

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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The Gambia Revisited

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Dear Peter,

"The Gambia goes from bad to worse. The boys on the street have gotten very bold. They pull watches off the wrist, chains from the neck. It's not safe to walk on the street anymore."

Uncle Joe welcomed me back to his guest house, where I had lived for the first six months of last year, with tales of violence and banditry. To hear him tell it, Banjul had changed in the six months I'd been away from the quiet town I knew to another West African crime capital. Cars were stolen, people were held up at gunpoint. In Serrekunda, a teeming residential area for the unwealthy workers in Banjul, guns could be bought illegally in the market, according to Uncle Joe.

While thievery has been on the rise for some time, the usual targets were white tourists, and the riskiest areas were downtown Banjul and Bakau, site of the tourist hotels and expatriate homes. The influx of crime in Serrekunda, with middle-class Gambians as the victims, marks a serious worsening of conditions. One of Uncle Joe's friends was slashed with a broken bottle by a youth who accosted him on a dark street in Serrekunda. Another friend had his car stolen from in front of a bar there. Such incidents come as a shock to most Gambians, who have prided themselves on their peaceful, law-abiding society.

Other Gambians I talked with said Uncle Joe exaggerated the crime problem, and I am sure they are right. He does have a tendency to embroider the truth. He warned me against walking around Banjul as I had during my stay last year. After some trepidation, I disregarded this advice, and in my brief visit I did not detect any hardening of attitudes or feel that I was in any danger. However, Uncle Joe's stories are usually founded on facts, and he is in a better position than most Gambians to know the full extent of the crime wave. The police inspector-general and the head of the department's criminal investigation division are frequent visitors to his bar and to his backroom dining table.

Banjul is only going the way of other cities whose community is being torn apart by swelling unemployment and shrinking expectations. Without a major improvement in standards of living, law officials have little hope of stopping the spread of crime. The result is an increasing severity in dealing with

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criminals. The threat of a jail sentence is not much deterrent to people who live in crowded, squalid shacks. Prison conditions are not much worse than what they are used to. A prisoner still has a place to sleep, some shelter from the weather and regular meals. The loss of freedom means little to a person who has no money with which to go anywhere or to do anything. Also, prisoners in West Africa don't bear the same stigma as those in the U.S. do. During the day they work at public jobs in the community, such as cleaning drainage ditches and sweeping streets. The prisoners' relationship with their guards and with passersby is relaxed and friendly. I have even met prisoners in The Gambia, hired out to private citizens, working without supervision.

In a land of extreme poverty, perhaps the only deterrent to thievery is the threat of a physical punishment that seems cruel and inordinate to Western eyes. Islamic law says a thief's hand should be chopped off. Mauritania, to the north of The Gambia, adopted the Islamic code as the law of the land last year and made the meting out of justice, including the amputation of thieves' hands, a public event. In Nigeria, armed robbers were publicly executed by firing squad until outcries in the Western press convinced the government to halt the practice. Now, with crime in Lagos seemingly out of control, authorities have discussed reinstating the executions. Lately, the Western press has focused on the blinding of criminals by police in one Indian state. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi joined the ranks of those who condemned the act as uncivilized, but the people of the state, according to press reports, support the police action. Poor people are the hardest hit by crime and the harshest opponents of criminals. A thief is as likely to steal a poor man's radio, which may have taken a year to save for, as that of a rich man who can buy a replacement the next day. No wonder that in West Africa, as elsewhere in the poverty-stricken world, a thief about to be caught in the street will often flee to a police station. Better to take one's punishment from a judge than at the hands of a mob.

The average Gambian can only look forward to tougher times in the months ahead. The tourist season is verging on disaster. The deluxe Atlantic Hotel, with a 250-room extension just opened, was only 60 percent full the week I was in Banjul, the middle of the tourist season. I was told the Atlantic is doing better than most of the other six tourist hotels. One hotel had closed its doors because of the scarcity of guests, putting about 100 Gambians out of work. The Gambian government was hoping for a good tourist season to offset another bad growing season for the peanut crop. The rise in peanut prices on international commodity markets because of the poor U.S. harvest won't do much to stop The Gambia's mounting budget deficits.

Another source of irritation in the capital area is the erratic power supply. With the installation of new power generators in June, the government promised the days of unreliable electricity would soon be over. To allow customers to prepare for power cuts while supply is still short of demand, the Gambia Utilities Corporation has a rotation system for blackouts during peak hours. Different sections of the city have their power cut

off from about seven to ten at night once every four days. During my six-day visit, however, the entire city went out for a few hours on two consecutive nights. If GUC is unable to meet the demand for power during the relatively cool month of January, it could have lots of trouble in March when all the air conditioners are turned on.

