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The Cost of Parliamentary Politics in The Gambia

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Introduction

Since independence in 1965, The Gambia has held periodic multi-party elections. But it had never registered an electoral turnover of power until December 2016 when independent presidential aspirant Adama Barrow, backed by seven opposition political parties, defeated the incumbent, Yahya Jammeh. Following the defeat of Jammeh - whose 22-year dictatorship was characterised by attacks on democratic freedoms - the political environment has become increasingly competitive.

238 candidates contested for the 53 directly elected seats - a further five are appointed by the president - in the April 2017 National Assembly elections. At present, 16 political parties are registered with the country's electoral body, an increase from nine in 2016. This proliferation has happened despite the high cost of registering a political party: 1 million Dalasi (D1,000,000 or \$20,000). But it is not just the cost of registering a political party that has risen sharply. For those contesting for seats in the legislature, the costs involved were high in 2017, and all indications suggest that they will be higher when the next scheduled legislative polls take place in 2022.

Methodology

This research into the costs of politics in The Gambia primarily draws on two sources of information. Desk-based research into secondary documents (including published and unpublished materials, newspaper articles and academic materials), and semi-structured interviews conducted with 14 aspirants who contested in the 2017 National Assembly elections. These included successful first-time aspirants, returning lawmakers and candidates who contested but lost, from the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC), Gambia Democratic Congress (GDC), National Reconciliation Party (NRP), People's Democratic Organization for Independence and Socialism (PDOIS), People's Progressive Party (PPP), and the United Democratic Party (UDP). Five experts from civil society, media, and academia were also interviewed in June and July 2020.

The aim was to understand the political economy of party financing in The Gambia with a specific focus on the cost of running for the National Assembly. Key questions that the interviews sought to find answers to were: how do parties and candidates raise money for electioneering? How do they spend the money raised? What is the cost of running for office in The Gambia? And what are some of the barriers and implications of increased costs for entry into politics?

I. Historical context

The Gambia maintained, albeit without consolidation, multi-party politics inherited from colonial rule. Despite the continued existence of a multi-party system in the post-independence era under Sir Dawda Jawara, the country's first president, the political scene was entirely dominated by his ruling People's Progressive Party (PPP) until 1994 when junior officers of the Gambia National Army took power in a *coup d'état*. The staging of the coup was the moment when men in uniform hijacked the country's political scene and democracy was significantly eroded through the stifling of institutions and suppression of dissent.¹ Just like the decades under Jawara and the PPP, the APRC's time in power saw The Gambia operate ostensibly as a dominant party system, despite the holding of regular elections from 1996.

In The Gambia, like elsewhere in Africa, the creation of representative institutions in the colonial period provided opportunities for Gambian elites to form political parties and mobilise the masses for support. The extension of franchise by the colonial administration to the colony in 1951 marked the beginning of multi-party competition. The emergence of the Protectorate People's Party, which later changed its name to the People's Progressive Party (PPP), and the 1960 constitutional advancement - which established a 34-member legislature, 19 of whom were directly elected - significantly transformed party politics in The Gambia. This extension of the franchise to the protectorate (rural) areas was taken advantage of by the PPP who came to dominate national politics by relying heavily on a strong rural base.

Following independence in 1965, the PPP declared its intention to advance a republican constitution, but it failed to gain public approval when this was put to a referendum, as urban parties formed an alliance to oppose it. However, in 1970, the republican constitution succeeded and on 24 April that year, The Gambia became a presidential republic.

The PPP's control of government largesse, its effective patron client networks and its ability to integrate all ethnic groups within those networks have been cited as reasons for the party's dominance of post-independence politics.² Pre-independence parties faded away as the PPP was able to use patronage and co-optation to weaken them. When new parties did emerge, they struggled to pose a sustained and serious threat to the dominance of the ruling party. In the 1987 parliamentary elections the PPP won 31 of the 35 directly elected seats, with the main opposition National Convention Party (NCP) securing just four. Parties could exist, and new entities were created, but they failed to pose a challenge to the status quo. Within a broader multi-party system existed a dominant party sub-system under both Jawara, and following the coup of 1994, Jammeh.

