

GAMBIA : A STATE IN SEARTH OF VIABILITY

By
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When the colonialist Goliaths began to retreat from the vast territories over which they had greedily held on for several decades, the nationalist Davids soon found out to their dismay that the parcelling out of spoils was only a small part of the responsibilities accompanying their victory. For, immediately after independence, they learned that their new responsibilities called for the establishment of institutions guaranteeing the continued existence of law and order in their societies ; for the creation and development of a sense of peoplehood among the diverse tribal groups over whom previously the colonialist giants ruled ; and, finally, for the construction of technological foundations on which economic, social, cultural, and political facilities had to be built, if the defeated Goliaths were to be kept at bay⁽¹⁾

Gambia, Africa's smallest state, came into existence in 1965, almost four years after the year which is now commonly called Africa's year. Though a latecomer in the ranks of African independent states, this small West African state is the microcosm of the total condition of the developing countries. In fact, this little country personifies the blunder of a colonial power ; that is, she is the absurd result of the colonial feuds of the European powers, particularly France and Britain.

Historical and geographical circumstances seemingly have conspired to make Gambia a struggling state in search of viability. Resting on the bosom of Senegal, Gambia occupies a territory of 4,000 square miles, and her population, as of the 1963 census, does not yet reach 400,000. This country's source of revenue is groundnut (or peanut), which is the cash crop grown by almost 90% of the population. Unlike her distant neighbors, say Zaire and Ghana. Gambia does not have any valuable mineral resources. In the

(1) Arnold Rivkin, *Nations by Design* (Garden City : Doubleday, 1967;), pp. 1-7.

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mid-fifties, the colonial economic experts banked heavily on the ilminite production, hoping that Gambia's economic woes would be once and for all done away with by such a gold mine. Unfortunately such a dream quickly faded away, once those investors turned their backs away from the Gambia. The British colonialists who were running the Gambia at the time became disillusioned, for previous efforts and time were fruitlessly expended on poultry, fisheries, and timber schemes (2). To the average British colonial official, Gambia was just a hopeless case.

This became more and more widely expressed when the wind of change began to sweep across the African continent. For, since every African colony was demanding independence, many thought that Gambia would join the bandwagon. Many British officials as well as some Gambians, however, felt that independence was unsuited for this little country simply because of the scarcity of resources and the unviability of the territory. Those who held this view argued quite strongly and persuasively that an independent Gambia was a bad investment and that Gambians were gambling with their lives by choosing such a disastrous course (independence(3)).

Well, the train of events decided otherwise, and today Gambians are among those marching soldiers of the Third World who are fighting a war, not against other human beings, but against time and underdevelopment. Faced with the question of survival in an international system whose older members have perfected both the techniques of power and the techniques for survival, this little country is now determinedly struggling to carve a place for itself in the international system dominated by nuclear giants.

Gambia's struggle for viability is based on three assumptions. First, there is the fear that any manifestation of inviability compromises, if not destroys, the personality of a state. Second, in the language of Karl Deutsch, the Gambian leadership assumes that Gambia's dignity would be tampered with in the realm of international relations if she does not prove her viability and self-sufficiency (4). And, finally, Gambian leaders also assume that failure to meet the economic and social demands of their internal clientele would lead to breakdown and chaos.

(2) Harry Gailey discusses these schemes in his *A History of the Gambja* (New York : Frederick Praeger, 1965; , pp. 142-153.

(3) "Gambia : A Gamble ?" *Venture*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (March, 1965; , pp. 11-12.

(4) Karl Deutsch, in his *Nerves of Government*, defines dignity as the ability to use one's personal ty. See pp. 131-132 for the application of this to the state's behavior. (New York : The Free Press, 1966).

With such an understanding, one can then proceed to examine the various strategies for survival used by the Gambian ruling elites to buttress their state's position vis-a-vis other states. In this respect, I would be inclined to say that this mini-state has for the past eight years pursued policies consciously designed to enhance the survival capabilities of both the regime and the state.

The first and perhaps the most important strategy is the one that seeks to create at home a political situation which encourages compromise or co-optation. This is to say, the politics of non-coercion or cooptation are used to keep the regime on solid ground. Reading clearly the signs in the dangerous elements which pose serious threats to the regime. Rather than set up a dictatorship of the rural areas, which by the way is numerically possible, President Jawara seeks to bring into his cabinet people from the highly influential urbanites (most of whom are Wolof by language) (5).

