

Public Policy

Delayed Democracy: How Press Freedom Collapsed in Gambia

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Alagi Yorro Jallow, who wrote *Delayed Democracy: How Press Freedom Collapsed in Gambia*, is a Gambian journalist presently in a self-imposed exile in the United States. A Google search of the author revealed robust biographical data on him. His career as a journalist began in 1987. He has worked as a correspondent for the International Press Institute and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and as a consultant for the London based free-expression organization called Article 19 (Nieman, 2007).

A recipient of the International Press Freedom Award, Jallow is an ardent advocate for human rights in his work as a journalist in his native Gambia where he had managed *The Independent*, one of the few newspapers that are diametrically opposed to the regime. As former Vice-Chairman of the Gambia Press Union, Jallow successfully spearheaded a movement to disband a government-media commission with extensive powers to penalize journalists. Nonetheless, his work as a journalist and human rights advocacy has not been without challenges (Nieman, 2007).

In this book, Jallow recounts how he barely escaped death when a group of armed men entered the office of *The Independent* in the early morning hours of April 2004 and set it on fire while staff members were still inside. Several staff members were wounded, and the office and printing equipment owned by the paper were destroyed, causing Jallow a huge financial loss. He escaped to the United States where he has been living since December of 2004 after he received several death threats following the brutal murder of a colleague, Deyda Hydara, also a Gambian journalist (Jallow, 2013).

Jallow has many other accomplishments, accolades, distinctions, awards, and fellowships under his belt. In 2007, he was the first Gambian to be inducted into the prestigious Nieman Fellowship for Journalism at Harvard University: an extraordinary, transformative learning opportunity open to journalists working in all media in every country around the world. He also became an Edward S. Mason Fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, a program in Public Policy and Management where he was awarded a Master of Public Administration degree by Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. He was also a Fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington, DC. In addition, Jallow served as a consultant for the Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance for two years. The Mo Ibrahim Foundation defines governance as the provision of political, social and economic public goods and services that every citizen has the right to expect from his or her government, and that a government has the responsibility to deliver to its citizens (Nieman, 2007).

Jallow's scholarly research interests include West Africa, African media studies, democratic governance, human rights violations, asylum and immigration, and other social justice issues as

well as Pan-Africanism. He is a lecturer in the Department of General Management at Martin de Tours School of Management and Economics of Assumption University in Bangkok, Thailand (Neiman, 2007).

Book Review

Jallow's genre as a journalist rather than an author comes through quite distinctively in the book. Reading this book is like reading a newspaper journal or reading from a newsreel. It is neither segmented by chapters nor sectioned into parts like most books but written under headlines as in a news clip. Thus, the reader would have to read the book in sequence to get a thorough grasp of the themes. The review here is undertaken and written in like manner.

In the introduction, Jallow lays the foundation of his work and provides an account of his political activism. He uses Francis Nyamnjoh's groundbreaking work titled *Mass Media, and Democratization in the Cameroun* (2011) as the conceptual framework from which he argues that in as much as there has been emphasis on the democratization of Africa, very little if any has been devoted to the role of the press as central to this process. Like Namnjoh, Jallow explores the role of the mass media in promoting democracy and empowering civil society in The Gambia. Jallow shows how patterns of media ownership and state control have evolved and the huge difficulties under which media workers operate. In essence, he holistically explores the question of media freedom in his native Gambia and argues that African governments have done very little in encouraging independent media. But unlike Namnjoh, Jallow does to reckon with the fact that the media themselves must also share some of the blame; instead, he is adamant that it is authoritarian regimes that are often opposed to the independent press (Jallow, 2013).

Thereafter, Jallow examines the role of the news media in a variety of contexts, constraints and challenges which inhibits journalism from fulfilling these ideal roles during the brutal dictatorship of Yahya Jammeh, then Gambia's military strongman. Jallow evaluates press freedom in The Gambia and the most effective policy interventions available to strengthen the contribution of the news media to foster both democratic governance and human development (Jallow, 2013).

Jallow goes on to argue that since the media play a crucial role in shaping a healthy and vibrant democracy and act as the backbone of any functioning democracy, the free exercise of its freedom must not be infringed. Therefore, Jallow investigates the relationship between the Gambian press and the military and quasi-military regimes in The Gambia within the context of press freedom. He examines in detail policies enacted by the Jammeh regime which restricted press freedom during the period of military rule in The Gambia and in the aftermath of the coup (Jallow, 2013).

