The Gambian Diaspora Political Engagement During Yahya Jammeh Rule and the 2016 Democratic Transition (1994-2016)

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ABSTRACT

The article examines on the ways in which Gambians living abroad contributed to political change during Yahya Jammeh's time as an authoritarian leader (1994-2016). The transitional democratic process of 2016 will be specifically examined. Drawing upon a body of theoretical literature focused on transnationalism, social transformation and the political activities of diasporas, this study demonstrates how Gambians residing outside of Gambia were able to act politically by engaging in advocacy, media activism, providing financial support for political activity, lobbying, and organizing international network mobilization.

Excluded from formal political participation at home, the diaspora used transnational spaces to challenge authoritarianism, support the opposition coalition, and influence international responses during the 2016 electoral crisis.

The article assesses the institutionalized framework for diaspora involvement created after Jammeh's departure; the authors highlight what has been accomplished and areas where there is still much to be done (such as denying the right to vote for those who live abroad and the weakness of state institutions). The article concludes that although the Gambian Diaspora was an important factor in the transition from authoritarianism to democracy; however, to achieve long term democratic consolidation requires political institutions that are inclusive and strong partnerships between the State/Diaspora, as opposed to relying solely on diaspora activism.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines how the Gambian diaspora shaped political change and democratic transition through transnational political engagement during Yahya Jammeh's authoritarian rule (1994–2016)

This paper focus on its political influence and it argues that, despite its institutional underdevelopment and lack of formal integration with governmental institutions, The diaspora has become a transnational actor especially during authoritarian rule and democratic transition.

The article examines diasporic political activity from 1994 to 2017 and activism around the 2016 presidential elections. Subsequently, the article provides transnational political activity through protest, lobbying, and advocacy. Next, the long-term implications of the diaspora's use of transnationalism and social transformation. Finally, the paper assess what institutional arrangements are currently influencing diaspora activity in The Gambia. Overall, the article argument is that despite the diaspora's major role in political change, the extent of their ability to affect change continues to be limited due to both structural and institutional limitations.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design combining documentary analysis with original empirical evidence. In addition to published literature and official documents, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with Gambian diaspora association leaders, political activists, entrepreneurs and a policymaker, together with an online survey of 52 Gambian diaspora members. These data are used to triangulate findings and provide first-hand perspectives on diaspora political engagement during and after the Jammeh era.

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy to identify participants with direct experience of diaspora political engagement during the Jammeh era. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants,

comprising diaspora association leaders (n=5), political activists (n=6), entrepreneurs (n=3), and a policymaker (n=1). Interviewees were based in the United Kingdom, United States, Germany, Sweden, and Senegal. Interviews were conducted between January and March 2026, each lasting 45-90 minutes, and were conducted via video conferencing platforms. All participants provided informed consent, and anonymity was assured to encourage open discussion of politically sensitive topics.

The online survey was distributed through diaspora social media networks, including Facebook groups and WhatsApp forums, between February and March 2026. A total of 52 Gambian diaspora members completed the survey. The survey collected data on demographic characteristics, types of political engagement, frequency of participation, and perceptions of diaspora influence on Gambian politics.

KEY EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The survey of 52 diaspora members and semi-structured interviews with activists, diaspora leaders, and a policymaker revealed several consistent patterns regarding Gambian diaspora political engagement during the Jammeh era and the 2016 transition. Survey findings indicated that financial contributions were the most common form of engagement, with 71% of respondents reporting they had contributed financially to opposition efforts or democratic transition activities. Media activism followed closely, with 65% of respondents indicating they had shared or created content critical of the Jammeh regime on social media platforms. Protest participation abroad was reported by 48% of respondents, while 42% had engaged in lobbying or petitioning international bodies.

Interview participants consistently identified three primary mechanisms through which the diaspora exerted political influence: financial support for opposition activities, media activism through online platforms, and international lobbying targeting foreign governments and multilateral organisations. One activist based in the United Kingdom explained:

"We were the voices that Jammeh couldn't silence. People inside The Gambia were afraid to speak, but we organised from Europe and America, raised funds and informed the international community."

A diaspora organisation leader in the United States echoed this sentiment, stating:

"Without the diaspora, the 2016 election would not have been possible. We provided the resources and the international connections that the domestic opposition simply did not have."

However, interview participants also expressed significant frustration regarding their continued exclusion from formal political participation. Despite the Supreme Court ruling in 2021 affirming diaspora voting rights, participants noted that implementation had been blocked. One UK-based activist remarked:

"We financed the fight for democracy... yet we are still denied the right to vote."

Another interviewee, a diaspora organisation leader in Sweden, observed:

"They removed Jammeh, but many of the same officials remain in power. It is difficult to trust institutions that have changed so little."

These findings highlight a significant contradiction: while the diaspora played a crucial role in the democratic transition, institutional barriers continue to limit their full political participation and recognition.

Transnationalism and social transformation

Transnationalism has become central to migration studies because it challenges the idea that migrant groups lose ties to their homeland once they were settled abroad. It emphasises the continued social, political, economic and cultural relationships that migrants have maintained and continue to maintain across borders.

Schiller, Basch, and Blanc describe transmigrants as people "who build social fields connecting from their place of origin to their host country".[1]

This is relevant to The Gambian diaspora, whose members remained politically and socially active from Europe, the USA and other parts of Africa.

Primarily, Gambia is a good example of many special characteristics associated with political participation in transnational environments. Firstly, political activity by Gambians abroad was deeply connected to the larger patterns of transnational social and economic interaction. The large flow of money sent home from Gambians overseas helped sustain household incomes when Gambia experienced severe economic hardship under Jammeh; these financial flows created complex webs of obligations and information that were able to be called upon for political action.[2]

Secondly, it is the transnational social question, as defined by Faist, or how social rights, political participation, and economic opportunities are shared across national borders in a time of increasing globalisation.[3]

Moreover, Jammeh regime systematically violated the political and civil rights of Gambian citizens within Gambia, creating a diaspora population both integrated into the democracies of host states' political systems and disenfranchised from all forms of meaningful political engagement with respect to their homeland. Thus, there existed a large degree of disconnection in terms of the diaspora populations' contributions economically and their lack of representation politically; this disconnect fuelled a strong sense of resentment among diasporas toward the homeland government, thus creating a high level of motivation to mobilise politically. Furthermore, the call for voting rights as a major component of diaspora political activism demonstrated an affirmation of the notion that citizenship should no longer be based on territoriality but rather on contributing financially to the nation's economy through remittances.

