

The Gambia

Ethnicity in The Gambia

Group selection

Group sizes according to the figures provided by the U.S. State Department Background Notes (not available online anymore), rounded to half-percentage points. The Serer - one of the smallest ethnic groups – are not included in the list as they are not politically relevant according to the EPR definition.

Power relations

1965-1993

Following independence, the Protectorate People's Party (later People's Progressive Party) gained power. It represented the interests of the (rural) majority Mandinka people - who had clearly been disadvantaged during the colonial regime - against the small, privileged urban elite in the capital which was overwhelmingly composed of Wolof and Aku/Creoles (⁴⁴⁷⁸). The PPP was made up mainly of Mandinka and denounced as a tribalist Mandinka party by its main rival, the urban United Party, in the elections before independence (⁴⁴⁷⁹).

⁴⁴⁷⁸ [Hughes, 1975]

⁴⁴⁷⁹ [Hughes, 1975]

Although originally being a Mandinka or at least rural party (the Mandinka are the most important rural people in Gambia), the PPP and especially its leader and elected president of the country, Dawda Jawara, reached out to all other ethnic groups after coming to power, forming a genuine national party and a power-sharing type of government (⁴⁴⁸⁰; ⁴⁴⁸¹). In principle, all ethnic groups were well represented in the government (⁴⁴⁸²). An exception to this pattern can be seen in the case of the Diola group which apparently was "marginalized" (⁴⁴⁸³, 52; ⁴⁴⁸⁴) and "politically eclipsed" (and "socially excluded") by the other ethnic communities until Jammeh's coup in 1994 (⁴⁴⁸⁵, 121). The Diola are thus coded as the only powerless group in this period.

⁴⁴⁸⁰ [Hughes, 1975]

⁴⁴⁸¹ [Hughes Gailey, 1999]

⁴⁴⁸² [Hughes, 1975]

⁴⁴⁸³ [Saine, 2009]

⁴⁴⁸⁴ [State Department, 1999-2016]

Whereas during the period of self-government (before 1965) the Mandinka group held a majority in the government, after independence they very much became a minority in the cabinet over time - despite them being the country's largest ethnic group and the PPP originally being a Mandinka party. In 1973, e.g., there were only 3 Mandinka in a cabinet of 10 (4 Wolof, 2 Fula, 1 Diola) (⁴⁴⁸⁶). The traditional urban elite, the Wolof and Aku, with their higher education and bureaucratic skills made themselves indispensable as soon

⁴⁴⁸⁶ [Hughes, 1975]

as the country achieved independence - even more so in the administration. Thus, although the president was a Mandinka (yet, also married to a Wolof woman), the Wolof still dominated the political life in this period (⁴⁴⁸⁷). This can also be seen by the persistent discontent of a part of the party's old Mandinka following who complained about the government's neglect of their ethnic interests. There were several splits within the party between the president's supporters and those who saw the "Mandinka cause" betrayed, as early as 1968 (⁴⁴⁸⁸). In 1975, a former vice-president in the PPP government - alienated by Jawara's policy of opening up the party to other ethnic groups - even founded a new opposition party (NCP) that appealed to Mandinka voters. He was soon perceived as a tribalist, and his party only won parliamentary seats in Mandinka areas in 1977. (It never reached national strength in the years before the military coup in 1994, achieving a maximum of 6 parliamentary seats in 1992) (⁴⁴⁸⁹). Given these observations, the Wolof are coded as "senior partner" in this power-sharing government and the Mandinka and the other ethnic groups (except for the Diola) as "junior partners".

