

WEST AFRICA EARLY WARNING & EARLY RESPONSE NETWORK

# WARN

*Policy Brief*

DECEMBER 2019

# GAMBIA

**CHALLENGES OF A FRACTURED NATION IN TRANSITION:**

THE IMPERATIVE FOR SOCIAL COHESION  
AND STABILITY IN THE **"NEW GAMBIA"**



**WEST AFRICA NETWORK  
FOR PEACEBUILDING**

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS FOR PEACE

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# Challenges

## of A Fractured Nation in Transition:

### The Imperative for Social Cohesion and Stability in the "New Gambia"

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Presidential Election in December 2016 was a defining moment for democratic consolidation and the foundation for peace and national cohesion in The Gambia. The election ended a 22-year reign of former President Yahya Jammeh and ushered in its first democratic transition since 1994. However, almost three years on, the long-term structural challenges of weak governance institutions, poverty and high youth unemployment, perceived corruption, illiteracy, inequality and proliferation of arms that characterised the previous regimes remain persistent in the country.

The nation is also fractured and fragmented along party, ethnic and regional lines. Political actors, opinion leaders and other interest groups on social media continue to use rhetoric and ethnic sentiments that deepen divisiveness and tensions in the country. In fact, inter-party clashes as well as disputes among the ruling coalition members are increasing as the new administration struggles for stability in governance. The political tensions are spilling over into violence and public disorder as evidenced in the April 2017 and April/May 2018 Parliamentary and Local Elections, respectively. These intra and inter-party frictions and fractures are manifestations of weak institutions and waning public trust in the Government to consistently hold the nation together. In this regard, national cohesion is key to firm up the implementation of reforms, reconciliation and enhance the country's budding democracy.



Figure 1: Maps of The Gambia. Source: [www.mapsofworld.com](http://www.mapsofworld.com)

This policy brief analyses the current political and socio-economic conditions undermining social cohesion and stability in The Gambia. It also highlights key resilient factors, likely scenerios as well as provides recommendations for response and mitigation.

#### 2. PREVAILING POLITICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION

##### 2.1 Continued Political Divide and Violence

The political climate remains fragile in The Gambia. The ongoing political tensions among the members of the ruling Coalition and fragmentation between President Adama Barrow and the United Democratic Party (UDP) pose a threat to The Gambia's nascent democratic transition. Pertinently, the sticking point is the adherence to the coalition's pre-election agreement that called for a

### West Africa Early Warning & EARLY RESPONSE Network (WARN)

The West Africa Early Warning Network (WARN) is an integral part of the West Africa Preventive Peacebuilding Program co-ordinated by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP). Through its WARN Program, WANEP is setting the stage for a civil society-based early warning and response network in Africa with emphasis on human security.

WARN covers the entire Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region.

Since 2002, WANEP entered into an agreement with ECOWAS through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in the framework of capacity building in Conflict Prevention. One of the goals of

this agreement is to interface WARN with the ECOWAS Early Warning Systems to optimize early warning conflict prevention in West Africa. In view of this development, WANEP has been operating a liaison office located at the ECOWAS Secretariat in Abuja, Nigeria since April 2003.

In recognition of the role and achievements of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding in Africa, particularly in West Africa, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations at its substantive session of 2006 granted WANEP Special Consultative Status to the UN. WANEP is therefore mandated to designate official representatives to the United Nations in New York, Geneva and Vienna to further its advocacy and outreach strategies for peace and human security.

transitional government to restore fair democratic processes, reestablish legislative and judicial checks on the authority of the executive branch, and to prepare for fresh presidential election within three years<sup>1</sup>.

However, this Agreement contravenes Section 63 subsection (1) of the 1997 Constitution, which states that the Term of Office of an elected President shall be for a period of five years<sup>2</sup>. Invoking the supremacy of the Constitution, President Barrow is justifying his mandate to stay for five years as opposed to the three years agreed as a coalition.