Gambians have learned to live with the power cuts, but their patience is wearing thin. They date the start of the power shortages to a blackout on Tabaski Day, a Muslim holiday, in late 1976. Power failures are common occurrences in most West African cities, and like their fellow sufferers in neighboring countries, Gambians have given derisive alternative names to their power company's initials—the Gambia Useless Corporation, or more explicitly, Gambia Uses Candles. That sense of humor may not last forever. Some people link the rise in crime to the power cuts that have left streets, homes and businesses in darkness. If businessmen and middle-class homeowners get fed up as they continue being the victims of crime, the government could lose its strongest supporters.

While I was there, Banjul seemed as peaceful as ever. I was struck by the friendliness and helpfulness of the people, especially in shops and offices, so different from the rude and surly attitudes of store clerks and office workers in Freetown. Politically, the country seems calm. Mention of the murder of the deputy police commander or of the four-day visit of Senegalese troops doesn't excite much discussion. The Libyan embassy remains closed, but with an air of temporariness. The embassy cars are parked in the driveway behind a locked gate, as if their drivers and passengers were only away on vacation.

The only visible signs of the turbulent events of October were the spray-painted graffiti on many buildings. They called for the support of MOJA, the banned Movement for Justice in Africa, sometimes coupled with inflammatory slogans. That no one has felt compelled to remove the words may be an indication that few people take them seriously. An acquaintance of mine who knows one of the six jailed MOJA leaders **thinks that they** didn't authorize the graffiti and don't endorse violent revolution. He attributes the signs to the same "hooligans" who are responsible for the street crime. The extent to which the government is concerned about MOJA may be revealed by the outcome of the leaders' trial, now in progress. The man accused of murdering the police commander has appealed his conviction and death sentence. The murder had no apparent political connections.

The government had instituted some new taxes and raised some prices, including gasoline, since I left, but it seems to have inflation in check. I didn't notice any dramatic increases in prices, another sharp contrast to Freetown where prices went up noticeably during the four weeks I was in England. Both countries have price controls; in The Gambia they work, in Sierra Leone they are a joke. I am uncertain of the reason for the difference. On the other hand, the government's ban on charcoal, an attempt to reverse the rapid deforestation of the country, is not being fully respected. Charcoal lots in the city have converted to selling wood and residents have changed their cooking methods, but they still use charcoal to prepare attaya, a sweet tea that is boiled repeatedly. The price of

charcoal has risen substantially in the city. I'm told that plenty is smuggled into the rural areas from Senegal.

The general reaction in Africa to the inauguration of Ronald Reagan as president is dismay. I encountered a striking exception to this prevailing opinion from a Ghanaian teacher of history and government at a high school in Banjul. I include his views to show that political opinions in Africa are as diverse as anywhere else in the world. His political views are also of interest because of his job, although his students often engage in arguments with him.

The teacher, Amadi Atta, said he was gladdened by Reagan's inaugural address because he wants to see a strong America to counter the threat of Russian expansion. "There are two superpowers in the world, Russia and America, and all the other countries of the world have to follow one or the other. People may not like it, but that's the way it is."

He had nothing but contempt for Carter's pronouncements on human rights, accusing the former president of hypocrisy. He cited the barring of blacks from the Plains Baptist church as proof of Carter's insincerity, an argument I have heard before from Africans. "President Carter pulled America right down into the mud," Atta said. "I hope Reagan makes America powerful again."

I asked if he wasn't concerned about the possibility of the Reagan administration installing an unpopular government in Africa, like a military government in Ghana for example. The U.S. had had a hand in the 1966 Ghanaian coup that overthrew socialist President Kwame Nkrumah, and the current president, Hilla Limann, has wrapped himself in Nkrumah's mantle.

Atta said the U.S. would not become involved in such activities again because "America isn't concerned about what happens in Africa." He said U.S. indifference to Africa was made clear in Angola. "America didn't really want to get involved. What it did was too little and too late." He would have liked to see a U.S.-supported faction take control of the government in Angola. He said he saw nothing wrong with the U.S. protecting its interests around the world.

Atta's conservatism extended even as far as South Africa. He insisted that the blacks there enjoyed a better standard of living than they would with a black government. He predicted that Zimbabwe would prove his point. "That country is going to break out in civil war soon. It's the same all over Africa, African against African, one tribe against another. The problem with Africans is that we've never learned fair-mindedness. In the whole continent, in the whole history of independence, you'll never find one fair-minded African leader."

Atta's political opinions would probably not be supported by most Africans, but his pessimism about African brotherhood is not uncommon. Two other times during my stay in Banjul, I heard Africans criticizing the way Africans treat each other. I have been surprised by how often I've encountered such sentiments in the past year. For many Africans, the hope of African unity has grown dim.

Regards,  
  
Bowen Quinn