Thirdly, the political engagement of the diaspora was influenced by the concept Levitt and Glick describe as "simultaneity", experiencing a life in which aspects of both sending and receiving societies exist at the same time.[4]

The Gambian diaspora political formation is linked with political developments since the military coup of July 1994, when Yahya Jammeh seized control of the government. Prior to the coup, it was generally one the stable countries in post-independence Africa during the period of Sir Dawda Jawara's rule.[5]

Abdoulaye Saine argues that the regime used political oppression such as jailing political opponents, torturing them, and killing them outside the legal system, forcing many opponents to flee.[6]

Consequently, The Gambian diasporic community transformed itself from an economically motivated migrant community into a transnational political community of awareness. According to Amat Jeng, many Gambians, particularly those who were educated and critical, migrated to exile in the western world under the rule of Jammeh.[7]

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[1] Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, "From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration," *Anthropological Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (1995): 48.https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276948461_From_Immigrant_to_Transmigrant_Theorizing_Transnational_Migration

[2] Zanker and Altrogge, *The Politics of Migration Governance in the Gambia*.2017. 7-8.

[3] Faist, 'The Transnational Social Question: Social Rights and Citizenship in a Global Context'.

[4] Levitt and Nina, 'Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society'. 1002-1039.https://globaldecentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Levitt-Glick-Schiller-Conceptualizing-Simultaneity-A-Transnational-Social-Field-Perspective-on-Society.pdf

[5] Hughes and Perfect, *A Political History of the Gambia, 1816–1994*.https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/60EAF9FDA05F18C4E05F2367062449B7

[6] Perfect, 'The Paradox of Third-Wave Democratization in Africa: The Gambia under AFPRC-APRC Rule, 1994–2008, by Abdoulaye Saine'.

[7] Amat Jeng, "Gambia's Democratic Transition: A Case Study of the Role of Political Elites in Democratic Transition" (master's thesis, Uppsala University, 2019), 7 8 https://www.academia.edu/65255623/Gambia_s_Democratic_Transition

This observation is important, as it illustrates that most people in the diaspora were educated professionals, journalists, students and political activists who were forced into exile due to actions taken by a government. the experience these individuals had while outside their country allowed them to build cross-national political relationships which would eventually be used to facilitate democracy movements against the Jammeh government.

Faist theory of "transnational social spaces" helps us understand the processes involved with how migrants create cross-national social and political organisations.[8]

Notably, this diasporic group did not merely serve as a transnational migrant group; it served as an organised and politicised transnational community.

The diaspora also played an important role in creating alternative media. Under Jammeh, independent journalism within The Gambia was severely limited. Thus, many journalists and activists were forced into exile. Platforms such as Freedom Radio were used to counter against Jammeh where they had access to un-censored news against Jammeh's rule.[9]

The exile community of Gambia has a strong role in the protest of the regime that took place. They were also involved in funding opposition parties; they were lobbying international bodies on behalf of the opposition; they were using social media to build public support for democratic reform within Gambia; they had an opportunity to use their transnational status to influence public opinion about democracy within Gambia.[10] Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt contend that a lot of migrant communities are involved in a form of collective transnationalism by way of town association and development efforts. The model explains the ways The Gambian diaspora has contributed to community development and social transformation with remittance money and through diaspora organisations.[11]

In addition to providing financial support to local communities in The Gambian context, diasporic organisations also provided funding for local community-based programmes and services that contributed to a broader social transformation in which these organisations were involved.

Nonetheless, The Gambian case also illustrates the limits of diasporic transnationalism. As significant as the diaspora was in driving Jammeh out of office, it is clear there are still some very strong structural issues in Gambian politics. Jeng has argued that politics has become too personalistic for a democracy to maintain a viable consensus.[12]

A further division of the transitional coalition, the re-entry into politics for previous supporters of Jammeh, and increasing public dissatisfaction showed the limitations of diaspora influence as the transition period came to an end. Therefore, although diaspora activism had a significant impact on the transition from authoritarianism to democracy, diaspora activists alone cannot provide guarantees of long-term democratic consolidation. The Gambian diaspora is thus a case study of how transnational groups can promote political and social changes across borders. The diaspora was able to act as a key player in political transformation through media activism, financial remittances, diplomatic advocacy, and disseminating democratic principles. In addition to these factors, however, success by a transnational social movement depends on reforms that provide for democratic institutions at the home country level, elite support of such reform, and the development of other forms of democratic government.

[8] VanWey, 'The Volume and Dynamics of International Migration and Transnational Social Spaces. By Thomas Faist. Oxford University Press, 2000. https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/79.2.793

[9] Jeng, "Gambia's Democratic Transition," 2.

[10] Jeng, "Gambia's Democratic Transition: 2, 33.

[11] Alejandro Portes, Luis E. Guarnizo, and Patricia Landolt, "The Study of Transnationalism: Pitfalls and Promise of an Emergent Research Field," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22, no. 2 (1999): 225.https://doi.org/10.1080/014198799329468

[12] Jeng, "Gambia's Democratic Transition," 45.

These transnational theories, simultaneity and social remittances provide a useful lens through which to view the political activities of the Gambian diaspora during this time. The frameworks help to describe how diaspora communities remain politically active at an international level while maintaining social connections, emotional bonds and cultural ties with their home country despite these global political activities.

