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Gambians trust the armed forces but are split over the presence of ECOMIG

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 317 | Sait Matty Jaw

Summary

In August 2017, as part of a broader reform agenda, Gambian President Adama Barrow launched a security sector reform (SSR) process to overhaul the country's security institutions in line with democratic norms and practices. The reform initiative is premised on the notion that the Gambia's security institutions, particularly the military, were politicized and "polluted" under former President Yahya Jammeh (Jaw, 2018; Jawo, 2018).

A few months into the process, an SSR assessment report flagged many gaps and malfunctions within the state security apparatus, including inadequate legal and policy frameworks and a lack of civilian oversight to direct security-sector governance (Foroyaa, 2018).

While the Gambia is working on a legal and policy framework to strengthen security governance, the continued presence of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Military Intervention in Gambia, known as ECOMIG, has also been a source of controversy.

ECOMIG, composed of about 500 troops from Senegal, Nigeria, and Ghana, was deployed to help restore order and democracy following Jammeh's initial refusal to leave office despite his defeat in the December 2016 presidential election (Point, 2017). The force was tasked with training and assisting the army and police in protecting the country from external threats and maintaining internal security, respectively. ECOMIG and the police have also been providing close protection for President Barrow (European Asylum Support Office, 2017). After repeated extensions (Africa-EU Partnership, 2018), the ECOMIG mandate was expected to end in August 2019 (Freedom Newspaper, 2019), but Barrow has announced that the security force would remain stationed in the Gambia throughout the country's transition to a full democracy in 2021 (Fatu Network, 2018).

While some observers have questioned whether the Gambia Armed Forces are prepared to keep the nation safe, particularly from former members of Jammeh's hit squad who are feared to be planning to destabilize the country, others have seen Barrow's call to extend ECOMIG's mandate as evidence of his insecurity and lack of trust in the nation's military (Jaw, 2017). Analysts perceive a brewing discontent among the armed forces and are calling for the president to build a stronger relationship of trust with the Gambian military (News 24, 2018).

Afrobarometer's first national survey in the Gambia reveals that citizens are divided as to whether ECOMIG should stay or leave. While a majority trust the armed forces and believe they protect the country from external and internal security threats, citizens express high levels of insecurity in their neighbourhoods and at political events.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer directs a pan-African, nonpartisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2020 are planned in at least 35 countries.

Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples. The Afrobarometer team in the Gambia, led by the Centre for Policy, Research and Strategic Studies (CepRass), interviewed 1,200 adult Gambians in July and August 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

Key findings

- Majorities of Gambians say they trust the Gambia Armed Forces (65%) and police (60%) "somewhat" or "a lot."
- Six in 10 (61%) say the Gambia Armed Forces "often" or "always" protect the country from external and internal security threats, and half (50%) say members of the military are respectful to citizens. However, only 37% say the armed forces get the resources they need to be effective.
- Among citizens who requested police assistance in the previous 12 months, fewer than half say that they found it easy to get the help they needed (44%) and that they received the needed assistance "right away" or "after a short time" (46%). One in five (20%) say they had to pay a bribe or do a favour to get the help they needed.
- About four in 10 Gambians say they were victims of theft from their house (40%) or felt unsafe walking in their neighbourhood (36%) during the previous year. One in four (25%) feared crime in their home, and one in 14 (7%) were physically attacked.
- In the past two years, about half or more of Gambians have feared or experienced violence among people in their neighbourhood (53%), during a public protest (49%), or at political events (56%).
- Gambians are split as to whether ECOMIG should leave and allow the Gambia Armed Forces and Gambia Police Force to take charge of security matters in the country.

