

Leaving the Commonwealth: explanations from different viewpoints

Naam: Rixte Schermerhorn
Studentnummer: 1509381
Docent: Wouter Veenendaal
Bachelorproject: Kleine Staten
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Introduction

Following The Gambia leaving the Commonwealth in 2013 (Hultin, Jallow, Lawrance, & Sarr, 2017), President Yameen of the Maldives recently announced in October 2016 that his country would also be leaving the Commonwealth (Safi, 2016). It is unusual for members states to leave the Commonwealth, few states that have done so usually later rejoined. Moreover, most states that did leave the Commonwealth were actually suspended from the organisation. That small states are leaving the Commonwealth at all is striking, due to the perceived benefits of being a member of the organisation. These supposed benefits range from financial resources for projects to technical assistance and policy recommendations (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2014a). However, after the presidential elections in December 2016, the new president of The Gambia announced that his state would be rejoining the Commonwealth (BBC, 2017). Consequently, this shows that the organisation still holds some appealing qualities for small states. Thus, by using the Maldives and The Gambia as case studies, the arguments for leaving the organisation despite the supposed benefits of being a member state are considered.

This thesis aims to outline the various arguments on why the small states left the Commonwealth. It will predominantly focus on the arguments given in the small states the Maldives and The Gambia, whilst also taking into account the comparative views of the Commonwealth. This thesis is also of social relevance as it provides insight into how former colonies deal with their colonial past and their own identity, as well as highlighting the relationship small states have with an international organisation ('IO') set up by their former coloniser.

Small States and IR theories

In the main international relations ('IR') theories, small states are viewed differently than large states. According to (neo)-realists small states are weak due to their lack of military and material resources. Therefore, small states are, more than large states, trying to ensure their survival by anticipating on international developments (Browning, 2006, p. 670). This means that international politics defines small states' domestic politics (Browning, 2006, pp. 670-671). Neo-realists argue that small states have two options in their behaviour in the international system: 'bandwagoning' or balancing (Walt, 1997, p. 158). 'Bandwagoning' is a strategy in which small states join larger states that are seen as the winning ones. Balancing

on the other hand means that small states join weaker coalitions in order to have a balance of power (Neumann & Gstöhl, 2006, p. 18).

In general, liberalism puts emphasis on international institutions for solving collective problems (Karns & Mingst, 2010, p. 37). Especially for small states, neo-liberal institutionalists put emphasis on IOs as a means to have influence in arena's in which they usually would not have any influence. However, neo-liberal institutionalists also argue that small states' power is limited to lobbying in IOs, the real power still lies in the hands of the large states. Nevertheless, IOs are important for small states (Thorhallsson, 2012, p. 142).

Constructivists on the other hand do not explain small state behaviour by examining their military capacity. The way states act in the international system is not only determined by material causes, but also by social causes (Karns & Mingst, 2010, p. 50). According to constructivism, decisions are made based on the logic of appropriateness as opposed to the logic of consequence. This means that states do not act in order to get the most efficient outcome, but when making decisions actors look at who they are too. Norms and identity are important factors in how actors behave (Checkel, 1998, pp. 325-326). In fact, a state's self-perception, rather than the actual size, can determine whether a state is small or large (Browning, 2006, p. 673). Therefore, it is not only the military capacity of a small state, but also its identity and norms that determine small state behaviour in the international system. Adding to this, constructivists argue that sovereignty is the most important institution in the international system, because sovereignty determines states' identities (Karns & Mingst, 2010, p. 51). Furthermore, intergovernmental organisations are powerful in the way that they decide how cooperation takes place, how choices are made and how states define their own interests (Karns & Mingst, 2010, pp. 51-52).

Small States in International Organisations

Most IR theories argue that small states have difficulties ensuring their survival in the international system. According to neo-liberal institutionalists, IOs could be of great help for small states. Firstly, many IOs have formal equality of all member states, and decision making rests on the one-state, one-vote principle (Panke, 2012, p. 313). This means that small states have a chance of exerting an equal amount of power in the organisation as a large state, and the small states can be consulted on some issues by the organisation (Browning, 2006, p.

672). Apart from the formal equality, many IOs promise security to their member states in their charters. Especially small states that try to survive the international system's anarchy could benefit from this security (von Dosenrode, 1994, p. 247). Moreover, IOs do not only ensure security for small states, but they can also help with achieving small states' goals in foreign policy (Vital as cited in Hey, 2003, p. 4).

Furthermore, due to the IOs' wishes for solving conflicts peacefully, the difference in power to affect decisions between the military weak and powerful states becomes smaller (Rothstein, 1968, p. 40). This leads to IOs as a means for small states to assert their soft power in order to influence policy outcomes, which shows to other countries that small states are able to affect world politics (Thorhallsson, 2012, p. 144). IOs are also able to provide a forum that inexperienced small states could use to develop their diplomatic skills. The WTO has special programs for diplomatic capacity training for small and least developed countries (Lee, 2013, p. 200). The UN General Assembly is also used as a centre stage by small states (Karns & Mingst, 2010, p. 102). IOs do not only help small states achieve their foreign policy, but could also cause small states to engage in more issues by using the strategy of 'forum shopping' where certain issues are taken to different specialised organisations in order to attract attention for the issue (Karns & Mingst, 2010, p. 274). Moreover, small states could get material help from IOs' specialised agencies (Rothstein, 1968, p. 40). Creating a new IO is another strategy of attracting attention to a certain problem small states can use (Baldacchino, 2013, p. 29). An example of such an organisation is the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), which was formed in 1990 as the 'ecological conscience' of the problem of climate change (Payne, 2004, p. 633).

In addition, the sovereignty of member states is protected by IOs. This is because an IO cannot do more than its members want the organisation to do and states' sovereignty is recognised by other states due to IOs (Mayall, 1998, p. 380; Thorhallsson, 2012, p. 143). Furthermore, it is possible for states to leave an IO, which is not necessarily the case in a military alliance (von Dosenrode, 1994, p. 246). From a neoliberal institutionalist perspective it is also argued that large states have to work together with small states in IOs. The function of these organisations could then be to bring order in the anarchic international system, which in turn could solve small states' security problems (Thorhallsson, 2012, p. 141). Small states could also benefit from the opportunity to build coalitions in IO (Karns & Mingst, 2010, p. 274). Consequently, small states gain a lot of benefits of membership of IOs.

The Commonwealth

The British Empire and colonialism

The British Empire had three phases of colonialism: the establishing of settler colonies in the Americas, Australia and parts of Asia, direct forms of rule in Asian territories, and indirect forms of rule in sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific (Lange, Mahoney, & vom Hau, 2006, p. 1427). In the settler colonies, colonialism helped development due to the institutions that were set up (Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2001, pp. 1374-1375). In most parts of Africa, where the British ruled indirectly, colonialism changed the local and political structures completely (Potter, 2007, pp. 624-625). Due to the indirect rule, the British set up few institutions to regulate the economy and the state and those they did impose often had negative effects on the state's development (Lange, Mahoney, & vom Hau, 2006, p. 1443). Colonialism did not help the African colonies' social development either: the ineffectiveness of central administrations led to the incapability to implement policies outside the capital city (Lange, 2004, p. 907). Moreover, due to the patron-client relations that were built to govern the country without stationing many British administrators, certain ethnic groups gained a lot more possessions than others, which lead to ethnic cleavages and conflict in the British colonies (Lange, Mahoney, & vom Hau, 2006, pp. 1445-1447).

The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth is an IO that has a lot of small member states (Sutton, 2001, p. 75), and that recognises the needs for small and vulnerable states (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2013a, pp. 7-8). The organisation emerged after a series of colonial and imperial conferences at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. These conferences were the start of the transition from the British Empire to the British Commonwealth (Hall, 1971, p. 22). At the end of the 19th century, the British colonies were granted more sovereignty, and they became aware that they needed some sort of relationship with the United Kingdom in order to promote their own interests (Hall, 1971, p. 28). The aim of the Commonwealth was that it was culturally seen as the successor of the British Empire by becoming a "family of nations" (Davis, 2013, p. 3; Brysk, Parsons, & Sandholtz, 2002, p. 294). The Commonwealth became a social and trading community, with the United Kingdom as the principal market, before the organisation became a political community (Hall, 1971, pp. 28-32). In 1949 the modern Commonwealth was established by the London Declaration. Now, the

Commonwealth members are independent and equal in relation to the United Kingdom, as opposed to the past when the United Kingdom formally was the leader of the organisation. The goal of the Commonwealth is to pursue peace, liberty and progress (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2017a).

The Commonwealth and democracy

The core values of the Commonwealth are stated in the Charter (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2013a). Democracy is the organisation's first important value. The rest of first part of values all add to the likeliness of a democracy according to the Commonwealth: international peace and security, the promotion of tolerance, respect and understanding, freedom of expression, and the separation of powers, rule of law and good governance (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2013a, pp. 3-5). The Commonwealth signed several declarations on the organisation's fundamental political values, for example the Declaration of Singapore in 1971 and the Declaration of Harare in 1991 (The Commonwealth of Nations, 1971; The Commonwealth of Nations, 1991). Within the Commonwealth there are groups that provide assistance in establishing a democracy and democratic institutions in a country. The most important group for democracy is the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group ('CMAG') (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2017g).

