

The 2021 Presidential Election and the Political Situation in The Gambia

On December 4, 2021, presidential elections were held in The Gambia. The current president, 56-year-old Adama Barrow, was elected head of state for a second term. The candidate of the ruling National People's Party (NPP), he received 53.23% (457,519) of the popular vote, far ahead of his main rival, the 73-year-old United Democratic Party (UDP) leader, human rights lawyer Ousainou Darboe, who won 27.72 % (238,253) votes. Six candidates competed for the presidency. The voter turnout, despite the coronavirus pandemic, was the highest in the history of the post-colonial Gambia - 89.3% (a total of 962,157 voters were registered).

The head of State is elected in one round with a relative majority. It is interesting that the vote in the country where half of adults are illiterate takes place in a peculiar way: an elector which comes to a poll station gets a glass ball, which he drops in an urn, with an attached photo of a candidate on it, in a voting booth. At the end of the vote, the Independent commission counts the balls and names the winner.

The international observers recognized these elections as « honest and just ».

The voting results were contested by four opposition leaders, including Darboe, whose supporters organized protest actions in the country's capital Banjul, which were dispersed by the police with tear gas. In total, during the elections (largely thanks to Barrow, who has a reputation of an « forgiving » leader), Gambians could openly support their candidates, media could openly publish any materials, and opposition parties could freely use the allocated air time on the public television. It is true that under Barrow the situation with respect to human rights in Gambia has improved; civil rights were extended; more young people and women entered politics, participating as candidates in parliamentary and other elections.

Barrow has, undoubtedly, used the administrative resource and won, above all, as a candidate for the legal second term, which is much easier to obtain than the first term, or, on the contrary, the third or the fourth one, having amended the constitution to reset the limit of the terms on the highest state posts, like it has happened in many other African countries. For Barrow the « legitimacy » of his nomination for the second term was particularly important, as despite the particular accomplishments of his regime, the discontent with the rule of the incumbent president is growing, as the base of his support is narrowing.

Gambians still now, after five years, give credit to Barrow for disposing of Yahya Jammeh's 20-year (1996-2017) dictatorship in the course of difficult elections in 2016 that turned into a political crisis (the current president obtained 43,3% at the time, while the previous one – 39,6%). His rule was symbolized by countless arbitrary arrests, violent disappearances and arbitrary executions.

However, President Barrow faced growing criticism of his policies, as he did not fulfill the majority of his promises given in 2016. Among them, for example, was the organization of a full scale judicial persecution of those who were responsible for the previous regime's violations: Barrow continually avoids taking the corresponding decisions, realizing that this will affect a lot of members of the ruling group, will lead to a conflict, and will create a threat to his rule. Meanwhile, shortly before the 2021 election, the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC) provided Barrow with a 17-volume report with a list of « criminals and crimes », to which he was asked to respond within 6 months; time is ticking, but the president is only calling on the « victims » to be patient. The « victims of the Jammeh dictatorship » fear that this issue will never be resolved, as in September 2021, NPP first concluded a pre-election alliance and then created a coalition with Jammeh's Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC) party. Of course, this move by Barrow - the leader of the ruling party - was a pre-election trick of the president; Jammeh, who is in exile in Equatorial Guinea, even claimed that the decision had been made without his knowledge and that his supporters had formed a new party, the No Alliance Movement, a splinter from the APRC, and opposed the union, but it is absolutely clear that the pact will reduce the chances of prosecution of the perpetrators of the repressions.

Barrow, who is in fact Jammeh's far relative, aspired to obtain the support of at least a part of the associates of the previous president, who still keeps a noticeable influence on the events that take place in the country, which could have been a « reasonable » pre-election strategy if the head of state eventually had not found himself between two fires: from one side, Jammeh's opponents, who wanted to revenge the regime's abuses, and from another side - supporters of the previous president, especially the military who had been fired by the current government in the framework of an unfinished reform of the power structures that apparently only aimed to cleanse these structures of dangerous opponents.

In reality, Adama Barrow (born on February 18, 1965) came to the post of the president by accident: he found himself during the 2016 elections « at the right time in the right place », as a lot of country's citizens, especially those who had suffered from repressions, were ready to vote for anyone who promised them « calm » life, but not to vote for Jammeh. Meanwhile, Barrow, a former sales manager at a Gambian trade company, who had obtained education in London, where he had studied real estate trade and worked in parallel as a shop guard, returned to Gambia in 2006 to establish his own real estate firm. Until 2016, Barrow held no elected posts; his first chance to enter big politics appeared in September 2016, when the whole executive committee of the opposition UDP, member of which he was, was imprisoned under Jammeh's order. At this moment, Barrow came to lead a coalition of 7 parties that opposed the government.