⁴⁴⁸⁷ [Hughes, 1975]

⁴⁴⁸⁸ [Hughes, 1975]

⁴⁴⁸⁹ [Hughes Gailey, 1999]

1994-2017

Military coup by junior officers led by Lieut. Jammeh, who outlawed all political parties at first. Later he (and his new hegemonic party) won all elections from 1997 onwards. There are no more signs that ethnicity played a significant role in the country's political life (⁴⁴⁹⁰). The PPP achieved to reconcile the different parts of the country's population (which had never been fully polarized) (⁴⁴⁹¹). Also the military coup in 1994 did not exhibit an ethnic dimension (⁴⁴⁹², 920; ⁴⁴⁹³, 31-2, 35). The coup leaders and the subsequent military rulers had varied ethnic backgrounds (⁴⁴⁹⁴, 920). Thus ethnicity in Gambia is coded as "politically irrelevant" from 1994 onwards.

⁴⁴⁹⁰ [Wiseman, 1996]

⁴⁴⁹¹ [Hughes Gailey, 1999]

⁴⁴⁹² [Wiseman, 1996]

⁴⁴⁹³ [Saine, 2009]

⁴⁴⁹⁴ [Wiseman, 1996]

Jammeh continues as the country's authoritarian ruler being "re-elected" as president in 2006. Political opposition is highly restricted, and repression sometimes gets violent and is characterized by severe human rights violations. The pertinent sources consulted indicate that ethnicity continues to be of little or no importance in national politics (⁴⁴⁹⁵, ⁴⁴⁹⁶, ⁴⁴⁹⁷). The 2008 and 2009 Country Reports by Freedom House (⁴⁴⁹⁸); cp. also ⁴⁴⁹⁹, 67) mention a possible favoritism by Jammeh towards his own Diola group (in contrast to the Reports of 2006 and 2007), and in the country's security forces key positions are increasingly occupied by Diola loyalists (⁴⁵⁰⁰, 121; ⁴⁵⁰¹, 55). The security apparatus, moreover, apparently exhibits ethnic factionalism (⁴⁵⁰², 61). And there also seems to be some ethnic voting on the part of members of the Diola group (even cross-border voting by Senegalese Diola) in favor of Jammeh. This suggests that ethnicity may become more relevant again in the future - especially when people will start to anticipate a decrease in Jammeh's grip on power, and politics will become more liberalized. However, for

⁴⁴⁹⁵ [Hughes Perfect, 2008]

⁴⁴⁹⁶ [Saine, 2009]

⁴⁴⁹⁷ [State Department, 1999-2016]

⁴⁴⁹⁸ [Freedom House, 1998-2018]

⁴⁴⁹⁹ [Saine, 2009]

the current time frame, i.e. until the year of 2009, it appears still reasonable to code ethnicity as politically irrelevant.

Yahya Jammeh got confirmed in office in the 2011 presidential election that was described as “neither free nor fair” (⁴⁵⁰³). There is some evidence that Jammeh favors his Diola co-ethnics when it comes to government jobs and positions in the country’s security apparatus (⁴⁵⁰⁴, ⁴⁵⁰⁵). However, neither does Jammeh appear to make explicit Diola claims, nor does his regime party, the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC) exhibit an apparent ethnic slant. None of the consulted sources mentions opposition groups organized along ethnic lines. In October 2013, Jammeh quit the Commonwealth and in March 2014 he announced to abolish English as the country’s official language and replace it with one of the local vernaculars (⁴⁵⁰⁶). Whether this announcement has real (ethno-)political consequences or whether it is just another eccentric political maneuver without any substantive effects remains to be seen.

After a failed coup in 2014, Jammeh increased the number of ethnic Diola in the government. However, there is no indication that Jammeh’s political activity became more ethnic than before. Apart from the fact that political parties are not allowed to be active on the national level at all, ethnicity still does not seem to play an important role in the Gambia. Many Gambians are of mixed ethnicity, intermarriages are common, and the Gambian nationality seems to be stronger than ethnic identities (⁴⁵⁰⁷, ⁴⁵⁰⁸, ⁴⁵⁰⁹). It is said that rather than seriously representing the interests of a specific ethnic group politically, Jammeh intended to stoke distrust amongst the different ethnic groups in order to secure his own power. On the one hand, sources state that Jammeh supported the Diola group. On the other hand, the APRC, Jammeh’s own party, accused him of supporting the Mandinga (⁴⁵¹⁰, ⁴⁵¹¹). In 2015, Jammeh declared the Gambia an Islamic State, which abolished the religious freedom and many other individual and human rights. Moreover, torture, extrajudicial killing and disappearances were common (⁴⁵¹²).

