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Youth Civic and Political (Dis)engagement in the 'New Gambia' Navigating Democratic Transition amidst Socio-Economic and Political Uncertainty in Contemporary Urban Gambia

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Youth Civic and Political (Dis)engagement in the 'New Gambia':

Navigating Democratic Transition amidst Socio-Economic and Political Uncertainty in Contemporary Urban Gambia

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Any errors of fact or interpretation in this thesis that may have eluded all efforts to prevent them are mine alone.

Abstract

Drawing on five and a half months of ethnographically informed research conducted between September 2023 and February 2024, this thesis explores how young people in The Gambia experience the country's transition to democracy in the aftermath of the 2016–2017 ousting of Yahya Jammeh. While this moment is often framed as a successful break from authoritarian rule, it has also given rise to ambivalence, disillusionment, and political fatigue, particularly among youth. Moreover, despite important shifts, the extent of democratisation remains tentative. In this light, the study examines how young Gambians navigate democratisation amidst persistent socio-economic uncertainty, political flux, and historical legacies of repression—and why their ways of navigating differ. It argues that these differences are shaped not only by unequal access to economic and political resources, but also by distinct social positions, intergenerational expectations, and divergent memories of state violence—as well as a broader sense of disillusion with the slow pace of reform and the perceived lack of meaningful change. Focusing on urban Gambia—long a site of both constraint and possibility—it investigates how youth respond to the partial openings of civic and political life in the post-authoritarian period. The thesis draws on Vigh's concept of social navigation to explore how young people engage with democratic transition as a lived and shifting horizon—through formal structures, informal practices, and everyday acts of resistance, aspiration, and withdrawal—thereby extending the application of the concept from conflict-affected settings to post-authoritarian contexts. Oosterom's extension of Vigh's framework further informs the analysis by showing how memories of past violence, alongside anticipations of uncertain futures, shape youth political subjectivities. While many Gambian youth value the expansion of civic and political space, engagement remains cautious—marked by mistrust, moral ambiguity, and a refusal to conform to reductive categories of engagement or apathy. By centring the lived experiences of urban youth, the thesis contributes to debates on democratisation, youth agency, and everyday politics in Africa, challenging linear or institutionalist accounts of transition and instead framing democracy as a contested and affective process. The legacy of authoritarianism casts a long shadow over public life, shaping how young people understand and negotiate the meanings of citizenship, dissent, and democratic possibility in the 'New Gambia'. The study concludes that Gambian youth experience democratic transition as a landscape marked by both openings and constraints. Youth civic and political (dis)engagement must therefore be understood as shaped by the uneven, fragile, and ongoing nature of the transition itself. Engagement is diverse, strategic, and conditioned by structural limitation, affective uncertainty, and embodied memory. While some youth embrace new political spaces through (digital) activism or party politics, others resist or withdraw through silence or migration. These practices defy binary framings of engagement or apathy, instead revealing forms of social navigation through which young people move across shifting post-authoritarian terrain with caution, creativity, and critique. Democratisation in this context is not a stable endpoint, but a contested and emotionally charged process—shaped from below by the everyday practices and imaginations of those whose hopes remain both urgent and unfinished.

Keywords: The Gambia; youth; urban politics; political transition; democratisation; uncertainty; everyday navigation; urban Africa

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List of Abbreviations

AFPRC	Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council
APRC	Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction
CA	Citizens' Alliance
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
GAMSU	Gambia Student Union
GDC	Gambia Democratic Congress
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
MOJA-G	Movement for Justice in Africa-Gambia
NAPSA	National Patriotic Students' Association
NAWEC	National Water and Electricity Company
NIA	National Intelligence Agency
NPP	National People's Party
PPP	People's Progressive Party
TRRC	Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission
UDP	United Democratic Party
UN	United Nations
UTG	University of the Gambia
WAVE	Women's Association for Victims' Empowerment

1. Introduction: Youth, Democracy, and the 'New Gambia'

1.1 Setting the Stage

On 1 December 2016, Gambians drew international attention by electing Mr Adama Barrow—a former real estate agent and political newcomer backed by a broad opposition coalition—as president. In doing so, they unseated long-term incumbent Yahya Jammeh, who had come to power through a military *coup d'état* in 1994 and had ruled The Gambia for over two decades, during which his regime was characterised by widespread repression and pervasive corruption. After initially conceding defeat and praising the "functioning Gambian democratic process" in a televised speech,[1] Jammeh reversed his decision a week later, plunging the country into a major political crisis. In a series of desperate moves to retain power, he challenged the election results through the courts, dismissed regional mediation efforts, and declared a state of emergency in a final attempt to tighten his grip on authority.[2] In the meantime, significant organised protests emerged across the country, with young people at the forefront, rallying around the #GambiaHasDecided slogan. The hashtag quickly spread across Facebook, WhatsApp, and X (then Twitter)[3] during what became known as the 'Impasse'. Beyond the digital sphere, #GambiaHasDecided was spray-painted on walls in downtown Serekunda, while billboards bearing the slogan appeared across the country—only to be swiftly removed by security agents.[4]

The crisis came to an end on 21 January 2017, when Jammeh agreed to leave the country following a month-long political standoff and the deployment of a regional military force (initially code-named 'Operation Restore Democracy') by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which had been mandated to remove him by force if necessary. Having earlier been inaugurated as president at the Gambian embassy in Senegal, Barrow returned to Banjul on 26 January[5] and was formally sworn in as the third President of The Gambia on 18 February at a fully packed Independence Stadium in Bakau. The atmosphere was charged with euphoria. For the first time in over fifty years, political actors from across the spectrum stood united in support of a democratic transition.[6] The occasion was attended by a high-level ECOWAS delegation alongside several other heads of state, including the then 92-year-old Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara, the country's first president. Supporters travelled from all corners of the country to attend the inauguration. Thousands spent the night at the stadium, waking to the rhythms of drumbeats and celebratory songs that set the tone for the day. By nine

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[1] Claus Kreß and Benjamin Nußberger, "Pro-Democratic Intervention in Current International Law: The Case of The Gambia in January 2017," *Journal on the Use of Force and International Law* 4, no. 2 (2017): 239.
[2] David Perfect, "The Gambian 2016 Presidential Election and its Aftermath," *Round Table (London)* 106, no. 3 (2017): 323.
[3] Throughout this thesis, I refer to the platform X, which was formerly known as Twitter. In instances where events occurred prior to the platform's rebranding, I continue to use the name X for consistency and clarity.
[4] David Harris and Sait Matty Jaw, "A 'New Gambia'? Managing Political Crisis and Change in an African Small State," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 62, no. 1 (2024): 51.
[5] Perfect, "The Gambian 2016 Presidential Election," 323.
[6] Sanna Camara, *Gambia Elections: Adama Barrow's Performance on the Ballot*, (Dakar: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, November 2021), 1-2, https://pscc.fes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/images/publications/FES_PSCC_Policy_Paper_Gambia_elections_Adama_Barrow_performance_on_the_ballot_EN.pdf.

o'clock in the morning, the atmosphere was already electric, and the stadium had reached full capacity. Security guards struggled to contain the tens of thousands who gathered around the perimeter to access the venue.[7]

Overenthusiastic youths, many of whom had lived most, if not all, of their lives under a regime where fear and repression had been constants, scaled the fences to force their way into the grounds, while others climbed rooftops of nearby buildings just to have a glimpse of the ceremony. Barrow arrived to fanfare and resounding applause, waving from his vehicle in flowing white robes. The stadium echoed with songs and slogans. Supporters donned pro-Barrow T-shirts and hats, waving the Gambian flag jubilantly above their heads.[8] Addressing the jubilant crowd, the new president declared the moment "a victory for democracy," emphasising that "for 22 years, the Gambian people yearned to live in a country where our diverse tribes will be bridged by tolerance and our determination to work together for the common good." Amidst the crowd's cheers, he proclaimed: "One Gambia, one nation, one people … Gambia has changed forever. The people are fully conscious that they can put a government in office as well as remove it."[9]

* * *

The Gambia is no longer governed by an authoritarian regime, yet the legacy of the past endures in myriad ways, shaping both the experiences and expectations of democratisation for its young generation. I became increasingly cognisant of this during an extended period of research in late 2023 and early 2024, engaging in conversations and everyday encounters with young people in the capital Banjul and its surrounding urban spaces. It is these encounters that form the basis of this study, which explores the perspectives, frustrations, and aspirations of urban youth as they navigate the layered terrain of post-authoritarian governance.

I first became interested in the intricacies of The Gambia's transition from the autocracy of Jammeh to the so-called 'New Gambia' under President Barrow, particularly in relation to the shifting civic roles and political engagement of youth while observing the protests organised by the political advocacy group Operation Three Years Jotna (*Jotna* means 'It is time' in the Wolof language). On 16 December 2019, thousands of protesters—mostly in their early 30s—marched through the capital, demanding that Barrow step down in January 2020, as promised in the Coalition 2016 agreement, which had set his term at three years.[10] For the first time in Gambian history, a public demonstration openly called for a sitting president's resignation—an unprecedented moment of democratic accountability. Notably, the movement was galvanised and widely mobilised through digital platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and X, reflecting the growing importance of online spaces in political organising and civic expression. These

[7] Ibid., 1-2.
[8] Deutsche Welle, "Barrow Takes Oath as Gambia's New Leader," *DW*, 18 February 2017, https://www.dw.com/en/gambias-new-president-barrow-sworn-in-for-second-time/a-37616047.
[9] BBC News, "The Gambia: President Barrow Sworn in at Packed Stadium," *BBC News*, 18 February 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-39011393.
[10] The united opposition alliance known as Coalition 2016, which successfully unseated Jammeh, was formed on the understanding that its agreed candidate would serve a three-year transitional term, implement key democratic reforms, organise new elections, and refrain from seeking re-election. However, the agreement was not legally binding, and rather than preparing to step down, President Barrow reneged on the deal, citing the constitutional provision of a five-year presidential term as justification.

digital tools were not just channels for dissemination but became sites of political contestation in their own right, shaping how dissent was articulated and circulated. However, the momentum waned after a second demonstration in January 2020 turned violent, with clashes erupting between protesters and security forces. These events raised deeper questions for me: How will the transition to democracy unfold? How are digital platforms transforming the political agency of young Gambians? And in what ways are youth continuing to challenge—or negotiate—the political *modus operandi* in the country?

Across Africa, youth have played central roles in pro-democracy movements, though with varying degrees of long-term impact. From the so-called 'Arab Spring' uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa to movements like *Y'en a Marre* ('We're Fed Up') in Senegal and *Balai Citoyen* ('Citizen's Broom') in Burkina Faso, young people have repeatedly demonstrated their capacity to contest the state and, at times, drive sociopolitical change. In recent years, new access to information and communication technologies has become a driving factor in predominantly youth-led protests and movements,[11] enabling faster mobilisation, wider dissemination of dissenting voices, and greater visibility both nationally and internationally. Hashtag-driven campaigns such as #EndSARS in Nigeria and #FreeSenegal exemplify how digital activism has reshaped the landscape of political engagement. Yet, once regimes fall and the momentum of street protests fades, young activists are often confronted with fragmentation, co-optation, or exclusion from formal political processes.[12]

This study examines the role of urban Gambian youth in the country's democratic transition—not only as protesters but as individuals navigating the complex and shifting terrain of post-authoritarian governance. Rather than focusing solely on institutions or elite actors, it draws on theoretical approaches that seek to understand democracy as a lived and contested experience. Patrick Chabal, in *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling*, argues that to understand politics in African states, it is imperative to consider what politics means to those living in these contexts, and how they perceive their relationships with the state and the multitude of non-state actors.[13] This, Chabal suggests, calls for a meticulous analysis of everyday struggles and mundane conflicts at the micro-level—where people strive to improve their livelihoods amidst conditions of precarity and constraint. As Karim Zakhour argues, "the mainstream approaches to the study of democratisation are inadequate in properly understanding the developing dynamics between the state and its citizens."[14] Following Lisa Wedeen's call to consider "how social science scholarship can benefit theoretically and empirically from attending to democratic phenomena that exist outside of electoral and other formal organizational confines,"[15] this study moves beyond mere conventional categories of political participation. By foregrounding everyday perspectives, it contributes to a growing body of literature that seeks to re-centre democratic analysis on the lived experiences of

[11] Mirjam de Bruijn and Jonna Both, "Youth Between State and Rebel (Dis)Orders: Contesting Legitimacy from Below in Sub-Sahara Africa," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 28, no. 4–5 (2017): 781.
[12] Jamie Bleck, Trevor Lwere, and Boukary Sangaré, "Youth in West and Central Africa: Quests for Inclusion and the Future of Governance," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 57, no. 3 (2023).
[13] Patrick Chabal, *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling* (London: Zed Books, 2009).
[14] Karim Zakhour, "While We Wait: Democratisation, State and Citizenship among Young Men in Tunisia's Interior Regions" (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2020), 4.
[15] Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3.

ordinary citizens navigating post-authoritarian uncertainty. By focusing on the perspectives, aspirations, and everyday challenges of youth, it seeks to offer a deeper understanding of how young people both shape—and are shaped by—the country's evolving democratic landscape. As Zakhour writes:

> It is by taking an ethnographic perspective that we can shift our focus away from dominant, often ideological, narratives of success or failure. To capture the everyday and lived experience helps us to understand the way that democracy and democratisation are enmeshed with state-citizen dynamics and larger social and economic processes.[16]

* * *

It was mid-September 2023 when I arrived at Banjul International Airport. The complex consists of two buildings—one old and abandoned, built during the First Republic, and a newer, more modern structure. Shortly after seizing power in 1994, Jammeh's government abandoned the original building—a modest structure with a small waiting lounge, departure hall, and narrow arrivals corridor—and commissioned a new airport featuring an extended runway and a larger waiting hall, now divided into check-in and waiting areas. Inside, the waiting hall is lined with a bar, a restaurant, stalls selling African crafts, currency exchange bureaux, and booths for mobile providers like Qcell and Africell. People drift through the lounge: some await arriving visitors, while others linger, perhaps hoping to earn from tourists. Among them are men offering taxi services and youths who loiter in search of coins, helping with luggage. Though it is quieter than usual, as the tourist season (between October and April) is yet to start. In the central lobby, a painting of Jammeh—depicting him in his characteristic white presidential attire, arms outstretched, holding a copy of the Holy Qur'an in one hand and a ceremonial sceptre in the other—once adorned the now black-painted ceiling, reminiscent of the Sistine Chapel. The once-ubiquitous posters and billboards along the side of the road of the man who vowed to rule the country for "one billion years if Allah says so" have also long been replaced. Likewise, the ersatz bronze statue towering over the entrance to Banjul—the so-called 'Unknown Soldier', depicting a man holding a baby in his right hand, an AK-47 slung across his back, and two fingers raised in the air.

This scene at the airport encapsulates the paradoxes of post-authoritarian transition that shape the everyday experiences of young Gambians. The abandoned building and the repurposed spaces of the new terminal symbolise both rupture and continuity: the infrastructural remnants of Jammeh's regime coexist with attempts to project a modern, forward-looking image. The fading iconography of Jammeh—now removed or obscured—evokes the ongoing negotiation of memory and political identity in public space. This ambivalent atmosphere mirrors the uncertainties that young people face as they navigate a political terrain marked by both symbolic transformation and persistent structural constraints.

Since Barrow's rise to the presidency—and his re-election in 2021—The Gambia has been pursuing a series of reform initiatives, though the process has been uneven, marked by delays in implementation and resistance from entrenched interests. Key priorities include transitional justice, constitutional and security sector reform, alongside a wider institutional

[16] Zakhour, "While We Wait," 4.

reform agenda. The first three seek to address historic human rights abuses, lay the groundwork for constitutional democracy, and reshape the security framework. Institutional reform aims to redefine the principles, values, norms, and processes of state institutions to improve service delivery, boost transparency and accountability, and strengthen public trust in governance.[17] I recall driving across the country about three years ago and seeing billboards that appeared as visual markers of these ambitions. One read, "The police are your friends and family." Another depicted an officer wildly swinging a baton at a person raising their arms defensively, while the text encouraged citizens to report human rights abuses to a special hotline. A third simply urged: "Don't bribe the police." Sobering yet symbolically potent, these messages formed part of a wider public relations campaign by The Gambia Police Force and the Community Policing Unit, signalling an attempt to distance the new administration from past abuses. One particularly eerie billboard, displayed by The Gambia Centre for Victims of Human Rights Violations, read: "Dear Government, Our families need closure. When will you start searching for us?" Below the words were faded images of missing persons. The Centre, established after Jammeh's departure by families of victims, continues to seek justice for those killed, disappeared, or otherwise harmed under the former regime.

At the moment of writing, more than eight years into the transition, The Gambia's record on human rights has improved, with greater respect for freedom of expression, association, and assembly. However, the rule of law remains unconsolidated, LGBT+ individuals continue to face severe discrimination, and violence against women persists as a serious and widespread concern.[18] At the same time, partial democratisation has enabled a more permissive environment for public discourse, and during my research, I was frequently told that conducting this kind of study would not have been possible before—or at least would have been significantly more difficult—as many people were previously too afraid to speak openly. When discussing what life under Jammeh was like, stories and incidents emerged that revealed a pervasive culture of silence and a prevailing climate of fear. "There was even a particular course called *Contemporary Gambian Politics* at the University of The Gambia (UTG)," said O., a 29-year-old final-year law student, "and at that time, when Jammeh was still in power, people would barely attend those lectures for fear that they might be arrested in class." I visited O. in November 2023 at his residence in Sanchaba Touba. Clad in a simple white kaftan, he spoke with quiet conviction. Part of his family had been directly affected by the Jammeh regime, a fact which, as he explained, had motivated his decision to study law. I had been introduced to O. by Dr Ismaila Ceesay, Senior Lecturer and Head of the Political Science Department at UTG, party leader of Citizens' Alliance (CA), founded in 2019, a former presidential candidate, and, as of April 2024, newly appointed Minister of Information. O. serves as the national youth president of CA. "My desire to join Gambian politics is anchored in the need to effect change,"

[17] Sait Matty Jaw, Mariama Davies, and Luqman Saka, *Access to Justice in Gambia: Courts Seen as Untrustworthy, Unfair, and Ineffective*, Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 951 (3 March 2025), https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/AD951-Many-Gambians-see-courts-as-untrustworthy-unfair-and-ineffective-Afrobarometer-2march25.pdf.

[18] Freedom House, *Freedom in the Word 2024: The Gambia*, https://freedomhouse.org/country/gambia/freedom-world/2024.

O. told me. “After the election, I believe it was the right time to give The Gambia what it really deserves in terms of good leadership.”[19]

“Young people are more enthusiastic about politics in this country,”[20] answered Dr Ceesay, when I asked him about ‘youth political engagement in post-Jammeh Gambia’—the research topic I had set out for myself. We were sitting in his office at the Law Faculty of UTG, in the Chancery Building at the Kanifing Campus, located on MDI Road, where Dr Ceesay had just taught the course *Introduction to Politics*, which I attended. He spoke about the ways in which youth political engagement had expanded since 2017. No longer merely present as a silent majority, he explained, young people were now registering, voting, and contesting elections in greater numbers, prompting political parties to invest more strategically in their mobilisation—through sports, music, and cultural outreach. Although senior party figures still held power, he noted that more young people were beginning to occupy leadership roles and shape public discourse in visible ways.

Throughout my research, I encountered a number of people and moments that reflected Dr Ceesay’s descriptions. At the same time, I met young people whose perceptions—how they make sense of ‘it’—and ways of navigating—how they act within ‘it’—the post-Jammeh era were more ambiguous. Their stories could not be reduced to standard categories of participation or disengagement, nor did they always align with dominant narratives of democratic success or failure. Conversations about ‘politics’ and ‘progress’—and the many threads that ran between them—emerged in many forms, not only in lectures and party offices, but also in workplaces, on verandas, and in the quiet moments of daily life. It was in one such moment that I met 24-year-old Amina, originally from a village in Foni Kansala—the home district of the former president, located south of The Gambia River, where Jammeh’s image still adorns the T-shirts and printed cloth worn by many supporters of his party. Amina, too, said she would like to see him return as a leader. “Since Barrow came, things have changed,” she told me. “Everything is too expensive now. Before, you didn’t even need to work much—you could just go to a neighbour’s house and eat there. That was The Gambia. But now, people don’t do that anymore.” In what would become a recurring theme, once I mentioned the transition, Amina expressed her concern about the rising cost of living, citing the increased prices of basic commodities such as rice, sugar, and onions. “Some businessmen and women take advantage of people’s desperation,” she said. “You’ll buy something for one price today, and by the next day, the price would go up by many dalasis.” I met Amina one afternoon at the house where she both lives and works as a housekeeper. She is employed by a friend of mine whose family has known Amina’s family for many years, as their family compounds are located close to each other. Tall and slim, she has a large burn mark running down her left arm—the result of a bus crash she had been involved in on the way to Senegal, as she later told me. Amina left school early to support her mother and has been working in domestic service for nearly eight years. Speaking about her future, she shared her hope of moving to Switzerland, where her boyfriend currently lives. She acknowledged that the journey would be long and difficult—especially for women—but remained determined. “It’s the only way for me to be successful,” she told me

[19] Interview with O., 12 November 2023.
[20] Interview with Dr Ismaila Ceesay, 12 October 2023.

solemnly.[21] Like others I spoke to, Amina's hopes and frustrations were directed more toward personal survival and future mobility than toward navigating civic and political spaces, as O. had done. For many, the lack of visible progress and persistent everyday struggles made political engagement feel distant or uncertain in its effectiveness.

Amina's words reflect a broader sentiment shared by several young Gambians I encountered—a deepening sense that democratic change has not brought the material or systemic transformation they had envisioned. While not everyone expressed the same degree of disillusionment, frustration with the slow pace of reform was a recurring theme. In some cases, this frustration has spilled over into unrest or desperate attempts to seek change, whether through political resistance or migration. In late 2022, eight junior-ranking soldiers and three civilians were accused of plotting a coup. The alleged ringleader, Lance Corporal Sanna Fadera, was later convicted and sentenced to twelve years in prison, while the others were acquitted.[22] Though isolated, the incident points to simmering tensions beneath the surface of the democratic transition. Beyond political unrest, return migrants continue to present complex challenges. In 2019, 27-year-old Buba Baldeh, a forced migrant returnee from Italy, was arrested for killing two fellow patients at Tanka Tanka Psychiatric Hospital—the country's only in-patient mental health facility, located in the West Coast Region—which has long struggled with severe under-resourcing and inadequate staffing. Baldeh's victims were also believed to be returnees.[23]

Meanwhile, concerns over rising crime persist, with incidents of armed robbery, shootings, and even bank heists making headlines. Some observers blame young people for misusing their newfound freedoms, while others draw attention to a growing epidemic of drug use—particularly the spread of 'kush', a synthetic drug reportedly named locally after the sprinter Gina Bass, in reference to its fast-acting effects.[24] It is within this context of uncertainty that the country's media landscape has become more vocal and independent. In addition, increased freedom of expression has allowed Gambians not only to scrutinise public institutions more openly, but also to voice their discontent through protests, online platforms, and everyday acts of dissent.

* * *

Often cited as one of the few successful cases of a peaceful democratic transition in Africa following the fall of an authoritarian regime, and praised for having "bucked the broader trend of democratic backsliding, showing real improvement despite the challenging circumstances,"[25]

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[21] Conversation with Amina, 17 January 2024.
[22] Nicholas Bass, "Sanna Fadera Sentenced to 12-Years Imprisonment, Others Acquitted & Discharged," *The Voice*, 1 November 2023, https://www.voicegambia.com/2023/11/01/sanna-fadera-sentenced-to-12-years-imprisonment-others-acquitted-discharged/.
[23] Kaddy Jawo, "'I Will Die Trying': Gambian Migrant Deportees Dream of Return to Europe," *Al Jazeera*, 13 September 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/9/13/i-will-die-trying-gambian-migrant-deportees-dream-of-return-to-europe.
[24] Kebba Omar Cham, "The Menace of 'Kush': A Rising Epidemic of Drug Abuse Among Adolescents in The Gambia," *Edward & Cynthia Institute of Public Health* (opinions), 2 October 2024, https://eciph.in/opinions/the-menace-of-kush-a-rising-epidemic-of-drug-abuse-among-adolescents-in-the-gambia/.
[25] Jeffrey Smith, "Gambia's Growing Pains Should Not Overshadow Progress," *Vanguard Africa*, 29 January 2020, https://www.vanguardafrica.com/africawatch/2020/1/28/gambias-growing-pains-should-not-overshadow-its-remarkable-progress.

The Gambia's experience warrants closer examination. Understanding the conditions that made this relative success possible—and how it might be sustained and deepened—is of growing interest to both scholars and policymakers. As Jimmy Hendry Nzally observes, "The country successfully transitioned into a democracy, even though there are still major reforms to take place. The Gambia's democratic and regime change transition could be a viable case to look into for other countries in Africa still trapped in protracted conflicts."[26] Yet, this 'success' remains ambiguous. Its benefits are unevenly distributed and experienced in different ways by various actors. Young people, despite their central role in ending decades of authoritarian rule, remain marginalised in many aspects of the post-Jammeh political order. Their engagement with the transition is often marked by ambivalence—expressed through protest, frustration, or withdrawal. That such frustration should emerge in moments of transition is not surprising, even in relatively promising cases. Scholars of democratisation have long warned that transitional periods often provoke tensions, competing expectations, and difficult trade-offs.[27] Thomas Carothers writes:

> Citizens bring to the new democratic process very high expectations that often are quite generalised. They expect that life is going to get a lot better quickly. They expect that the government is finally going to be responsible and take care of the people, and the injustices and inequalities that were so characteristic of the dictatorship are going to be replaced by a fairer system.[28]

The gap between these expectations and the lived realities of transition is one of several tensions this thesis seeks to explore. This study examines how and why such expectations arise, how they are shaped by everyday experience, and what they reveal about the prospects and limits of democratisation in The Gambia. Crucially, it approaches youth not as a singular or fixed category, but as a socially and politically differentiated group. Young Gambians differ in terms of class, gender, education, geography, and social background—all of which shape how they experience and respond to democratic change. Their political engagement takes many forms—sometimes assertive and confrontational, at other times subtle, strategic, or withdrawn—and does not always fit neatly into conventional frameworks of participation.

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[26] Jimmy Hendry Nzally, "Contemporary Democratisation Processes in Africa: Post Dictatorship, and The Gambia's Fragile Democracy," *International Journal of Political Science and Public Administration* 2, no. 2 (2022): 12.

[27] Carl Gershman, "Democracy Promotion: The Relationship of Political Parties and Civil Society," *Democratization* 11, no. 3 (2004).

[28] Thomas Carothers, "Tunisia in Transition: A Comparative View," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (commentary), 30 May 2018, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2018/05/tunisia-in-transition-a-comparative-view?lang=en.

1.2 Research Aim and Question

This study explores how young people in The Gambia experience, interpret, and navigate the country's transition to democracy amidst ongoing socio-economic and political uncertainty. It focuses in particular on urban youth, whose lives have been shaped by the legacies of authoritarian rule but who also played a visible role in the country's democratic turn. Rather than treating youth as a homogenous group, the study examines how different social positions—shaped by intersecting factors such as class, gender, education, and geography—influence young people's understandings of political change and their responses to it. The overarching research question guiding this thesis is:

> *How do young people in The Gambia navigate the country's transition to democracy amidst socio-economic and political uncertainty, and why do their ways of navigating differ?*

This formulation allows for a dual analytical focus: on the one hand, it seeks to understand how young people respond to the shifting landscape of political possibility in the post-Jammeh era—through activism, party participation, informal civic expression, or more ambivalent forms of withdrawal or negotiation. On the other hand, it asks why such responses differ, even among those facing similar structural conditions. By situating these differences within broader affective, material, and historical contexts, the study aims to illuminate how agency is shaped not only by opportunity but also by disillusionment, moral reasoning, and the memory of past regimes.

To trace these dynamics, the thesis follows two interrelated lines of inquiry: one concerned with the partial openings in civic and political life that have emerged since the end of authoritarian rule, and another focused on the constraints—structural, affective, and symbolic—that continue to limit young people's sense of political efficacy and inclusion. These strands are developed across the empirical chapters, which examine both emergent forms of youth engagement and the persistence of exclusion, disappointment, and resignation. Rather than approaching democratisation as a linear or institutional process, the study understands it as a contested and uneven negotiation—an ongoing process through which meanings of power, belonging, and futurity are shaped, challenged, and reimagined in everyday life.

In doing so, the thesis contributes to broader debates on youth politics and democratisation in Africa, engaging critically with established concepts such as social navigation while attending to the limits of agency in contexts of long-standing uncertainty. At the same time, it seeks to build on the relatively limited literature on everyday political life in The Gambia, particularly in relation to the post-authoritarian period, offering an account that centres the experiences, voices, and political imaginaries of young people as they navigate the ambiguities of the present.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into seven chapters, each contributing to a layered understanding of how young people in urban Gambia experience and navigate the country's transition to democracy in a context shaped by socio-economic uncertainty, historical legacies, and political flux.

Chapter One introduces the study and outlines its central research aim and question. It situates the research within the context of The Gambia's post-Jammeh transition and offers an initial orientation to the debates around youth political engagement and democratisation. While not aiming to provide an exhaustive conceptual or historical overview, the chapter sets the stage for the analysis that follows by sketching the key concerns, motivations, and framing of the thesis.

Chapter Two provides historical context by tracing key developments in governance, state formation, and youth civic and political engagement in The Gambia, from the colonial period through the First and Second Republics to the post-2016 transition. Rather than offering a comprehensive chronology, the chapter identifies key structural patterns and ruptures that inform the civic and political realities experienced by young Gambians today. It situates contemporary youth engagement within a longer trajectory of exclusion, mobilisation, and reconfiguration.

Chapter Three outlines the conceptual framework and key theoretical insights that underpin the study. It critically engages with the literature on youth in African contexts, focusing on the relational and socially constructed nature of 'youth' as a category, particularly within urban environments. The chapter draws on the conceptualisation of social navigation to explore how young people manoeuvre through uncertainty and political transition, drawing on theoretical work on everyday life, precarity, and post-authoritarian governance.

Chapter Four discusses the methodological approach adopted in the research. It reflects on the ethnographically informed and interpretive sensibility that guides the study, and elaborates on the use of semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, digital ethnography, and everyday observation. Particular attention is paid to issues of positionality, ethics, and the relational dynamics of knowledge production in a context where civic engagement remains politically sensitive and socially negotiated.

Chapter Five presents the first strand of empirical analysis, focusing on the shifting contours of civic and political life in the aftermath of authoritarian rule. It explores how young people navigate the partial expansion of civic space, the growing influence of digital platforms, the gendered silences surrounding transitional justice, and the ambivalent inclusion of youth within formal party politics. Drawing on participants' narratives and lived experiences, the chapter interrogates how democratic gains are taken up, reimagined, or contested amidst ongoing social risks, structural exclusions, and the enduring legacies of repression.

Chapter Six turns to the structural and affective limitations that continue to shape youth political and economic life in the 'New Gambia'. It explores themes of blocked aspirations, disillusionment, and frustration, and examines how these experiences are navigated, internalised, or resisted in ways that do not always align with conventional models of political participation. The chapter emphasises the uneven and ambivalent nature of democratic

transition, highlighting the everyday negotiations and compromises that define youth political subjectivity.

Chapter Seven concludes the thesis by synthesising the core findings and reflecting on their broader implications. It returns to the question of what it means to live through political transition and considers The Gambian case as a lens through which to understand the promises and limits of democratisation more broadly. It argues for an approach that takes seriously the everyday, affective, and differentiated experiences of youth—particularly in contexts where political possibility is both expanded and constrained by the legacies of authoritarian rule and the unpredictability of democratic reform.

2. Historical Foundations of Governance, Power, and Youth Engagement in The Gambia

> We are believed to be the Smiling Coast of Africa: a land of peace, a land of culture, a land of friendship.[29]
>
> The Gambia is hot… As you walk along the gravel roads, red dirt will mark your pant cuffs or skirt hem and coat your feet and legs. In the rainy season—what we call *nawet*—it's worse … the red dust and sand turns to mud… And the thunderstorms; they crash and boom as if the sky is waging war with the air, and we all duck under cover as the rain pummels the earth and soaks everything in its path. But a country is not just its weather, its buildings, its people. A country is also its government, its power structures, its leader and its way of life.[30]

This chapter offers an overview of The Gambia's political history—not to provide a comprehensive chronology, but rather to highlight key structural patterns and historical junctures, from the colonial period to the post-transition era, that are essential for contextualising current youth civic and political engagement. These developments form the backdrop against which informants' experiences of the so-called 'New Gambia' can be understood. While the country's history before colonialism is rich and significant, it lies beyond the scope of this study, which focuses on the institutional and political configurations that have shaped youth experiences of inclusion and exclusion in recent decades. The chapter therefore foregrounds those historical shifts most relevant to understanding how evolving forms of governance, marginalisation, and opportunity have influenced engagement of youth.

This chapter begins with an outline of the colonial administration and its legacy, particularly in terms of urban–rural divides and political centralisation. It then examines the post-independence era, tracing the First Republic under Jawara, followed by the authoritarian turn during Jammeh's rule and the militarised restructuring of state–youth relations. Finally, it considers the transition to democratic governance in 2016 and the emergence of new civic spaces and forms of youth participation in the post-Jammeh period. By tracing both continuities and ruptures in political transformation, it explores how successive generations of young people have negotiated, contested, or reimagined their place within shifting societal frameworks. In doing so, it situates the current cohort of urban youth within a broader trajectory of political change, illuminating how their lived experiences, aspirations, and modes of participation are embedded in—and at times actively reshape—the sociopolitical landscape of contemporary Gambian society.

[29] Interview with Binta, 6 February 2024.
[30] Toufah Jallow and Kim Pittaway, *Toufah: The Woman Who Inspired an African #MeToo Movement* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2022), 8.

2.1 From The Gambia Colony and Protectorate to Independence (c. 1816-1965)

In April 1816, a British expedition from Gorée led by Captain Alexander Grant took possession of Banjul Island, situated about 13 kilometres upriver from the Atlantic at Cape St. Mary's. Renamed St. Mary's Island, it became the site of Bathurst—later renamed Banjul in 1973—in honour of the British Colonial Secretary, the Earl of Bathurst.[31] This marked the beginning of Britain's colonial foothold in The Gambia, which gradually expanded through small land acquisitions including the strip between Bathurst and Cape St. Mary's, Niumi's Ceded Mile, and McCarthy Island, located 305 kilometres inland. These holdings constituted The Gambia Colony, which for much of the nineteenth century was administered from Sierra Leone. The Anglo-French Convention of 1889 formally delineated The Gambia's territorial boundaries, and by 1893 Britain extended its authority inland to establish a Protectorate covering both banks of the river for 355 kilometres.[32] During the colonial period, The Gambia was governed through typical British administrative structures, including an Executive Council and a Legislative Council, the composition of which evolved over time as European officials were gradually replaced by Gambian unofficial and elected members.

While the Colony—centred on Bathurst and Kombo-St. Mary's—was just 78 square kilometres and home to most European officials and merchants, the Protectorate spanned over 10,000 square kilometres and was almost entirely African. Though laws passed in Bathurst nominally applied to both territories, they were governed separately, with the Colony receiving greater attention and resources. The Protectorate, by contrast, was treated as marginal and in need of 'gradual development', reflecting colonial assumptions about its supposed political and economic inferiority.[33] This administrative divide is reflective of a wider colonial strategy of fragmentation designed to maintain control. Across British Africa, similar patterns prevailed: urban centres fostered a small, Western-educated elite, while rural governance was delegated to co-opted 'traditional' authorities serving colonial interests.[34] As Frantz Fanon observed, the colonial world was "divided into compartments," producing distinct political, social, and economic spheres that shaped unequal identities and expectations.[35] These divisions were not dismantled at independence but often reconstituted under postcolonial regimes, entrenching structural inequalities that continued to shape state-society relations.[36]

Modern forms of political activity among Gambians date back to the mid-nineteenth century but was initially confined to the Western-educated African elite in Bathurst. The earliest leaders were "Liberated Africans" or "Recaptives" from Sierra Leone and other parts of West Africa, individuals who, along with their immediate forebears, had been removed from slavery by the Royal Navy and subsequently resettled in Freetown or Bathurst.[37] Active in commerce,

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[31] Arnold Hughes and David Perfect, *A Political History of The Gambia, 1816-1994* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 41.
[32] Ibid., 6-7.
[33] Donald R. Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa: A History of Globalisation in Niumi, The Gambia*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2018), 156-57; Hughes and Perfect, *A Political History of The Gambia*, 41.
[34] Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly, *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change* (London: Zed Books, 2015), 8.
[35] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 37.
[36] Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).
[37] Hughes and Perfect, *A Political History of The Gambia*, 1-2.

government, and mission schools, they shaped the Colony's political life for decades. Though alliances occasionally crossed racial lines—especially in response to French threats—tensions emerged both with colonial officials and within the African elite. By the late nineteenth century, informal political networks had consolidated into a personalised system dominated by a few elite families, notably the conservative Forsters, who held the African seat on the Legislative Council for sixty years. Although figures like Edward Small at times challenged their influence, politics largely remained conservative, focused on modest reforms within colonial structures. Broader ideological movements such as Pan-Africanism, Garveyism, and socialism had little impact on this urban political class.[38]

In contrast, the Protectorate was administered through colonial-appointed African chiefs, recognised as the legitimate representatives of rural communities.[39] Throughout the colonial period, stark disparities persisted between British subjects in the Colony and those in the Protectorate, whose legal status varied by birth, naturalisation, or lineage. Predominantly rural, the Protectorate had limited infrastructure and only a few wharf-towns tied to the groundnut trade. Until the late 1940s, colonial investment in roads, healthcare, and education outside Bathurst was minimal, restricting rural access to basic services and economic opportunities.[40] With politics dominated by the urban-educated elite and most of the rural population poor and uneducated, the Protectorate remained politically marginal. Only in the final years before independence—despite resistance from conservative chiefs—were rural populations drawn into political mobilisation as self-rule became imminent.[41] Throughout The Gambia's colonial period, many young men from the Protectorate migrated seasonally to Bathurst in search of work, and by the 1940s—spurred by food shortages, economic hardship, and wartime employment opportunities—increasing numbers of Protectorate youth settled more permanently, gaining new skills and forging links with the urban economy.[42] Though life in Bathurst promised greater access to cash wages and modern aspirations in contrast to the Protectorate, the material conditions of the city were still harsh. Poor infrastructure, overcrowding, high infant mortality, inadequate waste disposal, and meagre wages meant that even middle- and upper-class Africans lived with constant risks of infestation and disease. Yet these difficulties did not deter migration, nor did they prevent residents from cultivating vibrant social lives. Music, dance, sport, study, and scouting offered outlets for creativity and enjoyment, especially among the youth. For many, the city offered respite from the physical demands of rural labour and a chance to embrace modernity through conspicuous consumption.[43]

The Gambia has a deep history of civic engagement, particularly in the Colony and its surrounding environs, where the colonial period saw the proliferation of social clubs, trade unions, professional associations, and political discussion groups. These forms of civic life laid the groundwork for public participation well before the emergence of formal party politics.

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[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., 51.
[40] Lamin Manneh, "Island Citizens: Environment, Infrastructure, and Belonging in Colonial Gambia 1816-1965" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2023), 265–66.
[41] Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, 187.
[42] Manneh, "Island Citizens," 281.
[43] Matthew James Park, "Heart Of Banjul: The History Of Banjul, The Gambia, 1816-1965" (PhD diss., Michigan State University, 2016), 8.

Beyond such associations, the extended kinship system has long served as a vital source of social capital—providing informal mechanisms for risk-sharing, conflict resolution, and access to employment. Formal political organisation followed a broader West African pattern, with direct electoral representation introduced only after the Second World War. It was only then that political pressure groups began to crystallise into parties. In the 1950s, three small, highly personalist parties emerged in Bathurst: the United Party, The Gambia Democratic Party, and The Gambia Muslim Congress. Politics during this period largely reflected the priorities of the urban elite, though trade unions and militant youth groups—particularly The Gambia's Young People's Association—also played a significant role in shaping public discourse and political action.[44] Politicised youth typically aligned with party youth wings or the growing nationalist movement, mobilising electoral support, organising demonstrations, and at times engaging in confrontations with rival groups.[45]

The Gambia Workers' Union was particularly influential, culminating in the country's first successful general strike in January 1961.[46] These developments, however, remained concentrated in the Colony; political rights and participation in the Protectorate were severely limited, and political life in those regions remains poorly documented. A turning point came in the late 1950s with the extension of direct territorial elections across the country. For the first time, the rural majority in the Protectorate gained a meaningful voice in national politics, transforming the political landscape. This shift was embodied in the formation of the Protectorate People's Party in 1959—later renamed the People's Progressive Party (PPP)—under the leadership of Dawda Jawara, a Protectorate-born, Wesleyan-educated, Glasgow-trained veterinary surgeon. The PPP's platform in the 1960 elections focused on redressing the historic neglect of the Protectorate in favour of the Colony. With strong support from newly enfranchised rural voters, the party secured decisive victories in the 1960 and 1962 general elections and was soon recognised by the British as the legitimate successor to colonial rule.[47]

Figure 1: Map of The Gambia. Source: Africa Guide, *"The Gambia Guide,"* accessed 12 June 2025, https://www.africaguide.com/country/gambia/.

[44] Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, 189.
[45] Hassoum Ceesay, *The Gambia and Pan-Africanism, 1900-2020: A Study in International Relations of a Small State* (Banjul: The Gambia National Museum, 2021), 38-39.
[46] Hughes and Perfect, *A Political History of The Gambia*, 201.
[47] Ibid., 3.

2.2 The Jawara Era and the First Republic (1965-1994)

Just before midnight on Wednesday, 17 February 1965, in the heart of McCarthy Square, Bathurst—now Banjul—the Union Jack was saluted for the final time. As the British national anthem, *God Save the King*, played, it was solemnly lowered, marking the end of colonial rule. When the clock struck midnight, a new chapter in Gambian history began: the red, blue, and green national flag, edged with white fimbriations, was hoisted for the first time to the sound of the Gambian national anthem, *For The Gambia Our Homeland*, played by the Police Band.[48] Amidst a week of jubilant celebrations, the newly independent nation emerged as a constitutional monarchy within the Commonwealth, with Dawda Jawara as Prime Minister and Queen Elizabeth II as head of state, represented by Governor-General John Paul. This arrangement lasted just five years. Following a national referendum, The Gambia became a republic on 25 April 1970, with Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara assuming office as its first president.[49] Yet independence brought with it the daunting challenge of state-building from the barest institutional foundations. In many respects, The Gambia had been swept along in the broader momentum of decolonisation rather than propelled by a forceful independence movement of its own. Few Gambians were formally educated, political development had been relatively limited, and constitutional reforms arrived more slowly than elsewhere in the region. The British left behind a skeletal administration: just two hospitals, four secondary schools, an economy reliant almost entirely on a single cash crop—peanuts—and only two financial institutions.[50] Jawara's government thus began its work with modest resources and inherited the uneven legacies of colonial rule.

The Gambia maintained, albeit without deep institutional consolidation, the multi-party politics inherited from colonial rule.[51] However, despite the continued formal existence of a multi-party system under Jawara, the early post-independence years witnessed the steady consolidation of PPP dominance, as the party repositioned itself from a primarily Protectorate-based movement to a national political entity. It strategically employed state patronage to marginalise rivals and broaden its support base. Although Jawara resisted formalising a one-party state or adopting overtly authoritarian measures, his role as executive president, combined with the PPP's enduring parliamentary majority, resulted in a de facto one-party dominant system. Between 1966 and 1994, the PPP effectively neutralised its main opponents, including the United Party and various breakaway factions. Politics during this era was shaped more by personal rivalries and shifting alliances than by clear ideological divisions. While the PPP maintained its core Mandinka support in the former Protectorate, it also sought to project itself as an inclusive national party representing both the former Colony and Protectorate, as well as

[48] Yunus S. Saliu, "The Gambia's Historic Path to Independence: A Nation's New Dawn," *The Voice*, 17 February 2025, https://www.voicegambia.com/2025/02/17/the-gambias-historic-path-to-independence-a-nations-new-dawn/.
[49] Hughes and Perfect, *A Political History of The Gambia*, 3.
[50] Tijan M. Sallah, "Economics and Politics in The Gambia," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 28, no. 4 (1990): 632.
[51] Sait Matty Jaw, Biran Gai, and Nyimasatta Sillah, *The Cost of Parliamentary Politics in The Gambia* (London: Westminster Foundation for Democracy, October 2020), 3, https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Cost-of-Parliamentary-Politics-in-The-Gambia221020.pdf.

all major ethnic groups.[52] This broad-based appeal, coupled with its centrist orientation, left opposition parties struggling to gain meaningful traction.[53] Although The Gambia retained the formal trappings of a multi-party democracy—with regular elections held every five years—a closer look reveals that Jawara presided over a system effectively dominated by the PPP.[54] Opposition parties did contest elections, but the PPP consistently retained power through a combination of patronage, incumbency advantages, and tactical alliances.[55] The term *sembocracy*—derived from the Mandinka word *sembo*, meaning power or force—has been used to describe this system of covert authoritarianism masked by democratic procedures.[56] These practices enabled Jawara to maintain political dominance while preserving the outward appearance of a functioning democracy.