Small State's benefits of Commonwealth membership

The literature on the Commonwealth depicts the organisation as a frontrunner on small states' interests (Sutton, 2007; Ross, 1997). The organisation's main priorities are to help small states with sustainable development, to assist them in coping with changes in the international trading system, and to ensure the security of small states (Sutton, 2001, pp. 76-79). The Commonwealth Secretariat published a report in 2014 called "Champion on Small States" (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2014a). This report states all the benefits of Commonwealth membership for small states according to the organisation itself, which are discussed below.

Policy recommendations for small states

The Commonwealth Advisory Group irregularly publishes the Vulnerability Report. This report identifies the main threats and vulnerabilities for small states in different sectors like politics and economy, and contains recommendations on how foreign actors should deal with small states (Commonwealth Advisory Group, 1997, p. 63). The recommendations have

caused international action in favour of small states in the past. For example, the organisation let its finance ministers go to a World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) meeting, to promote small states' interests and to speak about the vulnerabilities and costs of small states, after it was requested in the Vulnerability report (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2013b). Apart from policy recommendations, the Commonwealth provides its members with direct technical assistance when requested (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2014a, p. 1). An example of technical assistance is a project that helps small states on multilateral trade issues. It is hosted by the Small States Office in Geneva, and it aims to "facilitate fuller integration and beneficial participation of Commonwealth Small States into the international trading system thus enabling enhanced economic growth and development" (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2016a).

The MGSS and the CGSS

The Ministerial Group on Small States (MGSS) and the Consultative Group on Small States (CGSS) were set up in 1993 and 1994 in order to discuss special issues for small states between the ministerial meetings (Sutton, 2001, p. 78). The MGSS and the CGSS provide small states with important platforms where they could advocate their own interests. Furthermore, according to the Commonwealth, the two groups have helped the small states with their strategies in order to raise their voice effectively in the international system (Sutton, 2001, pp. 78-81).

Strategic Plan

In 2013, the Commonwealth Secretariat set up a Strategic Plan that has to strengthen small states' resilience. Although the plan runs until 2017, there were already results in 2014. According to the Secretariat, "international policies, mechanisms and rules are more responsive to small states' development strategies and resilience needs" than before the Strategic Plan. Moreover, an outcome is that small states are enabled to participate effectively in international decision-making processes, and the financing for climate policies are improved (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2014a, p. 2).

Practical and financial benefits

The financial resources from the Commonwealth to small states have increased in the years 2008-2013. The funding for technical assistance projects at national, regional and pan-Commonwealth level has increased (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2014a, p. 2). Furthermore, in

addition to the Commonwealth Joint Office for Small States in New York, in Geneva a Small States Office was established. The offices enable small states to have a delegation in the UN (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2014a, p. 2). The Commonwealth also helps small states in preparing for meetings in other international organisations (Ross, 1997, pp. 412-414). More practical benefits of the Commonwealth are the diplomatic and political support the organisation provides (Mayall, 1998, pp. 380-381).

Climate change

Climate change and its consequences for small states is an important issue in the Commonwealth. The organisation is trying to improve access for small states to appropriate climate financing to meet small state's challenges on climate change (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2014b, p. 7). Furthermore, several research projects on climate change are funded by the Commonwealth, and the organisation has established the Commonwealth Disaster Management Agency (CDMA) in 2000. This agency offers an insurance against the financial effects of natural disasters in small member states (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2014a, pp. 4-5).

Advocacy and publications

In international financial institutions, the Commonwealth has helped small member states to become a member of the IMF and the World Bank. The Commonwealth also participates in the Annual Small States Forum during the IMF/World Bank meetings. The organisation discusses small states' challenges in these meetings. Apart from participating in the IMF/World Bank meetings, the organisation has brought international attention to debt sustainability and solvency challenges of Commonwealth small states (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2014a, p. 3). Lastly, the organisation issues scientific publications on development of small states. This increases the knowledge of small states on policy options in order to overcome their vulnerabilities (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2014a, p. 11).

Ensuring security of small states

The United Kingdom still is a leading nation in the Commonwealth. Due to the big role the United Kingdom plays in NATO, the European Union ('EU'), the United Nations Security Council and the G7, the Commonwealth has obtained a global security role that none of the Commonwealth members could have achieved on its own (Ross, 1997, pp. 412-413). Helping small states improve their security position is not the main goal of the Commonwealth, but the

organisation still encourages small states to take measure on self-help, both on the individual and the collective level. The Commonwealth tries to give small state an image of cooperative players in international security, in order for them to form new regional coalitions (Ross, 1997, p. 418).

Leaving the Commonwealth

Most of the literature that is discussed is very positive about the effects of IOs on small states, and specifically about the Commonwealth (Sutton, 2007; Ross, 1997; Mayall, 1998). This makes the Commonwealth a most likely case for small states to be a member of the organisation. However, despite all these benefits, there are four states, large and small, that have left the Commonwealth and have not (yet) rejoined: Zimbabwe was suspended in 2002 and left in 2003, Ireland left the Commonwealth in 1949 when it became a sovereign state of its own (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2017b), The Gambia left the Commonwealth in 2013 (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2013c), and the Maldives left in 2016 (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2016b). It is striking that despite the supposed benefits for small states, two of these states (the Gambia and the Maldives) left the Commonwealth.

Therefore, the research question of this thesis is: *“What are the reasons given by the small states The Gambia and the Maldives for leaving the Commonwealth, despite the apparent benefits they are getting from the organisation?”* The goal of the research question is to examine whether countries that left the Commonwealth actually perceive the positive effects on small states as beneficial for them, and to see if there are reasons in the small states such as regime change or identity, that could explain their decision to leave the Commonwealth. The reasons given are not solely based on hard facts, therefore, the different perspectives are used in order to see how the Commonwealth and the cases perceived certain events that led to the withdrawal of both countries from the organisation. The scientific relevance of this research question is that it provides an addition to the existing literature on the behaviour of small states in international organisations. The thesis tries to find out if rational factors like security, economy or politics are not the only factors in the decision of joining an international organisation, but that there could be a constructivist argument that explains that factors like the image of an organisation and the history of a country can play a role too.

Expectations

Despite the myriad of apparent benefits of Commonwealth membership for small states, the Maldives and The Gambia left the organisation. Moreover, both countries were previously British colonies that gained independence in 1965. The Gambia left the organisation in 2013, and the Maldives left in 2016. In answering the research question, I have three expectations on what reasons are given for leaving the Commonwealth by The Gambia, the Maldives and the Commonwealth.

The Maldives and The Gambia, as former British colonies, could interpret help of the Commonwealth as neo-colonialism and as a violation of the countries' sovereignty. This is a logical problem of having ties with a former coloniser: former colonies can interpret help from the former coloniser as an attempt to influence domestic politics, which could decrease the former colony's capacity for self-determination (Bray, 1998, p. 153). The identity of the countries then determines their reaction on actions of the Commonwealth. Likewise, being a member of an IO implicitly means that a state identifies with the norms of that organisation (Aalberts, 2004, p. 37). In the case of the Commonwealth, this would mean that member states identify themselves with the Commonwealth Charter (2013a). This leads to the first expectation that *the Maldives and the Gambia give reasons for leaving based on constructivist arguments*.

For the Commonwealth, the promotion of democracy is very important (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2013a). In order to put pressure on a country in order to transition towards a democracy, IOs could create economic difficulties, assert diplomatic pressures to delegitimise the authoritarian regime, or even dismiss the country from the organisation. According to Pevehouse (2002), IOs can be successful in democratising authoritarian regimes because of their highly visible forum, and because pressure from an IO is a multilateral effort (Pevehouse, 2002, pp. 522-523). Both the Maldives and The Gambia are not classified as democracies by Freedom House, which publishes the index 'Freedom in the World'. Freedom House classifies The Gambia as 'not free' due to President Jammeh's dictatorship, and the human rights situation in the country at the time The Gambia left the Commonwealth (Freedom House, 2013). The Maldives was 'partly free' in 2016, when the country left the Commonwealth. However, in 2016 the country's civil liberties rating has declined, because of the human rights violations in the island nation (Freedom House, 2016). Therefore, the second

expectation is that *according to the Commonwealth, the Maldives and The Gambia left the organisation due to the lack of democracy present in the countries.*

However, it could also be the case that the supposed benefits are not at all beneficial to the two countries according to the countries themselves, which could also be a reason to leave the organisation. Hence, the third expectation is that *the Maldives and The Gambia left the Commonwealth because there were no benefits from Commonwealth membership.*

Conceptualisation and operationalisation

The definition of “small states” follows the Commonwealth definition, because the two deviant cases used to be members of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth and the World Bank define small state as a state that has a population of less than 1,5 million (World Bank, 2000, p. 3). The Commonwealth adds that a country could also be regarded as small if it has certain characteristics that cause the country to function in the same way as a small state. Some of these characteristics are: vulnerability to national disasters and external economic shocks, a limited market diversification and human and institutional capacity, and having a limited access to external capital (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2014b, p. 1).