Perceptions of the Gambia Armed Forces

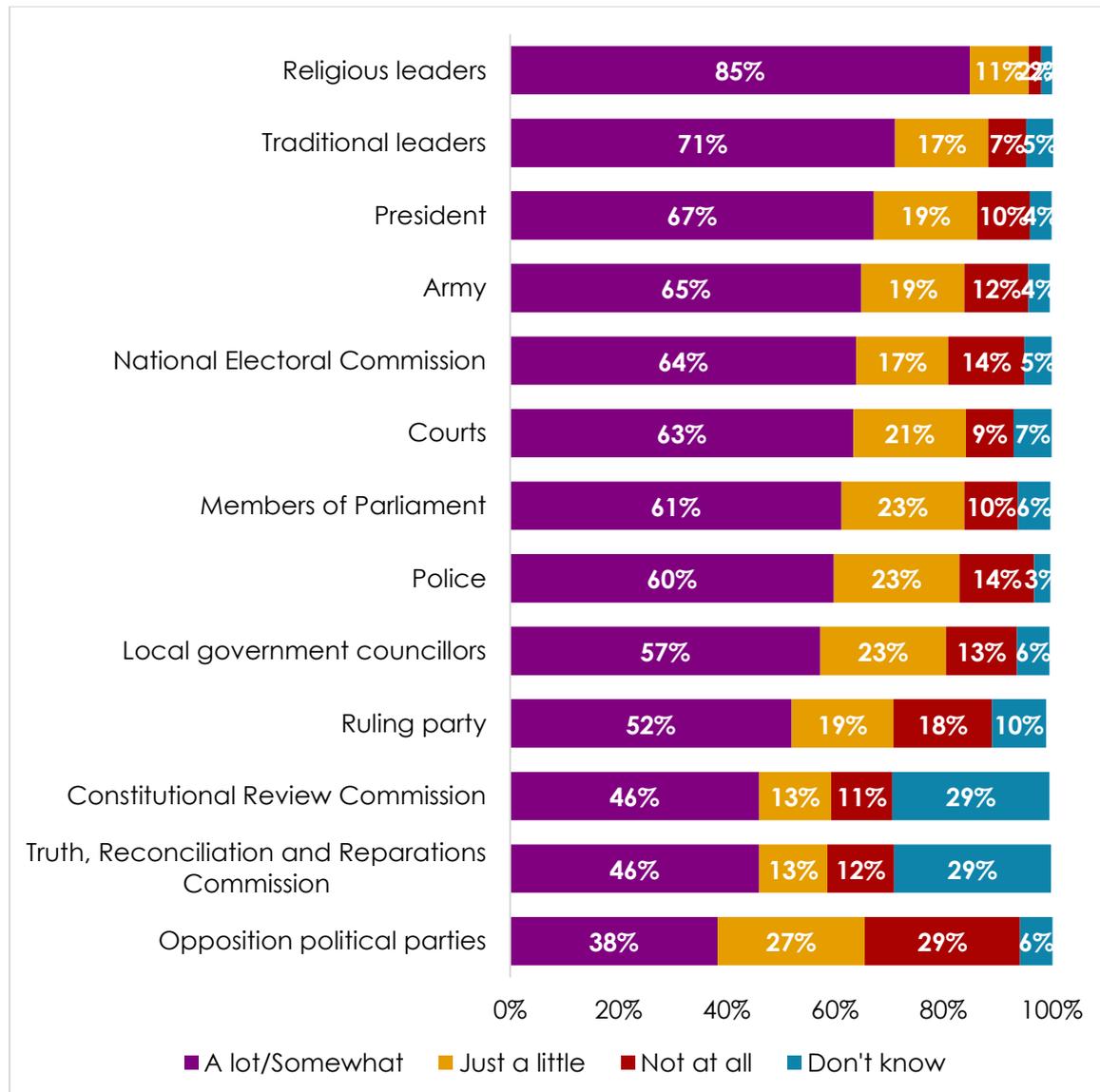
In July 1994, Yahya Jammeh led a group of junior Gambia Armed Forces officers in a successful coup (Jallow, 2019), and for more than two decades, he used the military to consolidate his power, often by instilling fear in citizens. Since Jammeh's defeat in the 2016 elections, the military has returned to its barracks, arrested so-called "jungulars" accused of extra-judicial killings and torture under orders from Jammeh, reinstated some members of the army who had been dismissed under Jammeh, and sought to establish its independence from political control (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2018). The army has also made efforts to strengthen civil-military relations in the country (Point, 2018).

These initiatives seem to have yielded positive results: Afrobarometer's maiden survey in the Gambia, conducted in 2018, reveals that two-thirds (65%) of citizens say they trust the Gambia Armed Forces at least "somewhat," including 48% who say they trust them "a lot." About three in 10 say they trust the military "just a little" (19%) or do not trust them at all (12%) (Figure 1). Among key institutions and leaders in the country, the army ranks fourth in popular

trust, after religious leaders (trusted “somewhat” or “a lot” by 85% of respondents), traditional leaders (71%), and the President (67%).

Only slightly less trusted than the army, the police enjoy the confidence (“somewhat” or “a lot”) of 60% of Gambians, while 23% trust them “just a little” and 14% say they do not trust them at all.