Under Jammeh, the APRC attempted to cripple and silence all other political parties. The PPP was banned along with other pre-coup parties. Censorship, control of the state media and the use of repressive laws forced parliamentarians to show greater loyalty to the will of the executive than the voter. This gave the APRC leverage in all political contests. APRC's closest political rival, the United Democratic Party (UDP), proved stubborn but its members were regularly harassed and detained without reason.³ In 2015, the Election Amendment Act increased party registration fees to D1 million (US\$20,000) and introduced stringent requirements for political parties that included having to hold a biennial congress, having 10,000 members with at least 1,000 per administrative area, and having to submit yearly audited accounts to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC).

Since Jammeh's departure, active and competitive political participation and a freer environment for political expression have shown signs of emergence in The Gambia. Seven new political parties have been established - the All People's Party (APP), Citizens' Alliance (CA), Gambia For All (GFA), Gambia Action Party (GAP), the Gambia Alliance for National Unity (GANU), National Unity Party (NUP) and the National People's Party (NPP) of President Barrow. But in September 2020, the process of reviewing and drafting a new constitution, that started two years ago and has been undertaken with extensive public participation, was rejected by the National Assembly. MPs close to President Barrow voted against it, preventing it from receiving the three-quarters majority it needed to pass. The draft constitution had the potential to guarantee space for a more vibrant multi-party election process to take place by refashioning entrenched clauses pertaining to electoral laws, media, and sedition provisions which the former government used to bully and disadvantage opposition parties. Proposed changes included the introduction of a quota for female representation, the extension of franchise to diaspora Gambians and the introduction of a two-term limit. Disputes over when the two-term limit for office would be introduced were a major reason for the changes failing to secure the legislative majority required.⁴

II. Current drivers of the cost of parliamentary politics

Gambia's political space was for so long dictated by incumbent political leaders. Whether during the three decades' rule of the PPP government or the military dictatorship of Jammeh, opposition parties were not accorded much room to leverage their right to contest equally with the ruling parties. But the more equal and competitive playing field ushered in by Jammeh's departure is also driving a rise in the cost associated with running for office.

Culture of transactional politics

Except for PDOIS, a party that has engaged more in creating civic consciousness and promoting a participatory political culture, most of The Gambia's political parties are primarily focused on the mass mobilisation of voters during elections. This transactional approach to politics has created a reality where 'doing favours' is the accepted norm. When a National Assembly member does work within their mandate, it is not seen as them doing what they should do, but as doing their constituents a favour, one that is in return

for constituents casting their ballot for that individual. Not all persons interviewed for this study agreed with that characterisation, but several confirmed that in the 2017 campaign voters insisted on being given money to vote for them:

'It was not easy because it is very costly you spend a lot on t-shirts, posters and even physical cash to give people...some people on election day, on their way to the polling station, will stop you and ask you to give them money to go and vote for you.'⁵

This lack of understanding about the role of parliamentarians means that candidates need to spend huge financial capital to convince voters to support them. In the view of one candidate, 'the people have a very wrong perception about politics, that is why for fifty years we are here, nothing is happening seriously because people's understanding of politics is still at a very low end'.⁶ A female parliamentarian interviewed said she was not comfortable handing over cash but acknowledged that other candidates were doing it and that if you do not your constituents will feel left out.⁷

Candidates believe that the more they are financially active in solving people's economic needs, the greater their chances of winning popular support. Political t-shirts are increasingly fashionable in contemporary Gambian politics and can cost thousands of Dalasi. One parliamentarian noted that she spent about D250,000 on t-shirts alone when contesting in 2017.⁸

This 'vote-buying' can also be more indirect. Political parties and candidates spend time and money investing in communities to gain electoral returns. Parties and candidates who invest heavily in community projects or financial support at individual levels are likely to succeed during elections. With rural poverty particularly pronounced in The Gambia, parties and candidates rely on the poor financial conditions of the electorate as a way of securing political support.

