Public Governance in Stalemate: Understanding Political Ambition, Civil Society Pressures, and Security Sector Apathy in the Gambia's Transition

*Kebba Gibba

Department of Management Sciences, School of Business and Public Administration, University of The Gambia, The Gambia

*Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the persistent political stalemate characterizing emerging democracies where ambitious political movements, activist civil societies, and a demotivated security establishment coexist in uneasy tension. Drawing on recent sociopolitical developments in The Gambia and comparable contexts, the study explores how excessive political ambition and fragmented civil advocacy, coupled with institutional fatigue within the security sector, have collectively contributed to governance stagnation and fragile state resilience. Through a governance and security lens, the paper argues that while political pluralism and civic engagement are essential to democratic deepening, their uncoordinated and confrontational manifestations often undermine institutional credibility, state authority, and social cohesion (Carothers, 2002; Resnick & Signé, 2025). The analysis concludes by proposing a recalibration of the political-civil-security interface, emphasizing constructive engagement, professional accountability, and strategic national dialogue as pathways toward sustainable democratic consolidation (Osborne, 2010; Linz & Stepan, 1996).

Keywords: political stalemate, democratic consolidation, civil-military relations, New Public Governance, The Gambia, civil society, political movements, governance reform

INTRODUCTION

In many transitioning democracies, political transformation has too often been accompanied by a cycle of ambition, activism, and apathy—where political elites pursue personal or party-centred goals, civil societies become increasingly reactionary, and security institutions lose the motivation and neutrality necessary for professional performance (Carothers, 2002; Linz & Stepan, 1996). The Gambia's post-authoritarian experience offers a telling example of this political paradox (Nabaneh, 2024). Once celebrated as a beacon of democratic renewal following the 2016 transition, the country now grapples with institutional stagnation, partisan fragmentation, and growing public disillusionment with governance and security institutions (Resnick & Signé, 2025; Daffeh et al., 2024).

The resurgence of politically ambitious movements and vocal civic groups-commonly observed in transitional democracies (Diamond, 1999; Bratton & van de Walle, 1997)-often intensifies competition within fragile political environments. Although these actors advocate accountability, their adversarial posture can deepen mistrust and polarization (Putnam, 2000; Fukuyama, 1995; Schedler, 2013). At the same time, the security sector, responsible for national stability, frequently suffers from low motivation, political interference, and stalled reforms (Hutchful, 2003; Bryden & Hänggi, 2005; Ball, 2002), resulting in a lack of strategic direction (Sedra, 2010).

This paper revisits the notion of political stalemate as both a symptom and a cause of governance fatigue. It seeks to unpack how these three actors-political movements, civil societies, and security institutions-interact within the post-transition landscape, shaping the trajectory of national stability and democratic governance. By

analysing these interdependent dynamics, the study contributes to broader debates on the challenges of sustaining reform momentum in fragile democracies, calling for renewed synergy, institutional professionalism, and balanced state-society relations (Daffeh et al., 2024; Osaghae, 2020).

The authors' own experiences, along with secondary research, serve as the basis for the article. Due to insufficient academic literature on Gambian politics and security studies, relevant data has also been gathered from interdisciplinary academic sources, grey literature, journalistic accounts, and social media (Yin, 2018).

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This analysis is grounded in the New Public Governance (NPG) framework, alongside theories of democratic consolidation and civil–military relations.

NPG emphasises pluralism, networked collaboration, and shared responsibility between state and non-state actors (Osborne, 2010). It argues that public value is co-produced through coordination rather than control. However, in fragile democracies, this networked ideal is often undermined by mistrust, competition, and limited institutional capacity (Ogunwa & Ogunwa, 2023).

From a democratic consolidation perspective, transitions from authoritarianism depend on institutional maturity and civic moderation (Linz & Stepan, 1996). More recent analyses highlight that Africa's democratic trajectory exhibits both consolidation and regression, shaped by institutional deficits and governance crises (Muhammad & Fanny Kinge, 2024; Carothers, 2002).

