

All in this together? Social tensions in the post-Jammeh Gambia

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 404 | Sait Matty Jaw and Thomas Isbell

Summary

The Gambia does not have a history of ethnic and religious tensions. But starting under former President Yahya Jammeh and continuing since the change of government in 2017, political rivalries are increasingly taking an ethnic form (Courtright, 2018).

The government's 2018 Conflict and Development Analysis noted a marked erosion of ethnic, regional, and religious relations in the country during Jammeh's two-decades-long autocratic rule, which was marred by egregious human rights violations (Government of the Gambia, 2018). For instance, in 2015 Jammeh declared the Gambia an Islamic state (Al Jazeera, 2015), and at a political rally in 2016, following protests by opposition United Democratic Party members, he threatened to eliminate the Mandinka, the dominant ethnic group in the Gambia (UN News, 2016). In an address to Parliament, current Vice President Isatou Touray accused Jammeh of having favored his home region, Foni (Africa Press, 2019).

Since assuming office in January 2017, the Adama Barrow government has launched a series of initiatives, including the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission and the Constitutional Review Commission, aimed at redressing past injustices and promoting national reconciliation. While most Gambians welcomed these reform processes, particularly the constitutional review (Isbell & Jaw, 2020), they have been marred by accusations and counter-accusations of exclusion, and members of Parliament close to Barrow recently shot down a new draft Constitution, apparently in an attempt to strengthen Barrow's re-election chances (Jaw, 2020).

Tellingly, the most controversial debate over the draft Constitution was about whether to describe the Gambian government as "secular." While the Christian Council preferred the word to be added as a safeguard against having the country declared an Islamic state (Makasuba, 2020), the Supreme Islamic Council and other Muslims argued that adding the word would encourage acceptance of homosexual acts and other practices they oppose.

Given the increasing polarization in the post-Jammeh Gambia, how tolerant are Gambians, and how salient are ethnicity and religion? Afrobarometer survey data from 2018 suggest that most Gambians are tolerant of different ethnicities, religions, and nationalities, though not of different sexual orientations. While majorities did not personally experience discrimination based on ethnicity or religion, substantial proportions say the government treats their ethnic group unfairly. A majority of Gambians also voice support for government under secular rather than religious law.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2021 are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts

face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in the Gambia, led by the Centre for Policy, Research and Strategic Studies (CepRass), interviewed 1,200 adult Gambians in July and August 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

Key findings

- Most Gambians express tolerant attitudes toward people of different ethnic (94%), religious (79%), and national (88%) backgrounds. But they are overwhelmingly intolerant (96%) toward homosexuals.
- Only about one in 10 Gambians (9%) say they identify more strongly with their ethnic group than with their nation. About half (53%) identify more or only as Gambian, while 36% value both identities equally.
- About one in six Gambians (16%) say they experienced discrimination or harassment based on their ethnicity during the previous year, while smaller proportions say they were discriminated against or harassed based on a disability (11%), their gender (8%), or their religion (4%).
- Among major ethnic groups, Jola respondents are most likely to say that they experienced discrimination or harassment (25%) and that their ethnic group is treated unfairly (46%).
- A strong majority (70%) of Gambians support government by secular law rather than religious law. Support for religious law is stronger among poor citizens (40%) and respondents who say they are "not at all satisfied" with the way democracy is working in the Gambia (40%).

