and Mandinkas escalated, ensuing from threats of ethnic cleansing of the majority ethnic group (Mandinka) by the incumbent in the lead-up to 2016 presidential election. The aftermath of this is the surge in ethnic conflict, violence, and the existence of mutual suspicion in The Gambia. Ethnicity, more than ever before, Courtright (2018) proffers, became linked to political persuasion – Jolas with the *Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction* (APRC)

party, Mandinkas with the *United Democratic Party* (UDP), and Fulas with the *Gambia Democratic Congress* (GDC).

The lack of allegiance to The Gambian nation has had a far-reaching impact on the country since 2017 in all spheres of life. This gloom over the newly-founded democracy, suggests a need to scrutinise the dynamics of politicised ethnicity and how it fractures democracy and democratic gains, and as well as development in The Gambia.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Review

2.1. Conceptual Review

Ethnicity is a matter of 'peoplehood' or the 'idea of shared provenance' with a population composed of people who share a common cultural background or descent (Ruane & Todd, 2003). By no means is this the only way to belong to an ethnic group - which citing Weber [1922] in Jenkins [2008] is 'primarily a political community that inspires the belief in common identity'. However, it is a powerful way of situating oneself in space and time as it does relate to the sense of past and present, territoriality, community, and self. An ethnic group is, therefore, according to Cohen (1974), an informal interest group whose members are distinct from the members of other groups within the larger society because they share an affinity, religious and linguistic ties. This means that ethnic groups are social formations distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries (Nnoli, 1979). For Nnoli (1979), 'language' is the most crucial variable in ethnic identity.

In this view, an ethnic group consists of those alike by their common ancestry, language, and culture and are regarded so by others (Nnoli, 1979). The author thus refers to the term ethnicity as merely the interactions among members of diverse groups reinforced within a political society consisting of different ethnic groups and tend to be exclusive. It is premised on social relations which accept or reject one's identification or belonging based on linguistic or cultural grounds, and it is often characterised by conflicting relations (Nnoli, 1979). From this assertion, *ethnic politics* would refer to a situation in which politicians tend to mobilise support based on an appeal to ethnic identity; and the people also tend to support leaders from the same ethnic group (Lynch, 2015).

One other explanation pertinent to this study is Hale's (2008) perception of ethnicity and ethnic politics. The author submits that while *ethnicity* is primarily about uncertainty reduction, *ethnic politics* is principally about interests. He advances that humans' cognitive drive to reduce the uncertainty they face in a seemingly competitive world results in ethnicity; and what they do with their less uncertain worlds depends on their particular interests. Arguably, the most fundamental of this human interest is the maximisation of life chances, from which flow the instrumental pursuits of wealth, security, power, and as well as seemingly irrational desires for status and self-esteem.

2.2. Theoretical Review

Ethnicity and ethnic politics in The Gambia could be aligned to various theoretical explanations proffered by scholars, but this work issue and limit itself to *primordialists* and *instrumentalists* view. The rationale for choosing these theories is informed by the dynamics of the ethnolinguistic resurgence of identity in the political sphere of '*the new Gambia*' conditioned by primaeval attachments and elites' manipulation of the democratisation process to create constituencies favourable to their respective purposes. Primordialism and Instrumentalism have proven to be relevant in providing the necessary theoretical explanations needed in exposing how politicised ethnicity impacts democracy and development in The Gambia.

2.2.1. Primordialism

The primordial approach to the study of ethnicity was propounded by American Sociologist Edward Shils. Shils' foremost argument is that modern societies are held together by an infinity of personal attachments, moral obligations in concrete contexts, professional and creative pride, individual ambition, primordial affinities, and a civil sense which is low in many, high in some, and moderate in most persons (Shils, 1957). The argument here is that individuals often have a primordial attachment to the territory where they lived, to the religion they practice, or to their kinfolks. These attachments could involve strong bonds of loyalty and comprehend skill solidarity borne from their primal cultural, linguistic, or other identities (Ugbem, 2019). The primordial theory sees ethnicity as a fixed characteristic of individuals and communities embedded in inherited biological attributes or a long history of practicing cultural differences, or both (Reuter, 2017). Here, ethnicity is seen as a collective identity that is deeply rooted in historical experiences and socialisation with members who often divide the world into 'us' and 'them' and have an intuitive bond with those who belong to their group. This can form the basis for conflict between ethnic groups, especially in an environment of intense economic and political competition.

– Primordial attachments: how people sought security to reduce the uncertainty they face in a seemingly competitive and hostile world

In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Africans were badly affected by the disruptive socio-economic and political changes introduced by the colonial regimes (Vail, 1989). The author argues that the pre-capitalist and pre-colonial hierarchies and elements of order in social life that Africans were accustomed to, were undermined by the growth of capitalist relations and the impact of colonialism, thereby depriving people of social and psychological security. As a result, in a hostile world, they have instead sought security through the invocation of a lost past of firm values as a way of recreating a life in which they can achieve emotional and, perhaps, physical safety. In essence, *ethnic identity* provides a comforting sense of brotherhood in a world tending towards social atomization and rootlessness (Vail, 1989). Ethnic leaders represent and embody the unity of the cultural group. In this view, ethnicity is a kind of romantic rejection of the present and it is a reaction to the sterility of modern positivism and has become something similar to a civil religion with a great emotional appeal (Vail, 1989). Ethnic attachments, therefore – deriving mainly from kinship, locality, and culture – posed to the development of the modern political sentiment of citizenship, particularly, in the emergent post-colonial 'new states' and post-dictatorial regimes (Jenkins, 2008), as was apparent in The Gambia in the eve of and post 2016 presidential elections.

Concerning this study, primordialists' perspective on political loyalty, based solely on ethnicity, drawing from individuals' irresistible urge to support their kind – those from the same territory, culture, ideological, ethnic, or linguistic background – is well-grounded in analysing Gambia's current political landscape. Of recent, although the practice is said to have been in play from some quarters since the granting of political independence, it is not uncommon for people to align themselves to a particular political party based primarily on their ethnic orientations. This was imminent and evident in the later years of the APRC and the Jammeh-led regime, and immediately afterwards. In 2016, after the crackdown on the opposition UDP executives, Jammeh referred to members of the Mandinka ethnic group as 'enemies, foreigners' and threatened to kill them 'one-by-one and place them where even a fly cannot see them if they were to protest (Hultin et al., 2017). The regime's recent demise painfully emptied the cauldron of ethnic strife, resentments, and violence jeopardising the corporate existence of various identities in the country. The tension between Jolas group and Mandinkas heightened; and with a lot of uncertainties, people began to lean on identities (Courtright, 2018). Ethnic

groups in The Gambia then became, as Joseph (1987) would put it, more political groupings within the framework of the modern state competing to assert their relevance at the expense of others.

