

World Watch Research

Gambia: Background Information

October 2024



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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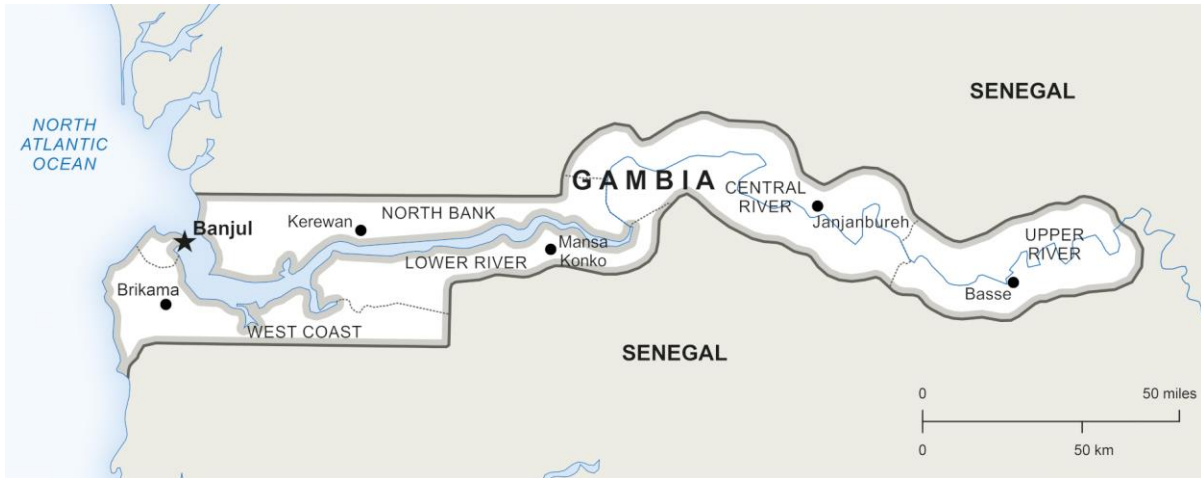
Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

These documents are the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. They include data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD). Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the end of each document under the heading “External links”. These documents may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © Open Doors International.

Map of country



Gambia: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
2,842,000	134,000	4.7

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

Gambia is a small West African state fully surrounded by Senegal except for its Atlantic coastline to the west. The Portuguese arrived at the Gambian coast in 1455 and established a trading post, but in 1618 the Portuguese sold Gambia to the British, effectively making Gambia Great Britain's initial foothold in West Africa. Its present boundary was set up through an agreement between Great Britain and France in 1889. The country became a British protectorate in 1894. (Source: [History World](#), The Gambia, accessed 11 October 2024). English remains the official language, despite statements to the contrary made by the previous president. Banjul is the capital city.

Great Britain accorded Gambia autonomous status in 1963. In 1965 the country became an independent nation. Under the leadership of the People's Progressive Party, Gambia successfully established a democratic parliamentary form of government, and the People's Progressive Party won elections held in 1966, 1972, 1977, 1982, 1987 and 1992. A year after a 1981 coup-attempt, Gambia and Senegal formed a loose confederation and named it Senegambia. The intention was to "integrate their military and security forces; form an economic and monetary union; coordinate their foreign policies and communications; and establish confederal institutions. The larger partner, Senegal, would dominate these institutions, controlling the confederal presidency and two-thirds of the seats in a confederal parliament" ([Britannica](#), Senegambia, accessed 11 October 2022). However, Gambia's increasing concern over its future autonomy and fear of being swallowed up by Senegal led to a dissolution of the confederation in 1989.

On 22 July 1994, Lieutenant Yahya Jammeh conducted a bloodless coup that ousted President Dawda Jawara, who had been democratically elected and had been in power since 1970. Jawara had survived a previous coup-attempt in 1981 with the help of the Senegalese army. Since 1996 the dominant party has been the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction under Yahya Jammeh. Other parties are also active in the country, for instance, the People's Progressive Party.

