



Election in The Gambia

December 8, 2021

On December 4, 2021, voters in The Gambia (Gambia) reelected incumbent President Adama Barrow in the country's first presidential poll since 2016, when Gambia shocked observers by voting out longtime autocrat Yahya Jammeh. Jammeh's departure paved the way for [widely lauded](#) governance gains and a marked improvement in U.S.-Gambia relations. Congress has expressed support for Gambia's post-Jammeh transition, including via legislation in the 117th Congress (S.Res. 456).

Some analysts considered the 2021 election a [bellwether](#) for Gambia's democracy. The U.S. Embassy [assessed](#) the polls as "free and fair," notwithstanding "minor procedural irregularities, as well as the need for broader structural reforms to the electoral processes." European Union observers [described](#) the process as well administered, while noting issues in the pre-election environment that contributed to an "unlevel playing field" favoring Barrow. Some candidates have rejected the results and may challenge them.

Looking ahead, Gambia faces challenges related to institutionalizing reforms and managing transitional justice. Prospects for U.S.-Gambia relations may partly depend on Barrow's commitment to pursuing accountability for abuses by ex-President Jammeh, a U.S. [sanctions designee](#) now living in exile.

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Figure I. Gambia



Source: CRS. Boundaries from U.S. Department of State and GADM.

Background

In 2016, Gambians shocked observers by voting out President Jammeh, who had ruled the country since taking power in a 1994 military coup. An erratic and authoritarian leader, Jammeh restricted civil liberties and curtailed dissent; his regime brutally [targeted](#) perceived opponents and sexual minorities.

With top opposition figures imprisoned ahead of the 2016 polls, the opposition coalesced behind Adama Barrow, an officer in the United Democratic Party (UDP). Barrow's victory surprised many who were not expecting a fair process. A crisis over Jammeh's refusal to step down was resolved in early 2017, when regional military forces intervened under an Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) mandate, to little resistance. Jammeh resigned and accepted exile in Equatorial Guinea. Many praised the intervention by ECOWAS, which has [arguably struggled](#) to uphold democratic norms in other countries.

Governance conditions substantially improved after Jammeh's departure. Barrow released scores of political prisoners, and private media burgeoned. The UDP and its allies dominated National Assembly elections in 2017, reinvigorating an institution that had previously served as a rubber stamp. In 2018, Gambia recorded one of the largest-ever leaps in Freedom House's annual "[Freedom in the World](#)" index.

By 2019, Barrow's decision to renege on a promise to serve only three years split his political coalition. Security forces used tear gas to disperse protests calling for his resignation, arresting dozens; authorities [shut down](#) two radio stations in connection with the demonstrations. In 2020, the National Assembly [rejected](#) a bill that would have enabled passage of a new constitution drafted with lengthy public input and U.S. and other donor support. Pro-Barrow legislators [allegedly](#) objected to a provision that would have counted Barrow's first term toward a new two-term limit on the presidency. In 2021, Barrow launched a new National People's Party (NPP), drawing defections from the UDP and other parties.

Outlook

Gambia's political outlook may depend on several variables, including the extent to which President Barrow moves to institutionalize governance reforms. Transitional justice is likely to be a prominent issue during his second term. In 2018, Barrow launched a Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparations Commission (TRRC) to uncover abuses by the Jammeh regime, grant reparations, and recommend cases for amnesty or prosecution. TRRC hearings, which concluded in 2021, featured testimony that [implicated](#) Jammeh in serious crimes, including murder and rape. The TRRC submitted its report to Barrow in November 2021; it was not made public, but commentators [speculate](#) that Jammeh is among those it recommended for prosecution. The government is to produce a white paper on the report by mid-2022. In its post-election [statement](#), the U.S. Embassy "urge[d] a reinvigoration in a second Barrow administration of the many reform efforts promised in 2016 that remain unfinished [... including] constitutional and electoral reforms as well as accountability through implementation of the [TRRC's] recommendations."

Efforts to prosecute the former president could spark instability, including within the army, whose ranks largely date from the Jammeh era. Moreover, President Barrow has signaled an intent to coopt, rather than alienate, Jammeh's base. In late 2021, Barrow and his NPP formed an alliance with Jammeh's party, the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction. Jammeh [rejected](#) the announcement from exile and endorsed another presidential candidate, yet some observers [speculated](#) that the alliance could impede the pursuit of justice for crimes by the Jammeh regime or herald Jammeh's return to Gambia. Barrow may weigh demands for justice against the expediency of reconciling with Jammeh and his former allies.

U.S. Interests and Issues for Congress

Since Jammeh's departure, U.S.-Gambia engagement has centered on encouraging Gambia's democratic transition. U.S. assistance has helped support the constitutional review process and other legal reforms, build the capacity of the National Assembly, enhance fiscal transparency, educate voters, and strengthen civil society. The International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute have worked to strengthen governance. The Biden Administration requested \$2.2 million for Gambia for FY2022, mostly for governance programs. Separately, in November 2021, the United States and Gambia agreed to a \$25 million [Millennium Challenge Corporation Threshold Program](#) focused on the power sector.

In 2017, the Trump Administration [imposed](#) sanctions on ex-President Jammeh under Executive Order 13818 ("Global Magnitsky"), citing corruption and human rights abuses. In 2018, the State Department [imposed](#) a visa ban on Jammeh under [§7031\(c\)](#) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs appropriations legislation. The Justice Department is [seeking](#) forfeiture of a U.S. property belonging to Jammeh allegedly acquired with embezzled funds.

Looking ahead, Congress may consider governance trends in Gambia in the context of [democratic retreat in West Africa](#), a region that has recently witnessed a [series](#) of military seizures of power. The oversight of U.S. anti-corruption assistance in Gambia, and of sanctions and asset recovery efforts targeting Jammeh, also may be of interest as Congress considers the Biden Administration's [pledged efforts](#) to expand anti-corruption efforts globally.

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