

Peace and Prosperity in the Gambia: Problems and Prospects

A Symposium on Security, Governance, and Development in the Gambia
A Paper Delivered by Paul Osei-Kuffour, Network Coordinator, West Africa
Democracy Solidarity Network, WADEMOS

Good morning, distinguished guests and participants. Permit me to stand on all existing protocols!

I thank the organizers of this conference, the United Nations Resident Coordinator's Office (UNRCO), the World Bank, the Government of The Gambia, and the Centre for Research and Policy Development for inviting WADEMOS to participate in this seminar that brings together pro-democracy actors, activists, and professionals from all fields of governance in Gambia and beyond to deliberate on the theme "Peace and Prosperity in the Gambia: Problems and Prospects" as we look into the future for democracy in the Gambian society.

I extend, to you, greetings and best wishes from the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (Ghana), an independent not-for-profit think tank that works through research, policy engagement, thought leadership, and advocacy to advance democratic and development, and WADEMOS, a regional initiative of CDD-Ghana that provides a platform to mobilize civil society resources, cooperation, solidarity, and voice to advance democratic governance in West Africa.

I commend the organizers for putting together this seminar. Democracy is facing resistance, and this process can contribute to solutions that reflect the realities, experiences, and aspirations of citizens and support for democratic governance in The Gambia.

I have been asked to share some insights on "Deepening Democratic Governance in The Gambia" at this symposium. The key issues for consideration are as follows:

- What strategies can be employed to address and reduce political polarization and extremism in The Gambia's democratic landscape?

- How can The Gambia's international partnerships and support be optimized to strengthen democratic governance and institution-building efforts?
- What role can civil society organizations play in deepening democratic governance, and how can their capacity and influence be enhanced to support democratic reforms?

The Context for Democracy in the Contemporary Era

It's important that, as a transnational organization, I take this opportunity to highlight some recent disturbing developments eroding democracy in West Africa. This provides lessons for countries in the sub-region, including The Gambia, as the seminar seeks to identify the shortcomings and prospects in Gambia's development agenda and aspirations.

Democracy is facing global recession, and we are seeing the rapid erosion and attack on democratic norms and values. The rise in populism, authoritarianism, misinformation, and the collapse of multilateralism. West Africa has not been left out in this conundrum. Democracy is rapidly on the decline with the rise in coup d'état and popular sympathy for coup makers. Since 2019 (last 5 years), 10 successful military coups have occurred in seven countries in Africa. More than half (6) of these military coups took place in West Africa alongside other coup attempts, of which the Gambia is not an exception. Coupled with this is the crisis in the Sahel, leading to humanitarian challenges and a rise in violent extremism and insurgency. Additionally, trust in institutions and government has been all-time low, according to the Afrobarometer.

Other challenges include deteriorating quality of elections, constitutional manipulations involving presidential term limits, political capture, worsening HR situations and civic space restrictions, failure of democracy to meet the expectations of citizens, and the foreign and external influence and manipulation in Africa for advancing geopolitical interests.

As I attempt to lay this background and within the context of this seminar, we should use some of the lessons from the subregion to interrogate our recommendations and proposals towards ensuring sustainable peace and prosperity in the Gambia. Any efforts towards long-term peace and security should be built on the foundation and respect for democratic norms and values aimed at:

- strengthening accountability,
- inclusive economic and development policies that help to reduce inequalities and vulnerabilities and enhance livelihoods,
- address the root causes of corruption,
- ensure efficiency in public administration,
- improve access to information,
- and respect for presidential term limits to rebuild confidence and trust between citizens and government.

On this note, I will attempt to proffer some suggestions and solutions to the key questions for deliberation in this session:

- **What strategies can be employed to address and reduce political polarization and extremism in The Gambia's democratic landscape?**

The hyper-partisanship underpinning African politics in most countries does not provide room for consensus building but extends the structural faultlines for polarization and extremism. African politics, including the The Gambia is mostly divisive and exclusionary, with the incentive to control state offices for personal power.

The UNDP 2019 updated *Conflict and Development Analysis for The Gambia* highlights key observations on Gambia's democracy. “It describes it as the result of a history and legacy of human rights violations, institutional dysfunction, and influential tactics that continue to sow division, fear, and politicization, often promulgated along ethnic lines, and that such divisions continue to shape relationships and have intensified the tensions identified overtime.”

Some proposals to reduce polarization and extreme vulnerability:

- Promote inclusive policies by mainstreaming youth, women, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups in governance through policy and legislation such as the AAB, youth policies, gender and inclusion policies, and disability policies, and ensure mechanisms exist for monitoring, reporting, and compliance.

