

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 - not included into the list as politically not relevant, according to the EPR definition.

Power relations

1965-1994 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 (³⁴⁶²). 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 (³⁴⁶³).

³⁴⁶² [Hughesn 1975]

³⁴⁶³ [Hughesn 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 (³⁴⁶⁴, ³⁴⁶⁵). In principle, all ethnic groups were well represented in the government (³⁴⁶⁶). An exception to this pattern can be seen in the case of the Diola group which apparently was "marginalized" (³⁴⁶⁷, 52; ³⁴⁶⁸) and "politically eclipsed" (and "socially excluded") by the other ethnic communities until Jammeh's coup in 1994 (³⁴⁶⁹, 121). The Diola were thus coded as the only powerless group in this period.

³⁴⁶⁴ [Hughesn 1975]

³⁴⁶⁵ [Hughes Gailey, 1999]

³⁴⁶⁶ [Hughesn 1975]

³⁴⁶⁷ [Saine, 2009]

³⁴⁶⁸ [U.S. State]

Whereas during the period of self-government (before 1965) the Mandinka group held a majority in the government, after independence they became a minority in the cabinet over time - despite their 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) (³⁴⁷⁰). The traditional urban elite, the Wolof and Aku, with their higher education and bureaucratic skills made themselves indispensable as soon as the country achieved independence - even more so in the administration.

³⁴⁷⁰ [Hughesn 1975]

Thus, although the president was a Mandinka (yet, also married to a Wolof woman), the Wolof still dominated the political life in this period (³⁴⁷¹). 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 (³⁴⁷²). 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) (³⁴⁷³). Given these observations, the Wolof were coded as "senior partner" in this power-sharing government and the Mandinka and the other ethnic groups (except for the Diola) as "junior partners".

³⁴⁷¹ [Hughesn 1975]

³⁴⁷² [Hughesn 1975]

³⁴⁷³ [Hughes Gailey, 1999]

1995-2005 Military coup by junior officers led by Lieut. Jammeh. Jammeh outlawed all political parties at first. Later he (and his new hegemonic party) won all elections from 1997 until 2014.

There are no more signs that ethnicity played a significant role in the country's political life (³⁴⁷⁴). The PPP achieved to reconcile the different parts of the country's population (which had never been fully polarized) (³⁴⁷⁵). Also the military coup in 1994 did not exhibit an ethnic dimension (³⁴⁷⁶, 920; ³⁴⁷⁷, 31-2, 35). The coup leaders and the subsequent military rulers had a varied ethnic backgrounds (³⁴⁷⁸, 920). Thus ethnicity in Gambia was coded as "politically irrelevant" from 1994 on.

³⁴⁷⁴ [Wiseman, 1996]

³⁴⁷⁵ [Hughes Gailey, 1999]

³⁴⁷⁶ [Wiseman, 1996]

³⁴⁷⁷ [Saine, 2009]

³⁴⁷⁸ [Wiseman, 1996]

2006-2009 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 (³⁴⁷⁹; ³⁴⁸⁰; ³⁴⁸¹). The two most recent Country Reports by Freedom House from 2008 and 2009 (³⁴⁸²; cp. also ³⁴⁸³, 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 (³⁴⁸⁴, 121; ³⁴⁸⁵, 55). The security apparatus, moreover, apparently exhibits ethnic factionalism (³⁴⁸⁶, 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 the current time frame, i.e. until the year of 2009, it appears still reasonable to code ethnicity as politically irrele-

³⁴⁷⁹ [Hughes Perfect, 2008]

³⁴⁸⁰ [Saine, 2009]

³⁴⁸¹ [U.S. State]

³⁴⁸² [Freedom House, 2008, 2009]

³⁴⁸³ [Saine, 2009]

vant. The period of 1994-2005 consequently is extended to 2009.

2010-2013 For the period 2010-13, the previous coding of ethnicity as being irrelevant was continued. Yahya Jammeh still acts as the country's authoritarian president. He got confirmed in office in the 2011 presidential election that was described as "neither free nor fair" (³⁴⁸⁷). 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 (³⁴⁸⁸; ³⁴⁸⁹). 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 (³⁴⁹⁰). 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.

³⁴⁸⁷ [U.S. State]

³⁴⁸⁸ [Freedom House, 2012]

³⁴⁸⁹ [U.S. State]

³⁴⁹⁰ [Jean-Matthew Ceesay, 2014]

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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 2013

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

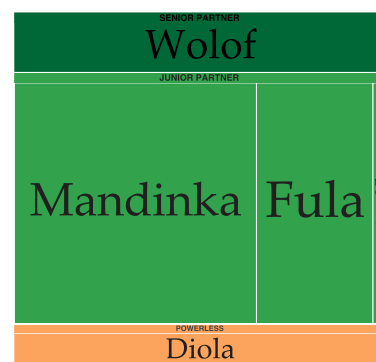


Figure 756: Political status of ethnic groups in The Gambia during 1965-1993.

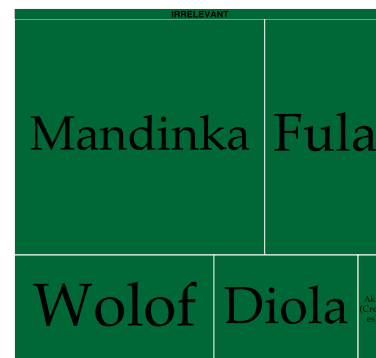


Figure 757: Political status of ethnic groups in The Gambia during 1994-2013.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in The Gambia

From 1965 until 2009

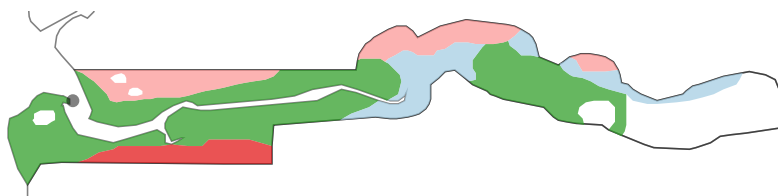


Figure 758: Map of ethnic groups in The Gambia during 1994-2013.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
Mandinka	5032	Regionally based
Wolof	1659	Regionally based
Fula	1393	Regionally based
Diola	719	Regionally based
Aku (Creoles)		Urban

Table 220: List of ethnic groups in The Gambia during 1965-2009.

Conflicts in The Gambia

Starting on 1981-07-30

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Gambia	NRC		1981-07-30			