Tolerance for differences – except sexual differences

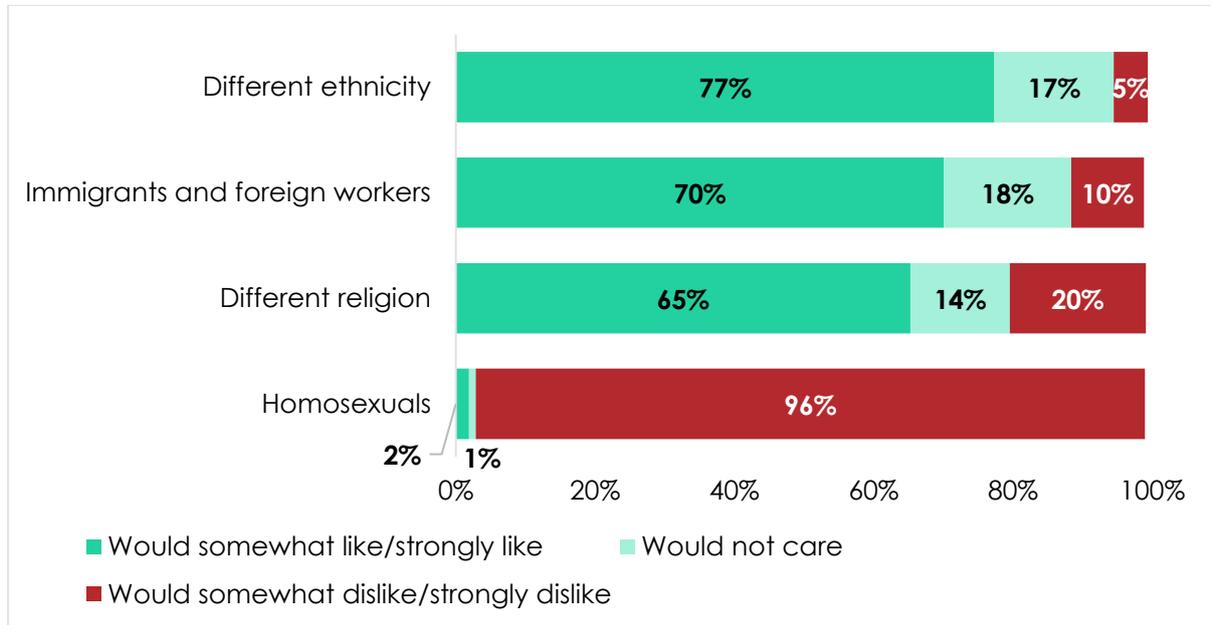
Most Gambians report tolerant attitudes toward people of different ethnicities, religions, and national origins, but not toward homosexuals (Figure 1). Asked whether they would like or dislike having people of different backgrounds as neighbors, large majorities say they "would strongly like," "would somewhat like," or "would not care" if they lived next door to people of a different ethnicity (94%), foreigners (88%), or people of a different religion (79%). Conversely, 96% of Gambians say they would dislike having homosexual neighbors.

Tolerance levels vary by certain socio-demographic characteristics, including lived poverty,¹ ethnicity, and level of education. When it comes to tolerance toward other religions, for example, poor respondents are less likely than their better-off counterparts to say they would like to have neighbors of a different religion but more likely to say they "would not care," producing overall tolerance levels that are very similar. But ethnic groups differ significantly in the proportions who express tolerance for different religions, ranging from 70% of Serahuleh to 88% of Wolof (Figure 2). Tolerance increases with education level, ranging from 72% of

¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

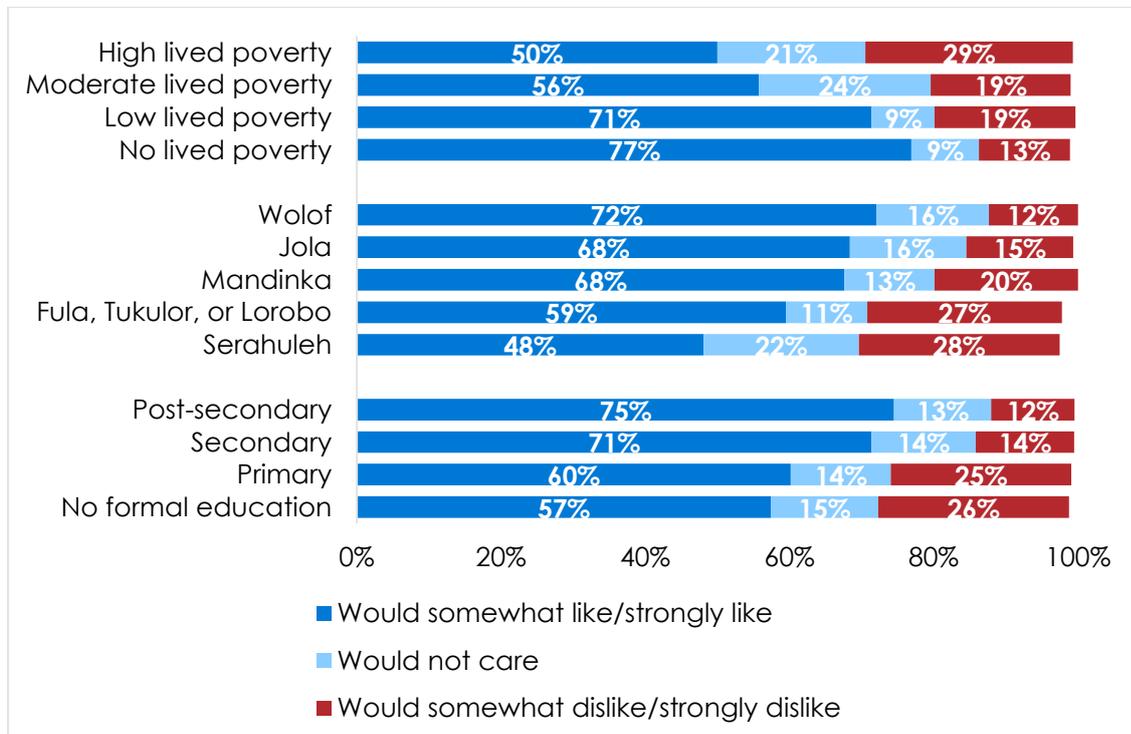
respondents with no formal education to 88% of those with post-secondary qualifications. Response patterns are similar with regard to tolerance for other ethnicities (not shown).

