

Crowds celebrate new President's triumphant return to Gambia

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Banjul: President Adama Barrow returned triumphantly to Gambia on Thursday, nearly two months after winning an election disputed by the country's longtime dictator, to the cheers of hundreds of thousands who jammed the roads in welcome.

Gambian President Adama Barrow

"That's my president!" the crowds cried, eager to see Barrow fulfill the promise of democratic reforms and newfound freedoms in this tiny West African nation.

The impasse after the Dec. 1 balloting had brought Gambia to the brink of military intervention, as regional leaders vowed to install the democratically elected Barrow despite legal efforts by longtime ruler Yahya Jammeh to overturn the result of the vote. Barrow had flown to Banjul from Senegal, where he had waited for Jammeh to leave Gambia.

"Barrow! Barrow!" people shouted from atop vehicles as far as the eye could see at sunset Thursday as the president's convoy made its way through Banjul. Women danced on minibuses and the sound of drums and music blared in the streets. Spontaneous parties erupted.

Barrow stood out of the roof of his vehicle and waved as he slowly made his way on a tour of the city and back to his home.

"I am a happy man today," Barrow told The Associated Press amid the crush of his arrival. "I think the bad part is finished now."

He promised to get his Cabinet in place and "then get the ball rolling," adding that a commission would be set up to address reconciliation.

Gambians had eagerly awaited Barrow, who has promised to reverse many of the authoritarian policies of Jammeh. The former leader oversaw a government accused of imprisoning, torturing and killing his political opponents. Some political prisoners have been released, but the fate of many who have disappeared remains unknown.

"Every Gambian must be free. We suffered for 22 years, but now enough is enough," said Seedia Badjie, 37.

Jammeh, who had been accused of rigging previous elections during his regime, initially called Barrow to concede after the balloting. But when the talk began about whether he could be indicted on war crimes charges, Jammeh shocked the world with a dramatic about-face, saying he would not cede power after all.

The international community, alarmed by Jammeh's unpredictability, said the election was fair and threw its support behind Barrow, a 51-year-old businessman.

Concerns emerged for Barrow's safety, and regional mediators urged him to wait for Jammeh's departure in neighboring Senegal. Ultimately, Barrow was sworn in Jan. 19 at the Gambian Embassy in Dakar, though officials say another celebration will be held in Gambia.

Jammeh finally left Gambia last weekend, bowing to international pressure and ending his more than 22-year rule. The

West African troops were poised to oust him if talks failed. Since then, they have been securing the country for Barrow's arrival.

A larger, more formal ceremony to welcome Barrow home will take place at a later date, spokesman Halifa Sallah said.

About 2,500 of the ECOWAS troops remain in Gambia "in the capital, Banjul, as well as at key crossing points between Gambia and Senegal and at the port and airport, according to Sweden's U.N. Ambassador Olof Skoog, the current U.N. Security Council president.

Barrow has asked the troops to stay for six months to provide security, said Mohamed Ibn Chambas, special representative of the U.N. secretary-general and head of the U.N. Office for West Africa and the Sahel.

Gambia, with nearly 1.9 million people, has become an example in West Africa as the region strives for stable, democratic changes of power. The world watched as Gambians showed they wanted change, supporting a coalition of opposition parties whose aim was to oust Jammeh and put the country on a path toward greater freedoms.

Jammeh ended up in Equatorial Guinea, taking luxury cars and other riches amassed during his presidency, and accompanied by family and trusted security guards.

When he left, Banjul exploded in celebration, with music blaring from speakers and people dancing in the streets.

Barrow faces immediate challenges, including a government that appears to be broke. Jammeh left the state coffers empty, the new leader has said.

Gambia's biggest export is peanuts, although the country, the smallest on Africa's mainland, also has become a significant source of migrants making their way to Europe.

Tourism is a vital industry, but the increasingly isolationist Jammeh regime had frightened away many visitors, and it remains unclear how long it will take hotels and resorts to recover.

The coming months will be crucial to building a country without a climate of fear and working toward reconciliation. Barrow has vowed greater freedoms and reforms to the security forces and the constitution.

Barrow already has named a female vice president, Fatoumata Tambajang, who has called for Jammeh's prosecution for alleged human rights abuses. But it emerged that she might be above the constitutional age limit for the post, and Barrow said he will form a vetting committee for further appointments.

Sallah, the spokesman, said a human rights commission will be set up and the new government will create a freedom of information act.

"We expect a lot of things from Barrow," said 26-year-old Modou Fall, who, like many others, wore T-shirt with the slogan "#Gambiahasdecided" to show support for Barrow. "We want the forces to stay so that we can reform our army ... and we need development in this country."

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