

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

THE GAMBIA

POLITICAL BACKGROUND

The election of President Adama Barrow in 2016 ended 22 years of authoritarian rule in The Gambia and created an opening for democratic reforms. Since then, progress to implement constitutional and electoral reforms to deepen transparency, openness, and inclusiveness in the political process has been slow. The voices of traditionally marginalized groups, including young people and women, are largely absent from such reform processes, as well as from other political leadership and decision-making processes. These practices contribute directly to creating barriers and perpetuating patriarchal norms that hinder the active participation and leadership of marginalized groups, curtailing their ability to represent the interests of their communities, and gradually widening the gap of trust between political actors and the electorate. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is supporting the advancement of democratic institution-building in The Gambia by working with government, political parties, and civil society actors to ensure that the government is transparent, accountable to, and representative of Gambian citizens.

CURRENT NDI PROGRAMMING

In order to build resilient and inclusive democratic institutions, NDI is working to remove barriers to the political participation of women and young people at the individual, institutional, and sociocultural levels.

INDIVIDUAL: STRENGTHENING LEADERSHIP SKILLS OF WOMEN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Historically, Gambian women and youth have not had access to the same networks, opportunities, resources, and advantages as their older male colleagues. NDI's Women's and Young People's Leadership Academies train women and young people from across the political spectrum and civil society to meaningfully engage with political leaders, influence internal processes, and take part in decision-making. Students gain a comprehensive understanding of political institutions and processes, professional networks and career pathways, and have opportunities to develop skills in leadership, policy-making, government relations, and advocacy. NDI also facilitates collaboration between current political party leaders and CSO representatives and women and young party members through individualized skills-building practice projects to showcase women and young people's capacities to spearhead projects.

INSTITUTIONAL: SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE AND REPRESENTATIVE INSTITUTIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Despite the country's democratic transition, political institutions remain largely dominated by personality and identity politics, have ineffective and unrepresentative structures, and concentrate leadership and decision-making power in the hands of an elite male few. Through targeted political party assessments and technical assistance, NDI supports civil society and political institutions to better understand and address the distinct barriers and opportunities facing women and young people's political participation. NDI aims to strengthen and amplify the voices of women and young people as they work with political leaders to mitigate these barriers, build on positive opportunities, and work towards carrying out inclusive institutional reform processes.

SOCIOCULTURAL: EXPANDING SPACE FOR MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION BY CHANGING NORMS

To increase political inclusion, restrictive sociocultural norms that hinder the participation of women and young people in political decision-making processes must change. NDI works with influential male political leaders to challenge perceptions around masculinity and femininity that normalize men's dominance in political power. Through the 'Men, Power, and Politics' curriculum, male political leaders examine their personal and professional experiences with gender norms and develop strategies to enhance gender equality within their political organizations. Similarly, young people are often perceived by political elites as 'not ready' to contribute to decision-making processes, and their ideas are seen as less valuable than those of their elders, limiting the space and opportunity for their meaningful participation. Through intergenerational dialogues, NDI hosts 'safe spaces' for discussions on how to dismantle harmful norms and co-create strategies for enhanced inclusion of youth within political parties. Finally, NDI and the Center for Research and Policy Development conducted a nationwide public opinion poll to identify dominant perspectives of women and young people in politics, providing granular data to political parties on how enhanced inclusion of women and young people could translate to the ballot box.

PAST NDI PROGRAMS

NDI first worked in The Gambia in 1995, providing intermittent technical assistance throughout the following two decades to support election observation efforts and strengthen capacities within the legislative branch. Following the country's democratic transition in 2017, NDI worked with the President's office to improve its messaging to the Gambian public on its policy positions. In March 2018, NDI conducted a nationwide public opinion survey to gather citizen views on the Gambian Constitution and other aspects of governance and presented the findings to key government officials, members of the Constitutional Review Commission (CRC), and CSOs in order to amplify and incorporate citizen voices during the constitutional reform process. In 2020, three Gambian political parties took part in NDI's regional political party strengthening academy to build skills for successful policy development, including internal and external communication, the use of information and communications technology tools, and constituent relations. From 2021 to 2022, NDI supported The Gambia's Inter-party Committee (IPC) to facilitate inter-party dialogue, promote peaceful elections, and mainstream diversity within both the IPC and political parties. NDI also worked with the Commission on Political Debates to hold the country's first presidential candidate debate as well as a series of national assembly candidate debates. Between 2020 and 2023, NDI worked with The Gambia's executive branch to develop and implement strategies to enhance intra-government coordination, information sharing, and to improve communication efforts between institutions and the general public. Additionally during that time, NDI also partnered with the Election Watch Committee, a youth-led coalition of seven civil society organizations, to conduct The Gambia's first systematic, long-term citizen observation of all elections within the 2021 - 2023 election cycle, including the December 2021 presidential elections and April 2022 National Assembly elections, and to advocate for the implementation of recommendations that improve future electoral processes. Finally, in 2023 and 2024, NDI worked with the Gambia Press Union and the Ministry of Information to plan for and implement the Access to Information Act, 2021 by helping to develop a framework for implementation and training government, media, and civil society actors to effectively work within the structures of the law.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Courtney Creek | Program Director, Central and West Africa | ccreek@ndi.org

BANJUL, THE GAMBIA

Artan Alijaj | Senior Resident Director | aalijaj@ndi.org