AFRICA 01.02.2017 | Bettina Rühl

Born to be free

Former Gambian dictator, Yahya Jammeh, is living in exile. His compatriots' new-found freedom comes at a hefty price

Gambia is home to just under two million people: roughly the population of Vienna. At just 11,000 square kilometres, it is the smallest state on the African mainland. However, the events of recent weeks are significant for the continent as a whole. Massive pressure from neighbouring African states and resistance from Gambia's own population have forced the country's longstanding dictator Yahya Jammeh, who was defeated in recent elections, to stand down as president.

This is the first time that African presidents have forced one of their own out of power. They have broken with a principle that has long held sway in African politics: birds of a feather flock together. However, the image of birds nested in their presidential villas answerable to nobody but themselves is no longer as applicable as it once was. Broad (and creative) protest movements have sprung up across Africa, mobilising those no longer willing to accept the despotic whims of each and every dictator that comes along.

Time to celebrate

Gambians were dancing in the streets after, on 21 January, news broke out that Jammeh had boarded a plane bound for Guinea, to pursue a life in exile. Unconfirmed reports now place him in Equatorial Guinea, some 3,000 kilometres from his homeland. Unlike Guinea, Equatorial Guinea is not a member of the International Criminal Court (ICC), offering Jammeh greater protection from prosecution.

Before his exile, Jammeh had enjoyed 22 years in power following a putsch in 1994 in which he took over Gambia's highest office. Though given to laughable bouts of narcissism, he frequently showed his brutal side. NGOs accuse him and his government of serious human rights violations, including arbitrary detention and the intimidation of

journalists. Among his more outrageous quirks was a belief that he could cure HIV/AIDS. He was repeatedly seen "treating" patients in Gambian hospitals. Anyone who cast doubt on this claim could face punishment.

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In December 2016, the long-established autocrat finally lost a presidential election. He initially conceded defeat to political outsider Adama Barrow, perhaps out of sheer bewilderment. After all, no one had thought the dictator would be defeated after so many years in power, least of all himself. In any case, Barrow won with 45 percent of the votes cast. Jammeh did not likely see his opponent as a threat: prior to his candidature, the 51-year-old Barrow had been a successful property developer who had never held public office. He had been a member and treasurer of the Gambian opposition United Democratic Party (UDP) for a number of years, but only became the opposition's presidential candidate after the arrest of longstanding UDP leader and human rights lawyer Ousainou Darboe in April 2016. Darboe had organised protests after an activist died in police custody; he believed the death suspicious.

A week after the 1 December election, Jammeh changed his mind and declared he would not leave office. He filed an appeal against the election result with Gambia's top court and demanded a rerun.

Tough talking

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a union of 15 countries, initially used diplomacy in an attempt to persuade Jammeh to step down. Acting as ECOWAS' chief mediator, Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari insisted the leader hand over the reins in line with the constitution and the election result. Buhari's harsh tone was unusual, but so were the circumstances. Since 2010, every other transition of power in ECOWAS states (in Guinea, Niger, Senegal, Mali, Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria and most recently Benin) has been peaceful and democratic.

However, Gambia's power-hungry dictator refused to back down in the face of threatened economic sanctions, and several mediation attempts by ECOWAS failed. Instead of making way for his successor, Jammeh had parliament extend his term of office by three months shortly before it was

due to expire, and declared he would only give way following a court ruling. Since Gambia does not have enough judges and is dependent on foreign support, such a ruling wouldn't have come until May 2017 at the earliest.

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Meanwhile, ECOWAS upped the pressure. On 19 January, Senegalese troops crossed the Gambian border. Followers of the elected president, Barrow, took to the streets to celebrate the invasion, joined by Gambia's army chief, Ousman Badjie. Leading members of the Gambian military had earlier declared they did not want to get mixed up in the political conflict. Badjie informed Jammeh his troops would not resist an invasion by neighbouring African countries. Nigerian fighter jets circled the Gambian skies, and Ghanaian troops were on stand-by. ECOWAS was preparing to send an intervention force totalling 7,000 troops: an astonishingly rapid and robust show of strength and determination. A military confrontation appeared inevitable; according to UN figures, around 25,000 people had already fled Gambia by this point.

Meanwhile, on 19 January, Barrow was inaugurated in Senegal. During his campaign, he promised to stand for an independent judiciary, greater democracy and press freedom.

His votes mainly came from younger people and those hit hard by the economic crisis in Gambia - one of the world's poorest countries.

In parallel with the Senegalese invasion, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution authorising ECOWAS to intervene. Secretary-General António Guterres called Barrow that evening to assure him the United Nations (UN) were backing him. However, the UN also indicated it favoured a peaceful solution over military confrontation. As ECOWAS pressed ahead, the UN followed laboriously behind. But ECOWAS then broke off its intervention for one more last ditch mediation attempt, brokered by Mauritania and Guinea. The attempt succeeded, and in the small hours of Saturday morning Jammeh announced he was standing down.

So why the second U-turn? Perhaps the prospect of escaping unpunished, away from the beady eyes of the ICC. Also the huge military pressure

from ECOWAS. In a rare moment of clarity, Jammeh possibly saw his underpowered military would be no match for the combined ECOWAS troops, even with the army's (in this case absent) backing. Arrest by foreign troops probably struck him as a less attractive prospect than escaping scot-free with all his luxury goods and several million freshly stolen bucks. According to his successors under Barrow, Jammeh plundered at least 12 million US dollars (11.2 million euros) from Gambia's central bank between his electoral defeat and his departure into exile. His cars and other luxury goods followed behind in a cargo plane. It is Gambia's population that will feel the loss.



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Bettina Rühl is a freelance journalist based in Nairobi and Cologne who has been writing about Africa for over 20 years. Her reports, which focus on how big political decisions and upheaval on the continent affect ordinary Africans, have been featured on German public TV and radio, as well as in newspapers including the *Berliner Zeitung* and the *Tageszeitung*.