The concept “democracy” is also defined according to the Commonwealth definition. This is because the Commonwealth definition determines whether the CMAG takes action in a country. The Commonwealth Charter states that democracy is a system in which all individuals have the right to influence the society in which they live (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2013a, p. 3). Although the measures the Commonwealth takes when promoting democracy are defined circularly, these measures will be used in order to operationalise the concept. The main actions the Commonwealth takes to strengthen democracy are: promoting regular elections, enabling citizens to participate and represent their community at a national and local level, and to promote free, fair and regular elections, and the strengthening of electoral bodies, institutions and processes (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2017d; The Commonwealth of Nations, 2013a, p. 3). Consequently, the operationalisation of the concept “democracy” is as follows: In a democracy citizens can represent their community at the national and local level, there are free, fair and regular elections, and there are strong institutions that make the previously mentioned characteristics possible.

The last concept is neo-colonialism, because the Commonwealth is originally an organisation that is made up of British ex-colonies. Neo-colonialism refers to the control of policies from a former colony by a foreign country (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007, p. 146). The most visible form of neo-colonialism is when loans are given or investments are made by which the domestic policies in the country that received the loans or investments are influenced by a foreign organisation or country that provided the loans or investments (Lumumba-Kasongo, 2011, p. 246).

Research design

This thesis is a single case study of the Commonwealth. Within this case the deviant cases The Gambia and the Maldives are investigated (Gerring, 2004, p. 344). The Commonwealth is a theory-guided, crucial case for the theory that small states want to be a member of international organisations. This is because the organisation provides a lot of apparent benefits for small states, and therefore is a most likely case that small states want to belong to the Commonwealth (Levy, 2008, p. 12). The Gambia and the Maldives are deviant cases because they both left the Commonwealth despite its supposed benefits (Levy, 2008, p. 13).

The Maldives is an atoll island nation in the Indian Ocean. The country has a population of nearly 400,000, a land area of 298 km² and a GDP of \$3,27 billion (Central Intelligence Agency, 2017a). The country's GDP puts the country in the category of middle income states, but since the population and the area are so small, the Maldives is classified as a small state. The Maldives joined the Commonwealth in 1982, and left it in 2016 (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2017c).

The Gambia is a country in Western Africa, which borders Senegal and the Atlantic Ocean. The country has a population of two million, a land area of 11,300 km² and a GDP of \$886 million (Central Intelligence Agency, 2017b). According to the current Commonwealth definition of a small state, The Gambia is not a small state when looking at its population number. However, in the Commonwealth's previous reports, and in Commonwealth news articles, when The Gambia still was a member, The Gambia is classified as a small state (World Bank, 2000, p. 4; The Commonwealth of Nations, 2012d). In 1965, the same year in which the country gained independence from the United Kingdom, The Gambia became a

member of the Commonwealth. In 2013 The Gambia left the organisation (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2017e).

The two countries are deviant cases because they are small states that both left the Commonwealth voluntarily, whereas the theory does not expect them to leave. The goal of this thesis is to explain why the Maldives and The Gambia do not fit the theory that small states want to be a member of international organisations (Levy, 2008, p. 8). It is expected that the Commonwealth and the two countries give different explanations for leaving the organisation. Therefore, there are two contrasting views of a former member state, as well as the views of the Commonwealth itself.

Moreover, for addressing the reasons provided by the Maldives and The Gambia, a quantitative content analysis from different news websites from the Maldives and Gambia is used. This content analysis is used to look at the amount of coverage on the Commonwealth on the news websites during the period 2012-2016 for the Maldives, and 2013-2017 for The Gambia, and to illustrate that the newspapers might put different emphasis on the same events (Thies, 2002, p. 353). In Reporters Without Border's Freedom Press Index, 180 countries are ranked on their press freedom. The Maldives ranked 117th in the 2017 ranking, and The Gambia ranked 143rd. In the Maldives, the government persecutes the independent media, and journalists receive death threats (Reporters Without Borders, 2017a). In The Gambia, former President Jammeh created a climate of terror for the media, and he kept a tight grip on what the media published (Reporters Without Borders, 2017b). Due to this lack of freedom of press in the two countries, the news websites give an image of what the government wants them to publish, and what reasons for leaving the Commonwealth the government wants to give. The Maldivian news websites that are coded in this thesis are *the Sun*, *Minivan* and *Maldives Independent*. The news articles that are coded for The Gambia are from the African news website *AllAfrica.com*. Most articles this website publishes, were first published in Gambian newspapers *The Point*, *Foroyaa* and *the Daily Observer*. For the analysis, all the news articles were labelled by how the Commonwealth is viewed, and how the country is viewed by the Commonwealth (Bryman, 2012, p. 291). For the coding scheme, see Appendix A. After labelling the news articles, articles in which reasons are given for leaving the Commonwealth are qualitatively discussed.

Furthermore, an interview regarding the views of the Ambassador of the Maldives to Belgium and the EU, Mr. Shiaan, will be used in considering the pros and cons of the Commonwealth for the Maldives. For The Gambia, an existing interview of *New African Magazine* with President Jammeh just after leaving the Commonwealth is used. By including these interviews as well as the news articles, the countries' views can be triangulated (Thies, 2002, p. 365).

Finally, in order to investigate the Commonwealth perspective on potential reasons for small states leaving the organisation, the Commonwealth website with Commonwealth news, statements and CMAG reports are used. The CMAG reports are important, because one of the expectations say that the Commonwealth explanation uses the lack of democracy as a reason.

Analysis

The Commonwealth perspective: why did the Maldives and The Gambia leave?

For the Commonwealth perspective, the statements that were issued as a reaction to the withdrawal of the Maldives and The Gambia from the Commonwealth and the CMAG are used.

The Maldives

In 2012, President Nasheed resigned after public protests. In reaction on this, the Commonwealth issued a statement to show concern about this development, because all Commonwealth member states are committed to values like constitutional democracy, peace, rule of law and human rights (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2012a). Furthermore, Secretary-General contacted the CMAG in order for the group to look into the Maldives' situation (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2012b), and the CMAG sends a ministerial mission in order to gather the facts surrounding the transfer of power (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2012c). In 2013, the Presidential Election was annulled, and afterwards the election date was postponed. Special Envoy Donald McKinnon was very worried about the callings for annulment of the election, because there was no evidence of malpractices in the election itself (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2013d). Less than two years later, the Commonwealth's concern in the Maldives shifted to human rights and freedom of speech instead of democracy (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2015a). At the end of 2015 there is again concern about the developments in the Maldives, because the Maldivian government declared a State of Emergency. The Commonwealth's reaction is that the state of emergency should be lifted as

soon as possible. This is because “it remains critical that fundamental rights and freedoms are protected, including freedom of association and freedom of expression and the media” (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2015b). In June 2016, the Commonwealth Secretary-General appointed a new Special Envoy to the Maldives: Dr. Mutunga. During his first visit in August 2016, he stated that his aim was to “work with all actors assisting the development of independent and accountable democratic institutions. These are essential to protecting the fundamental rights and freedoms of the Maldivian people” (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2016c). As is clear, the Commonwealth has been concerned with the Maldives’ democracy for a long time before the country decided to leave the organisation.

Secretary-General Patricia Scotland issued a statement in reaction to the withdrawal of the Maldives from the Commonwealth. However, she provides no explicit reason from the Commonwealth perspective for the Maldives to leave. Scotland only states that the organisation and its member states are disappointed by the Maldives’ decision to leave, and she mentions the commitments of the Commonwealth Charter: “the commitment of our member states to democracy and human rights, development and growth, and diversity” (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2016b). In the concluding statement of the CMAG meeting in March 2017, the group expressed its disappointment at the decision of the Maldives to leave the Commonwealth, and hoped that the Maldives will return to the organisation (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2017f, p. 2). Although the consolidating of the Commonwealth values has been an important task for the Commonwealth in the past years, both the CMAG and the Commonwealth did not give an explicit reason for why the Maldives left the Commonwealth.