Figure 1: Social tolerance | the Gambia | 2018



Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbors, dislike it, or not care.

Figure 2: Tolerance toward people of different religions | by lived poverty, ethnic group, and level of education | the Gambia | 2018

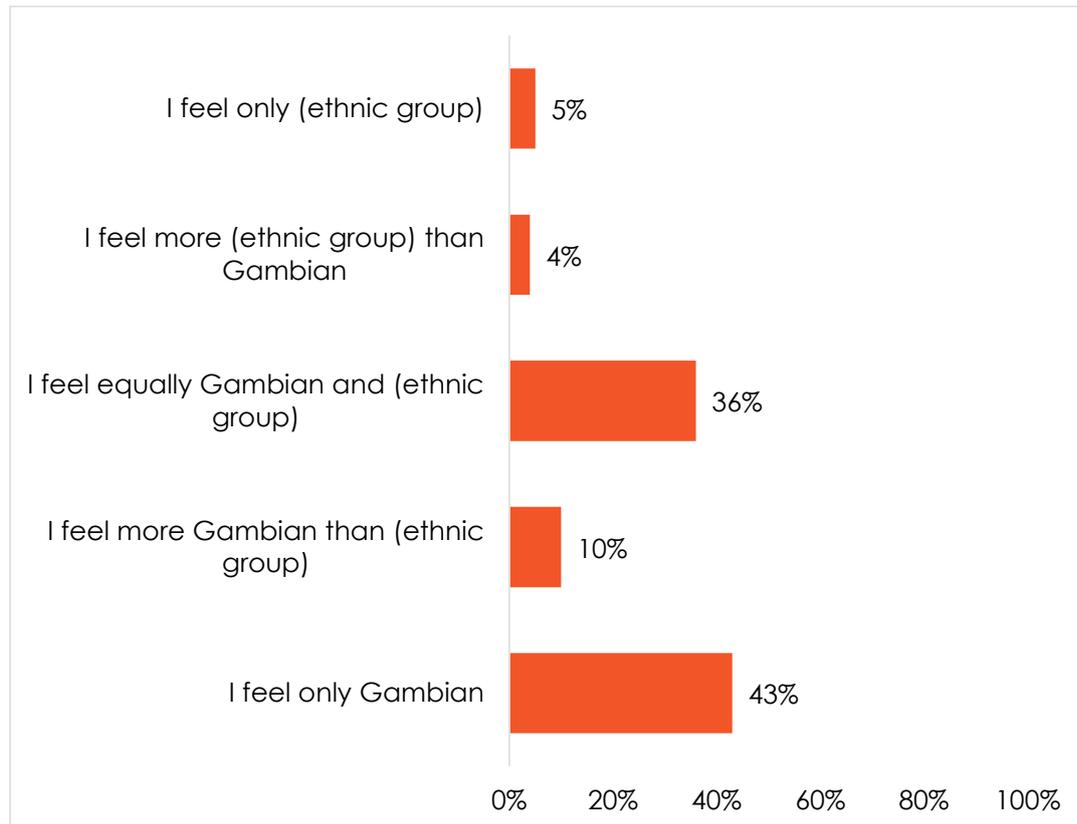


Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbors, dislike it, or not care: People of a different religion?

Salience of ethnicity

In the post-Jammeh era, ethnic identities remain salient. While more than half of respondents say they feel “only Gambian” (43%) or identify more strongly along national than ethnic lines (10%), a substantial proportion value their ethnic identity equally with their national identity (36%), more than their national identity (4%), or exclusively (5%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Ethnic vs. national identity | the Gambia | 2018



