



# The Politics of HIV Treatment Policy in the Gambia

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## Introduction

On January 18<sup>th</sup> 2007, President of the Gambia, Yahya Abdul-Aziz Jammeh announced that he had a cure for HIV, "I can treat asthma and HIV/Aids and the cure is a day's treatment. Within three days the person should be tested again and I can tell you that he/she will be negative.". Claiming a mandate from Allah, Jammeh claimed that using a combination of herbs and traditional healing methods he had the ability to cure 10 patients of HIV on a Thursday. This announcement marked the beginning of Jammeh's Presidential Alternative Treatment Programme.

This study aims to understand Jammeh's political motivations for implementing his HIV treatment programme. In this literature review, I aim to put together an understanding of what current theories of African Politics and HIV Treatment policy would say in answer to this question, when applied to what is known about Jammeh's HIV Treatment and broader studies around HIV in the Gambia and Gambian society.

"I can treat asthma and HIV/Aids and the cure is a day's treatment. Within three days the person should be tested again and I can tell you that he/she will be negative."

- Yahya Jammeh, Jan '07

## The African State

The term "African Politics", is inherently vague and even misleading, insofar as it claims to possess a meta-theoretical explanation for the vast majority of political behaviour on a large and diverse continent. Therefore, when incorporating one's analysis into the body of work that is African Politics, it must be considered what is the commonality between everything that we place under this label. This study takes the theoretical framework that African Politics is politics in which the origins of the state are exogenous - 'The African State is neither African nor a State'. It descends from arbitrary colonial administrative units designed as instruments of domination, oppression and exploitation. This unfamiliarity of the state to those whom reside in it, and in fact that it was imposed forcefully, is significant as the inherent legitimacy that the state provides its leaders in the West is lost. The state is not a viable power structure. States and governments are not afforded legitimacy by virtue of their position. This means that in order to maintain their political authority leaders must find alternative ways of not having their legitimacy challenged. This is commonly done through allocation of state resources, in order to keep powerful interest groups onside. This power structure, known as prebendalism, is used to fashion political stability by rulers. This study's aim to understanding Jammeh's political motivation in implementing PATP is operating in the assumption that Gambia is a politically structured in a prebendalistic fashion. We assume that there is something about the political landscape and power structures that existed in the Gambia in 2007, that Jammeh wished to change by use of PATP.

## The Politics of HIV in The Gambia

President Jammeh was not first African Leader to harness the political utility of AIDs. This section will look at the role AIDs has played in influencing government structures in Africa, understanding that in a Gambian context, making the argument that action on HIV policy poses a greater threat to the power of an African, competitively authoritarian leader than the virus itself. International, NGO AIDs action focusses primarily on providing aid, not challenging governments who are failing to do so, however, this does not mean that NGOs do not provide a genuine threat to government legitimacy, as will be elaborated on. The reoccurring theme that African states are patrimonial not bureaucratic, as has been consistently highlighted. This means that allocation of state resources and political position is primarily done based on interest group dynamics, not qualifications or any other metric of merit. Consequentially, the impact of population loss, especially in youth, and the subsequent skill shortages are less impactful. Lastly, and centrally in the context of PATP, is that the allocation of AIDs treatment resources, as with any form of state allocated benefits, can be directed to appease and please various interest groups, such that those with political power can benefit from the returning goodwill.

The relationship between healthcare providing NGOs in Africa and the governments of the countries they reside in can be understood from a theoretical point of view in terms of legitimacy capture. In an African, prebendalistic political context 'legitimacy' simply means to gain political control of certain actors through allocation of resources. Thus, legitimacy capture is just to change an actor's preferences by means of providing them with resources. The argument is International government structures capture the agency of certain actors, which creates a domain of government where people with HIV are constructed independent of their everyday lives.

This process is carried out by NGO's presence in African states allocating resources to communities with HIV in such a way that, although these individuals remain citizens of the state, they are governed in their capacity as HIV patients by international HIV policy. This is the theoretical framework behind the previously described relationship between British medical researchers and HIV patients in the Gambia. From a functional perspective, a de facto governance regime emerges with remit of HIV policy. This framing makes it easy to see why the presence of Western HIV Treatment in the Gambia poses such a great threat to Jammeh. Colonising a country's HIV policy poses a much bigger threat to post-colonial countries' power structures than imposing western political institutions' mandates on them because the power mechanism that HIV policy uses to gain legitimacy is one that is native and familiar to a post-colonial, African context. NGO's aid is primarily directed towards poverty and the number of resources readily available to NGO's vastly exceeds what many poor African governments can provide their citizens. Thus, this linkage between NGOs and the community provides a form of legitimacy that is almost unchallengeable.