The Gambia

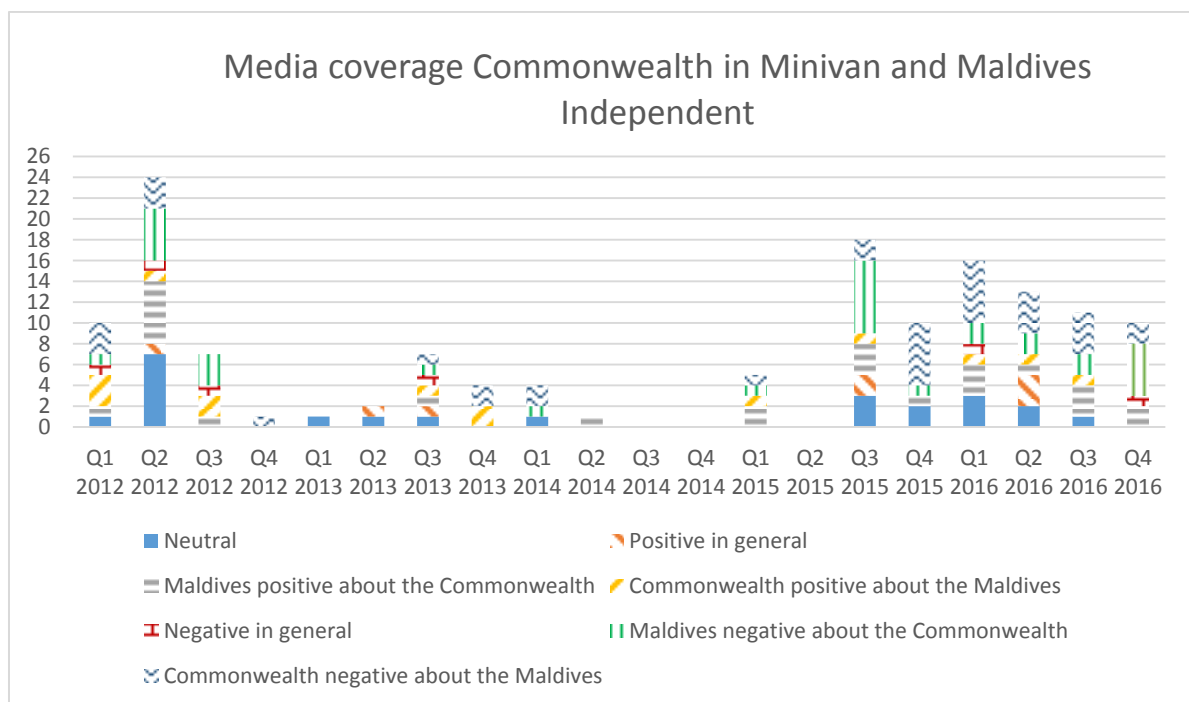
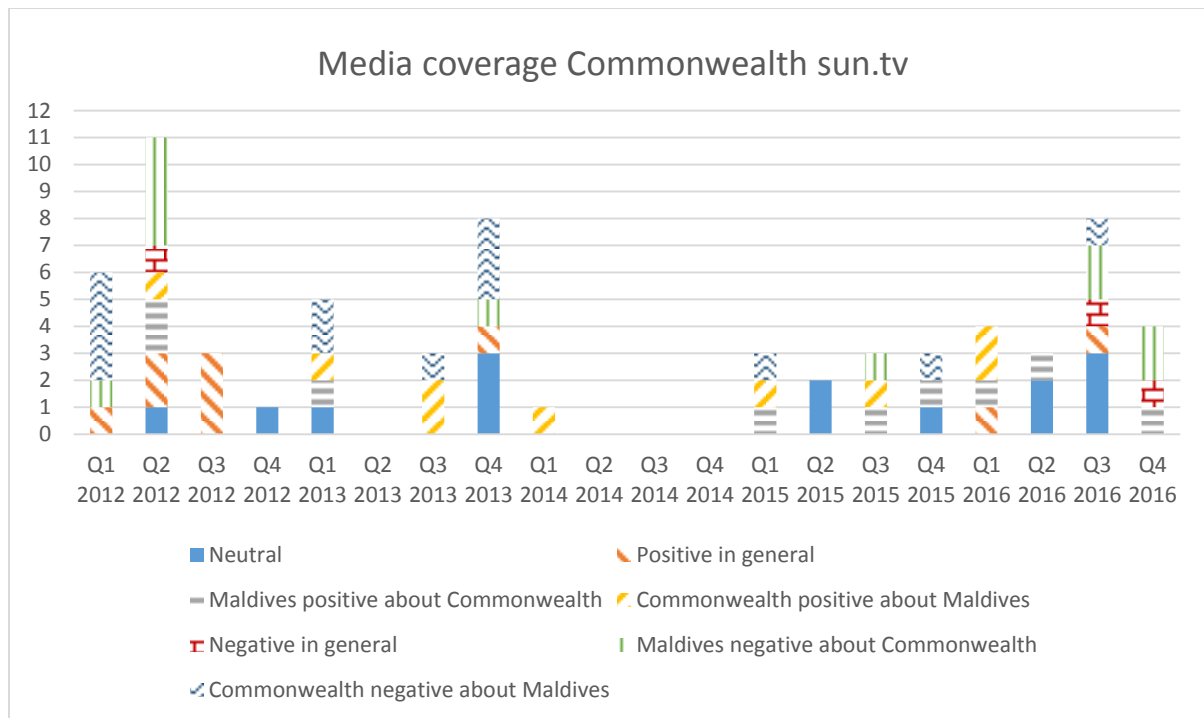
The Gambia received critiques on the way the country treats the media, and the elections in 2011. However, Gambian ministers then said the country was “open to debate on media reform, which it recognises as critical to economic and political development” (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2011a). For the Presidential elections of the same year, the Commonwealth sent an observer team to monitor the elections. The conclusion of this team was that the election day itself was peaceful and in accordance with the constitution, but during the campaign time, there were still some democratic issues. For example, the campaign time itself was too short for the opposition parties (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2011b).

The Commonwealth's reaction to the withdrawal of The Gambia was that the organisation was both disappointed and confused, due to the fact that the media knew earlier of The Gambia's decision to leave the Commonwealth, than the Commonwealth itself did (Uku, 2013). In a statement by Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma, Sharma says he regrets that The Gambia decided to leave the organisation, and that he hoped The Gambia would soon rejoin (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2013c). Three years later, after the Presidential election in which Adama Barrow was elected, the Commonwealth said: "We welcome any effort being made by the newly democratically elected government of The Gambia to try to re-join the Commonwealth" (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2017e). In the March 2017 CMAG meeting, the group "welcomed the Secretary-General's ongoing exchange with The Gambia's President, His Excellency Adama Barrow and his Government, to discuss the country's interest to return to the Commonwealth family" (The Commonwealth of Nations, 2017f, p. 2). As noted earlier, the Commonwealth has been concerned with democratic issues and freedom of expression in The Gambia, but the organisation itself did not give a reason why The Gambia has left the Commonwealth.

The Maldives' media perspective: why did the country leave the Commonwealth?

Maldives news website sun.mv, Minivan and maldivesindependent.com

In this analysis, three newspapers were selected. *Sun.mv* is a news website which publishes articles in both English and Dhivehi. The website *maldivesindependent.com* used to be called *Minivan news*, and therefore the two newspapers are analysed together (Shaahunaaz, 2017). The search word for all the news websites was "Commonwealth", which led to finding 68 news articles that were published in *sun.mv*, and 139 articles in *Minivan* and *maldivesindependent.com*. All the news articles are from the period 2012-2016, and they are all labelled according to the coding scheme in Appendix A. Below, the bar charts of the three news websites are shown.



Apart from some differences in emphasis, the news websites cover relatively the same amount of news articles on the Maldives and the Commonwealth. Both charts show that there are some periods in which there was a lot of media coverage on the Commonwealth (the beginning of 2012, the end of 2013, and the last two quarters of 2016), and periods in which there was nearly no coverage on the Commonwealth (the last two quarters of 2014).

Overview of Maldivian politics: 2012-2016

The amount of news coverage on the Maldives and the Commonwealth in the bar charts give a clear image about the period in which important events like presidential elections took place. This is because the Commonwealth is also concerned with domestic changes in the Maldives. The reason for the extensive media coverage in the first half of 2012 is the call for early elections by former president Mohammed Nasheed. Nasheed resigned on the 7th of February after two weeks of public protests. The Commonwealth is concerned with this event, because of their emphasis on democracy, and Nasheed was the first democratically chosen president of the Maldives (Musthaq, 2014, p. 166). The Commonwealth and the CMAG were in favour of new elections, but the progress on coming to an agreement regarding the date of the election went too slow for the Commonwealth and the CMAG (Sun.mv, 2012b). As the bar charts show, in the first quarter of 2012, the Commonwealth is negative about democracy in the Maldives. In the second quarter there are two different ways of Maldivian politicians reacting: reacting positively on the Commonwealth, or reacting negatively on the Commonwealth. The negative reactions are mostly about the complaint that the Commonwealth should not interfere with Maldivian domestic politics, but also about the request for technical assistance in February to the CMAG, to which there has not been a reaction in April (Robinson, 2012). At the same time, foreign minister Dunya Maumoon wants more cooperation with the Commonwealth (Robinson & Bosley, 2012), and parties with foreign links call possible withdrawal from the organisation dangerous (Bosley, 2012).