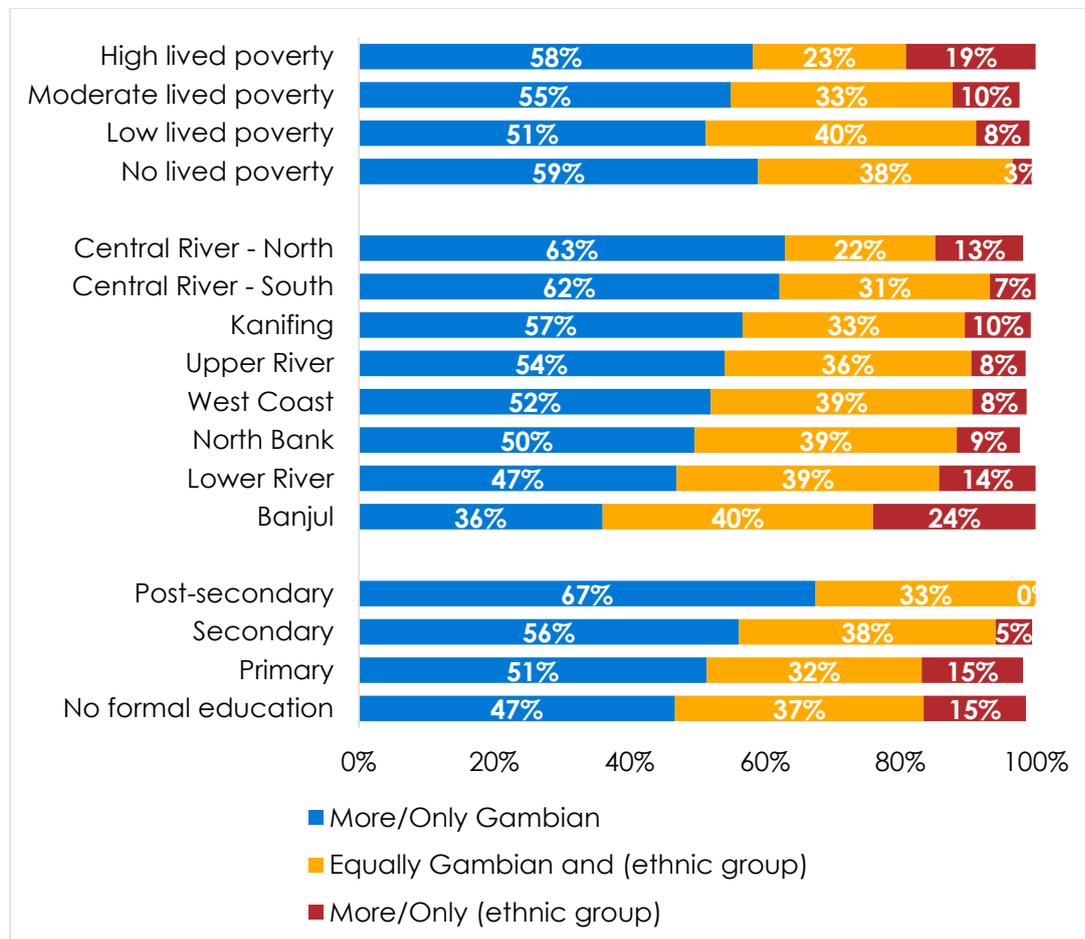
Respondents were asked: *Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a Gambian and being a [member of respondent's ethnic group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings?*

Salient identities vary by poverty level, region, and education level (Figure 4). For example, respondents with high lived poverty experiences are about six times as likely as the best-off respondents to say they identify only or more along ethnic lines (19% vs. 3%).

Likewise, a preference for the national identity increases with respondents' education level. While two-thirds (67%) of Gambians with post-secondary education say they feel only or more Gambian, the same is true of just 47% of respondents with no formal education. In fact, among respondents with primary schooling or no formal education, 15% identify only or more with their ethnic group.

And residents in Central River - North (63%) and Central River - South (62%) regions are more likely to choose national over ethnic identity than are their counterparts in Banjul (36%) and Lower River (47%).

Figure 4: Ethnic vs. national identity | by lived poverty, region and level of education | the Gambia | 2018



Respondents were asked: Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a Gambian and being a [member of respondent's ethnic group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings?