Diaspora political engagement under Jammeh's rule

Academic study has extensively examined diaspora participation in their home nations' political affairs. The involvement of diaspora communities in homeland politics is not a recent phenomenon; rather, it is a trend that has existed for more than a century. Research on transnational political participation suggests that diaspora groups may use peaceful and violent means to challenge or influence regimes in their home countries.[13]

Yahya Jammeh's twenty-two-year rule (1994-2016) is an important period in the political development of The Gambia, particularly the way that the nature of political participation is modified in situations of authoritarian rule. Typically, authoritarian regimes are characterised by restrictions on political space; however, in The Gambia, there exists a more complicated dynamic within which repression has been instrumental in transforming political activity from being primarily internalised within national borders into being conducted across transnational borders. It was through these transnational borders that the diaspora became a significant political actor that operated outside of the territorial boundaries of the nation-state while continuing to maintain a consistent level of engagement with domestic politics.

Authoritarianism and political exile

Yahya Jammeh's 22-year rule began with a bloodless military coup in 1994 and dramatically changed the sociopolitical climate of The Gambia by institutionalising a 'culture of fear' and systematic authoritarianism. Jammeh used the alliance for patriotic reorientation and construction (APRC) and the armed forces provisional ruling council (AFPRC) to consolidate power by aggressively suppressing dissent and undermining the rule of law.[14]

At the beginning of Jammeh's presented himself as reformist stance raised widespread hopes of political rebirth, of better governance and national progress.

This repressive apparatus included the disbanded National Intelligence Agency (NIA), now called the State Intelligence Service, and the notorious paramilitary hit squad known as the "Jugulars" that carried out extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and torture of alleged political opponents, journalists and human rights defenders.[15]

The situation not only caused many Gambians to go into exile but also motivated those Gambians who were already in exile to unite in opposition to the dictatorship.

Diaspora opposition networks and media activism

The political opposition of the diaspora to Jammeh occurred in a complex transnational environment with both opportunities and limitations. One thing is that Gambians in host countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and other European countries, had freedoms of expression, assembly, and association that were not available to their fellow citizens at home.[16]

These democratising spaces allowed members of the diaspora to create opposition parties, organise public protests and disseminate information to their community via media outlets owned or operated by members of

[13] Jaw, *Restoring Democracy in The Gambia?* P 75

[14] Altrogge and Zanker, *The Political Economy of Migration Governance in the Gambia*. 2019 15 https://www.arnold-bergstraesser.de/sites/default/files/medam_gambia_003.pdf

[15] Lamin Keita, 'Youth and Protest: How "#Gambia" Ended Decades of Autocratic Rule', *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 57, no. 3 (2023): 585–604, https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2023.2254859

[16] Taal, *for the Gambia, our homeland: the diaspora, development and politics* 183-231.

the diaspora. However, the diaspora also experienced a multitude of obstacles as well. the diaspora was affected by the global reach of Jammeh's security agencies, by regime informants embedded within the diaspora itself, and by an enduring fear that political actions taken outside of The Gambia would lead to violence against relatives who remained in The Gambia.[17]

One political activist explained:

> *We were the voices that Jammeh couldn't silence. People inside The Gambia were afraid to speak, but we organised from Europe and America, raised funds and informed the international community.*

In addition to providing space for organised opposition networks to develop, democratic forums provided a base for opposition networks that had developed via The Gambian diaspora, especially in the U.S. and European diasporas. Examples of opposition networks formed primarily based on The Gambian diaspora are the Democratic Union of Gambian Activists (DUGA), which utilised its organisational power to build political opposition, garner public support, campaign for democracy from within The Gambia, etc. In addition to DUGA, diaspora-based media platforms such as Freedom Newspaper, Fatu Network, and The Point Newspaper, amongst others, have served as an additional source for disseminating relevant news and/or information, reporting on human rights abuses, and challenging state-run narrative(s) reported by state-owned media organisations.



Figure 1 paramilitary group known as the Jungulars.

Despite these challenges, there are many barriers for this diasporic group to overcome to continue to develop as a politically active diaspora within typically more democratic political systems than found in African countries. Intelligence agents working for Yahya Jammeh often utilised informants to monitor or infiltrate migrant organisations and therefore extend their reach into foreign countries. Many activist groups have also been limited in their involvement due to fear of retaliation against family members in The Gambia for becoming involved in politics abroad.

There are several phases that could be used to explain how diasporic political activism has developed. Opposition awareness and the establishment of diaspora communities occurred from 1994 to 2000. It is at this point that diasporic Gambian citizens living outside of The Gambia started establishing an informal network to document human rights abuses committed by the newly installed military regime. Diaspora-organised

[17] Dana M. Moss, 'Transnational Repression, Diaspora Mobilization, and the Case of The Arab Spring', *Social Problems* 63, no. 4 (2016): 480–98, https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spw019.

resistance continued with the establishment of diaspora social networking sites, political advocacy groups and civil society organisations from 2001 to 2010.[18]

These groups developed progressively complicated plans for supporting growing internal oppositions and for promoting international public opinion rather than the Jammeh regime. The events of April 10-11, 2000, that saw Gambian security forces open fire upon students who were demonstrating, with a death toll of at least 14 people, including a journalist, indicated a significant turning point in diaspora mobilisation.[19]

In short, the public order act made the political landscape extremely difficult to navigate due to its use to restrict people's ability to hold peaceful assemblies.

One diaspora activist said that the killings of April 2000 were a turning point; at that time, "I had gone from being academically detached to having been too shocked by watching an entire country fall apart to remain silent. It is with that same feeling that I can no longer remain silently academic while others fight for our freedom."[20]

The diaspora Gambians' shift away from being fearful to taking an active role in politics can be seen in this sentiment.

Many Gambians left their home country, with numbers of intellectuals and disaffected young people leaving because of both the widespread persecution they were experiencing at that time and the poor economic management that occurred simultaneously. As a result of these two factors, a growing but geographically dispersed political opposition emerged among Gambians living abroad.[21]

The culture of silence was an important part of how this worked. In The Gambia, there existed a culture of silence. That is to say, the government would allow citizens to engage in formal political activities if they were acceptable to the government and helped the regime maintain its survival and legitimacy.