In 2013, the articles in which the Commonwealth is negative about the Maldives tell that the Commonwealth has democratic issues regarding the presidential elections (Sun.mv, 2013a). On election day 19 October, the police took action to prevent the election from taking place, and in November the election was annulled and rescheduled for 9 November. Later, this date was postponed to 16 November by the Supreme Court, which was criticised by the Commonwealth (Sun.mv, 2013b, Sun.mv, 2013c, Sun.mv, 2013d).

The relation with the Commonwealth cooled down afterwards, and until 2015 the relation remained quiet. In July 2015 talks of leaving the Commonwealth came up again, and Vice President Jameel issues a statement in which he stated the benefits of Commonwealth membership to the Maldives (Sun.mv, 2015). On independence day two days later, however,

president Yameen gives a speech in which he condemned all foreign interference in Maldivian politics, including Commonwealth interference (Naish, 2015).

In September 2016, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) asked the CMAG to suspend the Maldives from the councils in the Commonwealth, because of its backsliding into a dictatorship (Sun.mv, 2016b). As a consequence, the CMAG asked the government to implement the policies recommended by the CMAG before March 2017. This led to a lot of critiques from the Maldivian government towards the Commonwealth, and voices of leaving the organisation were present again. On 13 October, the Maldives left the Commonwealth (Sun.mv, 2016c).

The Maldives' government perspective on leaving the Commonwealth

Government documents

There are only a few government documents that specifically address the withdrawal of the Maldives from the Commonwealth. There is however, a “Foreign policy of the Maldives” document of 2016, in which the Maldivian government explains the country’s foreign policy strategies. An important goal of the policy is to “enhance the security and national sovereignty of the Maldives through increased bilateral and multilateral engagement” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maldives, 2017, p. 3). The government has certain strategies to achieve this goal. Among others these strategies are that the government wants to “strengthen the active participation of the Maldives at key international organisations that enhances the country’s diplomatic outreach and promote greater global recognition for the Maldives” and to “increase the Maldives participation in international efforts at promoting and maintaining stability, peace, and security” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maldives, 2017, pp. 3-4). When looking at these strategies, the Maldives cannot be considered to have an aversion to international organisations, thus the decision to leave the Commonwealth was influenced by alternative factors.

In President Yameen’s speech on Republic Day 2016, he stated that the main reason for leaving the Commonwealth is that no foreign organisation has a say in domestic issues (The Presidency of the Republic of Maldives, 2016). Furthermore, in the Presidential Address of 2017, the President said that “withdrawing the Maldives from the Commonwealth was the hardest decision taken in the history of the country’s foreign policy” (Yameen, 2017).

Maldivian Ambassador to Belgium and the EU Ahmed Shiaan's personal perspective

Mr. Shiaan gave a few reasons for small states to be a member of the Commonwealth in the 1980s: The “Commonwealth was actually a forum that gave a voice for Small Island States” (Shiaan, 2017). In the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (‘CHOGM’) in 1987, the Maldivian President talked about climate change for the first time, and afterwards, a special climate group within the small states unit was created by the Commonwealth. After the 1980s, the Commonwealth provided benefits on structural socio-economic areas: the Commonwealth helped with institutionalisation, modernisation and development aid (Shiaan, 2017).

The downside of Commonwealth membership for the Maldives was according to Mr. Shiaan mostly that the efforts the Maldives put into the climate group were not rewarded and supported by other Commonwealth members, and the organisation got all the credit (Shiaan, 2017). In a reaction to this, AOSIS was created in 1991 (AOSIS, 2015). The argument for creating AOSIS was that “within the Commonwealth the larger countries at that time like UK, India, Australia, Canada, they were saying like the Commonwealth is not about climate change” (Shiaan, 2017). The problem for the Maldives began when other members Australia, Canada and India started vetoing climate change issues in Commonwealth meetings (Shiaan, 2017). At this point, the Maldives thought that spending all energy on AOSIS was more effective than staying in the Commonwealth (Shiaan, 2017).

Furthermore, technical assistance was no reason to remain a member of the Commonwealth, because the Maldives does not get assistance, since it is not a developing country. Also, a less important argument for leaving was that the Maldives gave more money to the Commonwealth than they would get back (Shiaan, 2017).

Contrary to the news coverage on the CMAG, being on the CMAG agenda was according to Mr. Shiaan misunderstood by the rest of the Commonwealth. The CMAG agenda was a way of getting the Commonwealth's help, but now it is seen as a punishment for the member state. Mr. Shiaan added that the Maldives itself asked to be on the CMAG agenda when the country was on it (Shiaan, 2017).

Reasons for leaving the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth as a threat to the Maldivian sovereignty and identity

An argument for leaving the Commonwealth based on identity was already present in 2012 when the former President Gayoom and, later, in 2017 Mr. Shiaan stated that the Maldives does not fit in the Commonwealth due to the fact that the island nation has only been a British protectorate, which is very different from being colonised (Sun.mv, 2012a; Shiaan, 2017). Another argument based on identity and partially on sovereignty was in an article that quoted President Yameen: “There is no denying that there are those who attempt, in different way to cultivate cultural norms and so-called values that are alien to and frowned upon by our Islamic faith” (Naish, 2015).

The Maldivian government said that leaving the Commonwealth was because the organisation interfered with domestic affairs since 2012. Especially the CMAG supposedly treated the Maldives unfairly (Sun.mv, 2016c). According to Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Asim, The Commonwealth did advocate for democratic values, but at the same time, the organisation tried to influence domestic affairs and tried to make the government change its justice system (Sun.mv, 2016c). Especially at the end of 2016, sovereignty is the main reason of leaving the organisation. The Maldives did not ask for the assistance for judicial reforms, but the Commonwealth sent assistance. This was interpreted as an intervention in domestic politics by the Commonwealth (Sun.mv, 2016a). Member of Parliament and deputy leader of the Progressive Party of Maldives Mr. Riyaz said that the CMAG’s decision on the Maldives was influenced by “a group of individuals living in self-exile in UK” who wanted to overthrow the Maldivian government, which is an interference in Maldivian politics (Sun.mv, 2016d).

These arguments prove the first expectation that Maldivian newspapers and the government would give reasons for leaving based on identity and sovereignty.

The Commonwealth as an organisation without benefits

Former President Gayoom stated in 2012 that the reason for Commonwealth membership were the promising advantages for small states, but he claimed that there were no longer benefits to membership for the Maldives (Sun.mv, 2012a). The main reason Mr. Shiaan gave for leaving the Commonwealth was that there actually were no huge advantages for membership anymore since AOSIS has taken its place (Shiaan, 2017). Moreover, the Maldives did not get any assistance from the Commonwealth, because it is not a developing

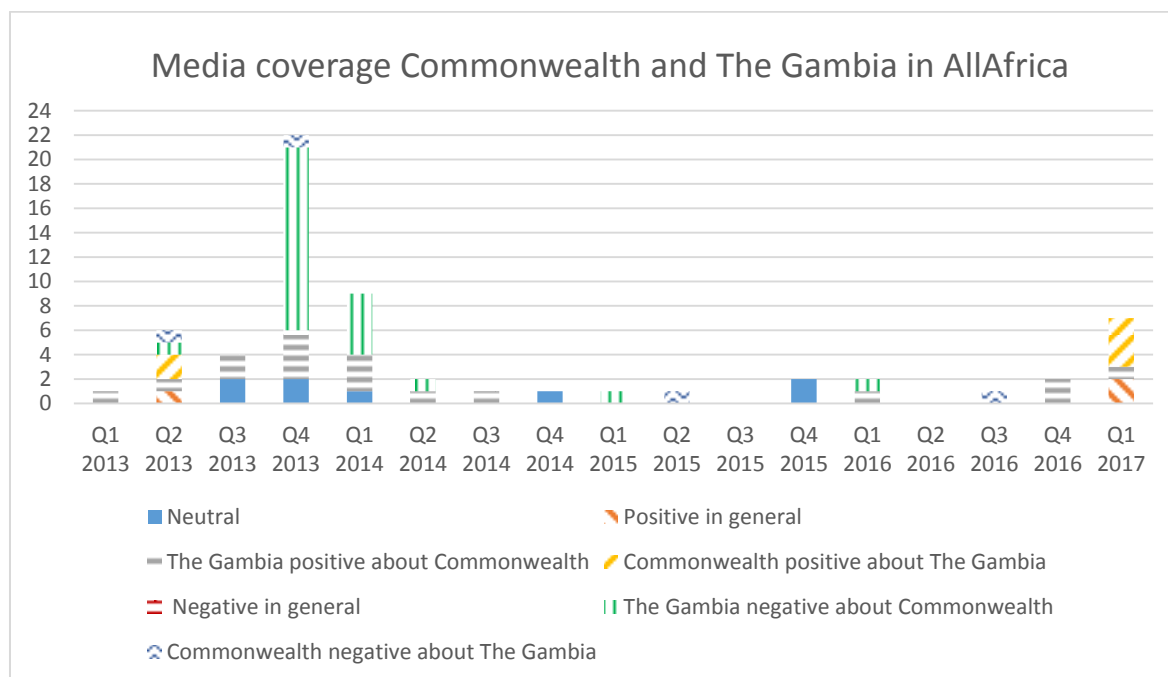
country. (Shiaan, 2017). Lastly, Mr. Riyaz said that the Maldives did not need the Commonwealth membership due to the close ties with the Middle East and China that provides more benefits than the Commonwealth does (Sun.mv, 2016d).

