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Research Article

### Stalled Transitions: The Limits of Regional Support and Institutional Reform in The Gambia's Democratic Consolidation

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#### About Article

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#### ABSTRACT

This study assesses the delayed democratic consolidation in The Gambia following the 2016 election impasse. Even though the Gambia received significant support from ECOWAS, progress in democratic governance has remained at best slow. A significant regression of civil liberties, institutional reforms, and political inclusion has been witnessed in many fronts of the country's democracy. This study employs a qualitative case study to examine how institutional lapses and the role of elites weaken democratic consolidation in the Gambia. The study found that the democratic governance trajectory of the Gambia revealed troubling youth and gender underrepresentation. The study adapted a qualitative method used thematic content analysis as the main data analysis method revealed that anti-corruption efforts in the country have been weak, with limited or no enforcement powers to prosecute offenders. The finding tells a disconnect between normative aspirations of democracy and the empirical outcome. The study argues that external support to the Gambia's democracy is not sufficient without greater political and institutional will from the government of the Gambia. The paper recommends stronger institutional reforms and civic empowerment for a sustainable democratic outcome.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The transition of The Gambia from authoritarian rule to democracy following the 2016 political impasse was widely regarded as a critical moment in West Africa's democratic trajectory. With decisive intervention from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), particularly through its Council of the Wise, the country embarked on an ambitious agenda of democratic reconstruction. ECOWAS provided technical, political, and moral support for constitutional reform, institutional development, the strengthening of civil society, and the promotion of media freedoms. These interventions were aimed at restoring democratic norms and laying the foundation for a consolidated democracy.

Aja and Eke (2017) postulate that during the political impasse in the Gambia, the reversed victory by former President Jammeh was condemned by ECOWAS as a perversion of democratic principles and values. ECOWAS was motivated by the need to restore democracy and avoid a humanitarian crisis that might arise as a result of President Jammeh's refusal to accept the verdict of the people. Njie and Saine (2019) discuss that former President Jammeh declared the electoral results unfair and maintained that his protest to reject the election results was because the results were marked by irregularities. He claimed that his supporters were denied voting by the polling stations and complained of errors made by the electoral commission in vote tabulation. Unuoha & Ngwu (2017) and Bavier (2017) argue that the IEC admitted committing some errors in the vote's tabulation; however, it insisted that Adama Barrow still won because the errors were marginal and not sufficient to cancel the result. This development heightened insecurity in the Gambia, and ECOWAS stood by the Gambians through its ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG) to support and restore the verdict of the Gambians. Maclean (2016) and Daffeh (2024) applaud that ECOWAS supported the Gambia's democratic transition and helped restore democratic values and institutional building in the Gambia. The ECOWAS intervention Mission in the Gambia (ECOMIG) helps to maintain peace and order in the Gambia while ensuring democratic consolidation by strengthening national reform projects and building credible democratic institutions for the Gambia. Sallah (2018) points out that during the political Impasse in the Gambia, ECOWAS supported the Gambia by ensuring that former President Jammeh left the country without any crisis. ECOMIG helped to restore peace and supported the consolidation of democracy in the Gambia through civil service reforms, constitutional building, and the establishment of the Truth Reconciliation and Reparation Commission (TRRC). Tella (2022) points out that ECOWAS supported the democratic consolidation of the Gambia by strengthening the security forces of the Gambia. Odigie (2017) argues that ECOWAS deployed four thousand (4000) armed soldiers in the Gambia, including air forces, to enforce the verdict of the election and prevent former President Jammeh from usurping power. Even when the political Impasse in the Gambia was settled, ECOWAS maintained two thousand five hundred (2500) soldiers in Gambia to be in the country for six months after the election to help in the democratic transition, nine years after the restoration of democracy in the Gambia today, one thousand (1000) ECOMIG soldiers remained in the