Experience of discrimination

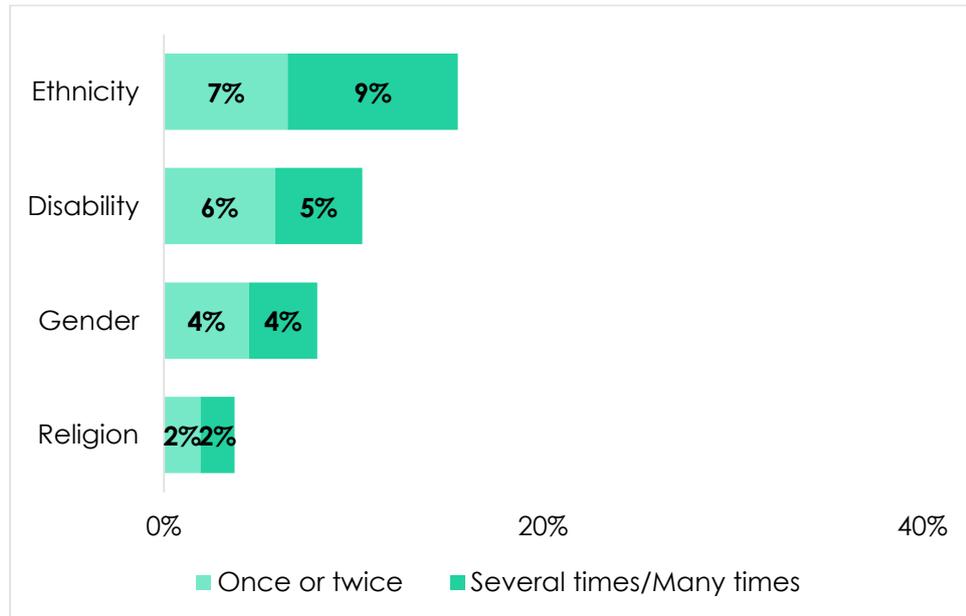
Just as most Gambians express tolerant attitudes toward people of different ethnic, national, or religious backgrounds, most also say they did not experience discrimination or harassment based on their religion (95%), gender (91%), a possible disability (88%), or ethnicity (83%) during the year prior to the interview. Nonetheless, about one in six Gambians (16%) do report having experienced discrimination or harassment based on their ethnicity "once or twice," "several times," or "many times" during the previous 12 months. And smaller proportions say they encountered these based on a disability (11%), their gender (8%), or their religion (4%) (Figure 5).

Among major ethnic groups, Jola are most likely to say they experienced discrimination or harassment based on their ethnicity (25%), followed by Mandinka (18%) (Figure 6).

Even more common is the perception by some ethnic groups that the government treats them unfairly. Almost half (46%) of Jola say they are at least "sometimes" treated unfairly, including 27% who say this happens "often" or "always" (Figure 7). Three out of 10 Mandinka (30%) report the same perception (at least "sometimes"), followed by 20% of Fula, Tukolor, or Lorobo respondents, 18% of Wolof, and 11% of Serahuleh.

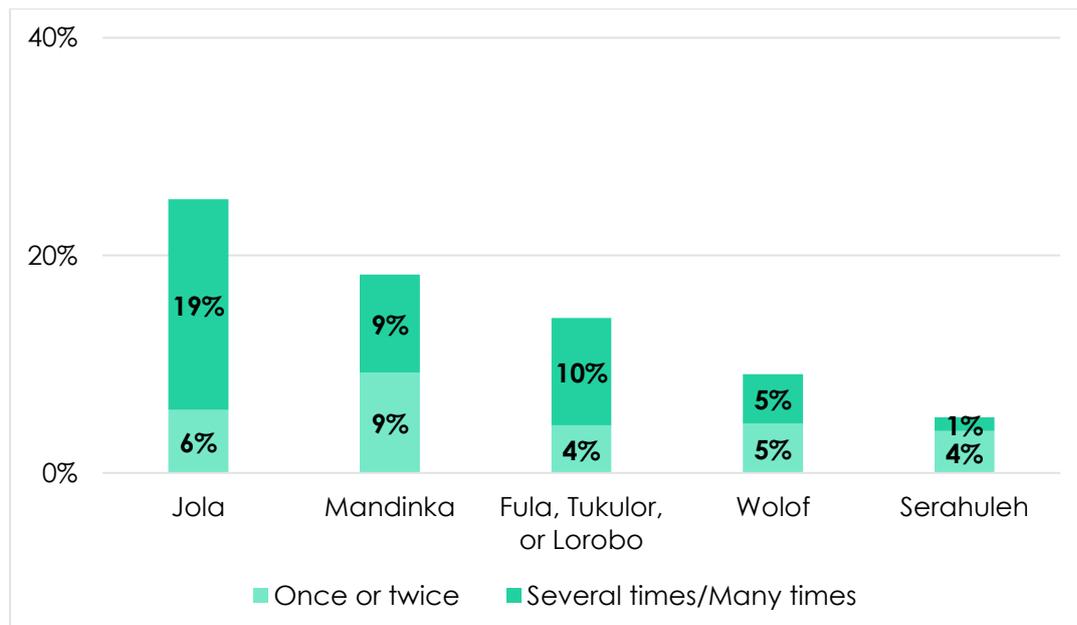
The relatively large proportions of Jola who report discrimination and unfair treatment may reflect, in part, their experiences and perceptions of the new government's rhetoric about the Foni region and supposed preferential treatment of the Jola, Jammeh's ethnic group, in the past (Gam24TV, 2019).