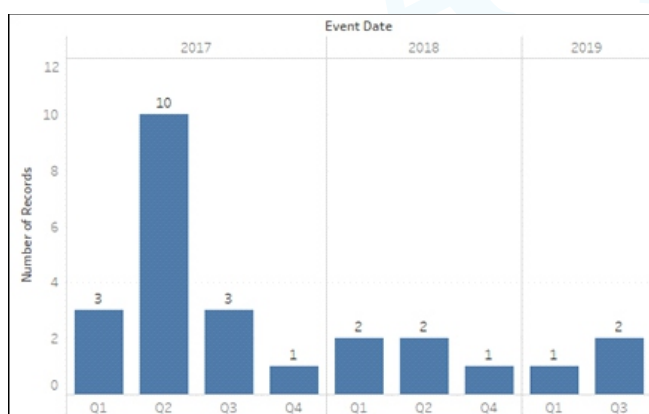


Figure 1: Political Violence in The Gambia from 2017 to November 2019  
Source: Data from ACLED

The political divisions that characterized the former regime of President Jammeh still persist. There has been many flare-ups of violence between the UDP supporters of the coalition Government and loyalists of the opposition Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC). For instance, between January 2017 and November 2019, 25 violent clashes (See figure 1) were recorded, particularly, before, during and after the Parliamentary and Local Government elections in Mankamang Kunda in the Upper River Region, Busumbala in the West Coast Region, and Tallinding in the Kanifing Municipality between supporters of the UDP and the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC). There were also reports of election-related violence between supporters of

the UDP and the Gambia Democratic Congress (GDC) in Jimara, Upper River Region.

President Barrow's intention to hang on to power until 2021 and possibly seek another term is also contributing to the rising political tension and violence in the country. The emergence of "Operation Three Years Jotna (Three Years is Enough)" - a grassroots movement has demanded that President Barrow and the Coalition partners honour the three years coalition agreement made prior to the elections in December 2016. According to the movement, President Barrow was elected based on the agenda of the Coalition. As a result, members of the movement have disclosed their determination to stage a nationwide protest in December 2019 against President Barrow's plans to stay in office for five years. Judging by the headlines of the local tabloids in recent time, it appears that the political climate ahead of the "Three Years Jotna" December 2019 ultimatum does not hold promise of peace. For instance, newspaper captions like "the Jotna" movement protesters stand the risk of being shot", "Army vows to crush Operation Three Years Jotna December protest", "Accusations of tribalism and witch hunting", "Only God can remove me from power", "Gambia: Opposing Barrow means going against God," and many more, suggest that the stakes are high.

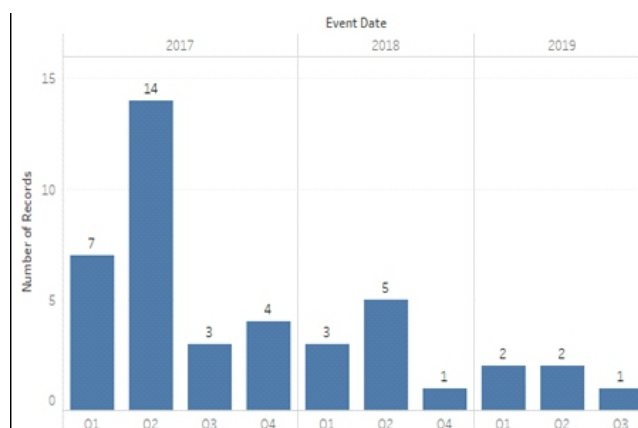


Figure 2: Protests and Demonstrations in The Gambia from January 2017 to November 2019

<sup>1</sup>See: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/516021501649448939/pdf/117432-WP-P163176-OUO-9-Patricia-Geli-authorThe-Gambia-Fragility-Risk-and-Resilience-Assessment-FINAL-2017-06-27.pdf> (Accessed 10/10/2019).