country providing strategic support to the country's democracy. ECOWAS supported the security service reform agenda of the Gambia through the transformation of the former National Intelligence Agency (NIA) to the State Intelligence Agency (SIS) and reformed the mandate of the latter in conformity with democratic standards. Nzally (2022) claims that since 2016, the Presidential security personnel of the Gambia have been members of the ECOMIG force. ECOWAS also maintained its security forces in the strategic areas of the Gambia from 2016 to date and helped to further consolidate democracy in the Gambia by supporting the Presidential elections of December 2021 and parliamentary elections through its technical mission.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Democratization scholars have argued that the lack of strong institutions and good value systems retard democratic consolidation in Africa. In some cases, political scientists attributed the failure of democratic consolidation in West Africa to the absence of certain preconditions, such as liberal values and strong institutions. This section outlines the key assumptions and intellectual reasons for what constitutes the practice of democratic governance and democratic consolidation. The section also outlines the convergence and differences in opinion among key scholars on democratic governance and consolidation. The section synthesizes key arguments and situates their relevance to the understanding of this study. It also outlines the benefits of democratic consolidation and provides key suggestions on what West African governments and ECOWAS must do to consolidate their democracy.

### 2.1. Theoretical Review

#### 2.1.1. The Elites Theory

The Elites Theory was founded by Robert Michels in 1911. The theory argues that all Organizations, even those with democratic ideals, are controlled by a small minority of elites. This theory provides a conceptual linkage for the understanding of democratic consolidation; it provides the basis to see what approach the government of the Gambia follows in the implementation of democracy as a system of governance. According to Cox (1996), this theory suggests that a democratic government that is necessary for development should ensure equal participation of everyone in the politics of the state, and argues that the most knowledgeable people in the society should be the guardians of democratic values and standards. Mills (1956) identified three main aspects of power: Pluralism, Elitism, and Marxism. Besides the fact that they all focus on elaborating the distribution of power, he suggested that Marxism elaborates more on class conflict and economics rather than politics. According to the Journal of Sociology (2010), the pluralist theory is a general type of government where all participants share an equal status, whether it is in possession, power, or rights. The work of elites by Vilfredo and Mosca is cited by Dowse and Hughes (1983) in analyzing the Elite theory. They suggest that the Elite theory concerns the nature and distribution of power, which was originally developed by Pareto and Mosca in their works "The Mind and Society" and "The Ruling Class". Horowitz (1959) distinguishes between democratic and totalitarian societies; he argues that



democracy could never be anything more than a manipulative, legitimating process. Through such a process, elites consolidated their power by designating the masses to support the interests of the powerful rather than representing the interests of the masses. This theory states that a representative democracy is not based on the will of the citizens, but that there is a cohesive elite group that makes almost all the important decisions. Ross (2006), argues that the formal structures of government explain 'who gets what, when and how'. He pointed out that the investigation and significance of the elite in the policy process are in the same way important.

Delican (2000) argues that elites control the formal institutions of government and are influential elements in government and the whole decision-making process. There are different views on the role of elites in democracy. Some scientists like Dowse and Hughes (1983) believe that elites are guards of democracy protecting it from the dangers of totalitarianism and ensuring democratic consolidation, while others like Magstadt (2006) believe that elites are the main threat to the survival of democracy. He claims that elites in democracy only facilitate the participation of a few, notably the rich and influential, in the democratic process. He argues that popular democratic participation is constrained in the elite system, which constrains democratic consolidation. Conversely, scholars such as Carlton (2017) argue that elites facilitate democratic consolidation. He contends that the elites are highly educated and informed, and therefore, they are best positioned to support democratic consolidation projects through policy formulation and provision of intellectual and critical support to the democratic process.

In the case of the Gambia, the assumption of the elites and democracy is more applicable in this study. While some praised the elites for facilitating the democratic policy development process in the Gambia, others chide the elites for strengthening dictatorship in the Gambia for the 22 years of leadership of President Jammeh. The elites provided critical support for Jammeh through compromising the Judiciary and providing a rubber-stamp Parliament that easily did the bidding of former President Jammeh. Despite the contrasting perspectives on elites in democratic consolidation, Hamilton (1988) believes that the role of the elites is crucial in democratic promotion. He claims that the elites not only provide policy initiatives for democratic survival but also ensure the respect of human rights and the rule of law, which are cardinal for democratic consolidation. Therefore, the role of the elites in democratic consolidation remains ever important to this study and provides a grounding framework for this research.