- Institutionalize data-driven policies to drive inclusion and reduce inequality, polarization, and poverty. In Ghana, a critical institution such as the National Development Planning Commission has not been optimized to achieve its independence and autonomy in advising, reviewing, and monitoring government pro-poor policies.
- Consider other models of governance that place a premium on collaboration, negotiation, and consensus-building as practiced in most Scandinavian countries to address the “winner takes all politics” and elite and state capture that breed political polarization and exclusion.
- Ensure respect for the rule of the law and equal justice for all. In many parts of Africa, the law is applied unevenly, and access to justice is limited to elites.
- Strengthen Human Rights and Peacebuilding Institutions to ensure protection and respect for human rights and freedoms, especially for disadvantaged and marginalized populations, and the promotion of peace and reconciliation, including inter-ethnic and interfaith dialogues to mitigate existing tensions and mistrust in society.
- Invest in civic education to sensitize and educate citizens on the challenges of polarization to democratic development.
- **How can The Gambia’s international partnerships and support be optimized to strengthen democratic governance and institution-building efforts?**

In a multipolar world, the geopolitics are very difficult to navigate, particularly for The Gambia considering the population and economic influence. Hence, to maximize outcomes from international partnerships, the following proposals could offer some benefits:

- Partnerships with development partners must be based on principles and value for money.
- Ensure transparency and accountability with the relevant checks and balances in the financial management processes, including strong parliamentary and civil society participation and oversight to enhance value for money (Parl can request memoranda from citizens and hold special consultations with beneficiaries and stakeholders).

- Target support to specific identified areas of challenges to address structural vulnerabilities and prioritize partnerships that provide transformative, catalytic, and multiplier effects for the economy, government, and society.
- Invest in strengthening the technical capacity of institutions in areas such as research, use of data, policy, and program evaluation to inform decisions around partnerships, etc.
- Identify innovations to boost domestic revenue to reduce dependency on foreign aid. We have seen efforts to formalize and digitize the informal economy to boost trade and economic activities. In Ghana, the ongoing digitization and issuance of the National ID Card process has helped to rid the payroll of ghost names.
- Provide strong commitment to democratic values and aspirations and ensure these provisions are enshrined in the constitution; otherwise, The Gambia may be caught up in the current competition and face the negative consequences of foreign influence and interference.
- Provide a National Development Plan with appropriate coordination and institutional mechanisms for monitoring, including reporting to parliament on the country's engagement with external partners.

What role can civil society organizations play in deepening democratic governance, and how can their capacity and influence be enhanced to support democratic reforms?

Government and the political class must recognize that citizens embody the sovereignty of the state. They have rights and responsibilities that have to be protected. Any suppression of citizens in the long term will delegitimize the state as citizens lose confidence and trust in their government. Civil society also has a responsibility to be professional and respect the moral authority of society. Provide below some proposals on the role of CSOs in deepening democratic governance:

- Ensure citizens are informed, active, and engaged. We believe that to have a well-governed democracy, citizens must be aware of how government works and how they can participate in governance. It is not enough for citizens to be informed. They must actively participate in governance. In many societies, citizens' participation ends at voting. Citizens should be willing to claim their

rights, exercise their responsibilities, participate in relevant decision-making processes, and hold the government to account. Civil society plays a critical role in this respect by educating citizens, keeping them engaged, mobilizing groups, and protecting the space for civic engagement. Additionally, the state must commit to popular participatory frameworks in governance. For example

- practice issuing public positions and engaging government and parliament on proposed legislation, policies, and programs
- Conduct policy and program audits and use feedback to engage government institutions and agencies.
- Promote human rights and civic education, including public interest litigation (e.g., the CSOs petition to the court against the SML revenue assurance contract).
- In terms of capacity, invest in strengthening technical capacity in areas such as research, use of data, policy and program evaluation, including social accountability programs, etc.
- Invest in local governance to open up democratic spaces for meaningful citizen engagement.

Conclusion

Democracy is at a crossroads! Africans are expressing disillusion for democracy that does not ensure the enjoyment of fundamental social and economic rights. We should therefore use this opportunity to address the historical and structural vulnerabilities facing the Gambian society. A well-governed and sustainable democracy should be inclusive of economic growth and development. This means that the model of economic development should be one that enables the participation of all parts of society, which should in turn lead to more equitable benefits resulting from growth and reduce marginalization, poverty, and polarization.

Thank you