Democracy Dialogue Report

Democracy Dialogue held by the Global Youth Innovation Network-Gambia chapter and the Network of Freelance Journalists in Fajara, The Gambia, 4 August 2018

Participants: 111 participants, including young people, academia, media and human rights activists

Introduction

Held on 4 August 2018 at the Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (TANGO) conference hall in Fajara, The Gambia, this dialogue was organised by the Global Youth Innovation Network (GYIN)-Gambia chapter along with the Network of Freelance Journalists (NFJ-The Gambia). It brought together over 100 participants from youth groups, academia, media outlets and human rights activists, among others, around the theme 'Reimagining Democracy – How Should Democracy Work for Gambia?'

The format of the event was intended to engage all participants - speakers and audience alike - in direct and frank discussions on the state of democracy in The Gambia. It was meant to point out what aspects of democracy have failed to work or are failing to work to give Gambians the democratic governance system that they yearn for.

The Gambia's new government was elected on a ticket of freedom, including of the press and of expression, and on the promise to take the country on a "solid path to democracy," as President Adama Barrow stated in his maiden speech at the United Nations General Assembly in 2017.

In this regard, the focus areas of presentation during the event included 'democracy and the media', 'democracy and the state of the economy', 'democracy and security', 'The Gambia we want' and 'democracy, politics and freedom'.

1. **Definition and concept of democracy**

Democracy and freedom

During the presentations, a renowned Member of Parliament and human rights

defender, Honourable Halifa Sallah, said that the fundamental foundation of democracy is for the people and their leaders to determine where power lies. He argued that democracy and freedom are missions and an essential principle in attaining sovereignty as a nation. He added that democracy and freedom is subset of a system that citizens have to evolve in becoming a republic.

Democracy and security

Speaking on democracy and security, the Military Assistant to The Gambia's Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), Colonel Musa Trawally, noted that it is a fact that democracy and security are inextricably linked and thus the absence of one certainly undermines the other. He defined democracy as 'about the people, by the people and for the people', saying the armed and security services are important pillars in the defence of a free society and of its civil basic values.

The role of The Gambia's armed forces, he said, is ever relevant in the collective drive to uphold and strengthen the country's democracy, stating: "Our staff have skills relevant to our security work today and they are selected because of their judgment, impartiality, and integrity and above all love for this country, all of which contribute to a strong ethos within the service."

Democracy and the media

The owner and editor-in-chief of the Monitor Newspaper, Baboucarr Ceesay, asserted

that democracy and the media are indivisible in a modern society. That is why a free press is often called the oxygen of democracy: one cannot survive without the other. He quoted Alexis de Tocqueville during his visit to the United States of America more than 200 years ago, saying: "You can't have real newspapers without democracy, and you can't have democracy without newspapers." According to him, this statement has been proven true in nations all over the world as democracies, established or emerging depend on the consent of an informed citizenry, and the news media are primary sources of the information people need in order to govern themselves.

As Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, wrote in 1787, "The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

Ceesay added that it is indisputable that the media played a very significant role in ending the 22 years of dictatorship in The Gambia in 2016, by informing the public about gross human rights violations and other undemocratic acts. In doing so, he said, the people were able to define the kind of government in place and make decisions, and there is no doubt that the media can play a great role in strengthening the democracy if empowered.

2. **Key problems and issues in our context**

High level of corruption and ineffective governance

Presenting on The Gambia We Want, the country representative of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, Madi Jobarteh, noted that for the past 18 months The Gambia has witnessed instances of high-level corruption, patronage and ineffective government. He said the country can claim to have democracy and enjoy all the free speech, free media, freedom of association and freedom of movement, but this does not translate into tangible and durable social and economic wellbeing for the people. For this to happen, the key word is accountability.

"Any society that encounters such problems simply lacks accountability as The Gambia has law-abiding citizens who pay their taxes effectively and elect representatives to manage their taxes to access better services," he said.

Draconian media laws

Babourcarr Ceesay noted that The Gambian media has since the former regime been appealing in the courts for the repeal of the harsh media laws that hinder journalists, such as the sedition law and its penalties. He also lamented that Gambian journalists lack legal protections and much-needed capacity to play their role in society.

While decrying the lack of resources of journalists to operationalise a standard daily newspaper, he said journalists are not valued by most of the authorities.

3. **Questions and answers**

- Ebrima Sabally, University of The Gambia: Why is it that the armed and security services sometimes fail to live up to their responsibility to protect the rights of the citizenry?

In his response, Colonel Trawally admitted that rights were violated during the past 22 years of the former regime under the leadership of Yahya Jammeh, but, he added, they are taking several actions to reshape and reform the armed forces to nurture democracy in the system.

- Lamin Njie, Youth activist: How does the media stand to challenge the False Information Law?

According to Baboucarr Ceesay, the Gambia Press Union (GPU) has never relented in its efforts to appeal to the government to repeal harsh media laws. He asserted that journalists are not the enemy of the government but should rather be perceived as a partner. The role of journalists is to hold them accountable. "We serve as social glue to the governed and the governors," he said.

- Musa Baldeh, University of The Gambia: What is the media's reaction to the recent presidential allegation that some journalists ask him for money in exchange for writing favourable stories for his government?

Baboucarr Ceesay noted that the GPU is working closely with journalists to inculcate ethical standards that guide their conduct.

4. **Recommendations**

- All presenters recommended that further democracy dialogues be held in all rural regions.
- Youth groups recommended to increase the duration of the forum.
- Journalists asked for more topics on other thematic areas to be discussed.

ONLINE NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS DECMOCRACY DIALOGUE:

The Point newspaper:
'Media, democracy are indefeasible in modern society'
http://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/article/media-democracy-are-indefeasible-in-modern-society

The Standard newspaper:
'Media and democracy are indivisible in modern society'
http://standard.gm/site/2018/08/08/media-and-democracy-are-indivisible-in-modern-society/

The Point newspaper:
99% of Gambians did not think change was attainable
http://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/article/99-of-gambians-did-not-think-change-was-attainable

The Point newspaper:
Gambia has witnessed high level of corruption, ineffectiveness of government
http://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/article/gambia-has-witnessed-high-level-of-corruption-ineffectiveness-of-government

The Point newspaper:
Les Medias et la Démocratie sont Incontournables Dans Toute Société Moderne.
http://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/article/les-medias-et-la-democratie-sont-incontournables-dans-toute-societe-moderne

MAMOS TV:
Gambia's Maiden Democracy Dialogue Successful! - Mamos TV
mamostv.tv/newsDetail/gambias-maiden-democracy-dialogue-successful_1500