## 2.2. Conceptual Review

### 2.2.1. Regional Integration

Regional integration refers to cooperation among countries within a specific geographic area to safeguard and promote the interests of member states, operating under rules established by treaties or other mechanisms. The central argument is that regional integration not only strengthens diplomatic, economic, and institutional ties among member states but also plays a pivotal role in advancing democratic governance, economic development, and social inclusion. Scholars such as Aly (1994) and Aboagye (2007) highlight historical context and

motivating factors, while Philippe & Langenhove (2007) and Vogt & Nhara (1998) assert that regional integration leads to democratic consolidation, peace, and security, making it an essential mechanism for collective progress.

West African states all belong to the global integration arrangement of the UN and the Continental regional integration arrangement, the African Union, since the Cairo Declaration of 1993. Sunday (2010) advances that the adoption of the New Partnership for Africa's Development in 2001 by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) creates the regional economic communities in Africa, which help to promote the continent's political and economic institutions to facilitate Africa's participation in globalization, and prevent Africa from falling back on the gains of democratic Governance. The OAU, through the Abuja Treaty, recognized five (5) regional integration arrangements in Africa to promote economic development and democratic Governance, as well as foster unity among African countries and African peoples. Sunday (2010) reasons that ECOWAS appears to be the best regional integration arrangement in Africa, having gained a good measure of international recognition through its massive peacekeeping efforts and democratic promotion mechanism in the sub-region. ECOWAS has adopted several policies and treaties that support its regional integration efforts in the sub-region. It has established several layers of regional integration and instituted accountability mechanisms such as the ECOWAS Court and ECOWAS parliament to provide oversight for the monitoring and implementation of regional integration initiatives in West Africa. Adedeji (2016) argues that political integration in West Africa is growing steadily despite recent cases of military interventions in ECOWAS member states. Shaw (2017) points out that ECOWAS has manifested its willingness to foster regional integration in West Africa by providing all available effort and resources in peacekeeping and democratic consolidation in the sub-region. Ntumba (2016) maintains that ECOWAS enjoyed broad support among West African governments for democratic governance practices through regional integration. Growing support has been manifested by sub-regional power-houses such as Nigeria and Ghana to restore democratic governance in member states through their commitments to regional integration efforts in the sub-region. Through regional integration, ECOWAS was able to leverage the support of other West African countries for the deployment of the military contingent in the Gambia to help restore democracy in the country. Robinson (1996) argues that regional integration is a multi-stage process leading to a customs union and a common market. He points out that political integration is the climax of regional integration arrangements, which perceives a systemized mechanism by promoting democracy and good governance as the preferred system of governance for all countries.

ECOWAS has undertaken several regional integration initiatives to maintain and consolidate democracy, stability, and security within the sub-region, such as the Protocol for Democracy and Good Governance and the ECOWAS Peace Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). The framework for such activities has recently been reinforced by the adoption of a permanent Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, and Resolution,



including protocols establishing a regional mechanism for mutual assistance in defense matters to promote democracy and economic development in the sub-region. The significance of regional integration is very germane for West Africa's economic transformation and democratic governance. Owing to growing political and economic weaknesses, West Africa is faced with regional integration that has the potential for democratic consolidation and economic growth through peer review mechanisms and closer cooperation among countries in West Africa.