The collective evidence of this suggests that while the Jammeh regime's consolidation of power in The Gambia was able to suppress local opposition forces, the global nature of contemporary politics allowed those same oppositions to be redefined at an international level, with the diaspora acting as a key site for both political conflict and mobilisation against the regime.

Diaspora activism and political change in 2016 presidential election

The 2016 presidential election marked the culmination of nearly two decades of diaspora political mobilisation and clearly showed how transnational actors can impact on homeland politics from abroad. Diaspora political activism contributed to President Jammeh's electoral loss via several different mechanisms: financial contributions to the opposition coalition; advocacy and lobbying efforts by diasporans strategically directed at decision-makers; information dissemination and counter-narratives constructed to contest the regime's narrative; and indirect mobilisation of voters within The Gambia.

Financially, diaspora contributions were particularly impactful. For example, The Gambia Democracy Fund (a U.S.-based diaspora-organised group) raised over $100,000 in funding for the opposition coalition's 2016 presidential election campaign.[22]

[18] Taal, for the Gambia, our homeland: the diaspora, development and politics. 189-196

[19] Madi Jobarteh, 'Civil and Political Rights', in *The Gambia after the Dictatorship* (Flüchtlingsrat Baden-Württemberg, 2019), https://fluechtlingsrat-bw.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2019-04-10-Gambia-EN-web.pdf.

[20] Taal, for the Gambia, our homeland: the diaspora, development and politics. 208.

[21] Amulai Touray, *resolving the Gambia political impasse of 2016 – the role of states and non-state actors*, 2023 (2023).5 https://euclid.egnyte.com/dl/Q5jw0vJM9c

[22] Essa Njie and Abdoulaye Saine, 'Gambia's Billion Year President: The End of an Era and the Ensuing Political Impasse', *Journal of African Elections* 18, no. 2 (2019): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.20940/JAE/2019/v18i2a1

This funding was important because Jammeh had an advantage in terms of his access to government funds, while opposition parties lacked financial support in the country. Beyond the normal avenues for raising money for campaigns, diaspora members raised money individually for the campaign. Isome diasporans used their remittance money to influence their relatives in The Gambia to vote against Jammeh. The significant amount of economic power that diaspora members wielded over their household economies in The Gambia (the country has one of the highest per capita reliance on remittances) was effectively harnessed by diaspora members to shape electoral behaviour.[23]

Media campaigns by the diaspora were equally effective. Media owned by members of the diaspora included on-line newspapers such as Freedom Newspaper, Kibaaro News, and Gainako as well as Fatu Network and served as an alternative source of information regarding the propaganda created through state-controlled media.[24]

Interview participants confirmed that fundraising and coordination from abroad were central to the opposition campaign. One political activist who participated in mobilising support for the opposition coalition explained that members of the diaspora organised fundraising campaigns, coordinated political messaging through transnational networks, and maintained international lobbying efforts throughout the election period. As the participant stated:

Interview participants confirmed that fundraising and coordination from abroad were central to the opposition campaign. One activist stated that the diaspora organised fundraising campaigns, coordinated political messaging and maintained international lobbying efforts throughout the election period.

These platforms monitored and recorded human rights abuses, revealed corrupt practices in government, and covered opposition activity by citizens who had been consistently denied coverage on their own country's local news sources. Platforms for social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter (X) were used to create transnational communication channels to allow Gambian citizens at home and abroad to exchange information, coordinate actions with one another, and provide support to each other. The hashtag movement #GambiaHasDecided created a sense of shared resolve and represented an image of inevitable political change.[25]

Jammeh restricted access of online media platforms like Freedom Newspaper and Fatu Network and WhatsApp. Civil servants who subscribed to those websites were arrested for questioning about what they wanted to do.

The diaspora provided an important mechanism for opposition unity, which was one of the primary obstacles to oppositions' ability to challenge Jammeh prior to the election. As a result of the diaspora having greater latitude of action compared to those at home, they were able to facilitate communication and mediation among various opposing political party groups while exerting consistent pressure on the disparate parties to form a single oppositional coalition.[26]

Coalition 2016 brought together seven political parties from the opposition and one independent candidate with leader Adama Barrow; it was also the first time in Gambia's political history when so many opposition parties would come together. This experience has shown how transnational actors can contribute their unique strengths to domestic politics through the role they played as brokers for this alliance during the election campaign but also by making sure that the coalition remained cohesive during the entire campaign.

The 2016 presidential election marked the beginning of a major crisis within The Gambia. This was the first

[23] Franzisca Zanker and Judith Altrogge, 'The Political Influence of Return: From Diaspora to Libyan Transit Returnees', *International Migration* 57, no. 4 (2019): 167–80, https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12578
[24] Taal, for the Gambia, our homeland: the diaspora, development and politics. 202-206.
Keita, 'Youth and Protest'.," 594-595.[25]
[26] Jeng, "Gambia's Democratic Transition,"

time since its near 52-year history as an independent nation that a sitting president had lost his position due to losing an election.[27]

While both local youth movements and an emerging new united opposition coalition played a crucial role in the "election earthquake" that took place during the election, it is also true that Gambia's diaspora emerged as one of the key driving forces behind the significant transformation of decades-long frustrations into a well-coordinated transnational campaign.[28]

Banned from voting by the regime of Yahya Jammeh, the diaspora leveraged its economic power and access to global communication networks to challenge the authoritarian political system.[29]

The high level of support for this digital activism has also been supported financially with large sums of money that were raised from people in the diaspora as well as via several crowd funding campaigns. However, the government has also made it difficult to register candidates, and these costs are estimated at approximately one million dalasi.[30]

Kora and Darboe also note that diaspora which contributed one million dalasis for the nomination fee for Adama Barrow to contest s for presidency.[31]

Jammeh initially accepted the election result and later congratulated Barrow on a phone call and a week later he reversed his decision citing irregularities in the election and calls for fresh election to be conducted.[32]