For example, the GDC was alleged to have spent millions of Dalasi on community projects in both urban and rural communities before the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2016 and 2017. The timing of these initiatives attracted opposition from those who believe that the main motivation was to convince voters to vote for them during elections. This practice has long-standing roots in The Gambia. During his regime, Jammeh would openly offer money to influential community leaders and individuals who attended his rallies. Such opinion leaders command significant respect within local communities and as such, their views can have significant impacts on voters' decisions.

Even in non-election periods, nearly all the political parties and political aspirants in The Gambia engage in humanitarian gestures of distributing food to select communities. However, parliamentarians interviewed for this study acknowledged that offering financial support to affected families and individuals during disasters is often politically motivated. In the aftermath of a February 2020 market fire in the town of Basse, political figures including President Barrow, UDP leader Ousainou Darboe and the GDC's Mama Kandeh made cash donations to the victims. First the GDC donated D200,000 (US\$4,000), then the UDP gave D400,000 (US\$8,000), before President Barrow offered D2,000,000 (US\$40,000). While there is citizen appreciation for the immediate relief this type of political humanitarianism can provide, it is also remembered during election periods when voters choose who to elect to office.

Weak and underfunded party structures

The Gambia suffers from an inherent lack of organisational party structures. Incumbent political parties have historically been sustained by their access to state resources. But their structural weaknesses have been exposed immediately after they vacate political power. Since the ban imposed on the PPP by the APRC in 1994 was lifted in 2001, it has struggled to contest elections without being part of an alliance. In 2017 it won just two seats in the National Assembly. The APRC won just five seats in the same election, although it held 43 when Jammeh controlled the presidency.

Opposition parties were simply unable to build nationwide structures to compete in the repressive environment created by the APRC. One candidate recalled losing his 2012 constituency election to an APRC opponent who was able to secure significant funds to aid his campaign. These resources enabled him to provide food, drinks, and entertainment for constituents at rallies and to drive around the community in flashy vehicles. But a dominant ruling party, utilising state resources to its electoral advantage, was less of a feature in the 2017 parliamentary poll. In the elections, candidates were often responsible for funding most of their own campaigns, with little or no oversight, or control exercised by the party on whose ticket they stood. As one parliamentarian confirmed:

'I made my own budget with the assistance of my campaign manager. I had the final say on the budget, not the party. It included transportation, to be able to reach out to people, and feeding of the people that were with you.'⁹

All the individuals spoken to for this study described the financial support offered by their party in 2017 as insufficient for fulfilling the financial obligations needed to perfect one's electoral campaign. One parliamentarian noted that the party only contributed about 10% of his total electoral cost. Another said that due to the financial situation of her party, she relied entirely on financial support provided by her family and friends.¹⁰ The Gambia does not have provisions for state funding of political parties.

Table 1 provides some indicative figures of how much political parties gave to their candidates during the 2017 parliamentary election, according to the candidates interviewed. However, this is different from a candidate's total campaign outlay which ranged from between D200,000 and D750,000 for those interviewed for this study. The higher amount is more than a legislator is paid in a year. One respondent explained the following:

'we have membership contribution from executives and individual donors, we have aid that we receive from different places, so this is how the party raise funds. Some are wealthier than the others but our party we normally finance ourselves. If you stand under the banner of a party, they support you a bit, but the rest you go and look for it for yourself'¹¹

Table 1: Political party support for candidates during 2017 parliamentary elections

Political Parties	Average amount given to party candidates (D)
United Democratic Party	D150,000
People's Progressive Party	D50,000
National Reconciliation Party	D80,000
Gambia Democratic Congress	D50,000

In the Gambia's newly liberalised political space, the personal costs of politics for individual aspirants are rising rapidly. For instance, one parliamentarian explained that the cost of his re-election increased from D25,000 in 2012 to D200,000 in 2017; an almost tenfold increase.¹²

Another parliamentarian from rural Gambia recalled spending huge amounts of his own money to win his 2017 parliamentary race.

