

The Army Coup of 22nd July 1994 in the Gambia.

Dawda Ceesay

Institution: Pan African University of Governance,
Humanities and Social Sciences,
University of Yaounde II, Cameroon.

Abstract: *Military coups in Africa took a violent shape in many African countries after independence. The countries that fought for political and economic freedom from foreign domination became infected with so many internal political issues. While it will be quite difficult to put all the causes of a military coup in one basket, some predominant factors leading to so many coup d'états in Africa are the Failure of some African governments to meet the expectations of their citizens, bad governance, and mismanagement of public resources, overstay in power by elected presidents and of course the influence of neocolonialism in Africa. Thus, the 1994 coup d'états in The Gambia was also waged to topple the President Jawara-led administration based on some of the above symptoms found in many African countries.*

Keyword: Coup d'états, Army, The Gambia, overthrow, July 1994.

Introduction

This essay is intended to closely study the July 22nd, 1994, military coup in The Gambia. The essay shall outline a brief account of the happening and the boiling stage of the coup, the factors leading to the coup and why it succeeded, and the factors leading to the division in the junta upon success.

Military coups in Africa took a violent shape in many African countries after independence. The countries that fought for political and economic freedom from foreign domination became infected with so many internal political issues. While it will be quite difficult to put all the causes of a military coup in one basket, some predominant factors leading to so many coup d'états in Africa are the Failure of some African governments to meet the expectations of their citizens, bad governance, and mismanagement of public resources, overstay in power by elected presidents and of course the influence of neocolonialism in Africa. Thus, the 1994 coup d'état in The Gambia was also waged to topple the President Jawara-led administration based on some of the above symptoms found in many African countries.

A brief account of the 1994 military coup in The Gambia.

The July 22nd, 1994 coup in The Gambia is described as a bloodless coup that ultimately resulted in the first change of government since the country's independence in 1965. The coup is described as such because the junior officers of the junta were able to overthrow the government of Sir Dawda without any bloodshed.¹

According to Wiseman, J. A. (1996), The Gambia, a small West African state experience a successful change of government through military intervention on July 22nd, 1994, for the first time since her independence from Britain. The change was pioneered by a group of young soldiers from the Gambia National Army (GNA), who successfully overthrew the long-established government of Sir Dawda Jawara, who led The Gambia to independence and had ruled the country since that time. Jawara's long reign of the leadership of The Gambia was suddenly brought to an end by the junior officers, headed by Lieutenant Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh. "Before the coup, Jawara had enjoyed the distinction of being the very last of that generation of African leaders who had led their countries to independence in the 1960s to remain in power. Since independence, the Gambian political system had exhibited a level of continuity which was unique in the region." For the whole of that period, while Jawara was president, The Gambia had enjoyed the fruits and bounties of multiparty politics, where every party was given the room and equal chances to contest in elections in the country, although despite the continuous contests and tights at elections, the People's Progressive Party (PPP) under the leadership of Jawara, had always been in control of the government for a period of over 30 years before the successful coup in 1994. Consequently, while in power the government of Sir Dawda had promoted the welfare and provision of certain human and civil rights for the citizens of The Gambia, which had obviously earned him international recognition. The country had been well stabilized and peaceful before its stability was interrupted in 1981 by Kukoi Samba Sanyang, who overthrew the Jawara's government while he (Jawara) was away in London. As a consequence of that, the Senegambia Confederation of 1982 to 1989 came into existence. At

¹ Momodou Loum (2002) Bad governance and democratic failure: A look at Gambia's 1994 coup, Civil Wars, 5:1, 145-174, DOI: 10.1080/13698240208402498

that time, there was no standing army in The Gambia, all that was available for security was the paramilitary Field force. Therefore, the Senegalese Army was sent to The Gambia, to restore peace and reinstate Jawara's government.²

Thus, at the time of the military coup on July 22nd, 1994, The Gambia was almost an exemplary state in the entire region, for its continuous multiparty system of governance and respect for democracy. And during that time, the regional trend in Africa was massively changing from the dominance of authoritarianism to a democratized system of government, but the negative side of the expected winds blew for The Gambia, as it witnessed a change from a multiparty system of governance to a military rule.³

On July 22nd, 1994 the junior officers of the Gambia National Army, in the composition of Lieutenant Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh (as the leader), Lieutenant Sana Sabally, Lieutenant Sadibou Hydara, Lieutenant Edward Singateh, and Lieutenant Yankuba Touray, took control of major installations such as the airport, and the radio station, as part of their plans to take control of the government centers in Banjul, the capital city.⁴ According to Sabally, S. (2019), in his testimony at the Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparation Commission (TRRC), it was part of their plans to have left one of their members at Farafeni Barracks (Yankuba Touray), so that he could delay the departure of any possible reinforcement from that camp.⁵

“ President Jawara and several of his senior government colleagues, including Vice-President

Saihou Sabally, boarded the ship, from where Jawara appealed to the rebellious troops to return to barracks. When this appeal was rejected by the rebels Jawara requested the assistance of the US marines to crush the coup. The US government turned down the request for direct intervention but allowed the *La Moure County* to transport Jawara and his ministers to safety in Senegal, from where the ousted president moved on to the UK.”⁶

Consequently, the military coup of July 22nd, 1994, could be described as a guardian coup, because the soldiers accused the sitting government of mismanagement of funds, corruption, and inefficiency of service delivery to the citizens, and had promised to return the country to a civilian rule after ousting the former government which was alleged to be failing in its purpose for the wellbeing of its citizens.⁷ A manifestation of that was realized when in 1996, the AFPRC restructured itself and decided to end the military rule for the interest of the civilians. The leader of the junta, Yahya AJJ Jammeh formed his own party and later contested in elections.