In November 2016, seven opposition parties formed a coalition in order to support the election of a new president and thereby achieve a transformation of the Gambia towards a more democratic system. Adama Barrow, chairman of the United Democratic Party, left his party to officially compete as independent candidate in the elections (⁴⁵¹³). To Jammeh’s surprise, Barrow won the election. However, Barrow only took office in February 2017, after Jammeh had refused to step down during several months and was finally forced to hand over the presidency by Senegalese and other foreign troops. Barrow, the new president, is half Mandinka and half Fulbe, however having been raised in a Fulbe village and having inherited the Fulbe culture (⁴⁵¹⁴). Nevertheless, the circumstances under which he competed in the elections indicate that, at least before 2017, ethnicity still did not play a major role. Rather did concerns about basic human rights prevail, which were violated across all groups living within the

⁴⁵⁰³ [State Department, 1999-2016]

⁴⁵⁰⁴ [Freedom House, 1998-2018]

⁴⁵⁰⁵ [State Department, 1999-2016]

⁴⁵⁰⁶ [Jean-Matthew Ceesay, 2014]

⁴⁵⁰⁷ [Access Gambia, 2017]

⁴⁵⁰⁸ [Freedom House, 1998-2018]

⁴⁵⁰⁹ [Sommerfelt, 2016]

⁴⁵¹⁰ [Haque, 2017]

⁴⁵¹¹ [State Department, 1999-2016]

⁴⁵¹³ [Jollof, 2016]

⁴⁵¹⁴ [Jallow, 2016]

Gambia (⁴⁵¹⁵).

⁴⁵¹⁵ [Haque, 2017]

From January 1st 2018 onwards, the political status of the different ethnic groups has to be re-evaluated under the new president Adama Barrow.

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Political status of ethnic groups in The Gambia

From 1965 until 1993

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Mandinka	0.395	JUNIOR PARTNER
Fula	0.19	JUNIOR PARTNER
Wolof	0.145	SENIOR PARTNER
Diola	0.105	POWERLESS
Aku (Creoles)	0.02	JUNIOR PARTNER

From 1994 until 2017

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Mandinka	0.395	IRRELEVANT
Fula	0.19	IRRELEVANT
Wolof	0.145	IRRELEVANT
Diola	0.105	IRRELEVANT
Aku (Creoles)	0.02	IRRELEVANT

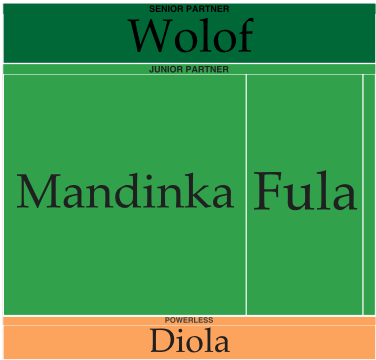


Figure 918: Political status of ethnic groups in The Gambia during 1965-1993.



Figure 919: Political status of ethnic groups in The Gambia during 1994-2017.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in The Gambia

From 1965 until 1993



Figure 920: Map of ethnic groups in The Gambia during 1965-1993.

	Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■	Mandinka	5068	Regionally based
■	Wolof	1864	Regionally based
■	Fula	1388	Regionally based
■	Diola	716	Regionally based
	Aku (Creoles)		Urban

Table 310: List of ethnic groups in The Gambia during 1965-1993.

Conflicts in The Gambia

Starting on 1981-07-29

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Gambia	NRC		1981-07-29			