'Over 90% [of funds raised] was done by myself, though the party supported me financially, morally and in other ways. Family members like my brothers, my friends, especially in the diaspora, helped me raise funds. I spent close to D750,000 (\$15,000), 30% of which came from family and friends.'¹³

His estimated expenditure was the highest of all the candidates interviewed. It also shows that the costs can be as high in rural constituencies as they are in urban areas. In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that costs of politics for candidates in rural communities is higher than those in the urban areas. Whilst urban politicians can easily access their communities, those in rural areas travel long distances for rallies; this increases costs. MPs often use their own funds to fuel vehicles and return to their constituencies, where they are regularly expected to cover the costs of funerals for prominent residents. Furthermore, they are expected to make more face-to-face visits than urban counterparts who can more easily keep in touch with their constituents through traditional and social media.

The candidate selection process in The Gambia also contributes to the costs of politics even if most parties do not have broad-based primary processes. Political parties do not often issue financial support to candidates during primaries; any funds they provide is given to the selected candidate. Individuals are therefore left to raise the funds necessary to convince local powerbrokers that they are the most electable candidate. Currently a candidate's financial status does not play a significant role in determining whether they should be selected or not. But given the increased need for personal funds to run for elected office in The Gambia, it may yet become a more important factor.

Campaign costs

The style of campaign adopted by candidates and the size of the constituency can determine how much a candidate spends during the campaign. Rallies are considered more expensive when compared with door-to-door campaigns, but they also have the potential of addressing a wider audience. One campaign manager described how his candidate's strategy during the 2017 parliamentary election was to spend the bulk of funds 'on the transportation and food stuff during rallies. No amount of money was allocated to the agents and campaign manager and team.'¹⁴

But for many, the transactional nature of politics even extends to the candidate's own support team. Campaign 'volunteers' expect the candidate to provide them with transportation, food and drinks during rallies, and phone credit. Candidates are expected to do their best to energise them and keep them actively engaged in the campaign until election day has been concluded. One current parliamentarian explained:

'sometimes you buy sugar and give to the boys and pay for their "attaya" [tea] and buy for the old women. We hire cars to transport them since I am against given money. I paid almost D20,000 a week for six weeks just to energise the campaign team.'¹⁵

Social obligations

The costs of politics do not end with winning a seat in the National Assembly. Those who are elected are socially obliged to respond to the financial demands of constituency members throughout their five-year tenure. Some candidates even said that occupying the seat was more of a burden rather than a reward, as the social responsibilities sometimes overwhelm them. Although their position increases their societal status, the higher status brings higher expectations from constituents. Some parliamentarians avoid going to their constituency as a result, because they know that when they do, they will be required to make substantive financial offerings. This expectation has not only put a financial burden on parliamentarians but has the

potential to disconnect them from voters, particularly in the rural areas, as they avoid regular visits.

At social events such as naming ceremonies, weddings and funerals, parliamentarians are expected to give out cash and gifts especially to those that strongly assisted them in getting elected. As one parliamentarian explained, 'each time I go back to my rural constituency, I go with at least D25,000 (\$500)'.¹⁶ Another noted that when he reaches his home in the constituency, he will find people sitting outside waiting for him.

At the time this research was conducted, MPs in The Gambia received a monthly salary of around D50,000 (\$1,000) that was supplemented by sitting allowances and travel allowances. This was in addition to the monthly constituency development fund allowance of about D8,000 (\$150) that National Assembly members are provided with for use in community projects in their constituency. For instance, the MP for Banjul South noted that she used the money to run a small community library she started for kids in her constituency. MPs understand such interactions are critical if they want to stand for election again in the future.

The limits of money

A candidate's social capital in a community can reduce the monetary costs of seeking political office. This can be generated by the work an aspirant does in his or her constituency, or draw on the legacy of their parents or family members in the same environment. Although the power of the PPP and APRC political machinery was often still strong enough to overcome this social capital, there have been instances where even the dominant political party of the time lost seats to the opposition because of those candidates' standing in the community. In 2012, APRC candidates were defeated in both Basse and Kombo Central constituencies by independent candidates Muhammed Magasi and Buba Ayi Sanneh respectively. In the case of Kombo Central, in addition to division within the APRC at the constituency level over the party's choice of candidate,¹⁷ Sanneh won by actively participating in social events and interacting more with the people of his constituency.