Causes of The Coup

Loum, M. (2002) argues that one of the primary causes of the 1994 coup is legitimacy failure. This he argued was because the government failed in its social contract for The Gambian people. Although The Gambia had been praised for its respect for human and civil rights during the Jawara regime, but it has been pointed at for certain failures such as “corruption, bad economic performance, the inability to handle a political crisis and illegal and unconstitutional acts”, and consequently, this had been seen as the main cause of the coup.

The Jawara-led government had also been accused of corruption and embezzlement of public funds and privatizing public fortunes by a few senior government officials. As seen in the case of vice president Sabally, who was charged by The Gambia Cooperative Union for actions of malpractice, resulting in a state of devastation and character assassination of the PPP government, as the media painted a brighter picture of what was going on (the malpractices) in Jawara's government. The announcement of such fraudulence by the media served as an agent of awareness for the civilians and hence any effort to dress such abnormalities would be highly appreciated and welcomed by many Gambians.⁸

² Wiseman, J. A. (1996) Military rule in The Gambia: An interim assessment, *Third World Quarterly*, 17:5, 917-940, DOI: 10.1080/01436599615182

³ Wiseman, J. A. (1996) Military rule in The Gambia: An interim assessment, *Third World Quarterly*, 17:5, 917-940, DOI: 10.1080/01436599615182

⁴ Wiseman, J. A. (1996)

⁵ Sabally, S. (2019). Testimony at the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparation Commission: 24th April 2019.

⁶ Wiseman, J. A. (1996)

⁷ Loum, M. (2002). Bad governance and democratic failure: A look at Gambia's 1994 coup, *Civil Wars*, 5:1, 145-174, DOI: 10.1080/13698240208402498

⁸ Saine, A. (2009). The Paradox of Third Wave Democratization in Africa-The Gambia under APRC Rule 1994-2008

Another major cause of the July 22nd, 1994 coup in The Gambia, as described by Wiseman, J. A. (1996), was the dissatisfaction harbored by some members of the Gambia National Army, due to the appointment of Nigerian army officers as seniors to their Gambian counterparts. The unhappiness of the soldiers soon germinated into great resentment, which ultimately paved the way for the coup as a means to end the unequal treatment meted on the Gambian Army. Added to the above dissatisfaction was the under-provision of suitable living conditions and the failure to allocate better wages and salaries for the soldiers made them very unsatisfied, and motivated to embark on the coup in order to change the government of Jawara. The soldiers, though assumed to be in their fractions and factions, the junior officers were able to implement a very solid gang for the change on July 22nd, 1994. However, the issue of different soldier factions and differences in ranking still followed and disintegrated the newly formed government of Jammeh, which shall be discussed in the subsequent subtopics.

Additionally, on the causes of the July 22nd coup, was the self-purported claim of being deprived and alleged unfair treatment of Jammeh as an individual person. Shortly, before the coup, Jammeh had been so resentful and unhappy for being removed from his post, as Commander of the Presidential Guard. He became unhappy and resentful about the transfer.⁹ Thus, Jammeh's personal anguish coupled with a host of other factors, served as the main catalyst that ignited the occurrence of the coup.

Greed and a highly stimulating hunger for power was also a major cause of the July 22nd military takeover in The Gambia. Soldiers who had wished to become leaders and they are in no way politicians, would think that the simplest way to make their dreams come through was to embark on military intervention in order to oust the incumbent by means of force and establish their own undemocratic government. Such coup plotters are pushed on the basis of their own interest for self-enrichment and privatization of the national properties. In essence, they are of the ultimate desire to be in control of the 'national cake' for their own benefit. Consequently, true replications of such desires were manifested by the military junta after taking over the mantle of leadership in 1994, for a long period of 22 years.¹⁰

Why did the coup succeed?

According to Eddie, C. J. (2000), the 1994 coup in The Gambia succeeded easily as a result of there being little or no resistance from both domestic and external sources at the time of its occurrence. To some people, the coup was welcomed with great enthusiasm, including some PPP supporters. This was due to the long-overstayed government of Jawara, entangled with mismanagement of funds and gross allegations of corruption, and thus the need for such malpractices to come to an end was long awaited by many Gambians.

Besides, the July 22nd coup succeeded because there was no intervention from the Senegalese troops, as was the case in the 1981 coup. During the time of the 1994 coup in The Gambia, the relationship between President Jawara of The Gambia and President Abdou Diouf of Senegal was not as good as in 1981, hence the Senegalese troops did not intervene to restore Jawara's administration.¹¹ Had the Senegalese aided to suppress the coup tensions during the time, perhaps there would not have been a success for the junta.