Civil–military relations theory (Huntington, 1957; Finer, 2006) underscores the tension between military professionalism and civilian political oversight. When political manipulation occurs without structural reform, morale erodes, capacity weakens, and neutrality collapses. The Gambian experience reflects this dilemma, where reforms initiated after 2017 remain incomplete and inconsistent (Resnick & Signé, 2025).

Together, these frameworks reveal how ambition, activism, and apathy intersect to sustain political stalemate rather than enable democratic progress.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in documentary analysis. It relies on secondary sources, including official government reports, policy documents, and scholarly literature on political transitions, civil society engagement, and security sector reform. Particular attention is given to The Gambia's trajectory as a post-authoritarian and transitioning democracy, where institutional restructuring and governance reforms remain contested.

Documentary analysis is used to systematically examine materials related to political movements, civil society organisations (CSOs), and the security sector. This approach enables a detailed exploration of how leadership ambitions, institutional fatigue, and civic activism intersect to shape political deadlock (Yin, 2018). The method is well suited for capturing complex, context-specific dynamics that are not easily quantifiable especially those concerning political behaviour, institutional culture, and governance reform processes.

By situating the analysis within The Gambia's ongoing transition, the study highlights relevant governance mechanisms such as security sector reform frameworks and emerging participatory dialogue platforms that illustrate both progress and persistent challenges. This methodological approach therefore provides a conceptual basis for understanding the broader implications of New Public Governance (NPG) practices within democratic transition settings.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Political Ambition and Fragmentation

In post-transition contexts, political ambition can either energise democracy or destabilise it. While the emergence of new movements signifies political pluralism, unchecked ambition often deteriorates into

competition for power devoid of policy coherence (Carothers, 2002; Bratton, 2007). Recent regional research indicates that weak governance and institutional fragmentation continue to hamper democratic consolidation across Africa (Resnick & Signé, 2025).

The Gambia's political landscape after 2016 reflects this paradox. The proliferation of political parties and movements-each portraying itself as a guardian of democratic renewal—has fragmented governance. Rather than consolidating democratic gains, elites have pursued personal or factional agendas, leading to coalition breakdowns and legislative paralysis (Daffeh et al., 2024).

Populist rhetoric has increasingly replaced policy engagement, with leaders mobilising citizens around grievances instead of governance issues (Olasunkanmi, 2024). This creates cycles of political noise but minimal institutional output. Ambition without reform orientation becomes an obstacle to state performance, turning democracy into a perpetual campaign cycle (Carothers, 2002).

These dynamics also strain civil society, forcing activists into reactive positions and polarising public discourse. The cumulative effect is a governance vacuum in which leadership legitimacy erodes and citizen trust diminishes (Minko, 2023).

Civil Society: Between Advocacy and Polarisation

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are vital to democratic deepening through accountability, service delivery, and mobilisation (Diamond, 1999). However, contemporary studies emphasise that CSO behaviour in Africa is shaped by embedded political networks, donor dependencies, limited autonomy, and internal fragmentation (Schritt, 2020; Ogunwa & Ogunwa, 2023).

During the 2016 democratic transition, Gambian CSOs mobilised citizens and defended electoral integrity. Yet, with political liberalisation, internal divisions and strategic misalignment emerged. Some CSOs aligned with political factions or donor priorities, compromising neutrality, while others prioritised visibility over sustained policy engagement (Minko, 2023).

This "activism fatigue" reduces credibility and undermines influence. Social media activism, though vibrant, often amplifies polarisation rather than promoting constructive dialogue (Ajaegbu & Ajaegbu, 2024).

A recalibrated civil society must embrace policy dialogue, coalition building, and self-regulation. Only through renewed professionalism and autonomy can CSOs maintain legitimacy as governance stakeholders.

Reforms without Transformation in the Security Sector

Security institutions form the backbone of national stability yet are often neglected in governance reform (Bryden & Hänggi, 2005). Analyses of Africa's democratic landscape confirm that civil-military relations and SSR remain essential to resilience (Resnick & Signé, 2025; Hutchful, 2003).