2.3. Instrumentalism

Like primordialism, ethnicity is considered a dependent variable for instrumentalists. However, instrumentalism holds that ethnic conflicts are influenced by factors outside the uncontrollable or entrenched ethnic identity. Instrumentalists relate ethnic conflicts to the practical utilities of different ethnic groups, individuals, and especially political elites rather than the deeply rooted elements such as blood ties, history, or other forms of primordial attachments (Celik, n.d). The argument here, Jenkins (2008) asserts, is that people (and peoples) can and do change their ethnic ascriptions in the light of their circumstance and environment. The pursuit of political advantage and/or material self-interest usually informs such behaviours among individuals and groups, who most certainly, are remarkably misrepresented (Jenkins, 2008).

Instrumentalist theorists point to other factors than ethnic affinity to explain identity conflicts. These factors include security concerns, competition, inequality, and greed. The process of ethnic mobilisation is, as a result, prompted by the unequal distribution of resources along ethnic lines (Che, 2016). Inequality, Ruane and Todd (2003) argue, gives additional motivation and urgency for communal solidarity and forces ethnic communities to insist on cultural distinctions for their own identity, amass new resources, and form institutions into older forms of power struggle. Therefore, sentiments of discontent driven by factors such as inequality, greed or security concerns, suggest that ethnic conflicts, under instrumentalism, are typically motivated by grievances/frustrations of the deprived, the excluded, the displeased or marginalised communities or entities within a polity. This argument is in tendon with Cohen's, in Celik (n.d), interpretation of ethnicity as a 'political and economic phenomenon' and ethnic groups as interest groups.

Cohen's (1974) argument is that cultures of various ethnic groups were initially 'non-political formations and activities', but they subsequently transformed and were politicised in the course of social actions in pursuance of economic and political interests. This act, the author argues, is undergone by manipulation of ethnicity to render it serving to certain ends. In this view, ethnicity has little independence outside the political process in which collective ends are sought (Grgić, 2017); and it is utilised as a legitimising and mobilising factor, especially by political entrepreneurs where the political and economic interests of ethnic groups are at stake. The argument here is that ethnic conflict does not emerge directly from the differences in ethnic identity, rather, such arise from elites' manipulation of ethnonationalist grievances in pursuit of their own interests (Grgić, 2017).

Che (2016) rightly argues that while instrumentalism points to elites' manipulation and politicisation of ethnicity to yield ethnic conscious appeals and support, it, however, cannot independently illustrate why people conveniently mobilise along ethnic lines. The author argues that It must draw on the wisdom of primordialism in acknowledging the power of ethnicity to perpetuate a sense of 'common blood', a sense of shared values, shared interests, shared threats, and most fundamentally, a sense of solidarity - which is indispensable for collective actions (Che, 2016).

In solitude, neither the primordialists nor the instrumentalists' explanation of ethnic conflict is robust enough to elucidate ethnic politics and political party loyalty in The Gambia. However, ethnic identity centred on primordialism, and ethnic grievances or frustrations elicited by political profiteers, in combination, trigger ethnic agitations, violence, and group formation or support of a group solely based on primaevial identities which strain democratic efforts.

Arguably, this could be said to be a more balanced account of what resulted in the resurgence of ethno-regional politics that has recently bastardised the political landscape of The Gambia.

3. Methodology

Given the fact that this study aims to explore factors responsible for the sudden resurgence of ethno-regional political party loyalty in contemporary Gambian politics – which, according to Alshenqeeti (2014), would entail the researcher to accumulate a detailed account of human behaviour and beliefs within the contexts in which they occurred, qualitative research is deemed ideal. Alshenqeeti (2014) highlights that qualitative data are 'most often' collected by researchers through interviews and questionnaires and for that reason, this study employed the use of both Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and Key Informant Interviews (KII), which are both qualitative in-depth interviews. Interviews conducted in this study enabled the researcher to collect data that are detailed and varied enough and provided a full and revealing picture concerning people's loyalties to political parties in the current democratic space, and from post-independence to post-Jawara regime. The study also entails the extensive use of primary data obtained from the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and The Gambia Bureau of Statistics (GBoS). Secondary data, like archives, reports, newspapers, books, journals, websites, and many others were used to fill in the gaps left by the interviews.

A purposeful sampling technique with a sample size of 30 people is used in this study. The research targeted a population of experts from identified institutions and stakeholders (including the masses) from the seven regions of The Gambia base on their knowledge and/or participation in Gambia's democratic process. With this, a population of well-informed respondents on the subject was met and they helped in providing necessary inputs for the study.

Having collected primary data through interviews and participant observations, data analysis is based on content and discourse analysis. This means analysing the contents of interviews or observational field notes to identify the main themes that emerge from the responses given by respondents or the observation notes made by the researcher (Kumar, 1999). This helped in reporting the findings into different sub-topics which answer questions set herein.

4. Relationship between ethnicity and political party loyalty in The Gambia

In the post-independence era in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), several political leaders who led their countries to independence gradually began to change course to become more ethnic elites instead of civic political leaders (Olajide, 2008). According to Ake (1996), as the prospects of political independence improved in these countries, the solidarity of the nationalist movement grew weaker; and competition between its component units became more intense. And by the time independence was attained in the early 60s, according to the author, the squabbles had grown strong enough in countries like Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Zambia, Uganda, Cameroon, and Zaire, resulting in civil strifes. This threatens the transition to independence and as well, the political viability of the new governments that emerged after colonialism. Once in office, some of the nationalist leaders and their political parties manipulated ethnic and communal loyalties and began to emphasize vertical solidarities across class lines. In particular, they tried to establish mutual identity and common cause by appealing to national, ethnic, communal, and even religious loyalties (Ake, 1996).