That the Maldives would not experience Commonwealth benefits was the third expectation. In the arguments given above, proof is given for this expectation.

The Gambia's media perspective: Why did the country leave the Commonwealth?

African news website AllAfrica.com

The discourse analysis of the events before The Gambia left the Commonwealth is based on the African news website *AllAfrica.com*. This general African news website is used due to the unavailability of archives of Gambian news websites. *AllAfrica.com* publishes a lot of articles that were originally from Gambian newspapers. In order to find the articles about The Gambia and the Commonwealth, the search terms “Gambia” and “Commonwealth” were used in the Factiva database. The results were 300 articles, and the relevant articles about The Gambia and the Commonwealth were filtered out, which led to 88 articles of which 66 were published in the three main Gambian newspapers *The Point*, *Foroyaa* and *The Daily Observer*.



Overview of Gambian politics and the Commonwealth: 2013-2017

The bar chart shows that usually there is not a lot of news coverage on The Gambia and the Commonwealth. Only at the end of 2013, the beginning of 2014 and the beginning of 2017 a

lot of articles have been published about the Commonwealth and The Gambia. This can be explained by two main events in Gambian relations towards the Commonwealth: in October 2013 the country left the Commonwealth, and in December 2017 the country chose a new president who is in favour of returning to the Commonwealth. A peculiar difference between The Gambia and the Maldives, is that The Gambia seems to have an overall aversion to international organisations. For example, the EU was regarded very negatively in a few news articles, because The Gambia was negotiating the terms for obtaining funds for development projects from the EU. However, the EU demanded the implementation of “17 points” which were about death penalty, freedom of expression and media regulations (Sillah, 2013). President Jammeh reacted by using arguments based on colonialism and sovereignty against the EU (Darboe, 2013).

Until the fourth quarter of 2013, Gambian newspapers rarely mention the Commonwealth in a political context. This is why Gambia’s withdrawal on 3 October 2013 came as a total surprise for the Commonwealth (The Point, 2013a). The amount of negative news coverage on the Commonwealth is only high in the fourth quarter of 2013. At the same time, there were several opposition parties, the PDOIS, NRP and UDP, that opposed the decision to withdraw from the organisation (Sallah, 2013; The Point, 2013b, Sanneh, 2013). Although the government did not give a real reason why the country left the Commonwealth, President Jammeh published two books in February 2014 called *A million reasons to leave the Commonwealth* and *How the tragic consequences of British looting and misrule in The Gambia inspired the founding of the United Nations and its drive for decolonisation in January 1943 and beyond*, which state that the colonial hegemony of the United Kingdom is the cause of the underdevelopment of the Gambia (Ceesay, 2014).

As displayed in the bar chart, the interest for the Commonwealth returned at the end of 2016 and in the beginning of 2017. This was because of the presidential elections that were held in December. The elections were called the “most significant since President Jammeh took power through a coup in 1994”, because opposition leader Adama Barrow challenged Jammeh in the election (Kode, 2016). Barrow won the elections, and he claims to be “very open to the international community and it is our priority to bring back everybody on board as The Gambia needs everybody” (Barrow as cited in Jeffang, 2016). The transfer of power did not go as smoothly as hoped, because initially Jammeh did not accept the election results and refused to step down. Jammeh declared a state of emergency in Gambia, and shortly after,

Senegal threatened to intervene if Jammeh would not step down (Ritters, 2017). Finally, under pressure Jammeh handed over power to President Barrow in February (Ateku, 2017). In the bar chart is displayed that the attitude of the Gambian government towards the Commonwealth, and of the Commonwealth towards The Gambia has improved during the first quarter of 2017. President Barrow wants to rejoin the Commonwealth as quickly as possible, and the Commonwealth itself is also in favour of The Gambia rejoining (Finnan, 2017).

The Commonwealth as a neo-colonial institution and a threat to the Gambian sovereignty and identity

The most important reason that is given by both the media and the Gambian government is that the Commonwealth is a neo-colonial institution that tries to keep the power over Africa and keep the continent underdeveloped. Jammeh says: “After 48 years of independence, we have had enough of colonialism and Britain”, and he adds that “they have not taken us anywhere but backwards” (Jere, 2013, p. 3). Ambassador Jackson gave a reason for leaving because “the West wants to micro-manage African resources” (Darboe & Jawo, 2013).

President Jammeh emphasises the cultural differences between The Gambia and the United Kingdom as well: “Let them be. And from now on we shall do what is right according to our norms, culture and religion. And we shall leave them to practise what is right according to their norms, culture and religion” (Jere, 2013, p. 5). Jammeh also gives the argument based on the lack of democracy in the Commonwealth: the Commonwealth is “not only a neo-colonialist institution, it is also an institution that is not subject to elections”, so “what type of democracy is that?” (Jere, 2013, p. 3).

In relation to the first expectation, that The Gambia would give a constructivist argument on identity to why the country left the Commonwealth, it can be concluded that this is the case for the Gambia’s media and government.

The Commonwealth as an organisation without benefits

In the *New African Magazine*’s interview, President Jammeh claimed that The Gambia left the Commonwealth because the organisation was not as beneficial as he hoped: “Let me tell you the true story about how much The Gambia was putting in the Commonwealth annually, compared to what we got from the Commonwealth. It didn’t balance” (Jere, 2013, p. 5).

Moreover, President Jammeh asked himself “if I have to give, say \$8m annually to an institution that belongs to both of us, and I get less than \$1m back annually, who is benefitting and who is losing?” (Jere, 2013, p. 5).

The third expectation gave the possibility that the Commonwealth does not give as much benefits as it seems. According to President Jammeh, this is the case for The Gambia too because the country contributes more money to the organisation than The Gambia gets back in benefits from being a Commonwealth member.

Conclusion

The research question of this thesis was: “*What are the reasons given by the small states The Gambia and the Maldives for leaving the Commonwealth, despite the apparent benefits they are getting from the organisation?*” I expected that The Gambia and the Maldives would primarily give a constructivist argument for leaving the Commonwealth because of their colonial past, whereas the Commonwealth was expected to give a reason based on the democracy in the countries because of the organisation’s emphasis on democracy.

The Maldives gave four important arguments for leaving the Commonwealth. Firstly, the Maldives have never been a real colony of the United Kingdom, and therefore the country should not belong to the Commonwealth since it is made up of British ex-colonies. Secondly, the country’s sovereignty was threatened by the organisation. Thirdly, the Maldives could be of more importance in AOSIS. Lastly, the Commonwealth did not provide the benefits the Maldives hoped for.

In The Gambia, the reasons are mostly similar, but the emphasis differs. To begin with, the argument of the Commonwealth being a neo-colonialist organisation is the most important. The Gambia has been a British colony for a long time, and as a result the demand for independence was a central point in leaving the Commonwealth. Moreover, the lack of democracy within the Commonwealth was unacceptable for the Gambia. Finally, like the Maldives, The Gambia claimed the Commonwealth did not provide any substantial advantages for the country.

The Commonwealth did not give any explanation for why the organisation thinks the two small states left the Commonwealth. However, in the organisation's statements, the aim of democracy and protection of human rights in member states are emphasised multiple times.

Hence, the first expectation that the Maldives and The Gambia would give a constructivist reason based on identity and neo-colonialism for withdrawing from the Commonwealth is only a part of the results. Both states also gave the reason that the Commonwealth was not as beneficial as the countries expected. Consequently, there is evidence for the third expectation: the countries themselves did not perceive the Commonwealth as beneficial for them. Lastly, there is no evidence for the second expectation that the Commonwealth gave reasons for why the two small states left the organisation based on the lack of democracy in the small states.

The neo-liberal theory that small states want to belong to IOs due to the many benefits they provide for small states, does not apply completely for the small states the Maldives and The Gambia in the Commonwealth. Both in newspapers and government sources from the countries, the most important reasons for leaving the Commonwealth that were given are that the organisation interfered in domestic policy, and the organisation did not offer enough benefits for the small states in order to make the countries tolerate the interference in their domestic policy. Nevertheless, like many other (small) states that left the Commonwealth, The Gambia wants to rejoin the organisation, which is in accordance to the theory that small states want to belong to IOs. As a result, The Gambia might not be a deviant case after all.

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Appendix A: Coding scheme

The label ‘positive in general’ is given to articles where the words “peaceful”, “cooperation”, “dialogue”, “effort”, “participate”, “partnership” and “gratitude” are mentioned. Also the removal of a country from the CMAG agenda is a reason to label the news article as ‘positive in general’. Lastly, the article is labelled ‘positive in general’ when there is mentioning of two-sidedly agreeing on technical assistance in the country.