In Jeshwang constituency in the 2017 National Assembly election, it was believed that the APRC candidate had more money than the UDP candidate who won the seat. Key to understanding why the UDP candidate won was community recognition of the extensive development work he had done for the area, which had generated social capital that he could leverage during the election.

In some instances, candidates use the legacies of relatives to canvass electoral support. In 2017, one campaign manager described how his candidate's campaign strategy had leveraged the legacy of his uncle's work in the constituency.

'The campaign process was tedious, but strategic. We travelled the length and breadth of the constituency of 33 villages with different ethnic composition and party affiliation. The election was greatly influenced by the legacy of his uncle who has done politics of development within the constituency, as a parliamentarian. We have reached out to the traditional rulers in the communities to give us their blessing and support.'¹⁸

So, whilst money is an essential component in aiding a successful campaign, social capital can be just as important to a candidate winning an election, with such a relationship being crafted in keeping with a well-established client-patron system. As one MP noted, 'what my grandfather did for our constituency, the parties know that no one will vote against me'.¹⁹ Another remarked that:

'Funds are crucial in the campaign process, but there are other key factors that guarantee winning a seat, in rural constituencies, heritage of the candidate, party affiliation, and his service to the community.'²⁰

Outlook

There is no law that regulates campaign finance in The Gambia. Whilst political parties are required to submit audited financial reports to the IEC, both scrutiny and enforcement is limited. There are no requirements for individual candidates to account for election spending. Even if such requirements did exist, most political parties in The Gambia do not have a proper oversight mechanism to monitor the campaign activity of their candidates, nor are the parties willing to publish their audited accounts.

The ongoing electoral reform process has discussed putting a ceiling on expenditure. But several of the parliamentarians interviewed did not agree with this provision. They argued that since the state is not supporting political actors, it should not put in place any measures to check spending. This has been reflected in wider consultations with political parties around electoral reform in The Gambia. There was vehement opposition expressed to a recent proposal to introduce laws around 'treating' - when an election candidate or their agents offer material incentives for people to vote for them or to abstain from voting.

Considering the prevailing circumstances as well as in response to regulations set by the Electoral Act, calls for state financing of political parties are getting louder in The Gambia. Respondents were generally in favour of the state providing subvention for political parties based on electoral percentages won during previous elections. Whilst this would be financially beneficial to these individual candidates, it is certainly true that the current high costs involved with seeking public office inhibit the participation of youth and women in politics. Just two of the 53 elected members of the National Assembly are women. High costs have the potential to undermine broader public participation in the democratic process.

While there is agreement that the cost of politics is increasing, some respondents argued that the rise in the cost is being driven by political actors who prefer to buy votes rather than trying to win over constituents with a well thought-out manifesto. Given this is unlikely to change, more work must be done to ensure voters are educated about the role of parliamentarians, so that they better understand the implications of their choices.

Summary

Pursuing a political career in The Gambia can be financially intensive. The findings of this study show that the cost of running for a National Assembly seat in The Gambia is high and driven by patronage networks and constituent expectations that extend to a candidate's time in office. The implication of this is that many women and young people are excluded from the process, due to their lack of access to funds or financial backers. The increase in cost may also lead to a situation where elections become money-dominated; a concern as The Gambia seeks to rebuild credible democratic institutions after more than two decades of dictatorship.

Historically, political aspirants in The Gambia often sought to join the ruling party to give themselves the best chance of winning. But this has had a detrimental impact on the development of the country's multi-party democracy. To avoid a scenario where the NPP - the party of President Barrow - is able to exhibit the unequivocal advantage of its predecessors, campaign finance legislation should be introduced to ensure a clear separation between the state and ruling party to avoid diverting state resources for the latter's political gains.

For the most part, partisan politics in The Gambia is not driven by issues or ideological leaning, but by political favours exchanged between voters and candidates that come with increasing cost implications. The relationship between parties and voters must be redefined to make voting based on merit. This will require continuing civic education about the roles and responsibilities of political parties, parliamentarians and the state. The convergence of these, given The Gambia's perpetual dominant party state since independence, needs to be unravelled, if multi-party democracy is to become a contest of ideas and not just financial muscle.

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