### 2.3. The Concept of African Democracy

The evolving concept of African democracy is centered on tailoring democratic systems to reflect the cultural realities and lived experiences of Africans. Ake (1993) contends that democracy in Africa must be reconstructed to resonate with these local contexts, advocating for community-based representation and governance that values both individual and communal rights. He insists that African democracy should be grounded in practical experiences, especially during economic and social hardship. Fye (2016) emphasizes that ordinary Africans, including the illiterate and poor, must shape the democratic process through active participation. He argues that African democracy must diverge significantly from liberal democracy by prioritizing concrete economic rights over abstract political rights, noting that the push for democracy in Africa is deeply influenced by prevailing economic conditions. The high-pitched economic inequality in Africa is a critical consideration for the future of African democracy. This means the process of democratization in Africa should shift emphasis from abstract legal and political rights to social and economic rights. Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1990) argue that a considerable economic intervention scheme should be a priority that will facilitate growth in the living standard of the people in Africa and a redistribution of economic wealth to benefit everyone, especially the poor. Joseph (1997) maintains that African democracy must be socially rooted and ensure that pro-poor social programs and policies are priorities to alleviate inequality perpetuated by capitalism. Ake (1991) reasons that Liberal Democracy promotes individualism. He maintains that the African perception of democracy is a system that is based on collective solidarity and promotes a culture of community. The assumption that liberal democracy is Universalist is rejected by Oladipo (2001) as utopian and a mere fantasy. He argues that the democratization process most represents the unique cultural experiences of the different people of the world.

### 2.4. African Mechanisms to Promote Democratic Governance

Although the African Union Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (2012) does not define democracy, it lays solid premises on what should constitute democratic governance in Africa. The Charter emphasizes adhering to values such as the rule of law and the supremacy of the constitution and constitutional order in the political arrangements of the States. Except for a few African countries, such as Mauritius, Namibia, Ghana, South Africa, and Botswana, most African countries generally rank poorly on democratic governance.

African countries continue to struggle with achieving a viable democracy and providing meaningful development for the people. With the desire to promote democracy in Africa, the African Union has adopted mechanisms such as the Constitutive Act to foster the practice of democracy in Africa.

Mbapnah and Njungwe (2008) reason that the AU Constitutive Act provides the opportunity for popular civil participation and accountability in African governance architecture. Through organs such as the Pan-African Parliament (PAP), the AU promotes democratic values in Africa through strengthening accountability in member states. Ottosen (2010) maintains that the Abuja Treaty set the base for structural reform in Africa to facilitate genuine democratic transition, which places importance on transitioning Africa as an equal player in the international system. Fye (2015) argues that the AU Constitutive Act provided the necessary apparatus and footing for the practice of democratic governance in Africa. He points out that the Abuja treaty and the Constitutive Act integrate the economic and development objectives needed for the sustainable transformation and development of Africa through a democratic process. The African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance provides an oversight mechanism for African countries to adhere to the principles of democracy. It ensures member states adhere to the supremacy of the Constitution and constitutional order in Africa and encourages countries to promote regular, free, and fair elections and reject unconstitutional changes of government in Africa through nurturing the culture of genuine democracy in Africa and strengthening governance institutions on the continent.

Nzewi (2009) points out that the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) promotes Africa's Rebirth and fosters Democracy and Good Governance in Africa. Ottosen (2010) argues that NEPAD engineered the Africa Peer Review Mechanism, which serves as a pillar to strengthen democracy and good governance in Africa. Ninalowo (2003) maintains that the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), which are the products of the Abuja Treaty, also help to foster democratic governance in Africa and act as a catalyst for effective implementation of democracy in Africa to foster economic and social development. The RECs help to prevent unconstitutional changes of government in Africa to inspire democratic practices on the continent. Ake (1996) observes that the Algiers decision on Unconstitutional Changes of Government, adopted in 1999, and the Lomé Declaration on the framework for response to Unconstitutional Changes of Government, adopted in 2000, created the basic philosophies to promote democracy and good governance in Africa. Despite the challenge of democratic governance on the continent, these mechanism helps to inspire hope and facilitate the practices of democratic governance in Africa that will promote economic growth and development for the people of Africa.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The study used the qualitative research method for this study. I adopted a qualitative case study research design because it provided me with an opportunity to explore the democratic consolidation process of the Gambia in depth. The research was conducted in the Gambia, covering all seven administrative



regions in the country. The population for this study comprised key stakeholders, including youth, women, and the elderly, as well as the ECOWAS Permanent Representative in the Gambia. The study collected data using in-depth interviews with key informants. This method of data collection was used because of its methodological astuteness. The research also used triangulation of data from official reports and case studies. This provided a systematic approach to my study and limited methodological vagueness in research, which ensures closeness between the researcher and his respondents. A structured interview guide was used as the data collection tool for this study. The guide provided structure to the pattern of conversation during interviews. Data analysis in this study was based on content analysis. According to Schilling (2006), content analysis is the systematic analysis of the content of the data. In this study, the data analysis process took place after each step of the fieldwork. Data was organized in folders and spreadsheets. The primary data from interviews were handwritten, transcribed, and typed. The data were spread onto a spreadsheet with individual sheets for the interviews conducted in each region. This research followed all the ethical rules of confidentiality and honesty as recommended by Scientific research.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Respondents' Demographic Information