The label ‘country positive about the Commonwealth’ is for articles in which a politician or a government official says that the Commonwealth is important for the country, or when the government is trying to improve certain policy to meet the Commonwealth’s wishes. An article is also labelled as ‘country positive about the Commonwealth’ when the country’s government voluntarily invites a Commonwealth official, when the country wants to “strengthen ties” with the Commonwealth or when it is mentioned in the article that the government accepts Commonwealth measures and wants to work together with the organisation. Articles in which the country is getting money from the Commonwealth, or when the Commonwealth organises conferences to which the country sends a delegation, are regarded as ‘country positive about the Commonwealth’. When there are more arguments are given in an article that would label it as ‘country positive about the Commonwealth’ than arguments that would label it as ‘country negative about the Commonwealth’, the article is also categorised as ‘country positive about the Commonwealth’.

The label ‘Commonwealth positive about the country’ is given to articles in which the Commonwealth mentions that there are “democratic elections” or “transparent elections” in the country. Articles in which the Commonwealth strongly encourage the country to do something is also labelled as positive about the country, because the Commonwealth than still has hope for change. The label is given when the Commonwealth congratulates the country with some achievement, or when the Commonwealth approves or respects something happening in the country. Lastly, when the Commonwealth says it hopes that the country remains a member or comes back as member of the organisation, the article is labelled as ‘Commonwealth positive about the country’ too.

The fourth label is ‘negative in general’. This label is given to articles that express ‘concerns’ and ‘disappointment’ about both the Commonwealth and the country. When the

Commonwealth and the country express an equal amount of negative remarks about each other, the article is labelled 'negative in general' too.

The fifth label is 'country negative about the Commonwealth' and it is given to articles in which a call for removal from the Commonwealth from within the country is expressed, or when the Commonwealth does not respond to requests from the country. The words 'influence', 'interference' and 'neo-colonialism' are also indicators that the country is negative about the Commonwealth. Moreover, when it is mentioned that the country does not agree with Commonwealth decisions, the article is labelled as 'country negative about the Commonwealth'. Lastly, when the country withdraws from the Commonwealth, the article in which this is mentioned is labelled as 'country negative about the Commonwealth' as well.

The label 'Commonwealth negative about the country' is given to articles in which for example political crises in the country are discussed. Also when the article mentions that the 'Commonwealth urges' or the 'Commonwealth expresses concern', or the Commonwealth thinks something it is misled by the country, it is an indicator to label the article as 'Commonwealth negative about the country'. Furthermore when the Commonwealth or an organisation that belongs to the Commonwealth threatens to suspend the country, warns the country, or is concerned about human rights or press freedom, the article is labelled as 'Commonwealth negative about the country' as well. Furthermore, concerns from the Commonwealth for human rights, elections that are not acceptable and sliding back to a "dictatorship" are reasons to label the articles as 'Commonwealth negative about the country'.

The last label is 'neutral'. This label is used when the article does mention the Commonwealth in political relation to the country, but it does not speak specifically about the relationship between the organisation and the country. An example is when it is Elizabeth II's birthday, who is the head of the Commonwealth, and the president of the country congratulates her.

Appendix B: Transcript Ambassador Ahmed Shiaan (12-5-2017, 16:15-17:20)

Rixte: I'll give some explanation about the first question: My thesis is about the Commonwealth, the British Commonwealth, and there are only two small states that have left the Commonwealth, which is the point of the interview. Were there any benefits for the Maldives?

Shiaan: First, I think you have to go to the origin of Commonwealth and how we became a member. So, rather than looking for a certain decision to leave Commonwealth, you should look into the larger perspective. I think that we applied to become Commonwealth member country in 1982. I can send the exact dates.

Rixte: I can find it, that is no problem.

Shiaan: We applied in 1982 and then we were told - as it had happened with the application for UN membership - that we don't qualify to be a full Commonwealth member country. The reason was that, unlike former colonies, Maldives was never under British control. We were a protectorate. We were the ones who approached the British monarchy in the 18th century, offering them money (annual) in order to protect us in case any other country in that region, including other colonial powers of that time, tried to attack us. So even before anyone tried to attack us, we would have a major European power to defend us.

This was the reason why we were never colonised. Under that agreement, we were annually paying the British, but they could not set foot in the Maldives. No British citizen or royal or any governor could be based in Maldives. But under the agreement, we cannot negotiate or conduct international relations without taking permission from the British. So that's the reason why we were not fully independent and sovereign because we had to consult the British if we were going to deal with any other state. But at those times we weren't worried about our international relations. We were basically living on our own and we were interested in how to sustain one self.

So that's part of the reason why we didn't get full membership when we first applied for Commonwealth membership and had the observer status instead. Then, I believe in 1985,

after three years as an observer, they made some changes and then we became a full member of the Commonwealth.

The reason why we wanted to join Commonwealth was because it gives a voice for a small state. Especially in the 1980s, it was very difficult to go and discuss certain things on your own because you wouldn't get enough people to listen. And Commonwealth was actually a forum that gave that voice for small island states.

If you look from the 1980s, the major concerns those days were issues on structural and socio-economic areas, like how they could help us in getting development aid, setting up schools, hospitals, how to modernise the judiciary and various other aspects. So that was also one of the key reasons to join Commonwealth, the socio-economic development rather than anything else.

Then Commonwealth slowly developed into an organisation where the majority was small states. It became actually a voice for small states, and we were the first country ever to raise the climate change issue. It was at the Vancouver Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in 1987 where our President said that something is happening on climate change, and now he is famously known as the first ever Head of State talking about climate change.

I can pass that speech, it's a very interesting speech for any student to go through. There is no word of "climate change" because at that time it was unheard of. We were basically saying that something was happening to the environment. The sea level was rising and we were facing that.

And that's the first time ever, as I said, that a Head of State would talk about climate change at a summit level. And then Commonwealth actually championed this issue. They created a special group, a committee, for the small states in order to facilitate and help them. So, we were very active and became a very vocal voice when it came to climate change because of our experience. You can say that we were like the poster boy of climate change during the early 90s, and we were giving a voice to the Commonwealth when it came to climate change.

Over the years, we benefited from being in the Commonwealth and getting a voice, but then we started to feel like we were the ones who would always be delivering to the

Commonwealth, and not the other way around. We would go into all the issues and the Commonwealth would get all the credit.

Then we decided to create in 1989 the AOSIS, the Association of Small Island States. We were the ones who actually took the lead and created that, and the part of the argument was: within the Commonwealth the larger countries at that time like UK, India, Australia, Canada, they were saying that Commonwealth is not about climate change. At that time, there were very few converted countries or people who were on board on climate change. Reason being that they could not believe that something was actually happening with climate change. And as it was more about economics for them, they didn't want that voice to be heard in the Commonwealth.

We were actually having a strong battle and struggling with these countries, and that extended during the '90s and then early 2000. If you look at the CHOGM in Perth in 2011 - and I was there at that meeting-, one of the striking factors was that for the first time, Australia basically said "no" on climate change issues. Canada followed up as well. It was striking because Commonwealth always makes decisions on a consensus basis, even if you don't entirely agree with something.

From that moment on we started to think that we put so much effort and funds in the Commonwealth, we are always supportive and willing to cooperate on all issues even if we have some reservations sometimes, and then when it comes to the most critical issue for us – the climate change – we don't get the support we wanted.

Regardless of the reasons, economic reasons or other, UK, Australia, Canada, India basically started vetoing things within the Commonwealth, especially on the climate change. So, we thought like: this is the very reason why we are there, and we are the ones who are doing all this work, but now what's there for us?

When we took over the chairmanship of AOSIS, - an association of 42 countries, small island states - we realised that we had to make a choice. As I mentioned before, climate change is the most important issue internationally for Maldives, nothing else. And when we took over the Presidency of the AOSIS, we realised that we could not be a lead voice everywhere; lead the Commonwealth, lead the AOSIS, or anywhere else. We had to choose one area or one

association that we would really feel that we can make a difference. And that was also part of the reason to leave the Commonwealth. And now, all the resources that we have been spending on Commonwealth is been diverted towards AOSIS.

To summarise, we decided to leave the Commonwealth because we felt like we should give a more focused fight for the main areas that we advocate on, climate change, sustainable development and other small states issues. And the best way to focus our energy is on AOSIS.

But, nevertheless, we still have a very close relationship with the Commonwealth countries, and we still engage on various issues related to them.