During the post-independence period, politicised Gambian youths found fewer alternative outlets for engagement. The youth wings of political parties were less active than during the struggle for self-government, and while The Gambia Workers' Union remained a force, it had been in gradual decline since 1961. A new central body, The Gambia National Youth Council, was established in November 1963, but it claimed to be non-political and non-sectarian. As a result, some disillusioned young people began to drift towards more radical forms of political expression.[57] This radical dissent was concentrated largely among urban youth, whose frustration stemmed both from ideological aspirations and the more immediate realities of economic and social exclusion. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the Gambian economy had performed relatively well. Groundnut exports, on which the economy heavily depended, commanded high market prices and generated significant foreign exchange earnings. However, this period of growth was disrupted by the global oil crisis, and by the 1980s the economy had effectively collapsed under the weight of rising external debt and inflation.[58] In parallel, the gradual Africanisation of the civil service during the earlier years of independence had enabled some educated radicals to be absorbed into the state through formal employment, which often muted overt opposition. However, by the late 1970s, these opportunities for upward mobility had significantly narrowed, further contributing to youth discontent. At the same time, processes of economic and social modernisation—particularly in Serekunda, Kombo St. Mary, and Brikama—drove a sharp increase in urban populations, fuelled by rural-urban migration. Many of these new urban residents were young men from impoverished rural backgrounds who faced inflation, high unemployment, and declining living standards. These conditions created fertile ground for radical politics among a generation that felt politically excluded and

[52] Major ethnic groups in The Gambia include Mandinka (34.4%), Fula (25.0%), Wolof (15.4%), Jola (9.5%), Serahule (8.2%), and Serer (2.9%). Other ethnic groups—including Krio/Aku, Manjago, Bambara, and others—make up approximately 4.6% of the population.
[53] Hughes and Perfect, *A Political History of The Gambia*, 3.
[54] Abdoulaye Saine, *The Paradox of Third-Wave Democratisation in Africa: The Gambia under AFPRC-APRC Rule, 1994-2008* (New York: Lexington Books, 2009); Arnold Hughes, "The Collapse of the Senegambia Confederation," *The Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 30, no. 2 (1992); Carlene J. Edie, "Democracy in The Gambia: Past, Present, and Prospects for the Future," *Africa Development* 25, no. 3 (2000): 162; David Perfect, "Politics and Society in The Gambia since Independence," *History Compass* 6, no. 2 (2008).
[55] Hughes, "The Collapse."
[56] Saine, *The Paradox of Third-Wave Democratisation in Africa*.
[57] Hughes and Perfect, *A Political History of The Gambia*, 201.
[58] Perfect, "Politics and Society," 430.

economically abandoned.[59] This broader climate of frustration is allegorically captured in *The Magic Calabash*, Nana Grey-Johnson's novel set in the Banjul quartier of New Town. The story centres on Erubami, a former government messenger, whose struggles reflect the suffocating reality of urban poverty and the erosion of hope during the First Republic. In one scene, Erubami attempt to seize a magical calabash from a goblin—a desperate act that symbolises the turn towards fantasy and despair when material change seems out of reach. The novel paints a bleak portrait of everyday life in New Town, where structural abandonment gives rise to collective fatigue and disillusionment:

> Nothing is normal nowadays … people walk in the middle of the road and cannot hear the car horns. Schoolboys are going mad. They take drugs and smoke Jamba… Only the poor have lost their jobs. While everything remains the same at the top, they tell us about the government programs that will make us happy again. But programs don't put food on our table.[60]

In this world, fantasy becomes a form of survival, and despair itself becomes politicised. Though fictional, Grey-Johnson's New Town echoes the conditions that fuelled a real and growing radicalism among urban Gambian youth in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During this period, many disaffected youths were drawn to the ideas of first-generation radical-nationalist leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah and Sékou Touré, whose critiques of neocolonialism—often grounded in pan-Africanist and Marxist-Leninist thought—offered compelling alternatives to the PPP's moderate political agenda. Ghana's offer of scholarships to over one hundred Gambian students in 1962, some of whom trained at the Kwame Nkrumah Ideological Institute in Winneba, served as a key conduit for revolutionary thought. Additional ideological inspiration came from Soviet, Chinese, and Cuban Marxism, as well as from the writings of Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, and, by the 1970s, Steve Biko. These influences often converged into a hybrid political discourse that fused race consciousness with Marxist critiques of underdevelopment and external domination. For some, Libya's Muammar Qaddafi also became a figure of admiration. Collectively, these currents contributed to an increasingly radical youth discourse that denounced the PPP as an instrument of Western imperialism.[61] Between 1979 and 1981, this radicalisation gave rise to a wave of youth resistance led by underground groups such as the Black Scorpions, the Movement for Justice in Africa–Gambia (MOJA-G), and The Gambia Socialist Revolutionary Party. These groups mobilised young people into a state of confrontation, organising acts of arson—including the burning of President Jawara's yacht, the *MV Mansa Kila-ba*—as well as the destruction of markets, street graffiti, and sustained public denigration of state leaders and institutions such as The Gambia Commercial and Development Bank.[62]

In July 1981, amidst severe economic strain caused by falling groundnut prices, prolonged drought, and rising global oil costs, The Gambia was plunged into crisis. After two

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[59] Hughes and Perfect, *A Political History of The Gambia*, 200-201.
[60] Nana Grey-Johnson, *The Magic Calabash* (Banjul: DBC Printers, 2004), 4.
[61] Ceesay, *The Gambia and Pan-Africanism*, 38-39; Hughes and Perfect, *A Political History of The Gambia*, 199-200.
[62] Lamin Cham, "The Kukoi Coup: Four Decades Today," *The Standard*, 30 July 2021, https://standard.gm/the-kukoi-coup-four-decades-today-0/.

decades of relative political stability, a group of disaffected paramilitary police aligned with leftist radicals launched a coup attempt against the Jawara government. Led by 29-year-old Kukoi Samba Sanyang, the insurgents accused the ruling PPP of corruption, tribalism, and subservience to foreign interests. Broadcasting from Radio Gambia, Sanyang denounced the regime for betraying the promises of independence through economic mismanagement and neocolonial complicity. Following the broadcast, exuberant crowds took to the streets of Banjul. With President Jawara abroad attending the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer, the coup escalated rapidly. A Senegalese military intervention, requested by Jawara, ultimately crushed the uprising and restored his government. According to Hassoum Ceesay, the violence lasted eight days, resulting in approximately 1,000 deaths and an estimated US$5 million in property damage caused by looting and arson. The coup was distinctive for being civilian-led, with many of its participants—including taxi drivers, fishermen, and watchmen—drawn from the urban poor.[63] In the aftermath, suspicions of Libyan involvement led to the expulsion of Libyan diplomats and the banning of organisations such as The Gambia Socialist Revolutionary Party and MOJA-G. Dozens of young activists were arrested on charges of armed insurrection, although many MOJA-G affiliates were later released.[64] The unsuccessful rebellion left a deep impression on public morale and ushered in a wave of despair. As Tijan Sallah notes, "many interpreted the bloody revolt as God's predestined will, instead of an avoidable violent expression of youthful frustrations with the status quo."[65] While Jawara's government survived, it emerged significantly weakened, with its legitimacy increasingly questioned and its authority subject to growing public scrutiny.

In response to mounting economic pressures and rising debt, the Gambian government adopted structural adjustment reforms in the mid-1980s, backed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other international donors. Aimed at boosting the economy, curbing inflation, and increasing foreign exchange revenue, these reforms nonetheless failed to resolve the country's fiscal challenges. Despite international support, fiscal deficits persisted, and living standards for most Gambians continued to decline.[66] While between 1966 and 1986 life expectancy at birth had gradually increased by three to four years per five-year period,[67] from 1985 onwards these gains were halved compared to earlier growth rates. By 1981, over 75% of the rural population was malnourished and did not consume enough food to meet minimum caloric requirements,[68] and by 1992, The Gambia was considered one of the poorest states in the world.[69] Besides those residing in rural areas, among the most severely affected were urban youths in Banjul and its surrounding areas, who bore the brunt of civil service retrenchments and currency devaluation. As unskilled workers lost their jobs and opportunities narrowed, many young people came to feel increasingly excluded from the country's economic, social, and political life. Public frustration with corruption, stagnation, and political inertia steadily

[63] Ibid.
[64] Giulia Giovanna Longo, "Unbroken Circles and Unfinished Legacies: A Gambian Story" (Master's thesis, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, 2020), 35.
[65] Sallah, "Economics and Politics," 638.
[66] Edie, "Democracy in The Gambia," 180.
[67] World Bank, *Life Expectancy at Birth, Total (Years) – The Gambia*, World Development Indicators, accessed 9 July 2025, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?locations=GM.
[68] Sallah, "Economics and Politics," 627.
[69] Edie, "Democracy in The Gambia," 179.

deepened, eroding President Jawara's authority after nearly three decades in office. In July 1994—at a time when many African countries were transitioning towards multi-party democracy—The Gambia moved in the opposite direction. A group of junior soldiers seized on widespread disillusionment and staged a military coup, vowing to end the dysfunctions of the First Republic.[70] For many urban youths, the coup was initially welcomed as a break with an exclusionary past and a potential path towards political renewal.

2.3 The Jammeh Regime and the Second Republic (1994-2017)

On the morning of 22 July 1994, the Jawara government was overthrown in a bloodless military coup led by a small group of junior officers from the Gambian National Army, headed by 29-year-old Lieutenant Yahya Jammeh—a native of Kanilai, a small village in Foni Kansala, located about two hours' drive from Banjul. Far from being marginal figures, several of these officers were relatively well educated—Jammeh had attended Gambia High School, while Edward Singhateh, the youngest at 25, was a former student of St. Augustine's High School—and, amidst economic decline and shrinking public sector employment in the 1980s, had viewed the army as a viable career path. Some had also received officer training in the United States or Britain. Unlike the failed 1981 coup attempt, there was little internal resistance and no external intervention, partly due to the dissolution of the Senegambia Confederation, which had ended in December 1989. Promising to redress the failures of the previous regime and return to the barracks within two years, the coup leaders initially enjoyed broad support, particularly among young Gambians. In their first public address, they denounced corruption, branded the PPP's thirty-year rule as tyrannical, and blamed it for the country's persistent underdevelopment.[71]

Jammeh retained power as chairman of the transitional military government, the Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council (AFPRC). During this period, political parties were banned, the press came under tight control, and dissidents in exile were actively targeted.[72] In 1996, the AFPRC was transformed into a political party, the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC), with Jammeh standing as its presidential candidate. Although framed as a return to multiparty democracy, the political environment remained tightly constrained. The main opposition party, the United Democratic Party (UDP), accused the APRC of electoral malpractice before and during the 1996 elections, raising serious concerns about the credibility of the vote.[73] Nevertheless, Jammeh was declared the winner, and the APRC subsequently secured a parliamentary majority in the National Assembly elections of January 1997.[74] Jammeh went on to 'win' the presidential elections of 2001, 2006, and 2011,[75] each increasingly marked by repression, the co-optation of state institutions, and the narrowing of political space.

While Jammeh initially introduced several popular policy initiatives—particularly in education and infrastructure—and publicly championed a seemingly progressive agenda on

[70] Edie, "Democracy in The Gambia," 180.
[71] Perfect, "Politics and Society," 431.
[72] Saine, *The Paradox of Third-Wave Democratisation in Africa*.
[73] Essa Njie and Abdoulaye Saine, "Gambia's 'Billion Year' President – the End of an Era and the Ensuing Political Impasse," *Journal of African Elections* 18, no. 2 (2019): 4.
[74] Hughes and Perfect, *A Political History of The Gambia*, 45.
[75] Ibid.

gender and youth, arguably to consolidate power and attract development aid, the contours of a semi-authoritarian state soon became apparent. His rule increasingly came to be characterised by arbitrariness and theatrical eccentricity, with the regime carrying out widespread human rights abuses aimed at silencing journalists, opposition figures, civilians, and, notably, dissenters within the security forces.[76] One of the more surreal episodes of his presidency was his claim to have discovered a herbal cure for HIV/AIDS, which he personally administered to patients. While Jammeh himself was amassing great wealth and flaunting a résumé filled with bogus awards, the Gambian dalasi depreciated against major world currencies, and the prices of rice and gasoline rose steadily.[77] The security services operated with near-total impunity, with political opponents regularly assassinated, co-opted, or forced into exile. Central to this apparatus of repression were the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) and the 'Junglers', a paramilitary unit tasked with intimidating journalists, political rivals, and, increasingly, civilians. Throughout Jammeh's presidency, protests, strikes, and other forms of dissent were systematically suppressed, and a pervasive atmosphere of fear surrounded even the mildest criticism of the regime. As the stories by informants demonstrate, several recalled a pervasive climate of fear and a culture of silence that characterised everyday life under Jammeh's presidency:

> During Jammeh's time, you couldn't sit on TV and say anything about him apart from something good. Jammeh dominated this country. When it was his birthday, for a whole week you'd see messages on TV from every public institution wishing him a happy birthday. From every institution—ministries, universities, colleges, public enterprises—you'd have messages coming in. Even the telecommunications companies joined in. The same thing happened on 22 July, the anniversary of the year he took over the country. It was always the same trend. It was a one-man show. No one else was allowed to be more relevant than Jammeh.[78]

> He used to have this thing called 'Operation No Compromise'—Jammeh, during his time, had this policy. So that meant whether you stole money, broke the law, or even killed someone, there was no mercy. The full force of the law would be brought down on anybody who broke it. But at the same time, there was corruption, there were human rights violations, killings, and torture. He would seize people's property—if you went out and bought a car that no one else had in the country, Jammeh would take it from you. He was petty like that… There was a lot of terror among the people—people were terrified of him. In fact, we were so afraid to talk about him that we came up with all sorts of nicknames because we didn't want him to know who we were talking about.[79]

> It was very difficult for anyone to openly express their political views—to be affiliated with the party of their choice, and so on. Governance was marked by brutality, disappearances, suppression of the people, poor socio-economic growth, and the like.

[76] Niklas Hultin, "Waiting and Political Transitions: Anticipating the New Gambia," *Critical African Studies* 12, no. 1 (2020): 95.
[77] Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, 221.
[78] Interview with informant, September 2023.
[79] Interview with informant, September 2023.

> That really caused me a great deal of internal turmoil because I believed that, if we truly want to develop this country, people must be free to be true to themselves. I think that's what led me to become more engaged in advocacy.[80]

Despite the risks, protest movements did emerge. On 10–11 April 2000, The Gambia Student Union (GAMSU) led mass demonstrations against the regime.[81] These were triggered by the torture and death of a student, Ebrima Barry, while in detention, and the rape of a 13-year-old schoolgirl by members of the paramilitary forces.[82] The protests—remarkable in a context where public discussion of sexual violence remained taboo—spread across major towns and cities, including Banjul, Basse, Brikama, Farafenni, Serekunda, and Soma. They were met with violent suppression: 16 students, a journalist, and a Red Cross volunteer were killed. Demonstrations of this scale would not re-emerge until the pro-democracy protests of 2016.[83]

Indeed, the broader political atmosphere remained marked by disengagement, particularly among the youth. As Ismaila Ceesay observes: "Under Jammeh's rule, Gambia youths had disengaged themselves from the political process and were never interested in politics. They hardly voted and were not interested in taking up political positions."[84] This political apathy stemmed not only from direct repression but also from a broader sense of futility—the belief that elections lacked legitimacy and that political participation would not yield meaningful change. Youth-led initiatives were frequently undermined, while state-sponsored organisations such as the National Patriotic Students' Association (NAPSA) were deployed to curtail autonomous mobilisation. Headed by Seedy Njie—a youth MP hand-picked by Jammeh's close ally Baba Jobe—NAPSA was established to neutralise the more critical GAMSU. Although intended to suppress dissent, NAPSA nonetheless helped sustain Jammeh's popularity among certain segments of the youth population, particularly students at Gambia College and UTG, many of whom benefitted from state patronage.[85] Moreover, rather than fostering civic engagement, regime-aligned youth wings became instruments of authoritarian control. Among the most notorious were the Green Youths—also known as the Green Boys and Girls—a paramilitary youth group established by Jammeh that functioned as an informal extension of the ruling party and came to symbolise political intimidation. They took their name from the green colour of the APRC's party flag, and their public presence often served as a visual reminder of the regime's reach. In addition to their role in intimidating political opponents, members of the Green Youths were also reported to have taken part in the so-called 'witch-hunts' that unfolded in rural areas, during which dozens of individuals—often elderly—were abducted, beaten, forced to ingest hallucinogenic substances, and coerced into

[80] Interview with Omar, 20 September 2023.
[81] Alieu Darboe, *The Gambia: 1994-Present* (International Centre on Non-Violent Conflict, February 2010), 1-4, https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/darboe_the_gambia.pdf.
[82] Sainabou Taal, "For The Gambia, Our Homeland: The Diaspora, Development and Politics" (PhD diss., University College London, 2017), 14; "'Kalama Revolutionists' Alleges Rape by Paramilitary," *Foroyaa*, 15 October 2019, https://foroyaa.net/kalama-revolutionist-alleges-rape-by-paramilitary/.
[83] Lamin Keita, "Youth and Protest: How "#Gambia" Ended Decades of Autocratic Rule," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 57, no. 3 (2023): 590.
[84] Ismaila Ceesay, *Youth Candidacy in the 2017 National Assembly Elections in The Gambia* (unpublished manuscript, 21 pp., shared with the author, October 2023), 14.
[85] Keita, "Youth and protest," 590.

confessions.[86] As one informant reflected: "The regime was not genuine about the plight of young people. Movements like the Green Boys were used by the former regime as attack dogs. They tortured people and did many sorts of bad things."[87]

On the international stage, Jammeh's conduct grew increasingly erratic: he withdrew The Gambia from the Commonwealth, severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan, exited the International Criminal Court, and in 2015 unilaterally declared the country an Islamic Republic without parliamentary or ministerial consultation. Despite repeated proclamations that The Gambia would become "the next Singapore," the economy remained stagnant, undermined by chronic mismanagement and deeply entrenched corruption, with Jammeh routinely accused of diverting public resources to secure elite loyalty.[88] Although elections were held at regular intervals, they were widely perceived as fraudulent, and the political landscape remained tightly controlled. Opposition groups were banned, while widespread censorship, a tightly regulated state media, and repressive laws were used to stifle dissent.[89] Parliamentarians were expected to demonstrate loyalty to the executive rather than to their constituents, giving the ruling APRC a sustained political advantage. UDP, as the main opposition force, remained active but faced persistent harassment, surveillance, and arbitrary detention. In 2015, the regime further entrenched its authoritarian grip through the passage of the Elections (Amendment) Act, which raised party registration fees to one million dalasi (approximately US$20,000) and imposed stringent requirements—including biennial congresses, annual audited accounts, and at least 10,000 registered members. These measures were widely condemned by opposition parties as deliberately exclusionary, particularly in a context where the average monthly salary for a government employee was just 3,000 dalasi (around U$45).[90]

By 2016, a political crisis was steadily unfolding as Jammeh's grip on power weakened. His increasingly erratic pronouncements alienated large segments of the population as well as key international donors. Moves towards a more fundamentalist interpretation of Islam unsettled both the Christian minority and many Gambian Muslims, who viewed this shift as a departure from the country's historically pluralistic religious culture. At the same time, Jammeh's use of ethnically charged rhetoric further eroded his legitimacy. In response, many young Gambians took to social media to reject identity-based divisions, circulating slogans such as "My tribe is Gambia," "Tribalism has no place in our nation," and "To hell with tribalism."[91] Relations with Senegal also deteriorated amidst suspicions of Jammeh's support for rebels in Casamance. Domestically, the increasing scale and visibility of emigration became both a source of embarrassment and a potent symbol of state failure. Migration increasingly came to be seen not merely as an ambition, but as a necessary response to blocked opportunities at home. This became particularly visible in the years surrounding Jammeh's fall, when thousands of young Gambians risked the dangerous journey across the Sahara and the Mediterranean. In 2016 alone, nearly 12,000 Gambians arrived in Italy by sea, placing the country among the top

[86] Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, 258.
[87] Interview with Muhammed S., 4 October 2023.
[88] Hultin, "Waiting and Political Transitions," 95.
[89] Jaw, Gai, and Sillah, *The Cost of Parliamentary Politics*, 4.
[90] Satang Nabaneh, "New Gambia and the Remaking of the Constitution," *ConstitutionNet*, 16 March 2017, https://constitutionnet.org/news/new-gambia-and-remaking-constitution.
[91] Keita, "Youth and Protest," 598; James Courtright, "Gambia's Truth Commission, *Africa Is a Country*, 11 November 2020, https://africasacountry.com/2020/11/gambias-truth-commission.

five nationalities crossing irregularly from Libya.[92] This exodus also gave rise to new forms of resistance. The diaspora became instrumental in sustaining a transnational campaign to hold Jammeh accountable. Critical narratives circulated widely through online radio and social media platforms, while financial support from abroad provided crucial resources for opposition movements.[93] Diaspora communities encouraged relatives to vote against Jammeh, organised protests abroad, and launched online media platforms including *The Fatu Network*, *Gainako*, *Jollof News*, *Maa Fanta*, and several others. Hosted across various countries, these outlets gave the diaspora transnational reach and helped shape political discourse beyond The Gambia's borders.[94] Activist groups like the Democratic Union of Gambian Activists, based in the United States, worked with young people to stage protests and called on opposition leaders to unite, while diaspora-led youth initiatives such as the Gambia Democracy Fund raised money to support the coalition.[95] The diaspora's involvement acted as a catalyst—fostering opposition unity and strengthening belief in the possibility of change through the ballot box.

Within The Gambia, the authoritarian apparatus remained deeply entrenched in the lead-up to the election. Jammeh continued to rely on a coercive security structure and a complicit judiciary to torture, imprison, and in some cases kill political opponents. While this repression had long served to consolidate his control, the arrest and subsequent death in custody of Ebrima Solo Sandeng—a respected UDP youth leader and long-time political activist—marked a significant rupture. On 14 April 2016, Sandeng led a peaceful demonstration at Westfield Junction—the main roundabout at the end of Kairaba Avenue—calling for electoral reform. He was arrested along with approximately 27 others and detained by the NIA, where he was tortured and died shortly thereafter. News of his death triggered a wave of protests and civic mobilisation, particularly among young Gambians not formally affiliated with any political party. His killing catalysed the emergence of the #NewGambia movement, with the hashtag #JammehMUSTGO gaining traction across social media platforms. Lamin Keita notes that Sandeng's death rapidly acquired symbolic force, comparable in its resonance to Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia in 2010.[96] In the wake of the killing and the arrest of 18 UDP members including party leader Lawyer Ousainou Darboe, new and informal forms of resistance emerged. Among them was the Kalama Revolution—a grassroots mobilisation led primarily by women—who gathered daily in Banjul during the court proceedings of Lawyer Darboe and his co-accused. Drawing on cultural symbolism and embodied protest, they carried *kalama* (Mandinka for 'calabash') gourd ladles and sang freedom songs, transforming domestic utensils into tools of political defiance. The calabash came to symbolise not only the material hardships women faced in feeding their families, but also the broader suffering endured under

[92] Louise Hunt, "Returning from Libyan Detention, Young Gambians Try to Change the Migration Exodus Mindset," *The New Humanitarian*, 16 Augustus 2018, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2018/08/16/returning-libyan-detention-young-gambians-try-change-migration-exodus-mindset.
[93] Sait Matty Jaw, "Restoring Democracy in The Gambia? An Analysis of Diaspora Engagement in Gambian Politics" (Master's thesis, University of Bergen, 2017).
[94] Ibid., 88.
[95] Keita, "Youth and protest," 595-96.
[96] Ibid., 591.

Jammeh's rule.[97] This gendered mobilisation added a powerful symbolic layer to the anti-regime struggle and further intensified the groundswell of popular dissent.

The intensification of domestic discontent converged with mounting frustration among the Gambian diaspora, particularly over repeated failures to build a strong and unified opposition alliance. These frustrations—compounded by poor opposition performances in the 2006 and 2011 elections—contributed to a growing consensus: that unseating Jammeh in 2016 would require unprecedented political unity.[98] In mid-October of that year, seven of the country's nine opposition parties came together to form Coalition 2016. By the end of the month, the coalition had agreed to nominate Adama Barrow—a relatively unknown realtor-turned-politician—as its presidential candidate. This was a rare and potent moment of political convergence, galvanised by a shared determination to end authoritarian rule. Both youth and veteran opposition figures—within the country and across the diaspora—played an instrumental role in building trust and coordination between historically fragmented parties. Young diaspora activists worked closely with seasoned opposition members at home to mobilise support, encourage voter turnout, and disseminate campaign messages across linguistic and literacy barriers. Informal organising efforts flourished, with regular meetings, WhatsApp groups, and coordinated outreach strategies enabling campaign messages to circulate widely and effectively.

Digital platforms became crucial channels of civic engagement, particularly among youth, who published coalition goals and distributed materials across social media. Hashtag movements such as #GambiaDecides served not only to energise the electorate but also to prompt critical reassessments of continued support for Jammeh.[99] "Every community had its own WhatsApp group," a community youth leader recalled. "We recorded audios in local languages, and these things went viral. We spoke about the issues—what Jammeh was doing. We spoke about the looting and the gross human rights violations. People understood for the first time that these things were happening in the country."[100] WhatsApp's voice format proved especially effective in reaching non-literate audiences, with tailored audio messages in Wolof and Mandinka helping the campaign extend beyond written communication. As daily life became increasingly precarious and repression deepened, this broad-based coalition succeeded in transforming widespread discontent into a decisive electoral force—culminating in "the first defeat of a sitting Gambian president at the ballot box."[101]

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[97] Isatou Bittaye-Jobe, "The Impact of State Violence on Women During the 22 Years of Dictatorship in The Gambia" (Master's thesis, City University of New York, 2021), 45.
[98] Njie and Saine, "Gambia's 'Billion Year' President ," 5.
[99] Saine, *The Paradox of Third-Wave Democratisation in Africa*.
[100] Interview with K., 7 November 2023.
[101] Niklas Hultin et al., "Autocracy, Migration, and The Gambia's 'Unprecedented' 2016 Election," *African Affairs* 116, no. 463 (2017): 323.

2.4 The Barrow Administration and the Emergence of the 'New Gambia' (2017-)

In the lead-up to the election, Jammeh characteristically predicted "the biggest landslide in the history of the country."[102] It was left to Gambian voters to prove him wrong. And indeed, on 1 December 2016, in a surprising turn of events, they voted for change—ousting one of the longest-serving rulers in post-Cold War Africa.[103] Though Jammeh initially conceded defeat, he reversed his position within days, alleging electoral fraud and triggering a tense political standoff known as the 'Impasse'. The #GambiaHasDecided movement—alongside offshoot hashtags such as #GambiaRising, #GambiaWomenRising, and #EnoughIsEnough—organised shutdowns and stay-at-home protests, while fractures emerged within the government and security forces. While some people chose to remain in the country, several thousand—mainly women and children—crossed into Senegal, and to a lesser extent Guinea-Bissau, fearing a possible outbreak of violence.[104]

Regional pressure intensified as West African leaders pursued mediation, and when Jammeh refused to cede power on 19 January 2017, ECOWAS launched a military intervention. Two days later, Jammeh fled into exile in Equatorial Guinea, and the Gambian military welcomed ECOWAS troops, who secured State House in anticipation of Barrow's return from Dakar.[105] The transition marked The Gambia's first peaceful transfer of power.[106] As Amat Jeng notes, few observers had anticipated Jammeh's defeat, given the regime's deep entrenchment and financial advantage.[107] Multiple factors contributed to his removal, including widespread economic discontent, low voter turnout, and the destruction of fraudulent voter cards by disgruntled soldiers. ECOWAS's role during the impasse was critical, but the mobilisation of young Gambians proved equally pivotal. As Keita argues, youth—long marginalised from meaningful political participation—mobilised creatively and persistently, sustaining opposition efforts in the face of intimidation and repression.[108] Their activism, coordinated with civil society, opposition parties, and a digitally connected diaspora whose financial contributions proved vital, played an instrumental role. Given this transnational reach, young Gambians are increasingly well positioned to harness global networks and resources not only for protest, but also for political leadership itself.[109]

In the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, there was widespread recognition that the country required not only a comprehensive institutional overhaul but also a national reckoning with the entrenched legacy of authoritarian rule. This aspiration quickly became central to the narrative of Barrow's so-called 'New Gambia'. The message was clear: a break with the past had begun. Yet the years that followed would reveal the uneven, fragmented, and politically fraught nature of the transition. More than eight years on, some democratic gains have undoubtedly been made. Chief among them was the establishment of the Truth,

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[102] Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, 264.
[103] Njie and Saine, "Gambia's 'Billion Year' President ," 2.
[104] "Thousands Flee The Gambia as Crisis Deepens," *Al Jazeera*, 19 January 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/1/19/thousands-flee-the-gambia-as-crisis-deepens.
[105] Perfect, "The Gambian 2016 Presidential Election," 329.
[106] Hultin et al., "Autocracy," 323.
[107] Amat Jeng, "Gambia's Democratic Transition: A Case Study of the Role of Political Elites in Democratic Transition" (Master's Thesis, Uppsala University, 2020), 8-9.
[108] Keita, "Youth and protest."
[109] Ibid.

Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC), launched in 2019 to investigate human rights violations committed under Jammeh's rule. Over the course of two years, the TRRC held public hearings, gathered testimonies from victims and perpetrators, and documented widespread abuses—including torture, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances. Its final report, submitted in 2021, issued bold recommendations for prosecutions, institutional reform, and reparations. While the government pledged to implement most of these in 2022, progress has been slow and politically fraught.

Despite successive peaceful elections and modest improvements in civil liberties, public disillusionment remains widespread—fuelled by allegations of corruption, stalled reforms, and the limited transformation of state institutions still shaped by authoritarian legacies. Barrow's own political trajectory has further complicated the transition. His refusal to honour the coalition's three-year mandate, his formation of the National People's Party (NPP), and his political alliance with elements of the former ruling party, the APRC, have deepened public scepticism and fractured the reformist consensus. The collapse of the draft constitution in 2020—following partisan disagreements over term limits and the role of religion—marked a critical setback, revealing the fragility of democratic renewal and the difficulty of building a new political order on contested foundations.

Although youth-led, feminist, and civil society activism has gained significant visibility in the national arena, the state's response has at times echoed past authoritarian tendencies—marked by the use of bans, arrests, and police violence. At the same time, broader efforts towards democratic consolidation have been further complicated by global crises. The Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine have had far-reaching repercussions for the Gambian economy, exacerbating inflation, disrupting trade flows, and constraining already limited state capacity. Many Gambians now find themselves grappling with a growing disjuncture between expanded civil freedoms and enduring material insecurity. As one informant explained, the fragility of democratic gains and the creeping return of authoritarian habits remain pressing concerns:

> On the question of justice and the democratisation of this country, we've made some progress—I must recognise that. But we are still far from getting it done. And the pace at which we are moving is really slow. I think people are starting to get relaxed again, and this is how Jammeh became a dictator. He didn't become a dictator from day one. Day one, he was a good guy. He was promising all these changes—because he was the guy who came to save us from... from Jawara's lazy, corrupt government, according to himself. So he started to learn that he could get away with things. He could touch our people and get away with it, kill them and get away with it, steal money and get away with it. So he kept doing it, until it became so open—because nobody said anything. And right now, where we are, people are starting to get relaxed in this country. And so Barrow and his government are starting to get away with small, small things. And getting away with small things is what lets you get away with big things—like torture, like murder, right? So I think the completion of the democratisation process rests in the hands of the people, not the government. The government is never going to lead the change that might actually disrupt their current flow. And some people in power—when

> the change that we want happens—they might lose that power. So they're not going to make it happen.[110]

The informant's reflection encapsulates a broader sense of political scepticism and structural critique that was echoed in many of my conversations. His words suggest that while the state may officially champion democratic reform, those in power often have little incentive to pursue changes that would threaten their own position. This observation points to a central tension within the so-called 'New Gambia': the disjuncture between official narratives of transition and the everyday realities of governance, accountability, and public trust. These tensions are not only structural but also deeply affective—shaped by collective memories of impunity, violence, and betrayal that remain vivid in the minds of many Gambians. The remark also foregrounds a key theme of this thesis—namely, that the burden of democratisation is increasingly perceived to rest not with the state, but with ordinary citizens, particularly youth. In this framing, democratisation is not simply a top-down process of institutional reform but a contested and ongoing struggle in which political agency is exercised from below. The fragility of democratic gains, as the informant suggests, lies not only in the enduring legacies of authoritarianism, but also in the absence of sustained popular pressure to hold power to account.

2.5 Conclusions

This chapter has traced the historical and political trajectories of The Gambia, from colonial subjugation to contemporary democratic aspirations. From the fragmented structures of British indirect rule to the one-party dominance of the First Republic, and from the authoritarian consolidation under Jammeh to the tentative reforms of the Barrow administration, each era has shaped the contours of civic life and political possibility. While democratic institutions have gradually taken root, they remain haunted by legacies of patronage, repression, and uneven development. The role of youth across these periods reveals both persistent patterns of exclusion and moments of rupture. In the colonial and early post-independence periods, youth engagement was largely channelled through party structures or labour activism. Under Jammeh, political disillusionment and coercion curtailed autonomous mobilisation, though expressions of dissent occasionally broke through in symbolic and dramatic ways. Only in more recent years—especially around the 2016 election—have young Gambians begun, or perhaps been permitted, to assert themselves more visibly as political actors, drawing on transnational networks, digital technologies, and grassroots coalitions to challenge entrenched power.

Yet the democratic transition remains fragile. As the closing quote suggests, the risk of political backsliding is real—particularly when popular vigilance fades and governments face little sustained pressure to deliver meaningful reform. The qualitative research I conducted in The Gambia—through everyday conversations and encounters with young people in Banjul and its urban peripheries in late 2023 and early 2024—coincided with a moment in which many of the core challenges of the transition had either stalled, deepened, or taken on new forms. The slow pace of transitional justice, the collapse of constitutional renewal, and the persistence of security sector impunity continued to shape public discourse, each pointing to a deeper struggle

[110] Interview with informant, September 2023.

over the direction and ownership of the democratic project. This was also a period marked by the fading euphoria of the 'New Gambia'. A spate of armed robberies, shootings, and even a high-profile bank heist provoked public anxiety and revealed new dimensions of insecurity. Meanwhile, disappointment and, to a lesser extent, renewed protest among youth reflected a growing disillusionment with empty promises and limited avenues for meaningful participation.

In many respects, the transition appears constrained by the lingering legacies of authoritarian rule and enduring failures of inclusion. It is within this contested and evolving landscape that I explore the role of young people—as critics, organisers, and political actors. Their engagement does not arise in isolation but is historically situated, shaped by generations of negotiation with the structures of the state, and animated by both memory and hope. The remainder of this study investigates, through interpretive ethnography, how experiences and expectations of marginalisation are lived and negotiated in everyday life, and how they intersect with the ongoing, uneven process of democratisation. The following chapter sets out the conceptual framework and theoretical insights that underpin this analysis, offering the key pillars on which the thesis stands.

3. Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Insights

This chapter examines the conceptual framework and theoretical insights that guide the study's analysis of youth civic and political engagement in post-authoritarian Gambia. It develops a situated understanding of 'youth' as a socially constructed and relational category, shaped by intersecting dynamics of class, gender, geography, and education, with particular attention to the urban context. Rather than approaching youth as a fixed demographic, the chapter examines how young people are both positioned by, and position themselves within, broader structures of exclusion, aspiration, and generational hierarchy. It then turns to Henrik Vigh's conceptualisation of social navigation as a key analytical tool for understanding how young Gambians manoeuvre through uncertainty, precarity, and shifting political opportunities. In this context, uncertainty is not simply ambient but is deeply intertwined with the country's ongoing political transition—marked by both democratic possibility and the lingering legacies of authoritarianism. The chapter engages with scholarship that foregrounds how political transition is not only institutional but also lived and interpreted, shaped by memory, structural constraint, and the ambivalence of change. Taken together, these insights provide a grounded lens for analysing how youth respond to and experience the country's post-authoritarian landscape—not only through formal actions, but also through everyday acts of adaptation, critique, and imagination.

3.1 Conceptualising 'Youth' and Urban Geographies of Youth in Africa

The category of 'African youth' has gained increasing prominence in academic and policy debates since the early 2000s, largely due to the sheer scale of the continent's young population. Africa remains the youngest region in the world, with approximately 70% of its population under the age of 30,[111] and more than 400 million individuals aged between 15 and 35—a figure projected to exceed 830 million by 2050.[112] This demographic weight has placed youth at the centre of development, migration and security discourses, often framed through the dual lens of governmentality: both as a latent threat and a latent resource.[113] The focus on youth has also intensified in light of political unrest, rebellion, and migratory movements, particularly since the wave of popular uprisings that swept through the Middle East and North Africa starting in the early 2010s, and the steady flow of young Africans towards the global North. Yet despite their numerical dominance, many young people remain structurally excluded, caught within deepening generational and spatial inequalities that hinder their access to power, opportunity, and meaningful participation.[114] At the same time, however, young people across the continent have begun to seize the opportunities afforded by technological connectivity. The current generation of African youth is more educated than any before, with unprecedented access to

[111] Peter Kelly and Annelies Kamp, eds., *A Critical Youth Studies for the 21st Century* (Boston: BRILL, 2015), 7.
[112] African Union, *Youth Development*, African Union website, accessed 10 June 2025, https://au.int/en/youth-development.
[113] Augustine Ikelegbe and Dauda Garuba, "Youth and Conflicts in West Africa: Regional Threats and Potentials," in *ECOWAS and the Dynamics of Conflict and Peacebuilding*, ed. Thomas Jaye, Dauda Garuba, and Stella Amadi (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2011), 99.
[114] Bleck, Lwere, and Sangaré, "Youth in West and Central Africa," 519-41.

information through mobile phones, social media, and internet platforms. Digital spaces such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X serve not merely as tools of leisure, but as avenues for imagining lives beyond national borders, engaging in transnational debates about governance, economic justice, and social change, and comparing their everyday realities with those of influencers and peers across the globe. These technologies have enabled new forms of expression and solidarity, and in recent years, many of the continent's most visible youth-led movements have been sustained—if not sparked—by the affordances of digital platforms, which have allowed young people to circumvent traditional hierarchies, assert political agency, and claim space in both national and global arenas.[115]

Conceptualising who qualifies or is categorised as youth is far from straightforward. While the African Union designates youth as those aged 15 to 35, institutional and cultural definitions vary widely. The United Nations (UN) and several international agencies often adopt the narrower range of 15 to 24, while others, such as the Commonwealth, extend the category to 29. In The Gambia, definitions have shifted over time: the National Youth Policy (2009–2018) classified youth as those aged 13 to 30, whereas the revised policy (2019–2028) adopted the broader 15 to 35 range, aligning with the African Union's framework. However, such numerical cut-offs fail to capture the full social meaning of youth. As anthropological and sociological perspectives emphasise, youth is not merely a biological or chronological stage, but a socially and historically constructed category whose meaning is fluid and context-specific.[116] The boundaries of youthhood are shaped by local norms and generational hierarchies, and must be understood as socially negotiated rather than biologically fixed. In some settings, these thresholds for adulthood hinge on access to marriage, income, and social recognition. In Kenya, youth has traditionally been linked to a stage of aspiration and ambition. In Lesotho, Christian Boehm characterises youth as a liminal phase, a suspended period during which adult status remains out of reach.[117] To become what Vigh calls *homi completto*—the "complete man"—one must typically attain both symbolic and material resources, including the ability to marry and support dependents.[118] Drawing on his study of the aspirations and strategies of young urban hustlers, Ceesay writes:

> In The Gambia the social category of youth is constituted by a characteristic set of conditions that begin somewhere in adolescence and extend for many as far as their late twenties or even early thirties. These conditions include having not yet attained the widely standard markers of adulthood which can entail income, marriage and childrearing or a combination of them. Thus, young men in their late thirties or early forties who lack these markers are still considered youth.[119]

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[115] Bleck, Lwere, and Sangaré, "Youth in West and Central Africa," 520.
[116] Catrine Christiansen, Mats Utas, and Henrik E. Vigh, eds., *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood: Social Becoming in an African Context* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2006), 10.
[117] Christian Boehm, "Industrial Labour, Material Strategy and Changing Livelihood Trajectories among Young Women in Lesotho," in *Navigating Youth Generating Adulthood*, ed. Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh.
[118] Henrik E. Vigh, "Social Death and Violent Life Chances," in *Navigating Youth Generating Adulthood*, ed. Christiansen, Utas, Vigh, 46-49.
[119] Ismaila Ceesay, "Aligners, Lovers and Deceptors: Aspirations and Strategies of Young Urban Hustlers in The Gambia" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2017), 34.

This highlights the insufficiency of age alone in capturing the lived realities of youth, particularly in societies where economic insecurity and shifting social norms delay the transition to adulthood. Structural challenges such as high unemployment, precarious livelihoods, and economic instability have collectively prolonged this transition, creating what Alcinda Honwana calls "waithood"—a condition of protracted suspension between childhood and adulthood in which full social and economic participation is indefinitely deferred.[120] In urban Ghana, for example, economic hardship frequently delays key transitions such as employment, marriage, and home ownership,[121] while in Madagascar, Jennifer Cole describes youth as no longer a temporary life stage, but rather a condition in which many remain indefinitely caught, shaped by economic decline and increasingly uncertain futures.[122] Honwana notes:

> Young people in waithood are pushed out of the system and forced to survive on the margins of society. Rejected by the state and the formal sector of the economy, they create new spaces and mechanisms for survival and operate in subcultures outside hegemonic structures.[123]

This points to a broader understanding of youth as a structurally mediated position, shaped as much by exclusion as by transition. Youthhood, therefore, should not be viewed as a neutral or natural phase of life, but rather as a politically charged condition, shaped by institutional and structural forces that delimit access to adulthood and social recognition. In many African contexts, these forces are embedded in gerontocracies that privilege age and systematically restrict young people's access to power, resources, and decision-making opportunities.[124]

Within this context, youth is also deeply gendered. While dominant discourses frequently centre on the experiences of young men, young women often face particularly precarious—and frequently invisible—transitions to adulthood. In many West and Central African societies, patriarchal norms intersect with generational hierarchies, compounding forms of exclusion that leave young women underrepresented in political, economic, and civic domains.[125] Girls are frequently regarded as adults immediately after puberty through the social expectations of marriage and motherhood, whereas boys may continue to be defined as youth until they achieve financial independence. Yet rising male economic precarity increasingly delays marriage, which in turn extends the period of social suspension for many young women. In The Gambia, as Isatou Touray observes, a patriarchal and gerontocratic order assigns leadership to men and caregiving to women—a model that is increasingly under strain due to high levels of unemployment and economic uncertainty.[126] These dynamics underscore once

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[120] Alcinda M. Honwana, *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa* (Sterling: Kumarian Press, 2012), 19.
[121] Jennifer Burrell, *Invisible Users: Youth in the Internet Cafes of Urban Ghana* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012).
[122] Jennifer Cole, "The Jaombilo of Tamatave (Madagascar), 1992-2004: Reflections on Youth and Globalisation," *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 4 (2005).
[123] Honwana, *The Time of Youth*, 23.
[124] Elina Oinas, Henri Onodera, and Leena Suurpää, eds., *What Politics?: Youth and Political Engagement in Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 3.
[125] Bleck, Lwere, Sangaré, "Youth in West and Central Africa," 520.
[126] Isatou Touray, "Sexuality and Women's Sexual Rights in The Gambia," *IDS Bulletin* 27, no. 5 (2006); Ceesay, "Aligners, Lovers, and Deceptors," 84.

again that youth is not only a matter of age, but a socially constructed and relational position, shaped by intersecting axes of gender, class, education, and access to opportunity. Global influences further complicate this landscape: among younger urban women in Senegal, for instance, traditional marriage models are increasingly being rejected in favour of companionate unions, reflecting broader transformations in gender relations across urban West Africa.[127]

While the category of youth across Africa is shaped by a diversity of cultural, structural, and economic forces, this thesis is particularly concerned with youth experiences as they unfold within urban contexts. Urbanisation has become a defining feature of contemporary African life, with profound implications for how youth experience and navigate structural conditions, political change, and everyday life. Notably, Africa's urban population has grown significantly—from 27% in 1950 to 40% in 2015—and is projected to reach 60% by 2050.[128] In fact, Africa south of the Sahara is urbanising more rapidly than any other region, having witnessed a 600% increase in its urban population over the past 35 years.[129] While megacities often dominate the narrative, secondary cities—urban centres with populations between 100,000 and one million—now house over 40% of urban residents and are expected to absorb two-thirds of future growth.[130] Although many African cities predate colonialism, the colonial period marked a turning point, accelerating rural-to-urban migration as individuals sought new opportunities in expanding towns and cities.[131] These urban centres offered access to wage labour, formal education, and new forms of mobility, while also providing an escape from the patriarchal and often coercive structures of rural life. They were also spaces of exclusion and control, marked by overcrowding, volatility, and the imposition of colonial policing beyond the bounds of customary authority.[132] Urban migration intensified after the Second World War and exploded in the 1990s with the onset of neoliberal reforms and global economic restructuring, which increasingly concentrated investment and opportunity in urban areas.[133] This period also coincided with a wave of political liberalisation, as authoritarian regimes gave way to multiparty systems and new constitutions that institutionalised elections, press freedom, and civil liberties.[134] Cities became vital arenas of mobilisation, where youth and civil society

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[127] Véronique Gilbert, "Mokk Pooj: Gender, Interpretive Labour, and Sexual Imaginary in Senegal's Art/Work of Seduction" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2017); Hélène Neveu Kringelbach, "'Marrying Out' For Love: Women's Narratives of Polygyny and Alternative Marriage Choices in Contemporary Senegal," *African Studies Review* 59, no. 1 (2016).

[128] Joseph Teye, *Migration, Inequality, and Development in Africa: Trends, Impacts, and Policy Implications* (New York: UN Expert Group Meeting on Sustainable Development Goal 10 and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration, October, 2018), https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/unpd_egm_201811_joseph_teye.pdf.