Such a strategy is rational and rewarding, for it creates the necessary *modus vivendi*, from which the other strategies flow. That is, by coopting or winning over elites from potentially dangerous areas, the regime avoids the possible booby traps on the home front. But I would hasten to add that, though the ethnic arithmetic may give rise to a working power equation sooner or later one of the numbers contributing to the power question may lose its value, and thereby create a breakdown. At any rate, however, such a development has not yet taken place in the Gambia. And, until such a situation arises, we can hold on to the arguments advanced above.

The second strategy is Gambia's utilization of the traditional technique of manipulation of the conflicts among big power neighbors by smaller states. In so far as Gambia is concerned, three circles are of significance to her immediate needs. The first deals with the Commonwealth circle ; the second, with the Western circle; and the third, with the African circle. The Commonwealth circle is important to the Gambia for two reasons: first, there is the financial aid from Britain, and we must remember that when the Gambian leaders decided in 1964 that they too wanted to join the club of independent states, the British government promised to help in the balancing of the Gambian budget. In fact, the British contributed heavily to the development chest of the Gambia during the 1967/71 period. The British government has also assisted the Gambia to meet her 1971/74 development program.

(5) These political alignments are discussed lengthily in my Ph. D. dissertation on *Political Parties and National Integration in the Gambia* (University of Virginia, 1972).

During this period the British government gave L 2 million interest free loan to the Gambia (6).

Though the Gambia has accepted the generous offers of help from the British government, her leaders have tried to minimize dependency. In 1967 Dr. D. K. Jawara wrote an article for the *New Commonwealth*, in which he stressed the Gambia's desire to be viable. Indeed, Jawara prided himself with the successful balancing of the Gambian budget in 1967 (7). This was a big psychological boost, for the Gambian quest for viability made it necessary. The Gambian leaders believe that, apart from the need to maintain friendly ties with the old "Mother Country", there is the need to remind the Senegalese rulers that Gambia is, after all, different from Senegal, since Gambians still cherish the political-cultural similarities of the Commonwealth peoples.

The Gambian leaders have demonstrated this in their diplomatic ventures abroad. The recent State Visits of President Jawara to Nigeria and Sierra Leone and the return visits of leaders of these countries have accentuated this Gambian position (8). In his speech at the Sierra Leone Parliament, Dr. Jawara dwelled on the historical connections in politics, administration, trade and migrations between Gambia and Sierra Leone.

The second reason why the Gambia has joined the Commonwealth is because the technical knowledge of the Commonwealth members would be at Gambia's disposal. Recently, Mr. I. M. Garba Jahumpa, the present Minister of Finance, restated the Gambia's belief that good would come out of the Commonwealth (9). This statement was made after he had returned from a Commonwealth conference. He revealed that in the New Commonwealth Education Study Fellowship Scheme, which would replace the Ten-Year old Commonwealth Education Bursary Scheme, the Gambia with other Commonwealth countries would enjoy better educational facilities ranging from three months to three years. He emphasized that aid was forthcoming in the area of book development and literacy (10).

Whether this is a realistic appraisal of the relationship and the benefits it offers, only time will tell. But one thing seems to be clear ; that is, the

(6) *The Gambja News Bulletin* May, 13, 1971;, p. 1.

(7) Dr. D. K. Jawara, "Gambia", *New Commonwealth*, No. 10 (1967;, p. 457.

(8) See *Gambjan News Bulletin*, Feb. 20, 1971 ; Jan. 27, 1973.

(9) See "The Gambia Will Benefit from the Commonwealth", *Gambja News Bulletin*, March 13, 197x, p. 1.

(10) *Gambjan News Bulletin* (March 13, 1971).

Gambian leaders are capitalizing on Gambia's Commonwealth membership to distinguish her more and more from Senegal.

The development of closer ties with the Commonwealth West African states has given rise to close personal friendship between the Gambian leader and his counterparts in these other Commonwealth countries. Of particular significance is the friendship between Dr. Jawara and General Gowan. In fact, Dr. Jawara's unflagging support for the General's campaign against Biafra has been construed by many suspicious critics as a way of winning support from Nigeria in any future confrontation between Gambia and her Francophonic neighbor, Senegal.

But, if this is the hope of the Gambian rulers, the utterances of Gowan on the subject have shelved the matter. The two states, Gambia and Senegal, *West Africa* reported Gowan saying, must deal with their own problems(11). Yet, these statements do not end the speculation and Gambian leaders bank heavily on Commonwealth support in case of emergency on the African front:

This takes us to the next circle, the Western circle. The Gambian strategy is that Gambia's economic insignificance, at least in the eyes of the Western nations, should not deter Gambians from operating in a prudent manner in the international system. Faced with an ideological struggle between the East and the West, the Gambian leaders stick to their policy of supporting the Western Power they know best. This is to say that they prefer old ways, old ties, and old relationships to uncertainties inherent in any shift from one camp to the other.