<sup>2</sup>Constitution of The Republic of The Gambia, 1997 Reprinted 2002. Chapter VI The Executive. Part 1: The President. Tenure of Office of President Section 63. (Accessed 12/10/2019).

Figure 2, indicates that already 42 incidents of protest and demonstrations have occurred across the country between January 2017 and November 2019. Most of these protests and demonstrations were not authorized by the Police as prescribed in the Public Order Act (2009). This recent spate of protests, and the methods of Police response, as well as the growing number of Police checkpoints across the country have also increased concerns and fear among the local people, especially, ahead of the anticipated “Three Years Jotna” movement protests in December 2019.

## 2.2 Inter-Ethnic Tensions and Issues of Identity

While the Gambia has long been acclaimed as a model of ethnic pluralism, current ethnic cleavages undermine national social cohesion. The polarisation of ethnic groups along party and regional lines continues to threaten the stability of the country. Notably, the relationship between the current President's majority ethnic group, the Mandinka, relative to one of the ethnic-minority groups, Jola of former President Jammeh, is strained<sup>3</sup>. For instance, the transitional justice programme and the newly launched Truth Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC) are viewed by most Jolas as a “witch-hunt”. In like manner, reforms in the Security Sector are also perceived as a ploy to remove or sideline Jolas enlisted in the armed forces.

In August 2017, it was reported that a handful of soldiers were detained and subsequently dismissed without reasons – the officers claimed their dismissal was predicated on their ethnicity<sup>4</sup>. This is further deepened by the perception of dearth of Jolas in cabinet and other key positions in the current Government<sup>5</sup>. There are also tensions in relation to issues of identity and citizenship – especially in reference to people from a non-Gambian parent. According to the 1997 Constitution, a person born in the country or abroad is presumed to be a citizen if one of their parents is Gambian<sup>6</sup>.

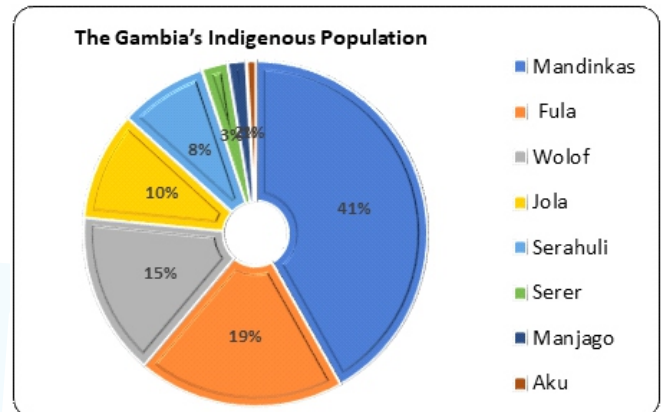


Figure 3: The chart depicts ethnic groups percentages in The Gambia.

Source: [www.rootsgambia.com/ethnic-groups.php](http://www.rootsgambia.com/ethnic-groups.php)

## 2.3 Perceived Corruption and Economic Conditions

Corruption remains a critical structural problem in The Gambia. The country has been ranked 93rd out of 180 countries in the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (CPI) 2018<sup>7</sup>. Even though the economic growth estimated at 4.6 per cent in 2017 from 0.4 per cent in 2016 is below potential, it is projected to accelerate to 5.4 per cent in 2018 and 2019 and 5.2 per cent in 2020<sup>8</sup>. Meanwhile, poverty is widespread with high prices of goods and services, affecting living conditions of the average Gambian. Unemployment, especially among the youth, is also a human security challenge. The national unemployment rate hovers around 30 per cent, with a rate of 45 per cent affecting youth between the ages of 15 and 35<sup>9</sup>. This is a contributing factor to the high youth out-migration in search of better economic opportunities outside the country. Over 8,498 Gambians arrived in Europe in 2017, with many others in Africa along the Central Mediterranean route now opting for voluntary return. Since 2017, nearly 4,000 Gambian returnees have been assisted to resettle in their communities<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>3</sup>Managing President Yahya Jammeh's Exit: "From Consolidated Autocracy to Consolidated Democracy?". WANEP WARN Policy Brief. January 26, 2017. Available at: [www.wanep.org](http://www.wanep.org) (Accessed 11/10/19).