The Gambia's SSR agenda sought to modernise and professionalise its forces. However, progress remains slow and inconsistent. Morale within the armed forces and police has been eroded by irregular reforms, weak welfare systems, and political patronage (Ball, 2002). Leadership turnover and recycling of retired officers further demotivated younger professionals.

The absence of a coherent national security doctrine has left institutions reactive rather than strategic (Sedra, 2010). Public trust remains fragile due to historical memories of repression, creating a dual perception of security forces as both necessary and suspect. An uninspired security force contributes to national uncertainty. Motivation, professionalism, and autonomy are essential for anchoring democratic stability (Huntington, 1957).

The Governance Triangle: Ambition, Activism, and Apathy

The interaction among political movements, civil societies, and security institutions creates a condition of institutional fatigue (Bratton, 2007). Regional studies affirm that fragile democracies are plagued by overlapping challenges: weak checks and balances, polarisation, and security governance gaps (Resnick & Signé, 2025).

Each actor functions in relative isolation while expecting others to drive reforms. Political actors rely on civil society for legitimacy and on security forces for control. CSOs rely on political openness and security stability. Security institutions rely on political direction and public trust. When these interdependencies break down, governance enters a cycle of blame, mistrust, and stagnation (Diamond, 1999; Carothers, 2002).

The result is a fragile democracy that oscillates between hope and frustration. Institutions appear busy but achieve little. Policies are announced but rarely implemented. Citizens alternate between electoral enthusiasm and post-election cynicism. The Gambian case exemplifies this cyclical pattern of reform enthusiasm followed by reform fatigue (Daffeh et al., 2024).

RECOMMENDATIONS

A sustainable pathway out of political stagnation requires leadership committed to long-term institution-building rather than narrow electoral gains. As seen in Ghana's steady democratic consolidation, reforms anchored in issue-based politics, internal party democracy, and civic education have strengthened governance by reducing personality-driven competition (Carothers, 2002; Olasunkanmi, 2024).

Civil society organisations must also evolve beyond confrontational activism toward structured, evidence-based policy engagement. Kenya offers an encouraging example: following the 2010 constitutional reforms, coordinated CSO platforms such as the Kenya Human Rights Commission and Uwiano Peace Platform demonstrated how self-regulation, transparency, and policy-oriented advocacy can meaningfully influence governance outcomes (Minko, 2023).

Security sector reform should prioritise professionalism, meritocracy, and improved welfare to reinforce impartiality. Liberia's post-war restructuring-led by ECOWAS, the UN, and national authorities—illustrates how merit-based recruitment, leadership accountability, and depoliticisation can rebuild trust in the security forces (Hutchful, 2003; Ball, 2002). Strengthening inter-agency cooperation through joint policy councils and shared governance frameworks is equally essential. Rwanda's integrated planning model, which aligns ministries and local governments through performance contracts and cross-sector coordination, demonstrates the potential of such mechanisms to reduce bureaucratic fragmentation (Osborne, 2010).

Finally, inclusive national dialogue initiatives grounded in truth, reconciliation, and transparency can rebuild cohesion in divided societies. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and The Gambia's recent Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC) show how structured dialogue processes can foster healing, restore confidence in public institutions, and lay the foundation for democratic resilience (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Together, these reforms present a practical roadmap for revitalising governance and restoring public trust across African democracies.

CONCLUSION

The political stalemate facing The Gambia and comparable democracies is systemic, rooted in misalignments among political ambition, civic activism, and institutional inertia. Political movements pursue rhetorical reform, civil societies grapple with overreach and fragmentation, and the security sector remains demotivated and structurally constrained (Resnick & Signé, 2025; Diamond, 1999).

Through NPG principles, renewed civil–military professionalism, and sustained institutional dialogue, tension can be transformed into cooperation. Democratic consolidation requires coordinated ambition, engagement, and accountability. Only through synergy and shared responsibility can fragile democracies move from cycles of impasse to durable governance and stability.

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