Jammeh did not return to the barracks with his fellow soldiers as he had promised. Instead, he remained in power until his defeat in the December 2016 elections. He often resorted to the idea of pan-Africanism to maintain the support of the citizens. In 2014, the year of a failed coup while he was abroad, he vowed to drop English as an official language and also [withdrew from British Commonwealth membership](#) saying the country would "never be a member of any neo-colonial institution" (The Telegraph, 9 March 2014). In 2015, Jammeh [declared](#) that the country should be referred to as the Islamic Republic of Gambia: "In line with the country's religious identity and values I proclaim the Gambia as an Islamic state. As Muslims are the majority in the country, Gambia cannot afford to continue the colonial legacy" (The Guardian, 12 December 2015).

After ruling the country for 22 years, Yahya Jammeh lost the presidential election in December 2016. Even though he initially resisted handing over power, pressure from the international community forced him out. In December 2017, he was [officially accused](#) of human rights violations (US Treasury Press Release, 21 December 2017).

Adama Barrow took office in January 2017 and has improved the human rights situation to a certain extent. He vowed to reverse some of the decisions taken by Yahya Jammeh. For example, the country [rejoined](#) the British Commonwealth and also changed the name of the country back from the 'Islamic Republic of The Gambia' to 'Republic of The Gambia' (The Commonwealth, 8 February 2018). Local government elections were held in April and May in 2018 without major incident. In October 2018 the "Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission" was set up to investigate human rights abuses committed during the Jammeh era. These and many other improvements have lifted the country from Freedom House classification of 'not free' to 'partly free' ([Freedom in the World 2022 Gambia and 2023](#)).

In December 2021, Barrow was [re-elected as president](#) with 53% of the vote (BBC News, 6 December 2021). In April 2022, legislative elections were held in the country. President Adama Barrow's National People's Party won 19 of the 53 contested parliamentary seats, overturning the main opposition United Democratic Party's (UDP) majority, however, it fell short of securing the majority needed to govern the country alone (Al-Jazeera, 10 April 2022).

In [April 2023](#), Switzerland's Attorney General indicted Ousman Sonko, Gambia's former interior minister, for crimes against humanity committed under the regime of former authoritarian leader Yahya Jammeh. Sonko is accused of supporting, participating in, and failing to prevent systematic attacks against Jammeh's political opponents. Sonko served as Gambia's interior minister from 2006 to 2016, fleeing to Sweden and then Switzerland, where he applied for asylum. Arrested in Switzerland in January 2017 following a complaint by the Geneva-based legal group TRIAL International, Sonko has been in custody there ever since.

According to the [Freedom in the World 2024 Gambia](#), which covers events from 2023, Gambia experienced notable developments, including the sentencing of the alleged leader of a 2022 coup attempt and the passage of significant legislation such as the Prevention of Torture Act and an anticorruption bill. Additionally, the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry to investigate local government funds sparked controversy, with critics alleging it was timed to influence the May 2023 local elections.

Political and legal landscape

Gambia is a multi-party republic. The president is the head of both the government and the state. It has a unicameral legislative body with 53 members. The Supreme Court is the highest judicial organ in the country. The Constitution also allows Sharia courts to assume jurisdiction over family matters.

Three years after the dramatic fall of long-time strongman Yahya Jammeh a new political crisis arose. Analysts believe that the new president made some unrealistic promises: For example, the new president came into office in January 2017 with a promise of only serving for three years and then stepping down on 19 January 2020. However, in late December 2019, Barrow formed a new political party, the National Peoples Party, to allow him to contest in the December 2021 presidential election. That move led to protests and harsh crackdowns.

Freedom House categorized Gambia as 'partly free' in its [Freedom in the World 2023 Gambia](#) report and several significant events shaped the political landscape of the country throughout 2022. In April 2022, legislative elections saw President Adama Barrow's National People's Party (NPP) securing 18 of the 53 elected seats in the National Assembly. Although this made the NPP the largest party, it did not grant them a majority. In May 2022, the Barrow administration released a white paper that mostly endorsed the recommendations from the Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparations Commission (TRRC). The Commission was established to address human rights abuses during the rule of former authoritarian leader Yahya Jammeh. The government confirmed that prosecuting Jammeh should be a priority. Additionally, in late December 2022, there was a crackdown on several members of Gambia's armed forces, who were arrested for an alleged coup attempt (see below). These events suggest a complex and unsettled political environment in Gambia.