As political parties began to appeal for ethnic sympathy to win polls, the majority ethnic group continued to win elections under the pretext of democracy, a system that Fareed Zakaria (1997) rightly refers to as *Electoral Democracy*. This ethnic-based democratic system led to agitations by minority ethnic groups as they were left out and at times denied or granted limited access to national resources. In some countries, it led to a call for secession, or rebellion, and in few

others, it led to coup d'état or outright civil war. In The Gambia, it led to the emergence of a political system which later metamorphosed into a one-party-dominant system centred on the strong personality of Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara, from the majority Mandinka ethnicity (Edie, 2000). The findings of this study, therefore, establish a positive relationship between the ethnic composition of various regions/districts/constituencies in The Gambia and political loyalty and support for candidates.

The manipulation of the ethnic consciousness of the electorates by political profiteers for their gains had been embedded in Gambian politics even before the granting of independence. The geopolitical division of the country into a Crown Colony and the Protectorate designed by the colonial imperialists created room for such as it favoured those dwelling in the Colony of Greater Banjul Area (GBA) and its environs, and it proportionately disadvantaged those in the Protectorate from civic participation and/or accessing resources. In his study *Ten Years of Gambia's Independence: A Political Analysis*, Nyang (1977), stresses that political life in The Gambia under colonial rule assumed significance only when parties came on the scene in the early 1950s. Before then, the newly-enfranchised urbanites (composed mainly of the minority Wollof and Aku ethnicity) competed for the limited power made available to them, thereby side-lining the rural areas and rural elites (which constituted the majority Mandinka and Fula ethnicity) from participating in the national political process until the 1960s when Britain conceded a new constitution allowing for the extension of the franchise to the 'Protectorate' (Edie, 2000).

Before this period (the 1960s), three small and highly personalised, ethnic or religious-oriented political parties – the United Party (UP); the Gambia Democratic Party (GDP); and the Gambia Muslim Congress (GMC) – came into being in Bathurst (Banjul) in the 1950s. With the extension of the franchise to the rest of the country, they proved unable to retain their political dominance once the provincial masses set up their political party. The Protectorate People's Party (subsequently People's Progressive Party), under the leadership of Dawda Jawara (a Mandinka), emerged as the largest political organisation during the general elections of 1960 and 1962 and was accepted by the British as their successors (Hughes & Perfect, 2006). Party support took an ethnic dimension and became intense as the new political leaders appealed to voters during these general elections based on the Colony/Protectorate rivalry with its clear pattern of ethnic dichotomy and affiliations. Edie (2000) indicates that:

All the Colony parties (UP, GDP & GMC) drew their support from the urban areas while PPP depended on the rural areas for its support base. PPP had a strong identification with the Mandinka ethnicity, as did UP with the Wollofs in Banjul and Fulas outside of Banjul. Realizing that in the long run, it would need the support of other ethnic groups to ensure electoral victory, PPP adopted a less parochial name - the People's Progressive Party - and a new ethnic-inclusive style of politics.

The PPP administration adopted a style of politics based on building coalitions and forming alliances with political leaders of various ethnicities. The party's new strategy of limiting ethnic divisions prevented regionalism from becoming a factor in national division (Nyang, 1974; Edie, 2000). This was a more rational choice at the time, hence the urban Wollofs and Akus dominated state bureaucracy and were expected to acquire technical and administrative skills relevant for the survival of the new state. With this strategy, the PPP, therefore, emerged after independence as the dominant party which significantly weakened opposition parties. Since voters in the provinces outnumbered those in the capital city and surrounding areas by nearly five to one, the PPP (with its support base in the provinces) became successful in creating a *one-party dominant system* for three decades (Edie, 2000).

This situation remained so even with the advent of the National Convention Party (NCP) in 1975 established by Sherif Mustapha Dibba, a Mandinka. NCP soon became the major opposition party. Dibba had been a former high-ranking member of President Jawara's cabinet, a one-time Vice President who vacated the PPP after a conflict within the leadership (centred on corruption scandals and condemned for *tribalism* and disloyalty). Dibba hoped to build on Mandinka's resentment at Jawara's successful policy of turning the PPP into a national trans-ethnic party through power-sharing with the Bathurst/Banjul and non-Mandinka provincial elites (Hughes & Perfect, 2006). NCP's initial strength was, according to Wiseman (1985), based on its mobilisation of discontented rural Mandinka, unhappy with the PPP leader's neglect of their interests in favour of urban elites and other ethnic interests. Thus, NCP managed to remain by far the only credible threat to the PPP leadership till the early 1990s as both parties shared similar ideologies and rural support base.

A military rule was set in, in 1994, breaking this pattern of politics briefly. Reasons proffered for the 1994 coup d'état, according to a respondent from the Gambia National Museum, include economic stagnation and nepotism. However, Saine (2008) posits that the most important were related to the complacency of the ruling PPP and endemic corruption. These factors, the author argues, inspired deep-seated disillusionment among the people, especially the youths, who became convinced that their plight, and that of their country's, could only be remedied outside the framework of President Jawara's democracy. The young soldiers led by Lieutenant Yahya Jammeh thus received popular acclamation from almost all Gambian, irrespective of ethnicity. In fact, unlike other countries in the sub-region, Gambia's coup shows no evidence of ethnic base as the coup plotters were of varying ethnic identities. Jammeh was a Jola, Sabally was Fula, Hydara was a 'Moor' (of Mauritanian ancestry), Touray was Mandinka, and Singhateh was a Christian Mandinka with an English mother (Wiseman, 1996).

From the very beginning, the military showed no interest in adhering to democratic principles. Saine (2008) accounts that the moment the Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council (AFPRC) established the rules and controlled the transition programme entirely in its favour; and modified the constitution to engineer the outcomes of both the referendum over a new constitution and the presidential elections, people began to despair. Proceeding these was the run-up to the presidential election marred by violence, intimidation and electoral malpractices (Saine, 2008). The author argues that the legal and political processes were smeared purposefully to suit the political aspirations of Yahya Jammeh. In sum, he became the first president of the second republic of The Gambia despite widespread accusations of electoral malpractices and condemnation from both international observers and the primary opposition contender (Ousainou Darboe of the UDP). This, according to the author, affected the credibility of the transition programme and the presidential elections (Saine, 2008).