But, here again, there may be other considerations. This writer will venture to say that Gambia's operations within the Western circle are based on two important assumptions. First, that the Gambia, by courting the Western states and their Asian allies, can more and more validate her claim as an independent state ; and by hoping that Western countries would be similarly convinced, Gambian elites therefore expect support and assistance from these countries whenever their integrity is in jeopardy. Second, fearing the wrath of the West as well as that of the conservative African states, the Gambian leadership prefers the label of "progressive moderate" to that of an "African radical".

With respect to the two assumptions enumerated above, the following deserve our consideration : (1) how does Gambia pursue this policy ; (2) what

(11) *West Africa* is the London-based monthly that deals with issues about the western part of Africa.

results, if any, has she gained ; and, (3) what are the effects and implications of such a policy on Gambia's viability ?

The Gambia pursues this policy by identifying with Western states or other Western allies on certain issues which are of crucial importance to the Western states or their allies. For example, when the Western nations, especially the U.S.A., fought tooth-and-nail against the arrival of Mao's representatives at the United Nations, Gambia joined the fight by actively lobbying against the pro-Perking group.

There were, however, other factors propelling Gambia towards an anti-Peking direction, and among these is the fact that the Nationalist Chinese close allies of the U.S.A. have been working miracles in the Gambian rice fields. And, since the fruits of their labors in the Gambia increased the Gambian government's domestic position, many a Gambian politician found it inconceivable to oppose the Nationalist Chinese in the U.N. debates. This Pro-Taipéh policy of the Gambia government has persisted right up to the present moment. Recently, the Taiwan government came to the rescue of their Gambian allies who were recovering from a painful drought. The Nationalist Chinese gave L 8,000 (32,000 Gambian Dalasis)(12) to the Gambian government for this purpose.

Coming to the results of the Gambian policy towards the West, one finds that they are largely, and certainly, limited. Gambia undoubtedly has received some aid from the West, but not as much as she would have liked. Despite this limitation on the aid, her policy towards the West and the peripheral Western states, like Sweden, has made it possible for her to host thousands of tourists from Scandinavia(13). Indeed, new faces from Western Europe are going to be seen in the Gambia, once the German and British tourist agencies begin to operate(14).

Tourism, therefore, is a result of this Gambian courtship of the West, and the effects of tourism on the Gambian economy are by no means insignificant. Many Scandinavians are now frequenting the Gambia ; some are engaged in tourist businesses in the country ; and many more are beginning to invite and host Gambian students in Scandinavia. All these are the effects of the Gambian policy towards the West, and they are going to give rise to many more effects of which only time can tell.

(12) *Gambja News Bulletin* (March 29, 1973).

(13) See *The Gambja News Bulletin*, June 27, 1971.

(14) *Africa Briefing International*, September 22, 1973.

But another question still persists : what are the implications of this policy for Gambian viability ? Well, the implications are many and conflicting. First of all, the Gambian ruling elites believe that their hob-nobbing with the West does help them in their quest for the collective legitimization of their country's status in the international system. In searching for answers to their viability problem, Gambian leaders feel that the West may grant them both the financial and psychological blessings necessary for their viability. The encouragement of Western capital through the granting of tax investment concessions is one of the many ways by which the ruling elites hope to enhance their extractive capabilities.

This may sound contradictory, but the rationale for such a policy is that the flow of foreign capital into a developing area provides opportunities which would be non-existent otherwise. The Gambian leaders are ready to lecture anyone who has patience to listen on the economics of tourism, and their recent efforts to advertise and sell the Gambia as a holiday resort only confirm my assertion.

But what other implications does the Gambian policy have for the viability issue ? Here, we can argue that Gambian leaders believe that their policy towards tourism and other kindred matters will help in their drive to diversify the country's economy. To these men, anything that helps in the transformation of the Gambian economic system from a monocultural to a diversified economy is worthy of testing.

Yet, the viability problem does not rest entirely on the Gambian economy ; it also depends on the African power distribution. Gambia is interested in a power equation which will remove any lingering doubt her integrity as a subsystem in the African system of states(15). Fearful of Senegalese intentions, Gambian leaders wish to operate within the African circle in the most prudent manner.