Issues such as corruption and economic stagnation persist. Barrow had promised to create jobs and repeal Jammeh-era laws during the 2016 campaign, but very little progress has been made to that end.

The attempted coup in December 2022

As reported by Reuters on 21 December 2022, the Gambian government alleged that it had [thwarted a coup](#) aimed at overthrowing President Barrow and arrested four soldiers involved in the plot. This follows a history of coup attempts in the small West African nation, which spent over two decades under the authoritarian rule of former President Yahya Jammeh. Jammeh, who himself came to power through a coup in 1994, was ousted in a 2016 election by Barrow, an event seen as a win for democracy. However, discontent with Barrow's administration has been rising due to its inability to address the pressing issues of poverty and inflation. The government revealed that the army was searching for three additional suspects connected to the coup attempt. It remains unclear if this plot was connected to the previous regime. According to [Freedom in the World 2024 Gambia](#): "In January [2023], eight Gambian Armed Forces soldiers, one police officer, and two civilians were charged over an alleged coup attempt at the end of 2022. The alleged leader was sentenced to a 12-year prison term in October, and the rest of the accused were acquitted and released over the course of the trial."

Some critics argue that The Gambia is [sliding back](#) into a dictatorship under President Barrow. Despite initially being celebrated for ending Yahya Jammeh's 22-year regime, Barrow's administration has recently been accused of undermining democratic gains by arresting journalists and government critics, raising concerns about the erosion of press freedom and civil liberties.

Third Term?

President Adama Barrow, who initially pledged to be a transitional leader for three years, has hinted at running for a third term. Despite his 2017 promise of a brief tenure, he completed a full five-year constitutional mandate and was re-elected in 2021. According to [AllAfrica.com](https://www.allafrica.com) (13 June 2023), Barrow has indicated a willingness to extend his presidency beyond this second term, suggesting a significant shift from his earlier commitment to a short-term presidency.

Religious landscape

Gambia: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	134,000	4.7
Muslim	2,520,000	88.7
Hindu	460	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnic religionist	146,000	5.1
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	25,400	0.9
Atheist	130	0.0
Agnostic	16,400	0.6
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Gambia is a Muslim majority country, mostly Sunni, but other Muslim communities also exist. Some citizens mix indigenous beliefs with Islam and Christianity.

Economic landscape

According to Africa Development Bank's 2024 [Gambia Economic Outlook](#):

- **Economic growth and resilience:** Gambia's real GDP growth improved to 5.6% in 2023, supported by the tourism, construction, and industry sectors, alongside private investment and public spending. However, inflation accelerated due to rising food and energy prices, leading to a tightening of monetary policy.
- **Fiscal and debt management:** The fiscal deficit narrowed significantly to 3.5% of GDP in 2023, aided by expenditure restraint and better customs revenues. Public debt also decreased substantially to 71.8% of GDP, but challenges such as a low tax revenue base and a widening

current account deficit remain.

- **Social challenges and employment:** The cost of living crisis worsened, increasing poverty rates from 45.8% in 2019 to 53.4% in 2021. Unemployment stood at 31.6% in 2023, indicating persistent social challenges despite economic growth.
- **Outlook and structural transformation:** Economic growth is projected to continue, with a focus on agriculture, services, and construction. However, structural transformation has been slow, with labor shifting primarily from agriculture to services, bypassing the more productive industrial sector. Investments in infrastructure, technology, and financial access are essential to fast-track this transformation.

According to a [World Bank Press Release](#) dated 24 May 2024, Gambia's economy demonstrated significant resilience, with a real GDP growth of 5.3% in 2023, despite global and regional challenges. This growth was driven by improved agricultural production and increased public and private investment. However, rising inflation, monetary tightening, and global economic slowdowns affected the tertiary sectors and private consumption. Looking forward, Gambia's economy is projected to grow by 5.6% from 2024 to 2026, although risks such as regional geopolitical tensions, debt vulnerabilities and extreme weather events could impact this outlook. Despite recent growth, long-term challenges persist, including high poverty and inequality, labor market issues, and a lack of structural economic change.