Figure 1: Trust in institutions and leaders | The Gambia | 2018

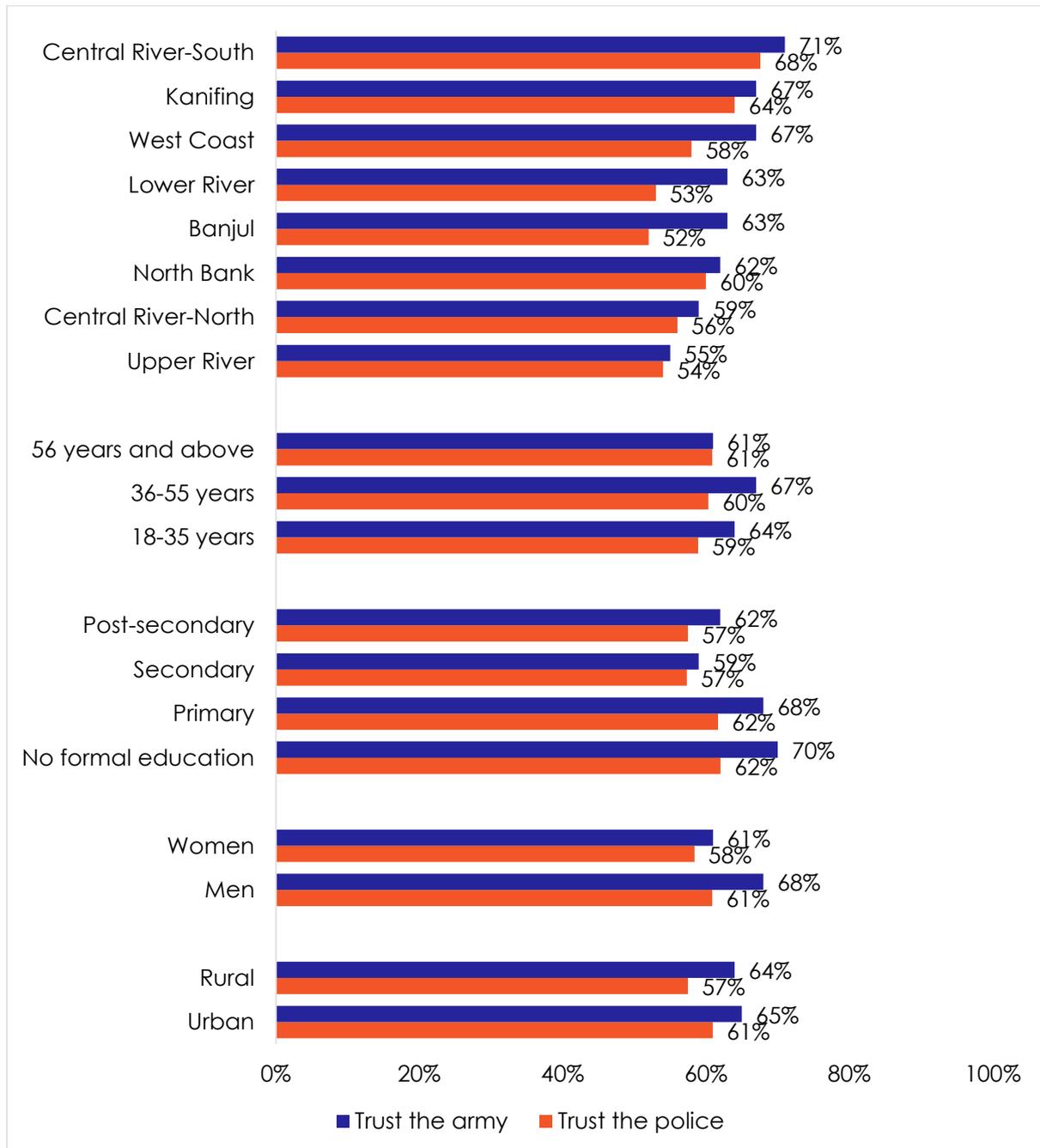


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Popular trust in the Gambia Armed Forces is strongest in Central River-South (71%), Kanifing (67%), and West Coast (67%) and lowest in Upper River (55%). Women are less likely than men to express trust in the military (61% vs. 68%), as are respondents with secondary or post-secondary education (59%-62%) compared to their less-educated counterparts (68%-70%) (Figure 2).

Popular trust in the police shows a similar pattern with regard to regions and education levels.