Moreover, the coup succeeded as planned due to the good tactics and strategies implemented by the junta. According to Sabally, S. (2019) in his testimony at the Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparation Commission, the soldiers had put down great plans during the coup, part of which was the allocation of responsibilities for each member of the core plotters to handle. For example, while moving to the government centers, they controlled the airport, and the radio station, and assigned Yankuba Touray to delay the expected reinforcement of soldiers from Farafeni. Due to good planning, their way to success was smoothly paved.

Factors responsible for the fracas within the junta upon success.

Firstly, the endless sacking and detention of members of the junta upon success, for example, Captains Mamat Omar Cham and Sherriff Samsideen Sarr, Ministers of Information and Tourism and Minister of Trade, Industry, and Employment (respectively) were sacked and imprisoned by the Jammeh led administration, when the administration failed to have confidence in them for still

⁹ Wiseman, J. A. (1996). Military rule in The Gambia: An interim assessment, *Third World Quarterly*, 17:5, 917-940, DOI: 10.1080/01436599615182

¹⁰ Loum, M. (2002). Bad governance and democratic failure: A look at Gambia's 1994 coup, *Civil Wars*, 5:1, 145-174, DOI: 10.1080/13698240208402498

¹¹ Perfect, D. (2008) Politics and Society in The Gambia since Independence: history *Compass* 6/2 (2008): 426-438, 10.1111/j.1478-0542.2008.00513.x

being loyalist to former president Jawara.¹² Despite having been in the struggle all together, things started becoming soar among them, due to suspicions and allegations.

Secondly, in November 1994 the bitterness among the soldiers escalated, as some senior officers alleged to be headed by Basiru Barrow were accused of conspiracy against the new government. Those alleged soldiers the persons of Basirou Barrow, Abdoulie Dot Fall, Gibril Saye, and co-members were arrested and killed.¹³

Thirdly, on January 27th, 1995, another allegation of conspiracy was levied against Vice Chairman Sanna Sabally, and Sadibou Hydar, who were accused of attempting to kill Jammeh. They were captured and tortured, Hydar died and Sabally was sent to prison for 9 years.¹⁴

Another issue that led to the fraction of the junta was the sudden promotion of the coup plotters (junior officers) to the rank of 'Captains', while some senior officers in the Gambia National Army were not promoted. The angry senior army officers were seen as conspirators who wanted to side with Jawara and his officials, and measures were taken against them.¹⁵

Consequently, according to Wiseman, J. A. (1996), in October 1995 Ebou Jallow also fled the country over fear of falling into Jammeh's trap. Some versions hold the view that Jallow had stolen \$3 million from the Central Bank of The Gambia, but Jallow debunked that allegation by saying that he fled to free himself from the foreseeable troubles of Jammeh. Thus, due to the above points, the junta could not have stayed flesh-and-bone. What started as one formidable force of many junior soldiers now became a one-man show, as the regime took the real shape of the predominant African politics – executive dominance and dictatorship.

Conclusion

Consequently, the rise of military rule in The Gambia in 1994 was punctuated with lots of atrocities committed by the soldiers and other civilians who took advantage of the coercive military administration to even commit capital crimes on the population of The Gambia. Overstay in power became very unavoidable due to some divided reasons. Opposition parties were rendered powerless, and freedom of speech was seriously limited. The establishment of the National Intelligence Agency also posed a significant threat to so many civil servants and citizens as well.

References

- David Perfect (2008) Politics and Society in The Gambia since Independence: history Compass 6/2 (2008): 426–438, 10.1111/j.1478-0542.2008.00513.x
- Edie, C. J. (2000). Democracy in The Gambia: Past, Present and Prospects for the Future: Africa Development, Vol. XXV, Nos. 3 & 4, 2000
- Hughes, A. (2000). 'Democratization' under the military in The Gambia: 1994–2000, Commonwealth & Comparative Politics, 38:3, 35-52, DOI: 10.1080/14662040008447825
- Loum, M. (2002). Bad governance and democratic failure: A look at Gambia's 1994 coup, Civil Wars, 5:1, 145-174, DOI: 10.1080/13698240208402498
- Perfect, D. (2010). The Gambia under Yahya Jammeh: An Assessment, The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs, 99:406, 53-63, DOI: [10.1080/00358530903513681](https://doi.org/10.1080/00358530903513681)
- Saine, A. (2009). The Paradox of Third Wave Democratization in Africa-The Gambia under APRC Rule 1994-2008
- Sabally, S. (2019). Testimony at the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparation Commission: 24th April, 2019.
- Wiseman, J. A. (1996). Military rule in The Gambia: An interim assessment, Third World Quarterly, 17:5, 917-940, DOI: 10.1080/01436599615182

¹² Wiseman, J. A. (1996) Military rule in The Gambia: An interim assessment, Third World Quarterly, 17:5, 917-940, DOI: 10.1080/01436599615182

¹³ Sabally, S. (2019) Testimony at the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparation Commission: 24th April, 2019.

¹⁴ Sabally, S. (2019)

¹⁵ Wiseman, J. A. (1996)