<sup>4</sup>See: <https://newint.org/features/web-exclusive/2018/03/21/division-threatens-gambia> (Accessed 11/10/19).

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>See "National Cohesion is key to Implementing Reforms needed for Stability and to jumpstart the Economy." By Paulin Maurice Toupane, Adja Khadidiatou Faye and Aissatou Konte. Available at: [https://issafrica.org/iss-today/the-gambia-must-heal-its-social-and-political-divisions?utm\\_source=BenchmarkEmail&utm\\_campaign=ISS\\_Today&utm\\_medium=email](https://issafrica.org/iss-today/the-gambia-must-heal-its-social-and-political-divisions?utm_source=BenchmarkEmail&utm_campaign=ISS_Today&utm_medium=email) (Accessed 01/01/19).

<sup>7</sup>Transparency International. Corruption Perception Index 2018. Available at: <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2018> (Accessed on 04/02/19).

<sup>8</sup>The World Bank – The Gambia Overview. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gambia/overview> (Accessed on 04/02/19).

<sup>9</sup>Conflict and Development Analysis – The Gambia. A collaboration of Ministry of Interior of the Republic of The Gambia and West Africa Network for Peacebuilding – The Gambia (WANEP), with support from joint UNDP-DPA Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention and United Nations in The Gambia. 15 June 2018.

<sup>10</sup>Conflict and Development Analysis – The Gambia (updated June 2019). Available at:

[https://www.wanep.org/wanep/files/2019/Aug/FINAL\\_2019\\_Updated\\_CDA\\_Report\\_18\\_July\\_2019.pdf](https://www.wanep.org/wanep/files/2019/Aug/FINAL_2019_Updated_CDA_Report_18_July_2019.pdf) (Accessed 21/10/19).



### 3.0 SOCIAL COHESION: A Challenge and National Imperative

Undoubtedly, the aforementioned socio-economic and political dynamics in The Gambia pose significant threats to social cohesion across the country. Over two decades of the prolonged regime of former President Yahya Jammeh, the socio-political landscape was tinted with anxiety, repression, violence and widespread human rights concerns. This period was also characterized by deep mistrust and confidence deficit which affected the cohesiveness of the social fabric. Thus, strengthening social cohesion is a national imperative in assuaging the emerging threats to stability in The Gambia.



*President Adama Barrow launched the National Development Plan (2018-2021) Credit: Official Twitter of the President of The Gambia*

Even though the current Government has embarked on reforms and adopted a National Development Plan in February 2018, the objective to deliver good governance and accountability, social cohesion and resuscitating the fragile economy is being hindered by the heightened political polarization and inter-party wrangling in the country. The new administration will require inclusive participation from diverse actors and interest groups, sustained consultations, dialogue and consensus-building to maximise impacts of the planned reforms and development agenda. Concerning this, there are also key challenges of availability of adequate resources (including funding and technical capacity) and political will to implement the National Development Plan (2018-2021). Although, regional, continental and other development partners are expected to provide funding to support the

post-crisis and stabilization agenda for The Gambia, a lot of the pledges have not yet been honoured. This may be largely due to the recurrent political wrangling among members of the ruling coalition. The African Union Technical Support to The Gambia (AUTSTG) has also provided technical experts to advise the Government on the constitutional review processes, transitional justice and security sector reforms, democracy and the rule of law. However, the successful stabilization process and democratic reforms in the country largely depends on the political will and cohesion within the coalition Government.