According to the Heritage Foundation's [2024 Index of Economic Freedom](#):

- Gambia's economic freedom score is 58.2, ranking it as the 93rd freest economy globally and 8th in the Sub-Saharan Africa region.
- Gambia's economy is classified as "mostly unfree," with a slight improvement from last year.
- Despite economic reforms aimed at enhancing growth and stability, the country still faces significant challenges, including weak rule of law, corruption, and an inefficient regulatory environment. Property rights are moderately protected, but the judicial system and government integrity remain areas of concern. The labor market is burdened by high unemployment and underemployment, and the overall business environment is hindered by red tape and inconsistent regulation.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Gambia](#) (accessed 11 October 2024) and [UNDP Human Development Report Gambia](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Mandinka/Jahanka 33.3%, Fulani/Tukulur/Lorobo 18.2%, Wolof 12.9%, Jola/Karoninka 11%, Serahuleh 7.2%, Serer 3.5%, other 4%, non Gambian 9.9%. The Wolof live mainly in the capital, Banjul. There are also Mauritians, Moroccans and Lebanese resident in the country who are mainly traders and shopkeepers.
- **Main languages:** English (official), Mandinka, Wolof, Fula, other indigenous vernaculars
- **Average rate of population growth:** 1.82% (2021 est.)
- **Urban population:** 63.2% of the total population (2021)
- **Rate of urbanization:** 3.75% annual rate of change (2015-2020 est.)
- **Median age:** 21.8 years

- **Expected years of schooling:** 9.9 years
- **Literacy rate, adult (% ages 15 and older):** 50.8
- **Employment to population ratio (% ages 15 and older):** 54.0
- **Unemployment, total (% of labor force):** 9.1
- **Unemployment, youth (% ages 15-24):** 12.5
- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Gambia ranked 172nd out of 189 countries with a value of 0.496
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 62.0 years
- **Gender Development Index (GDI):** 0.846
- **Gender Inequality Index (GII):** 0.612

According to [UNHCR data](#) (published 15 March 2024):

- **Refugees:** As of February 2024, there were a total of 4,263 refugees including asylum seekers in Gambia.

Technological landscape

As per DataReportal's [Digital 2024: The Gambia](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 54.2% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 14.4% of the total population
- **Active mobile cellular connections:** 107.5% of the total population.

According to [Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 Gambia](#):

- (Overview) "The online environment has markedly improved in The Gambia since 2017, when President Adama Barrow succeeded Yahya Jammeh, who had ruled for more than two decades and consistently violated political rights and civil liberties. Gambians now take to the internet to express views on many sensitive issues. Harassment of internet users for their online activity has declined, though arrests of online journalists and users who criticize or insult the president still occur. "
- (C8) "In November 2022, the Central Bank of The Gambia was hit with a ransomware attack that resulted in the theft of at least two terabytes (TB) of sensitive data, with hackers demanding a ransom of \$2.5 million. It is unclear if the bank paid the ransom."

Security situation

The security situation in the region is increasingly frustrating for Gambia, particularly as many West African countries face a growing threat from the expansion of jihadist groups. While Gambia itself currently faces no immediate external threat to national security, concerns remain, especially given the ongoing instability in neighboring regions. However, an incident in late January 2022 highlighted the presence of Senegalese insurgents from the Casamance-based Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance in Gambia, which led to the deaths of four Senegalese soldiers from the ECOMIG peacekeeping force and the temporary capture of seven others. This conflict spilled over into southern Gambia in March 2022, causing significant instability and forcing over 5,600 Gambians to flee their homes.

On the human security front, issues persist, particularly concerning human rights. The US State Department's [2021 Country Report on Human Rights Practices](#) in Gambia noted problems such as government-sanctioned torture, degrading treatment, harsh prison conditions, and a lack of accountability for gender-based violence. Trafficking in persons remains a critical concern. For Christians in Gambia, security risks are primarily cultural or religious, including practices like forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

Despite these challenges, Gambia is seen as a key partner by the USA. In [June 2024](#), the US Secretary of State called Gambia's president to commend the country on its improvements in human rights and to discuss the shared values between the two nations, underscoring the importance of their bilateral relationship (Press Release, Office of the Spokesperson, 13 June 2024).