[129] Marc Sommers, "Urban Youth in Africa," *Environment & Urbanisation* 22, no. 2 (2010): 319.

[130] Liam Riley and Jonathan Crush, *Transforming Urban Food Systems in Secondary Cities in Africa* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); OECD et al., *Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics 2025: Planning for Urban Expansion*, West African Studies (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1787/2a47845c-en.

[131] Catherine Coquery and Mary Baker, *The History of African Cities South of the Sahara: From the Origins to Colonisation* (Princeton, NJ: Wiener, 2005); Bill Freund, *The African City: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[132] Antoinette Burton, *African Underclass: Urbanisation, Crime, and Colonial Order in Dar es Salaam* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 8.

[133] Pádraig Carmody and Francis Owusu, "Neoliberalism, Urbanisation, and Change in Africa," in *Africa under Neoliberalism*, ed. Nana Poku and Jim Whitman (London: Routledge, 2018).

[134] Nic Cheeseman, *Democracy in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

organisations challenged one-party rule and advocated for democratic reform.[135] Young people joined political parties, civic associations, and—in some contexts such as Uganda—even gained formal representation through legislative quotas.[136]

Today, the reality of urban life for many youth remains one of precarity. Informal settlements dominate the urban landscape, with limited access to sanitation, healthcare, and housing.[137] Youth are often the most vulnerable, experiencing displacement through eviction, natural disaster or family breakdown.[138] Although cities continue to attract youth seeking education, employment and healthcare, most find themselves excluded from formal opportunities. Informal employment is the norm, comprising 95% of youth labour and nearly 70% of gross domestic product in some regions.[139] With more than half of urban youth unemployed or underemployed,[140] and over 300 million expected to seek work by 2050,[141] the socio-economic pressures of city life are unlikely to ease. Along similar lines, these patterns of urban exclusion and youth vulnerability are mirrored in The Gambia, where young people are similarly drawn to cities by the promise of opportunity but often encounter structural barriers and economic insecurity.

Urbanisation in The Gambia has accelerated significantly in recent decades, fuelled largely by internal migration from rural areas.[142] Today, the country ranks among the most urbanised in Africa south of the Sahara,[143] with over two-thirds of the population living in the Greater Banjul Area—a sprawling conurbation that includes the capital city Banjul, Kanifing Municipality, and, increasingly, the northern parts of Brikama in the West Coast Region, commonly referred to as the Kombos.[144]Young people, in particular, relocate to urban centres in search of education, employment, and opportunity, contributing to a youthful concentration in coastal cities. Many live with extended family members, a practice often rooted in the belief that guidance from a non-parental guardian can support their success in new environments. Yet, despite these movements, strong social ties to rural communities are typically maintained, facilitated by mobile phones and social media. Urbanisation has also brought shifting socio-economic dynamics. While urban centres such as Banjul and Kanifing reported lower poverty rates in 2017—17% compared to 70% in rural areas—they also face higher rates of youth

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[135] Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Jeffrey Paller, "From Urban Crisis to Political Opportunity," in *Africa under Neoliberalism*, ed. Poku and Whitman.

[136] Amy Stephenson Patterson, Tracy Kuperus, and Megan Hershey, *Africa's Urban Youth: Challenging Marginalisation, Claiming Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 7.

[137] Thomas Bollyky, *Plagues and the Paradox of Progress* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 133.

[138] Graham Tipple and Suzanne Speak, *The Hidden Millions: Homelessness in Developing Countries* (London: Routledge, 2009).

[139] Eric Scheye and Eric Pelser, "Emerging crimes / Africa's development models must change," *ENACT Observer*, 17 November 2020, https://enactafrica.org/enact-observer/africas-development-models-must-change; Matteo Rizzo, *Taken for a Ride: Grounding Neoliberalism, Precarious Labour, and Public Transport in an African Metropolis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7.

[140] Bollyky, *Plagues*, 100.

[141] World Bank, *Migration and Development: A Role for the World Bank Group* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2016), https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/690381472677671445/pdf/108105-BR-PUBLIC-SecM2016-0242-2.pdf.

[142] OECD et al., *Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics 2025*, 31.

[143] Ibid.

[144] The 'Kombos' is a commonly used term referring to the western, urbanised part of The Gambia.

unemployment, particularly among those aged 20 to 24.[145] Rural youth are more often absorbed into informal agricultural labour, whereas urban economies offer fewer stable points of entry into the workforce. Simultaneously, rural regions remain disadvantaged in terms of access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, underlining the persistent inequalities that shape the urban–rural divide.

Yet African urban youth are not merely victims of marginality. They may navigate the constraints of city life with improvisation, resilience, and creativity. Far from being passive, they engage in diverse forms of agency, from civic engagement and protest to entrepreneurship and cultural production.[146] As scholars have argued, urban youth often perceive their citizenship as distinct from that of older generations—more relational, aspirational, and grounded in everyday struggles over employment, gender justice, health, and safety.[147] In Tanzania, this finds expression in the term *vijana*; in Uganda, in critiques of "older people"; and in Ghana, through self-identification as "future leaders."[148] These discourses articulate youthhood as both a personal identity and a collective condition. Young people thus contest binary portrayals that reduce them to either threats or assets.[149]

Within the constraints of waithood, cities may offer zones of experimentation, leisure, and alternative belonging. In The Gambia and Ghana, some young people find moral and spiritual structure in movements such as the Tablighi Jama'at and Pentecostal churches, particularly when migration plans falter or employment remains elusive.[150] Others draw on global youth styles and aesthetics to forge solidarity through music, fashion and digital media. In Kano, Nigeria, young men join neighbourhood gangs and adopt reggae and hip hop identities to gain visibility in a society that often overlooks them.[151] Brad Weiss shows how youth in Arusha, Tanzania, decorate their worlds with signs of imagined global belonging—from barbershops named after foreign cities to walls plastered with Black American celebrities.[152]

This thesis approaches youth as a socially constructed and contextually contingent category, offering a grounded analysis of how urban youth in The Gambia articulate their identities, engage with political life, and navigate structural constraint. Youth is not a biological stage, but a political position, often situated between dependence and autonomy, aspiration and exclusion. When situated within urban environments, the condition of youth acquires further layers of complexity. Urban youth are often at the forefront of negotiating modernity, global

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[145] Bertelsmann Stiftung, *Gambia Country Report 2024*, BTI Transformation Index (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024), https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/GMB; National Youth Council of The Gambia, *National Youth Policy of The Gambia, 2019-2028*, (Banjul: National Youth Council of The Gambia, April 2020), https://nyc.gm/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/National-Youth-Policy-of-The-Gambia-2019-2028-Final.pdf.
[146] Honwana, *The Time of Youth*.
[147] Patterson, Kuperus, and Hershey, *Africa's Urban Youth*, 2.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Honwana, *The Time of Youth*; Siobhan McEvoy-Levy, *Troublemakers or Peacemakers? Youth and Post-Accord Peace Building* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013); Jeremy Seeking, *Heroes or Villains? Youth Politics in the 1980s* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1993).
[150] Burrel, *Invisible Users*; Paolo Gaibazzi, *Bush Bound: Young Men and Rural Permanence in Migrant West Africa* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015); Marloes Janson, *Islam, Youth, and Modernity in The Gambia: The Tablighi Jama'at* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
[151] Yunusa Zakari Ya'u, "The Youth, Economic Crisis, and Identity Transformation: The Case of the Yandaba in Kano," in *Identity Transformation and Identity Politics under Structural Adjustment in Nigeria*, ed. Attahiru Jega (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2000).
[152] Brad Weiss, "Thug Realism: Inhabiting Fantasy in Urban Tanzania," *Cultural Anthropology* 17, no. 1 (2002).

influences, and economic uncertainty, while also navigating entrenched hierarchies and structural inequalities. Urban spaces can offer increased exposure to education, media, and networks of political engagement, yet they also heighten the visibility of exclusion and the pressures of consumption and success. As such, the urban experience can intensify the contradictions of youth, amplifying both its aspirations and frustrations. The urban context may thus accentuate the political salience of youth, where young people increasingly assert themselves through new forms of collective action, cultural expression, and sometimes resistance—whether through civic movements, informal economies, or more confrontational means.

By bringing the concepts of youth and urban youth into dialogue, I aim to explore how urban settings not only reflect but also reshape the contours of youth. In particular, I am interested in how urban youth in The Gambia articulate their identities, make claims on the state, and negotiate pathways towards social recognition and economic security in a context of prolonged uncertainty and limited opportunities. It is within this urban landscape of both constraint and possibility that young Gambians must navigate the uncertainties of political transition—an endeavour that requires not only strategic engagement with shifting structures, but also a deeper understanding of how agency unfolds under conditions of ongoing uncertainty, as explored through the lens of social navigation in the following section.

3.2 Social Navigation, Uncertainty, and Political Transition

This study draws on Henrik Vigh's concept of social navigation to analyse how young people in urban Gambia experience their political context and make decisions in everyday life amidst persistent socio-economic and political uncertainty, thereby extending the application of the concept from conflict-affected settings to post-authoritarian contexts. The conceptualisation of 'the everyday' points to social and cultural acts and processes that people deem a normal part of life, drawing attention to the ways in which individuals seek to influence, reorganise, and appropriate the structures that affect their lives.[153] Although social institutions may be continually disintegrating during prolonged periods of crisis, a focus on the everyday demonstrates how these institutions are also being rebuilt—alongside shifting configurations of power that may open up new opportunities to address everyday concerns.[154]

People that live in highly unstable environments must constantly evaluate the ongoing changes and shifts around them, and this forms the basis of their everyday social practice. To portray this behaviour, Vigh presented the concept of social navigation, which he describes as the process whereby "agents seek to draw and actualise their life trajectories … in a shifting and volatile social environment."[155] This concept captures both people's current assessments of their social surroundings and their anticipations of future developments: when making decisions, individuals consider how configurations of power might evolve, and how they might best position themselves to maximise the returns of their efforts. Drawing on Michel de Certeau,

[153] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 14.
[154] Stephen Lubkemann, *Culture in Chaos: An Anthropology of the Social Condition in War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Henrik E. Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War: Youth and Soldiering in Guinea-Bissau* (New York: Berghahn Book, 2006), 160.
[155] Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War*, 4.

Honwana argues that youth in conflict settings often resort to 'tactics' that respond to immediate needs, rather than 'strategies' aimed at achieving long-term goals;[156] yet Vigh reminds us that anticipated futures also shape these tactical responses. Developed across several works, social navigation offers a valuable lens for exploring the interplay between agency, structural conditions, and social change.[157] It captures how individuals manoeuvre through environments that are themselves in flux—what Vigh describes as "motion within motion." This framing is especially apt for understanding youth, who must continually adjust their trajectories in response to both personal aspirations and shifting sociopolitical landscapes. Rather than viewing youth engagement as static or reducible to binaries such as active versus passive, social navigation draws attention to the fragmented and tactical nature of their practices, which may include delay, withdrawal, improvisation, and strategic ambiguity. This double movement—navigating both uncertain futures and unstable structures—is particularly salient in the Gambian context, where young people contend not only with the legacies of authoritarian rule, economic precarity, and social marginalisation, but also with the contradictory expectations generated by the discourse of democratic reform. They must navigate a complex field of overlapping and often conflicting pressures, from donor-driven development agendas to the promises of local politicians and their own lived experiences of frustration and hope. Social navigation thus enables a more nuanced analysis of how young Gambians strategise, adapt, and engage amidst the volatility and contradictions of the post-authoritarian moment.

While Vigh's framework foregrounds the anticipatory dimension of navigation, recent scholarship has extended this concept by reintroducing the temporal weight of the past into young people's calculations. Marjoke Oosterom, in her study of youth and social navigation in Zimbabwe's informal economy, argues that navigation is not only about charting possible futures in volatile environments, but also about interpreting and responding to the present through the lens of past experiences. Drawing on Vigh, Oosterom highlights how memories of past violence—whether state repression, political betrayal, or communal unrest—inform how young people assess their current circumstances and anticipate future risks.[158] Thus deepening Vigh's original formulation by showing that uncertainty is not solely forward-looking but also anchored in historical consciousness. In this sense, the process of navigation is temporally layered: past, present, and future become interwoven in young people's efforts to manoeuvre through unstable terrain. Jacqueline Kennelly and Stuart R. Poyntz make the observation that youth research often renders young people's lives as detached from the structures and histories that shape them; instead, they argue, it is vital to understand youth experiences as "emerging from a past, while lived in the present."[159] In post-authoritarian contexts such as The Gambia, where memories of surveillance, loss, and political manipulation remain close to the surface, this insight is particularly relevant for the study. It underscores that social navigation is shaped

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[156] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*; Alcinda M. Honwana, "Innocent and Guilty. Child-soldiers as Interstitial and Tactical Agents," *Politique africaine (Paris, France : 1981)* 80 (2000).
[157] Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh, *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood*; Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War*; Henrik E. Vigh, "Motion Squared: A Second Look at the Concept of Social Navigation," *Anthropological Theory* 9, no. 4 (2009).
[158] Marjoke A. Oosterom, "Youth and Social Navigation in Zimbabwe's Informal Economy: Don't End Up On The Wrong Side," *African Affairs (London)* 118, no. 472 (2019).
[159] Stuart R. Poyntz and Jacqueline Kennelly, *Phenomenology of Youth Cultures and Globalisation: Lifeworld and Surplus Meaning in Changing Times* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 3.

not only by anticipated change but also by remembered harm—a dual orientation that informs how young people engage with political openings and recalibrate their expectations amidst the uneven rhythms of democratic transition.

In this study, social navigation is employed as a conceptual lens to explore how young people manoeuvre through socio-economic and political uncertainty in contemporary urban Gambia. Uncertainty has become a central theme in scholarship on postcolonial African contexts, particularly in relation to the far-reaching economic and political transformations that have unfolded since the early 1990s—a period sometimes referred to as "the crisis."[160] While independence was envisioned as a return of power to African governments and their peoples—charting a path towards political stability and economic self-sufficiency[161]—the colonial legacy fostered conditions in which authoritarian regimes could arise and persist for decades.[162] Though many African countries experienced modest per capita growth in the early years of independence, by the mid-1970s and early 1980s, most began to falter. The 1980s marked a particularly difficult decade, as food and petrol prices soared, governments struggled to pay salaries, electricity shortages disrupted industrial output, and infrastructure deteriorated. These crises had profound and enduring effects on living standards.[163]

In such contexts, change is rarely experienced as linear progress; instead, it tends to unfold in unpredictable and destabilising ways, shaped by overlapping structural pressures. Vigh conceptualises these settings as constituting a "world of uncertainty"—an environment in constant motion, shaped by intersecting social, political, and economic forces, in which the future becomes increasingly difficult to predict, and long-term aspirations are often replaced by the immediacy of survival and the necessity of short-term adaptation.[164] Mirjam de Bruijn and Jonna Both remind us, however, that no crisis exists in isolation; rather, each is part of a cumulative sequence of wars, famines, economic breakdowns, and other disruptions that unfold under authoritarian regimes or in fragile state settings.[165] While they do not negate the existence of agency in such contexts, they raise important questions about the degree of room people have to manoeuvre. Their aim is not only to trace constraint, but also to understand the motivations and emotions—such as fear, exhaustion, or resignation—that shape decision-making under pressure. This combined framing proves especially useful for thinking through the Gambian

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[160] Elizabeth Cooper and David Pratten, eds., *Ethnographies of Uncertainty in Africa* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 1; Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman, "Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis," *Public Culture* 7, no. 2 (1995): 324; Liv Haram and C. Bawa Yamba, eds., *Dealing with Uncertainty in Contemporary African Lives* (Stockholm: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2009), 11-12.

[161] Mueni Wa Muiu, "African Countries' Political Independence at Fifty: In Search of Democracy, Peace, and Social Justice," *African and Asian Studies* 12, no. 4 (2013); Weiss, Hebert "The Congo's Independence Struggle Viewed Fifty Years Later," *African Studies Review* 55, no. 1 (2012).

[162] Steven Thomson, "Developing a Multiethnic Ethos: How Colonial Legacies, National Policies, and Local Histories Converged in a Gambian Village Charter," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 12, no. 2 (2012); Abdoulaye Saine, "The Gambia's 2006 Presidential Election: Change or Continuity?," *African Studies Review* 51, no. 1 (2008).

[163] Rebecca Simson, "Africa's Lost Decades, 1974-1994," in *The History of African Development: An Online Textbook for a New Generation of African Students and Teachers*, ed. Ewout Frankema, Ellen Hillbom, Ushehwedu Kufakurinani, and Felix Meier zu Selhausen (African Economic History Network E-Book, 2025).

[164] Vigh, "Motion Squared," 422.

[165] Mirjam de Bruijn and Jonna Bot, "Introduction: Understanding Experiences and Decisions in Situations of Enduring Hardship in Africa," *Conflict and Society: Advances in Research* 4, no. 1 (2018): 193.

context, where patterns of political instability and economic fragility have long coexisted with shifting popular expectations and contested trajectories of reform.

At independence in 1965, the Gambian state inherited a skeletal colonial administration, minimal infrastructure, and an economy heavily reliant on groundnuts. Jawara's government faced steep challenges: limited formal education, delayed constitutional reform, and scarce public services.[166] The economy performed relatively well through the 1960s and 1970s, buoyed by favourable groundnut prices.[167] However, the global oil crisis and rising debt triggered economic collapse by the 1980s. In response, the government adopted World Bank and IMF-backed reforms, which stabilised inflation but imposed austerity measures with severe social costs.[168] By 1981, 63% of the population lived below the poverty line,[169] and the country remained among the poorest globally—ranked 166th of 173 on the 1994 UN Human Development Index, with over 75% in absolute poverty and life expectancy around forty.[170] Mounting hardship and political inertia fuelled public discontent, culminating in the 1994 coup led by junior officers who promised to end corruption and prioritise youth and rural development. Initially welcomed—especially by young people—the new regime soon revealed its authoritarian character. Jammeh's early promises gave way to repression, rights abuses, and economic decline. The dalasi depreciated, living costs soared, and public services deteriorated. By 2008, nearly 70% of Gambians lived below the poverty line.[171] These hardships disproportionately affected youth, particularly in rural areas, where shrinking opportunities and a sense of exclusion pushed many to attempt the perilous journey to Europe—both as a survival strategy and a form of resistance to their marginalisation.[172] The dangers of the journey were often outweighed by the desperation of staying behind.[173] This emotional urgency is powerfully expressed in the poetry of Momodou Sallah, whose verses capture the existential weight of departure:

I must go to Barca or Berserk
I must go
I must fly away
From this jail
And look for bail
I drink the Atlantic
And eat the Sahara
I swim with sharks

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[166] Sallah, "Economics and Politics," 623.
[167] Perfect, "Politics and Society," 430.
[168] Sallah, "Economics and Politics," 628-29.
[169] Abdoulaye Saine, "The Gambia's Foreign Policy since the Coup, 1994-99," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 38, no. 2 (2000): 75.
[170] Edie, "Democracy in The Gambia."; Momodou Loum, "Bad Governance and Democratic Failure: A Look at Gambia's 1994 Coup," *Civil Wars* 5, no. 1 (2002).
[171] Abdoulaye Saine, "The Gambia's 2006 Presidential Election: Change or Continuity?," *African Studies Review* 51, no. 1 (2008).
[172] Sheriff Kora and Momodou N. Darboe, "The Gambia's Electoral Earthquake," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 2 (2017).
[173] Daniel Macmillen Voskoboynik, "'Death Has Become the Solution to Poverty': Gambia's Exodus," *The Leap* (blog), 25 November 2016, https://theleap.org/portfolio-items/death-has-become-the-solution-to-poverty-gambias-exodus/.

To escape the economic barks
I must go to Barca or Berserk[174]

The year 2016 marked a historic turning point for The Gambia, ending 22 years of authoritarian rule through democratic means and raising hopes for those across Africa living under electoral dictatorships. Yet democratic renewal proved far more complex than a change in leadership. Barrow's administration inherited a hollowed-out state apparatus: a depleted treasury, widespread institutional mismanagement, and a traumatised political culture. As the National Development Plan (2018–2021) noted, the country faced "a broken economy" and "wide-ranging challenges … among the most urgent of which is the frustrations and lack of opportunities for our young people."[175] International support quickly followed, with donors pledging US$1.7 billion at an EU conference in 2018 to support economic recovery and institutional reform. While The Gambia has experienced improved growth since the transition—with economic activity expanding by an average of 5.5% annually between 2017 and 2024, compared to just 2.8% between 1990 and 2016—deep structural challenges persist. These include institutional fragility, limited economic diversification, inadequate infrastructure, weak human capital development, and an uncompetitive business environment. As the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) notes, "At present, Gambians enjoy more freedom, but their economic circumstances are not significantly better."[176] Global shocks such as COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, and rising commodity prices have further strained public services and driven up inflation.

Domestically, Barrow's presidency has been marked by internal frictions, including the repeated dismissal of senior officials and the collapse of the constitutional reform process in 2020—developments that have raised doubts about the administration's coherence and reformist credibility. These setbacks have contributed to declining public trust in political institutions and a broader sense of national drift. As political scientist D. Badjie wrote in *The Point*, "If we don't know where we are going as a country and a people, then any road will lead us there—and that may not be pleasant … The Gambia today is in a state of political uncertainty … how it will all end is anyone's guess."[177] This broader "state of political uncertainty" has been reflected in the perspectives of informants who voiced frustration over the limited impact of political change on their everyday lives. As one young man put it:

> Young people have lost hope in the government system, and that is increasing—like, that loss of hope is increasing on a daily basis. A lot of things are not going right with the government, and a lot of young people are thinking that, you know, at the end of the day it doesn't make sense. We had Jawara—he was democratic, but things didn't change that much. We had Jammeh—he tried a bit, but, you know, he was dictatorial, there was no freedom. And now we have Barrow, who is not doing, you know, very well. So at the

[174] Momodou Sallah, *Innocent Questions* (Leicester: Global Hands Publishing, 2012).
[175] Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, *The Gambia National Development Plan (2018-2021),* (Banjul: Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, 2017), https://gambia.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/1.-The-Gambia-National-Development-Plan-2018-2021-Full-Version.pdf.
[176] Bertelsmann Stiftung, *Gambia Country Report 2024*.
[177] D. M. Badjie, "The Gambia today: Politics of Uncertainty," *The Point* (opinion), 24 December 2024, https://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/opinion/the-gambia-today-politics-of-uncertainty.

> end of the day, what is the essence of still having hope that something better would come?[178]

The young man's words are embedded in what Jennifer Johnson-Hanks has described as a "routinised state of uncertainty,"[179] and perhaps even more precisely, in what De Bruijn and Bot call the "experience of enduring hardship" in a society under duress.[180] Duress, as they conceptualise it, involves the accumulation and normalisation of crisis over time—where violence, deprivation, and instability contribute to a sociality in which uncertainty and suffering are not exceptional, but habitual.[181] These conditions become internalised, shaping how individuals assess their options, make decisions, and imagine their futures. In many parts of Central and West Africa, De Bruijn and Bot argue, everyday life is saturated with memories and experiences of oppression, ecological crisis, famine, corruption, discrimination, and the chronic absence of state support. This is a complex of hardship that is both social and material—a distinction Anthony Giddens identified as central to the structure-agency dialectic.[182] In The Gambia, while large-scale violence does not define the post-authoritarian moment, the legacy of state repression, prolonged economic insecurity, and stalled reform continues to shape young people's lives in similarly durable and embodied way. As put by Jeffery Smith:

> It is a society collectively grappling, and still coming to terms, with their collective and individual traumas induced by Jammeh's autocratic rule. In this way, the country very much remains in a tenuous transition.[183]

Furthermore, the uncertainty of poverty, as Melina Kalfelis argues, is not only economic but also affective, leaving deep imprints on the social and psychological fabric of society.[184] Elizabeth Cooper and David Pratten note that such forms of uncertainty, along with mistrust and jealousy, are often overlooked in developmental discourse, yet are essential for understanding how individuals relate to the state and to one another.[185] These dynamics contribute to a broader atmosphere of resignation—an everyday sensibility marked not necessarily by disengagement, but by a pragmatic recognition of the limits of meaningful change. This sense of resignation speaks to what Nadine Beckmann describes as the affective impact of decline, which can shape how people envision their futures and interpret the prospects available to them. Susan Whyte and Godfrey Siu define uncertainty as "the inability to predict the conditions on which you are dependent"—a condition that remains clearly visible in The

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[178] Interview with Omar, 20 September 2023.
[179] Jennifer Johnson-Hanks, "When the Future Decides: Uncertainty and International Action in Contemporary Cameroon," *Current Anthropology* 46, no. 3 (2005).
[180] De Bruijn and Bot, "Introduction."
[181] Ibid.
[182] Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: An Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984).
[183] Abdur Rahman Alfa Shaban, "Unpacking Gambia's Three-year Pact: Constitution vs. Coalition MoU," *Africanews*, 28 January 2020, https://www.africanews.com/2020/01/28/unpacking-gambia-s-three-year-pact-constitution-vs-coalition-mou/.
[184] Melina Kalfelis, "'Flexibel aus Armut': Die Lebenswelt von lokalen Entwicklungsakteuren in Burkina Faso vor dem Hintergrund entwicklungspolitischer Erwartungshaltungen," *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde* 61 (2015).
[185] Cooper and Pratten, *Ethnographies of Uncertainty.*

Gambia.[186] According to Afrobarometer, a majority of Gambians express pessimism about the country's economic future, with 77% giving a negative evaluation of national conditions and 57% describing their personal living conditions as "fairly bad" or "very bad."[187] Access to basic necessities remains a widespread concern: many report that they or someone in their household went without income or medical care at least once in the past year, alongside recurring shortages of cooking fuel, water, and food.[188] Gambian youth, who make up the largest share of the population—with 60% under the age of 25—encounter a specific set of challenges. While often more educated than previous generations, they also face disproportionately high levels of unemployment, which reached 45.3% according to the 2022–2023 Gambia Labour Force Survey, up from 41.5% in the previous cycle.[189] These figures underscore the everyday realities that the concept of social navigation seeks to capture—how young people assess their options, interpret their constraints, and attempt to move forward in environments where stability and opportunity often remain elusive.

It is important to recall that The Gambia remains a country in political transition and, as such, exhibits many features typical of transitional states: weak policy implementation, unstable governance, socio-economic challenges, and elite competition over political control—often accompanied by the disruptions caused by efforts to dismantle entrenched systems of rule. These dynamics help explain the difficulties many Gambians face as they navigate the shift from dictatorship to democracy.[190]

But what, then, is political transition? As Nic Cheeseman explains, it refers to the interval between two political regimes.[191] In this thesis, it specifically denotes the period of transition from autocracy to democracy through processes of democratic reform. For Adriano Nervo Codato, transition is "an open-ended, a critical moment throughout which the nature and the course of change depends, above and beyond all, on the strategies adopted by the groups, of actors involved in these process."[192] In this sense, transition is shaped by the choices and actions of those in power—whether to preserve the status quo or to undertake genuine reform. It is often a complex and uncertain process, one that does not inevitably lead to democracy. Transitions are not automatic or guaranteed; they are negotiated, unstable, and frequently

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[186] Susan R. Whyte and Godfrey E. Siu, ""Contingency: Interpersonal and Historical Dependencies in HIV Care," in *Ethnographies of Uncertainty*, ed. Cooper and Pratten, 29.
[187] Afrobarometer, *Gambians Bemoan Economic Conditions, Express Dissatisfaction with Government Performance*, *Afrobarometer Survey Reads* (news release, 23 December 2024), https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/R10-News-release-Gambians-critical-of-economic-conditions-and-govt-performance-Afrobarometer-bh-23dec24.pdf.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Gambia Bureau of Statistics (GBoS), *Gambia Labour Force Survey Report 2022-2023* (Banjul: GBoS, 2024), file:///C:/Users/Gebruiker/Downloads/2022-23%20Gambia%20Labour%20Force%20Survey%20Report%20(GLFS%202022-23)%20_%20Revised%20version%20(1).pdf; Gambia Bureau of Statistics (GBoS), *Gambia Labour Force Survey Report 2018* (Banjul: GBoS, 2018), file:///C:/Users/Gebruiker/Downloads/2022-23%20Gambia%20Labour%20Force%20Survey%20Report%20(GLFS%202022-23)%20_%20Revised%20version%20(1).pdf.
[190] Ibrahim Bangura and Saatchi Sen, "Embracing Change: Young People and Social Movements in post-Arab Spring Tunisia," in *Youth-Led Social Movements and Peacebuilding in Africa*, ed. Ibrahim Bangura (London: Routledge, 2022), 217.
[191] Nic Cheeseman, *Democracy in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
[192] Andriano Nervo Codato, *Political Transition and Democratic Consolidation: Studies on Contemporary Brazil* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2006).

fragile. Powerholders may resist reform, co-opt the language of change, or reproduce authoritarian logics within new institutional forms. Democratisation, then, is a gamble—an uncertain wager on the future—offering the promise of renewal but also the risk of regression or stasis. While change can be unsettling and provoke resistance, it also carries the potential for reinvention and institutional transformation. Political transitions are rarely linear. They often introduce a new layer of uncertainty: transition is a contested and inherently incomplete process, mobilised both as a demand and a promise, and shaped as much by continuity as by rupture. Patterns from the past are frequently reconfigured rather than dismantled entirely; resistance, for instance, does not simply vanish when transition begins.[193] This duality captures the central tension of democratic transition: the hope for meaningful change is real, but its success depends on sustained struggle, political will, and institutional consolidation.

This raises a central question that sits at the heart of this thesis: what does it mean to live through a political transition in one's everyday life? Critics of mainstream democratisation theory have long argued that a narrow focus on elections, constitutions, and formal institutions fails to account for the lived experience of political change. As such, scholars increasingly stress that democracy must be evaluated not only through its procedural aspects, but also in terms of its substantive outcomes—such as inclusion, social justice, and citizen agency. Frederic C. Schaffer similarly cautions that the visible architecture of democracy may be adopted without challenging the deeper hierarchies of power and exclusion.[194] Rather than approaching democratisation as a linear or technocratic process, this study situates political transition within the social, economic, and historical specificities of the Gambian context. By drawing on Vigh's concept of social navigation, it explores how young Gambians engage with the contradictions, openings, and constraints of this transition—not only through formal avenues of participation, but through the subtle, everyday ways they adapt, manoeuvre, resist, and imagine alternative futures amidst persistent uncertainty and flux. The aim is not only to trace the contours of this evolving landscape, but also to understand the motivations and emotions—such as hesitation, frustration, or resignation—that shape decision-making under such conditions.

3.3 Conclusions

This chapter has laid the conceptual foundation for understanding how young people in The Gambia navigate the country's transition to democracy amidst socio-economic and political uncertainty, and why their ways of navigation may differ. By foregrounding the socially constructed and spatially embedded nature of youth—particularly within urban African contexts—it has shown that youth is not just a demographic category, but a relational position shaped by intersecting dynamics of class, gender, education, and access to opportunity. Within this framework, the city emerges as both a site of marginalisation and a space of potential, where young people encounter forms of exclusion but also forge solidarities, exercise agency, and articulate alternative political imaginaries that unsettle conventional understandings of participation. Vigh's concept of social navigation offers a particularly useful lens through which

[193] Paul Gready, *Political Transition: Politics and Cultures* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 3.
[194] Frédéric C. Schaffer, "Political Concepts and the Study of Democracy: The Case of Demokaraasi in Senegal," *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 20. No. 1 (1997): 40.

to explore these dynamics, capturing the double movement experienced by young Gambians as they navigate both uncertain life trajectories and a volatile sociopolitical terrain. This notion of "motion within motion" helps illuminate how youth respond to disillusionment and hope, structural constraint and emergent possibility—not through fixed decisions or clear-cut allegiances, but through ongoing recalibrations of tactics, desires, and expectations. It enables a more layered analysis of political engagement, attentive to informal strategies, subtle acts of withdrawal or dissent, and the imagined futures that shape present choices. In bringing together these perspectives, this study contributes to wider debates on youth, political agency, and democratisation in Africa, while also expanding the relatively limited scholarship on youth political subjectivities in The Gambia—a field often confined to studies of electoral mobilisation.

At the same time, this conceptual framework opens space to challenge dominant framings of democratisation in Africa, which often rely on procedural or institutional benchmarks while neglecting the affective, embodied, and everyday experiences of political change. While the December 2016 election in The Gambia has received substantial scholarly attention—particularly regarding the involvement of a range of actors, activities, and organisations that made such a historic overturn of power possible—far less is known about how young people have interpreted and inhabited their political context after such a historic moment. This thesis seeks to address that gap by shifting the analytical focus away from elite actors and exceptional events, towards the more ambiguous, uneven, and often ambivalent ways in which democracy is lived and negotiated. It centres young people's own interpretations of the political present—not simply as agents of mobilisation, but as individuals grappling with the contradictions of reform, the endurance of authoritarian afterlives, and the slow workings of institutional change. More broadly, while youth are widely recognised as central actors in processes of social transformation, scholarly approaches often reduce them to either heroic change-makers or marginal, apolitical subjects. Both framings obscure the complexity of youth political subjectivity. By approaching youth not only as a subject of inquiry but as a conceptual lens, this study contributes to a more grounded, relational, and differentiated understanding of political transition.

It is crucial, therefore, to approach democratisation not as a linear movement from authoritarianism to democracy, but as a fragmented and ongoing negotiation unfolding across multiple social worlds. Avoiding the pitfalls of developmental pessimism requires attention to the mundane and sometimes contradictory forms of political life that take shape in its wake. The examples explored in this thesis—whether through activism, informal organising, digital engagement, cultural expression, or silence—underscore the ways in which young Gambians participate in, reshape, and at times quietly resist democratic discourse. These practices unfold in a political landscape still marked by ageing patriarchs, entrenched gerontocracy, and the enduring legacies of authoritarian rule. By turning to the lived realities of youth, this research asks not only what democracy means, but how it is inhabited, interpreted, and reimagined by those who have inherited its contradictions. In doing so, the thesis makes two key contributions. First, it advances scholarly understandings of youth, uncertainty, and democracy in Africa by offering an empirically grounded account of how political transitions are experienced and navigated in everyday life. Second, it enriches academic knowledge of the Gambian context by

examining how urban youth engage with change in a setting shaped by economic hardship, authoritarian legacies, and contested meanings of citizenship and reform. Ultimately, this conceptual framework aims to capture not only how democracy is institutionalised, but how it is lived, unsettled, and reconfigured by those for whom its promises remain both urgent and incomplete. By foregrounding youth not only as political actors but as conceptual interlocutors, the framework offers a more grounded, affectively attuned, and relational approach to understanding democratic transition—one that moves beyond binaries of success and failure to engage with its everyday negotiations, contradictions, and reinventions. To explore these dynamics empirically, the following chapter focuses on the methodological approach that guided this research, detailing how I engaged with young people in urban Gambia to trace their everyday encounters with democracy, uncertainty, and political possibility.

4. Methodology

> I'm not really sure how much you know about The Gambia. I'm just talking, thinking that you know it as much as I do—but sometimes, you really have to be here to understand the context of some of these things.[195]

This chapter focuses on the methodological approach that guided this thesis, which draws on five and a half months of ethnographically informed research conducted in urban Gambia between September 2023 and February 2024. Methodologically, this study is guided by an interpretive sensibility that attends to youth experiences as embodied, narrated, and socially situated. It seeks to understand how individuals make sense of democratisation and citizenship not as fixed or formal categories but as lived and negotiated processes. Rather than treating this case as representative of a broader population—a common tendency in certain qualitative research traditions—this study emphasises context, tracing meaning within situated encounters rather than extracting variables or seeking representativeness in a statistical sense.[196]

Following an ethnographic orientation, the study aims to uncover how concepts such as democracy, politics, and citizenship are understood, expressed, and embedded in everyday life. Michael Burawoy's insight that ethnography can "extend out"—from the particular to the political, from micro-interactions to broader sociopolitical dynamics—frames this methodology.[197] In what follows, I outline the methodological approach and specific methods employed during the research, discussing how I engaged with participants, navigated urban spaces, and approached digital platforms as sites of both expression and inquiry. Throughout, I reflect on the ethical, relational, and interpretive dimensions of the research process, including the challenges and opportunities that emerged in both expected and unexpected ways.

The chapter is organised into four parts. It begins by outlining the research design and methodological orientation, before turning to the research setting and location. It then describes the methods of data collection, and concludes with a methodological reflection on the ethical, practical, and analytical dimensions of the research, including its limitations.

4.1 Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative, ethnographic design situated within an interpretive framework, aiming to understand how young Gambians navigate and articulate civic and political life during a period of democratic transition. Rather than seeking universal laws or generalisable claims, I approached this study with the conviction that meaning is produced through context-specific interactions and grounded in subjective experience. Interpretive research acknowledges that objectivity and subjectivity are intertwined, and that reality—while accessible in some ways—is always mediated through human interpretation, including my

[195] Interview with Alagie, 30 October 2023.
[196] John Gerring, "The Case Study: What It Is and What It Does," in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, ed. Carles Boix and Susan Stokes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 147.
[197] Michael Burawoy, "The Extended Case Method," *Sociological Theory* 16, no. 1 (1998): 5.

own.[198] Within this framework, truth is not fixed but situated; it emerges through the meanings people assign to their actions, relationships, and environments. In this regard, it was important to approach civic and political life not as abstract categories, but as lived practices shaped through everyday experiences and articulated through individual and collective narratives.

Upon starting my research, I had a sense of direction as to which methodological approaches might best suit my research interests. Put differently, I was motivated for this study from the onset. As observed by Netta Weinstein "motivational processes are responsible for initiating and directing human activity; they energise behaviour, generate and increase task engagement, and direct actions towards certain ends or goals."[199] This motivational drive shaped not only my choice of topic, but also the attentiveness and commitment I brought to the process—especially in a context where political subjectivities are often ambiguous and shaped by complex historical legacies.

Ethnography fundamentally involves immersion into the lives of others—observing, listening, and participating in daily rhythms to gain insight into meaning-making as it unfolds in real time. As Edward Schatz writes, ethnography centres on participant observation and "immersion in a community, a cohort, or a cluster of related subject positions."[200] In line with this, political science scholars have emphasised the importance of gathering evidence *in situ*—within the settings where political events, decisions, and discourses emerge. These perspectives underscore the need to remain close to the practices, spaces, and relationships through which political life is enacted.

Throughout the research, I practised what Paul Lichterman calls interpretive reflexivity: sustained attentiveness to the social positions of both researcher and researched, and to the communicative dynamics shaping their interactions.[201] I did not enter the research context as a neutral observer, but as a Dutch-Gambian woman, born to a Dutch mother and a Gambian father, with familial and social ties to The Gambia as well as to the Netherlands. As a student of African Studies at Leiden University in the Netherlands, my educational and cultural background has been shaped by predominantly 'Western' academic frameworks. Having grown up in the Netherlands, this context has inevitably shaped my perspective, even as I maintain personal and emotional connections to The Gambia. In such a setting, my presence inevitably influenced perceptions, conversations, and interpretations. Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg stress that reflexive research requires systematic reflection on interpretations at multiple levels—data, context, theory, and the researcher's own positionality.[202] In this spirit, I remained attentive to how my subjectivity shaped the knowledge I could access and produce, and how my presence might have influenced the dynamics under investigation.

This orientation translated into a commitment to ethnographic practices, structured around a triangulation of qualitative techniques: in-depth semi-structured interviews, informal

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[198] Donatella Della Porta and Michael Keating, *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2.
[199] Netta Weinstein, *Human Motivation and Interpersonal Relationships: Theory, Research, and Application* (New York: Springer, 2014), 3.
[200] Edward Schatz, ed., *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 5.
[201] Paul Lichterman, "Interpretive Reflexivity in Ethnography," *Ethnography* 18, no. 1 (2017).
[202] Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg, *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2009).

conversations, participant observation, and digital ethnography. These methods enabled an exploration of civic and political engagement from multiple angles and settings—formal and informal, public and private, online and offline. Jack Katz notes ethnography's particular suitability for tracing "life in action: behaviour changing; people in the process of becoming; groups in the process of formation and transformation,"[203] emphasising processes, tensions, and contradictions over fixed categories. This was especially pertinent in a context where political life frequently manifests informally and ambiguously within everyday interactions.

My research design also resonates with Andrew Ross's description of a "hybrid blend of investigative journalism and field ethnography"[204]—an approach both curious and grounded, engaged and analytical. My role shifted constantly between participating and observing, asking questions and listening, speaking and remaining silent. Recognising that neither full neutrality nor total immersion was attainable, I embraced a stance shaped by my background, education, and social location. I position myself as an "observing participant,"[205] situated both within and outside the research context, with a perspective that is always partial and relational—sometimes close, but not quite part of the context. This ambivalence occasionally granted access to insights I might not otherwise have received, and at other times marked a limit to what I could grasp or participate in.

Against the backdrop of these complex sociopolitical realities, and in light of my specific, situated perspective, this research adopts both interpretive and reflexive approaches. It seeks to derive meaning from words, gestures, silences, emotional registers, and the broader political context that gives these articulations their resonance. Attention is focused not only on what people say or do, but also on how they interpret their actions within wider social, historical, and affective structures. This thesis specifically highlights young people whose political subjectivities emerge outside conventional arenas of power, emphasising informal, relational, everyday engagements. Rather than offering a definitive or generalisable account, I offer a situated interpretation, guided by Alvesson and Sköldberg's emphasis on furnishing "opportunities for understanding" rather than fixed truths.[206] The following section elaborates further on the specific research setting of this study.

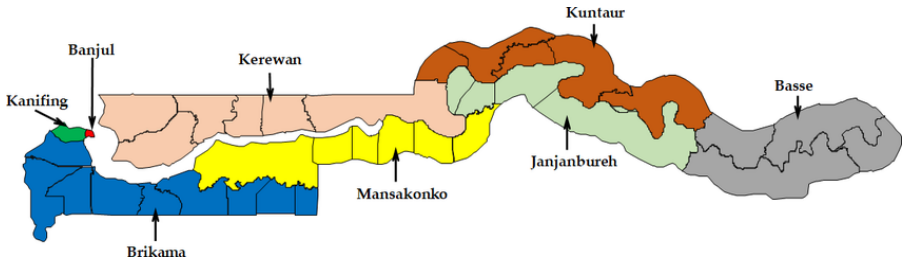

Figure 2: Map of The Gambia showing its eight local government areas.

[203] Jack Katz, "From How to Why in Luminous Description and Causal Inference in Ethnography (Part I)," *Ethnography* 2, no. 4 (2001): 471.
[204] Andrew Ross, "Research for Whom?" in *Militant Research Handbook*, ed. Marcelo Hoffman, (New York: New York University, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, 2013), 8.
[205] Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[206] Alvesson and Sköldberg, *Reflexive Methodology*, 9.

4.2 Research Setting and Location

The accounts and reflections presented in this thesis emerge from five and a half months of ethnographically informed research conducted between September 2023 and February 2024 in urban Gambia. I carried out this research in a setting that, while somewhat familiar, also presented new challenges and unfamiliar terrains. I have travelled to The Gambia many times since childhood—though always as a holidaymaker not a researcher—and this shaped the limits of my earlier engagement. Many of the experiences, interests, and everyday realities of my interlocutors were new to me, just like most of the interlocutors themselves. While I possessed a degree of cultural knowledge and some familiarity with the Wolof language due to my 'half' Gambian heritage, I still needed to learn a great deal about the country, its political dynamics, and to establish contacts for my research. I was also aware of the ways in which I stood apart. My lack of command of local languages, as well as my English—shaped by a Dutch accent—differed from local forms of speech and often marked me as coming from 'outside'. At the same time, my name and surname and skin tone usually led people to recognise me as Gambian, athough I am often mistaken for Fula—a group associated with lighter brown skin. These initial recognitions sometimes opened doors or created a sense of affinity, but they did not erase the reality that I was not fully embedded in the social worlds I sought to learn from. My connection to The Gambia was real, but partial; it afforded me moments of proximity while simultaneously reminding me of the distance created by my upbringing in the Netherlands. Familiarity, in this sense, was contingent, and the movement from visitor to researcher required continuous reflection on the boundaries of my belonging, and on the tensions between being somewhat seen as 'one of us' and still being, in many ways, from 'elsewhere'.

The Gambia (officially the Republic of The Gambia) is a small West African country situated along the banks of the River Gambia and almost entirely surrounded by Senegal, save for its short Atlantic coastline. With a land area of just under 11,000 square kilometres and a population of approximately 2.8 million, it is the smallest country on continental Africa and one of the most densely populated, with an average population density of around 270 people per square kilometre. Administratively, The Gambia is divided into seven regions: Banjul City Council, Kanifing Municipal Council, West Coast Region, Lower River Region, North Bank Region, Central River Region, and Upper River Region. These are further organised into eight local government areas—Banjul, Basse, Brikama, Janjanbureh, Kanifing, Kerewan, Kuntaur, and Mansakonko (see figure 2)—which are subdivided into 43 districts. The country is among the most highly urbanised in Africa south of the Sahara, with more than two-thirds of the population residing in the Greater Banjul Area—a sprawling conurbation encompassing the capital city Banjul, Kanifing Municipality, and, increasingly, parts of northern Brikama in the West Coast Region, also commonly referred to as Kombo.[207] It was within this urban coastal zone that the research for this thesis was primarily carried out, informed by the daily lives, routines, and reflections of young people navigating this dynamic and densely populated setting.

[207] UN-Habitat, *The Gambia: National Urban Profile* (Nairobi: UN Human Settlements Programme, 2011), https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/download-manager-files/Gambia%20National%20Urban%20Profile.pdf.