## The Gambia and The Presidential Alternative Treatment Program

The Gambia is a West African, ex-British colony, gaining independence in 1965. It is a primarily Muslim country and has four main ethnic groups; Wolof, Mandinka, Jola and Fula. There is a deep culture of traditional medicine and other cultural practices across Gambian ethnic groups. Yahya Jammeh, a member of the Jola ethnic group, took power in 1994 in a military coup. Jammeh's grandfather and the Jola ethnic group generally were known in the Gambia to be traditional healers. In 2007, in the wake of the AIDS Crisis, Gambians were afraid of the threat AIDs posed to them, however the population prevalence of the virus was only 1.8%. Jammeh launched PATP in January 2007, alongside newly promoted National AIDS Secretariat, Dr. Tamsir Mbowe. The program was launched alongside a media campaign. Jammeh's treatments, which entailed rubbing a mixture of nuts and herbs into the patient's skin and blessing them with prayers, were broadcast on Gambian television. Patient's personal medical records and identities were released in Gambian government press statements, alongside updates on the program's success. Patients were forced to stop taking anti-retroviral treatment in order to be enrolled in PATP. Throughout the program's term Jammeh claimed in Gambian Press to have cured 9,000 patients of HIV, however Tamsir Mbowe later confessed in an investigation of the program, that only 311 HIV positive patients were enrolled. Jammeh sent his patient's blood samples to a be tested for CD4 levels in Senegal and used the results to argue his treatment's scientific legitimacy. In spite of a lack of protest from the general Gambian public, perhaps due to Jammeh's military heavy police state, anonymous surveys from the time show that very few Gambians believed that the program was scientifically legitimate.

## The Gambian State and British Medical Presence

The Gambia in 2007 is as a 'Competitive Authoritarian' state. British medical institutions played a key role in ensuring the presence of Western political structures in post-colonial Gambia. This linkage provided a threat to Jammeh's political hold on the country. Competitive Authoritarianism is defined as a regime where the formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority. Jammeh's regime perfectly fits this description. During his over 20 years in power he won four highly disputed, multiparty elections by landslide margins. Allowing him to operate under a guise of legitimacy sufficient enough to placate any external forces from intervening. There seems to be a trend across Africa that cultural proximity to the West increases the propensity of competitive authoritarian regimes to democratise. Acting democratically leads to becoming democratic. The Gambia's main source of British cultural presence came directly through British Medical Research. It is also worth considering, in light of the assumptions laid out previously, regarding the Gambia having a prebendalistic political structure, how HIV treatment functions a political tool from the point of view of British medical researchers. Unlike most western power structures when transported to an African context, HIV treatment is not relying on some intangible plea to an unfamiliar democratic justice, it is a direct for of resource allocation that requires personal interest group engagement. This means that foreign medical actors in the Gambia were able to gain a political foothold in the country, not by carrying their weight of professional legitimacy in a western context, but through prebendalism; allocating large amount of wealth and resources to social interest groups. The argument is that funding capacity of an external actor is substantial enough that these conditional linkages pressure a country into democratisation through ever-increasing Western partnership. In the Gambia, this may take the form of Jammeh needing to conduct himself politically in a manner that is deemed legitimate in the eyes of Western onlookers. This is the central connection between Jammeh's 'Competitive Authoritarian' state and HIV treatment as a conditional linkage to Western funding institutions. It politically constrains Jammeh.

"I am not a witch doctor and in fact you cannot have a witch doctor. You are either a witch or a doctor."

- Yahya Jammeh, Jan '07

## President Jammeh and his HIV Policy

The explanation that the arguments lead us to, is that Jammeh aimed to use PATP as a means of weakening British presence in the Gambia as he saw them as a threat to his power. This threat manifested primarily in two forms. Firstly, that due to the amount of resources that NGO's and researching bodies were able to acquire, the Gambia's own healthcare service could not compete. This is significant because HIV was some a force for fear in the minds of Gambians and consequentially, the actors who could provide treatment for the virus and improve healthcare in the community gain legitimacy in that community, due to the Gambia's political structure. Thus, the Gambian healthcare system was not able to compete with British, medical actors when it came to legitimacy capture. Secondly, this heavy British Medical presence in The Gambia provided a linkage to the West. This meant both that Jammeh's behaviour was under more non-Gambian eyes and that non-Gambian ideals made their way into the country. This forced Jammeh to act democratically within his competitively authoritarian regime, decreasing the stability of his power.

Jammeh implements HIV treatment program that latches on a backdrop of Gambian ideals, such as his history of traditional healing through Jola connections and the power of Allah's spiritual healing, all while claiming legitimacy in Western medical terms, arguing that his program is scientifically sound. Harness this trifecta of elements is specifically done to delegitimise the British medical presence in the Gambia and thus weaken the political threat the pose to him.