Ousainou Darboe, a prominent lawyer and a politician, hailing from the majority Mandinka ethnicity, continued to be (recounted a respondent in an FGD) the primary source of agitation from the dawn of Jammeh's political career to the end. Jammeh himself, despite hailing from a minority Jola ethnicity, however, succeeded in winning from the ballot box four times and consolidated his grip on power by empowering the military and yielding them too much power, resources and influence; and by financial rewards and threats of withdrawal of social services or starving of developmental needs in areas considered to be opposition strongholds, recounted a respondent from the Beakanyang Organisation Promoting Human Rights, Accountable Governance and Environmental Sustainability. Jammeh had, however, maintained 'exclusive' support from the Jola ethnic group throughout his 22-years in power; both from within The Gambia and from the Casamance region of Senegal, the respondent noted. Evidence of this could be drawn from the 2001 presidential election when Jammeh won a second five-year term. It was a hotly disputed election partially due to allegations of some fifty to seventy – five

thousand of Jammeh's co-ethnic Jolas crossing over from Senegal's Casamance Province to cast votes in The Gambia (N'Diaye, Saine, & HOUNGNIKPO, 2005; Saine, 2008). The author posits that this was made possible as the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) announced earlier in 2001 that anyone in possession of a voter's card is eligible to cast a ballot irrespective of the person's name appearing in the counterfoils (Saine, 2008). Some believe that this was a deliberate attempt to enable Jammeh to cling to power by creating room for his co-ethnic Jolas of Casamance to acquire Gambia national documents.

The accusation of *tribalism* in The Gambia today has taken an interesting switch from what it was during the later years of colonial rule and in the earlier years of nationhood. As opposed to these periods when ethnic accusations were primarily exchanged between Mandinkas (aligned with Jolas) and urban Wollofs, accusations of *tribalism* and *ethnic politics* now pinned Mandinkas against Jolas (Hultin & Sommerfelt, 2020) reinforced by ill-rhetoric and hate speeches by both masses and politicians. It was so prominent that the presidency was caught right in it. According to Hultin and Sommerfelt (2020), towards the end of Jammeh's rule, and especially in the lead-up to the 2016 election, he invoked ethnicity more frequently and directly. In June 2016, he referred to the Mandinkas 'enemies and foreigners' and threatened to kill them. In ethnic terms, he claimed he would not allow foreigners to destroy The Gambia:

In 1864, there were no Mandinkas in this country. You came from Mali. I will not allow foreigners to destroy this country... I will wipe you out and nothing will come out of it. The first demonstration; they were all Mandinkas. The second demonstration were Mandinkas and two Fulas. The Fulas have joined the bad guys; welcome to hell' (Mbai, 2016).

With these inflammatory remarks, the 2016 presidential election became linked to groups' survival. Jammeh's repeated threats reinforced a climate of fear among the politicians and the masses. The opposition, therefore, used every available tool, including invoking ethnic sentiments, to bring an end to his rule.

4.1. 2016/2017 Presidential and National Assembly elections

Following threats of ethnic cleansing and other state-engineered persecutions, mistrust between neighbours of varying ethnic identities deepened, especially between Jammeh's co-Jala ethnic group and Darboe's co-Mandinka ethnic group. As these neighbours pulled apart, groups began to place prominence on seizing political power for themselves. Increasingly, they became terrified of what appeared to them to be a grave consequence suppose they should lose to their rival ethnic group in the competition and control of the state power. As a result, the 2016 presidential election in The Gambia became an intense tussle between the various ethnic identities in the country. And when Jammeh's defeat was announced, this fear contributed to plunging the country into a *political impasse* following his rejection of the electoral results. The *impasse* ended, and the tension eased only when he (Jammeh) fled in late January 2017, deterring what many thought would have been a military intervention by the Economic Community of West Africa States Military Intervention in Gambia (ECOMIG) (WANEP, 2017). But before then, the cornerstone of communal tension had already been laid. Towards March 2017 National Assembly (NA) elections, people started peeling the old wounds and this resulted in the outpouring of electoral violence across the country.

In the ensuing analysis, it will be noted how Jammeh, who enjoyed relative support from all Local Government Areas (LGAs) in previous elections ended up canvassing votes, unlike in previous elections, exclusively from the Foni districts (with few exceptions of cause) found in the Brikama LGA. Whether deliberate or coincidental, Foni is where Jammeh's co-ethnic Jolas are predominantly found in The Gambia. Jammeh equally lost considerably to the opposition

in Mandinka dominant areas, some of which were APRC strongholds before 2016. With their high Mandinka concentration, the 2016 Coalition standard-bearer Adama Barrow, who happens to come from the UDP and a Mandinka, garnered many votes. Similar observations can be drawn from the performance of Mamma Kandeh of the GDC, a relatively new presidential contender who hails from the Fula ethnic group.

The positive relationship between ethnicity and party loyalty in The Gambia was most evident in the Parliamentary and Local Government elections where Jammeh's APRC party, now in the opposition, won all the five (5) NA seats and secured all the ten (10) Councillorships in Foni, but no NA seat anywhere else in the country and only a handful of councillors in other areas beyond Foni and Kanifing. This is equally true of the UDP in areas with high Mandinka concentration, and nothing in Foni, or Jola dominant areas. Similarly, the GDC with its Fula ethnic affiliation was equally successful in areas of Fula domination, or other ethnic minorities who due to the recent political atmosphere, are increasingly becoming hostile towards Mandinka political dominance, nor do they want to be associated with the APRC after 2016.

The table and chart below present the percentage distribution of Gambians by ethnicity and LGA and the 2016 Presidential election results by LGA. Before this moment, some of the LGAs were APRC strongholds before the ugly head of ethnicity sprang up to openly engulf the politics of the state. Table 1 depicts the distribution of Gambians by ethnicity while Figure 1 illustrates the share of votes in various LGAs in 2016.