My focus on urban youth was shaped both by practical considerations and by a conceptual commitment to exploring civic and political engagement in a context where young people's voices, aspirations, and frustrations are especially visible and contested. They form an increasingly prominent presence in the changing urban landscape and live at the crossroads of social, political, and economic pressures. As individuals navigating spaces shaped by both traditional norms and globalised imaginaries, they offer valuable insights into how political subjectivities are formed, expressed, and contested in contemporary Gambian society. Focusing on urban areas also allowed for a more feasible and grounded inquiry within the scope of a five-and-a-half-month project. Even within a geographically small country, the diversity of local contexts would have made it difficult to examine youth engagement dynamics nationwide. Moreover, my linguistic limitations shaped the feasibility of the research: while English is The Gambia's official language, its everyday use is far more prevalent in urban settings than in rural regions, where Mandinka, Wolof, and Fula dominate. As I speak only basic Wolof and do not understand other major local languages, conducting meaningful and ethically sound research in rural areas would have presented considerable challenges.

During the research period, I was based in two key locations: Brufut and Kololi, both situated in the West Coast Region and part of the Greater Banjul Area. While these were not the only sites where I conducted research, they served as my residential anchors and the points from which I navigated daily life and research encounters. Brufut, where our family house is located, is a relatively tranquil town situated inland from the Atlantic coast, although the name is often used more broadly to refer to an area stretching towards the sea. Located within Kombo North District, Brufut is accessible via a red sandy road linking it to neighbouring areas such as Brusubi and Ghana Town. Known for its calm atmosphere, green spaces, and reputation as a relatively affluent area, Brufut consists largely of enclosed family compounds, often marked by flowering shrubbery, freely roaming livestock, and high walls topped with improvised security measures. The area reflects a blend of tradition and growth, with its quiet lanes increasingly giving way to new developments owing to its strategic proximity to Serekunda, Banjul, and the tourist-heavy Senegambia strip.

Kololi, by contrast, offers a markedly different urban atmosphere. Our former family house there now accommodates guests and extended relatives. My decision to base part of the research period in Kololi was deliberate—motivated by its dense, socially vibrant environment, its proximity to spaces where youth activity, nightlife, and informal economies unfold, and by the recognition that Brufut's more residential character offered a more limited window into the textures of everyday urban life. Kololi is known for its continuous street activity—people selling goods, socialising, drinking *attaya* (strong green tea), or chatting at all hours. Voices carry from compound to compound; children play in the streets while traffic noise drifts in from nearby roads. If anyone is celebrating—and someone almost always is—the DJ's music will continue well past midnight. The air is crowded with sound, and only in the early hours before dawn does quiet settle in. Unlike the more residential stillness of Brufut, or similar neighbourhoods like Bijilo and Kotu, Kololi sustains a textured and heterogeneous sense of community, where the wealthy and less affluent live in close proximity. Villas stand beside more modest homes where cooking is done over charcoal fires and laundry by hand. Kololi's vitality lies in this convergence, yet rising property prices and ongoing development have sparked

growing concern among residents about being priced out of their own neighbourhoods—an anxiety often voiced informally, but rarely translated into explicit political mobilisation.

These two locales—Brufut with its quiet intimacy and Kololi with its social density—shaped my rhythms of movement and patterns of interaction throughout the research period. From these homes, I traversed The Gambia's urban spaces for interviews, observations, and informal encounters, using various modes of transport: the green-and-yellow shared taxis that stop wherever flagged, the often-crowded *gelle-gellies* (minibuses), and, on occasion, hired 'town trip' taxis typically used by tourists and wealthier residents. I also sometimes borrowed my father's car, which allowed for more flexible travel, though not without frustrations—from mechanical problems to the traffic disruptions of the rainy season. Despite these logistical constraints, such mobility proved vital to my methodology, enabling me to access a diverse array of sites and interact with people across socio-economic and geographic boundaries. Travelling, in a way, became a method in itself. Moving between neighbourhoods and localities within the urban coastal area—and occasionally venturing further inland—offered a way to understand difference, not only in terms of ethnicity, language, or religion, but also in how people stay connected across space and time. As Mirjam de Bruijn and Inge Brinkman argue, mobility and connectivity are crucial to understanding contemporary African life.[208] Joining interlocutors on visits to family homes helped me see how kinship ties were sustained, and how rural–urban relations continued to shape identity, opportunity, and memory. For two weeks during the research, I travelled inland to our family farm in Bush Town, a village in the Central River Region situated across from the town of Bansang and reachable by a hand-pulled ferry. This brief but rewarding journey offered a window into rural life and its contrasts with the coastal urban settings where most of my research unfolded. The experience enriched my understanding of how spatial, cultural, and economic differences shape everyday life in The Gambia, while also underscoring the enduring ties and mutual dependencies that connect urban and rural spaces.

[208] Mirjam de Bruijn and Inge Brinkman, "Research Practice in Connections: Travels and Methods," in *The Social Life of Connectivity in Africa*, ed. Mirjam de Bruijn and Rijk van Dijk (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

Figure 3: A bus at the Barra Ferry Terminal waiting to board the ferry to Banjul. Photograph taken by the author, December 2023.

4.3 Data Collection

In line with ethnographic principles, I employed a combination of methods—primarily in-depth semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, participant observation, and digital ethnography—to gather relevant data with the aim of shedding light on the lived experiences, political subjectivities, and everyday practices of young people as they navigate life in urban Gambia. Ethical considerations were integral to all aspects of my methodology. I have therefore addressed ethical concerns throughout my discussion of methods, recognising that ethics is not merely a procedural requirement but a continual practice embedded within each research interaction. Alongside these ethical reflections, I have also discussed the various challenges that emerged—some anticipated, others less so—as part of an effort to remain transparent about the complexities and contingencies of conducting research in a setting that is both familiar and dynamic.

4.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

One of the principal methods in this study was the use of in-depth semi-structured interviews. In total, I conducted 28 interviews with a diverse group of individuals: two scholars from UTG, five young politicians, and 21 young people who did not explicitly identify as affiliated with any political party. This last category included a wide variety of interlocutors—journalists, musicians, civil society members, students, unemployed youth, and others engaged in informal labour ranging from tourism and street vending to creative freelancing and small-scale entrepreneurship. Most of the youth I interacted with were unmarried, although some were recently married, and many had experienced different states of unemployment or underemployment. Their educational backgrounds ranged from early school dropouts to high

school diplomas and ongoing university studies, and several had been involved in political or cultural activities, broadly defined. Although all participants were living in urban areas at the time of the interviews, several had relocated from rural regions, often in pursuit of education or employment—stories that reflect broader patterns of internal migration and urban aspiration. With the exception of the two scholars, most participants were aged between 20 and 35. While both the African Union and the Gambian government define 'youth' as those between 15 and 35, I deliberately excluded minors from this study to ensure that all interviewees were legally able to provide informed consent.

My process of identifying and recruiting participants unfolded through a blend of personal networking and digital outreach. Before arriving in The Gambia, I had already begun informally mapping out potential contacts by observing the social media presence of several young Gambians—some visibly political, others more reserved. These early observations helped familiarise me with local discourses and online personalities. Once in the country, I reached out to individuals directly through platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, X, and by phone or email. In the early stages, I adopted an exploratory attitude, speaking with everyone who responded. I also consulted acquaintances from earlier visits and occasionally relied on suggestions from family members or friends who offered introductions to individuals they believed would be interested in or relevant to my study. Although some of these suggestions included individuals with links to political institutions, I made it clear that my focus extended beyond formal political actors—I was particularly interested in the perspectives of so-called 'ordinary Gambians', whose political lives might not be publicly legible but were no less significant.

Each participant was contacted personally and provided with a clear explanation of the research aims, scope, and their role in it. I was struck by how many responded positively—especially those I contacted spontaneously through social media. There was an openness, a willingness to engage, and an eagerness to reflect aloud. Many expressed appreciation for being invited to share their views and seemed genuinely invested in the conversations that followed. I carry a deep sense of gratitude for those who entrusted me with their time and stories. These were not always easy conversations, and yet participants often met me with generosity, candour, and care.

Not every interview arrangement went smoothly. Some participants failed to appear for scheduled interviews, prompting me to adopt the habit of reconfirming appointments a few hours in advance. Others did not respond to follow-up messages. In response, I began to ask interviewees at the end of each meeting whether they could recommend others who might be interested in participating. This informal snowballing approach proved fruitful, especially in helping me reach individuals active in journalism, social movements, or civil society organisations. While I did not aim for a representative sample, this process created a chain of introductions that deepened the study's reach and diversity.

Over time, I became aware of a gender imbalance in my sample. Although I aimed for a more balanced representation, young men—particularly those active on social media or involved in public discourse—were generally more responsive and readily engaged in extended conversations. In contrast, arranging interviews with young women often required more time, coordination, or the involvement of mutual contacts. At times, I found myself relying on what

felt more accessible, which often meant conducting multiple interviews with particularly talkative young men. A university lecturer once remarked, half-jokingly, "Well, of course you are young and pretty and light-skinned—these men want to talk to you." While I did not dwell on the comment, it served as a reminder of how gender, race, and appearance may shape access and interaction in subtle ways. Through ongoing adjustments and sustained effort, however, I was ultimately able to achieve a relatively balanced group of interlocutors.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format, guided by prepared question lists that enabled a consistent thematic orientation while leaving space for unexpected digressions—a practice encouraged by Alan Bryman.[209] I designed three loosely differentiated interview frameworks—one for scholars, one for young politicians, and one for young people more generally—tailored to reflect each group's positioning and lived experiences. Although the guides helped maintain focus, the interviews often unfolded organically, shaped by participants' interests, energy, and willingness to elaborate. Some conversations stayed close to the questions I had prepared; others veered into surprising and illuminating terrain. I recall an interview with a law student who provided an in-depth analysis of the constitutional draft process—discussing legal complexities with a clarity that made me acutely aware of my own limitations. These moments of humility, where the interviewee's expertise eclipsed my own, reminded me of the depth and richness that qualitative research can uncover. Whenever points were vague or unclear, I asked for further elaboration or concrete examples,[210] thereby extending the discussion while deepening the material. Most interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, depending on the flow of conversation and the setting.

In preparing the interviews, I paid close attention to informed consent and ethical integrity. As Bryman notes, informed consent rests on the principle that participants are provided with sufficient information to make an informed decision about whether to take part in the research.[211] Before each interview, I offered a clear explanation of the research objectives, my role as a student researcher, the potential uses of the data, any foreseeable risks and benefits, and the participant's right to skip questions, end the interview, or withdraw entirely. I also clarified their right to anonymity and confidentiality. All participants gave oral consent, and most agreed to audio recording.

To protect confidentiality, recordings were made on my phone—kept in flight mode to avoid connectivity risks—then encrypted and transferred to password-protected USB drives stored securely during my stay. These files were later uploaded to a secure personal server, after which the original recordings were deleted from the device. I transcribed each interview myself and used pseudonyms to protect identities. No one else accessed the raw data, and all records will be securely deleted at the conclusion of the project.

Initially, I was hesitant about requesting permission to record, fearing it might inhibit conversation. These concerns proved largely unfounded. Many participants did not mind being recorded, and several students were already familiar with academic research practices—including voice recording—and offered reassurances that helped me feel more confident in the process. Four participants declined to be recorded. These interviews, based entirely on note-

[209] Bryman, *Social Research Methods*.
[210] Ibid.
[211] Ibid.

taking, proved unexpectedly rewarding. The absence of a recorder encouraged freer expression, and moments of silence gave space for unhurried reflection. While more demanding in terms of attention and accuracy, these interviews offered valuable moments of depth and spontaneity. Nonetheless, I share Naomi Quinn's view that audio recording is indispensable for enabling detailed analysis, maintaining eye contact, and producing a more reliable record—especially when conducting research in a language that is not one's mother tongue.[212]

All interviews were conducted in English and without interpreters, which enabled more direct and fluid interaction. At the same time, this shaped the research in important and relevant ways. English is The Gambia's official language and is widely used in education and public discourse, but it is not the primary medium of everyday communication for most Gambians. In many informal settings, local languages such as Wolof, Mandinka, and Fula dominate. Thus, the ability to participate in an English-language interview presupposed a certain level of education, confidence, and urban familiarity. This created a socio-linguistic filter that excluded potential participants who may have had valuable insights but did not feel comfortable expressing themselves in English. While this limitation was shaped by my own linguistic ability and the absence of interpreters, it inevitably shaped the demographic and discursive texture of the data collected.

Interview settings were chosen by participants and included offices, workplaces, cafés, the beach, and, in a few cases, my father's store—Jahanka Amsterdam Enterprise—in Bakoteh, a district of Serekunda. The store offered a convenient and informal space, particularly for those without access to private or quiet venues. On three occasions, I visited participants at home due to last-minute childcare responsibilities, and two interviews were conducted online via FaceTime and WhatsApp. Some locations posed logistical challenges—ambient sounds from traffic, the sea, or neighbouring conversations occasionally disrupted recordings. However, I prioritised participants' comfort and found that informal settings often encouraged openness and ease.

After the initial round of interviews, arranging follow-ups proved difficult due to scheduling, transport, and time constraints. However, many interviews had already reached thematic saturation, with recurring concerns beginning to surface. As a result, I chose to expand the participant base rather than pursue repeated meetings. I remained in contact with several participants via social media—particularly Instagram, WhatsApp, and X—which allowed for follow-up questions and ongoing dialogue. These informal connections helped refine and deepen my understanding of youth political engagement over time.

[212] Naomi Quinn, *Finding Culture in Talk: A Collection of Methods* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

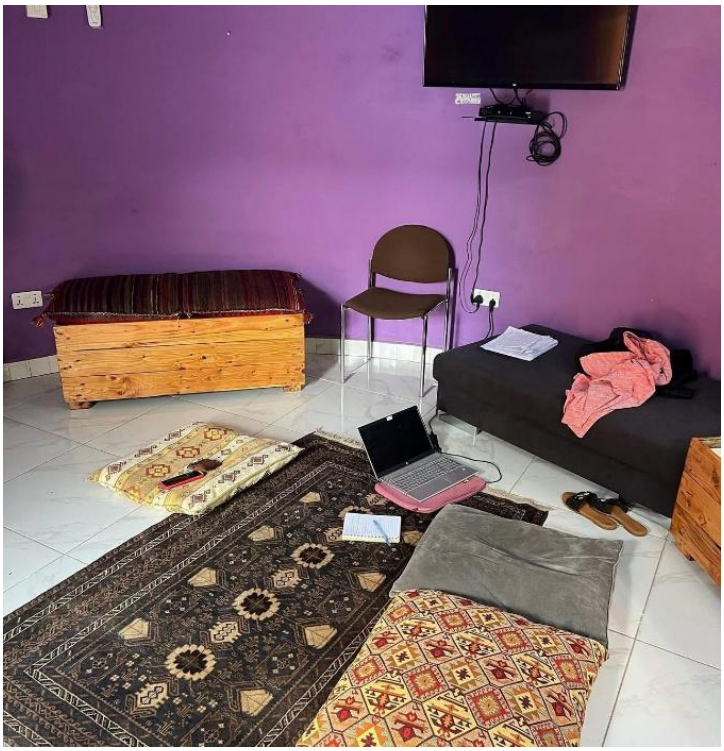

Figure 4: Interview setting at the Women's Association for Victims' Empowerment (WAVE) in Manjai Kunda. Photograph taken by the author, September 2023.

4.3.2 Informal Conversations

Alongside interviews, informal conversations played a vital role in the research process. These exchanges, unfolding organically in a range of settings, offered valuable contextual insight and often revealed perspectives that may not have surfaced in more structured encounters. They took place before or after scheduled interviews, during social gatherings, in shared taxi rides, at cafés, workplaces, or simply while spending time in the spaces where people socialise and "sit."[213] Some of these conversations were with individuals I had already interviewed; others were with people I encountered for the first time or had known for years—including friends and family members, young and old. Though often spontaneous and unstructured, I suggest that these discussions were no less meaningful than recorded interviews, particularly in helping me understand how people think about political change, their sense of agency, and their relationships to public life. I often jotted down fragments of these conversations afterwards, especially when a turn of phrase, anecdote, or moment struck me as particularly revealing. These encounters also became central to my own process of reflection, encouraging me to remain attentive to the unexpected, confront my assumptions, and observe how different people—including those outside my core group of interlocutors—made sense of the post-Jammeh period in varied and sometimes contradictory ways.

I found that the absence of a formal structure often enabled a different kind of openness. Free from the expectations of a recorded interview, people spoke in more relaxed, candid ways, often shaping the conversation on their own terms. This informality extended to myself as well,

[213] Gaibazzi, *Bush Bound.*

allowing for a more fluid and mutual exchange in which I too felt less bound by the roles of interviewer and researcher. That said, I was always transparent about my role and research intentions. Even in informal settings, I made it clear that I was conducting academic research and that our conversations could inform my understanding of the broader themes under exploration. As ethnographic scholars such as Kathleen Musante DeWalt and Billie R. DeWalt emphasise, ethical responsibility is not limited to formal protocols, but involves ongoing sensitivity to the dynamics of power, trust, and vulnerability that shape all research encounters.[214]

The flexibility of informal conversation was particularly important given the often unpredictable schedules and competing responsibilities of many of my interlocutors—especially young people balancing work, study, and family obligations. These conversations offered a more accessible form of engagement, one that accommodated people's lives rather than requiring formal arrangements. The same held true for older Gambians, many of whom shared insights shaped by longer-term perspectives and political memory. These intergenerational dialogues broadened my understanding of how the democratic transition was being interpreted and experienced across different segments of society.

On several occasions, I accompanied participants to the spaces where they usually gathered—street corners, family compounds, or friends' homes—and spent time simply "sitting" with them and their social circles before initiating an interview. This practice echoes what Paolo Gaibazzi describes in his ethnographic work on Gambian social life.[215] For Gaibazzi, "sitting" is more than just being physically present; it is a socially embedded act that signifies hospitality, respect, and relational engagement. As he writes, "offering a chair or a place on a mat to a visitor is an act of hospitality and respect, the acknowledgment of the social presence of the guest and the first step towards establishing or continuing a social relation with him or her."[216] I found this concept deeply resonant. Many meaningful conversations emerged precisely from such moments of sitting—of being present, listening carefully, and allowing the rhythm of the interaction to unfold at its own pace. Rather than treating informal conversations as secondary or peripheral, I came to understand them as central to the knowledge generated in this research: relational, situated, and grounded in the everyday textures of life.

4.3.3 Participant Observation, Going Around, and Everyday Observations

Over the course of my research, I spent much of my time engaging informally with a wide variety of individuals—young and old, men and women, family members and strangers. The Gambia is a very small country, and personal networks are of great value. As observed by Charles Kadushin, "social networks, however, have been at the core of human society since we were hunters and gatherers. People were tied together through their relations with one another and their dependence on one another."[217] Many homes or compounds are filled with extended family members, and hospitality runs deep: if someone arrives while a meal is being served—

[214] Kathleen Musante DeWalt and Billie R. DeWalt, *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011).
[215] Gaibazzi, *Bush Bound*.
[216] Ibid., 8.
[217] Charles Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks: Theories, Concepts, and Findings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

even a stranger—they are invited in with an open gesture and the familiar call to "Join us!" or "Come and eat!" Social life moves fluidly between casual exchanges and more ritualised forms of interaction, and it is common for people to greet one another in familial terms—'bro,' 'sis,' 'auntie,' or 'uncle'—whether in the street, at work, or in more official spaces. Most Gambians are Muslim, but there are also Christians and people of other denominations, and during religious holidays it is common for neighbours and friends of all backgrounds to celebrate together—sharing food, stories, and laughter. Rarely did a day go by without someone expressing curiosity about my research, inviting me for a meal, pulling me into conversation, or welcoming me into their everyday life.

It is noteworthy that I was able to gain a firsthand perspective on the political transition. One factor that made this possible was the transition itself—people often told me that such research would have been difficult to conduct before. In The Gambia today, one observes people speaking more freely, and I was able to witness a range of civic and political activities. This experience not only allowed me to follow the transition as it unfolded, but also helped me establish contacts that would prove valuable later in the research. As noted by Leonard Cargan, "a major advantage of the observation technique is its directness: It allows for the recording of behaviour as it occurs. It is not necessary to ask people about their attitudes, feelings, or views; you watch what they do and hear what they say."[218] Furthermore, meeting people in their everyday environments brought research into settings that were natural and meaningful.[219]

While I had visited The Gambia many times before and maintained strong family ties in the country, this time I tried to approach familiar relationships and routines with a sense of attentiveness, shaped by the responsibilities and sensitivities of conducting research. Living with my family gave me access to many layers of domestic and social life, and I began to notice small gestures, routines, and silences that I may have previously overlooked. I was drawn into cooking, errands, religious practices, and conversations that extended late into the evening—each offering a different entry point into how people navigate belonging, morality, and generational shifts. I attended naming ceremonies, school events, birthdays, shopping trips, and everyday errands—experiences that, while not always formally structured, offered valuable glimpses into the textures of urban life. What stood out was not necessarily the unfamiliarity of these encounters, but how being in a research mindset made me more present and observant. Activities as simple as driving along chaotic roads or helping with household logistics became part of a broader participatory rhythm that grounded my understanding of the social world I was trying to study.

These forms of participation allowed me to witness how people interpret their roles and responsibilities, how they articulate frustrations or hopes, and how political change is spoken about—or not spoken about—in the rhythms of everyday life. Beyond the household, I joined young Gambians in cafés, workplaces, university campuses, and NGO offices. I documented these experiences in a research journal, alongside encounters from daily errands, gym sessions, Sunday beach days, informal drop-ins, and travel across regions. These were rarely formalised research settings, yet they often revealed something about how people make sense of political

[218] Leonard Cargan, *Doing Social Research* (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 142.
[219] Sherri Jackson, *Research Methods: A Modular Approach* (California: Wadsworth Publishing, 2008).

participation, belonging, and aspiration. I tried to pay attention to posture, silences, laughter, and hesitations—what was said, what was avoided, and how.

There were, however, limitations. Gender dynamics shaped my access to certain spaces and conversations. It was generally easier to speak spontaneously with men about political matters than with women, particularly in informal public spaces. Language also remained a significant barrier. While many people in urban Gambia shift fluidly between English, Wolof, Mandinka, Fula, and Aku English, my limited understanding of Wolof meant that I could usually follow the general theme of a conversation but missed the nuances—the jokes, asides, or emotional tones that carried meaning. Other dominant national languages, such as Mandinka and Fula, remained almost entirely inaccessible to me. Even when others kindly translated fragments of speech, I was aware that much was being left out, and that language shaped not only who I could speak to, but also how I could interpret what was said. Although Wolof is not the most widely spoken language nationally, it holds a central place in urban communication, popular media, and youth culture. A stronger command of it would certainly have expanded the scope and depth of my observations and made it easier to access more subtle, coded, or affective registers of communication.

Still, many of my most revealing encounters came through moments of what Isabelle Rivoal and Noel Salazar call "serendipity"—or "the art of making an unsought finding."[220] There were times when not looking like I was doing research made me more approachable. Bryman suggests that qualitative research often hinges on "being in the right place at the right time and striking the right note in relationships."[221] In my case, this sometimes meant that research relationships began as friendships, or as informal interactions that gradually took on more significance. These unplanned moments became just as valuable as scheduled interviews in shaping how I understood youth life and civic engagement. Many insights emerged not solely from planned interviews but from spontaneous conversations on street corners, outside neighbours' compounds, beneath mango trees, at taxi stands, and during shared meals.

One such serendipitous encounter was meeting Dr Ceesay, a senior lecturer in political science at UTG. I had hoped to cross paths with him, having read his work on urban Gambian youth, but our meeting happened by chance at Spice Hub, a well-known restaurant in Kololi. Dr Ceesay became a particularly useful contact for this research, generously sharing not only literature and scholarly insight, but also encouragement and reassurance at key moments in the research process. His mentorship helped me refine my thinking and locate my findings within the broader trajectory of Gambian political transformation. In addition to our conversations, Dr Ceesay invited me to attend his undergraduate *Introduction to Politics* course, held weekly at the Law Faculty of UTG on the Kanifing campus. The lectures, delivered without microphones to an audience of around 200 students, required active concentration and note-taking. Sitting near the front of the lecture hall, I took careful notes—recording not just the content of the lectures but also the tone of student questions, the energy in the room, and the ways in which political concepts were introduced and debated. These observations deepened my appreciation

[220] Isabelle Rivoal and Noel B. Salazar, "Contemporary Ethnographic Practice and the Value of Serendipity," *Social Anthropology* 21, no. 2 (2013).
[221] Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 431.

of how civic education and political discourse circulate in academic settings and among youth audiences.

4.3.4 Digital Ethnography

In addition to conducting interviews and participating in everyday life in urban Gambia, I extended my ethnographic attention to the digital realm, recognising that online spaces have become increasingly significant arenas for civic discourse, social interaction, and political expression among Gambian youth. (For example, The *Gambia Youth and Women's Forum*, a public Facebook group with over 55,000 members, was particularly active in exposing the ills of the Jammeh administration in the lead-up to the election. It became a key space where youth and civil society figures exchanged opinions, shared information, and mobilised public attention.) In this way, the importance of incorporating people's digital 'habitat' into the ethnographic gaze should not be overlooked, as it forms an integral part of their broader social environment.[222] In this study, digital ethnography was not treated as a separate domain but as a complementary mode of engagement—one that intersected with, and was shaped by, my offline experiences. Since online and offline lives are interwoven, understanding both discursive spaces proved crucial for exploring how young people construct, negotiate, and communicate political meaning.

Since 2017, the Gambian media landscape has opened considerably, creating space for new forms of visibility, expression, and dissent. In urban areas especially, platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and X have become key sites for political and social engagement. Traditional figures—journalists, clerics, commentators—are now joined by a growing number of young Gambians who use these platforms to voice their views and shape public discourse.[223] According to the latest *We Are Social* report, there were 449,000 social media users in The Gambia as of January 2025, representing 16.1% of the population[224]—though it is noteworthy that this figure likely understates the full reach of social media, as phone sharing is common and digital content often circulates offline. This crossover is evident in radio talk shows, which often reference or rebroadcast material originating online. Notably, the influence of social media extends beyond urban centres; in rural areas, smartphones are often held by community or religious leaders who selectively share posts within their networks.[225] WhatsApp, in particular, plays a central role: its forums reflect offline structures—familial, religious, political—and are widely used to exchange information, with voice notes in Wolof or Mandinka serving as especially powerful tools for political commentary and discussion.

My own engagement with digital ethnography unfolded in two broad phases. The first involved a period of distant, mostly covert observation,[226] during which I followed public Facebook groups and pages where debates on political and social issues were active and

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[222] Ronald E. Hallett and Kristen Barber, "Ethnographic Research in a Cyber Era," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 43, no. 3 (2014).
[223] Idayat Hassan and Jamie Hitchen "How Hashtag Activism Moves Offline in The Gambia," *Democracy in Africa*, https://democracyinafrica.org/hashtag-activism-gambia/.
[224] Simon Kemp, *Digital 2025: The Gambia*, DataReportal, 3 March 2025, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-gambia.
[225] Hassan and Hitchen, "How Hashtag Activism Moves Offline."
[226] Bryman, *Social Research Methods*; Dhiraj Murthy, "Digital Ethnography: An Examination of the Use of New Technologies for Social Research," *Sociology (Oxford)* 42, no. 5 (2008).

recurring. Searching terms such as 'Gambia politics' or 'Gambia youth' led me to threads and posts where common themes and recurring voices emerged. On X, hashtags such as #GambiaDecides, #ThreeYearsJotna, and #EndFGM served as useful entry points to monitor conversations and observe how individuals positioned themselves in relation to key events or debates. As Aim Sinpeng notes, "digitally mediated political movements, or hashtag activism, [are] a specific form of activism whereby activists and ordinary people engage in collective contentious activities on social media platforms."[227] Hashtags are crucial for political mobilisation not only because they link specific words or phrases—making content easily searchable and shareable—but also because they function as agenda-setting tools and discursive frames.[228] In this way, hashtags do not simply reflect sentiment; they shape public narratives, foster shared identities, and enable visibility. Algorithms on platforms such as X further enhance this dynamic by prioritising trending content based on engagement metrics, amplifying its reach. Although not as widely used as Facebook or WhatsApp, X stood out for its public-facing and performative character, offering insight into the more visible and sometimes aspirational dimensions of political subjectivity among digitally active youth. During this phase, I engaged as a passive observer, refraining from commenting or initiating contact, and instead took notes on the ways political meaning was being performed, negotiated, or challenged in real time.

Once in The Gambia, my digital engagement became more participatory and increasingly overlapped with my offline research. I reached out to individuals whose social media presence I had followed during the preparatory phase, and several agreed to participate in interviews. As I added informants, friends, and acquaintances to my social media networks, I began following their digital lives more closely—joining WhatsApp groups, receiving forwarded messages, and observing how political conversations unfolded through posts, stories, comments, memes, and emojis. These online exchanges became both a site of observation and a means of relationship-building, allowing me to stay connected, share updates, and remain attuned to public sentiment and informal commentary on political events.

Importantly, these digital interactions did not end when I left The Gambia. Conversations continued across platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, often helping to clarify earlier discussions, confirm or complicate interpretations, or open up new lines of inquiry. In some cases, I followed up with individuals I had already met; in others, new contacts reached out to respond to content I had shared. These ongoing interactions contributed to a form of what Hennie Boeije describes as member validation—a process through which data is returned to participants for confirmation, clarification, or dissent.[229] Through this practice, I was able to offer participants a degree of agency over how their contributions were used, ensuring that their voices were not simply recorded but also reflected back with care. The ease of digital communication made this process more accessible and allowed participants to decide whether they were comfortable disclosing particular reflections.

As with all methods, digital ethnography raised its own ethical considerations. Thus, I was careful to distinguish between publicly available content and private exchanges, sought

[227] Aim Sinpeng, "Hashtag Activism: Social Media and the #FreeYouth Protests in Thailand," *Critical Asian Studies* 53, no. 2 (2021).
[228] Guobin Yang, "Narrative Agency in Hashtag Activism: The Case of #BlackLivesMatter," *Media and Communication* 4, no. 4 (2016).
[229] Hennie Boeije, *Analysis in Qualitative Research* (London: SAGE, 2010), 117.

consent before citing any private communication, and refrained from quoting personal posts without explicit permission. While I remained mindful of these ethical boundaries—citing only personal material where consent was obtained—I am aware that digital research, like all ethnographic work, is shaped by the researcher's own perspective and interpretation. Which groups I followed, which voices I listened to, and which interactions I thought of as meaningful were all filtered through my interpretive lens. Moreover, I recognise the limitations of digital ethnography, particularly in contexts where access to digital tools is uneven and literacy not universal. While platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook offered important insights into youth political discourse in urban Gambia, they do not represent the full range of Gambian social life. Nonetheless, when used alongside more traditional methods, digital ethnography proved an indispensable lens for exploring how political subjectivity, critique, and participation are imagined, articulated, and circulated in the hybrid social spaces that many young Gambians now inhabit.

4.4 Methodological Reflections and Limitations

This research has been shaped by an ethnographic orientation that privileges proximity, attentiveness, and reflexivity—not only in observing what is said and done, but in tracing how meaning is co-produced through relationships, interpretations, and positionalities. At the same time, ethnographic research demands sensitivity to the ways in which the researcher is socially, politically, and emotionally positioned within the context of the study. Reflexivity, in this sense, entails more than self-awareness; it involves sustained engagement with how the researcher's own biography, identity, and presence shape every stage of the research process—from access and rapport-building to interpretation and representation. Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow describe this as a process of "active consideration of and engagement with the ways in which [one's] own sense-making and the particular circumstances that might have affected it."[230] My position as a young woman, a student researcher with a Dutch mother and a Gambian father, raised in the Netherlands and returning to The Gambia with both personal ties and academic intent, shaped the contours of my encounters—at times enabling, at others constraining. There were moments when I was treated somewhat more as an insider—especially within familial or peer contexts—and others when I was clearly positioned more as an outsider, marked by my Dutch-accented English, my limited command of local languages, or my unfamiliarity with certain norms and rhythms of everyday life. These shifting perceptions influenced who spoke to me, how they spoke, and what I was able to hear or understand. This dual positionality—never fully insider nor fully outsider—granted me access to certain intimacies while simultaneously reminding me of the gaps in my knowledge and the partiality of my interpretations.

Reflexivity, then, was not only a methodological or ethical imperative, but also a question of writing—of how to craft a narrative that foregrounds the researcher's presence without overpowering the voices of others. As Alvesson and Sköldberg suggest, the empirical material presented here should be read "as an argument in efforts to make a case for a particular

[230] Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow, *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 100.

way of understanding social reality, in the context of a never-ending debate."[231] What this thesis offers, therefore, is not a definitive account of Gambian youth or their civic and political engagement, but a situated and relational interpretation—one shaped by the people who entrusted me with their reflections, and by the position from which I listened. With this in mind, I do not claim to offer a comprehensive account of how young urban Gambians experience the democratic transition. Rather, I aim to present a set of situated and partial insights—moments of interaction, interpretation, and observation that helped me make sense of the broader dynamics shaping youth civic life. These reflections are grounded in everyday engagement, and as Alvesson and Sköldberg remind us, the purpose of qualitative research is not to deliver universal truths but to provide "opportunities for understanding."[232]

My perspective is certainly shaped by certain privileges, including the freedom to move between countries, the support of a university, and the protection of a European passport. These stand in stark contrast to the structural constraints faced by several of my interlocutors—particularly those who had experienced irregular migration, bureaucratic rejection, or the sense of being excluded from global circuits of mobility and opportunity. James Ferguson captures this feeling of marginalisation through the notion of "abjection," pointing to the lived experience of youth who feel discarded or forgotten by the global order.[233] Ruben Andersson, too, reminds us that for those who lack the necessary capital—whether legal, economic, or cultural—mobility is not freedom but friction, uncertainty, and systemic delay.[234] These asymmetries surfaced throughout the research, not only as topics of discussion but as structures embedded in the very act of doing research. They made me more attuned to the stakes of representation, and to the ethical obligation to treat each story not merely as data, but as a claim to dignity, visibility, and care.

In this light, reflexivity also shaped the way I chose to write—not in pursuit of a neutral or objective voice, but in recognition that knowledge is always situated and relational. As Dvora Yanow writes: "If knowledge is situated knowledge, produced by situated knowers, 'I' is the most normal and natural voice for the researcher to use."[235] This echoes Timothy Pachirat's insistence that political ethnographers must account for their own partiality and the power dynamics that flow through the research process.[236] Writing from this position means acknowledging that the knowledge produced here is neither exhaustive nor detached, but grounded in specific moments of interaction, shaped by trust, emotion, vulnerability, and contingency. Reflexivity, in this regard, is not a discrete phase but a continuous practice—threaded through each conversation, each interpretive decision, and each line written. It also means recognising that ethical engagement extends far beyond institutional protocols: it is deeply relational, dependent on how we listen, how we speak, and how we remain accountable

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[231] Alvesson and Sköldberg, *Reflexive Methodology*, 304.
[232] Ibid., 9.
[233] James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 236.
[234] Ruben Andersson, *Illegality, Inc: Clandestine Migration and the Business of Bordering Europe* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2014).
[235] Dvora Yanow, "Dear Author, Dear Reader: The Third Hermeneutic in Writing and Reviewing Ethnography," in *Political Ethnography*, ed. Schatz, 290.
[236] Timothy Pachirat, "The Political in Political Ethnography: Dispatches from the Kill Floor," in *Political Ethnography,* ed. Schatz, 144.

to those who allow us into their lives. The empirical material introduced here—whether gathered through interviews, conversations, or digital platforms—must therefore be seen not as raw data but as shared meaning, produced through fragile and situated exchanges.

And yet, perhaps the most enduring insight from this process is that the stories I encountered were never static. Instead, they continued evolving long after I left The Gambia. Indeed, one of the powerful dimensions of working with people in context is that you are sometimes drawn into their stories—but those stories do not conclude neatly. While writing this thesis, I came to realise that although I set out to explore certain aspects of youth civic and political engagement in urban Gambia, the ambition to definitively "close gaps in knowledge" is ultimately an illusory one. As James Clifford and George E. Marcus remind us, "There is no whole picture that can be 'filled in', since the perception and filling of a gap leads to the awareness of other gaps."[237] What this work offers, then, is more a momentary snapshot—partial, situated, and evolving. It gestures towards a broader and unfinished conversation, one that involves not only young people and their practices of political engagement, but also the intergenerational dynamics, rural-urban continuities, and affective registers that shape life in post-Jammeh Gambia. Rather than offering closure, this research opens space for reflection—for thinking with others, rather than thinking about them—and for contributing, however modestly, to the ongoing and plural conversations about youth, politics, and sociopolitical transformation in contemporary African contexts.

The following empirical chapters build on these methodological reflections by tracing how young Gambians experience and navigate civic and political change in the post-Jammeh era, and why their responses to the transition diverge across social, economic, and affective lines. Chapter Five examines the partial openings of civic and political life—moments of mobilisation, expression, and cautious optimism—while Chapter Six turns to the structural and emotional constraints that temper these gains: from the disappointment of stalled reform to the harsh realities of economic exclusion and political repression. Together, they reveal how democratic transition is lived not as a singular or uniform experience, but as a contradictory process shaped by uneven access, shifting expectations, and the layered realities of youth life in contemporary urban Gambia.

[237] James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 18.

5. Contours of Change: Navigating Civic and Political Possibility in Post-Authoritarian Gambia

This chapter explores the period of partial democratisation that has unfolded since the ousting of Jammeh—marked by the re-opening of political space and expanded freedoms of expression—which has generated new, yet uneven, opportunities for civic and political engagement. It examines how the reconfiguration of power and the loosening of authoritarian controls have enabled the emergence of a diverse range of organisational forms: youth-led and grassroots advocacy initiatives, a proliferation of political parties, and the reappearance of actors previously marginalised or silenced. Mapping the contours of this changing landscape, the chapter explores four interrelated domains: first, the expansion of civic space and the revival of youth-led organising (5.1); second, the gendered silences and social risks surrounding transitional justice and public testimony (5.2); third, the re-emergence of youth voices within formal political parties and electoral processes (5.3); and finally, the ambivalent dynamics of inclusion and instrumentalisation that shape youth participation in party politics (5.4). Drawing on my encounters with young people navigating these developments, the chapter investigates how they experiment with new forms of engagement—public, digital, artistic, and institutional—while also negotiating the ambivalences, social risks, and structural constraints that shape these engagements. Rather than viewing the post-2016 period as a clear rupture with the past, it attends to the continuities and contradictions that underpin this moment of transition. In doing so, this chapter asks:

> *In what ways do young urban Gambians navigate the ambivalent and uneven openings of civic and political life in the aftermath of authoritarian rule?*

5.1 *"We Protest, We Go on TV, We Criticise, and Then We Go Home"*: Expanding Civic Space and the Contested Boundaries of Activism

Shortly after my arrival in The Gambia, I was invited by 28-year-old environmentalist and human rights activist Muhammed H. to take part in a beach clean-up at Cape Point—an elevated promontory in Bakau—where The Gambia River meets the Atlantic Ocean at the country's westernmost tip. This is where most of Bakau's hotels and beaches are located. The coastline here is characterised by rocky outcrops interspersed with small stretches of sand, which often disappear entirely at high tide. The main exception is the large beach at Cape Point itself, which has been artificially extended through sand replenishment efforts aimed at countering coastal erosion. The clean-up—organised in commemoration of the International Day of Peace—brought together various civil society organisations, including Peace Hub The Gambia (a youth-led peacebuilding and social cohesion network founded in 2020) and the Amnesty International Kanifing Municipality Group (one of the local chapters of Amnesty Gambia).

I had reached out to Muhammed H. a few days earlier via Instagram, where he has built a visible presence around his environmental and human rights work, regularly sharing images of beach clean-ups, public events, and lectures held across the country. His online engagement reflects broader shifts in the country's (social) media environment since 2017, which has opened

new avenues for visibility, connection, and dissent. In urban areas, platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and X have become key arenas for expression and engagement. Political activists, journalists, social commentators, and religious figures—those who would traditionally shape political debate through conventional media—are now highly active online. Alongside them, an increasing number of young Gambians have found their voice through social media, with their opinions exerting growing influence on their peers.[238] Reflecting on this, Muhammed H. explained:

> When we started advocating on Facebook and X—sharing pictures and showing what was really happening—people began to pay attention. Social media has really helped our work. Before, we organised a lot of activities, but without publicity, they didn't get much traction. Now, people engage with our posts. We also make flyers to support mass mobilisation. When people use the same hashtag, it can even become a trend. Local media pick up our events, use our photos, and help spread the word. Social media has connected us—not just with people here, but also with the outside world who can now see what we're doing.[239]

As Edmore Chitukutuku notes, social movements do not die in the digital age—they migrate and multiply across online platforms.[240] Social media, in this sense, does not displace institutional politics but acts as a supplemental domain, enabling citizens to share information, debate, strategise, and mobilise beyond the reach of traditional state surveillance. In Africa, the rise of platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and X has accompanied the spread of mobile internet, creating new spaces for civic engagement and grassroots mobilisation.[241] These digital arenas have become crucial for young people to assert political agency, bridge spatial and generational divides, and participate in public discourse through networked forms of engagement. From early on in the research process, I came to understand that social media was not only a critical space through which youth expressed civic and political engagement, but also a useful means for establishing contact with individuals active in civil society and advocacy spaces.

I followed up with Muhammed H. to learn more about his work with The Gambia Environmental Alliance, established in 2021 as the first coordinating body for environmental community-based and civil society organisations in the country. Our meeting formed part of an initial effort to map out the activist groups that had emerged in the wake of the transition, as the lifting of restrictions on civil liberties opened up new avenues for youth-led organising and social movement development. I arrived at the beach around ten in the morning. It was a beautiful day: a clear blue sky, a lingering sense of morning calm, and seagulls flying overhead. Muhammed H. arrived about two hours later, having just come from a radio programme—still the most widely used source of information for many Gambians, particularly those outside the

[238] Hassan and Hitchen "How Hashtag Activism Moves Offline."
[239] Interview with Muhammed H., 4 October 2023.
[240] Edmore Chitukutuku, "Going Virtual: Social Media and Youth-Led Social Movements in Africa," in *Youth-Led Social Movements*, ed. Bangura, 55.
[241] Ibid.

urban digital sphere.[242] Around 25 people were present, most of them women, some about my age, others older.

I started speaking with a young woman who seemed to be in her early twenties, close to my own age then. She wore a white polo shirt and black skinny jeans, and had her curly braids pulled into a ponytail. Her name was Mariama—my *toomaa* (namesake). I introduced myself and told her about my research. She was enthusiastic and encouraged me to speak to the others in attendance. "It's important to hear their stories," Mariama told me, referring to the other women present. Most of them, she explained, were victims of Jammeh's regime. I had no idea. I remember that when I was first considering a research topic, I had avoided writing about the transitional justice process, thinking it was a topic I felt unequipped to approach with the care it required—especially as the process was still very much ongoing, and I did not feel like the right person to take it on, given that I hadn't personally lived through the years of dictatorship. Yet, as I came to find throughout my research, the stories of the past—however painful they were—were impossible to avoid. Mariama, who holds a bachelor's degree in political science from UTG, told me she has been engaged in human rights advocacy for the past three years with the Women's Association for Victims Empowerment (WAVE), an organisation involved in the transitional justice process with a focus on women victims. "When I started engaging with the victims and survivors of the past regime, I felt like I was doing something that was allowing me to directly help people," she reflected. "I felt like it was a calling, and I decided to join this space. If you look at where we are today, after being a 22-year dictatorship, it is very unique."

While I encountered a civic landscape throughout my research that appeared vibrant and expanding, my *toomaa* explained how different things had been during Jammeh's presidency. She described how involvement in civil society had been limited or actively discouraged. Some people I spoke with were unaware that such spaces even existed, while others recalled being advised by family members to avoid participating in anything that might be perceived as 'political'. "Before, I didn't really know about the civil society space because of the dictatorship; it wasn't really a popular thing to be part of those things," Mariama recounted. "People could not even talk about those things. They were not even allowed to voice their opinions."

Fear was a recurring theme in the recollections of those I spoke with. It formed a constant backdrop to their lives, shaping how they spoke, acted, and interacted with others. Their stories reveal how, during a regime marked by widespread state-sponsored terror and violence, The Gambia became a place of silence. Michael Jackson describes how such violence destroys an individual's capacity to speak and act openly in the public domain, instead driving them into privacy and isolation.[243] As he puts it, "in violence one can act only under the threat of pain, of degradation, or of death—and speak only to debase or incriminate oneself, or assent to the other's will."[244] Fear, as Peter Lambert observes in relation to the Third Reich, led

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[242] Afrobarometer, *Gambians Support Media Freedom but Want Government to Prevent False News and Hate Speech, Afrobarometer Survey Shows* (news release, 3 May 2021), https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/news_release-gambians_support_media_freedom_within_limits-afrobarometer-2may21.pdf.

[243] Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling: Variations on a Theme by Hannah Arendt* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2013), 51.