Furthermore, the heightened political tension in the country has also taken ethnic and regional dimensions. The issue of ethnicity is deeply entrenched and visible in the body politic of the country with antecedents in previous election periods. This was evident in a series of spiteful campaign messages by politicians during the December 2016 Presidential election and has continued in the recently conducted Parliamentary and Local Government elections. This contributed to former President Jammeh losing the Mandinkas' support which led to his downfall. The voting pattern of the parliamentary and local council elections also suggests ethno-political divisions in the country. In this regard, the coalition UDP won more seats in the Mandinka predominant settlements (including President Barrow's hometown), the GDC won in areas where there are more Fulanis and Wollofs, while the APRC recorded their victories in the Jola communities including Foni – the homeland of the former President. This is considered to be a by-product of years of neopatrimonialism entrenched by the erstwhile leader which has deepened the division of the country along ethnic lines. A key challenge, therefore, is how to foster social cohesion, stability and national consensus on issues of public interest. This bespeaks the need to promote trust and confidence buildings, dialogues and mediation as responses to the emerging security threats and potentially violent elections in the future.

Another significant challenge to social cohesion in The Gambia is the weak economy. This manifests in economic hardships, growing unemployment among women and youths, illegal migration and urban crimes. This has also dwindled trust between State and citizens owing to weak State capacity to respond to the varied socio-economic needs of populations. The country's tourism sector, for

example, which is the biggest foreign exchange earner and accounts for 20 per cent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP)<sup>11</sup> was largely affected by the global economic downturn, Ebola outbreak in West Africa between 2014 and 2016, and regional security dynamics including surging violent extremism, kidnapping and human trafficking. Given the dividends of the tourism sector to the economy, any effect on it would harm the larger society, breeding frustrations and discontent, especially among the youth. An example of this is the liquidation of Thomas Cook, the British global travel group, in September 2019. For the Gambia that relies so much on tourists from Europe facilitated by Thomas Cook, the impact this will have on the economy will be enormous considering that it accounts for 45 per cent of tourist visiting The Gambia<sup>12</sup>. Last year alone, at least 200,000 tourists visited the Gambia and Thomas Cook carried the largest share of visitors. There are fears that 35 per cent of those working in the industry are likely to lose their jobs if contingency plans are not taken to mitigate the impact of the collapse of Thomas Cook<sup>13</sup>. This is a recipe for social violence such as terrorism, protests, riots and heightened urban crimes, especially in a country where the existing state of intergroup relations in frayed.

Growing tension on mainstream and social media platforms also contributes to waning social cohesion in the country. While the media is playing a key role in increasing participation, inclusivity and awareness among the citizenry, it has also been a source of political vilification, violent communication, fake news and a mobilization source for violent attacks against political opponents. This is aggravating tensions at the community and national levels among political, ethnic and religious groups, which is counterproductive to community and national resilience.

#### 4.0 KEY RESILIENT FACTORS

The foregoing analyses on threats to social cohesion in The Gambia provide the opportunity to highlight the following critical sources of resilience that continue to hold the society together and prevent it from sliding into a full blown conflict.

#### 4.1 Promoting Peace and Social Cohesion:

The setting up of the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparation Commission (TRRC) by an Act of Parliament in January 2017 to establish a historical and reliable record of human rights violations during the tenure of former President Yahya Jammeh (July 1994 – January 2017), is seen as a step forward in the consolidation of national cohesion and reconciliation in The Gambia. Among others, the Commission is mandated to recommend redress for the wrongs committed and abuses suffered as well as provide reparations for victims. In sustaining this effort, there is an urgent need for the setting up of an inclusive and independent national infrastructure for peace to fully implement the recommendations that would be presented by the TRRC.