Efforts by the diaspora to assist increased after the crisis worsened. Organisations in the diaspora sent emergency to international bodies such as the United nation, the AU and ECOWAS. They urged these organisations to protect the electoral results and to uphold the will of The Gambian people.[33]

Protests, contention, lobbying and advocacy

Protests and demonstrations were held at various sites outside Gambian embassies and international summits where Jammeh would be attending, at locations such as United Nations headquarters and the International Criminal Court. to express disapproval with the actions taken by President Yahya Jammeh in his country. These types of protests were also utilised to bring awareness about the conditions under which people are living in The Gambia.[34]

In addition to these target areas, the diaspora also targeted their lobbying efforts toward multiple other entities, including the host country governments, international organisations and human rights bodies. For example, within the U.S., diasporic organisations established working relationships with members of Congress which ultimately helped them advocate for travel bans to be placed against Gambian government officials who were involved in human rights violations.[35]

In part, the U.S. government's choice to suspend the Gambia on AGOA trade preferences in 2015 was

[27] David Harris and Sait Matty Jaw, 'A "New Gambia"? Managing Political Crisis and Change in an African Small State', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 62, no. 1 (2024): 45–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/14662043.2024.2308948.

[28] Keita, 'Youth and Protest'. 585–604.

[29] Keita, 'Youth and Protest'. 585–604.

[30] Ibid

[31] Sheriff Kora and Momodou N. Darboe, 'The Gambia's Electoral Earthquake', *Journal of Democracy* 28 (2017): 147–56. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2017.0031

[32] *Gambian President Rejects Election Results after Conceding Defeat*, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/10/gambian-president-rejects-election-results-yahya-jammeh-adama-barrow.

[33] Touray, *resolving the Gambia political impasse of 2016 – the role of states and non-state actors*. 4-6.

[34] Taal, for the Gambia, our homeland: the diaspora, development and politics. 197-202

[35] Njie and Saine, "Gambia's 'Billion Year' President," 19.

attributed to human rights violations to which the diaspora advocacy contributed.[36]

Diaspora lobbying strategies included much more than just public protests. Gambians have employed lobbying tactics, including petitions, media campaigns, collaboration with organisations working for human rights, and communicating directly with policymakers from the host countries. For example, through documenting and reporting on numerous instances of arbitrary arrest, torture, and restrictions placed on the right to free speech, diaspora advocates in the U.S. created a framework that allowed them to characterise the Jammeh regime as one that was increasingly at odds with democratic standards advocated by western governments. Using such advocacy networks, diaspora lobbyists sought to internationalise Gambia poor human rights records. Likewise, in the UK, diaspora organisations collaborated with members of parliament (MPs) on several occasions to bring up issues related to The Gambia during parliamentary debates in the House of Commons and to increase the pressure on the British government to have an increasingly critical view of Jammeh's rule.[37]

UK-based activist also organised protest at the Gambia High Commission and at Downing Street. Diaspora protests that took place at these venues were often timed to coincide with other forms of activism and media coverage, both online and within diaspora communities. This connection allowed protesters to associate their localised efforts with broader networks of diasporic activism.



Figure 2 A protest at Downing Street against the execution of death row inmates in Gambia.

The European Union withheld aid from The Gambia in 2014 partly due to governance and human rights concerns, as the diaspora activism contributed to an international criticism of the Jammeh administration. [38] The EU was able to generate additional pressures against the Jammeh regime because of the EU's criticisms of the Jammeh regime's human rights issues along with discussions regarding potential sanctions. Members of the E.U. parliament issued a warning in September 2016 that they would consider sanctioning officials of the Gambian government should the worsening condition of human rights continue.[39]

As a result of their transnational networks, diasporic groups were able to document and transmit systematic evidence of human rights abuses to other human rights organisations, foreign missions, and international multilateral bodies. Diasporic groups were also able to collect and verify information on the abuses because they had access to information in The Gambia; the Jammeh regime attempted to suppress all such information. Thus, diasporic activists acted as "information brokers" in transnational advocacy networks for local

[36] Tralac, *United States Removes Three Countries from AGOA*, 2015, https://www.tralac.org/news/article/6896-united-states-removes-three-countries-from-agoa.html.
[37] UK Parliament, *Human rights in the Gambia*, 19 July 2016, https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/49610/human-rights-in-the-gambia.
[38] Euractiv et al., *EU Cuts Aid to Gambia over Human Rights Concerns*, 11 December 2014, https://www.euractiv.com/news/eu-cuts-aid-to-gambia-over-human-rights-concerns/.
[39] Alieu Manneh, *Gambia: MEPs Warn of Sanctions over Poor Human Rights*, 22 September 2016, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/gambia-meps-warn-of-sanctions-over-poor-human-rights/651003.

grievances against the Jammeh administration (as defined by Keck & Sikkink), converting those grievances into legible human rights complaints at an international level.[40]

In addition to digital activism, diaspora activists during the struggle to challenge authoritarian rule established numerous civil society organisations (CSOs), advocacy groups and other CSOs to assist with their online efforts. Over the years, many of these CSOs have continued to play an increasingly important role in mobilising members of The Gambian diaspora and creating linkages to institutional structures within the U.S., Europe and Africa. However, most notably in both the U.S. and Europe and in neighbouring countries, including Senegal. Additionally, this rapid growth was due to the proactive and deliberate strategy employed by diaspora activists, as well as their calls for democratic reform, respect for human rights and ultimately regime change or a return to democracy.[41]

Table 1 key diaspora political movements (1995–2016)

Organisation / Network	Headquarters	Main Activities	Outcome / Impact
Gambia Democratic Action Group (GDAG)	USA	Advocacy, protest organisation	Promoted international pressure against the Jammeh regime.
#GambiaHasDecided movement	Europe (multi-country)	Election support, media campaigns	Symbol of post-dictatorship civic renewal
Gambia Democracy Fund	USA	Organise fundraisings.	Manage to raise funds for the restoration of democracy in The Gambia.
Committee For the Restoration of Democracy in Gambia (CORDEG)	USA	Activism	Manage to restore democracy and the rule of law in The Gambia.