Once you become a Commonwealth member country, I think there is a British nationality act Schedule 3, so under Schedule 3 of the nationality act of, I think even that is 1981, it was Thatcher who was there at that time, the reason why they brought it was to exclude Hong Kong when they became independent to get the British citizenship. Imagine transferring all those rights to China, what will happen to UK? So to stop that, UK for a valid political reason they excluded China. Commonwealth membership gives certain rights to Commonwealth member countries in the UK, under that any member country can vote in UK elections. So anyone who is in UK, if it's a Commonwealth member country can vote. Also, any member of the Commonwealth can join the UK armed forces. So this is a very interesting aspect of the Commonwealth that most are not aware and also if you look at the Commonwealth charter, the Queen de facto is the head of state, even though you are a republic still in a way you have given in a certain recognition to that. So I believe that are various aspects in modern day if you look at that, issues with that, and this is something that even most Maldivians, if you ask them, like we can go and vote in another country they would be saying: seriously? They wouldn't know, even the British citizens actually wouldn't know that, you know, Maldivians can vote, and I recently joked when in 2015, I was at Number 10 and PM Cameron was talking about the Commonwealth and the Brexit; at that time he was campaigning to win against the Brexit. And he was asking the Commonwealth voters, you know, to vote to remain rather than for the Brexit. And some of us actually joked when he can actually make it very easy, like bring around ten million from India to UK. They can all vote. So legally it is possible, which is a very interesting aspect. So I thought I'll give the background of the Commonwealth. So I hope that answers the benefits and why we left Commonwealth.

Rixte: What do you think of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group?

Shiaan: Yes, CMAG is actually a group of the Commonwealth, responsible for upholding the Harare Declaration.

Rixte: For the promotion of democracy.

Shiaan: Yes, democracy, human rights and various good practices and governance, which the Commonwealth believes that should be a common notion. At the time, there were so many countries who said that this is very unfair, this is like pick-and-choose, because the Commonwealth is a very wide organisation with many diverse cultural and social development stages. It is not coherent in the sense of being one country saying that we want to achieve this. It's not. There are countries in the Commonwealth that are one of the least developed countries in the world, one of the smallest countries is in the Commonwealth as well. and, on the other hand, you have countries that are G7 members and P5 members.

This means that when you make certain rules, it's nearly impossible to apply them to all member states. For instance, take the issue of gay rights. This issue is still very strongly argued even in Europe, let alone in countries like Africa where traditionally and socially they don't have the structure to apply them. Maybe after 15-20 years they will be able, but how can you dictate those things and then say ok, you have violated our principles. It's very difficult when you make these generalised points.

Take for instance our case. In 2012 we were put on CMAG agenda. I happens to know so much about this issue because I was the Ambassador to UK. We were put on the agenda of CMAG because our President said to ask the Commonwealth Secretariat to put us on the CMAG agenda, so we can discuss about the issues.

One aspect of CMAG which is not properly understood, even within the Commonwealth, is that CMAG's purpose is to help the country, to assist it in going through that process of reform and transformation. Because when you are on CMAG agenda you get assistance, you get technical advice, and you will get help to do that.

And even if you look at our new Constitution of 2008, we were the ones who requested the Commonwealth at that time to help us to get our new modern constitution. Even this was done through assistance, through the Commonwealth, and through UNDP.

But the way things were dealt within CMAG, it became kind of a disadvantage, something negative. In the sense that if you are on CMAG agenda then you must have done something wrong. So, when that happened, the whole issue became like a stigma. Being on the CMAG agenda nowadays is like a stigma rather than an advantage. But that was not the purpose of creating CMAG.

Rixte: But do you mean that it has become a stigma? Since you asked for help.

Shiaan: No, it's not because of us, but generally, there is that stigma attached. No one wants to be on the CMAG agenda anymore, but when it was created, the reason was to assist countries.

If you look at our engagement with Commonwealth we have been on their agenda in 2003, 2004, 2007 and at that time most people weren't bothered, and it wasn't regarded as a stigma, then. But now everyone talks about that as a stigma, as something negative.

And this is a conversation that I had with the Commonwealth Secretary-General, I said look: Now people are looking this in a different way, we are being punished because we have been there. And if she doesn't go and explain what this is, and this is part of the reason as well, if you look, why we left Commonwealth, saying it is unfair, we cannot be used as an experiment and take the blame for things.

When we are trying to do those things, that they are supposed to do, they are not doing, and the Commonwealth's argument is: look at the Charter, anyone who wants to see that they will say look, you can go and check the Charter, and see for themselves. But how many will read their own country's constitution or any party manifesto? I mean who will, go and read Commonwealth Charter to check what it is. And it's for them to come and talk about, so I think that was part of the reason as well, if you look into the CMAG, where we were really unhappy, but the main reason why we left was not that. I think that's something that doesn't bother so much, because if you look at our history, that has never had any impact, and it will

never have any impact. But the unfair treatment and Maldives being used as an experiment was one of the key reasons why we left Commonwealth.

Recently, media-wise, we saw certain articles written in a negative way. In the sense that being on the CMAG agenda is something negative. But we should have countered by saying that, being on the CMAG agenda is nothing that you should be ashamed of.

Rixte: What do you then think of Maldivian media itself?

Shiaan: Maldivian media coverage was negative as well, because they see being on the CMAG agenda as a punishment. That's something that we should have done, gone to our media and explain that being on the CMAG agenda, it's not something negative, something dangerous. But it's something for the Commonwealth to work closely. They can appoint a special envoy, that person can be a broker, so there are advantages and Maldives is not a country that is shy of inviting people.

We are a very accommodating country and that's our mentality. Most countries, wouldn't even allow that. Whenever, something goes wrong it will be the Maldivians that will be coming first and complaining about that. And it's the socio-economic mentality of the Maldivians

On CMAG those were the main issues. And recently, you will see we were never on the agenda. We were discussing it and at that time because of the negative press in the domestic media, the government decided not to be in the CMAG agenda. So then it became a fight not to be in the agenda. And they were saying what's the big deal, you have already engaged with us within the CMAG agenda, so that's the story.

Rixte: So the CMAG agenda is not main reason to leave?

Shiaan: No, this has been building for a long time, and this argument is going on for a long time within the foreign ministry, but politicians they have different views and how they see it. I don't think our argument leaving the Commonwealth would have actually gotten any attention if not for the political differences and issues.

Rixte: But why then, leave the Commonwealth at the time you did? So in October 2016.

Shiaan: There's no right or wrong time to leave Commonwealth, once you make that decision.

The relevant bill was submitted to the parliament in 2015. It has been there for two years, and has been debated at least twice in the parliament. So, it wasn't something sudden. These democratic processes are not known internationally.

When you leave, people say you left. But for two years there were discussions in the parliament, and it was the parliament that advised the president to leave, and then he took that advice and made the decision. The president has to get the approval of the majority of the parliament. And this is something that most people don't know, they think that the president made that decision, whereas it was the parliament that had discussed it before and gave an opinion to him.

Again, these are the disadvantages of being a small island state. If we had a spokesperson, he would have been reminding for a long time the fact that the bill is debated in the parliament. There would be a narrative, and then people wouldn't be able to ignore the facts and write about it the way they want it to write. The British media was also very unhappy about how could this small state leave the Commonwealth?

Rixte: Yes, because the organisation views itself as a champion of small states.

Shiaan: Yes exactly. The British media came quite hard those days. As it happens sometimes, even in Europe, journalists picked on certain stories from the local media, they just translated and re-used them. Without having or adding their personal opinion about the story. This also happened with the French or Dutch media. They translated what the British had published and that sometimes doesn't help the readers to understand what's happening. British media was defending British interests and point of view.

Rixte: But do you then think that the Maldivian media are influenced by the British media as well?

Shiaan: Yes, I think so. Also, the majority of our media is aligned with the opposition. And as the opposition was against leaving Commonwealth, the media naturally was anti-leaving Commonwealth.

Rixte: My last question, which is not on the list, but does the Maldives miss the Commonwealth? Like, certain advantages it gave?

Shiaan: It is a very difficult question to answer actually. I mean, if anyone was going to miss it, it would be me, because I have been the one who has always been engaged with the Commonwealth for the longest time. I have been to five Commonwealth Heads of Government in a row, have attended so many Commonwealth board meetings (governors), discussing how to reform Commonwealth in order to be more reflective and serve the aspirations of the Commonwealth countries and its citizens. I think those aspects I, personally, do miss. But as a country I don't think there is much.

Rixte: But the technical assistance from the Commonwealth?

Shiaan: Actually, Commonwealth doesn't give technical assistance, especially to Maldives because we are not a developing country.

Rixte: So, there are different organisations that could take place of the Commonwealth? And be a better alternative?

Shiaan: AOSIS is something we are actually championing and we are doing quite a lot of work. Even as we speak, our whole team is in Bonn right now. If you look at the past two years, the successes that we have had – for instance the Paris negotiations and what we managed to include in the Agreement - is unbelievable. I don't think we would have been able to do all that if we didn't give 100 percent.

Now we can have a more focused concentration on AOSIS and the small state island issues. We are looking at the Oceans governance issues, and this is something we haven't engaged in before. To give you another example. Until now we were never engaged with the IMO. Maldives is a 99% maritime country, and is surrounded by sea, and we have never done anything before, why? Because we simply didn't have any time after Commonwealth. But

now, we are becoming more active in the IMO. Others, larger countries, will have the staff to deal with all issues, but we, in London, for instance, we have just three staff. How can they do all these things? So, I think those are the advantages. To answer your question, yes, it is a give-and-take I think.

Rixte: Thank you very much.