#### 4.2 Religious Tolerance:

Religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence being promoted by interfaith committees, including the Gambia Christian Council/ Supreme Islamic Council, are designed to promote peace and stability among religions and between sects in the country. Mindful of the multiple diversities within a relatively small population, The Gambia has been able to maintain peaceful coexistence among its people largely due to a number of cultural and social ties between ethnic and faith-based groups. Almost 90 per cent of the population is Sunni Muslim, and close to 9 per cent is Christian, predominantly Roman Catholic<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, inter-religious marriages are common and widely accepted which have helped to mitigate cross-cultural tensions and build a unified sense of national identity.

**4.3 Inter-Party Committee (IPC):** The Inter-Party Committee (IPC), which helps coordinate relationships and serve as a dialogue forum amongst Gambia's political parties, also holds the potential to reinforce stability and social cohesion. The IPC continues to be a respected medium for the resolution of politically motivated conflicts, delivered through engagements and dialogue efforts. The IPC also engages in sensitizing the public and political party members on issues of tribal politics and exclusionary ethnolinguistic practices.

<sup>11</sup>See: <https://www.export.gov/article?id=Gambia-Travel-Tourism> (Accessed 21/10/19).

<sup>12</sup>See: <https://qz.com/africa/1719477/thomas-cooks-collapse-will-devastate-gambias-tourist-industry/> (Accessed 21/10/19).

<sup>13</sup>Ibid

<sup>14</sup>Op. Cit. The Gambia Fragility Risk and Resilience Assessment.

#### 4.4 ECOMIG and International Organisations:

Intergovernmental organisations, especially ECOWAS, AU, UNOWAS have been instrumental in addressing challenges of democratic governance in The Gambia. The continued presence of the Economic Community of West African States Military Intervention in The Gambia (ECOMIG), the AUTSTG and international partners in the country contributes to strengthening and upholding democratic norms, solidifying the gains that have already been made and making further progress more likely. These organisations have also engaged in a lot of preventive diplomacy with the key political actors in and outside the country.

#### 4.5 The Role of Civil Society and other Interest Groups:

Vibrant and well-informed Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), women, youth and other interest groups could contribute to the prevention and mitigation of tensions in the country. While CSOs in The Gambia grapple with finding unified voices around the key issues, a number of them have over the years worked extensively to engage various stakeholders and played critical roles in creating and sustaining various platforms to promote peace, reconciliation and national cohesion. In this regard, WANEP as a key CSO has made significant contributions through capacity building in community early warning and response, dialogue and mediation for both state and non-state actors. It has also provided extensive analysis to inform policy and decision-making on emerging conflict trends particularly at Track II and Track III levels. WANEP also leads a coalition of CSOs that monitors election, governance and human rights, emphasizing the positive and negative aspects of the process and shares its perspectives with key stakeholders. The Gambia Bar Association, the media, women and youth groups also continue to be constructive and provide checks and balances through their engagements with the transition processes.

**4.6 'Seyfo (Chiefs) and Alkalos':** These are Community and Village Heads who are well respected within society and among other duties have the responsibility to mediate community conflicts. With their knowledge on the norms and traditions of the people, they are a credible resources for conflict prevention and social cohesion.

#### 5.0 SCENARIOS

As the political dynamics continue to unfold and as the Government is almost in its third year in office amid obvious challenges, the following scenarios are envisaged:

##### (a) Best-Case Scenario (Likely)

The Government leverages on the international community, ECOWAS, AU and UNOWAS to engage key political actors, CSOs, the media and other interest groups to facilitate a constructive national conversation on the political direction of the country. This would not only douse the rising political and ethnic tensions in The Gambia, but also create space for inter-community dialogue, inclusivity as well as strengthen social cohesion. These dialogue processes would also diffuse plans for nationwide protests and demonstrations by the "Operation Three Years Jotna" movement in line with the end of the third year of the transition Government as stipulated in the Coalition Party Agreement (December 2016). Another outcome would be the promotion of peace and stability as a shared responsibility and every stakeholder in the country and the diaspora is instrumental in helping to resolve tensions before they escalate to public disorder and full-blown conflict.