Institutional framework for diaspora engagement

The previous sections have outlined the changing political and developmental status of The Gambian diaspora. Therefore, the formal institutional structure for managing these relationships will be examined, with particular focus on the relevant governmental agencies, as well as the policies governing the state's interactions with the diaspora community in The Gambia. While there are many examples of how this new institutional landscape has been productive, it is still developing and remains significantly underdeveloped due to its lack of full implementation.

The Gambia diaspora and migration directorate

The main focal point in how The Gambian government engages with its diaspora is the Gambian diaspora and migration directorate, which has been created by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was directly created as a result of one of the recommendations made in the 2017 Gambian diaspora strategy and after President Adama Barrow declared the diaspora an ‘eighth region'.[42]

The directorate is mandated to be the main service delivery and coordination unit on all diaspora-related issues.

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[40] Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn A. Sikkink, *Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Cornell University Press, 1998),18-25 https://doi.org/doi:10.7591/9780801471292

[41] Jaw, *Restoring Democracy in The Gambia?* P 80.

[42] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Cooperation and Gambians Abroad, *Directorate of Diaspora and Migration*. https://mofa.gov.gm/diaspora-division/

The directorates' core functions include a wide variety of activities to enable an optimum and structured interface between the government and the diaspora.[43]

The Gambia diaspora and migration directorate has been given the authority to develop and implement a diaspora strategy that will provide a foundation for the country's diasporic communities to be actively engaged with their home country. The directorate is tasked with establishing a diaspora development fund; promoting circular labour migration; and using the expertise of high-skilled Gambian professional migrants.[44]

The directorates also coordinate closely with the Ministry of Interior and the Office of the Vice President. Most importantly, it is the chair of the technical working group for migration and development, which is part of a broader National coordination mechanism on migration for the government.

National coordination mechanism on migration

The National Coordination Mechanism on migration established under the office of the vice president provides a common forum where relevant government institutions and international stakeholders can engage through technical working and the implementation of the migration policy.[45]

Migration and sustainable development in The Gambia project (MSDG)

One of the key developments has been the introduction of migration and sustainable development in The Gambia with a technical cooperation programme through partnership with GK Partners with support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.[46]

The MSDG programme also promoted a whole-of-government approach to addressing diaspora affairs issues as well as to implementing its policies. The MSDG programme specifically was designed to develop The Gambian diaspora strategy by establishing formal working relationships between the Office of the President, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and development partners.[47]

The migration and sustainable development in The Gambia project & diaspora development fund began as a pilot in 2020/21 under The Gambia diaspora technical support programme. the diaspora development fund awarded grants totalling €74,890 to 10 diaspora fellows. Through contributions, technical assistance, etc., these diaspora fellows raised an additional €710,280. Therefore, the diaspora added approximately 9.4 times what was provided by MSDG. Together, the project created approximately €785,170 in socio-economic investments, equivalent to around D50 million.[48]

After a successful pilot, the 2022/23 Diaspora Development Fund (DDF) programme was increased to provide €275,000 in co-funding for 55 Gambian diasporans as part of its fellowship programme. This is one of several initiatives that are working to promote and develop diaspora engagement in national development.[49] Additionally, the Commonwealth Secretariat has stated that diaspora engagement is being increasingly included in the national plans for economic development; primarily with regards to developing ways to

[43] Commonwealth Secretariat, *Charting a Feasible Course*, 5-6.

[44] *Directorate of Diaspora and Migration*.

[45] Altrogge and Zanker, *Political Economy of Migration Governance in The Gambia*, 14.

[46] *MSDG Briefing Paper (BP): No. 2 — MSDG Project Summary*, Migration and Sustainable Development in The Gambia (MSDG) (GK Partners, 2017), https://gambiandiaspora.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/MSDG-BP-2-MSDG-Project-Summary-Sep-2017.pdf.

[47] *Ibid*

[48] *Diaspora Development Fund (DDF) Diaspora Development Fund (DDF) Pilot Scheme & MSDG Diaspora Fellows*, Migration and Sustainable Development in The Gambia (MSDG) (GK Partners, 2021), https://gambiandiaspora.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/MSDG-Diaspora-Fellows-2020-21.pdf.

[49] Migration and Sustainable Development in The Gambia (MSDG). 'Diaspora Development Fund (DDF).'GK Partners. https://gambiandiaspora.net/thematic-box/diasporadevelopmentfund/

increase remittances from the diaspora, support for entrepreneurial endeavours by members of the diaspora and promotion of investment opportunities.[50]

Institutional connections remain strong between diaspora governance and migration governance systems in The Gambia. The recovery-focused national development plan 2023-2027 identifies "migration and diaspora engagement" in its "national development policy" for the purpose of creating "the socio-economic benefits of migration to national development."[51]

The National Development Plan also addresses the need to work collaboratively with diaspora groups to achieve economic growth, youth empowerment, skill development and social transformation.

The lack of coordination among state institutions is one such challenge; weak funding and ineffectiveness in terms of bureaucracy as well as inconsistencies in implementing policies have severely impacted the operational capacity of programmes focused upon the diaspora. Furthermore, past mistrust amongst segments of the diaspora and state institutions continues to hinder future collaboration. Taal explains that historically, the tensions between the politically engaged diaspora and their homeland governments (authorities) thwarted efforts at cooperation with regards to development.[52]

Scholars of migration governance contend that diaspora engagement policy for The Gambia continues to be highly dependent on the priorities of external donors most notably those related to the European Union's migration management agenda.[53]

Although the institutionalisation of diaspora engagement since 2017 is significant for transforming state-diaspora relations in The Gambia. The Gambian state increasingly views the diaspora as a strategic actor in development, governance and democratisation.