This policy is consciously designed to enhance the viability of the Gambia as a state. Unwilling to listen to any suggestions of pro-federalist elements in Gambia and Senegal, the Gambian leaders try to steer a middle course between the conservative camp and the radical group. I guess this

(15) This point was reiterated by President Jawara when he addressed the first Guinean Ambassador, Monsieur Boubakar Kassory Bangoura. The President said that the Gambia "attaches paramount importance to the respect for the territorial integrity of every member state of the United Nations ... be they near or far". *Gambja News Bulletin* (June 22, 1971 ; p. 1

was why President Jawara told a Western correspondent early in the post-independence period that he is a “progressive modernate”.

This ambiguous definition of his political position has been a blessing rather than a wrath for President Jawara. He has used his political shrewdness along with his country's smallness to carve a special place for himself in the African continent. Dr. Jawara clearly does not have the dominating personality of a Kwame Nkrumah, and indeed a tiny fraction of the African people would suspect him of nursing any notion about ruling or dominating Africa. For this reason, Gambia's Jawara or Jawara's Gambia fares well within the African continent.

It is this shrewdness of the Gambian leader that makes him the target of criticism from Gambians who believe in a more militant, if not radical position. But it is this same shrewdness that makes many Senegalese diplomats concede their inability to stampede Gambia into accepting a federation.

To illustrate this point, I have to cite examples from the African system itself. Let us take the Portuguese invasion of Guinea, and see how the Gambian regime responded to this crisis. For those who know little or nothing about the relationship between Guinea and Senegal, a few introductory words would be sufficient.

Guinea and Senegal were part of the French colonial community, but in 1958, when DeGaulle gave a choice of independence to the African colonies, only Guinea opted for it. Since that time, Guinea has been looked upon by other Franco-*phonic* African states as the political leper of their community. The revolutionary rhetoric and actions of Sekou Toure became more and more distasteful, particularly to the Senegalese ruling elites. When the Portuguese invasion of Guinea fell to the ground, Sekou Toure demanded the repatriation of all Guinean counter-revolutionaries living in Senegal(16). To this demand, President Senghor of Senegal gave a deaf ear. This strained the relationship between the two countries ; and, as a result of this uneasy relationship, it became not very common to hear, over the radio stations of both countries, propagandistic vituperations directed against each other.

Here one may ask the question : where does Gambia fit into this matrix? This is the question that I seek to answer, hoping that it will illustrate the point I have raised earlier. The Gambian leaders capitalized on the diffe-

(16) For details in the role of the Gambia in this crisis, see *The Gambja News Bulletin* (Nov. 22, 1970) ; “Gambia-Guinea Joint Communiqué”, *The Gambja News Bulletin* (D (December 5, 1970) ; *Gambja News Bulletin* (December 3, 1970).

rences between these two powerful neighbors because they felt that this is one of the classical ways of maximizing gains, especially when the issue of survival is pressing. The Gambian leaders think that their cultivation of good ties with Guinea will serve as an effective leverage in their dealings with Senegal.

In fact, when the Portuguese invasion of Guinean territory took place, President Jawara expressed his strong support for President Toure ; and, again, when the security forces in the Gambia captured about 38 anti-Toure Guineans, the Gambian government cooperated fully with the Guinean establishment(17). One result of this crisis was Guinea's decision to open a diplomatic mission in the Gambia. The Guinean mission is now in operation and Toure's regime has offered to help the Gambia, although presently Guinea's ability to help is very limited.

Gambian leaders, one can argue, are trying to play traditional power politics to survive in the African international system. Unprepared to join a Senegambian fraternity, these leaders now seek ways to buttress their positions, both locally and internationally. Locally, they hope to be able to appeal to the people by stressing their Gambianess, that is, the Anglo-African admixture in their psycho-cultural make-up, and by pointing out the need for closer cooperation among the ethnic groups in what is Gambia today.

On the international level, however, they harp on their Commonwealth membership, whenever the question of Sene-Gambia emerges ; and in the great debate over ideological beliefs, they disown any interest in radicalism, but at the same time, they deny any links with conservatism. Internationally, the slogan of progressive moderation seems to be the guiding star to the Gambian ship of state.

In conclusion, therefore, we hope to reemphasize the fact that Gambia recognized the limitations both of her size and of her resources, and, for this reason, she has developed specific strategies for survival in the international system. Sensitive to the international system, Gambia has tried to establish relationships with other countries in the hope of enhancing her survival capabilities. But, whether this system of self-evaluation and self-protection will continue to pay big dividends, only time will tell.

(17) *The Gambian News Bulletin* (December 5, 1970) pp. 1-3.