Promising to reestablish the Gambian membership in the Commonwealth, which the country had left in 2013, and the jurisdiction of the Rome Statute on the territory of the country and to fight corruption, Barrow during a political crisis in the wake of the 2016 elections (Jammeh contested the elections results) obtained strong support of the international community in the face of the EU, ECOWAS, AU, USA, etc. Surely, the West and the Gambians were « tired » of Jammeh, who often performed ridiculous and dangerous initiatives, while Barrow, who lived for four years in the Great Britain, was considered to be one of « their own ». That is why international financial institutions offered more resources on « peace-building » in this small African country and the European Union financed not only the deployment of the Mission of ECOWAS in Gambia (ECOMIG) in 2017, but also the multimillion projects for development. In 2018, Western donors decided to contribute 1,7 billions of dollars to the Gambian national development plan (2018-2021).

Meanwhile, the relative stabilization of internal situation and external financial inflows in the economy did not lead to the improvement of life conditions of common Gambians. On the contrary, the privatisation of agricultural lands, the confiscations of traditional lands from local communities (75% of Gambians live off agriculture) by influential farmers and the use of arable lands for commercial purposes (for example, for sand extraction), launched due the authorities' connivance, has led to the impoverishment of the rural population.

For the majority of citizens, the main problem is the daily fight for survival: approximately half of 2,4 million Gambians earn below the poverty threshold. The notorious gap between the « rich » and the « poor » continues to grow, even though the economy, which depends on tourism (which has shrunk dramatically), peanut and seafood exports, and the re-export of European goods, has not suffered from COVID-19 pandemic as seriously as could be expected. The rate of GDP growth has fallen from 6,6% in 2018 to 6,3% in 2020, which is not significant, even though food prices have risen greatly over the same period.

In 2016, Barrow identified the creation of a large number of working places for the young people as one of the main objectives of the government. However, the unemployment rate for this category of citizens, as well as for the country in general, has risen from 9% in 2012 to 26% at the end of 2021. This, undoubtedly, was tied in part to the pandemic, but even in the pre-COVID period the promised construction of new industrial facilities had not occurred. In its turn, the lack of economical abilities pushes out young Gambians from periphery regions to urban centers, where many of them are recruited by Islamists to participate in military conflicts on the territory of Mali, Niger, Nigeria and other countries of the region or join the migration flow to Europe.

To be fair, some accomplishments of the Barrow regime should be noted: first, the development of business climate, especially offering tax holidays and other benefits to local and international

entrepreneurs and investing in construction and infrastructure; second, the launch of offshore petrol extraction, which was particularly promoted by the government; third, the construction of, as the president said, « many kilometers » of roads and other objects of infrastructure.

At the same time, the unresolved land issue, the rise of prices and unemployment prompted Gambians to remember another unfulfilled promise by Barrow, which was given during the 2016 elections, – to retire after three years along with the transitional government. Back then, his statement about the absence of the intention to monopolize power for many years gave Barrow, undoubtedly, additional points during the elections; it was also difficult for him to expect a long rule given the situation at that time. But after Jammeh's departure, neutralization of some supporters of the previous president, cooptation of others and a relative stabilization of the situation in the country, Barrow decided, as some other African leaders, that this promise was not necessary to fulfill. In December 2019, opposition demanded the head of state to leave his post; after his refusal protests took place in the capital, but were dissolved by the police. In September 2020, the pro-presidential majority in the parliament blocked the bill which limited the number of presidential terms by two.

Even though Barrow started a war on corruption, the connivance of various abuses by his environment has reduced citizen's belief in the sincerity of his intention to implement good governance. Against this background, Jammeh, who remains in exile, continues to enjoy the support of a part of Gambian society (he is 56, so he is a contemporary of the incumbent president and still has long years of political activity ahead), which is a permanent source of Barrow's anxiety.

In terms of foreign policy, the current government is generally orientated to European countries (especially the Great Britain) and China, which are main sponsors and trade and economic partners. For Russia, which is interested in peaceful development of the African countries, the 2021 elections in Gambia are important because over the last years - after Barrow's participation in October 2019 in Russia-Africa summit in Sochi and his meeting with V.V. Putin - there took place certain development of bilateral relations, even though Gambia still occupies only the 155th place among Russia's export destinations and the 193th among Russia's sources of imports. The trade turnover from September 2019 to September 2020 stood at 11,6 million dollars, which entirely consisted of Russian exports to Gambia that included products of plant origin, textiles, vehicles, and equipment.

Thus, the victory of Adam Barrow, whose success in 2016 was lauded by Russia, in the 2021 presidential election seems to favor the development of relations between our two countries.

Denisova T.S
PhD (History), Leading Researcher,
Head of the Centre for Tropical African Studies
Institute for African Studies of the RAS