Table 1.
Percentage distribution of Gambians by ethnicity and LGA in 2013

Ethnic groups	Local Government Area (%)							
	Banjul	Kanifing	Brikama	Mansakonko	Kerewan	Kuntaur	Janjanbureh	Basse
Mandinka/Jahanka	22.5	32.2	39.8	55.7	30.8	23.9	24.6	28.9
Fula/Tukulor/ Lorobo	20.9	17.3	19.7	32.1	21.9	41.1	41.2	29.8
Wollof	24.4	14.6	10.7	4.7	31.4	32.6	25.4	0.6
Jola/Karoninka	6.8	16.4	18.6	1.3	1.0	0.3	0.6	0.3
Sarahule	3.9	7.5	2.3	3.6	0.6	0.3	6.7	38.9
Serere	11.8	4.7	2.8	0.5	7.3	0.4	0.3	0.1
Creole/Aku Marabou	4.3	1.4	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1
Manjago	1.1	2.9	2.9	0.8	1.0	0.1	0.2	0.1
Bambara	2.6	0.9	0.7	0.7	5.0	0.6	0.5	0.8
Other	1.7	2.0	2.1	0.5	1.0	0.7	0.6	0.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Gambia Bureau of Statistics (GBoS) Census 2013 ¹

¹ Banjul – the administrative capital of Greater Banjul Area (GBA)

Kanifing – the administrative capital of Kanifing Municipal Council (KMC)

Brikama – the administrative capital of West Coast Region (WCR)

Mansakonko – the administrative capital of Lower River Region (LRR)

Kuntaur & Janjanbureh – the administrative capitals of Central River Region North & South (CRR) respectively.

Kerewan – the administrative capital of North Bank Region (NBR)

Basse – administrative capital of Upper River Region (URR)

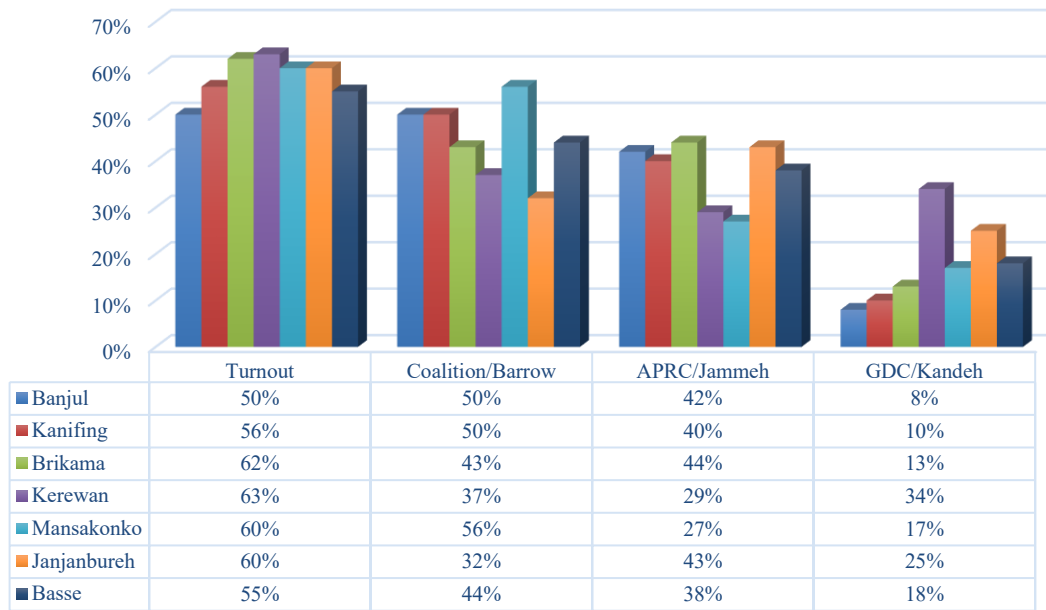


Figure 1. Percentage Share of votes for Barrow, Jammeh, and Kandeh in various LGAs in 2016
Source: extracted from Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) presidential election results in 2016

From the 2016 presidential elections, Jammeh swept all the five constituencies of Foni and Kombo East in Brikama LGA. This is attributed to the high presence of Jammeh’s co-Jala ethnicity and other minority groups in these areas. Apart from Old Yundum constituency, the rest of the constituencies in the Brikama LGA are Mandinka-dominated. This explains why Barrow was equally able to secure a considerable vote margin as an opposition contender in these constituencies when they were traditionally APRC strongholds. This assertion is corroborated by Njie and Saine (2019) in their analysis of the December 2016 election results. The authors indicate that hence Foni is Jammeh's birthplace, and a Jola-dominated area, he was able to secure 19,691 (81.88%) of total votes cast in the five constituencies as oppose to Barrow’s 2,874 (11.95%), and Kandeh’s 1,485 (6.18%) votes. This, they argue, is an indication of the influence of ethno-regional identities on Gambian politics as manifested in the distribution of votes among these three candidates.

Likewise, in Baddibu (a Mandinka-dominated settlement in Kerewan LGA) and elsewhere, Njie and Saine (2019) accuse Barrow of using a strategy of identity/ethnic-card politics to dwindle Jammeh's support in 2016. Fluent in Mandinka, Fula, Wolof, and Sarehule (Soninke), Barrow tailored his speeches to the majority language spoken in each area. This the authors argue, was a highly successful ploy that succeeded in wooing ethnic-conscious votes and resulted in Barrow winning with huge margins. In all the three constituencies of Baddibu (Lower Baddibu, Central Baddibu, and Illiassa), Barrow succeeded in securing 12,657 (52.62%) votes as opposed to Jammeh’s 5,829 (24.23%) and Kandeh’s 5,569 (23.15) (Njie & Saine, 2019).

Barrow's ploy in wooing voters by tapping into people's ethnic consciousness was very prominent on campaign trails in 2016. Towards this period, The Gambia witnessed an astonishing surge in ethnic politics. Ethnic motivated tensions erupted in various communities fuelled mainly by the ill-rhetoric of politicians and social media. More than ever before, people lived in continuous fear of being persecuted by the APRC led regime solely based on their political affiliation, which at the time was equated to their ethnicity- Mandinkas for UDP and

Fulas for GDC. This became a common tool in the hands of political profiteers to shrink Jammeh’s popularity.

Compared to previous electoral results, 2016 appeared to be the worst year for Jammeh and the APRC party concerning the party's performance in non-Jola communities. Before the resurgence of ethnic politics, perhaps now on a scale never seen before in the history of The Gambia, Kerewan, Mansakonko, and Janjanbureh LGAs, even with their Mandinka ethnic dominance, had consistently failed to put Jammeh's primary contender and his UDP ahead of him and his APRC party in any of the previous elections. Saine's (2008) analysis of the 2006 presidential elections proves this when he points to Darboe’s disappointing performance in these areas even when in an alliance with National Reconciliation Party (NRP) and Gambia Party for Democracy and Progress (GPDP).