Demographic data in qualitative research helps identify patterns and trends within a population and provides critical information for comparing findings across studies. A total of 42 respondents were reached through key informant interviews and focus group discussions, reaching data saturation using snowballing. Mugenda (2012) suggests that a range of 10-30 participants is sufficient for qualitative research, focusing on the depth and richness of data from a carefully selected group. The study analyzed the demographic characteristics of 42 respondents, revealing a male-dominated majority, with 34 males and 8 females, indicating a gender-based distribution.

**Table 1.** Age Distribution of Respondents

Age Level	Frequency	Percentage
25-35	11	26%
40-60	27	64%
Above 60	4	10%
Total	42	100%

Source: Field research, 2024

The study's age distribution is skewed towards adults, with the 40-60 years group accounting for over three-quarters of respondents (64%). The 25-35 age bracket has the second-highest frequency, with 26% of respondents in their late 30s to mid-40s. Only four respondents were above 60. This skewed age distribution contributes to the methodological robustness of the study and highlights the focus on experts with relevant knowledge.

### 4.2. Regions of Respondents

The research represented all seven Gambian administrative regions, with the majority of respondents from the Kombos, comprising 60% of Gambians. Although the sampling wasn't done on the basis of focus on the Kombo area, the snowballing technique used led to the participation of more respondents from this region. This concentration strengthens the research methodology and emphasizes the significance of expert knowledge in this study.

**Table 2.** The Regions of Respondents

Banjul	10	24%
KMC	10	24%
WCR	10	24%
LRR	7	17%
CRR	2	5%
URR	2	5%
NBR	1	2%
Total	42	100%

Source: Field research, 2024

### 4.3. Educational Level of Respondents

This table shows the educational qualifications obtained by the 42 respondents. The majority of respondents are master's graduates: 31 (74%). One respondent (2%) has a Ph.D. Seven respondents (17%) have a Bachelor's degree, two (5%) have a Diploma, and one (2%) has a West African Examination Certificate (WASSCE).

The data shows that the majority of respondents are highly educated and knowledgeable, with 31 of the respondents having a master's degree. The finding also shows that a large number of the respondents are senior public servants who hold advisory roles in government, academia, and civil society organizations.

**Table 3.** The educational level of Respondents

Educational Level	Frequency	Percentage
Ph.D	1	2%
Masters	31	74%
Bachelors	7	17%
WASSCE Certificate	1	2%
Diploma	2	5%
Total	42	100%

Source: Field research, 2024

### 4.4. Professional Distribution of Respondents

The study reveals a diverse range of professions among 42 respondents; 5 respondents (12%) are members of the Executives, constituting one of the highest categories that participated in this study. The members of the National Assembly have 5 respondents (12%), while the Local government council and the University of the Gambia have 4 respondents (10%) and



2 respondents (5%) respectively. The National Youth Council has 3 respondents (7%), while the opposition and Civil Society Organizations have 5 respondents (12%) respectively. The Media and the critical opinion leaders also constituted 5 respondents each, taking a percentage share of 12% respectively.

The data shows a diversified range of occupations among the respondents, with most of them being in senior positions and advisory roles in either government, Academia, or Civil Society. The fact that all the respondents are in the middle or senior cadre of their profession suggests that the study data stem from experts' reflections. The target group's diverse educational backgrounds are reflected in the depth and complexity of the findings.