Furthermore, Jallow identifies and analyzes the institutional, legal and non-legal measures and mechanisms utilized by the repressive Jammeh regime to control the Gambian press from 1994 until the time of his ouster. The book also examines both direct and indirect forms of repressive measures the Jammeh regime deployed to control the press. This includes, but not limited to, selective assassinations of journalists, extra-judicial decrees, promulgation of ex post facto laws, bribery, and compelling journalists to reveal sources and methods they use to obtain information. This work therefore attempts to address the poignant issues faced by journalists in their quest to find and present the facts and the truth about the facts and delineate the many ways that autocracies seek to control the media (Jallow, 2013).

Under the heading "The Brief History of Gambia," Jallow provides the precolonial, colonial

and postcolonial history of The Gambia (Jallow, 2013). Nevertheless, he does not offer any foundational information about the press. In the succeeding heading “A Sketch of Politics in Gambia,” Jallow provides a portrait of the period that The Gambia enjoyed political calm until 1981 when it showed some signs of turmoil with the first aborted coup d’état. Before then, press freedom was not even a subject of political discussion. Nonetheless, with Dauda Jawara becoming the longest reigning head of state in Africa, next perhaps to the late Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, the condition for a change in leadership became eminent. In 1994, a young Army Lieutenant named Yahya Jammeh overthrew Dauda Jawara in a bloodless coup (Jallow, 2013).

Next, in a comparative narrative, Jallow provides a detail account of democratic governance, civil liberties and peaceful existence by the citizenry under Dauda Jawara. He states that all throughout the Jawara regime, all opposition parties that abided by the rule of law were allowed to operate freely and to participate in the electoral process without intimidations. Jallow also states that these liberties were extended to nonpolitical entities such as labor unions and the press. According to him, there were many opposing news media operating at the time and there was no infringement on press freedom under Jawara. Internationally, according to the author, The Gambia was so peaceful that it was called “the smiling coast,” a place of sunshine, welcome, and generosity of the spirit by its population. Jallow then contrasts the peaceful existence under Jawara to the revolutionary changes the nation experienced under Jammeh with specific emphasis on the restrictions on press freedom. The rest of the book is devoted to this narrative (Jallow, 2013).

Book’s Greatness

The book’s greatness is not only in the many accomplishments of the author and the positive reviews the book has received across the globe. Rather, but also in its content which reveals the author’s courage and bravery in facing down the brutal totalitarian regime of Yahya Jammeh. The author’s ambitious and aggressive critique of the military regime’s restrictions on press freedom in The Gambia positions him as a proponent of press freedom everywhere, according to human rights advocate Larry Siems. He says the following about the book: “This book which incorporates much of Alagi’s best writing over the past eight years is both an illuminating guide to what he correctly characterizes as a catastrophe for journalism in the Gambia, and a testament to the spirit of independent journalism in Africa—a spirit as Siems contends that has not been and cannot be extinguished” (quoted by Jallow, 2013, pp. 12-13).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Earlier on in the analysis, I suggested that Public Policy was a Western construct and not an African one. As such, the great book reviewed here provides substantial insight into how public policies have been used and “weaponized” especially by postcolonial African leaders to sustain their grip on power rather than the progressive and developmental governing strategy for which it was intended. Consequently, this misuse of the Public Policy concept has oftentimes resulted in the establishment of undemocratic conditions, the establishment of dictatorships, and then the dehumanization of society. The analysis clearly shows that in each of the instances, the relationships between people and their governments were in fact worse than they were under colonial rule.

Against this backdrop, I offer two recommendations for future researchers who may be

interested in undertaking more analytical work on Public Policy in the continent of Africa. First, the reviewed book can be used as a prototype for future research on African Public Policy in specified areas. Second, however, I caution the potential or future researchers to guard against the “one-size-fits-all” theoretical approach in analyzing Public Policy as this is the pitfall for most novice analysts of Public Policy vis-à-vis Africa. The future analyst must take into consideration that while the African continent was partitioned by European colonizers in the infamous “Scramble for Africa,” the resulting postcolonial nation-states are unrecognizably diverse, making Public Policy analyses very difficult to pin down. Even nations with a common sphere of influence must be analyzed independent of others. For instance, even while Ghana, Sierra Leone and Nigeria were colonized by Britain, it does not necessarily mean that they have uniformity in their public policies. Therefore, Public Policy analyses of each nation must be undertaken independently and uniquely.

References

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