Figure 5: Experience of discrimination | the Gambia | 2018



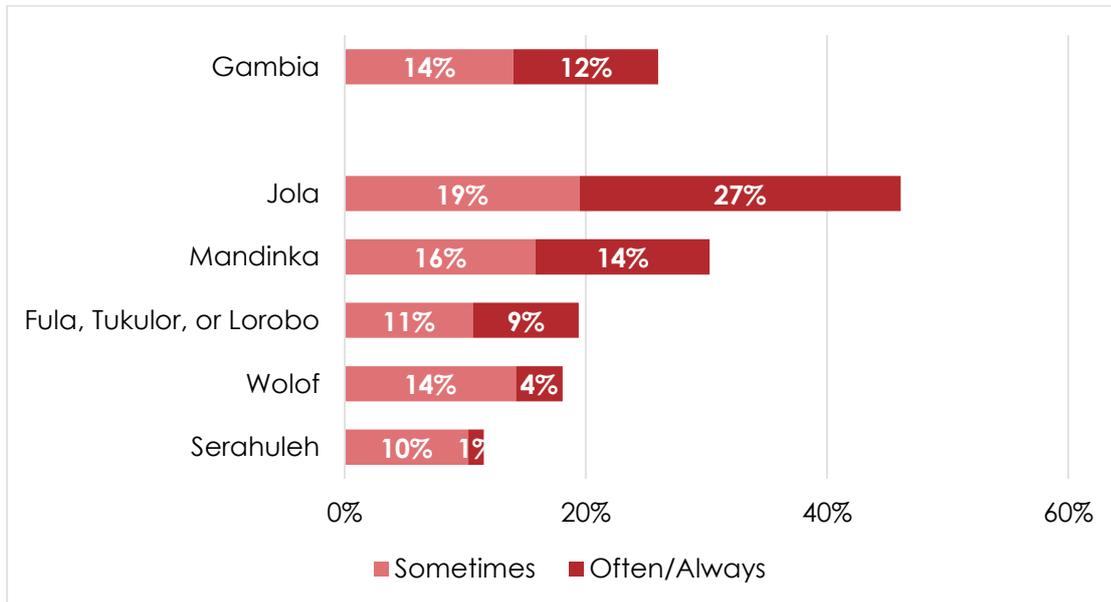
Respondents were asked: In the past year, how often, if at all, have you personally been discriminated against or harassed based on any of the following: Your ethnicity? Any disability you might have? Your gender? Your religion?

Figure 6: Experience of discrimination based on ethnicity | by ethnic group | the Gambia | 2018



Respondents were asked: In the past year, how often, if at all, have you personally been discriminated against or harassed based on any of the following: Your ethnicity?

Figure 7: Ethnic group treated unfairly by the government | the Gambia | 2018

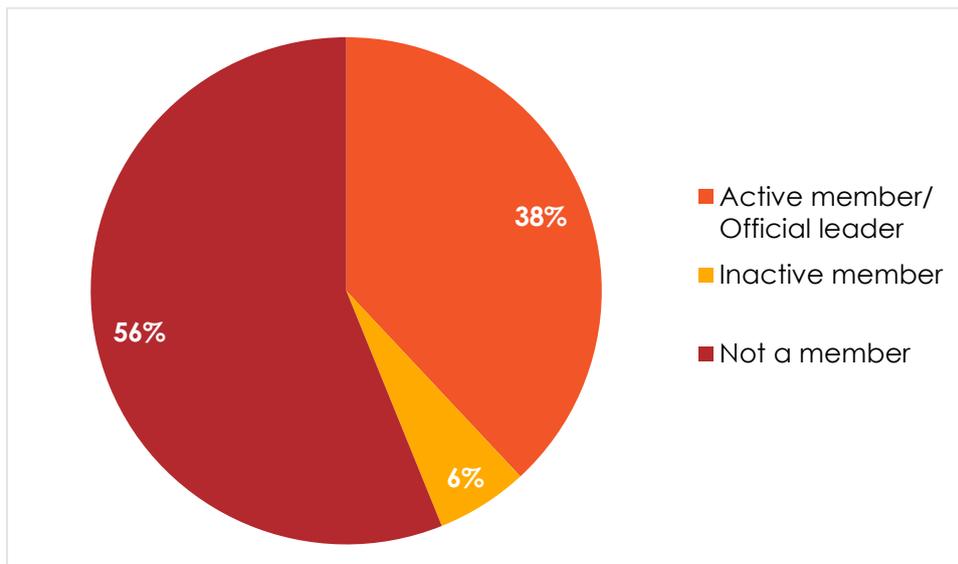


Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, are [members of the respondent's ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government?

The role of religion in the Gambia

In public debates surrounding the efforts of the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission and the Constitutional Review Commission, religion has become somewhat politicized. Many Gambians engage in religious activities, including about four in 10 (38%) who are active members or leaders of religious groups that meet outside regular worship (Figure 8).