**Table 4.** shows the Regions of Respondents

Profession	Frequency	Percentage
The Executives	5	12%
National Assembly	5	12%
Local Government Councils	4	10%
University of the Gambia	2	5%
National Youth Council	3	7%
ECOWAS	1	2%
Opposition parties	5	12%
Civil Society Organizations	5	12%
The Media	5	12%
Opinion Leaders	5	12%
National Women Council	2	4%
Total	42	100%

Source: Field research, 2024

#### 4.5. Assessing the state of Democratic Consolidation in the Gambia

The Gambia's political transition since the fall of Yahya Jammeh's authoritarian regime in 2016 has marked a pivotal moment in the country's democratic journey. However, the democratic consolidation process in The Gambia is still a work in progress. This section assesses the current state of democratic consolidation in The Gambia across several core dimensions: participation, representation, competition, responsiveness, and transparency.

The construction of this was based on thematic analysis of the content of the field data by group, and arranging data from respondents into themes for analysis. The analysis was based on respondents' perception of the state of democracy in the Gambia and their perception of the five dimensions highlighted below.

##### 4.5.1. Representation

The level of representation by key stakeholders of the Gambian society, such as youth, women, and the differently abled, was assessed to consider the level of representation in the democratic process in the Gambia. The findings show

limited representation in the democratic process of the Gambia. The findings of the study show that women and youth are underrepresented in the democratic process of the Gambia. The findings show that women can drive significant change in the democratic process when given opportunities and empowerment to participate in politics. However, in The Gambia, the study found that women are underrepresented in politics. The findings show that only three out of 58 members of the Gambian National Assembly are women. Also, the study revealed that only three out of 23 cabinet positions are women, and eight out of 120 local government councilors are women. The study found that women still face obstacles such as negative social norms, religious bias, and unfavorable legal environments that constrain their participation in the democratic process.

"The Gambia's political landscape is predominantly male-dominated, with women being largely marginalized despite their representation in the population and registered voters. Regionally, women have a higher percentage of voters. Prior to the 2021 elections, women were underrepresented in the cabinet and parliament. Locally, women were underrepresented in the council. Despite some voluntary gender quotas and women's wings, they remain underrepresented compared to their male counterparts."

The findings show that President Adama Barrow initiated a sound democratic reform process in 2018. The finding shows that the democratic building process in The Gambia, which was supported by ECOWAS, involved establishing the Constitutional Review Commission (CRC) and drafting the Draft 2020 Constitution in June 2018. The draft addresses gender equality, prohibiting discriminatory treatment, providing equal opportunities, and establishing a quota system for women's representation in parliament. The Constitution aligns with regional and international human rights obligations.

The finding shows that the push for a constitutional provision for women's political representation aligns with a 2018 Afrobarometer survey, with 89% of respondents supporting the quota system. The respondents noted that providing quotas for women, youth, and the disabled in the democratic process will facilitate democratic consolidation and address political representation imbalances, however, one of the respondents Nyaling highlighted that the 2020 Constitution Promulgation Bill was rejected due to partisanship and lack of consensus building among political actors which stifled participation by the minority, women, youth and the disabled in the democratic process.

"The Gambia is still in the process of democratic transition; we are yet to have our democracy consolidated. Despite the support we receive from ECOWAS, both technically and financially, our leaders are still not willing to widen popular participation in our democracy."

The finding revealed that despite the rejection of the constitution by the Executive, the finding shows that the Civil society in The Gambia is utilizing progressive provisions to improve legal frameworks, including introducing a private member bill. One of the respondents, a female parliamentarian, noted that she collaborated with the Civil Society Gender Platform on Transitional Justice to increase women's representation in the



National Assembly by introducing a private member's bill. The study found that the Gambia National Assembly's total seats are set to rise from 58 to 71, with 16 reserved for women, elected from each region, and appointing one woman, a move that the study found would advance women's democratic participation. The finding shows that representation in the Gambia highlights the need for a time-limited positive measure to provide opportunities for historically disadvantaged groups, particularly women. The finding shows that Political parties are primarily patriarchal, with women often playing supportive roles.

"Despite the lack of women in leadership positions, there is a pressing need for an Affirmative Action Bill to ensure women's representation in political processes and decision-making organs, including parliament".