[244] Ibid., 57.

individuals to 'self-police' and 'self-censor'.[245] Under Jammeh, Gambians would caution one another against speaking in public or, at the very least, advise extreme discretion—carefully choosing their words and trusted listeners—for fear of arrest. A pervasive mistrust in others developed, as anyone could be a potential informant for the regime. In the words of one journalist I interviewed at the offices of *The Standard* in Bakau in October 2023:

> There was a lot of self-censorship during the Jammeh days, and as a result, many people—or many great minds—left. People shied away, people were quite reserved, probably out of fear for their own safety.[246]

Mr Sait Matty Jaw, whom I interviewed in November 2023 at his home in Brusubi—a developing and tranquil area outside of Banjul, known for its residential neighbourhoods and expanding infrastructure—reflected on the shifts in political space and civic expression following Jammeh's departure. We were seated in his living room, each on a large leather chair, as his young daughter played nearby, occasionally interrupting our conversation with laughter and questions directed at her father. A lecturer in political science at UTG and Afrobarometer project director for the Centre for Research and Policy Development (CRPD), he observed:

> Civil society was almost non-existent under Jammeh. Back then, the only groups that were critical of Jammeh were the political parties—because they were political parties—but civil society and others were mostly focused on gender and women's development, not on political questions. Now, a new generation is emerging in civil society—what I would call political civil society—which has developed since 2017 and beyond. Today, people are critical: we protest, we go on TV, we criticise, and then we go home. You couldn't do that under Jammeh. There are now many opportunities for young urban youth; even if they're not involved in partisan politics, they're active in civil society.[247]

Mr Jaw's reflections echoed the sentiments expressed by others I spoke with, who have become increasingly engaged in civic and political life since 2017. As one youth leader whom I spoke to in Serekunda—the largest metropolitan area in the country—put it:

> When the change of government happened, the space became bigger, wider, and freer. We are now able to do our work much more effectively than before—in terms of messaging, who we engage with, and access to the government. I think our strength lies in the fact that people can speak their minds freely, without fear of intimidation. There are now many more protests and publications openly criticising the government.[248]

While walking along the beach that afternoon during the clean-up, clearing up litter and placing it in a wheelbarrow, I spoke to Y., a man who appeared to be in his late thirties. He wore black sunglasses, a camera slung around his neck, and a white T-shirt with the words *#NeverAgain* printed in black on the back—a phrase that has become central to the country's post-transition discourse. Established as a campaign by the TRRC—#NeverAgain was designed to facilitate

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[245] Peter Lambert, "The Third Reich: Police State or Self-Policing Society?," in *Everyday Life in Mass Dictatorship*, ed. Alf Lüdtke (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 50.
[246] Interview with Alagie, 30 October 2023.
[247] Interview with Sait Matty Jaw, 21 November 2023.
[248] Interview with Omar, 20 September 2023.

and promote public participation in national conversations on "what went wrong, why it went wrong, and how to best prevent a recurrence of human right violations and abuses in The Gambia," through the empowerment of Gambian society and the transformation of civic culture.[249] As one youth activist, whose father was extrajudicially killed by the NIA, explained: "The TRRC mantra is basically 'Never Again'. So, in order to ensure that these things do not repeat, we have to teach them to the younger generation."[250] These expressions of civic memory and justice-seeking not only reckon with the past, but also shape the emerging vocabularies of protest and political engagement among youth in the present. They provide a moral and affective framework through which young Gambians are interpreting their political agency—grounded in historical awareness, but also animated by a forward-looking sense of possibility and change.

Figure 5: Resting in the shade at Cape Point. Photograph taken by the author, September 2023.

Y.'s presence at the event, and his choice of clothing, seemed to embody this ethos. A practising journalist and photographer based in Banjul, he also serves as a spokesperson for Team *Gom Sa Bopa* ('Believe in yourself'), a youth-led movement committed to raising awareness among young people about civic engagement and social life through art. Earlier that year, in May, the group had organised a protest under the theme *Dafa Doy* ('It's Enough') in response to new tariffs introduced by The Gambia's National Water and Electricity Company (NAWEC). Protesters gathered at NAWEC headquarters under a heavy police escort, holding placards and banners with slogans such as "Affordable electricity and water is a human right!" and "Bring back cheaper tariffs!". This mobilisation not only reflected frustration with the rising cost of

[249] Aminata Ndow, "Knowing What I Know Now: Youth Experiences of Dictatorship and Transitional Justice in The Gambia" (Master's thesis, Gent University, 2020), 60.
[250] Interview with Muhammed S., 4 October 2023.

living, but also formed part of a broader repertoire of youth-led civic engagement emerging in the post-transition period. Such actions intersect with wider democratisation efforts across the continent. In contexts where large segments of the population remain underrepresented, "popular protest has been sweeping the continent ..., seeking to fundamentally transform Africa's political and economic inequities."[251] Scholars note that:

> Against the backdrop of marginalisation, young people across the continent, and in West and Central Africa in particular, create for themselves or take advantage of any opportunities to assert their political voices. Due to their marginalisation from formal politics, many young people find other ways to make their voices heard and to fulfil their citizenship duties.[252]

One such avenue through which young people seek to "make their voices heard" is protest, which Honwana argues they engage in as a direct response to the everyday challenges generated by political and economic exclusion.[253] Since 2017, several protest movements have taken shape in The Gambia, reflecting the intersection of longstanding grievances and limited opportunities within a broader context shaped by newly guaranteed rights to free assembly, association, and expression. This shift is evident in the increasingly assertive demands for improved public services, signalling a broader transformation in civic consciousness and political engagement. Many of these concerns—particularly around the lack of reliable healthcare, education, electricity, water, and roads—were frequently raised in my conversations with young people, who spoke with urgency about the day-to-day frustrations these deficiencies produce. Similar grievances have been reflected in public mobilisation as well. In March 2018, doctors employed in public hospitals staged a sit-down strike, calling for systemic reforms within the health sector and the Ministry of Health, and demanding the resignation of the then Minister of Health, who had controversially blamed service-delivery failures on doctors allegedly diverting medicines for sale in private pharmacies.[254] In September of the same year, teachers organised a parallel strike to call for improved remuneration.[255] Both protests were swiftly suppressed by police intervention and participants returned to work within a month, they nonetheless highlighted not only a renewed willingness among citizens to make their voices heard, but also growing public dissatisfaction with the state's ability to provide essential services in post-Jammeh Gambia.

This discontent is not confined to organised protest alone. Throughout my research I met several Gambian youth who engage with political and social issues through a range of other diffuse and creative forms of civic expression. Alongside protests and petitions are music, spoken word, and visual media—forms that are situated within a broader cultural politics. While these expressions may not always constitute formal mobilisation, they nonetheless offer important spaces for reflection, critique, and engagement with questions of governance,

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[251] Branch and Mampilly, *Africa Uprising*, 1-2.
[252] Bleck, Lwere, and Sangaré, "Youth in West and Central Africa," 527.
[253] Honwana, *The Time of Youth*.
[254] Alieu Ceesay, "Gambia: Doctors Embark on Strike as Ultimatum Elapses," *The Fatu Network*, 9 March 2018, https://fatunetwork.net/gambia-doctors-embark-strike-ultimatum-elapses/.
[255] Momodou Jawo, "Gambia: More Teachers Join the Strike After VP's Threat," *The Point*, 28 September 2018, http://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/article/more-teachers-join-the-strike-after-vps-threat.

inequality, and everyday life. One such conversation took place in late 2023, when I met with Alieu—a 33-year-old hip hop artist and music producer from the unplanned settlement of Ebo Town, located along the Brikama-Banjul Highway. The area is flooded almost every year with polluted water from the uphill Kanifing Municipality due to the lack of adequate infrastructure for sanitation and drainage. These recurring floods are a visible manifestation of what Amanda Atwood, writing in the context of Zimbabwe, describes as "unstable infrastructure."[256] In The Gambia, this instability extends beyond lack of adequate infrastructure for sanitation and drainage to include difficulties with electricity, education, health care, and road conditions explained Alieu, who performs under the names Izzy T. or Talibeh Izzy. Dressed in dark-washed jeans, a white graphic T-shirt, a baseball cap, and sneakers, he spoke about his journey into music. Raised by his grandmother, Alieu began writing poetry in school before being inspired by artists such as J. Cole, Bob Marley, and Youssou N'Dour to start making music. After completing high school, he enrolled at university but left after a year to pursue what he described as "what was inside my heart." "That was music," he explained, "but that did not stop me from learning." He went on to explain that he had taken various courses since then and obtained certification in several areas.

As we spoke, Alieu reflected on how the space for dissent had shifted since the political transition, particularly for artists like himself who use music as a form of expression and critique. "During the time of Jammeh, we couldn't address the wrongdoing 100% because we knew it comes with a whole lot of danger … you might get caught," he recalled. "Most of my people got caught, we even went to perform in Senegal and when we came back, we almost got arrested … our phones have been tapped. We saw a whole lot of government cars at our homes. It wasn't safe—just because we addressed certain things." Alieu remembered the time he released a song critical of the former government. When he returned home late one night, his grandmother was so alarmed that she urged him to stop making music for fear it might get him killed. Since the transition, Alieu has continued to raise critical issues through music, using his lyrics to engage with the frustrations and material challenges that shape everyday life in urban Gambia. During our conversation, he observed:

> The rainy season is affecting a whole lot of places—experiencing floods and all that—especially me hometown, Ebo Town. You cannot travel without wasting a whole lot of time. Imagine, I just have to come from around the corner—it's not far—and I had to spend like 50 minutes on the road, you know. That's time wasted, you know. And you cannot blame it on any driver, because it is about the roads. Even if we have a few good roads, the cars are not even OK, you know. And that is because of the roads and all that… And the poverty rate too. The poverty rate is getting worse every year. We try and do whatever we can, but it's never enough. And it keeps getting worse when there's more money coming in. And the other thing is electricity is very expensive and most of us cannot afford it, yeah. So I don't know where we're headed, but it's not going to be cool. And I think it's only right that we address a whole lot of issues like that.[257]

[256] Amanda Atwood, "Zimbabwe's Unstable Infrastructure," *Spheres: Journal of Digital Cultures* 3 (2016).
[257] Interview with Alieu, 12 September 2023.

Since 2017, after years of fearing the government, musicians and other artists have found greater freedom to express themselves. Today, songs about both love and politics can be heard across the airwaves. When I asked Alieu whether he considered his work 'political', he replied:

> I think music itself is politics. Some of the artists out here, I think they're doing politics. We are speaking out to the government or speaking out to the people with powers—that's like addressing the truth. They might call us activists, I don't know. But then we're going to do it, not because we're involved in the politics, but because we want to spread the truth. That's quite different from involving in politics, you understand. But then the political aspect of it is, I think, the truth that you're speaking—and people are buying it.[258]

Alieu's reflections highlight the ways in which artistic production can serve as a form of protest—perhaps less visible than street demonstrations, but no less significant in articulating dissent, holding power to account, and giving voice to lived realities that might otherwise go unspoken. In the last decade, musicians and other artists across the African continent have increasingly harnessed the tools of digital connectivity to exert political influence, often using the democratised platforms of the internet to bypass traditional gatekeepers and reach wide audiences. As Susan Shepler notes in her study of youth music in Sierra Leone, such cultural production not only helps generate political conversation, but also offers insight into what she terms "youth's moral universe." She argues that these artistic expressions may represent a "shift in strategy" from past modes of violent rebellion to more symbolic and discursive forms of resistance.[259] Alieu's work can be read in this light: as an attempt to speak truth through music, not from within formal political structures, but from a place of artistic and social engagement.

At the same time, however, Alieu pointed to the ongoing risks and ambiguities that accompany public critique. While formal censorship has receded, informal forms of silencing and social backlash remain potent. "At first it was being scared of Jammeh, but right now it's about the people at large," Alieu told me.

> If I talked about—let's say for instance—Lawyer Darboe, if I want to speak about the wrongs that he's doing, the whole UDP are going to feel like I'm attacking them at large, when that is not it. If I want to speak about Barrow, and he's the leader of NPP, NPP are going to take it at large and attack me too.[260]

He paused, then added with a small laugh, "They might even add me into a WhatsApp group and start insulting me and all that." His comments point to the complex terrain of political speech today, where partisan affiliations, heightened sensitivities, and digitally amplified reactions all shape what can be said, and how it is received.

In this way, Alieu's reflections offer an important bridge between the more visible modes of mobilisation—such as street protests—and the quieter, more personal negotiations of civic identity and expression that some young Gambians undertake. Despite the widening of civic space and the growing visibility of public mobilisation, protest too remains constrained by the

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[258] Ibid.
[259] Susan Shepler, "Youth Music and Politics in Post-war Sierra Leone," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 48, no. 4 (2010): 628.
[260] Interview with Alieu, 12 September 2023.

legacies of authoritarian rule and the social caution it engendered. Public demonstrations are still frequently met with surprise, and even suspicion, by bystanders unaccustomed to overt expressions of dissent after decades in which such acts were heavily repressed.[261] Under Jammeh's leadership, many young people grew increasingly disillusioned, as social movements and digital protests often failed to yield meaningful change. The deep-seated distrust of the political system, cultivated over years of authoritarian governance, continues to shape attitudes towards activism, even after the formal end of such regimes. As Nduka Otiono notes, the lived experiences of repression do not simply vanish with a political transition; rather, they linger, conditioning the emotional and political repertoires through which citizens engage with—or withdraw from—public life.[262]

One of the first visible acts of dissent under the new government took place in November 2017, when the ad hoc social movement #OccupyWestfield—spearheaded by Alieu Bah, a former editorial writer for *The Standard* and a prominent member of various youth groups—planned to take to the streets to express frustration over NAWEC's erratic water and electricity supplies in urban areas. The public gathering followed a lengthy discussion with authorities, which initially resulted in the group being granted a permit to protest—but this was later revoked by the police. At the time, the country was experiencing a hot spell, and some residents reported outages lasting close to 24 hours. In a Facebook post, Bah wrote:

> #OccupyWestfield is a leaderless, amoebic, spontaneous rising of young new Gambian millennials. It is preposition not a position, a stance not an ideology. It is a critique and shared desire. Even though I started the campaign, I just want us to realise this is not my movement or organisation. It's a LEADERLESS movement.[263]

The protest had been organised by a number of young activists, including Salieu Taal and Raffie Diab of the #GambiaHasDecided campaign, as well as rapper and self-described 'RapTivist' Killa Ace—an early member of Team *Gom Sa Boppa* and affiliate of Senegal's *Y'en a Marre*. The movement gained momentum online and relied heavily on Facebook for mobilisation, underscoring Robert Kozinets' observation that online communities are not merely 'virtual' but often translate into real-life action.[264] The planned protest drew support from a remarkably diverse group of participants, including young people, students, workers, women, and taxi drivers—reflecting broad-based engagement across urban Gambia. Occupy Westfield resonated widely because it addressed issues that affected nearly everyone, particularly the persistent and widespread electricity and water cuts. The movement quickly grew in visibility, trending more than any other issue at the time. On platforms such as Facebook and X, it dominated the conversation, with thousands actively engaging online. In defiance of the ban, a small crowd still gathered at Westfield Junction: members of the #OccupyWestfield team, a few supporters, and well-wishers. Some held banners, others wore printed T-shirts, and Bah read a public

[261] Peter Gardner et al., "PROFILE: Extinction Rebellion in The Gambia," *Social Movement Studies* 23, no. 1 (2024): 125.
[262] Nduka Otiono, "Dream Delayed or Dream Betrayed: Politics, Youth Agency and the Mobile Revolution in Africa," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 55, no. 1 (2021): 133.
[263] Eddy Jatta, "On and Off bi Dafa Doi: Protest Against NAWEC this Sunday," *Whats On Gambia*, 1 November 2017, https://whatson-gambia.com/on-and-off-bi-dafa-doi-protest-against-nawec-this-sunday/.
[264] Robert Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online* (London: SAGE, 2010), 15.

statement on behalf of the organisers. The statement expressed disappointment with the government for revoking the permit and framed the decision as a threat to Gambia's democratic aspirations.[265] Shortly after they assembled, the protesters were instructed to disperse by groups of heavily armed security personnel. In the aftermath, Bah became the target of fierce backlash, facing death threats, assassination threats, and a wave of online insults. Rumours circulated that he had been paid millions of dalasis to stage the protest, while others questioned his Gambian nationality. Amidst a fierce back-and-forth debate, some defended the action as a democratic right, while others dismissed it as an "unnecessary protest" and called for dialogue instead.[266] While Barrow remained silent, the police issued a statement branding the group as troublemakers and national security threats.[267]

Mixed responses to protest activity—at times permitted, yet also subject to criticism or suspicion—may help explain the caution adopted by some individuals involved in civic activism. Y., the journalist and photographer I had met during the beach clean-up, described himself as an activist, though explained that he sometimes avoids using the term, opting instead for 'advocate'. "When people hear the word 'activist', they think, 'Oh no, an activist is out to cause problems'; they don't want that. 'Advocate' sounds more neutral," he said. Y.'s hesitation may be read alongside what David Harris and Sait Matty Jaw describe as an association in The Gambia between protest and *fitna*—a term derived from Arabic that denotes 'chaos' or 'social disruption'.[268] Creating *fitna* is widely seen as harmful to the individual, the family, and society at large. This contrasts with the usage of the term in Senegal, where, although it carries a similar connotation, it is more readily understood as something potentially necessary under certain conditions. Given Senegal's longer and more visible history of protest, this difference is perhaps unsurprising. By contrast, the notion of *maslah*—the idea of 'letting bygones be bygones'—is often seen in The Gambia as a more appropriate or socially acceptable way of addressing conflict.[269]

Throughout my research, I encountered a range of ways in which individuals described and navigated their civic involvement—some more visible and public-facing, others more reserved or informal. While terms like 'activist' and 'advocate' were often used interchangeably, several participants reflected on the different associations these labels might carry, and how they could be received by others. Such reflections point to a broader awareness of the social dynamics that shape how civic roles are performed and interpreted, particularly in a context where protest and political expression continue to elicit ambivalent responses. For some, more direct mobilisation offers a meaningful way to voice concerns and push for change, while for others, engagement takes place through quieter forms—art, education, local initiatives, or online discussion—which may feel more appropriate or sustainable given their circumstances. These variations suggest that youth civic engagement in The Gambia today is not uniform but shaped by a range of motivations, constraints, and historical experiences. Rather than signalling disengagement, more restrained forms of participation may reflect strategic choices about how

[265] Longo, "Unbroken Circles," 91-92.
[266] "Occupy BAC Former Councillor Calls for Dialogue," *The Voice*, 22 July 2019, https://www.voicegambia.com/2019/07/22/occupy-bac-former-councilor-calls-for-dialogue/.
[267] Longo, "Unbroken Circles," 91-92.
[268] Harris and Jaw, "A 'New Gambia'?," 58-59.
[269] Ibid.

best to navigate an evolving but still partially democratised political landscape. In some cases, this positioning takes the form of subtler and quieter forms of civic presence—often gendered and intimate—in which silence operates not simply as absence, but as a mode of endurance, protection, or quiet defiance.

Figure 6: Youth taking part in the Cape Point beach clean-up. Photograph taken by the author, September 2023.

Figure 7: Muhammed H. giving instructions on how to plant coconut seedlings at Cape Point. Photograph taken by the author, September 2023.

5.2 Untangling a Culture of Silence: Gendered Testimony and the Politics of Speaking Out

Following our day at the beach, I met Mariama at WAVE's spacious compound, located near the Manjai Kunda turntable. The compound serves not only as the organisation's office but also as a sanctuary-like space for the women survivors seeking solace or respite. It provides a place where they can unwind, watch TV, listen to music, or simply find a moment of tranquillity away from their everyday routines. The atmosphere was quiet and serene. I snapped a few pictures of the garden and the colourful walls, adorned with a variety of paintings. "We have art-based therapy," Mariama explained. "I think the reason why it's colourful is because every staff member had to pick a colour they liked the most. So I picked purple, and another colour, and my boss chose yellow—and that's why you have different colours around." We entered a small, round, holiday lodge-type building with high ceilings and pillows scattered in a circle on the floor—a space designed for group sessions and informal exchanges. As we sat down, I asked Mariama about WAVE's focus on women victims. She explained:

> There was a gap between the men and women that were testifying in the TRRC. Many women did not register… Some of the women had to seek permission from their husband to be part of the process, and if they were not married, they needed permission from a male figure—either from their father or their uncles—to be part of process. A lot of people saw providing your testimony as exposing your story online, making you more vulnerable. They questioned what they stood to gain from it in the end.[270]

Figure 8: WAVE compound in Manjai Kunda. Photograph taken by the author, September 2023.

[270] Interview with Mariama, 13 October 2023.

Figure 9: WAVE compound in Manjai Kunda. Photograph taken by the author, September 2023.

Mariama's account points to the layered constraints that shape women's engagement with the transitional justice process, including not only logistical and familial barriers, but also deeper cultural expectations around discretion and honour. Her reflections resonate with the notion of *sutura*—a Wolof term that encompasses ideas of "discretion, modesty, privacy, protection, and the happiness that the previous terms are said to ensure."[271] While commonly understood as a Muslim value, *sutura* is shared across ethnic groups in The Gambia and is also recognised in neighbouring Senegal. In the context of transitional justice, *sutura* helps explain why some women were hesitant to speak publicly: not only because of fear or pressure, but because public testimony risked exposing intimate and painful experiences in ways that might bring shame not only upon themselves, but also their families. Maintaining *sutura* can be understood as a form of self-protection. As a gendered virtue, there is often more at stake when *sutura* is violated by a woman, as it is closely tied to ideals of feminine honour.[272] Within this moral framework, *sutura* guards information about the household, its members, and the extended family, helping

[271] Ivy Mills, "Sutura: Gendered Honour, Social Death, and the Politics of Exposure in Senegalese Literature and Popular Culture" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2011), 2-3.
[272] Loes Oudenhuijsen, "You Have to Know How to Play, Otherwise They Will Catch You": Young Women and the Navigation of Same-Sex Intimacies in Contemporary Urban Senegal" (Master's thesis, Leiden University, 2018), 7.

ensure the reproduction of an honourable life within hierarchically structured communities.[273] To disregard it is to risk dishonour[274]—though, notably, only upon public exposure.

As Wolof morality suggests, shame is not produced by the act itself but by its exposure. In this context, the TRRC's highly public format directly challenged the value of *sutura*, and for some, made participation untenable. "Now Streaming on YouTube," read a *New York Times* headline in a piece that described The Gambia's TRRC as "the most accessible truth commission in history," featuring "a live feed that sends testimony through YouTube, Facebook, television and radio—directly into phones and homes around the country," with "listeners stretch[ing] from the capital, Banjul, into the countryside and abroad to the diaspora."[275] While this openness expanded public access and engagement, it also created constraints for others. Several individuals reportedly declined to testify in public, either for their own protection or to avoid bringing dishonour to their families.[276] Of the 300 testimonies collected during the TRRC, 69 were by women and girls.[277]

In conversations with young women, several reflected on how the value of *sutura*, shapes gendered expectations of silence, honour, and endurance:

> We have a lot of people who *sutura*. *Sutura*, *sutura*—we've been *sutura*-ing people since we were born. But I don't want my generation to grow up with the mindset that it's good to keep *sutura*-ing people.[278]

> It's like you preserve your honour. In The Gambia, families very much respect their honour; they don't want anything that can spoil their reputation as their family or community.[279]

> A lot of women go suffer in silence because they don't want to put their family's reputation in a bad state and being called the bad person in the family.[280]

In several conversations, the notion of *sutura* emerged as a recurring theme shaping how women navigate visibility, vulnerability, and the social risks of speaking out. At the same time, many Gambian women have begun to critically reflect on their social positions and confront the structural violence that has long constrained their voices. The transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic government—while partial and uneven—has opened new spaces for contestation and expression. Within these spaces, women have increasingly articulated experiences of gender-based violence in ways that challenge established norms of silence.

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[273] Karlien Strijbosch, Valentina Mazzucato, and Ulrike Brunotte, "Performing Return: Victims, Criminals, or Heroes? Senegalese Male Returnees Engaging with the Stigma of Deportation," *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 30, no. 11 (2023): 1623.
[274] Ibid.
[275] Julie Turkewitz, "Now Streaming on YouTube: Confessions From a Presidential Hit Squad in Gambia," *New York Times*, 31 August 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/31/world/africa/gambia-truth-commission-yahya-jammeh.html.
[276] International Centre for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), *Women's Experiences of Dictatorship in The Gambia* (report, Dember 2019), https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ_WomenExperiencesGambia%20FINAL%5B5140%5D.pdf.
[277] Bittaye-Jobe, "The Impact of State Violence," 5.
[278] Interview with Rohey, 13 February 2024.
[279] Interview with Fatima, 8 February 2024.
[280] Interview with informant, January 2024.

Feminist movements such as #IAmToufah and #SurvivingMelville have gained visibility in this context,[281] drawing from the global #MeToo movement while developing locally grounded forms of resistance.

The #IAmToufah movement gained visibility in June 2019, when Fatou Jallow—known as Toufah—a young woman and former beauty queen, publicly spoke about being sexually assaulted and raped by Jammeh. Her decision to speak out drew widespread attention to sexual violence in The Gambia and sparked a strong response, particularly among youth. In the following weeks, a solidarity protest was organised under the hashtag #IAmToufah, calling for greater recognition of sexual violence and an end to the silence that often surrounds it. Protesters carried signs reading "No Means No" and wore white T-shirts printed with #IAmToufah on the front; the backs read "Our silence is their protection. Speak up!" and "The Next Victim Could Be YOU." Some participants taped black and red Xs across their mouths in a symbolic gesture against enforced silence. Over two hundred people marched down Kairaba Avenue.[282] Several months later, on 31 October 2019, Jallow testified before the TRRC. Her five-hour statement—broadcast live on national television and online platforms—reached audiences across the country. She was among several women who spoke to the commission about sexual abuse and gender-based violence under Jammeh's rule. In the months that followed, Toufah came to be seen by many as the face of a Gambian MeToo movement.[283]

Around the same time, the hashtag #SurvivingMelville gained momentum after Isatou Chaat Joyce Sanyang publicly accused senior government official and lawyer Melville Robertson Roberts of rape via X. Her statement encouraged other women to come forward with similar allegations, breaking open a space of collective reckoning. Through these campaigns, women turned to social media to share their stories and, in some cases, to publicly name those responsible—challenging cultural and religious taboos around speaking out, and disrupting the entrenched culture of silence that characterised both authoritarian rule and broader patterns of political and cultural life in The Gambia.

Notably, these campaigns form part of a broader transnational wave of feminist mobilisation, shaped by digital circulation and global solidarities, yet grounded in local histories of harm and silencing. They can be understood as acts of what Maria Lugones describes as "infra-politics"—subtle, often covert forms of resistance that reveal "the power of communities of the oppressed in constituting resistant meaning and each other against the constitution of meaning and social organization by power."[284] While the term was originally developed by James C. Scott to describe everyday forms of resistance among subordinated groups,[285] Lugones extends it through a decolonial and feminist lens, foregrounding the affective, relational, and embodied dimensions of such practices. These feminist interventions illustrate the growing significance of online platforms in shaping public discourse and reflect how some women are actively engaging with the post-authoritarian moment to reframe how harm is

[281] Harris and Jaw, "A 'New Gambia'?," 57.
[282] Jallow and Pittaway, *Toufah*, 241-43.
[283] Louise Hunt, "The Gambia's 'MeToo' Year Breaks Silence on Rape," *The New Humanitarian*, 5 February 2020, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/02/05/Gambia-SGBV-gender-Jammeh-MeToo.
[284] Maria Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 746.
[285] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

remembered, contested, and politicised. In this way, the #MeToo movement, alongside post-2017 processes such as transitional justice and the expansion of fundamental freedoms, has enabled Gambian women to speak out and to experiment with new forms of visibility, using social media as a tool for both collective healing and civic engagement. As Nanjala Nyabola notes, one of the more hopeful implications of social media for democracy is its ability to facilitate civic organising among marginalised groups that are often excluded from traditional public spheres. For women around the world, these platforms have provided new ways of accessing institutional power in contexts where it is frequently denied. [286] The most recent example of such mobilisation is the coordinated response to the 2024 parliamentary motion to decriminalise female genital mutilation (FGM) in The Gambia. Among those who took part was Fatima, a 21-year-old law student and blogger from Sanchaba, a mid-sized settlement about 15 kilometres from Banjul.

I first met Fatima in February 2024, at Jahanka Amsterdam Enterprise, a second-hand store located in Bakoteh, a district in the city of Serekunda. "I am into activism, and I love feminism," she told me during our conversation. "Whenever there is an opportunity to do something, whether it is activism or in the church, I always get involved. My mum always complains that she barely sees me at home, but I think I am basically into anything that I feel can be able to have a positive impact."[287] Fatima lives with her mother and her mother's sister's family on their shared compound. Raised by a single parent, she explained that this experience shaped her belief that anyone can succeed if given the right opportunities. "Mostly everything I do comes back to my mum taking care of me," she said. "People say if there's no man in the house, the house can't function—because men are seen as the financial providers. But I didn't have that. It was just my mother, and she still gave me the same education as someone whose father paid for everything." While Fatima and her cousins have pursued education, she noted that the older generation in her household tends to be less educated and remains strongly supportive of Jammeh—valuing, above all, the sense of order and security they associate with his rule.

F.'s activism sits at the intersection of legal reform, faith, and feminist organising. She is outspoken, digitally connected, and enthusiastically engaged in civic life. On 18 March 2024, she joined the protests outside the Gambian Parliament in Banjul to prevent the democratic reversal of the FGM ban. The Gambia had outlawed the practice in 2015, but enforcement had remained inconsistent, and in 2024, a motion was introduced to reverse the legislation. In response, civil society organisations launched a coordinated campaign, using medical evidence to raise awareness about the harms of FGM. Supported by national and international development partners, they organised events across the country, including online campaigns, radio talk shows, and billboards along the highway bearing slogans such as "Don't let the razorblade be our nation's symbols" and "Stop FGM." Social media played a central role—not only in circulating information but in mobilising support and sustaining pressure on public institutions. As the campaign gained traction, many advocates faced backlash for speaking out. The Gambian government remained largely silent, as did major opposition parties, including

[286] Nanjala Nyabola, "Seeing the Forest – and the Trees: The Global Challenge of Regulating Social Media for Democracy," *The South African Journal of International Affairs* 30, no. 3 (2023): 462.
[287] Interview with Fatima, 8 February 2024.

their women and youth branches, possibly fearing electoral repercussions. It was not until the UN Commission on the Status of Women convened in March 2024 that the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Welfare publicly reaffirmed its commitment to upholding the ban.[288] Several months later, Fatima and fellow activists celebrated a victory when lawmakers rejected the bid to overturn the legislation. However, Barrow's silence on the matter—coupled with reported embargoes on public engagement by ministries and media outlets aligned with his party—has raised concerns about the government's commitment to upholding fundamental freedoms and ensuring accountability. These concerns have been further compounded by the growing interference of religious leaders in public debates on legal and political issues, despite The Gambia's constitutional status as a secular state.[289]

During my research in The Gambia, the topic of FGM frequently surfaced in conversations, in the wake of the August 2023 conviction of three women for performing FGM on eight girls—a case that reignited public discussion around the practice, which few had dared to question when Jammeh unilaterally outlawed it in 2015. The discussion revealed several dimensions of the current moment in The Gambia. Partial democratisation in the post-Jammeh era has opened up new space for civic engagement, enabling forms of contention that were previously unthinkable under authoritarian rule. At the same time, the country's newfound democracy has allowed for renewed expressions of religion and tradition—including the defence of practices such as FGM. In response, youth-led protest movements and digital feminist campaigns have become visible within the political landscape, with activists such as Fatima publicly mobilising around issues like gender-based violence and FGM, often drawing on connections to broader global networks of organisers. Yet these openings remain uneven and contested. Activists frequently find themselves navigating public suspicion, particularly when their causes are perceived to be aligned with international agendas or reliant on foreign funding. As Fatima explained:

> A lot of people think that feminism is like a foreign concept, that it's not something we've known from the beginning. Some people, when they see you working for the betterment of women and everything women—like if you are pro-women—they're like, oh, this person, she's allowing the Western world to influence her. Or everything that you do for women, it's like you are influenced by the West… Apparently, there are a lot of people who believe that feminists and activists are the people who are having money in this country. Like, that we drink money, that we like … as long as you are a feminist, you have money because the West gives.[290]

F.'s words speak to the ways in which certain forms of civic engagement are framed as externally driven—entangled with broader anxieties about Western influence, donor agendas, and questions of cultural authenticity. Activists working on gender and rights-based issues are sometimes labelled as 'Western puppets', especially when addressing topics such as FGM or

[288] Ibrahim Drammeh, "In The Gambia, Activists and Civil Society Win a Victory for Women and Girls," *Freedom House* (perspectives), 29 October 2024, https://freedomhouse.org/article/gambia-activists-and-civil-society-win-victory-women-and-girls.
[289] Africa Practice, "Culture and Power: U-turn on FGM in The Gambia," 15 May 2024, https://africapractice.com/culture-and-power-u-turn-on-fgm-in-the-gambia/.
[290] Interview with Fatima, 8 February 2024.

feminism, which critics portray as foreign impositions. This creates both symbolic and social tensions, as activists must navigate not only institutional and cultural barriers, but also suspicions that their efforts are not truly 'Gambian'. This recalls, in part, the enduring legacy of Jammeh's isolationist rhetoric, which consistently portrayed global institutions and rights-based discourses as foreign impositions. While he publicly promoted a seemingly progressive gender and youth agenda—arguably as a strategy to consolidate his rule and attract development funding—he simultaneously framed human rights as Western tools designed to undermine African sovereignty, at times even threatening Gambians who advocated such ideals with death.

The current dynamics—the cautious openness of civic space, the suspicion surrounding certain organising, and the enduring legacy of authoritarian rule—highlight the complex and contradictory nature of democratic transition. They reveal the contours, limits, and tensions of a society negotiating what it means to become democratic after decades of repression. During Jammeh's presidency, contentious issues such as FGM were either controlled through top-down decrees or rendered untouchable by appeals to religion, and cultural sovereignty. In the post-Jammeh era, these same issues have become subject to public debate, civic action, and competing claims over moral authority. In this context, the FGM debate, is emblematic of the broader dynamics of The Gambia's democratic transition: it reflects a society in flux, where new voices are emerging and long-silenced experiences are being shared—yet where cultural contestation, political calculation, and institutional inertia continue to influence the boundaries of what can be said and done. Democratisation, in this context, is not a linear process of liberal progress, but a contested terrain in which the meaning of rights, citizenship, and justice is being actively renegotiated. These tensions are not only evident in debates around culturally sensitive issues such as FGM, but also surface in more visible forms of civic expression, where individuals and groups seek to test the boundaries of newly gained freedoms. It is within this shifting political landscape that emerging acts of protest and public mobilisation—once unimaginable—are beginning to take shape.

Figure 10: Exterior mural at The Gambia National Museum in Banjul. Photograph taken by the author, November 2023.

5.3 *"The Fear Factor is Out"*: Youth Entry into Formal Politics

On 10 March 2023, hundreds of members of the UDP Youth Wing marched from Bund Road Junction to the National Assembly, calling for action against rising corruption. The protest marked the first opposition-led demonstration to be officially permitted in the country in nearly three decades. Protesters carried placards bearing slogans such as "Corruption Kills Democracy" and "Mr President, Investigate Central Bank Scandal." "The principal reason for this peaceful protest is to demand greater transparency and accountability from the President Adama Barrow-led government," said Binta, one of the organisers and youth wing leaders. Dressed in a white T-shirt with the Gambian flag cross-draped over her shoulders, she stood surrounded by a heavy police presence as she joined other youths in delivering petitions to both the National Assembly Secretariat and the Office of the Attorney general. "This is the first time the government has granted UDP a permit in more than 27 years," stated party leader Lawyer Darboe in an audio message. "We used to apply, but the government never accepted. I thank the youth wing who took the steps in applying for the permit," he added.[291]

The protest testified to people's eagerness to let their voices be heard in the streets and to be part of a movement that stands for something. It did not only mark a shift in how opposition voices could engage publicly, but also reflected a broader reconfiguration of youth political participation across party lines. Shortly after the UDP permit was submitted, the NPP Youth Wing—representing the ruling party—also applied to protest against alleged corruption in local government councils. Although the permit was granted, the protest was later cancelled. While no official reason was provided, observers noted that an existing commission of inquiry into local councils may have rendered the protest politically redundant. Even so, the move points to how youth wings across the political spectrum are seizing opportunities to act publicly on governance issues—a shift that would have been difficult to imagine under the previous regime.

During my research, I met several young people, including Binta, who were involved in youth organisations affiliated with political parties. While their individual experiences and aspirations varied, their trajectories reflected the broader political reconfigurations unfolding in the post-Jammeh period. "The regime was so brutal against political opponents, and, you know, we young people—we don't want to die—so a lot of young people were not into it [politics]," remarked 26-year-old political science student Muhammed S., son of the late Solo Sandeng. Social navigation under Jammeh, in this context, was thus shaped by the imperative to avoid being labelled a 'political opponent'; many young people therefore adopted strategies of risk avoidance. I spoke with Muhammed S. in October 2023, seated together in a modest office at Jahanka Amsterdam Enterprise, where the low hum of the air conditioner underscored our conversation. "When it comes to taking up political positions, we see that both women and young people are now definitely venturing more into politics than they would before, but I believe this is also because the fear factor—or the murder factor—is out of it," he reflected. After returning from exile—a period of forced displacement following his father's murder—Muhammed S. co-founded the Solo Sandeng Foundation with his older sister to continue their

[291] Voice of America, "Gambians Hold Rare Public Protest," *VOA Africa*, 10 March 2023, https://www.voaafrica.com/a/gambians-hold-rare-public-protest/6999089.html.

father's legacy of advocacy for justice, and civil and political rights. "This is one person whose personality was very revered among political figures," he said of his father, "because, as much as he was partisan, he also lived by his beliefs and firm convictions."

Muhammed S.'s reflections point to a broader generational shift, increasingly evident in the growing number of young people entering formal politics in the post-2016 period. While some engage through activism or civil society initiatives, others pursue influence within party structures and elected office. Among those who have made this transition from civic engagement to formal political participation is K., a young organiser and politician I met in late 2023 at the Kanifing Municipal Council headquarters, where he currently serves as a local government legislator. We spoke around lunchtime in a large meeting hall furnished with rows of wooden tables and chairs. The space, typically used for council sessions and public meetings, was quietly occupied—several people were seated at different tables, having lunch and chatting with one another. K. told me:

> Between 1994 and 2016, no new politicians were born—and if they were, they were born within the ruling party. Jammeh setting the cost of running for president at one million dalasi was a way of disenfranchising the people, because he knew it would be difficult for individuals, especially young people, to afford that money. Only those with financial means could run for office. A young person just starting out in their professional life couldn't afford it… And then there was the fear that came with it—you don't have a family, you don't have children. I mean, who wants to die at that tender age? We all saw what happened to the young politicians, how they were tortured. This made it really difficult for young people to join opposition parties. And even if they did, they were just sympathisers—just party members, but not very active.[292]

Tall and charismatic, 27-year-old K. wears semi round-framed glasses and, whenever I met him, was always stylishly dressed in a traditional kaftan. Named after his grandfather—one of the first religious leaders to be arrested during the 1981 *coup d'état*—K. was born into a family with a long history of political involvement. His father served as a campaign manager for the National Convention Party (NCP), the main opposition party during the First Republic, with the party's office located within their family compound. K. did not deny the influence of his family's political background, though he is the only one among his siblings to have become an active politician. "I started politics early because my father was a politician. At the age of 14 or 15, I went to meetings of UDP, just listening to what they had to say and the things they were doing. So my upbringing is that I was born into a family that was very much politically involved," he explained. When UDP was established in 1996, its first meetings were held in K.'s family compound in Bakau. The town has a long history of political defiance and was reportedly one of the first communities to resist colonial authority, refusing to allow officials to carry out a population census. As K. put it, "The notion was that once they know your number and once they can count you, they can control you."

During high school, around the age of 16, K. described himself as already deeply engaged in political issues. He often found himself in trouble for questioning events unfolding in the country, as many of his teachers were reluctant to discuss them. "I just knew there was

[292] Interview with K., 7 November 2023.

something wrong with Jammeh's government," he reflected. "Even if I couldn't put my finger on it, I knew that what was happening at that time was not ideal for governance." Media, he explained, played a vital role in enabling young people to learn and organise beyond their immediate environments. "We had no weapons, but we did have social media, skills to write, knowledge gained from the few books we read, and exposure from travelling around the world. We could see what other countries were enjoying—even just our neighbours in Senegal."

K. was part of the Progressive Youth Network, one of the pioneering youth-led political groups in The Gambia, founded in late 2015 to promote political dialogue and increase youth participation. Initially conceived as a non-partisan platform, the group sought to connect young people with political parties and other stakeholders, while advocating for inclusive leadership. As the 2016 presidential election approached and Jammeh prepared to seek a fifth term, the Network stepped up its efforts, urging opposition parties to form a united coalition.[293] "We wrote to the opposition leaders urging them to form a coalition for the 2016 election," K. recalled. Once the coalition was formed, K. became actively involved in youth outreach—particularly among those who had only ever known one political leader. "I was very much participatory within the campaign," he explained. "We were going on radios—I've got pictures of that—and spoke to young people about change and how they could play an active role in democratisation."

The outcome of the 2016 election, K. recalled, was decisive in shaping his decision to enter formal politics. "When the change happened, it was an opportunity," he said. "As young people, we had been complaining about not being part of the decision-making process. I thought to myself, why not get into the field and contest for the opposition?" Already holding a prominent position within his party, K. was elected as a local government councillor in the municipality of Kanifing at the age of 22. "For a young person at that time, it was very unprecedented. I think it was a very good example for other young people—to see that if K. can do it, I can do it too."

Carl Gershman offers a useful framework for understanding the evolving role of civic engagement in democratisation. In autocratic contexts where political competition is restricted, civil society often acts as a surrogate for party politics—advocating for rights, circulating uncensored information, and voicing excluded concerns. It becomes a space for political learning, helping individuals overcome fear, recognise their rights, and develop civic confidence. This process initiates what Gershman calls the "opening" of closed political systems[294]—a role reflected in the activities of the Progressive Youth Network and of diaspora actors, whose contributes were examined in Chapter Two. Gershman notes that when a country is highly closed, civil society cannot fully perform its democratic functions. Yet even under such conditions, groups in exile can drive change by exposing human rights abuses and mobilising international pressure.[295]

As Gershman notes, the role of civil society changes once a democratic transition is underway. In the post-breakthrough period, civil society shifts from resisting the state to holding

[293] Sait Matty Jaw, "WhatsApp, Youth, and Politics in The Gambia: An Analysis of 'Democratic Gambia," in *WhatsApp and Everyday Life in West Africa – Beyond Fake News*, ed. Jamie Hitchen and Idayat Hassan (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 45-46.
[294] Gershman, "Democracy Promotion," 30.
[295] Ibid.

it accountable—monitoring governance, promoting transparency, and fostering inclusion. This phase is often marked by tension. Success can weaken civil society, as its most capable members are drawn into formal politics. This was evident in the Gambian context as well, seen in K.'s move from activism to electoral politics. Such transitions are common, as civil society often serves as a talent pool for reform-oriented leadership. Gershman cites similar patterns in Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where prominent activists entered government after political openings.[296] The blurring of boundaries between activism and statecraft raises questions about co-optation and the sustainability of civic energy. While this dynamic can enrich democracies by injecting experienced reformers into the state, it can also hollow out the civic space that once served as a vital check on power.[297]

At the same time, youth engagement does not always follow institutionalised pathways. As Mohamed Ben Moussa observes in relation to the Arab Spring, youth movements often operate outside or alongside established civil society organisations and are shaped by cross-membership, ideological diversity, and fluid organisational forms. Many young people maintain ties to political parties or advocacy groups, yet sometimes act independently—driven by a shared desire for reform. Their mobilisation is facilitated by digital media, where political action increasingly hinges on the ability to produce and circulate information.[298] Elements of this dynamic have also been visible throughout my research, where youth engagement continues to take hybrid forms—blending formal political engagement with more diffuse, networked expressions of dissent and solidarity. An individual might simultaneously be a member of a political party, active in civil society, and rooted in community-based or religious networks. Thus, as my empirical data suggests, civic and political engagement do not always necessarily progress from nonformal to formal structures; rather, young people often move fluidly between the two, participating in both at once.

In the aftermath of the 2016 transition, members of the Gambian diaspora too began to reengage with national politics in new ways—shifting from a posture of resistance to active participation in shaping the post-Jammeh future. It cannot be said with certainty how many Gambian nationals reside in Europe or North America, as many live in these regions without legal status; however, a 2015 report in *The Guardian* estimated the global Gambian diaspora at around 70,000, including approximately 11,000 in the United States. Many of these 'diaspora Gambians', as they are often called, are young adults—though not exclusively so. Some are highly educated, while others have not completed primary school. Some are working or studying abroad temporarily, with plans to come back to The Gambia, while others may never set foot on African soil again.[299] As scholars have noted, the fall of the regime created possibilities for diaspora actors to contribute to national development and democratic consolidation.[300] One such figure is Mr Jaw—previously mentioned in this chapter—who became prominent within the Gambian political diaspora following his arrest in 2014, when he

[296] Ibid., 31.
[297] Ibid.
[298] Mohamed Ben Moussa, "From Arab Street to Social Movements: Re-Theorising Collective Action and the Role of Social Media in the Arab Spring," *Westminster Papers in Communication & Culture* 9, no. 2 (2017).
[299] Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, 258.
[300] Hultin et al., "Autocracy."

and two other researchers were detained in connection with a Gallup Poll study on Jammeh's approval rating.