Moreover, large gaps are evident. the current diaspora policy is yet to be formally validated, and an IOM 2025 consultancy advert directly states that "the present strategy contains several gaps with regard to the extent of coverage and execution."[54]

Key weaknesses that have been identified include the tendency to concentrate on professional and investor diaspora groups and to overlook other important segments of the diaspora, such as youth, women and marginalised communities; a lack of a cohesive framework resulting in an inability to define or assign clear roles and responsibilities among government agencies, diasporic organisations and the private sector; and limited systems to monitor and evaluate progress, provide feedback and maintain diaspora confidence.[55]

To overcome the identified challenges, the government is revising the diaspora strategy and updating the national development plan. The revised diaspora engagement strategy will be developed in collaboration with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As such, this new plan includes an actionable "plan of action" which outlines specific objectives that will provide guidance for implementing the plan of action up until 2030.[56]

Challenges in state-diaspora relations

Although The Gambia has established a Directorate of Diaspora and Migration and while the government

[50] Secretariat, *Charting a Feasible Course for The Gambia Diaspora Investment Strategy*.21–23.

[51] Republic of the Gambia, 'Recovery Focused National Development Plan (RF-NDP) 2023–2027', Banjul, 2023, 134 https://mofea.gov.gm/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/RF-NDP-2023-2027.pdf

[52] Taal, for the Gambia, our homeland: the diaspora, development and politics. 157–180.

[53] Altrogge and Zanker, *Political Economy of Migration Governance in The Gambia*, 13–20

[54] International Organization for Migration, 'Consultancy: Review and Revise the Gambia Diaspora Strategy,' IOM Procurement Notices, 2025.https://www.impactpool.org/jobs/1186683

[55] International Organization for Migration, 'Consultancy: Review and Revise the Gambia Diaspora Strategy,' IOM Procurement Notices, 2025.https://www.impactpool.org/jobs/1186683

[56] Ibid

recognise the diaspora community through the rhetorical statement "the eighth region", numerous challenges such as voting rights and access to consular service.

The diaspora's long-standing exclusion from participation in national elections is probably the most obvious contradiction. In this regard, it is ironic that Gambians living abroad played a vital part in helping Gambians achieve their first democratic transfer of power in 2016 by providing funding to the opposition coalition, and through transnational networks they were able to influence advocacy pressures against the Jammeh regime.

Although the Independent Electoral Commission has stated that it is technically feasible to implement diaspora voting (and publicly committed to it several times, including as recently as May 2021), the IEC has never followed up on those commitments with actual action.[57]

The government is reluctant to assist in this effort because of what are perceived by many to be deep-seated reservations on the part of some members of government regarding the inclusion of foreign-born individuals in the national political process.

In addition, the 1997 constitution has established a constitutional right for all citizens of The Gambia to participate in the election process under Article 39 (Section 1) of the constitution. However, each successive government has been unable to successfully implement a system for those citizens of The Gambia living outside of the country to cast their votes. As a result of this failure by the government and the independent electoral commission, the Supreme Court of The Gambia ruled in favour of five Gambians Bakary B. Dabo, Sidi Sanneh, Cherno Njie, Pa Samba Jaw, and Jeggan Grey Johnson – in January 2021, as they had filed a legal action against both the IEC and the government to be allowed to participate in the election process.[58]

The National Assembly voted to reject clause 14 of the Elections Bill 2021 on 4 March 2025 with a vote of 25 against and 14 for, with most of the opposition being from the ruling party government and their political allies; therefore, despite the court decision, the diaspora voting still will not be introduced.[59]

The National Human Rights Council expressed concern and disappointment with this decision because it effectively disenfranchises a large part of Gambian society which is making valuable contributions to Gambia's socio-economic development.[60]

interviewees consistently expressed frustration that despite contributing financially and politically to democratic transition, they remain excluded from voting abroad. One participant remarked:

> *We financed the fight for democracy... yet we are still denied the right to vote.*

A second concern, perhaps even more challenging than accessing consular services as previously mentioned, is obtaining these services with respect to passport renewals/issuance. While a valid Gambian passport serves as a means of identifying oneself when travelling outside of The Gambia, the passport also has a role in ensuring that one's property interests are maintained, that a person may visit their families within The Gambia and/or other countries, and that one may make investments or otherwise conduct business in The Gambia. Many Gambians living overseas have expressed difficulty in dealing with what they see as long periods of time before receiving assistance from Gambian government offices (embassies) responsible for providing them with

[57] *OPINION: Gambia: Elections Cannot Be Credible When Two-Hundred Thousand Eligible Voters in the Diaspora Are Excluded*, 29 July 2021, https://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/opinion/opinion-it-has-been-rightly-argued-that-one-of-the-fundamental-pillars-of-influencing-citizenry-driven-processes-and-expression-of-choice-on-how-individuals-wish-to-be-governed-is-through-voting-a-week-ago-the-iec-forged-ahead-with-its-voter-registration-.

[58] Sankulleh Janko, *Gambians in Diaspora to Vote in All Elections, Supreme Court Declares*, 21 January 2021, https://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/headlines/gambians-in-diaspora-to-vote-in-all-elections-supreme-court-declares.

[59] Kaddy Jawo, *Explainer: Why the Diaspora Cannot Vote in The Gambia*, 23 December 2025, https://malagen.org/explainers/explainer-why-the-diaspora-cannot-vote-in-the-gambia/.