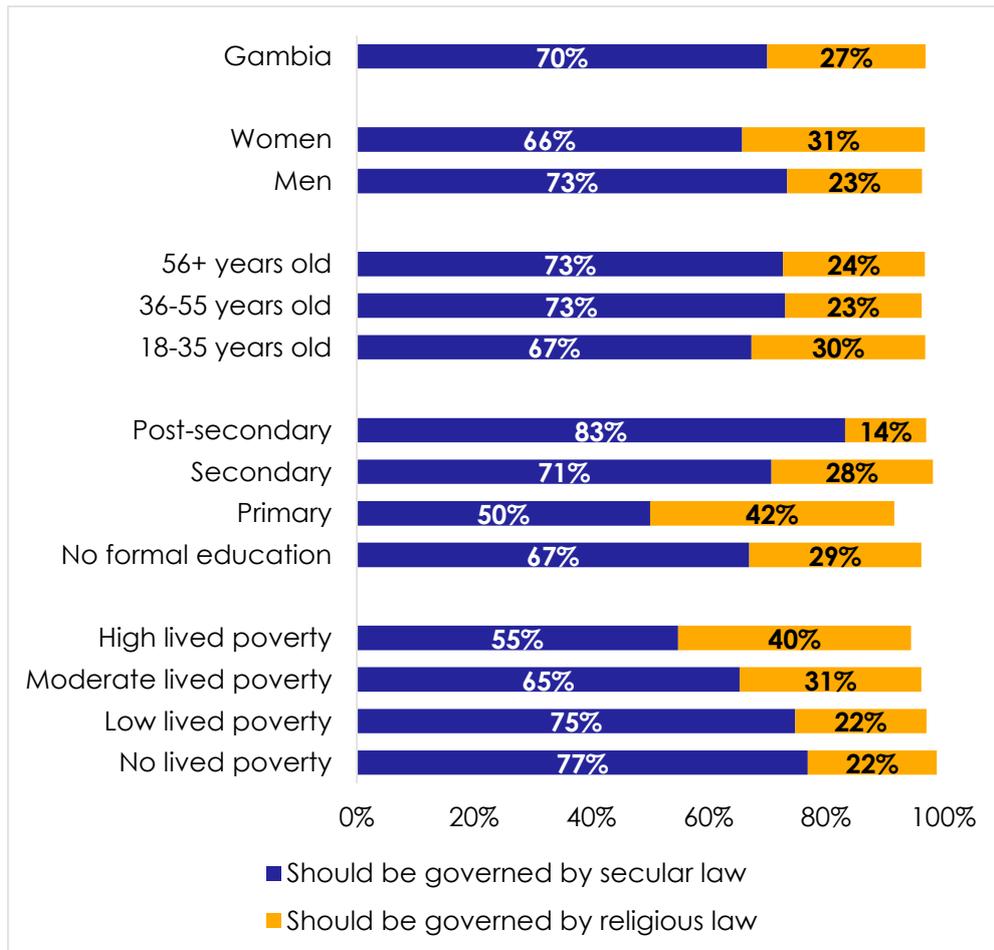
Figure 8: Membership in a religious group | the Gambia | 2018



Respondents were asked: Now I am going to read out a list of groups that people join or attend. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member: A religious group that meets outside of regular worship services?

But despite widespread religious engagement, seven in 10 Gambians (70%) say their country should be governed by secular law, while only one in four (27%) favor religious law. Poor respondents are almost twice as likely to support religious law as are well-off citizens (40% vs. 22%). Support for religious law is also stronger among women (31%) than men (23%), among younger citizens (30% of those aged 18-35, vs. 23%-24% of their elders), and among Gambians with primary education only (42%) (Figure 9).

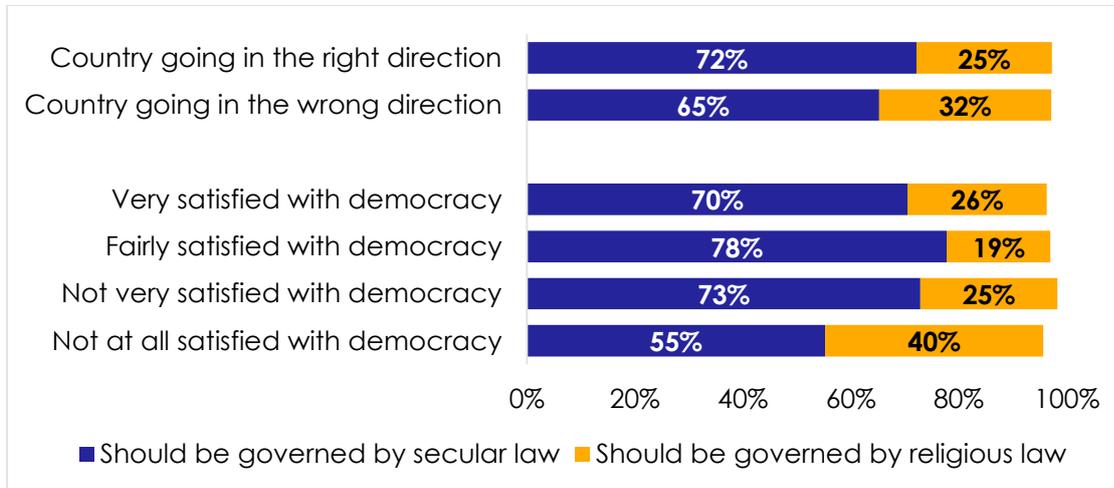
Figure 9: Secular vs. religious state | by socio-demographic group | the Gambia | 2018