Their detention—which exceeded the constitutionally mandated 72 hours—sparked the viral #FreeSaitMattyJaw campaign on social media. After being released and later re-arrested, Mr Jaw was eventually acquitted following a six-month trial. He left for Senegal shortly thereafter and later continued his studies in Norway through the Students at Risk programme. "While I was in Mile 2,[301] I started having ideas of what to do. Back then, if you had a problem with the regime, most people would leave. But me—my intention was not to leave," Mr Jaw reflected. "I was young, not married, and stupid as well. I was just this stupid, brave guy who wanted to do what I was committed to do. But, fortunately or unfortunately, while I was in Mile 2, I got information that somebody wanted to recommend me for a scholarship to Norway. When I heard that, I said, 'Well, this is my way out.'" From exile, Mr Jaw became increasingly involved in transnational political activism and emerged as a vocal critic of the regime. In the course of our conversation, Mr Jaw reflected:

> The problem I had was, if Jammeh was still around, I would not come home. So then I became part of the diaspora activists—writing, releasing blogs. I would mobilise young people here [in The Gambia] to register and vote… The way the diaspora was framed was to fight Jammeh. So, if you fought and you won—what else is there to fight for? Most of them joined political parties. Some were already members. But instead of continuing the fight to consolidate democracy, they joined parties—and then the polarisation began.[302]

Mr Jaw's reflection points to a broader dilemma faced by activists in the post-Jammeh period and is illustrative of what Gershman identifies—as outlined above—as a central tension of the post-breakthrough phase: the risk that civil society actors, once vital to resisting authoritarianism, may lose coherence and critical capacity once drawn into partisan politics. In the case of diaspora activists, their role during the authoritarian era was largely framed around resistance; yet with Jammeh's departure, sustaining that oppositional energy became more difficult. For some, joining political parties offered a pathway to remain engaged and influence the direction of the new democracy from within. Yet, as Mr Jaw suggests, this shift also risked diluting the broader goals of democratic consolidation, as oppositional unity gave way to growing fragmentation and partisan polarisation. Along similar lines, Bah notes:

> When we were fighting against Jammeh, there were a lot of different forces. Some people were fighting Jammeh because they didn't like his tribe. Some people were fighting him because they didn't like the way he speaks. Some people were fighting him because he was a poor person, just a common soldier. So that point is important: that we unite our forces. Because the moment Jammeh fell, the forces that were supposed to

[301] Mile 2 Prison (officially Mile 2 Central Prison) is a penal institution located on the outskirt of Banjul. Under Jammeh's presidency, the facility became notorious for its harsh conditions, the use of torture by prison guards, and its role as a detention site for political opponents. One of Jammeh's oft-cited euphemisms—"I will send you to my five-star hotel"—was a thinly veiled reference to Mile 2. Despite inadequate record-keeping, the TRRC was able to establish that at least 41 individuals died in the prison between 1994 and 2017.
[302] Interview with Sait Matty Jaw, 21 November 2023.

advance the struggle all fell into different camps and started fighting each other, which is not unusual.[303]

Mr Jaw's and Bah's reflections highlight the challenges that accompanied the transition from authoritarian rule to a more open, yet increasingly fragmented, political landscape. Both point to the difficulty of sustaining the momentum of civic resistance once the shared objective of ousting Jammeh had been achieved. For Mr Jaw, the post-transition period revealed how quickly diaspora actors shifted from oppositional activism to partisan alignment—raising concerns that the broader democratic project was giving way to polarisation. Bah similarly reflects on the fragile alliances that once united disparate groups against a common enemy, noting how these quickly unravelled along lines of ethnicity, class, and ambition. For young Gambians, this moment allowed for new forms of political navigation—some through formal institutions or party structures, others through critical reflection, strategic withdrawal, or the cultivation of alternative spaces for dissent. Together, their observations suggest that political transitions are not neat ruptures but moments of reconfiguration, in which actors must renegotiate their roles within an altered—and at times disillusioning—political terrain. These tensions unfolded alongside more structural changes to the political landscape, as formal barriers to participation were lowered and new political actors emerged.

5.4 *"My Party Always Wants to Empower Youth"*: Between Inclusion and Instrumentalisation

One key legislative development that contributed to opening up the political space following the 2017 transition was the passage of the Election (Amendment) Bill on 28 February 2017. Intended, in the words of the bill itself, "to encourage widespread participation of the ordinary citizenry in the new democratisation dispensation," the bill significantly reduced the previously prohibitive fees required to contest political office. These were restored to their original amounts: 10,000 dalasi for presidential candidates (approximately US$150), 5,000 for National Assembly candidates (US$75), and between 2,500 and 12,500 for other elected offices (US$35–185). This reform facilitated the emergence of numerous new political parties in subsequent years, including the All People's Party (APP), Citizens' Alliance (CA), Gambia For All (GFA), Gambia Action Party (GAP), Gambia Alliance for National Unity (GANU), and the National Unity Party (NUP). The most prominent among them is Barrow's NPP, formed following his split from UDP in 2019. Most recently, the youth-led Visionary Gambian Alliance (VGA) began the process of registering with the Independent Electoral Commission ahead of the 2026 presidential election, reflecting what *The Fatu Network* described as "the growing involvement of youth in shaping the future of the nation."[304] While these reforms created new avenues for youth engagement, they also introduced new tensions—forcing young Gambians to navigate between opportunity and co-option, between inclusion and control.

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[303] Phil Wilmot, "What the US Can Learn from Gambia about Defeating Petty Tyrants," *Waging Nonviolence*, 25 September 2024, https://wagingnonviolence.org/2024/09/lessons-from-gambia-about-defeating-petty-tyrants/.
[304] "EXCLUSIVE: New Political Party Emerges Ahead of Gambia's 2026 Presidential Election," *The Fatu Network*, 30 January 2025, https://fatunetwork.net/exclusive-new-political-party-emerges-ahead-of-gambias-2026-presidential-election/.

According to Afrobarometer, most Gambians (64%) view the existence of multiple political parties as essential for meaningful democratic choice, with a minority (38%) worrying that party competition fuels social division. The survey also found strong perceptions of electoral freedom: 87% feel "completely free" and 9% "somewhat free" to vote without coercion.[305] In contrast to broader African trends—where youth often disengage from party politics—young Gambians appear nearly as politically affiliated as older generations. An earlier Afrobarometer survey found that a majority of respondents aged 18–35 (55%) report feeling close to a political party, only marginally lower than the 58% of middle-aged and older respondents who say the same.[306] This suggests that younger Gambians are not markedly more detached from partisan politics than the wider electorate. Despite a proliferation of parties since 2017, most remain small and struggle to build national support. In practice, the Gambian party system continues to revolve around two dominant poles: a pro-Barrow bloc centred on NPP, and an opposition bloc led by UDP. This binary structure, echoing earlier eras under Jawara and Jammeh, has created tensions for smaller parties navigating an increasingly polarised and crowded landscape. While most parties espouse similar goals—democracy, market-based growth, and national development—their platforms often lack ideological distinction, with voter loyalty shaped more by regional, ethnic, or personal ties than by clear policy differences. This persists despite constitutional bans on parties organised solely around identity-based criteria.[307]

These entanglements of political identity and personal affiliation are deeply embedded in the social fabric, often generating tensions between collective expectation and individual conviction. This dynamic is evident in the experience of Ida, a 21-year-old student and student leader at the Management Development Institute, a tertiary education institution located in Kanifing. Coming from a family with direct experience of political repression and long-standing ties to UDP, she explained that she was expected either to remain politically neutral or to support the party historically associated with her community. However, she chose to distance herself from the party, explaining that its ideology did not align with her personal values. Ida's experience highlights how, even amidst expanded political space, youth must continually negotiate competing pressures—between familial loyalty, memory, and personal conviction. "To me, their ideology and what I believe in are two totally different things. Even though my people died because of UDP, that is not what I believe," she said. Her decision prompted concern within the family and led to conversations in which she was advised not to express her dissent publicly, for fear of undermining the family's political identity. "At the family level, everybody knows that I am anti-UDP," she continued. "They don't even ask me about politics." Her ambition to enter student politics was met with somewhat similar resistance, with her parents questioning the wisdom of such involvement given the family's traumatic political history. Although she eventually won a student leadership election, her achievement was received with indifference rather than celebration. Ida's experience underscores the influence

[305] Afrobarometer, *Summary of Results: Afrobarometer Round 10 Survey in The Gambia*, 2023, compiled by the Center for Policy, Research, and Strategic Studies (Banjul: Afrobarometer, 31 December 2024).
[306] Maame Akua Amoah Twum, *Gambians Say Government Must Do More to Help the Youth*, Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 521 (25 May 2022), https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/AD521-Gambians-say-govt-must-do-more-to-help-youth-Afrobarometer-dispatch-25may22-1.pdf.
[307] Bertelsmann Stiftung, *Gambia Country Report 2024*.

of family expectations, ethnic affiliation, and political memory in shaping how young Gambians engage with the party system—even as they seek to assert their own political agency. For me, Ida's story stresses the importance of memories of past violence in shaping people's assessments of the present, thus developing Vigh's insights on how the present and future are linked through navigation.[308]

While individuals like Ida attempt to assert political autonomy, the dominant parties continue to set the political agenda, benefitting from more established structures and the capacity to use legal mechanisms to challenge perceived irregularities in voter registration, electoral procedures, and campaign conduct. With the notable exception of the People's Democratic Organisation for Independence and Socialism (PDOIS)—which has placed sustained emphasis on civic education and fostering a participatory political culture—most parties in The Gambia focus predominantly on the mobilisation of voters in the run-up to elections.[309] This transactional approach to politics has reinforced a culture in which the provision of personal or localised favours is widely expected and accepted, a reality that has been described by observers such as Jaw as emblematic of the prevailing norms of political engagement in the country.[310] One young man recounted the case of a candidate who campaigned for 21 days without delivering a single speech. Instead, he would attend rallies where others spoke on his behalf, offer brief thanks to the speakers, and then depart almost immediately in his vehicle. Despite his silence, that candidate went on to win the election. Reflecting on the episode, the young man remarked: "That candidate had things to give to the people, and people believe this is what politics is about."[311] He elaborated further, pointing to the broader implications of such practices:

> The political culture in this country is set up in such a way that when you run for public office, you don't do it based on policies and manifestos; you do it based on what you can give to the people right now, right here. So it's about giving money out to the people. You have people selling their votes for as low as 200 dalasi, which is less than five dollars. So there is a very big poverty-driven element within our political system that is making it difficult for us to elect competent and responsible leaders.[312]

Alongside more active and competitive political participation, and a freer environment for political expression since Jammeh's departure, a notable development is that political parties in The Gambia have increasingly extended their reach to young people—both within formal party structures and through more informal channels of engagement. As one scholar from UTG observed, youth participation has become far more visible and influential in recent electoral cycles:

> If you look at previous elections, many young people ventured into politics, unlike before. They now question their politicians and engage with political discourse, which has given politics in this country real traction. Young people have become a key factor

[308] Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War*; Oosterom, "Youth and Social Navigation in Zimbabwe's Informal Economy."
[309] Jaw, Gai, and Sillah, *The Cost of Parliamentary Politics*, 4.
[310] Ibid., 4-5.
[311] Interview with Cherno, 27 September 2023.
[312] Ibid.

> in politics, with many politicians now actively seeking their support. Young people hold the majority of votes—it's said that nearly 70% of the electorate is young. They had the numbers before, but were disengaged – they didn't vote, didn't take part in politics, and didn't even register. They were simply there. But that has changed. Now they vote, they register, and they also contest. This has truly changed the dynamics… Since 2017, many political parties have revived their youth wings to bring more young people into politics and to recruit them. And you can see where they invest their money—most of it goes towards young people through football, sports, music, and culture, because these are the things young people enjoy. In some cases, even though young politicians still complain that the old guard continues to control the political parties, young people are now being given more opportunities to take part. I've seen young people taking on leading roles in political parties, unlike before.[313]

In this context, many political parties have revitalised their youth wings as a means of both mobilising and recruiting young supporters. Resources are increasingly channelled into activities that resonate with youth interests—such as football, music, sports, and cultural events—reflecting an effort to speak to young people in the spaces where they are most active. While some young politicians continue to voice frustrations about the persistent dominance of the older generation within party hierarchies, there are growing signs of change. Several informants identified the run-up to the 2016 elections as a formative moment, describing it as an awakening that paved the way for a more assertive and organised youth presence in politics. Since then, parties have worked to institutionalise this participation through the establishment of formal youth structures, especially in urban areas and on university campuses. "We were able to build student wings in 2017 at UTG and Gambia College,"[314] one member of the UDP Youth Wing explained, adding that students could now join the party through these university branches. He also mentioned the introduction of party-sponsored scholarship schemes aimed at attracting and supporting young members. At its 2022 national congress, UDP passed a resolution stipulating that youth position holders must be aged between 18 and 35, marking a significant departure from earlier practices where youth leaders could be well into their fifties. Other parties soon followed suit. One Youth Wing member from The Gambia Democratic Congress (GDC), who had left his job in the hospitality sector to join the party and later rose through its ranks, reflected proudly on the role young people played in resisting dictatorship. Speaking with clear enthusiasm about his party's emphasis on youth empowerment, he even extended an invitation to join the party's diaspora chapter: "My party always wants to empower youth, and you being a youth, I can always link you up so you know you have this connection."[315]

The 2021 presidential election further underscored this growing youth presence, with a visible surge in young people taking on active roles within party structures. Youth coordinators—both male and female—assumed prominent public-facing responsibilities, including delivering speeches at rallies, organising campaign events, and managing digital outreach. Informants widely emphasised the importance of social media as a campaign tool.

[313] Interview with Dr Ismaila Ceesay, 12 October 2023.
[314] Interview with UDP Youth Wing member, 7 November 2023.
[315] Interview with GDC Youth Wing member, 13 November 2023.

"The most intensive campaign activity we did was the use of social media," a CA Youth Wing member recalled. "We did Facebook Live sessions, and our 'Youth Wing Dialogue' became a key programme. It made many people, particularly young people, like the party."[316] K., similarly highlighted the significance of online engagement:

> A lot of young people reach out to me on social media, especially Facebook and X, to tell me about the problems they're faced with in our constituency and how we can find solutions for them. I think it has been one of the greatest tools as a young politician.[317]

These reflections resonate with a growing body of scholarship on digital political communication, which identifies social media as a new and increasingly influential public sphere—one that fosters horizontal dialogue and facilitates direct interaction between citizens and political actors. In contexts where traditional forms of political participation remain limited or uneven, these platforms may provide young Gambians with alternative avenues for visibility, influence, and engagement within the democratic process.[318]

Figure 11: Graffiti in Banjul reading "Youths Don't Be Fool Twice" and "Banjul South Not For Sale". Photograph taken by the author, October 2023.

Yet, as several informants pointed out, the growing focus on youth mobilisation has not necessarily translated into substantive inclusion within party structures. Many of those I spoke with voiced frustration with what they described as entrenched hierarchies and patriarchal

[316] Interview with CA Youth Wing member, 12 November 2023.
[317] Interview with K., 7 November 2023.
[318] Duncan Omanga, "WhatsApp as 'Digital Publics': The Nakuru Analysts and the Evolution of Participation in Country Governance in Kenya," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 13, no. 1 (2019): 175.

norms that continue to shape internal party dynamics—spaces where leadership is often determined not by merit or demonstrated ability, but by age and seniority. Ndey, a party member in her early thirties, remarked: "We are a conservative society, and people believe that our role is just to support the older generation." Echoing a sentiment shared across numerous conversations, she continued, "Most parties are still controlled by the older generation, and young people are supposed to just be behind. The elders will say, 'The future is yours, you are the next generation, just support us until the future is here.'" Her reflections speak to a broader pattern identified across the region, in which young people—despite often constituting the most active segment of party membership—are routinely relegated to supportive rather than strategic roles, including mobilising voters, managing logistics, and performing at rallies.[319] These concerns were also raised by Omar, a 27-year-old youth leader and spoken word artist who had worked for several years on civic education initiatives with the country's National Youth Parliament. We met in September 2023 during the height of the rainy season, as flooded roads, stalled vehicles, and interrupted journeys had become part of everyday life. After wading through waterlogged streets in Serekunda, I arrived at the Youth Parliament's office, perched on the top floor of a building overlooking the city. Dressed in a bright blue kaftan, Omar reflected on the visibility of youth in electoral mobilisation, yet their continued marginalisation from positions of political decision-making:

> On the side of political involvement—that is, rallying, clapping for politicians, serving as support staff—we see that young people are really there. And in terms of voting, young people do turn out. But in terms of political participation as leaders, the young people are definitely not there. And young people make up a large percentage of our population, but if you look at parliament or local government, I'm not aware of there being many youth representatives.[320]

His remarks, like those of many others, underscore a persistent gap between the visibility of youth engagement and access to positions of genuine influence within political structures. Several informants traced this exclusion not only to internal party hierarchies but also to broader social norms and cultural expectations that continue to shape perceptions of political legitimacy. A recurring theme in several conversations was the notion that marriage serves as a key marker of maturity and credibility—particularly for men seeking public office. "One of the jokes they used to make during my campaign was about how I was not even married," recounted a 27-year-old who had stood for parliament in 2022.

> They would look at me like, 'Oh, he is so young.' And some of the people who said this were even young like me. It came off as a joke, but it did have an influence. For them, marriage is akin to responsibility. I am responsible—I'm just not married.[321]

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[319] George M. Bob-Milliar, "Party Youth Activists and Low-Intensity Electoral Violence in Ghana: A Qualitative Study of Party Foot Soldiers' Activism," *African Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (2014); Ransford Edward van Gyampo, "Political Apparatchiks and Governance in Ghana's Fourth Republic," *Educational Research* 11, no. 1 (2011); Honwana, *The Time of Youth*.
[320] Interview with Omar, 20 September 2023.
[321] Interview with Cherno, 27 September 2023.

These individual experiences are mirrored in national-level survey data. According to a recent Afrobarometer poll, a majority of Gambians (53%) believe the country is more likely to prosper by following "the wisdom of elders" rather than embracing "fresh ideas from young people," with 42% agreeing "very strongly." Even among youth respondents, deference to elder authority remains pronounced: only 36% expressed a preference for the ideas and leadership of their own generation.[322] This cultural valorisation of seniority continues to shape how leadership potential is assessed and validated. A 28-year-old peace and social justice advocate, reflected on the barriers this creates: "Always there is the perception that young people are not respectful, that they are not disciplined. It is one of the things politicians used to say—that young people are not mature enough to lead because we are not showing the elderly that we can work with them."[323] His comments point to a deeper ambivalence at the heart of current political discourse: while youth participation is increasingly encouraged, it is often welcomed only on terms set by the older generation, reinforcing a political culture in which the presence of young people is symbolic rather than transformative. As K. put it:

> You had people within the party who were not OK with young people running for office because they were seen as traditionalists. The older you are, people tend to think you have more wisdom—that you're wiser. And then there's also history. You talk to people today on the street and they'll say, 'I don't think Gambia needs a young leader. I think we need someone with wisdom and experience, because we've seen what youthful leadership has done to us.'[324]

Beyond age, it became apparent throughout my research that gender relations exert a particularly strong influence on the nature of youth politics in The Gambia. In patriarchal societies, young women's participation in formal politics is often constrained by the early socialisation of youth into rigidly gendered roles, as well as by the persistent male dominance over resources, institutions, and public spaces.[325] These dynamics were keenly felt by many of the young women I spoke to, who articulated a range of frustrations, hesitations, and aspirations shaped by both structural exclusion and everyday experiences of discrimination. N., a youth leader in her mid-20s and active in civil society, was particularly vocal about these challenges and their underlying causes. Although she expressed deep commitment to her work in advocacy, particularly in the area of democratisation, she also shared her ambition to enter partisan politics in the future—ideally after gaining experience and perhaps securing a position at the UN. When we met for our interview at her workplace at a not-for-profit research and advocacy organisation near Brusubi Turntable, she spoke candidly about the realities she expects to face as a young woman entering formal politics:

> After the change of government, a lot of young women actually embraced politics. But the gender stereotype has always been there. I have seen a lot of women that went into politics and leave as fast as they could because their characters were assassinated, they

[322] Twum, *Gambians Say Government Must Do More.*
[323] Interview with informant, January 2024.
[324] Interview with K., 7 November 2023.
[325] Hilde Coffe and Catherine Bolzendahl, "Gender Gaps in Political Participation Across Sub-Saharan African Nations," *Social Indicators Research* 102, no. 2 (2011).

were bullied, they were insulted, things they did in the past that had nothing to do with their political career were dug up and exposed—all stuff like that. We have seen young women who went back to being just political party supporters. It has been one of my future plans to enter active politics—that means partisan politics. But I know what is there waiting for me. I know the bullying that is waiting for me. I know the character assassination that is waiting for me. I know every other bad thing that is waiting for me.[326]

Her words reflect a clear-eyed recognition of the gendered risks associated with political visibility—costs that many young women are forced to weigh carefully when considering leadership roles. Similar experiences were echoed by Binta, the UDP Youth Wing leader introduced earlier in the chapter, who had long observed the limited and often marginal roles assigned to women within her party. While male counterparts were encouraged to lead, she noted that women were largely confined to supportive roles. Alongside this, she told me that she had encountered religiously framed objections to her ambitions, with some questioning whether her faith permitted women to seek leadership. Coming from Jamisa, a small town in Brikama, she recounted instances of being bullied within her community. "Some of the times when I went out for a campaign trail, when I picked up my bags, people would start saying, 'Ha, she's leaving again. Look at her going out spending seven, ten days outside while her parents are here, they don't even know what she's doing.'"[327] In addition to community gossip, she faced harassment on social media, particularly from men attempting to bully her on X. Yet despite these challenges, Binta expressed determination to persist: "I have built a wall for myself," she told me matter-of-factly. Even within her family, political aspirations were initially met with resistance. Although her mother had been a politician herself, she advised Binta to delay entry into the political arena until she was at least in her thirties or forties. "That was the old ideology that people had," Binta reflected. Her mother eventually offered her support, but her father remained opposed, believing she should pursue a career in banking instead. Binta's story points to a broader set of social norms that continue to discourage women from participating in public life until they have reached what is perceived to be an appropriate age, stage of life, or level of domestic stability. These norms are also reflected in public attitudes. According to a recent Afrobarometer survey, a majority of Gambians (60%) believe that female candidates are likely to face community criticism, including name-calling and harassment, while 40% believe women seeking office may encounter opposition from their own families.[328] As Fatima observed, this atmosphere of scrutiny and hostility can be deeply dissuasive:

> When young girls see the type of backlash faced by women politicians, or when they don't see many women in those positions, it makes them automatically change their minds. There is a lot of fear among women about judgment. There is also a sense of

[326] Interview with N., 12 December 2023.
[327] Interview with Binta, 6 February 2024.
[328] Baboucarr Fatty and Maame Akua Amoah Twum, *Gender Equality in The Gambia: Citizens Demand Greater Government Efforts*, Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 663 (3 July 2023), https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/AD663-Gender-equality-in-Gambia-Citizens-demand-greater-government-efforts-Afrobarometer-1july23.pdf.

> imposter syndrome, where they feel they are not fit to be there, and I think that also relates to the underrepresentation of women in national politics.[329]

She recounted how, when presidential aspirant Marie Sock contested the 2021 election, public commentary focused almost entirely on her appearance—especially her haircut—rather than her qualifications. "People began calling her all sorts of names," Fatima explained. This type of gendered scrutiny reinforces the perception that women's political presence is aberrant or inappropriate, reducing their political subjectivity to matters of personal appearance and morality, rather than policy or competence. Such examples underscore the multiple and intersecting barriers that continue to limit young women's full and equal participation in Gambian politics—barriers rooted not only in party structures but also in deep-seated cultural norms, family expectations, and social media landscapes that remain hostile to female leadership.

Taken together, these experiences reflect the deeper ambivalence that continues to characterise youth participation in the political sphere—caught between visible mobilisation and meaningful inclusion. As scholars have observed, politics and the political sphere often carry a tarnished, self-interested, and corrupted affective value in many African contexts.[330] In The Gambia, while young people have become increasingly visible in political spaces, many continue to feel that their involvement is valued only insofar as it helps generate votes or project an image of inclusivity. This section has shown that, for those seeking more substantive participation, the doors to formal political power remain guarded by entrenched hierarchies of age and gender. Gerontocracy and patrimonialism continue to shape the landscape in which youth must try to manoeuvre. Even when aspiring to autonomous political agency, young activists risk being seen as mere proxies for others—manipulated, bought, or brainwashed—thus narrowing the field for sincere and independent action.[331] Suspicion and paranoia often haunt youth mobilisation, while exclusion from decision-making roles fosters scepticism towards both political and traditional elites. Together, these dynamics suggest that efforts to include youth in party politics often stop short of genuine empowerment, reinforcing a system in which the presence of young people is encouraged symbolically but constrained in practice. This marginalisation, if left unaddressed, may contribute to growing disillusionment with governance processes—ultimately weakening democratic consolidation in The Gambia.

5.5 Conclusions

The post-2016 period in The Gambia has seen the gradual opening of new civic and political spaces—contested, fragile, and uneven. While the easing of authoritarian controls has made room for a wider range of expression and organising, these shifts remain shaped by the memories of repression, the pull of cultural expectations, and the moral uncertainties that accompany transition. As this chapter has explored, young people are present within this evolving landscape in diverse ways. Some take part in protests or digital campaigns, while

[329] Interview with Fatima, 8 February 2024.
[330] Chabal, *Africa*.
[331] Oinas, Onodera, and Suurpää, *What Politics?*, 7-8.

others contribute through quieter or more localised forms of engagement—whether through community work, peer support, or advocacy shaped by lived experience. Their actions are not only expressions of individual agency, but also situated responses to shifting norms, social risks, and historical burdens, which they must navigate with care.

In addressing the question of how young urban Gambians navigate the ambivalent and uneven openings of civic and political life in the aftermath of authoritarian rule, this chapter has shown that participation is rarely straightforward. These openings are not evenly distributed, nor are they universally welcomed. Youth engage not with unqualified optimism, but with a complex mix of hope, pragmatism, and scepticism. Their efforts are shaped by economic constraints, cultural scripts, historical consciousness, and affective attachments—to family, community, and nation. These do not merely limit what can be done—they structure the very conditions under which political subjectivities are imagined and enacted.

Democratisation, in this sense, is not a linear or cumulative process, but an ongoing negotiation—marked as much by hesitation, doubt, and contradiction as by mobilisation or reform. By tracing youth organising, digital activism, transitional justice, and formal political participation, this chapter has illustrated the multiplicity of ways in which young Gambians encounter and contest the meanings of civic life in a society emerging from authoritarianism. Their experiences suggest that to understand democratic transition, one must attend not only to institutional developments, but to the everyday negotiations through which the political is lived, shaped, and remade. As one interlocutor reflected, “The fear factor is out”—but as this chapter has shown, fear has not vanished; it has changed form. It lingers in silences, in social caution, and in the compromises demanded by visibility. Yet alongside this fear, new forms of dissent, care, and hope continue to take shape—however uncertain, however partial.

6. Frustration and Constraints: Youth Aspirations, Disillusion, and the Boundaries of Change in the 'New Gambia'

This chapter sheds light on the affective and structural constraints that shape how young urban Gambians navigate the post-authoritarian landscape. While the country's political transition raised hopes for renewal, its outcomes have been uneven, and for a number of youth, the promise of change has given way to economic precarity, political inertia, and deepening disillusionment. Building on the previous chapter's focus on emergent forms of engagement and expanding civic space, this chapter shifts attention to the barriers, exclusions, and frustrations that continue to delimit youth agency in the 'New Gambia'. It explores three interrelated domains: first, how economic insecurity and restricted migration regimes shape imaginaries of departure and the pursuit of futures elsewhere (6.1); second, how police repression and surveillance continue to influence youth civic and political expression (6.2); and third, how faltering reform efforts have eroded trust in democratic processes and intensified scepticism about the state's willingness to deliver meaningful change (6.3). Drawing on personal accounts marked by blocked opportunities, moral ambivalence, and quiet endurance, the chapter investigates how young people negotiate the boundaries of political and economic transformation—not only through protest and critique, but also through withdrawal, improvisation, and the search for alternative horizons. In doing so, it asks:

> *What barriers do young people in the 'New Gambia' face in their efforts to claim political and economic agency, and how do they navigate these constraints amidst the enduring legacies of authoritarian rule and the uneven rhythms of democratic transition?*

6.1 *"We Love Our Country but There Is No Hope For Us"*: Blocked Futures and the Imaginary of Elsewhere

> People are ready to go, people are waiting to go. I know friends—my people—they always tell me. Even today there was a boat. The people are going because people have no hope here. The youths have no hope here. You don't have work, and even in the place where you are working, they make it hard for you. So now, what is the essence of you living here? We see our brothers and sisters who went through the Mediterranean and now they are in Spain. We see their videos, we talk with them, they are living at least a better life. Even though they don't have papers, at least they are living a better life there … When you get to Spain or you make it to Germany, you work, and when they come home, they build a house for their mothers, their family, and everything. So it's not like we don't love our country—we love our country—but there is no hope for us. So that's why we have to leave, to try and find a better way to come. Even me, I just talk, I don't care. When I see a boat, I may go the *backway*. Because guess what? I have no hope here.[332]

[332] Interview with Idris, 12 February 2024.

This account, shared by 27-year-old Idris from Bakau, encapsulates the frustration and constraints that ripple through his generation. It reflects widespread aspirations among West African youth for a better future,[333] where hope is increasingly tied to the prospect of migration—a theme that has become nearly ubiquitous in everyday conversation and collective imagination.[334] In my encounters, this aspiration was often condensed into talk of the 'backway'—the colloquial term for the irregular journey to Europe, either by pirogue across the Atlantic to the Canary Islands or overland through the Sahara Desert and across the Mediterranean Sea. (In recent years, as routes through Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia have become increasingly restricted and concerns about discrimination against sub-Saharan migrants have grown, the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands has gained popularity, despite its well-known dangers.) More than a route, the backway has come to symbolise a response to blocked futures at home—a desire to leave, sometimes unclear, sometimes desperate, often futile, that stems from a broader feeling of betrayal by the state, by society, and by the sense that life is happening elsewhere. It may also be understood as a way of coping with Honwana's concept of "waithood": a protracted and uncertain phase in which young people are suspended in limbo, unable to transition into recognised adulthood.[335] Migration, in this context, becomes a means of escaping that suspension. As Harold Schweizer puts it, "the person who waits is out of sync with time"; leaving is thus an attempt to resynchronise with life's expected rhythms—an effort to reclaim lost agency.[336]

Throughout my research, this sense of waiting and feeling stuck was echoed in several conversations, including one with Awa, a young woman in her mid-twenties originally from Bansang, a riverside trading town in east-central Gambia. After completing high school, lacking both the desire to farm and the wish to marry early, Awa moved to the coast to live with her mother's younger sister. She is now training to become a hairdresser. Her trajectory resonates with what Dorte Thorsen observes in her study of youth migration in Burkina Faso: that internal mobility is often a way for young people to assert independence while simultaneously meeting family obligations.[337] Awa sends her mother money each month—a gesture that reflects her effort to be seen as responsible and adult, despite remaining unmarried. Awa and I met at the Tropic Shopping Centre in Senegambia, the heart of the country's tourism industry. Promoted as part of wider efforts to modernise retail and create employment, the mall offers a range of shops, restaurants, and medical services. We decided to sit inside, where the heavily air-conditioned seating area offered a welcome respite from the hot and humid weather outside. As we spoke, Awa told me she had begun earning a little money doing hair, though her income remained minimal. In the future, she hoped to open her own salon and train other girls. A few months earlier, her brother had embarked on the backway. He hadn't told her beforehand—only

[333] Charles Piot, *Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa after the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press Books, 2010).
[334] Cathy Conrad Suso, "Totally Napse: Aspirations of Mobility in Essau, The Gambia," *Third World Quarterly* 43, no 8 (2022).
[335] Honwana, *The Time of Youth*.
[336] Harold Schweizer, "On Waiting," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (2005): 779.
[337] Dorte Thorsen, "Child Migrants in Transit: Strategies to Assert New Identities in Rural Burkina Faso," in *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood*, ed. Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh.

after reaching Spain did he send a message. She was taken aback when she heard the news, but not entirely surprised. When I asked why, she explained:

> There are a lot of young people who are determined to work. They went to school—some have their degrees, even their master's—but they're not employed. And that's what led some to take the backway journey. I think if they're working—if they have something to do—they wouldn't even think of going backway. At least they'd be doing something and getting something. But if they're not working, if they're not getting anything, they will—they have to go. Because they have a mother, a father, a whole family to help. You cannot be here doing nothing and expect your family to survive. And if you're a male child, it's like something compulsory—you have to feed your family. Even though you're not married, you need to take that responsibility. So unemployment really, really kills young people. So many young people are suffering from that. So many young people have died this year. You can go to a specific village and find that 41 people from there died on the backway. So you can see that it has had a big impact on our lives—as a country, and also as young people. Because when young people are tired, when young people are frustrated, the only thing they can think is: either I die, or I make it.[338]

As I listened to Awa's account and those of others, it became clear that for many young Gambians, navigating the post-2016 transition means grappling not only with unmet expectations, but with a deepening sense that the democratic opening has failed to translate into tangible change—particularly in the realms of work, dignity, and social responsibility. Although the political transition had initially raised hopes for change, many young people spoke of how little had improved in their daily lives. Promises of opportunity often felt distant amidst persistent challenges such as unemployment, low wages, and rising living costs. In this context, migration appeared as less a matter of personal ambition than a response to a system offering few real prospects. For some, leaving is seen as one of the few viable paths forward when opportunities at home seemed increasingly out of reach. According to the 2022–2023 Gambia Labour Force Survey youth unemployment in The Gambia stands at a high 45.3%, up from 41.5% in 2018.[339] Recognising that an absence of employment and livelihood oftentimes propels young people to undertake perilous journeys across the desert and the sea, Honwana writes that "their quest is not merely for survival but also about dignity, because *liggeey* ('work' in Wolof) makes one a respected person, capable of taking care of oneself as well as others."[340] Migration, then, is not only about escape but also about striving for a better job, a better life, and a fair share of well-being—aspirations that many young people associate with life in the West. These imagined futures are rendered tangible through television, the internet, social media, and the stories of those who have migrated successfully. Notably, today's generation of young Gambians is more educated than any before and has unprecedented access to information. Through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X, they not only glimpse lives beyond their borders but also engage in transnational debates about governance,

[338] Interview with Awa, 20 December 2023.
[339] GBoS, *Gambia Labour Force Survey Report 2022-2023*.
[340] Honwana, *The Time of Youth*, 84.

economic justice, and modern lifestyles. Aware of their material deprivation, they seek inclusion in what Honwana describes as the "good life," with its associated access to mobility, modern consumer goods, and global visibility.[341]

Yet, not everyone who wants to leave is able to do so. As Jørgen Carling observes, many of those who aspire to move are caught in what he terms "involuntary immobility"—an aching contradiction between the aspiration to migrate and the inability to do so.[342] This captures the predicament of many young Gambians today.[343] Against this backdrop, contemporary migration is marked by a mobility paradox: while social media and transnational networks continually broadcast alluring images of life abroad, actual mobility remains increasingly constrained by restrictive immigration regimes and prohibitive costs.[344] Within this contradiction, many young people experience what is colloquially referred to as the 'nerves syndrome', or *napse* in the local vernacular. The term captures an intense, all-consuming desire to migrate—a desperation so overwhelming that it comes to dominate an individual's thoughts, actions, and emotional well-being.[345]

The broader dynamics of waiting, frustration, aspiration, and constrained mobility take on a more tangible form in the everyday experiences of young people like Idris—the young man whose words opened this chapter—whom I spoke to in early 2024 as we sat in a weathered café overlooking the shoreline at Cape Point. It was a bit later in the afternoon, and it wouldn't be long before the sun began to set. Further down the beach, a group of boys were playing football, their shouts carried faintly by the breeze as they chased the ball across the sand. I had known Idris for some time before returning to The Gambia for my research, and over the years, our conversations had become easy and familiar—sometimes thoughtful, sometimes casual, generally relaxed. Tall and slender, he wore a white t-shirt with *The Gambia: The Smiling Coast* printed in colourful letters—the kind commonly sold in tourist shops, reflecting the country's self-styled image as the Smiling Coast of Africa. It was a reminder of the tourism economy that both sustains and constrains young men like him. Not long after Idris dropped out of school in grade nine following the death of his father, who had paid his school fees, he began working as a tour guide around Cape Point Beach in order to help his mother, who worked in the gardens, and to support the family as the oldest son. He recently created an Instagram account dedicated to his tourism activities, with the aim of attracting more customers. The café where Idris and I are seated is a regular hangout for him and his friends—a place where they exchange news and rumours, listen to music, trade ideas, and share their social and economic frustrations over cups of *attaya* or coffee. Informal meeting points like this, where young men often converge to spend their free time, are a common feature of urban youth life across African contexts. For example,

[341] Honwana, *The Time of Youth*.
[342] Jørgen Carling, "Migration in the Age of Involuntary Immobility: Theoretical Reflections and Cape Verdean Experiences," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28, no. 1 (2002).
[343] Ceesay, "Aligners, Lovers and Deceptors"; Suso, "Totally Napse."
[344] Nauja Kleist and Dorte Thorsen, *Hope and Uncertainty in Contemporary African Migration* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 1.
[345] Suso, "Totally Napse."

related patterns of socialisation are referred to as *grin* in rural and urban Mali,[346] *bases* in Ghana,[347] and *fadas* in Niger.[348]

Figure 12: Late afternoon at a café overlooking the shoreline in Bakau. Photograph taken by the author, February 2024.

Figure 13: Young men playing football on the beach as the sun sets. Photograph taken by the author, February 2024.

[346] Gunvor Jónsson, "The Mirage of Migration: Migration Aspirations and Immobility in a Malian Soninke Village" (Master's thesis, University of Copenhagen, 2007).
[347] Burrel, *Invisible Users.*
[348] Adeline Masquelier, "Teatime: Boredom and the Temporalities of Young Men in Niger," *Africa (London. 1928)* 83, no. 3 (2013).

Promoted as a destination for sun, sand, and smiles, tourism plays a central role in the Gambian economy—both symbolically and materially—attracting visitors drawn to its beaches, birdlife, and cultural heritage. While it lacks the expansive national parks of East Africa or the monumental attractions of North Africa, it has developed a niche appeal, particularly for birdwatching, recreational fishing, and historical tourism linked to the transatlantic slave trade, such as James Fort on Kunta Kinteh Island.[349] The sector also supports a range of informal livelihoods, from guiding and craft-selling to small-scale hospitality work—roles often taken up by young people seeking income in the absence of formal employment. Locally known as 'beach hustlers', these young Gambians operate on the margins of the industry, employing diverse income-generating strategies and benefitting both financially and materially from their interactions with *toubabs* (white westerners).[350] For Idris, tourism remains precarious: highly seasonal, dependent on external flows, and subject to both formal regulation and informal policing. In this context, local tour guides often find themselves navigating a space shaped as much by opportunity as by exclusion. "It's a tough job," Idris explained. "The tourist season is only six months. After that, there's no work. Most of the hotels are closed, so no tourists around—we have to find another way to make a living." Outside the season, Idris tries to sell coffee, but he admits the income is minimal. For Idris, tourism work is not only economically precarious but also subject to surveillance, as he revealed when he shared the story of his arrest at the beach just weeks earlier:

> I'm working on the beach as a tour guide, and they say I need a paper.[351] Since I was a kid, I've been coming here. I don't steal, I don't rob anybody. But they say I need that paper. They arrested me and took me to the Senegambia Police Station. I had to sleep there until morning—all because they said they were charging me with idling. They said I was idling, that I shouldn't be there without a paper. I can't even remember the exact charges, but it started with idling or disobeying. I didn't like that. I didn't even want to know more because I was angry. I slept at the police station—small bed, stinking, one toilet inside, all stinking. So those are the crazy things that make us lose hope here.[352]

Idris finds himself in a difficult position, navigating ongoing insecurity and limited opportunities. "We all know that The Gambia is a paradise, we all know that—but because of how the government treats people and the living condition, that makes things crazy for people," he told me. His use of the word 'paradise' is revealing. It reflects the emotional and imaginative resonance the country holds for those who live there: a place of beauty, warmth, and community. Yet this image stands in sharp contrast to the everyday realities young people face—unemployment, limited prospects, and experiences of marginalisation. These feelings contribute to a more complex relationship with the idea of home—one marked by both attachment and frustration. The contrast between an idealised Gambia and the realities of

[349] Ceesay, "Aligners, Lovers, and Deceptors," 109.
[350] Ibid., 21.
[351] The 'paper' Idris refers to most likely denotes the Tourism Development Area (TDA) identification card—a registration document that records the holder's name, serial number, type of business, and designated area of operation. This card is required for individuals seeking to work or operate within the TDA and serves as a form of official authorisation to engage in tourism-related activities in designated zones; see Ceesay, "Aligners, Lovers, and Deceptors," 101-06.
[352] Interview with Idris, 12 February 2024.

structural precarity reveals not naivety but a sharpened awareness of what the country could be, and what it fails to provide. This tension—between belonging and disillusionment—was a recurring theme in the narratives of the young Gambians I spoke with. Their aspirations and frustrations reflect a desire for dignity, even if that means leaving the 'paradise' behind. As Adriano Cancellieri argues, home is not a romanticised, fixed space, but a "plural and conflictual field of action" that can both exclude and empower.[353] Similarly, Lauren Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism"—an attachment to something that continually disappoints—captures the ambivalence many feel towards the state.[354] For those who have redirected their hopes elsewhere, there remains a lingering sense of "lacking citizenship."[355] This tension between the pull of home and the promise of elsewhere also surfaced in my conversations with Amina, the young housekeeper first introduced in Chapter One. In a later exchange, she elaborated on her desire to migrate, balancing emotional ties with a pragmatic sense of opportunity:

> The life here and there is not the same. I will miss the people around me when I go. Here, if you're lonely, you go somewhere—you can't even be lonely, there are people everywhere. And the food—I will miss the food. Do you guys cook *ebbeh*[356] there? . . But I know Europe is a beautiful place where you go and the hustle there is not the same as in Africa. My boyfriend used to say that. He has a *toubab* wife there and two children… I will go in Ramadan—then it's easier. The *naar*,[357] they are wicked, but in that holy month they have more mercy. Then I will go.[358]

Amina's words capture the emotional ambivalence of holding on to the comfort of community and the familiarity of home, while feeling an almost inevitable pull towards leaving. Yet as the conversation deepened, it became clear that her aspirations were shaped not only by imagined opportunities abroad, but also by the pressures of daily survival, family obligation, and limited alternatives at home:

> It's not easy with us. My family—nobody is helping us. Me and my sister, we are the head of the family. One uncle and two cousins I know went the backway. They think that when they go, they will be successful. Life there is nice. . . It's my boyfriend that asked me to go. He sent me the money. My mum asked me to go too. Before, my mum didn't allow me to go. They came with this idea. She was the one who used to tell me they rape the girls there. I don't know why she changed her mind. Before, I didn't' want to go. But my boyfriend sent me money. I know it's a long journey, but God is good. Many people die, but they have to—it's their time. When my time comes, I will die. . . Unless you go with your husband, they will sleep with you. If you go alone, they will sleep with you. I'm going with my ex because I want to protect myself. My boyfriend

[353] Adriano Cancellieri, "Towards a Progressive Home-Making: The Ambivalence of Migrants' Experience in a Multicultural Condominium," *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 32, no. 1 (2017): 59.
[354] Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism," *Differences (Bloomington, Ind.)* 17, no. 3 (2006): 24.
[355] Zakhour, "While We Wait," 216.
[356] A Gambian street food: a seafood soup made with cassava, smoked fish, shrimps, crabs, and crab meat, seasoned with lemon, tamarind, and chillies.
[357] Arabs or North Africans.
[358] Conversation with Amina, 17 January 2024.

> told me that. He even said to wear something that covers your body so that men will not look at you. . . Food is a problem—and drink, water to drink. And even the river. [You mean the ocean?] Yes, the ocean.[359]

Amina's reflections show how the desire to migrate is shaped by practical concerns, emotional ties, and imagined possibilities elsewhere. Her decision to leave is not simply a personal choice, but one conditioned by the pressures of daily survival, shifting gender roles, and limited prospects within The Gambia's post-authoritarian landscape. In navigating this constrained environment, Amina—like many other young people—interprets migration as a necessary response to a system that offers little space for upward mobility or recognition. While most of the conversations I had about migration were with young men, Amina's account stood out for the way she openly and in detail shared her own plans to leave. Her role as one of the main providers for her family speaks to changing gendered responsibilities in a context where traditional expectations of men as breadwinners have become harder to sustain. At the same time, her plan to travel with her ex-boyfriend for protection highlights the gender-specific risks women face when navigating irregular migration routes. Although women make up around half of all international migrants,[360] their experiences are often overlooked in public and academic debates, especially when it comes to irregular migration.[361] For Amina, migration reflects a pragmatic response to limited opportunities at home, shaped by both structural pressures and personal obligations. Her account underscores how young Gambians navigate the democratic transition through everyday decisions about work, mobility, and care in a context where the promises of change remain largely unmet.

While Amina spoke about her plans with determination, her reflections also pointed to the risks involved—risks that had become a source of local concern in Bakau just a few months earlier, when at least 21 young people from the area lost their lives attempting to reach the Canary Islands by boat. Following the incident in Bakau, Kemo Bojang, Youth Councillor at Kanifing Municipal Council and a resident of the community, shared his reflections in a Facebook post:

> We've lost a lot of young people today, most of them our friends and people we grew up with. Always remember my brothers, who embarked on a perilous journey seeking hope and a better future but, tragically, never completed it. Their stories, struggles, and dreams will forever be a sombre reminder of the urgent need to address corruption, impunity, justice, and the need to fight for the people that really matter. For all of us who have been tasked to steer the affairs of this country, I hope we reflect before we sleep on how we have failed these young people.[362]

Kemo's post conveyed not only personal grief but also a broader sense of political responsibility. It resonated deeply with a growing digital discourse in which young Gambians

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[359] Ibid.
[360] Nicolamaria Coppola, "Gendering Migration: Women, Migratory Routes, and Trafficking," *New England Journal of Public Policy* 30, no. 2 (2018).
[361] Alison Gerard and Sharon Pickering, "Gender, Securitisation, and Transit: Refugee Women and the Journey to the EU," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 27, no. 3 (2014).
[362] Adama Makasuba, "21 Gambians Die of Acute Hunger in Migrant Boat Bound for Spain," *Gambiana*, 2 November 2023, https://gambiana.com/21-gambians-die-of-acute-hunger-in-migrant-boat-bound-for-spain/.

express collective mourning, frustration, and demands for accountability. This form of online engagement reflects a shift in the meaning of migration: once viewed as a route to opportunity and advancement, it is now increasingly marked by danger, desperation, and disillusionment.