[60] National Human Rights Commission, *NHRC Expresses Concern over Na'S Denial of Voting Rights to Diaspora Gambians*, 8 March 2025, https://www.africa-press.net/gambia/all-news/nhrc-expresses-concern-over-nas-denial-of-voting-rights-to-diaspora-gambians.

various types of information regarding obtaining passports, including what fees will be charged, how much those fees are, and what requirements need to be met prior to submitting an application. They still receive inconsistent information.[61]

One activist observed:

> *They removed Jammeh, but many of the same officials remain in power. It is difficult to trust institutions that have changed so little.*

In some instances, individuals have had to go back to The Gambia to address their passport issues, which is an extremely costly and lengthy process and directly contradicts the very reason for engaging with the diaspora. The two together illustrate a significant contradiction; the state has sought both financial and political legitimacy through its diasporic community while simultaneously being hesitant to provide them with either complete citizenship or reliable diplomatic assistance.[62]

A report shows there is an increasing gap in the hardships experienced by average citizens and the ease of unmatched sections, at which diplomatic and service passports are being granted to government employees, family members of these employees and other individuals who are related to them. The report states that there was an uncontrolled and questionable allocation of such a high-status document, while average citizens struggle with endless hardships to secure such documents.[63]

A recent dramatic development in April 2026, as hundreds of undocumented Gambians gathered at The Gambian Embassy in Madrid after Spain declared it would offer lawful resident status to illegal immigrants. To be able to obtain legal status, many Gambians spent up to 12 hours waiting, while there were only two immigration officials handling an extremely large number of applicant immigrants. Many pregnant women and families travelling by bus from remote areas such as Valencia had been camping at the embassy for several days prior to the emergency. The situation had become so dangerous that Spanish police were called out to manage the crowds.[64]

The Gambian immigration department said, in response to this problem, that the biometrics enrolment team working out of Spain did "not have any passport booklets in their possession" and that the entire application process for the biometric passports will take place in The Gambia. The Gambian immigration department also stated they had an "adequate stock of biometric passports". However, the example provided demonstrates that there is an enormous gap between the planning of government agencies and actual assistance delivery in the field.[65]

The failure to carry out certain policies is symptomatic of a broader erosion of public confidence in politicians. This sense of betrayal has been stated perhaps most strongly by Momodou Malcolm Jallow, who serves as a member of Sweden's parliament (a Gambian national). He wrote an opinion editorial in which he argues that the Barrow administration broke all its campaign promises made while they fought against former president Jammeh: 'Barrow promised electoral reforms, constitutional reforms, presidential term limits and a New Gambia.' Instead, what did we get? Delays, Deception and Dysfunction.[66]

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[61] Altrogge and Zanker, *The Political Economy of Migration Governance*, 7.

[62] Commonwealth Secretariat, *Charting a Feasible Course*, 5.

[63]Muhammed Jallow, *A National Call for Equity, Accountability and Reform in the Gambian Passport System*, 2 December 2025, https://standard.gm/a-national-call-for-equity-accountability-and-reform-in-the-gambian-passport-system/.

[64] Enia Gómez/ and Carlos Hidalgo, *Dozens of Migrants Storm Gambian Embassy in Madrid after Vulnerability Certificates Denied*, 1 May 2026, https://www.surinenglish.com/spain/dozens-immigrants-storm-20260501100256-nt.html.

[65] Tabora Bojang, *GOV'T DENIES PASSPORT SHORTAGE AS HUNDREDS STORM GAMBIAN EMBASSY IN SPAIN*, 29 April 2026, https://standard.gm/govt-denies-passport-shortage-as-hundreds-storm-gambian-embassy-in-spain/.

[66] Momodou Malcolm Jallow, *A Betrayal Etched in Blood: How the Barrow Government Has Failed Solo Sandeng, the Diaspora, and Gambia's Democratic Struggle*, 3 April 2025, https://standard.gm/a-betrayal-etched-in-blood-how-the-barrow-government-has-failed-solo-sandeng-the-diaspora-and-gambias-democratic-struggle/.

In conclusion, this article has demonstrated the role of The Gambian diaspora in the politics of The Gambia both before and after twenty-two years of rule by Yahya Jammeh. What stands out is the way this community maintained an active engagement in the political affairs of their homeland whilst physically absent from it. The political space within The Gambia itself was eliminated by Yahya Jammeh. Any dissent against him was met with arrest, torture and, in some instances, death. Consequently, the political opposition relocated to other countries where many Gambians had migrated to. There they formed organisations, created free media outlets, collected money for their efforts and pressured international bodies. They were able to perform functions which those of their countrymen living in The Gambia could not carry out due to fear of persecution. Therefore, The Gambian diaspora played a key role in the struggle for democratic reforms. This was most clearly illustrated by the events surrounding the 2016 presidential election. Diaspora money contributed to the financing of the opposition coalition. Diaspora media opposed the government-controlled media. Diaspora lobbying kept international pressure on Jammeh while he refused to concede the election results. These actions strengthen the opposition campaign and contribute to international pressure during the post-electoral crises.

The interview findings reinforce the documentary evidence by demonstrating that members of the Gambian diaspora viewed themselves as central actors in political mobilisation, fundraising, advocacy and international lobbying during the democratic transition. At the same time, respondents highlighted continuing frustrations regarding voting rights, institutional engagement and state recognition, suggesting that the relationship between the Gambian state and its diaspora remains incomplete.

Nevertheless, it appears that there is now a considerable disparity between the extent to which the diaspora contributed to the democratisation process and how much recognition they have received for doing so. Although a decision made by the Supreme Court of The Gambia in 2021 confirmed that diaspora Gambians have the right to vote, diaspora Gambians have yet to be included in national elections. Legislation necessary to provide for this, passed by parliament in 2022, was rejected by the national assembly in 2025. Delivery of consular services is very different for how accessible they are and as far as their level of quality goes. The national diaspora strategy that was long overdue has still never received official approval. These shortcomings illustrate a much broader gap. Specifically, although The Gambian state places a high value on the diaspora's economic contributions, especially through remittance payments, it has taken considerable time to grant diasporans the same level of political rights and institutional inclusion required for true partnership.

Ultimately, this article illustrates that diaspora communities can exert great political leverage; however, their ability to do so is limited. Diasporas may alter the outcome of a particular crisis; however, they will never alone create the type of democratic institutions that sustainably ensure democracy. If the relationship between The Gambia's state and its diaspora is to reach maturity, then it needs to evolve beyond a transactional one. The diaspora is not merely a means of collecting funds; diasporans are citizens and should therefore be treated as such.

This article's identification of the institutional gaps and contradictions identified here raises several key issues for members of the Gambian diaspora as to how they perceive their role relative to that of the homeland state, their political power or potential impact, and the constraints imposed by post-authoritarian transformation.

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