‘Surprisingly, even in places where the UDP/NRP/GPDP alliance was expected to do well, as in Lower and Central Badibu, Jarra East, Janjanbureh, and the Kombos, in part because of their heavy concentration of Mandinkas, Jammeh had a clean sweep. Similarly, in Bansang, Darboe's hometown, and Basse and Lower Fulladu, which are home to ethnic Fulani and where the UDP/NRP coalition was expected to carry without a struggle, Jammeh was yet again the victor. Jammeh also swept the votes in both Lower and Upper Saloum and Banjul where high concentrations of rural and urban Wollof live, respectively. Predictably in Foni, home to Jammeh's co-ethnic Jolas, he won handily’ (Saine, 2008).

The author is apt in recognising the influence of ethnicity on politics in The Gambia. It is a phenomenon known to be exploited by a politician, who would often tell members of their constituencies ‘one is ought to support your very own’. Table 2 captures the comparison of electoral performances of APRC and UDP in various years.

Table 2.
Comparing Electoral Performance of APRC and UDP in 2001, 2006, 2011, and 2016 in Non-Jola dominant areas

Constituencies	2001		2006		2011		2016	
	APRC	UDP	APRC	UDP	APRC	UDP	APRC	UDP/Coalition.
Kerewan LGA								
Lower Badibu	37.86%	27.19%	63.88%	32.55%	67%	24%	15%	66%
Central Badibu	39.56%	25.10%	66.46%	30.68%	68%	23%	25%	50%
Illiasa	47.32%	24.04%	73.47%	23.32%	76%	18%	29%	47%
Mansakonko LGA								
Jarra West	53.88%	40.30%	56.18%	42.15%	64%	26%	28%	55%
Jarra Central	63.32%	22.37%	70.26%	27.48%	81%	11%	46%	29%
Jarra East	50.25%	39.96%	62.46%	35.01%	75%	18%	20%	54%
Kiang East	52.57%	43.68%	62.61%	35.93%	73%	25%	31%	54%
Kiang Central	49.36%	38.76%	60.32%	38.20%	71%	22%	28%	50%
Kiang West	29.26%	65.09%	38.43%	58.54%	71%	27%	21%	73%
Janjanbureh LGA								
Janjanbureh	55.52%	36.95%	65.66%	32.55%	80%	15%	61%	34%
Lower Fulladu West	49.31%	33.22%	60.73%	30.64%	77%	14%	53%	28%

Source: compiled from IEC presidential election results 2001, 2006, 2011 and 2016

Apart from Kiang West, which remained defiant to the Jammeh rule, these constituencies were easily swept by him and his APRC party despite their Mandinka ethnic domination. However, Jammeh's victories in these constituencies have often been characterised by abuse and allegations of electoral malpractices. As in many other African countries, incumbents rely on election results to identify the regions in which their support base lies and where the opposition has a stronghold (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009; Njie & Saine, 2019). This information is

sometimes used to punish regions by ignoring the provision of development projects such as education, healthcare, and road infrastructure. In The Gambia, Njie and Saine (2019) confirm that one such area is Kiang where the incumbent lost heavily to the coalition in 2016. The area remained underdeveloped compared to other regions, especially in terms of road infrastructure, electricity, and water supply; but through intimidation and by withholding development, Jammeh was able to win in this area in the 2011 elections.

However, Jammeh's failure to fulfil his election pledges, coupled with the unwarranted statement against ethnic Mandinkas (the dominant ethnicity in the area), resulted in his failure to secure victory in all the three constituencies of Kiang in 2016 (Njie & Saine, 2019) and other Mandinka heartlands (Baddibu and Jarra) across the country. In 2016, these constituencies swing their support as Jammeh maintained a persistent crackdown on their ethnicity for their assumed affiliation with the UDP, which he often referred to as 'a Mandinka party'. In addition, his frequent outburst on the presumed *domineering nature* of Mandinkas cost him considerable support from members of this group. His frequent attempt to ferment anti-Mandinka sentiment was a deliberate ploy to gang up against other minorities against them. However, it backfired and contributed to his surprise loss in the 2016 presidential election (Hultin & Sommerfelt, 2020).

Similar to the 2016 Presidential electoral upset, the National Assembly and Local Government elections of 2017 and 2018 respectively were no less ethnic motivated. As mentioned earlier, Jammeh's APRC party, now in the opposition, managed to secure only five (5) National Assembly seats out of the fifty-three (53) elected seats, exclusively from Foni. This was a significant decline from the previous elections in 2012, where the party secured forty-three (43) out of forty-eight (48) seats across the country. This was by far, the worst performance of the party in two decades. The UDP on the other hand, which had never managed to secure beyond seven (7) National Assembly seats since 1997, pulled the majority of seats (31 out of 53) in 2017; won seven (7) out of eight (8) Mayoral and Chairmanship positions and secured a record number of 62 Councillorship out of 120 wards in 2018. Like the APRC, it equally did so, in most cases, in areas dominated by Mandinkas, leaving GDC to take ownership of the Fula communities and other minority groups.

4.2. Countdown to Ethno-regional Politics in The Gambia

From 2011 onwards, several events set the base for what later came to be known as the greatest electoral upset in the history of The Gambia. Jammeh's loss to a first-time presidential contender in 2016, barely known within the ranks of the UDP, and less so to The Gambia, was least expected. Even the winner himself, Adama Barrow, appeared bemused. Before the elections, however, Jammeh made several key missteps that cost him re-election.

Notable among these missteps were, according to Hultin et al., (2017), first, the detention of former presidential candidate and key UDP figure, Ousainou Darboe (a primary irritation to Jammeh for many years), coming on the heels of the death of Solo Sandeng (also of the UDP) in custody, resulting from his (Solo) and co's protest for electoral reforms in The Gambia. This served as a lightning rod for several opposition parties to mobilise their supporters and resources, for the first time without Darboe, who has for years been accused of being a divisive figure to the opposition's effort for a coalition. Second is Jammeh's interference with people's religious beliefs and how they chose to worship, denigrating the faith of the minority Christian population and unilaterally and unconstitutionally declaring The Gambia an Islamic State in 2015 (Hultin et al., 2017). Third, and most relevant to this work, is his calling into question Gambian nationality based on ethnicity and his frequent crackdown on political figures of the majority Mandinka ethnic group.