Christian origins

Christianity arrived in Gambia with Portuguese sailors in 1456 when they sailed upriver and landed on James Island. However, the Roman Catholic Church did not begin putting down roots until the mid-19th century. In the early 19th century freed slaves who were Christian converts came to settle in Gambia after the founding of the city of Bathurst on St. Mary's Island. In 1849 a Catholic mission was established in the settlement. *(Source: Anthology of African Christianity, Oxford, 2016)*

Methodists first arrived in the country as early as 1821. The first Anglican mission church was established in 1855. Early church missions around this time were established by the United Society Partners in the Gospel (USPG) and the Church Mission Society (CMS). The World Evangelical Crusade (WEC) entered the country in 1957. The Association of Baptist's for Evangelism came to the country in 1978, followed by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1982.

Church spectrum today

Gambia: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	1,900	1.4
Catholic	84,000	62.7
Protestant	21,000	15.7
Independent	19,500	14.6
Unaffiliated	7,900	5.9
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	134,300	100.2
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	8,200	6.1
Pentecostal-Charismatic	25,700	19.2

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

Christians in Gambia make up only 4.7% of the population. The majority are Roman Catholic but there are also small vibrant evangelical groups in the country, most of which are concentrated in the major cities.

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Gambia>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.
- [Africa - Recent upsurge in military coups - September 2023](#)

External Links

- Recent history: History World - <https://www.historyworld.net/history/Gambia,The/828>
- Recent history: Britannica - <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senegambia-confederation-Africa>
- Recent history: withdrew from British Commonwealth membership - <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/gambia/10686147/Gambia-president-rejects-English-language.html>
- Recent history: declared - <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/12/gambia-now-an-islamic-republic-says-president-yahya-jammeh>
- Recent history: officially accused - <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0243>
- Recent history: rejoined - <http://thecommonwealth.org/media/news/gambia-rejoins-commonwealth>
- Recent history: Freedom in the World 2022 Gambia - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/gambia/freedom-world/2022>
- Recent history: 2023 - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/gambia/freedom-world/2023>
- Recent history: re-elected as president - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-59542813>
- Recent history: April 2023 - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/19/swiss-charge-ex-gambian-minister-with-crimes-against-humanity>
- Recent history: Freedom in the World 2024 Gambia - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/gambia/freedom-world/2024>
- Political and legal landscape: Freedom in the World 2023 Gambia - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/gambia/freedom-world/2023>
- Political and legal landscape: thwarted a coup - <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/gambia-foils-military-coup-arrests-four-soldiers-govt-2022-12-21/>
- Political and legal landscape: Freedom in the World 2024 Gambia - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/gambia/freedom-world/2024>
- Political and legal landscape: sliding back - <https://www.dw.com/en/free-speech-is-gambia-sliding-back-into-dictatorship/a-67053483>
- Political and legal landscape: AllAfrica.com - <https://allafrica.com/stories/202306130572.html>

- Economic landscape: Gambia Economic Outlook - <https://www.afdb.org/en/countries/west-africa/gambia/gambia-economic-outlook>
- Economic landscape: World Bank Press Release - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/05/23/gambia-economy-shows-resilience-amid-global-challenges>
- Economic landscape: 2024 Index of Economic Freedom: - <https://www.heritage.org/index/pages/country-pages/gambia>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Factbook Gambia - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/gambia-the/>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP Human Development Report Gambia - <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/GMB>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNHCR data - <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/107387>
- Technological landscape: Digital 2024: The Gambia - <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-gambia>
- Technological landscape: Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 Gambia - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/gambia/freedom-net/2023>
- Security situation: 2021 Country Report on Human Rights Practices - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/gambia/>
- Security situation: June 2024 - <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-call-with-republic-of-the-gambia-president-barrow/>
- Further useful reports: Africa - Recent upsurge in military coups - September 2023 - <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/reports/africa-recent-upsurge-in-military-coups>