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Our country should be governed primarily by religious law.
 Statement 2: Our country should be governed only by civil law.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Support for being governed by religious law may also reflect, in some cases, dissatisfaction with current conditions in the Gambia. For example, Gambians who see the country as going in "the wrong direction" are more likely to support religious law than those who feel the country is going in "the right direction" (32% vs. 25%) (Figure 10). Likewise, Gambians who say they are "not at all satisfied" with the way democracy is working in their country hold more favorable views of religious law than more satisfied respondents.

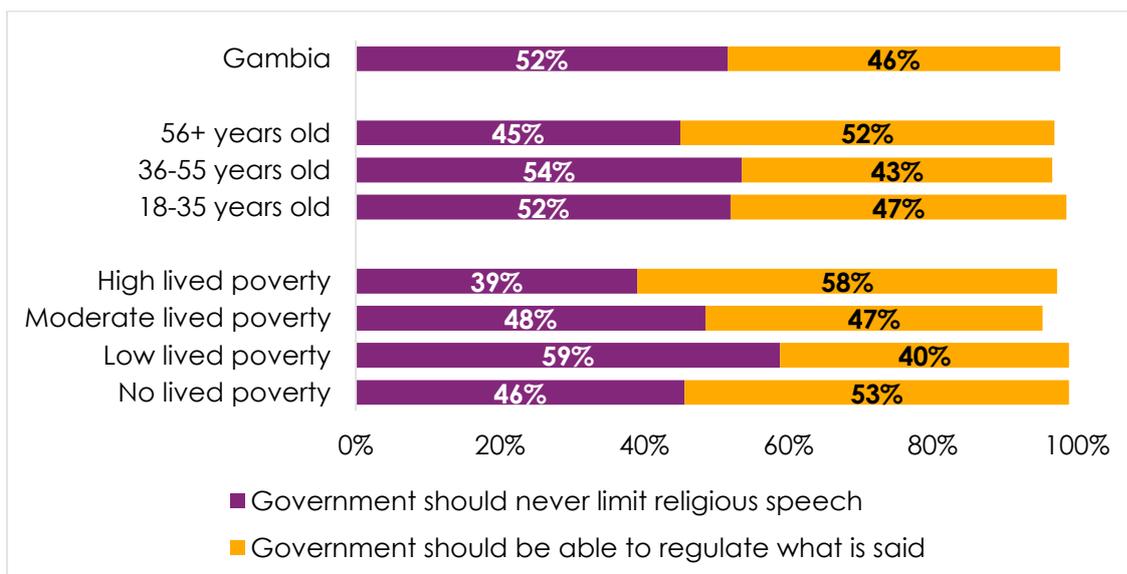
Figure 10: Secular vs. religious state | by perceived country direction and satisfaction with democracy | the Gambia | 2018



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Our country should be governed primarily by religious law.
 Statement 2: Our country should be governed only by civil law.
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

Gambians are divided in their views on the relationship between state and religion. A slim majority (52%) say freedom of religion should be absolute, with no regulation by the state, but almost as many (46%) say the government should have the power to regulate what is said in places of worship, in particular when it might threaten public safety (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Should government be able to regulate what is said in places of worship? | by age and lived poverty | the Gambia | 2018



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Freedom of religion and worship are absolute, meaning that government should never limit what is said in a place of worship.
 Statement 2: Government should have the power to regulate what is said in places of worship, especially if preachers or congregants threaten public security.
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

Conclusion

Most Gambians express ethnic and religious tolerance. Yet there are pockets of tension that, if not addressed – or worse, if manipulated by politicians – could threaten the country's cohesion and stability. Poor people and citizens who are dissatisfied with the country's democracy may be more likely to look to alternatives under religious law, pointing to a need for the government to strengthen democratic institutions and to address poverty through sustainable employment programs. Clearly, perceptions of discrimination among the Jola and Mandinka reflect the country's political polarization, and political leaders must work to promote national unity and social cohesion so as to strengthen the harmonious relationships that should continue to define the Gambia.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, directs a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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