According to an interviewee from the Gambia National Museum, Jammeh's attitude towards this group (Mandinkas) is said to be influenced by years of enduring ethnic rhetoric directed at him, his Jola group, and the area he comes from (Foni). Since his ascendancy to power in 1994, Jammeh, who initially exhibited no outward inclination towards any particular ethnicity, the respondent posits, was essentially not accepted in some quarters for merely hailing from the minority Jola ethnic group. Compared to a few other groups, Jolas, until very recently, had not been prominent in the political life of The Gambia. Jammeh hailing from such a docile group formed the underlining base for many criticisms and not the impotence of his policies or development aspirations. Arguably, this contributed to raising the '*Jola*' in him and forced him to retire to his ancestral root for support, virtually daring his co-ethnic men/women to end years of a stereotype of them being suitable for menial jobs and dwelling in slums. Along with the campaign (which was known to be very harsh on his co-ethnic Jolas) to change their status quo, Jammeh initiated several development packages (including scholarships and job opportunities) for them; participants in an FGD added.

As Jammeh grew more attached to the people of Foni, so did he alienate the Mandinkas and increasingly became paranoid of them, recounted The Association of NGOs in the Gambia (TANGO) interviewee. In a television appearance in 2006, he (Jammeh) made anti-Mandinka remarks, using maps of the sub-region to elucidate how the Mandinkas were not historically indigenes of The Gambia. His argument has always been that members of this group came from Mali and therefore have no moral claim over leadership in The Gambia. For this, the interviewee blames Jammeh for 'sowing the seed of discord'. He also tended to demonise the Mandinkas for their supposed affiliation with the UDP, where they make up a significant number. Being a 'Mandinka', according to the respondent, was equated to being an 'opposition' at the time. It was, therefore, a common practice to arrest, victimise, harass, torture, and imprison members of the ethnic group and party sympathisers without exhausting the legal processes.

Jammeh's alienation of this single largest ethnic group became more apparent towards the 2016 elections. His spin on ethnicity continued to be his accusation of members of this group of '*tribalism*' (Hultin et al, 2017). The authors argue that he played ethnic groups against one another for two decades, but he overplayed his hand in 2016 when he threatened to kill members of the largest ethnic group. At a rally in Tallinding on 3rd June 2016, Jammeh allegedly referred to them as foreigners and enemies of The Gambia and vowed to kill them 'one-by-one and place them where even a fly cannot see them' (Hultin et al, 2017). In the same rally, he further asserted that since 1994, all the trouble makers have been Mandinkas and if they don't behave, he would bury them 'nine feet deep' (Sommerfelt, 2016). The tension between Jammeh's co-Jola group and Mandinkas was long-running before this inflammatory speech, but these remarks, among many others, heightened the pressure between the two groups.

Jammeh's frequent genocidal rhetoric was profoundly alarming and was not taken lightly by the international community, no less than Mandinkas living in The Gambia and beyond. The UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng, stated that 'public statements of this nature by a national leader are irresponsible and extremely dangerous. They can contribute to dividing populations, feed suspicion and serve to incite violence against communities, based solely on their identity' (United Nations, 2016). Mr Dieng was particularly appalled by these vitriolic remarks, hence history has shown that hate speeches that constitute an incitement to violence can be both a warning sign and a powerful trigger for atrocity crimes as seen in Rwanda, Bosnia, and more recently in the Middle East (United Nations, 2016).

This vitriolic language, many believe, is responsible for the resurgence of ethnic politics in The Gambia, as it set a breeding ground and offered a justifiable base for people to retire to their primordial identities to provide support and security for one another against tyranny. Political profiteers used these grievances to score political points (thereby confirming the argument of the *Instrumentalists* discussed earlier), and party support based solely on ethnicity became unavoidable. And as if attacking Mandinkas was not enough. Jammeh’s mockery and insults of other ethnicities, like his threats to join Fulas on ranks with Mandinkas after a crackdown on demonstrators at Westfield, leaving Solo Sandeng dead and others mercilessly tortured; and insults thrown at Banjul women, the Wollofs in particular, for skin bleaching; left one interviewee questioning if he was not deranged at the time.

Jammeh’s preference for his ethnic brethren, according to Hultin et al.(2017) was clear, and ethnic neopatrimonialism was essential to the formation of the security forces, especially the feared ‘Jungulers’ (a private militia and the Jammeh's death squad). The State Guards – those tasked to safeguard the country’s most strategically valuable points, such as the State House, the President’s villa in Kanilai (his home village), and the Denton Bridge (roadway connecting the capital to the mainland) is filled with Jolas (Hultin et al.,2017). The argument is that while the former President's APRC party accuses the UDP of ‘tribalism’ it was bent on appointing Jola APRC stalwarts from the Fonis and the urban Western Region of The Gambia to key security and cabinet positions leaving other regions proportionately underrepresented.

Foni reciprocated Jammeh's 'goodwill' by maintaining exclusive support for him throughout his 22-year rule and even beyond. This region remained hostile to opposition groups and opposition party sympathisers based on ethno-regional factors. It is interesting to note that there had never been a Jola or a Foni Presidential contender in The Gambia during the 22-year of Jammeh's rule (although there had never been one before 1996). There exists no significant challenge to the APRC and its leadership in Foni up till today, and most of the time, APRC candidates go unchallenged (at least not challenged by members of other political parties) during National Assembly and Councillorship elections. Table 3 presents evidence from electoral results of the region from 1996 to 2016.

Table 3.
Comparing Oppositions’ performance in Foni to Jammeh’s APRC party

Election Year	Political Parties	Constituencies				
		<i>Foni Brefet</i>	<i>Foni Bintang</i>	<i>Foni Kansala</i>	<i>Foni Bondali</i>	<i>Foni Jarrol</i>
1996	APRC	71.95%	83.75%	93.21%	81.70%	75.82%
	UDP	23.20%	11.45%	3.72%	10.93%	17.26%
	Others	2.42%	4.79%	3.07%	7.18%	6.88%
2001	APRC	80.44%	76.14%	86.76%	84.85%	94.42%
	UDP	11.60%	16.07%	8.96%	6.37%	2.62%
	Others	2.65%	2.6%	1.06%	2.9%	0.98%
2006	APRC	87.65%	92.72%	98.57%	96.21%	87.60%
	UDP	10.83%	6.40%	1.15%	2.79%	9.39%
	Others	1.52%	0.88%	0.28%	1.00%	3.02%
2011	APRC	91%	94%	98%	97%	87%
	UDP	5%	3%	1%	1%	5%
	Others	4%	3%	1%	2%	8%
2016	APRC	74%	84%	92%	81%	69%
	UDP/ Coalition	19%	12%	6%	7%	16%
	Others	7%	4%	2%	12%	15%

Source: compiled from IEC Presidential Election results from 1996 to 2016.