Migration has long been embedded in The Gambia's social and economic life.[363] Historically, mobility was associated with gaining experience, securing social status, and contributing to one's household or community.[364] Archival records and oral histories show that young people have long sought opportunities beyond the village or family compound, with movement seen as a route to both personal and collective advancement.[365] These imaginaries continue to hold power, even as the conditions of migration have become increasingly precarious. From the mid-1990s onward, a combination of deepening political repression and economic stagnation intensified the urge to leave, and by the time of the political transition, thousands of young Gambians (mostly males) were embarking on irregular journeys across the Sahara and Mediterranean.[366] The ousting of Jammeh was expected to alter this trend. Both local actors and international observers anticipated that the return to democracy would reduce irregular migration, interpreting it as a problem driven in part by political closure and authoritarian rule. This sense of optimism, grounded in the hope that often accompanies regime change, initially appeared to be borne out: irregular migration declined after 2017, influenced both by a renewed sense of domestic possibility and by increasing insecurity in Libya. Yet this downward trend was short-lived. Recent Afrobarometer data show that approximately seven in ten Gambians consider emigrating, with the number thinking about it "a lot" nearly doubling since 2018.[367] These aspirations are especially pronounced among young adults. Meanwhile, Europe's rejection of Gambian asylum claims—on the grounds that the country is now 'safe'—has done little to deter movement.[368] According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), more than 35,000 Gambians reached Europe irregularly between 2014 and 2018.[369] In 2024 alone, over 1,600 Gambians are reported to have died attempting the journey, most of them at sea.[370]

The ongoing lack of opportunities at home, combined with the precariousness of local livelihoods, continues to drive a steady and deadly exodus, as young people seek to escape what they perceive as a political and economic dead end. This reality, in turn, raised important questions for me throughout my research about how democracy is experienced and understood

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[363] C. Omar Kebbeh, "The Gambia: Migration in Africa's 'Smiling Coast'," *Migration Policy Institute,* 15 August, 2013, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/print/4195#.WpVwqbYZOi4.
[364] Catherine Conrad Suso, "Involuntary Immobility and the Unfulfilled Rite of Passage: Implications for Migration Management in The Gambia, West Africa," *International Migration* 58, no. 4 (2020).
[365] Ibid.
[366] Bertelsmann Stiftung, *Gambia Country Report 2024*.
[367] Afrobarometer, *Economic Challenges Push More Gambians to Consider Emigration, New Afrobarometer Study Finds* (news release, 18 December 2024), https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/R10_Economic-challenges-push-more-Gambians-to-consider-emigration-Afrobarometer-bhh-18dec24.pdf.
[368] Jawo, "'I Will Die Trying'."
[369] Ndey Sowe, "IOM Chief of Mission Says Survey Reveals Emigration from Gambia is Unique," *Foroyaa*, 16 November 2020, https://foroyaa.net/iom-chief-of-mission-says-survey-reveals-emigration-from-gambia-is-unique/.
[370] Tabora Bojang, "Over 1,600 Gambians Died on Backway in 2024 – Migration Activists," *The Standard*, 22 January 2024, https://standard.gm/over-1600-gambians-died-on-backway-in-2024-migration-activists/#:~:text=At%20least%201603%20Gambians%20have,while%2046%20died%20on%20land.

within such a context. In his study on experiences of democracy among young men in Tunisia's interior regions, Zakhour argues that for many, democracy is not simply a matter of political rights or institutional procedures, but is fundamentally tied to questions of justice, employment, and dignity.[371] The young men in Zakhour's study do not view jobs and welfare as external to democracy or as mere outcomes of it—they see them as integral to its very meaning. Zakhour cautions against interpreting frustration with democratic transition solely in terms of unmet material demands. Rather, the persistent emphasis on substantive outcomes reveals how prior political imaginaries of statehood and citizenship condition what democracy is expected to provide. Zakhour's interlocutors' understanding of democracy is shaped by associations with Europe, modernity, and state responsibility, and they make little distinction between the social protections of European welfare states and the legitimacy of their democratic systems. Far from being "wrong" or inconsistent, these views illustrate that the experience of democratic transition is predicated on historically and socially situated expectations—expectations that are themselves a product of long histories of inequality and aspiration.

Similarly, the young people I spoke with throughout my research did not express disappointment solely in terms of unemployment or poverty, but rather in relation to a broader sense that the state had failed to deliver on the substantive promises of democracy. Their critiques were not only about economic precarity but about the feeling of being excluded from national visions of progress and reform. One such reflection came from Adama, a 29-year-old public administration student and assistant librarian at UTG. As the eldest son in his family, recently married and responsible for supporting his siblings, Adama felt the weight of expectation acutely. We met at the Ministry of Higher Education in Bijilo, along the busy Senegambia highway, where I was visiting an acquaintance and Adama had come to arrange paperwork for his tuition. Despite having a university degree, he too was planning to leave the country. We spoke casually about higher education in both The Gambia and the Netherlands, and about elections and voting. "I don't know whether I will vote or not," he told me. When I asked why, he replied:

> This country is not promising. I don't even think that by the next election you will find me here—that is not part of my plan, that is not part of my goals. My plan is, before the end of next year, I will also leave this country to go and do my education. Yes, that is my plan—especially America, or maybe England.

When I asked whether he planned to return, he paused before answering:

> It depends whether this country needs me or not. This country does not need youths, because they are not encouraging youth. This country is not encouraging youths, which means that the country does not need me.

Adama's reflections capture a frustration I hear repeatedly throughout my research: that even those who pursue higher education remain entangled in uncertainty. While the number of graduates has steadily increased—reaching 6,342 in 2020—graduate unemployment remains high, standing at 35.2% in 2018.[372] In a context where the private sector is limited and access

[371] Zakhour, "While We Wait," 264-65.
[372] GBoS, *Gambia Labour Force Survey Report 2018.*

to government jobs increasingly competitive, many young people struggle to find stable and meaningful work. The financial burden of higher education adds to these pressures, with annual tuition fees ranging from 34,000 to 40,000 dalasi (approximately US$470–555), excluding housing, transport, and learning materials. These economic constraints intersect with deeply rooted social expectations. As Gaibazzi notes, "men shoulder the financial obligations for their parents and households, and since households are in a chronic need of cash for basic consumption items, men are expected to go and find it."[373] For young men like Adama, the pressure to migrate is not only a response to material insecurity but also a moral obligation tied to masculinity and familial care. This burden is compounded by a broader social perception that educated but unemployed youth are failures or burdens. As Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera observe in other parts of the global South, young men without work are often seen as social "problems," and a university degree no longer guarantees secure or meaningful employment.[374] Adama's statement that "this country does not need me" signals more than economic despair. It reveals a deeper crisis of recognition: a sense that youth aspirations are undervalued, unacknowledged, and structurally excluded. For him, migration offers not just the hope of income but the possibility of reclaiming dignity—of becoming the kind of person he feels the state does not allow him to be. In this way, migration functions not simply as a form of escape but as a strategy of self-assertion in the face of blocked futures. Importantly, even those with employment or small businesses consider leaving. As one young woman and youth leader in her mid-20s explained:

> Sometimes you see a young person with a business or a job, and the person just wakes up one day and takes the backway. And people are like, 'but he had a job'—but what has that job done for him or her in life? We're losing lives every day. Just last week, we lost 41 young Gambians at sea, which is very sad. Before that, I think there were 21. It has really been a challenge, but young people have lost hope in this country. For them, battling death in the Mediterranean Sea—seeing whether they will win or death will win—is far better than staying in this country and facing the struggles.[375]

With the change of government, The Gambia's international isolation came to an end,[376] opening the way for renewed donor engagement—particularly with the European Union (EU). Since then, the country has become a prominent target of externalisation, or the outsourcing of European border control to third countries.[377] And has seen the assisted return of over 2,600 Gambian migrants from Libya within 18 months of the transition.[378] Alongside deportations, the government launched initiatives aimed at discouraging irregular migration through skills training, entrepreneurship programmes, media campaigns, and the creation of Migration Information Centres. The Youth Empowerment Project (YEP), one of the earliest efforts,

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[373] Gaibazzi, *Bush Bound*, 94.
[374] Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera, *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
[375] Interview with N., 12 December 2023.
[376] Omar N. Cham and Ilke Adam, "The Politicisation and Framing of Migration in West Africa: Transition to Democracy as a Game Changer?," *Territory, Politics, Governance* 11, no. 4 (2023).
[377] Luiza Bialasiewicz, "Off-Shoring and Out-Sourcing the Borders of Europe: Libya and EU Border Work in the Mediterranean," *Geopolitics* 17, no. 4 (2012).
[378] Hunt, "Returning from Libyan Detention."

initially targeted returnees but soon expanded to include broader youth populations. These interventions—aligned with the EU–IOM Joint Initiative—reflect a 'root causes' approach that frames migration primarily as a response to poverty and limited opportunity. In 2017, the *Tekki Fii* ('Make It Here') campaign emerged to promote self-reliance and success at home, using billboards, social media, and celebrity endorsements to counter the allure of Europe. While officially framed as development support, such initiatives have also been read as part of a wider project of 'containment development'.

African migrants are increasingly among the unwanted in Europe, and potential migrants are seen as "capable of threatening European and African sovereignty and security."[379] Against the backdrop of Gambians pleading for more open visa acquisition, the EU is much more likely to spend their money and time working on campaigns to do the opposite: keep Gambians at home. Dinah Hannaford's notion of containment, involves "increasingly constricting channels of legal migration [and] the externalization of European borders."[380] In this way, the border tactic of containment operates through a complicated system of deterrence, including visa restrictions which, over the past 15 years, she observes, have become "increasingly impossible to obtain."[381] These measures do not halt migration but rather, as she notes, "make [migrants] more vulnerable in myriad ways."[382] In this regard, containment is not only about stopping movement, but about governing it from a distance, thereby manufacturing differentiated access to the ability to move. The backway can thus be understood as a strategy for survival, as well as a deliberate reorientation and form of resistance to the limitations placed on both life in The Gambia and the possibilities of leaving those conditions. Containment development aims to geographically localise Africans' desires and imaginations. Loren B. Landau argues that "in an era of planetary entanglement and exchange, this discursively and materially excludes Africans from what it means to be fully human."[383] Philippe Rekacewicz illustrates the ways in which the EU's visa regimes limit most of the developing world from travelling to the EU, creating a system of visas, border controls, and detention centres that discriminates, dehumanises, illegalises and readily endangers undocumented migrants.[384] This results in a map of the world that starkly illustrates the so-called "geography of an unwanted humanity."[385] This is the barrier that West African migrants are so intensely eager to penetrate—and that the EU is so equally eager to protect.

In the wake of repeated tragedies, some have called for deeper reflection on the failures that underpin this system. After the deaths of 62 Gambian migrants in a shipwreck off Mauritania in 2019, writer Musa Bah posed the question: "If after self-rule for this long, our youth still knowingly risk their lives in the high seas just to make a living, there must be

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[379] Loren B. Landau, "A Chronotype of Containment Development: Europe's Migrant Crisis and Africa's Reterritorialization," *Antipode* 51, no. 1 (2019): 169.
[380] Dinah Hannaford, "Containment and the Specter of African Mobility," *South Central Review* 37, no. 2 (2020): 45.
[381] Ibid., 47.
[382] Ibid., 45.
[383] Landau, "A Chronotype of Containment," 169.
[384] Philippe Rekacewicz, "Mapping Europe's War on Immigration," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 16 October 2013, https://mondediplo.com/outsidein/mapping-europe-s-war-on-immigration; Henk van Houtum and Rodrigo Bueno Lacy, "The Migration Map Trap. On the Invasion Arrows in the Cartography of Migration," *Mobilities* 15, no. 2 (2020).
[385] Suso, "Totally Napse," 1926.

something fundamentally wrong."[386] His comment cuts to the heart of the issue: that migration is no longer only about opportunity, but a reckoning with the broken promises of independence, development, and democratic renewal.

For many young people I spoke to, the idea of leaving The Gambia was not simply a dream or escape fantasy—it was a serious and sustained consideration, often emerging from economic necessity but also from a deeper sense of political abandonment. While some had long held such aspirations, others traced their desires to more recent disappointments: the unmet expectations of post-Jammeh reforms, the rising cost of living, and the visible self-interest of political elites. For some, migration plans were vague; for others, they were precise and immediate. But across these accounts, a common theme emerged—the belief that life abroad might offer not just work and income, but dignity, respect, and a chance to belong. These overlapping layers of aspiration, marginality, and political disillusionment reveal that migration is not only an economic strategy, but also a commentary on the limits of citizenship in The Gambia's post-authoritarian present.

What emerges, then, is a picture of young people navigating the democratic transition not through formal participation or ideological commitment, but through critical assessments of its failures and through strategies of survival, mobility, and refusal. Migration—whether enacted or imagined—serves as both a practical response to structural exclusion and a form of political commentary on the limits of citizenship in the 'New Gambia'. Rather than viewing youth disillusionment as apathy or disengagement, it should be understood as a situated reading of the gap between democratic promise and lived experience. In this sense, the desire to leave does not signal a turning away from politics, but rather an attempt to reorient life in a context where the pathways to recognition, responsibility, and social becoming remain profoundly blocked.

6.2 *"Just Sit Down and Do Nothing":* Navigating Repression, Risk, and Digital Dissent

> In terms of democracy, I think the strength we have is the fact that people are able to speak their mind freely without any fear of intimidation and so on, compared to what we had during the 22 years of dictatorship. There are a lot more protests now that are criticising the government. Even though it's not completely free—because we've seen the arrests of some protesters and opposition party members because of their ideas about the government or the president—that is not democratic. Because when we say democracy, a key component of it is freedom of speech.[387]

These were the words of a young activist I interviewed in September 2023, several months before he was arrested along with a small group of young advocates from the *Sess Nenn* ('We've had enough') pressure group. In April 2024, they staged a silent sit-in at the Never Again Memorial Arch in Banjul. Formerly known as Arch 22—built in 1996 to commemorate the

[386] Musa Bah, "The Barra Tragedy: The Way Forward," *The Standard*, 9 December 2019, https://standard.gm/the-barra-tragedy-the-wayforward/.
[387] Interview with informant, September 2023.

military coup of 22 July 1994—the 36-metre-high monument was renamed to honour the victims of Jammeh's regime. The group had initially planned a protest march from Independence Drive to The Gambia Ports Authority to draw attention to the worsening ferry services at the Banjul–Barra Crossing, which had recently made headlines when passengers were left stranded for hours after the *Kanilai* ferry—named after the former president's home village—broke down offshore.[388] By the time the march was denied a police permit on grounds of 'national security', the organisers had already mobilised dozens of youth through WhatsApp to join. In the end, a small group of activists instead decided to gather quietly at the Arch—a symbolic space at the heart of the capital. Their intention was not to stage a disruptive demonstration, but to make a statement through silence, occupying space without confrontation. As one organiser later explained, "What we wanted to do was just sit down and do nothing. I don't think there is any harm that could be associated with that." Notably, the sit-in did not breach any known laws or constitutional provisions; rather, it reflected a peaceful exercise of their right to assembly and expression.

Despite their peaceful approach, the group was swiftly ordered to disperse by the police. After complying and leaving the site, they were arrested shortly afterwards. Though their detention was brief, it triggered widespread reactions online. While I was not in the country at the time, I was able to follow the events closely through social media, where young Gambians mobilised quickly using hashtags like #FreeTheYouths, #FreeGambia, and #SessNen. Although the group physically present at the site was small, the protest expanded into a broader act of digital solidarity, as a significant number of social media users effectively joined the demonstration online—voicing support, sharing images, and demanding their release. As Simbarashe Gukurume notes, social media has enabled the emergence of "a virtual community of dissent that actively fosters counterhegemonic discourses."[389] These digital spaces allow movement leaders and supporters to connect, strategise, and organise protests irrespective of geographic or temporal location. Following their arrest, images of the detainees, edited with handcuff graphics and crying face emojis, circulated widely. The protesters were released later that day but charged with misdemeanours including unlawful assembly and disobeying police orders—charges they strongly denied.

The experience of the *Sess Nenn* advocates is not isolated. Journalists, government critics, and protesters have reported similar forms of pressure in recent years, including intimidation, arrest, and legal constraints. In this context, public dissent in the 'New Gambia' remains a sensitive and closely regulated issue. Activism—particularly when it challenges the government or contests dominant political narratives—can carry considerable risk. As one youth activist from Serekunda noted, "I think it can be dangerous to go out and protest in public, especially when that protest directly questions those in power." She continued: "Still, they have this mentality that they are securities, and that if you go out to protest you are disturbing things. There are people in this system who still believe that protesters are enemies, and this is something that has not changed." A central mechanism shaping this repressive dynamic is

[388] Nelson Manneh, "GAF, Others Rescue Passengers on Board Kanilai Ferry After They Spent Five Hours at Sea," *Foroyaa* 15 April 2024, https://foroyaa.net/gaf-others-rescue-passengers-on-board-kanilai-ferry-after-they-spent-five-hours-at-sea/.
[389] Simbarashe Gukurume, "#ThisFlag in Zimbabwe: Reclaiming Political Space," *African Journalism Studies* 38, no. 2 (2019): 49.

Section 5 of the colonial-era Public Order Act, which requires individuals or groups organising a public procession to obtain prior police approval.[390] Failure to do so renders the assembly 'unlawful', exposing participants to arrest, detention, and prosecution. In practice, a common complaint is that this provision grants authorities wide discretion to deny protest permits, often on broad or ambiguous security grounds—a pattern that has persisted across successive administrations. As one young man remarked, "You cannot go out and protest if something bothers you unless and until you get a permit—and they are never going to give you a permit if you are going to protest against something that is explicitly or clearly against the government." His comment reflects a broader sentiment that the right to protest remains conditional and fragile.

This perception is reinforced by episodes of direct violence in recent years. In 2018, police opened fire on environmental protesters in Faraba Banta, killing three young men and injuring several others who had gathered to oppose sand mining believed to be destroying their farmland.[391] Two years later, in January 2020, security forces cracked down on a demonstration organised by the Jotna movement, which called for Barrow to honour his promise to step down after three years (see Chapter One). The crackdown involved tear gas, over 130 arrests—including the movement's leadership—the closure of two independent media houses, and the detention of four journalists charged with "inciting violence." While the country's human rights record has improved since 2017,[392] Amnesty International described these actions as "deeply troubling," warning that they carried "alarming echoes of Gambia's brutal past."[393] Several of my informants referred to such events when discussing their own reluctance to participate in public protest. Encounters with the police—ranging from dispersals to detention—were often described as routine features of political engagement, particularly when dissent targeted the executive. This sense of risk persists despite the 1997 Constitution's formal guarantee of the right to peaceful assembly, highlighting the gap between legal protection and lived experience. These accounts are echoed in public opinion data: according to a 2023 Afrobarometer survey, 36% of Gambians believe that the police routinely use excessive force during protests.[394] This tension—between constitutional rights and their constrained realisation—shapes how many young people in The Gambia interpret the limits of democratic practice and navigate the risks of political participation. Reflecting on the Jotna protest, one young man remarked:

> They [the protesters] were tortured, tear-gassed, and beaten by security forces for protesting. Simply for protesting. These people had no weapons. They were not destroying property. They were just marching to show their discontent with what was happening. They got beaten. Not the only thing. When they came out to protest, do you know what happened? People in this country mobilised people all the way from the

[390] Freedom House, *Freedom in the Word 2024: The Gambia*.
[391] Kebba Touray, "Villagers of Faraba Banta Protest Against Sand Mining," *Foroyaa*, 28 May 2018, https://foroyaa.net/villagers-of-faraba-banta-protest-against-sand-mining/.
[392] Freedom House, *Freedom in the Word 2024: The Gambia*.
[393] Amnesty International, "Gambia: Mass Arrests Risk Fuelling Tensions," 27 January 2020, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/gambia-mass-arrests-risk-fuelling-tensions/.
[394] Maame Akua Amoah Twum, *Amid Increased Insecurity, Gambians Cite Corruption and Lack of Professionalism among Police Shortcomings*, Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 665 (5 July 2023), https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/AD665-Gambians-cite-lack-of-professionalism-among-police-failings-Afrobarometer-1july23.pdf.

> provinces, thousands and thousands of them, to do a counter-protest. Just to show how much support Barrow has.[395]

Such incidents appear to have contributed to a more cautious attitude towards public protest, with several young Gambians expressing a sense of apprehension. Fear of the state and its security forces was a recurring theme throughout many of my conversations. Fanta, a 28-year-old civil servant, reflected on this tension. While she strongly believes in the right to protest, she explained that the risks often outweigh the potential benefits:

> I think citizens have the right to go out to show their displease in terms of things that are happening within the country and around them. And I believe they should be given the chance to at least show their dissatisfactions. So, I don't think it is a waste of time, but you would see quite a lot of demonstrations in The Gambia, and even though they call them peaceful, the protesters end up being sent away or are met with tear gas. So, I prefer not to be exposed to those things.[396]

Fanta's comment also illustrates how memories of past violence inform how youth interpret and respond to the present. In this sense, political subjectivity is not only shaped by anticipation, as Vigh suggests in his notion of social navigation, but also by recollection.[397] Oosterom has extended this framework to show how remembered harm—particularly experiences of repression or betrayal—profoundly shapes young people's decisions about when and how to act.[398] For many Gambian youth, fear of physical harm, detention, or retaliation remains a powerful constraint on political expression. This is reflected in Afrobarometer data: nearly two-thirds of Gambians report that they would "never" participate in a demonstration.[399] Although older and more economically secure individuals are slightly more risk-averse, the age gap is relatively narrow—challenging the assumption that youth are automatically more likely to mobilise. Crucially, the absence of protest does not necessarily indicate apathy. Instead, disengagement may arise not from indifference, but from disappointment, fatigue, or mistrust.[400] In The Gambia, the lingering effects of authoritarianism continue to inform how dissent is imagined, embodied, and enacted. As Otiono writes:

> The distrust of the system cultivated for decades while under the stranglehold of authoritarian leaders continues to affect people's reactions and attitudes towards activism even after the toppling of such regimes. Apparently, the experiences that arise from years of repression are hard to shake.[401]

Yet fear is only part of the picture. While many youth refrain from public protest, this does not imply passivity or acceptance. According to Afrobarometer, 61% of Gambians believe the

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[395] Interview with informant, September 2023.
[396] Interview with Fanta, 11 September 2023.
[397] Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War*.
[398] Oosterom, "Youth and Social Navigation in Zimbabwe's Informal Economy."
[399] Sait Matty Jaw and Tomas Isabell, *Citizen Engagement in Gambia: Enough to Secure Democratic Gains?*, Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 348 (2 March 2020), https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ab_r7_dispatchno348_citizen_engagement_in_the_gambia.pdf.
[400] Joakim Ekman and Erik Amnå, "Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology," *Human Affairs* 22, no. 3 (2012).
[401] Otiono, "Dream Delayed or Dream Betrayed," 133.

police are *never* justified in using force to disperse peaceful demonstrations[402]—a figure that underscores the persistence of democratic aspirations, even when they are not visibly enacted. The tension between normative commitment and practical risk lies at the heart of how civic life is navigated in the post-authoritarian landscape.

In response to physical risks and legal barriers that accompany public protests, several Gambian youth take to the internet to express their views. As scholars argue, the shrinking of corporeal civic space has often prompted a corresponding expansion of digital civic space.[403] In the Gambian context, platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and X have emerged as alternative arenas for political expression, mobilisation, and critique. Several of my interlocutors described these platforms as safer, more accessible, and more responsive than physical gatherings. Ayesha, a youth community leader in her mid-twenties who had never attended a political event in person, explained: "I would rather watch online or follow on social media than to be there physically. So, I just follow online to keep myself up to date and to know the things they are discussing."[404] This tendency towards online rather than offline engagement may be understood as a strategic response to risk. As Otiono observes, online activism offers a safer alternative by allowing individuals to express their views anonymously, with minimal time and personal exposure. Especially in repressive or unpredictable political environments, such forms of engagement may function as a survival tactic—one that enables participation while mitigating the threat of physical harm, arrest, or social reprisal.[405]

Indeed, digital mobilisation has become increasingly central in recent years. While a government ban on an anti-Barrow protest in early 2020 temporarily disrupted online organising, social media platforms have remained vibrant arenas for contestation. During the 2021 presidential campaign, opposition candidates used Facebook and WhatsApp to reach supporters, while diaspora-led fundraisers enabled new forms of political finance. Initiatives such as *Digital Inclusion: Not Without Our Rural Women* encouraged women in rural areas to participate in political discussions via voice notes. Moreover, ahead of the 2022 National Assembly elections, the *Not Too Young to Run* campaign used digital platforms to support youth candidates, several of whom went on to win seats.[406] Most recently, sustained online activism played a key role in shaping public discourse around the proposed repeal of the ban on FGM in 2024 (see Chapter Five). These developments illustrate how digital platforms have become essential to both the form and content of youth civic engagement—offering tools not only for mobilisation but for reshaping political culture.

Nevertheless, online spaces are neither entirely safe nor uncontested. While social media is often perceived as less risky than street protest, it remains subject to surveillance and state reprisal. Several informants mentioned that online platforms are monitored, and that digital

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[402] Afrobarometer, *Gambians Accuse Police of Using Excessive Force, Political Bias* (news release, 16 June 2023), https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/R9-News-release-Gambians-cite-unprofessional-conduct-by-police_-Afrobarometer-bh-14june23-1.pdf.

[403] George Karekwaivanane and Natasha Msonza, "Zimbabwe Digital Rights Landscape Report," in *Digital Rights in Closing Civic Space: Lessons from Ten African Countries*, ed. Tony Roberts (Sussex: Institute of Development Studies, 2021).

[404] WhatsApp message from Ayesha, 3 March 2024.

[405] Otiono, "Dream Delayed or Dream Betrayed," 133.

[406] Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2024: The Gambia*, https://freedomhouse.org/country/gambia/freedom-net/2024.

expression can have tangible consequences. Although the early years of the Barrow administration appeared to signal a modest shift towards greater tolerance, recent prosecutions suggest that notable constraints persist. In September 2023, journalist Bakary Mankajang—known for his Facebook and TikTok page Mankajang Daily, which has around 70,000 followers—was detained after covering the killing of two police officers. His whereabouts were unknown for two days. Upon release, he was charged with "interference with witnesses," an offence punishable by up to two years in prison. Furthermore, in October 2023, prominent critic and human rights activist Madi Jobarteh was arrested and charged with seditious intention, incitement to violence, and false publication following Facebook posts. A well-known online talk show host was detained twice that same year for criticising the president, and later reported being subjected to physical violence and sexual assault while in custody. Such incidents have heightened public anxiety and reinforced a culture of self-censorship. Certain topics—particularly those affecting LGBT+ communities—remain especially taboo, and are often addressed only by pseudonymous users.[407] As explained by Fatima, a young blogger introduced in the previous chapter, whose blog features life stories of individuals she finds inspiring, including queer and gender non-conforming people:

> I think most of them are not safe in The Gambia. And there's actually a community in The Gambia, right? But then they are safer within their community, right? So that's why, most of the time, even within their families, they're not safe. They cannot come out and say it. Maybe the only people who know are their friends or others in the movement—people they trust—and basically, maybe the Internet, right? Maybe most of the time their family members are not on the Internet, that's why they feel safer online. . . But even then, when I was writing their story, their name was anonymous because they preferred it that way. . . I remember I wrote a story about someone else, but when I shared this story, it kind of brought issues within her family. And because of—like I said—we have this culture of *sutura* in The Gambia. So she had to text me to take it down, just so she could at least have peace at home.[408]

In this case, Fatima was referring to a non-binary individual who had shared their story under the condition of anonymity. Yet despite these precautions, Fatima recalled a separate incident in which another blog post had unintentionally exposed its subject to familial backlash, prompting a request for removal. The safety of digital activism, then, remains conditional and unstable, shaped by shifting red lines, selective enforcement, and the risks of visibility. Moreover, online spaces have their own internal contradictions. While many see them as vehicles for political inclusion, others point to their role in spreading disinformation, fuelling hostility, and amplifying social divisions. "They attack you on social media, sending audio messages everywhere," one young woman told me. Afrobarometer data from 2021 shows that 84% of Gambians consider social media the main source of false news—surpassing politicians (78%), government officials (63%), and journalists (60%).[409] Hate speech, often with ethnic undertones, has also proliferated. As Mr Jaw reflected:

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[407] Ibid.
[408] Interview with Fatima, 8 February 2024.
[409] Afrobarometer, *Gambians Support Media Freedom.*

> In politics, sometimes these elites will tend to use tribe to mobilise others, but I keep warning these politicians that anybody that uses the tribal card—you will never win an election in this country … in urban areas, it's a melting pot. So we are so melted that, you know, people don't even want to hear some of these issues. But you do hear this online, with some people even insulting others. But wherever you hear this, people criticise them—people criticise it, and even call it hate speech to an extent … but this largely stems from the legacy of Jammeh. Even the ethnic questions also stem from Jammeh, when he threatened to bury the Mandinka six feet deep and all those different things. So these are all the dynamics that we are all dealing with today—but it's mostly through dialogue and engagement that we can address this.[410]

His remarks underscore both the legacy of divisive rhetoric and the public's resistance to its revival. At the same time, survey data suggests that while most Gambians support media freedom, many also endorse government action to curb hate speech and disinformation[411]—revealing a public actively engaged in negotiating the ethical boundaries of civic discourse.

Importantly, despite the existing challenges and fears offline mobilisation has not extinguished. In the case of the *Sess Nenn* protest, the organisers ultimately decided to navigate the police permit restrictions by holding a small sit-in, rather than mobilising all the youths they had gathered through WhatsApp. A similar strategy could be seen in the #OccupyWestfield movement (see 5.1), where, in defiance of the ban on their planned protest, a small group gathered at Westfield Junction. In both instances, young people thus found ways to navigate restrictions by employing tactics that allowed them to express their views publicly, albeit in a limited form. At the same time, as we have seen, these approaches did not always shield them from police repression. However, such restrained actions may still generate public sympathy, as they are less likely to be seen as disruptive. This, in turn, can lend legitimacy to their cause and underscore the seriousness of their grievances. Moreover, in some cases, offline mobilisation has catalysed more strategic and visible forms of resistance. Digital platforms notably play a role in facilitating this shift, enabling rapid coordination, broader reach, and transnational solidarity. Following their release, the *Sess Nenn* activists created online spaces to continue their mobilisation—posting statements, holding press briefings, and disseminating updates via Facebook and YouTube. These tools enabled them to bypass official channels, challenge dominant narratives, and draw international attention. Their experience illustrates how Gambian activists operate across a hybrid terrain of online and offline engagement, navigating repression not always by withdrawal, but sometimes by adaptation. In this context, digital tools serve not as substitutes for protest, but as means of sustaining political presence in a climate where open dissent remains fraught with risk.

[410] Interview with Omar, 20 September 2023.
[411] Afrobarometer, *Gambians Support Media Freedom.*

6.3 *"In the Hands of the People, Not the Government"*: Faltering Reforms and Fractured Expectations

> The current climate is based on a transition. Remember, there was a shift in the political climate—a very huge shift. Jammeh had ruled for 22 years, dictatorial style. Therefore the shift from autocracy to democracy has been a very huge challenge, and The Gambia is still facing that challenge—in terms of creating new legal frameworks that are consistent with democracy, in terms of doing all the reforms that are necessary. . . This is the current climate that The Gambia is facing—a challenge in ensuring that the transition from autocracy to democracy is fully mature and consolidated. . . Along with this also, we've seen an opening in democracy and more enthusiasm in democratic ideals. The population are more—we got to adapt, to understand we're in a democracy. . . The state and its institutions are finding it difficult to really catch up with the pace of democratic change, and that is causing some challenges in the country.[412]

This reflection, offered by a lecturer at UTG, captures the layered complexity of the country's post-authoritarian moment—and the uncertain terrain that young Gambians must navigate marked by both openings and constraints. Recalling the aftermath of the 2016 elections, the lecturer described a political landscape suspended between aspiration and inertia, where the transition from autocracy to democracy remains incomplete, uneven, and fraught with contradiction. His words were echoed throughout my conversations with young Gambians. After more than two decades of centralised power and systematic repression, the removal of Jammeh was widely celebrated as a moment of rupture, a rare instance of peaceful democratic change on the continent. Yet, as the lecturer notes, the real work of transition has proven difficult. The state continues to struggle to construct legal frameworks, advance institutional reform, and recalibrate state–society relations in a manner that reflects democratic ideals. While citizens—particularly youth—have adapted to new forms of civic expression and critique, as I have demonstrated throughout the thesis, the state has remained sluggish: haunted by the legacies of authoritarianism and unable—or, in the eyes of some, unwilling—to match the pace of democratic expectation. In the words of Mr Jaw, "22 years of dictatorship—it kills many things."

I found that Gambian youth frustration and disappointment with the transition are powerfully exemplified by the fate of the draft constitution—one of the most emblematic projects of the post-2016 reform agenda, intended to replace the 1997 document that had been extensively altered under the previous regime to consolidate executive power. Announced as part of Barrow's commitment to democratic renewal, the initiative gained widespread support, and in 2017 the Constitutional Review Commission was formally established. Over two and a half years, the Commission led an ambitious nationwide consultation process, reaching even into the diaspora. This participatory approach was widely praised, and the resulting draft came to be known in public discourse as "a Constitution of the People."[413] It reflected many demands voiced during the consultation phase, including presidential term limits, stronger checks on executive power, gender quotas, and provisions for greater youth representation. Afrobarometer

[412] Interview with Dr Ismaila Ceesay, 12 October 2023.
[413] Interview with Cherno, 27 September 2023.

data at the time confirmed broad popular support for key aspects of the draft, reinforcing its legitimacy as a democratic milestone.[414] Yet in September 2020, the draft was rejected by the National Assembly, falling short of the required two-thirds majority. The 31–23 vote was interpreted among many as a calculated effort to protect elite interests—particularly regarding presidential term limits and executive control. For citizens, the rejection marked a shift in the public mood, from cautious optimism to deepening scepticism. As one political analyst remarked at the time, "a clear line was drawn between the popular will and a minority of parliamentarians—and the latter got their way."[415]

Although political and civic spaces appear to have become less restrictive under Barrow's administration, constitutional reform remains elusive—despite broad consensus that there can be no meaningful break with the political past without genuine and comprehensive reform.[416] A revised constitution introduced in August 2024 only intensified the sense of disillusionment. Stripped of many provisions designed to enhance accountability, the new proposal was quickly dubbed the "Barrow Constitution"[417]—a name that suggests a growing sense of betrayal and highlights the transformation of what was once a participatory process into an elite-driven manoeuvre. As Idris (introduced in section 6.1) reflected:

> At that time [of the 2016 election] we voted for the coalition because this was a democratic election, so maybe they would come with democracy and all that—but we see that now it is worse. Because they are still working with the 1997 Constitution so nothing changed, it's just like the government changed, but the system didn't. Even the government didn't really change—the same people who worked for Jammeh are now working under Barrow.[418]

Idris told me he had supported the 2016 Coalition, explaining that after more than two decades of authoritarian rule, he felt it was time, as he put it, to "give someone else a chance and see what happens." Several years on, however, he doubts that what followed has been any better. While The Gambia's 2016 election has been internationally celebrated as a peaceful democratic breakthrough, young people like Idris challenge that narrative. Their experiences suggest that the transition was more symbolic than structural—offering new leadership, but little change in how power is exercised. For Idris, the so-called 'New Gambia' represents less a rupture than a rebranding of the same old system. In this sense, the promised transition feels superficial, as everyday realities of power, inequality, and exclusion persist. Idris' reflections echo frustrations voiced by others throughout my research, stemming from the idea that, beneath the rhetoric of

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[414] Thomas Isbell and Sait Matty Jaw, *The Gambia's Draft Constitution Reflects Citizens' Preference for Term Limits, Gender Quota*, Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 338 (27 January 2020), https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ab_r7_dispatchno338_gambias_draft_constitution_reflects_citizen_preferences.pdf.
[415] Sait Matty Jaw, "The Gambia: Why MPs Just Shot Down the Popular New Draft Constitution," *African Arguments*, 24 September 2020, https://africanarguments.org/2020/09/the-gambia-why-mps-just-shot-down-the-popular-new-draft-constitution/.
[416] Satang Nabaneh, "Why The Gambia's Quest for a New Constitution Came Unstuck—and What Next," *The Conversation*, 6 October 2020, https://theconversation.com/why-the-gambias-quest-for-a-new-constitution-came-unstuck-and-what-next-147118.
[417] Aïssatou Kanté, Paulin Maurice Toupane, and Sampson Kwarkye, "ECOWAS Is Still Pivotal to Steadying The Gambia's Transition," *ISS Today*, 25 February 2024, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/ecowas-is-still-pivotal-to-steadying-the-gambia-s-transition.
[418] Interview with Idris, 12 February 2024.

change, little has shifted in people's lived experience of governance. Pointing to what he saw as political neglect and empty promises, Idris criticised the priorities of the country's leaders:

> The National Assembly members are buying 2 million dalasi Prado cars, and still, people are hungry. You know, when you go outside you see people are hungry, you see people who are starving just to make ends meet. . . We only talk about these issues in the street and on social media. Because guess what? The people who we have to go to and complain to—these are the people eating from the government. We have our deputies, we have our mayors, but when you go there complaining, those people they are getting their salary from the government or from the President. So the things will not go anywhere; it will only be talk, talk, talk, but nothing will happen. So that's the problem.[419]

This episode, cited by multiple interlocutors during my research, became a potent symbol of state indifference and the disconnect between political elites and ordinary citizens. Despite public outcry—particularly on social media—lawmakers retained the vehicles and offered minimal justification beyond procedural entitlement. For many young Gambians, such displays of privilege are not isolated incidents but structural indicators: evidence that political change has primarily served those in power, while everyday realities for the majority remain precarious. Idris' reflections capture a broader sentiment of disenchantment—one that speaks not only to failed expectations but to the deeper affective toll of symbolic democracy without substantive transformation. I found Idris' earlier reference to the 1997 Constitution (often referred to as the "Jammeh Constitution") telling. Indeed, it seems that how several informants experienced the current political situation is deeply informed by memories of the past. Every political action—or inaction—on the part of Barrow has been subject to comparisons with Jammeh. Critics like Idris see a state unwilling to ensure a complete break with the past and instead holding on to unchanged methods from the Jammeh era. For instance, the launch of the Barrow Youth Movement in 2018 was widely criticised as a rebranding of Jammeh's infamous Green Youths. As Dr Ousman Gajigo wrote in *The Standard*, "The Barrow Youth Movement is his version of the Green Youths for Jammeh."[420] Criticism intensified with the appointment of Seedy Njie—a close Jammeh ally and former Minister of Information during the final days of the regime—as the head of the initiative. Njie had accompanied Jammeh into exile and was later nominated to Parliament by Barrow, fuelling public perception that the transition had preserved rather than dismantled old structures of power. Along similar lines, the use of billboards, campaign branding, and presidential imagery has drawn uncomfortable parallels with Jammeh's authoritarian aesthetics. Ahead of Barrow's inauguration, his image was prominently displayed across Banjul, prompting discomfort among some citizens; their removal was viewed as a small but meaningful gesture towards democratic restraint. As one *Foroyaa* commentator put it, "People elect representatives not to make them kings, but to transform them into public

[419] Ibid.
[420] Ousman Gajigo, "The Barrow Youth Movement Is His Version of the Green Youths for Jammeh," *The Standard*, 31 December 2018, https://standard.gm/the-barrow-youth-movement-is-his-version-of-the-green-youths-for-jammeh/.

trustees." [421] These concerns re-emerged during the 2021 campaign, when journalist Alagi Yorro Jallow warned of the return of a "Cult of Personality syndrome." In *Gambiana*, he wrote: "Elections are not won by displaying large poster boards and large truck-grade convoys. . . Politicians must know this."[422]

At the same time, the country's media landscape has become more vocal and independent, enabling greater scrutiny and public expression. Moreover, citizens are increasingly willing and able to voice their discontent. As Harris and Jaw note, a "politically active public" has emerged—illustrated by movements like #GambiaHasDecided and the Jotna campaign—which signals, in their words, that "the genie has been let out of the bottle." Although levels of protest do not match those seen during the 2016–2017 'Impasse',[423] there have been notable instances of civic mobilisation that would have been unthinkable before. Recently, in November 2024, a group called the Coalition of Progressive Gambians held a peaceful protest against the 2024 draft. Dozens marched from Bond Road to the National Assembly, demanding the reinstatement of the 2020 draft constitution and calling on Barrow not to seek re-election in 2026. Their chants—"No to the third term," "respect the voice of the Gambian people," "free the press"—underscored demands for accountability and democratic renewal.[424] A month earlier, a small group of Gambians staged a similar protest in New York during Barrow's visit to the UN General Assembly, echoing the same slogans: "No to third term," "no to corruption," and "Barrow must go.""[425]

These protests reveal widespread dissatisfaction with a government that, in the eyes of many, has failed to meet the expectations raised in the wake of transition—dissatisfaction that surfaced repeatedly throughout my research. Some informants referred explicitly to the rejection of the 2020 draft constitution not only as a legal disappointment, but as a moment that confirmed long-standing doubts about the sincerity of the reform agenda. In their view, the rejection signalled that while citizen voices might be welcomed in symbolic terms, they were ultimately sidelined when the interests of the political elite were at stake. Others expressed their dissatisfaction in less direct ways. Across conversations, this frustration often took the form of a recurring "they"—a pronoun used to refer to those in government who, in the words of one informant, are "those few people within that circle, who have all those things plus they are immune to the law," which, in the informant's view, amounts to "a government of a few people, for few people, and by few people."[426] Consequently, some Gambian youth have become disillusioned and politically apathetic. However, others appear to have been emboldened to continue engaging and protesting against the emerging system. In the latter instance, informants' narratives suggest that, in some cases, this frustration gave rise to a more cautious

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[421] "Is the Removal of President Barrow's Pictures an Act of Vandalism or a Progressive Move to Prevent a Personality Cult?," *Foroyaa*, 22 February 2017, https://foroyaa.net/is-the-removal-of-president-barrows-pictures-and-act-of-vandalism-or-a-progressive-move-to-prevent-a-personality-cult/.
[422] Alagi Yorro Jallow, "Political Billboard Portrays a Cult of Personality," *Gambiana* (opinion), 27 March 2021, https://gambiana.com/opinion-political-billboard-portrays-a-cult-of-personality/.
[423] Harris and Jaw, "A 'New Gambia'?," 58.
[424] Binta Jaiteh, "CoPG Stage Street Protest Over Delay in Passing CRC 2020 Draft Constitution," *The Voice*, 8 November 2024, https://www.voicegambia.com/2024/11/08/copg-stage-street-protest-over-delay-in-passing-crc-2020-draft-constitutionby-binta-jaiteh/.
[425] Omar Bah, "Gambians Protest Against Barrow in US," *The Standard*, 27 September 2024, https://standard.gm/gambians-protest-against-barrow-in-us/.
[426] Interview with Cherno, 27 September 2023.

but sustained sense of resolve—a view that if meaningful change could not be realised through state institutions, it might instead come from elsewhere.

One of those who reflected further on these dynamics was Cherno, a 29-year-old law student and youth advocate I met at the offices of Activista The Gambia, a youth-led civil society organisation located in Serekunda. Outspoken and sharply analytical, Cherno had followed the constitutional process closely but had grown increasingly doubtful of the government's sincerity. "I think completing the democratisation process rests in the hands of the people, not the government," he explained. "The government is never going to lead a change that might disrupt its current position. . . Therefore, it falls to us—individuals, civil society—to push for the completion of the democratisation process." Cherno had grown up in a large polygamous family in Upper Saloum, one of the most neglected districts in the Central River Region. There, he encountered the routine pressures of rural life: unreliable infrastructure, limited healthcare, scarce educational opportunities, and a heavy dependence on farming increasingly disrupted by climate volatility. His father, who had never attended school, worked hard to ensure that his children could continue their education. Cherno eventually moved to the Kombos to pursue his studies, becoming active in civil society out of what he described as "frustration with the failure of political representation." "Growing up, I saw individuals come into our community asking for our votes, promising to do this or that," he explained. "But in my 29 years on this earth, I have not seen a single one of them live up to their promises." Cherno went on to describe how Upper Saloum's current National Assembly representative had lived abroad during the years of dictatorship, only returning after Jammeh was gone. The representative's lack of ties to the district, he argued, explained the absence of real concern for the lives of the constituents. "His family isn't even in the district. He's not close enough to care like I do—because my family is still there. That's why I got into politics. For me, it's about solving the problems of the people."

In 2022, Cherno decided to run as an independent parliamentary candidate. Though he did not win, he remains committed to running again. Several parties had approached him, offering to endorse his candidacy, but he declined—unwilling to become part of the structures he sought to challenge. As he explained:

> What I'm trying to do is keep myself clean. If I join a political party, I won't be part of the decision-making body. But if they make bad decisions, it reflects on the whole party, and I'd be associated with that. I don't want it to be said one day that I was part of that.[427]

Running independently had been financially and logistically difficult, but for Cherno, it appeared to be the only path that aligned with his principles. His stance points to a broader reading of the political landscape, in which much of the political system and its actors are seen as dominated by patronage, corruption, and self-interest. As he put it:

> Every once in a while, there's a case of political corruption—it's exposed in the media, everyone hears about it, but no action is taken. You don't hear about prosecution. Why? Because politics gives people that immunity. And because of that, people go into it not to serve, but to access networks, money, and power.