The finding shows that the Women's Act calls for political parties to ensure at least one-third of election candidates are women, gradually increasing to a 50% quota. The findings show that despite this provision, Gambian women are not fully benefiting from crucial legislation, as they face competition from men in unfamiliar environments. The finding shows that women operate in informal spaces, with public spaces predominantly male-dominated. The study points out that women's limited representation in the National Assembly is due to poor political engagement and party leadership.

The findings show that increased women's representation in governance and democracy can lead to progressive policy reforms, change social norms, and promote democratic accountability. The findings show that strong laws and institutions are needed to address gender stereotypes and improve access to political decision-making. The findings show that The Gambia should create new opportunities for women in politics and decision-making processes after 22 years of authoritarian rule.

#### 4.5.2. Participation

The findings show that the engagement and participation of critical stakeholders of The Gambia, such as women and youth, in the 2016 and 2021 elections in The Gambia were impressive. "In the past, participation in democracy in the Gambia was limited due to the autocratic regime of President Yaya Jammeh; because of that, people rallied behind the banners of the opposition coalition to usher in the democratic and constitutional change of government".

The finding shows that beyond the 2016 elections, from civil society forums, government platforms, and on the streets, Gambian people in all categories, including youth and women participated effectively and manifested a strong commitment and ethos to ensure that the new government in Banjul lives up to its commitment to democracy, good governance, and respect for human rights.

The finding shows that people in Gambia are holding the government accountable through democratic participation and social accountability mechanisms. The study shows that such participation led to the formation of youth organizations like A-Plus Gambia and Not Too Young to Run. The finding shows that these organizations are proactively advancing good governance, human rights, and democracy by assessing

gaps between policies and government actions, ensuring the progressive realization of socio-economic rights, and promoting alternative policy choices for democratic consolidation.

The finding also shows that the government of the Gambia has opened up the democratic space for the participation of civil society organizations and the media in the democratic process. The study shows that the government of The Gambia is enhancing its relationship with political actors through interactive activities by establishing the Inter-party committee to foster the participation of the political parties in the democratic process of The Gambia. The finding shows that the government is also ensuring media engagement and participation in governance.

"The government has organized for the first time in the history of this country a president's dinner with the media. This is impressive to cement media government relations and foster the full participation of the media in our democracy".

The study found that The Gambia's political landscape is predominantly dominated by men, despite women comprising 50.5% of the population and 58% of registered voters.

The study found that the government has increased political inclusivity for women, youth, and persons with disabilities in political parties. The finding shows that the government has reviewed political party structures and provided training to various levels through the inter-party committee to foster participation in the democratic process of the Gambia. The government, the study found, has strengthened interparty relationships and recognized the need for concerted efforts to enhance the inclusion and participation of every Gambian, especially among young people, women, and People living with disabilities.

#### 4.5.3. Competition

The study also projects the level of competition by all political players in the democratic process of the Gambia for effective multi-party democracy in the Gambia. The finding depicts that as of December 2023, the level of competition in the democratic process of the Gambia has improved significantly. The finding shows that the government has ensured a level playing ground for the emergence of new political parties to effect completion. The finding shows that as of 2023, The Gambia has 19 registered political parties. However, the finding shows that despite government efforts to widen competition in the democratic process, the requirements for political parties, like a registration fee, candidate nominations, and annual audits of the IEC, remain a significant challenge for genuine competition. "Imagine a candidate has to pay one-million-dalasi (\$17,000) registration fee and gather the signatures of 10,000 registered voters, with at least 1,000 from each of the country's regions. Candidate nomination requirements and fees present an obstacle to genuine competition in our democracy. The government is doing this deliberately to disadvantage political parties from competing properly. This is not good for our democratic consolidation."

The finding depicts that although Gambians have regained freedom from political influences to foster competition in the democracy since Jammeh's rule ended, however, the study illustrates that actions like the politicized distribution of funds



persist and undermine fair competition to ensure democratic consolidation.

The findings confirm that Ethnic divisions in Gambian politics also affect fair competition in the democratic process. The finding shows that major parties are heavily influenced by ethnic groups.