However, not all fault Jammeh for the resurgence of ethnic politics or recent tensions between various ethnicities in The Gambia. It must be recognised that Jammeh does not bear all of the blame for ethnic posturing, as the UDP allegedly brought up the ‘Mandinka issue’ during the

September 2006 and January 2007 presidential and National Assembly elections respectively by often claiming they should 'bail each other out because The Gambia is a Mandinka nation', TANGO interviewee noted. Similar provocative statements, as reiterated earlier, made Jammeh hostile towards this group despite having a considerable number of them within the ranks of the APRC party. This hostility directed at the Mandinkas, Fabakary Tombong Jatta, APRC interim leader admitted in a televised interview, is responsible for Jammeh's downfall and APRC in the 2016 polls (Bah, 2017).

A more balanced argument would thus find both Jammeh and few other politicians liable for the surge in identity politics in The Gambia. Some respondents argue that Jammeh may have contributed to its recent surge, to the mistrust and ethnic hostility in the country, but many others precipitated it. The phenomenon in contemporary Gambian politics, five years after the departure of President Jammeh, is more apparent and pronounced. More than ever before, people easily find reasons to belong to a political group or entice others to belong based solely on their identities, or, purposefully hate a group because its leader hails from a particular ethnicity. This is evident in the manner in which politicians recruit supporters, and from the 2017 and 2018 NA and Local Government elections results respectively.

An interviewee from a Regional Governor's Office faults the surge in identity politics on general indiscipline that besieged the country's contemporary politics. She recounts that the newly-found democracy, left unchecked in the name of *Freedom of expression* coupled with ignorance, is contributing to fanning the embers of ethnic tensions across the country. With the opening up of the democratic space, WANEP (2018) corroborates, tensions began to play out in new ways and via the new medium of expression. Divisions linked to ethnic discontent are now fuelled mostly by public debates in the media. There continue to exist significant mistrust and division amongst ethnolinguistic groups, which had been fostered and engineered by the state through intentionally unequal access to goods and services (WANEP, 2018). This practice followed on from the Jammeh-led regime, and it is making roots in the present Gambia. The desire for revenge in the new democratic dispensation, according to Amie Sillah, the Executive Director of Women for Democracy and Development, in WANEP (2018), continues to undermine social cohesion through discrimination, regionalism, partisan and ethnolinguistic profiling; thus hindering the overall development trajectory of the country.

There exist more divisive figures, some worse than Jammeh in their promulgation of identity politics in The Gambia. Of recent, UDP's deputy party leader, Aji Yam Secka, was on records requesting natives of Niani in the Central River Region to stand by their brother, Ousainou Darboe, because they (Mandinkas) are the majority (Njie, 2020). Similar comments from politicians are common, especially in the rural Gambia where they often succeed in getting through voters by appealing to their ethnic orientations. The latest of such rhetoric came from Hamat Bah, President Barrow's Tourism Minister and a former presidential candidate for NRP – a stakeholder in the 2016 coalition. Bah (a Fula) is one politician recognised for engaging in ethnic politics and his latest outburst, coincidental or deliberate, came on the same day the UDP sets out to meet its supporters in the rural Gambia. On this said date (17th October 2020), media outlets reported Bah warning Gambian Fulas against voting for what he called the 'rats', insisting that it would spell the suffering of Gambian Fulas.

...the rats are moving. Be alert and make sure you do not let them pass through any door or window...Our (meaning Fulas) sufferings will end if you give your votes to Adama Barrow...but these rats are moving about, if you give your votes to them, you will suffer and all of us will suffer (The Fatu Network, 2020).

Following this comment, many people became outraged and condemned Bah for referring to the 'oppositions' as 'rats'. This is by far the most reasonable interpretation of Bah's comment.

Some took 'rats' to mean Mandinkas hence, it coincided with the UDP tour (who are once again, the fiercest opposition to the presidency). If one is to go by this interpretation, then Jammeh may be right in referring to UDP as a Mandinka party. In general, such remarks by Bah would be punishable in a country like Rwanda where ethnicity is given a legal relevance, but in The Gambia, hate speeches are increasingly becoming a norm. Hardly do politicians or political parties distance themselves from such rhetoric even though they would deny castigating supporters to make them. This continues to endanger Gambia's longstanding and reputable traditions of inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony, and as well creates dysfunctional patterns of governance.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In most heterogeneous societies, ethnicity continues to adversely impact democracy, good governance, and development. Studies have however shown that ethnic diversity in polities in itself is not the challenge, but the challenge arises from how diversity is governed in these societies. And since civic political leaders are prone to transforming into ethnic elites to win elections in Africa, this resulted in politicised ethnicity in many countries including The Gambia. A virulent ethnolinguistic resurgence characterises the political atmosphere of the so-called *new Gambia*. The political elite's manipulation of the phenomenon for their aggrandizement continues to have a devastating consequence on the lives of ordinary Gambians since the departure of president Jammeh in 2017. More than ever before, a climate of fear, suspicion, conflict, and the likes, symbolise inter-group relations. Ethnicity, therefore, overwhelmingly strained the realisation of the ideal democratic ethos and derailed development efforts in The Gambia by entrenching nepotism, corruption, conflict, and ethnic profiling.

To remedy these misnomers, citizens' confidence in the rule of law must be restored through greater accountability and responsiveness to all, irrespective of ethnic or religious identity. Most importantly, political elites who often toy with the ascribed ethnic sentiments of groups and individuals, must redirect their rhetoric towards a more rational appeal with a nationalistic outlook instead. In addition, civic education must be taken seriously in The Gambia to de-emphasise the importance of ethnicity in national affairs. Finally, it is strongly suggested that The Gambia assert both legal and political relevance to *ethnicity*, hence the legal silence on the phenomenon is paradoxical to the country's electoral experience since Jammeh's departure in 2017.

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