##### (b) Middle-Case Scenario (Very Likely)

Irrespective of pressures from the 2016 election coalition members and the "Operation Three Years Jotna" movement, President Barrow maintains his position and intention to abide by the five years mandate enshrined in the 1997 Constitution. This further strained relationships among coalition partners, leading to protests mainly within the strongholds of the UDP resulting in violence and public disorder. This situation provides a strong incentive for the ruling Government to drive the constitutional and security sector reform processes to protect incumbency rather than promoting democratic tenets, or to maintain the supremacy of the Presidency rather than establishing a robust system of checks and balances. This will create an unpredictable political environment beyond the three years coalition agreement and sets a bad precedent for future political parties contesting for power.

**(c) Worst-Case Scenario (Likely)**

In an event of President Barrow's refusal to adhere to the coalition agreement and complete his first five-year term, it would result in heightened tensions and disagreements, which could lead to further split within the ruling coalition. Granted, a split within the ruling coalition would also weaken President Barrow's chances of a second term of office and make him to explore other possible avenues to enhance his re-election in 2021. One of the scenarios is to make political concessions that could result in building alliance with the main opposition party, Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC) of former President Jammeh. The likely condition that could facilitate this alliance is granting of amnesty to Jammeh and his close associates in exile and within the country. Another scenario is the creation of a new political party that would attract former Jammeh's supporters to bounce back into mainstream political activities in the country. This would have implications for the country's nascent democracy and the reconciliation process. In all of this, protests and demonstrations from political parties and the "Operation Three Years Jotna" movement would intensify with the police and military deployed to restore law and order resulting to running street battles with loss of lives and injuries recorded. ECOWAS and the international community would intervene to mediate to restore normalcy.

**6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

The policy brief suggests the following response options in order to ensure stability and propel growth in the country:

**ECOWAS/AU/UNOWAS and the rest of the International Community**

- ECOWAS and Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs) to ECOMIG, in partnership with AU and UNOWAS should engage key political actors to facilitate dialogue on the political direction for The Gambia;
- International development partners should continue to

provide technical assistance as well as mobilizing adequate funding for national programs to accelerate economic growth in line with the country's development plan.

**Government**

- The Government should adopt a conflict resolving architecture that allows for proper deliberation on key issues affecting the polity and strive to build bipartisan as well as state-citizens consensus;
- The establishment of a national infrastructure for peace is imperative and desirable. To this end, the Government should prioritise and ensure inclusive processes and actions required to create a national peace and social cohesion commission to strengthen national capacities for dialogue and reconciliation across the country;
- The Truth Reconciliation and Reparation Commission (TRRC) should be more open and transparent in implementing its mandates, especially with regard to timeliness, provide reparations for victims, and reintegration as well as acceptance of perpetrators into the community.

**Civil Society Organizations/Traditional and Religious Groups**

- CSOs, traditional and religious leaders should intensify their engagement with political parties and their supporters to exercise restraint, refrain from violence and adopt a conflict resolving approach that allows for deliberations of issues and consensus building towards resolving the political challenges.

**The Media and the Diaspora**

- The media should use their space to promote peace and national cohesion through peace messaging, outreaches, awareness creation and circumspection in their reportage to avoid further escalation of violence.



## 7.0 CONCLUSION

Rising political tensions have security implications on the stability of the country. Public discontent with the current political and socio-economic challenges has triggered violent protests, leading to the destruction of public and private properties. While the responsibility to reunite the country lies squarely with the current Government, a space for dialogue with opposition parties, the “Three years Jotna” movement and other stakeholders is imperative to

rekindle hope and confidence of Gambians within and outside the country. The Government should, therefore, prioritize revitalizing the economy, implementing its National Development Plan (2018-2021), deepening accountability in governance, promoting peace, cohesion and national reconciliation. It is also imperative for political stakeholders in the country to engage in dialogue that would contribute to reducing rising tension, political violence and enhance peace and security.

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