The finding demonstrates that the 2021 presidential election highlighted the challenges women face in competing in the democratic process. The finding revealed that Marie Sock, the first Gambian woman to file a nomination for the Presidency, was rejected by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). The study establishes that out of 13 political parties, none had a female flagbearer, highlighting the gender imbalance in leadership roles and subordinated roles for women to compete fairly in the democratic process of the Gambia.

#### 4.5.4. Transparency

The finding shows that in 2017, the election of President Adama Barrow brought hope for good governance and transparency in Gambia. However, the findings depict that the new government has not delivered on the promise of fostering transparency in governance. The findings demonstrate that although the country witnessed increased judicial independence and transitional justice mechanisms, transparency in governance remains a problem. The finding shows that the Civic space has expanded, but the study suggests that democratic backsliding is evident in the Gambia.

The finding demonstrates the widespread prevalence of corruption in Gambia. The findings corroborate the Afrobarometer survey that 21% of respondents agreed to pay bribes for public services. The finding shows a lack of transparency in the work of the police, judges, magistrates, and government officials.

“I don’t trust this government to be transparent; there is no shred of transparency in this government. Everything they do is to favor their friends and families.”

The findings show a lack of transparency in democratic governance and in handling public affairs in the Gambia. The study found that the donation of 54 vehicles to national assembly members, the First Lady’s foundation scandal, and the contract awarded to Semlex do not all conform to democratic norms and standards. The finding shows that the government is far behind in ensuring transparency and accountability. The findings depict that the law and all laws of the Gambia require accountability and transparency. The finding illustrates that fundamental democratic issues in the Gambia are not shared with the public; the study found that this has eroded public confidence in the governance in the Gambia.

The finding emphasized the importance of accountability and transparency in public institutions, stating that a lack of these will lead to decreased trust and increased costs in democratic governance.

“The President should respect the rule of law and prioritize national interests, regardless of party affiliation. We need him to be transparent; we need him and his ministers to declare their assets to the public for transparency purposes. This will enable the citizens to hold the government accountable. Look at the Faraba Commission, the Janneh Commission, and now

the TRRC; nothing has been transparent with this government. The findings of this commission have not been implemented. This is an affront to our democracy”.

However, the finding shows governments’ commitment to strengthening transparency in the democratic process with the coming into force of the Access to Information bill in 2022.

The study illustrates that the Gambia has implemented an Access to Information Act to align with regional and international obligations to promote and protect information access and foster transparency in governance. The finding shows that the Gambian government is determined to implement the law, including establishing mechanisms for the Information Commission. The finding demonstrates the Commission’s desire for transparency in democratic governance through access to information to the public with impartiality. The finding revealed the government’s commitment to allocate resources for transparency in the Gambia’s democratic process. “The Gambia’s Access to Information Law marks a significant victory for democracy, promoting transparency and citizen participation in public life. The law requires public and private sector officials to make information available, demonstrating the potential of civil society and government institutions for democracy and development.”

The finding illustrates that the Gambian government is embracing the Access to Information law, which aims to foster transparency, accountability, and participation in decision-making. The finding demonstrates that the law will be a key to a democratic society in the Gambia.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Despite significant ECOWAS support, The Gambia’s democratic consolidation stagnates due to state capture by the elite and institutional weakness. This research reveals significant discrepancies between regional support and domestic political commitment. ECOWAS has, however, offered a roadmap for reform. This remains to be implemented by the political actors in The Gambia.

The study illustrates a core argument: external support alone cannot consolidate democracy. Strong internal commitment to the rule of law and inclusion is essential.

These findings reinforce elite theory’s claim that elites use power to advance their own interests. This highlights the need to realign regional support with enforceable benchmarks and greater domestic accountability. Future research should identify ways to bind political elites to democratic norms, especially in post-transition states with weak institutions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a strong need to reinstate constitutional reform process in The Gambia. ECOWAS and civil society actors must pressure Gambian lawmakers to revive the 2020 draft constitution or its essential elements, particularly term limits, gender quotas, and presidential accountability. Moreover, strengthen Anti-Corruption Mechanisms will also facilitate strong democratic governance. The establishment of an independent and well-resourced anti-corruption commission should be prioritized. ECOWAS could assist by providing technical support and public accountability frameworks.





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