[427] Ibid.

C.'s reflections shed light on the cynicism that a number of informants hold towards politics and politicians. Across conversations, they voiced a growing scepticism that extended beyond individual leaders to encompass the political system as a whole. Trust in government—an essential foundation for any functioning democracy, and especially vital in a fragile post-authoritarian context—appeared increasingly fractured.[428] Whereas autocracies often suppress dissent through coercion, democratic systems rely on a baseline of public legitimacy. Yet when there is a sustained disconnect between political rhetoric and the lived realities of citizens, that legitimacy can quickly erode—along with belief in the promise of democracy itself.[429] Among the young people I spoke with, mistrust surfaced in various forms: disillusionment with political parties, frustration with leaders perceived as distant or unaccountable, and a deepening cynicism about the system's capacity for change.

Rohey, a 21-year-old journalism student and beauty pageant participant, voiced this frustration. She criticised the president's silence during moments of national concern, describing how this lack of communication left her and others feeling abandoned. "I hate that the president doesn't talk to us when things happen," she told me.

> So many things go wrong in The Gambia, but Barrow never speaks up. Just talk to your people—tell us what's happening and what the government is doing. Even after his re-election, he stayed silent. I remember during the 2021 AFCON [Africa Cup of Nations], crime was rising, and he said nothing. Then Senegal won, and he went on X to congratulate them. We were so angry. I just thought, what is wrong with this? With him? Now 2026 is around the corner, and I pray we make a better choice.[430]

Rohey also expressed disappointment with the lack of political courage among presidential candidates: "Before the elections we have presidential debates and just two of them showed up," she continued. "So why should I vote for somebody that is not bold enough to come and have a debate on why I should vote for him to be a president?" Similar frustrations were echoed by Alieu, the hip hop artist introduced earlier in this thesis. "I have never voted in a presidential election," he said. "I only vote in these local councillors' elections—on the people that I think I can sit and talk with, not the people that I cannot reach." In a later conversation, Alieu elaborated further, questioning the value of voting in a system he saw as lacking credibility.

> I think every responsible Gambian should vote, yes. But I think the voting is not enough. It's not enough because it's not going to change anything—that's what I believe. It's not going to change anything because I honestly believe that our votes most of the time get rigged, yeah. So we're just … we are just going to vote because we want to be good citizens, but I don't think that is even enough. . . We are not even close to moving in the right direction because we have people up there that are corrupt and they are picking few of us to join them in doing the same thing that they are doing, and then what are we doing really?[431]

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[428] Jurgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).
[429] Natalia Letki, "Investigating the Roots of Civic Morality: Trust, Social Capital, and Institutional Performance," *Political Behaviour* 28, no. 4 (2006).
[430] Interview with Rohey, 13 February 2024.
[431] Interview with Alieu, 12 September 2023.

Of notable concern is the issue of corruption—or rather, the perception that no real effort is being made to fight it. Afrobarometer data from 2024 confirms this growing public anxiety: eight in ten Gambians believe corruption has worsened significantly over the past year—more than double the figure recorded in 2018. Confidence in whistleblower protection has also declined, with fewer than half of respondents believing they can report corruption without fear of retaliation. Meanwhile, 86% say the government is doing a poor job of addressing the issue.[432] As Cherno put it:

> Now we have freedom of speech, but there is widespread corruption. They are stealing left, right, and centre, and nobody is saying anything. The problem with this country is this government, and the thing is they are bad at being bad—they can't even steal without us knowing it.[433]

Concerns about favouritism and unearned privilege also surfaced regularly. Maimuna, a recent university graduate searching for work, voiced her frustration at navigating a job market she described as deeply unfair. "It's all about who you know. Some people have qualifications and get rejected, while someone else—without proper papers—gets the job because their brother or uncle is in the system." Others raised grievances about land access and resource distribution, accusing the government of selling public plots to foreign investors. "The land ministers are selling everything to the Indians," one young man told me. "When we sell our country to foreigners, what is left for us?"

These narratives reveal how personal frustration is often entangled with broader perceptions of institutional failure. Corruption, impunity, and opaque governance were frequently cited not only as obstacles to opportunity but also as symbols of an incomplete or superficial political transition. For some, the persistence of authoritarian tendencies—evident in attacks on the media, continued impunity for Jammeh-era figures, and the recycling of political elites—undermines the very idea that the system has truly changed. As one informant put it:

> All this corruption makes our democracy very fragile. That's why the democratic strength we have right now is really weak. Young people are disengaged from politics because of stereotypes like 'politics is a bad game' or 'if you want to be honest, you can't be a politician.' As Muslims, we're taught to preach peace and practise honesty and transparency. So if you follow those principles, you can be a good politician. So it's just very unfortunate that we have Muslim politicians who are very dishonest.[434]

Another remarked:

> A lot of us are disappointed. They are grooming themselves to become dictators again, to become tyrants again, because recently we have seen a lot of attacks on the media.

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[432] Afrobarometer, *Gambians Report Declining Trust in Institutions amid Rising Concerns over Corruption, According to new Afrobarometer Survey* (news release, 17 October 2024), https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/News-release-Gambians-report-declining-trust-in-institutions-amid-rising-corruption-Afrobarometer-17oct24.pdf.
[433] Interview with Cherno, 27 September 2023.
[434] Interview with Omar, 20 September 2023.

> We've seen a lot of attacks on individuals who were detained unlawfully. We've seen a lot of corruptions in the government, you know, so this is not what we want.[435]

Some youth drew a direct link between political frustrations and broader social consequences. In their view, the lack of trust in political leaders and the limited opportunities available to youth had pushed many towards emigration, drugs, or criminal activity. A civil society activist in her late twenties, observed:

> The government has announced youth as a priority, but there is no commitment. And what they do not recognise is that if young people are disempowered, if they don't have access to opportunities, and if they feel marginalised and sidelined, it not only increases the number of young people who die in the sea trying to get to Europe—it also increases the crime rate in The Gambia. We've seen how recently there have been so many cases of armed robbery, of murder, of, you know, all of these things.[436]

Alieu offered a similar reflection:

> Most youths in The Gambia engage in drugs. Most youths in The Gambia are not learning; they don't have proper education, they don't have a job. And I don't see that changing any time soon. I think we should at least try and develop in these areas. We have to try and stop the youths from taking too much drugs.[437]

Together, these voices reveal a deepening disillusionment—not just with individual leaders, but with the overall trajectory of the transition. Among some Gambian youth I encountered, this frustration and disappointment in the transition was immediately recognisable. One young man who exemplifies this is Lamin, a 27-year-old night watchman originally from a village near Soma, a busy market town and transport hub in the Lower River Region. Known for its strategic location between northern and southern Senegal, Soma serves as an important economic crossroads. Yet for Lamin, it was also a place marked by early hardship. "I did not like school. At that time, my friends had lunch—I went to school hungry," he recalled. He left school in the sixth grade and started working as a bike mechanic, much to his mother's disapproval. At one point, he showed me a long scar on his foot, a reminder of an accident he had while riding one of the bikes. Later, Lamin moved to the Kombos in search of work, spending several years in his cousin's bakery before taking up his current job as a night watchman at a local guesthouse in Sukuta. Lamin preferred urban life, but was candid about its challenges:

> In the Kombos, there are not so many advantages. In the village, food is available wherever you go, and there's always somewhere to live too. But here, it is more difficult. If you don't have a good job, eating and finding a place to sleep becomes a problem.

He continued to express his frustration more directly:

> Before people don't go out [to steal]. We sit inside and watch TV. Things was very easy. To have money was not that difficult. Under Barrow life is very hard. I live here. I live

[435] Interview with informant, November 2023.
[436] Interview with informant, February 2024.
[437] Interview with Alieu, 12 October 2023.

> in Gambia. I see how life is. Everybody is crying, everybody is saying the same. Electricity, everything is costly, food everything. A bag of rice how much is that now? The salary is not good. It is difficult when you are paying rent. When you are having a job and your family is seeing that you are having a job, you need to give them something of course.

Like others, Lamin identified the high cost of living and lack of security as pressing concerns that the government should address but has not:

> There is no security. Before, you could go out at night, come back, and sit and relax. Now, you're afraid—afraid someone might attack you. These deportees, they disturb things. But I feel sorry for them. Sometimes I sit with them and listen to their stories but me I don't like to make friends too much. I used to have a lot of friends but now I just like to sit and do my own thing. You know, my brother went backway in 2016. He came to stay with me. He said he was coming to work in the city. Then he packed his bag and told me, 'I go backway.' I don't want to go. It's no safe at all. Some people sell their lands to go backway—they sell their whole compound.[438]

Lamin's account brings into sharp relief the lived experience of a democratic transition that, for many like him, has not delivered. His sense of exclusion is both economic and political. According to Afrobarometer, only 22% of young Gambians believe the government is adequately addressing their needs. Yet youth are also less likely than older generations to vote, contact elected officials, or engage in collective action.[439] When I asked Lamin whether he planned to vote, he replied that although he had an ID card, he had never bothered to register. "Me, I don't vote," he told me plainly. "I don't think it will change anything."

These patterns are not unique to The Gambia. As Danielle Resnick and Daniela Casale argue, youth political engagement is shaped by context: young people are more likely to participate when they feel included, when elections are perceived as fair, or when they identify strongly with political parties. In the absence of such conditions, withdrawal becomes more likely—either as quiet protest or out of resignation. Lamin's choice not to engage may thus be read as a quiet fading out: a sense that politics is something that happens elsewhere, among others, and holds little relevance for those on the margins.

This pattern of disenchantment and disengagement is not new. Under the Jammeh regime, many young people similarly withdrew from formal politics, often as a way to navigate a closed, coercive political system. As one commentator noted in *The Fatu Network*, low youth turnout during that period was not necessarily apathy but a form of resistance—a conscious or subconscious strategy to withhold legitimacy from a system seen as illegitimate. The commentator wrote: "They do not even believe that their votes count. They are convinced that voting will not change the situation nor will it remove the APRC from power. They fear that Jammeh will not step down even if defeated."[440]

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[438] Interview Lamin, 21 January 2024.
[439] Twum, *Gambians Say Government Must Do More.*
[440] "Gambian Youth and Partisan Politics: Apathy or Resistance?," *The Fatu Network*, 19 January 2016, https://fatunetwork.net/gambian-youth-and-partisan-politics-apathy-or-resistance/.

This framing complicates assumptions that youth disengagement is simply a matter of disinterest. Rather, it highlights how disengagement can serve as protest—a refusal to participate in what is perceived as an unreformable system. Even the UDP boycotts during the 2001–2003 and 2011–2013 electoral cycles rested on this same principle: that no credible elections could take place under an authoritarian regime.[441] While the fall of Jammeh brought a wave of mobilisation and hope, the subsequent re-emergence of frustration and withdrawal points to how conditional and fragile that hope has been. When democratic institutions fail to respond, and when economic hardship overshadows civic concerns, disengagement may again become a form of coping—or a quiet mode of dissent. As N., a youth activist, put it:

> You see very few young people interested in politics, because they need to do farming to sustain their families. Or they have to come to the Kombos to work and send money back to the village. So they're already preoccupied with survival, and don't really build much interest in politics or other things.[442]

Even though Vigh's concept of navigation is closely associated with movement and motion,[443] I would suggest that youth withdrawal from political life may also be seen as a form of navigation. As Vigh himself notes, navigation is not only about movement but also about positioning oneself within a shifting social terrain.[444] In this sense, youth like Lamin, who choose not to register to vote or participate in elections, may still be navigating the democratic transition—through tactics of distance, quietness, and self-protection. Such immobility is not inaction but a calibrated response to uncertainty, disappointment, and mistrust. Lamin's narrative, in its modesty and restraint, reflects a broader condition shared by many young Gambians: a sense that democracy, in its current form, is a distant promise rather than a present reality. While not all expressed the same degree of disillusionment, frustration with the pace and depth of reform emerged time and again as a defining feature of their experience of transition. Yet, for some youth, this frustration did not lead to withdrawal but rather to renewed determination. The very contradictions of the post-Jammeh era—its tentative freedoms and persistent failures—have, for others, become a reason to remain engaged. They see the current moment not as a closure, but as an invitation to act, to participate, and to hold the state to account in whatever ways are available to them.

In his study of Tunisian youth post-Arab Spring, Zouhir Gabsi finds that many young people experienced a renewed sense of citizenship in the wake of political change. Despite ongoing economic hardship and frustration with elite dominance, they valued the freedoms that followed—the right to speak, to organise, and to dream. Gabsi's informants described heightened civic pride, stronger feelings of solidarity, and a desire to participate in shaping their country's future.[445] These reflections resonate with the narratives I encountered in The Gambia, where young people often acknowledged the gains of the post-Jammeh era—particularly the

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[441] "UDP May Boycott 2016 Election," *The Standard*, 29 October 2014, https://standard.gm/udp-may-boycott-2016-election/.
[442] Interview with N., 12 December 2023.
[443] Vigh, "Motion Squared."
[444] Ibid.
[445] Zouhir Gabsi, "Tunisia's Youth: Awakened Identity and Challenges Post-Arab Spring," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 1 (2019).

opening of political space and the broader visibility of youth voices—even as they expressed ambivalence about the depth and direction of reform. There is pride in having helped end the dictatorship and a clear awareness that today's political moment, however flawed, differs fundamentally from the fear and repression of the past. Indeed, several informants told me that, although they do not want to join political parties or even consider themselves to be interested in politics, they remain active in their own communities and, at times, in youth or civic associations. Moreover, many youth explained that they are attentive to what is happening in the country; they know what they fought for, and they will not allow the transitional government to hijack the transition.

While the experience of Lamin illustrates why some young Gambians have become disillusioned and politically apathetic, resulting in their withdrawal from a system they no longer trust, other narratives suggest a different trajectory. For some youth, frustration with the pace and substance of reform has had the opposite effect: it has emboldened them. They are using the democratic openings brought about by the transition—however partial or uneven—to voice discontent, mobilise support, and demand accountability. This is not to deny the constraints and contradictions of the current moment, but rather to highlight how young people continue to improvise strategies of engagement, using both traditional and emerging forms of political expression.

One such moment came in July 2024, when young Gambians, under the banner of Concerned Gambians, staged a peaceful protest against two controversial parliamentary bills aimed at increasing salaries and entitlements for judicial officers and National Assembly members. Drawing inspiration from youth-led protests in Kenya, the demonstration was organised via social media and attracted a diverse crowd of young people, civil servants, and civil society actors. Despite the rain, hundreds gathered in Banjul, holding placards with messages such as "Youths Are Not Happy" and "You Told Us You Would Make Us Better, But Instead Bitter." The most frequently chanted slogan—"Stop stealing"—was directed squarely at lawmakers and the executive, reflecting growing frustration with the perceived misuse of public resources.[446] Among the organisers was Momodou Lamin Manjang, a university student who had previously mobilised a smaller protest over rising insecurity following the murder of a young woman in Westfield. "We want to express our anger about the incident, and we also want to tell the government to do more about protecting people's lives and properties," he told local media at the time.[447] These citizen-led actions demonstrate that, despite disillusionment, young Gambians continue to resist political inaction and demand accountability. While formal politics may appear closed or compromised, contentious politics—through street protests, social media campaigns, and civic activism—remains a space where youth can express their frustrations and assert their claims.

As Abdoul Karim Saidou observes, youth turn to contentious politics not as passive victims but as active agents seeking alternative ways to claim their place in societies that have

[446] Ousman Saidykhan, "Concerned Gambians Seek Police Permit to Protest Against Judicial & National Assembly Officers' Remuneration Bills," *The Alkamba Times*, 2 July 2024, https://alkambatimes.com/concerned-gambians-seek-police-permit-to-protest-against-judicial-national-assembly-officers-remuneration-bills/.
[447] Momodou Jawo and Jankey Touray, "Angry Gambians to Protest over Fatal Stabbing," *The Point*, 22 January 2024, https://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/headlines/angry-gambians-to-protest-over-fatal-stabbing.

long marginalised them.[448] Thus, young people are not merely coping with adversity but actively improvising responses to it—generating alternative modes of being and forms of self-worth that stretch beyond dominant economic or patrimonial frameworks.[449] Despite institutionalised vulnerability and limited opportunity, as Honwana suggests, "waithood" should not render youth as passive. Rather, it opens up analytical space to consider experimentation, innovation, and leisure as strategies of navigation.

This was evident in the narratives of several young Gambians I met, including Rohey and Cherno, both introduced earlier, whose ways of navigating the transition blur the boundaries between political expression, performance, and everyday life. Alongside her journalism studies, Rohey is active in pageantry. "I entered pageantry by accident," she recalled. "I thought it was a singing contest! But I love taking challenges and getting out of my comfort zone, so I stayed." What began as a misreading evolved into a platform. Each contestant was asked to develop a social project, and Rohey chose to focus on women and children—issues that have remained central to her efforts ever since. She later joined a workshop on transitional justice, curating an exhibition on victims of the Jammeh era. "That was when I knew—this is what I'm doing. That was the start." Today, she uses social media—especially X, which she described as hosting "more mature minds"—as a key space of engagement. "I talk about a lot of issues," she explained, "from gender-based violence and youth unemployment to FGM and Palestine. It's just diverse—it depends on what's happening, but I always try to show up."

C. similarly described his political expression as emerging through creative practice. "For me, poetry has always been a way to say the uncomfortable things I want to say to the system," he told me. Beginning in high school and developing later through his involvement in a spoken word community in the Kombos, his creative practice has consistently resisted conformity. "I've written a lot on governance, on the economy, on healthcare, education, gender, youth issues. It's always advocacy—it has always, always been about advocacy." He described poetry as "the absolute expression of freedom," where the boundaries of speech are shaped not by institutions but by artistic integrity. "If you don't want me to speak at your event, don't invite me. But you can't invite me and then tell me what to say." Both Rohey and Cherno challenge narrow understandings of civic or political involvement by illustrating how critical consciousness can emerge through spaces at times dismissed as peripheral or aesthetic. Their forms of engagement are rooted in expressive practices—digital media, performance, public memory—and animated by a desire for relevance, autonomy, and voice. Their stories remind us that youth engagement is often nonlinear, improvisational, and difficult to categorise, emerging through moments of reinvention, refusal, and subtle transformation.

Notwithstanding the challenges examined in this section, a number of the young people I encountered acknowledged that the political transformation in The Gambia has, at the very least, opened space for greater personal freedom and democratic practice. Many offered a measured assessment of the post-Jammeh period—highlighting improvements in civic expression and political openness, even as they pointed to persistent failures of reform as well as ongoing socio-economic and political uncertainty. Their descriptions of the current moment

[448] Abdoul Karim Saidou, "La Participation des Jeunes aux Politiques de Sécurité au Burkina Faso: Entre Inclusion Précaire et Alternative Suicidaire," *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Reveu Canadienne des Études Africaines* 57, no. 3 (2023).
[449] Oinas, Onodera, and Suurpää, *What Politics?*, 6.

often relied on terms such as “fragile democracy,” “messy,” “uneven,” “ongoing,” and “unfinished”—suggesting that while progress had been made, it remained partial and constantly contested. Some felt the process was “on track” and expressed cautious optimism; others recognised that the difficulties of transition were not unexpected, and that time and sustained public pressure might yet yield meaningful change. As Alagie, a 30-year-old journalist for *The Standard*—the most widely read newspaper in the country—reflected during our conversation one afternoon at the newspaper's offices in Bakau:

> I mean, democracy is messy. We all know that. But it has opened so many doors, and we are very thankful for some of these changes that have taken place after Jammeh. . . The government are tolerant—we all know that. They often remind us of that. I mean, they rant about how they have opened up the media landscape, how they’ve allowed freedom of expression to flourish—as if they brought that themselves. But in actual sense, we all know the reality. Each and every Gambian, in every corner of the country, fought for the change. Fought to end the dictatorship. Fought to bring about, you know, the freedoms that we are all enjoying today. . . But now again, with every dispensation come challenges. Some people suddenly think the struggle may have ended with the removal of the Jammeh dictatorship. That’s not the case, right? The struggle is still on. We are still fighting. There are a number of issues that shouldn’t exist in a democracy. And the struggle is on. We are hoping now, that since we are a democracy, some of these things will come to pass with time.[450]

As Alagie’s quote illustrates, young Gambians continue to reflect critically on the meanings of democracy and their own role within it. While disillusionment, frustration, and withdrawal are undeniably present, they do not always mark an absence of political agency. Instead, they at times reveal how youth are choosing, with care and discernment, how and when to engage—and on what terms. Whether through open protest, artistic expression, or quiet refusal, many are insisting that the transition is not yet complete, and that the democratic space they helped to open must be actively defended. Their engagement may be uneven, cautious, or ambivalent, but it is nonetheless present. In this sense, the struggle is not only for reform, but for the right to define what democracy should mean in everyday life. This speaks directly to the observation made by the university lecturer at the beginning of this section: while the state remains slow to adapt to democratic expectations, Gambian youth are already experimenting with new forms of civic expression, forging ahead in their own ways and on their own terms.

6.4 Conclusions

This chapter has examined how, despite the formal end of authoritarian rule, young people in the ‘New Gambia’ continue to encounter notable constraints in their efforts to claim political and economic agency. While the preceding chapter explored the partial openings of civic and political space and the emergence of new forms of youth engagement, the focus in the current chapter has been on the limits and disillusionments that shape everyday life in the post-transition period. Through narratives of blocked aspirations, repressive policing, and faltering

[450] Interview Alagie, 30 October 2023.

reform, it has shown how the democratic transition is experienced as uncertain, uneven, and frequently deferred. Throughout my research, I encountered a number of Gambian youth whose frustration and disappointment in the transition were quickly recognisable. For them, the post-2016 period has brought neither the material improvement nor the systemic transformation that they had envisioned. Instead, the gap between the rhetoric of renewal and the persistence of structural exclusion has produced a deepening sense of frustration, mistrust, and—in some cases—withdrawal from political and civic life altogether.

Yet responses are far from uniform. While some young people turn away from political processes and aspire to seek opportunities elsewhere through migration, others channel their frustration into action—organising protests, forming advocacy groups, or engaging in online critique. For some, frustration and disappointment with the transition have thus led to disillusionment and some form of apathy. For others, however, the same frustrations have served to embolden their commitment to civic and political engagement, prompting them to speak out and protest against the emerging system. Such acts challenge the state and make use of the civic and political openings explored in Chapter Five. At the same time, the endurance of repressive practices—particularly constraints on freedom of assembly and expression—has led some youth to shift away from street protest and towards more dispersed, digital forms of expression. Social media has emerged as a crucial outlet, allowing young Gambians to voice dissent, circulate critique, and contest political narratives from the relative safety of online spaces. These strategies reflect not merely resignation, but a recognition of the limits of state-led transformation and a recalibration of agency under uncertainty.

As with the more hopeful forms of engagement analysed in the previous chapter, these practices remain shaped by young people's social position, moral reasoning, and affective experience. What distinguishes the responses examined here, however, is the weight of disappointment, the residue of unfulfilled expectations, and the uneven capacity to absorb or resist the consequences of stalled reform. Taken together, these findings complicate any linear narrative of youth empowerment or democratic progress. Instead, they point to a political terrain in which possibility and constraint are deeply entangled—and in which young people must continually navigate not only structural barriers, but also the emotional and moral ambiguities of hope, doubt, and refusal in the face of slow and selective change. In doing so, they reveal the relevance of uncertainty—not as a temporary disruption, but as a structuring feature of post-authoritarian life. Youth experiences of frustration and fragile hope speak to the ambiguity of political transition—an ambiguity that the next and final chapter reflects on by synthesising these insights and considering their broader implications.

7. Conclusion

This chapter concludes the thesis. It begins with an overview of the research process, before synthesising the findings from the preceding two empirical chapters in relation to the central research aim and question. It thereafter reflects on the broader implications of the analysis, outlining the thesis's main contributions to ongoing debates around democratisation, navigation amidst uncertainty, and youth civic and political engagement in post-authoritarian settings. The chapter closes with the limitations of the study and proposes avenues for future research.

7.1 Overview of the Research Process

This thesis has explored the aftermath of The Gambia's presidential election in December 2016, an unprecedented moment that brought an end to Jammeh's 22-year rule. Often celebrated as a rare instance of peaceful democratic transition on the African continent, the election was widely hailed as signalling hope and renewal in a country long governed through authoritarian means. The Gambia's political transition has provided opportunities for increasing youth civic and political engagement in spaces they could previously not navigate, and the arrival of new media—especially social media—has contributed significantly to enhancing their agency, mobilisation, and effectiveness in interfacing with the state, especially on socio-economic and political issues. Moreover, increased democratisation and global interconnections have enabled a new sense of vigour among young people who were long scared or hesitant to participate in Gambian politics. Yet beneath the surface of the country's political transition, young Gambians—who were instrumental in bringing about political change—continue to face particular challenges in a struggling economy marked by high unemployment. The aim of this study has been to explore what democratic transition means in everyday life for youth in urban Gambia—not as an abstract ideal or a series of institutional benchmarks, but as a lived, affective, and contradictory experience. It approaches democratisation not as a linear or inevitable process, but as a fragile and uneven negotiation shaped by memories of the past, everyday constraints, and fluctuating hopes for the future.

This thesis examines how young people have inhabited, negotiated, and at times resisted the possibilities and constraints produced in the aftermath of transition. It examines how youth respond to—and attempt to reshape—the conditions that govern their lives, often drawing on creative, informal, and ambivalent forms of civic and political engagement. The research highlights how divergent political subjectivities emerge across lines of class, gender, geography, and education, and how youth engagement takes shape not only through protest or institutional involvement, but also through silence, withdrawal, digital expression, and migration. The aim has not been to evaluate democratic progress in terms of success or failure, but rather to offer a grounded understanding of how democracy is made meaningful—or not—in the lives of young Gambians who have inherited the uncertain legacies of authoritarian rule.

The reflections presented here are based on five and a half months of ethnographically informed research conducted between September 2023 and February 2024 in urban Gambia. I employed a combination of methods—primarily in-depth semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, participant observation, and digital ethnography—to gather insight into the lived

experiences, political subjectivities, and everyday practices of young people navigating life in the post-Jammeh era. Methodologically, the research has been guided by an interpretive sensibility attentive to experience as something embodied, narrated, and relationally situated. Rather than treating democracy as something implemented or legislated from above, the study foregrounds how it is lived, reinterpreted, and at times quietly subverted from below. It considers how young people make decisions, assert claims, withdraw, or simply carry on under conditions of uncertainty—and how their emotional orientations towards the state, the past, the present, and the future shape their sense of what is possible, desirable, or worth struggling for.

Although a rich body of scholarly work has examined The Gambia's 2016 presidential election—focusing on its causes, key actors, and the challenges facing the incoming government—there is comparatively little research on the lived experiences of youth in its aftermath. In particular, little is known about how young Gambians engage with or withdraw from civic and political life, and how they navigate the everyday realities of a post-authoritarian transition. By exploring youth civic and political engagement in the post-Jammeh era, this study seeks to shed light on how young people make sense of their current political context, and how their experiences reflect both continuity and change in the wake of the democratic shift. In centring Gambian youths' everyday perspectives, this thesis contributes to a growing body of scholarship that calls for a rethinking of democratisation beyond formal institutions and electoral moments, towards the lived realities of those who are at times rendered peripheral to political analysis. By placing youth voices at the centre, the thesis offers deeper insight into how young Gambians navigate, challenge, and occasionally reimagine the democratic possibilities—and limitations—of the so-called 'New Gambia'. These dynamics are explored across the two empirical chapters. Chapter Five examines the partial openings of civic and political space in the post-authoritarian period, while Chapter Six turns to the structural and affective constraints that continue to shape how democracy is understood, questioned, or quietly endured in everyday life.

7.2 Research Aim and Findings

The aim of this study was to explore how young people in The Gambia experience, interpret, and navigate the country's transition to democracy amidst ongoing socio-economic and political uncertainty. As The Gambia's political transition has provided opportunities for increasing youth civic and political engagement in spaces they could previously not navigate, some youth have chosen to assert their voices through protest, online activism, and electoral engagement. At the same time, however, there are those youth whose disillusionment and frustration with the political transition have deepened, as democratic promises fade and economic hardships persist. I was thus interested in why the ways of these youth differ. The study focused in particular on urban youth residing in the Greater Banjul Area or the Kombos, where the economic, social, and political landscape offers young inhabitants possibilities but also entails constraints. Rather than treating youth as a homogenous group, the study has attended to how different social positions—shaped by intersecting factors such as class, gender, education, and geography—influence young people's understandings of political change and their responses to it. The following overarching research question guided the inquiry: *How do young people in*

The Gambia navigate the country's transition to democracy amidst socio-economic and political uncertainty, and why do their ways of navigating differ?

I used social navigation as a conceptual tool to explore how young people experience their political context and make civic and political decisions in everyday life within an uncertain and changing socio-economic and political terrain. In doing so, the study extends the application of the concept beyond conflict-affected settings to post-authoritarian contexts. I also drew on Oosterom, who stresses the importance of memories of the past in shaping young people's assessments of the present, thereby building on Vigh's insight into how the present and future are linked through navigation.[451] In doing so, I have attempted to demonstrate how the process of navigation is temporally layered: past, present, and future become interwoven in young people's efforts to manoeuvre through instability, uncertainty, and the shifting possibilities of civic and political life in the 'New Gambia'. In this way, the thesis contributes to an understanding of youth experiences as situated—"emerging from a past, while lived in the present"[452]—and oriented towards futures.

The empirical data presented in the study suggests that Gambian youth experience democratic transition as a landscape marked by both openings and constraints. Building on this, I suggest that youth civic and political (dis)engagement in the 'New Gambia' must be seen as shaped by the uneven, fragile, and ongoing nature of the transition itself. In particular, I have attempted to show how urban Gambian youth engage with or withdraw from political and civic life in the wake of authoritarianism, and why their responses differ. These differences are not only reflective of structural opportunity or access, but also emerge from affective orientations, moral evaluations, and memories of past violence or betrayal. Many youth express dissatisfaction with the slow pace of reform and the absence of tangible change in their daily lives. Perceptions of corruption, political opportunism and the limited impact of institutional change fuel a sense of disillusionment. Rather than viewing engagement as a means of transforming this reality, many feel that participation carries little weight. The result is not apathy, but forms of withdrawal, scepticism or selective engagement that reflect a deeper sense of political exhaustion. Their stance—whether politically engaged or disengaged—may be a self-conscious choice that engages with the civic and political realities of the country, and can be linked to experiences of empowerment (political agency and influence) or, conversely, disillusionment (corruption, unfair state policies, and suppression).

It is worth mentioning that while I have applied social navigation as a central conceptual tool—providing insights into how young people respond to an uncertain and shifting political terrain—the study also complicates this framework. Although civic and political spaces have opened in the wake of the transition, the very ability to navigate these spaces remains uneven and conditional. The uncertainty of the democratic moment—marked by continuing socio-economic precarity, institutional mistrust, and political unpredictability—has shaped not only how young people navigate, but whether they feel able or willing to do so at all. In this sense, the study raises important questions about the limits of agency embedded within the idea of navigation itself. Rather than assuming that all youth are equally equipped to improvise within

[451] Oosterom, "Youth and Social Navigation in Zimbabwe's Informal Economy"; Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War*.
[452] Poyntz and Kennelly, *Phenomenology of Youth Cultures and Globalisation*, 3.

these openings, the findings suggest that navigation is structured by unequal access, lingering fear, and a volatile socio-economic and political context. What may appear as strategic choice or creative adaptation is at times a response born of resignation, survival, or constraint.

In Chapter Five, I focused on the possibilities—particularly in terms of expanded civic and political space—that have accompanied The Gambia's return to democracy after 22 years of authoritarian rule. The political transition has provided opportunities for increasing youth civic and political engagement in spaces they could earlier not navigate. Youth frequently expressed that they are enjoying greater political and civic freedoms than before, and several of them are actively participating in civic and political life. Their current assessment is informed by memories of the culture of silence and fear that characterised the Jammeh era, and as such, many are aware of the freedoms they now possess—and are eager to protect and expand them. Youth are engaging in a variety of ways: through localised advocacy, digital activism, protest, artistic expression, party politics, or simply by talking about politics, uncertainty, and hope in everyday spaces. They are also drawing on new forms of visibility and connection, including access to international platforms and media networks, which were previously inaccessible or too dangerous to use. While these developments point to the emergence of a more politically active public, public responses to different forms of engagement remain complex and mixed. To better understand the moral, social, and affective reasoning that underpins these dynamics, I have drawn on concepts such as *fitna*, *maslaha*, and *sutura*—which help to explain not only why some people hesitate to engage, but also how others navigate the tensions of visibility, restraint, and obligation in the current moment. Chapter Five has also underscored that civic and political spaces in post-authoritarian Gambia remain ambiguous: public demonstrations are often met with suspicion or surprise, and party politics continues to be dominated by gerontocratic and patriarchal norms, reminding us that while youth may be navigating new freedoms, they are doing so within uneven and often exclusionary terrain.

In Chapter Six, I turned to the frustrations and contradictions that continue to shape everyday life in The Gambia, exploring how and why many young Gambians are feeling increasingly frustrated with the political transition. The post-2016 period—despite some positive changes—remains fragile, and has failed to deliver the material and structural changes that many youth had hoped for. Youth frequently voiced frustration with a government that continues to invoke its democratic credentials while failing to provide adequate services, educational pathways, or meaningful employment opportunities. In spite of the expansion of fundamental freedoms, young people have grown weary of the dissonance between state rhetoric and lived reality, and have begun to question the meaning of the 'New Gambia'. The Chapter elaborated on the imaginary of emigration that has emerged among many as a politically charged horizon: a form of escape, critique, and aspiration through which youth express both their rejection of the status quo and their hope for a more liveable future elsewhere. Migration, in this context, becomes not just an economic decision but a moral and political response to stagnation, with some wishing to join a growing diaspora that seeks to contribute to change from beyond the country's borders. For some, frustration with the slow pace of reform has resulted in disillusionment with the political transition itself. In the absence of improved socio-economic conditions in everyday life, withdrawal becomes more likely—either as quiet protest or out of resignation. I suggest that youth's decision to not engage—despite available

openings—appears to be influenced by several contextual factors and can be linked to experiences of disillusionment and marginalisation. Furthermore, the chapter unravelled another narrative: while some youth do participate in civic and political life, they are not necessarily quick to take to the streets. At least for now, the repressive environment and memories of violence have prompted many to opt for mainly nonconfrontational tactics, avoiding the likelihood of escalation through practices of careful navigation. Despite state forces repressing dissent, youth who continue to engage in protest—and thereby risk their safety—are not engaging in unnecessary confrontation. Rather, their actions may be understood as political navigations in times of change and uncertainty,[453] involving young people who risk danger today in pursuit of a more free and liveable position in the future.

7.3 Contributions of this Study

This thesis makes several contributions to the study of youth politics, democratisation, and political transition in Africa, both empirically and conceptually. One of its central contributions has been to foreground youth perspectives in an effort to resist the silencing to which young people are continuously subjected, and to challenge the ways in which their role as agents of societal transformation is often discounted.[454] By turning to the lived realities and everyday experiences of young people in urban Gambia, the study offers an alternative account of what democracy means—not as a fixed institutional ideal, but as a contingent, contested, and affectively charged process. In doing so, it challenges linear or institutionalist readings of transition, arguing instead that democratic change is experienced as a slow, uneven, and contradictory process. Political transition here is not an endpoint, but may be a reconfiguration of political life: one that reactivates old hierarchies, creates new fault lines, and prompts competing visions of power, belonging, and reform.

Drawing on empirical data from post-Jammeh Gambia, the study extends the concept of social navigation from conflict-affected settings to post-authoritarian contexts. I have found this conceptualisation useful because it captures both the efforts of young people to construct meaningful lives and the structural constraints that shape their civic and political engagement. By reorienting the concept towards the ambiguities of political transition, I have attempted to highlight that navigation is not merely forward-looking but also shaped by memories of the past, experiences of betrayal, and the moral reasoning young people use to weigh their choices. At the same time, the study complicates more voluntaristic readings of social navigation by drawing attention to the conditions under which navigation becomes possible—or impossible. While new civic and political spaces have formally opened in the so-called ‘New Gambia’, the ability to move through these spaces is shaped by socio-economic precarity, institutional distrust, and ongoing uncertainties. In this sense, the thesis raises questions about the limits of agency embedded in the idea of navigation itself, suggesting that what may appear as strategic engagement or tactical withdrawal is often a reflection of constrained choices, uneven opportunity, or cautious survival.

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[453] Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War*.
[454] Honwana, *The Time of Youth*; Mamadou Seck Diouf, “Engaging Postcolonial Cultures: African Youth and Public Space,” *African Studies Review* 46, no. 2 (2003).

Empirically, the thesis offers a grounded account of how young people experience and respond to democratic transition. Based on five and a half months of ethnographically informed research, it traces how youth engage—or refrain from engaging—with civic and political life through a range of practices, including protest, digital expression, artistic production, local advocacy, and strategic withdrawal. By taking an ethnographic perspective, the thesis shifts attention away from dominant, often ideological narratives of success or failure, and instead foregrounds the everyday and lived experiences of democratisation.[455] This approach reveals how the experience of political change is deeply entangled with socio-economic uncertainty and broader political processes. In this way, the study centres the economic, social, and emotional challenges youth face in daily life, and explores how structural conditions shape the political subjectivities of the young.

The thesis highlights the differentiated nature of youth civic and political engagement, showing how responses to transition vary not only by gender or class, but also by affective orientation: some youth express pride and commitment, others mistrust or fatigue, and most hold conflicting emotions and motivations at once. It reframes withdrawal or disengagement not as apathy, but as a situated and often strategic response to disillusionment, disappointment, and the limitations of institutional reform. It also reveals how migration—often imagined as a form of exit—can function as critique, aspiration, or political refusal. In doing so, the thesis complicates dominant framings of youth as either heroic agents of change or marginalised, apolitical victims of crisis.

Methodologically, the thesis contributes to a growing body of work that foregrounds affective, gendered, and everyday registers of political life. Through an interpretive, ethnographically grounded approach, it redirects analytical focus away from elite actors, legal frameworks, or electoral events and towards the ways in which post-authoritarian life is lived, narrated, and emotionally inhabited by those not always visible in formal political spaces. It shows how expectations and experiences of political transformation are deeply shaped by emotion—hope, betrayal, doubt, mistrust—and how these affective landscapes inform what young people consider possible, meaningful, or worth struggling for.

Taken together, these contributions offer a more grounded, relational, and differentiated understanding of political transition in The Gambia and beyond. By treating youth not only as political actors but as conceptual interlocutors, the thesis makes space for more nuanced interpretations of what democratisation and political transition feel like, and how they unfold in everyday life. It challenges simplified dichotomies of success and failure, participation and apathy, instead framing youth engagements as continually interpreted, navigated, and—at times—quietly reimagined by those living in their wake.

7.4 Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

As with any research, this study has several limitations that shape both the depth and the reach of its findings. These limitations are not presented as flaws, but as acknowledgements of scope—of what was possible within the constraints of time, access, and positionality, and of what remains to be explored in future work. One limitation that becomes immediately clear is

[455] Zakhour, “While We wait,” 3-4.

that the study is geographically concentrated in urban Gambia. While this focus was practical (given my limited command of local languages spoken in rural areas) as well as intentional (given the concentration of civic and political activity, media presence, and youth mobilisation in urban centres), it limits insight into how democratic transition is experienced and navigated by youth in other parts of the country. Future research could build on this work by exploring how young people in rural areas engage with political change.

Building on this, I would also note that while my focus was on urban Gambian youth, the sample of young people I spoke to was relatively small—comprising 26 formal interviews, though accompanied by many informal encounters. This raises questions about the extent to which the insights presented in the study are generalisable, and it certainly warrants further research. Moreover, while the study aimed to be attentive to different categorisations of youth, it has not been able to capture the full spectrum of positionalities. Although gender was examined in some depth—particularly through attention to political silences, respectability, and the notion of *sutura*—other important axes of identity and exclusion, such as disability, sexual orientation, or linguistic marginality, remained outside the scope of this project. These dimensions offer important avenues for future research, particularly as they intersect with questions of inclusion, exclusion, and youth civic and political engagement.

The study has undoubtedly also been shaped by my own positionality as a Dutch-Gambian woman and student researcher. As interpretive research is never free from the researcher's own perspectives, the questions I asked, the relationships I formed, what I observed and what I did not, and the interpretative choices I made were inevitably influenced by my own ethical commitments, personal values, and theoretical assumptions—whether consciously or unconsciously.[456] While I have attempted to reflect on these dynamics with care and reflexivity, they remain part of the knowledge produced in this study. In this way, I understand the researcher not as a neutral observer but as an embedded participant in the meaning-making process.

Finally, the timeframe of the research—five and a half months—enabled sustained engagement with everyday practices and experiences, but limited the possibility of tracing how political subjectivities shift over time. A longitudinal approach would allow for a deeper exploration of how hope, disillusionment, and civic engagement evolve across electoral cycles or moments of national crisis. Despite these limitations and the many "stones left unturned"[457] during my research and within the thesis, I hope that the study opens several important avenues for further inquiry and invites closer attention to the affective and ethical dimensions of political life, to the ambivalence of democratic transition, and to the uneven terrain through which young people continue to navigate, question, and reimagine their place in The Gambia.

[456] Thomas A. Schwandt, *A Qualitative Inquiry: A Dictionary of Terms* (New York: SAGE Publications, 1997).
[457] Lidewyde H. Berckmoes, "Dealing with Deceit: Fieldwork Encounters and Lies in Burundi," in *Emotional and Ethical Challenges for Field Research in Africa. The Story Behind the Findings*, ed. Susan M. Thomson, An Ansoms, and Judith Murison (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 128.

Postscript

On 8 May 2025, at least 27 protesters and two journalists were arrested in Banjul during a peaceful demonstration organised by the youth-led civic group Gambians Against Looted Assets (GALA). The protest centred on the controversial sale of former President Jammeh's properties, amidst growing concern that these assets were being offloaded below market value and allocated in a non-transparent, politically biased manner. Sparked by (social) media revelations and mounting public frustration, the demonstration reignited youth-led mobilisation, culminating in a second protest at Westfield Junction two days later. There, demonstrators blocked traffic and held a 2 p.m. prayer on the busy highway while calling for transparency, justice, and the release of the detainees. Back home in the Netherlands, I looked at images circulating on social media that captured the mood of defiance: mostly young men with fists raised high; some wearing T-shirts bearing slogans such as "Gen Z Against Corruption" and "Solidarity Rocks"; others holding placards that read "Keep the Solo Sandeng Spirit Alive." In response, the police deployed their high command to the scene and attempted to de-escalate tensions through dialogue. As the standoff continued, police officials pledged that the detained youths would be released—a promise that was fulfilled over the course of the weekend.

These events reveal several important dimensions of the current political moment. First, they testify to the continued eagerness of citizens—particularly youth—to align themselves with movements that demand accountability and justice. Second, they underscore the enduring presence of Jammeh's legacy, which continues to cast a long shadow over debates about governance, corruption, and the unfinished business of democratic reform. Third, the arrests of peaceful demonstrators and journalists drew condemnation from domestic and international observers alike, raising concerns about the erosion of civil liberties in a post-Jammeh era. Together, these dynamics reflect both the fragility of the country's democratic transition and the contested nature of the gains achieved since 2017.

The involvement of youth in The Gambia's historic 2016 presidential election was instrumental in exposing the repressive practices of Jammeh's regime and in rallying collective demands for socio-economic justice and national renewal. Youth activism, opposition coalitions, and transnational pressure all converged to create the conditions that ultimately forced Jammeh to step down. Yet, while the former president was removed from office, the deeper demands for structural transformation and genuine democratisation have yet to be fully realised. What comes next remains uncertain. Political transitions are rarely linear, and the trajectory of reform is shaped as much by unpredictability as by deliberate planning. In some cases, what unfolds can be far more surprising than expected. Few, if any, anticipated The Gambia's breakdown of authoritarianism in the 2016 election, and even the very existence of The Gambia as an independent nation would have seemed improbable to many of those who helped construct colonial rule there two-thirds of a century earlier.[458] The road ahead could bring stagnation or democratic backsliding, but it could also give rise to renewed momentum for reform. Economic conditions may improve, a new constitution representing the wishes of the people could be adopted, and the foundations of a Third Republic might be laid. A new

[458] Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, 155.

generation of Gambians may come to take democracy as normal and non-negotiable, refusing to return to past authoritarian modes of governance—not out of nostalgia, but because they carry no romantic illusions about the old system.

As The Gambia moves towards its 2026 presidential election—ten years after ousting one of the longest-serving rulers in post-Cold War Africa—these tensions are likely to intensify. For many young Gambians, the election will serve not only as a test of democratic credibility, but as an opportunity to renegotiate the social contract. Whether through participation, protest, digital activism, or strategic withdrawal, their responses will continue to shape how democracy is understood, questioned, and reimagined in the present moment. The philosopher Jacques Rancière once argued that protests expose the paradox at the heart of democracy. He observed that "democracy as a form of government is threatened by democracy as a form of social and political life and so the former must repress the latter."[459] This insight appears relevant in The Gambia, where both formal and informal commitments to democratic norms and values coexist with acts of suppression and constraint. What lies ahead remains unclear—but what is evident is that recent events reflect a growing plurality of voices, a deepening politicisation of everyday life, and a rising willingness among Gambians—especially the youth—to challenge the political *modus operandi* of the 'New Gambia'. Far from being passive observers, many are asserting themselves—sometimes in the streets, sometimes online—in the continuing effort to define what democracy should look like in practice.

[459] Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 47.

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