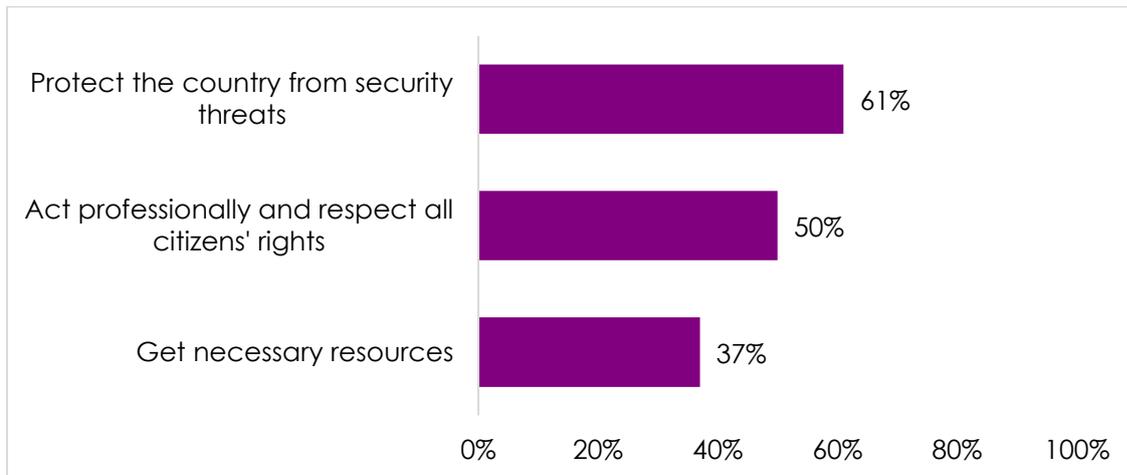
Figure 2: Popular trust in the Gambia Armed Forces | by socio-demographic group
 | The Gambia | 2018



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say they trust the army "somewhat" or "a lot")

Citizens have mixed feelings about the performance of the armed forces. While six in 10 (62%) say the armed forces "often" or "always" keep the country safe from external and internal security threats, only half (51%) say they "often" or "always" act professionally and respect the rights of all citizens (Figure 3). Fewer than four in 10 (37%) say the armed forces get the resources they need to be effective.

Figure 3: Performance of armed forces | The Gambia | 2018



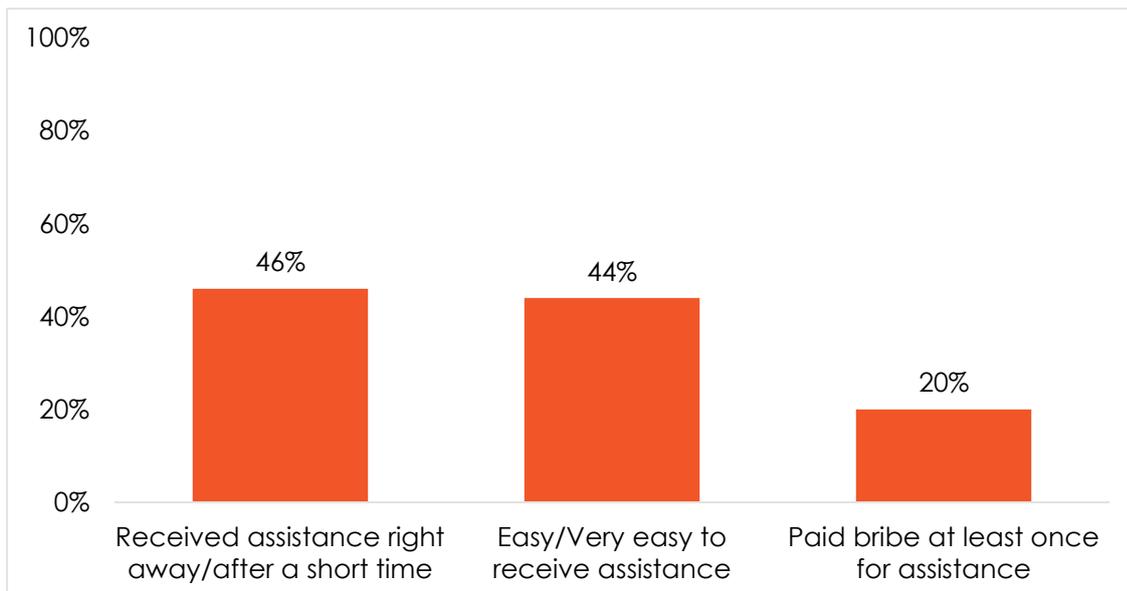
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, to what extent do the armed forces of our country:

- Keep our country safe from external and internal security threats?
- Operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?
- Get the training and equipment needed to be effective?

(% who say "often" or "always")

With regard to the perceived performance of the police, fewer than half of respondents who sought police assistance during the 12 months preceding the survey say that they received the needed assistance "right away" or "after a short time" (46%) and that it was "easy" or "very easy" to obtain help (44%). One in five (20%) say they had to pay a bribe or do a favour to get police assistance (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Getting assistance from the police | The Gambia | 2018



Respondents who had requested assistance from the police in the previous 12 months were asked:

- How easy or difficult was it to obtain the assistance you needed?
- How long did it take you to receive the help you needed from the police?
- And how often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed?

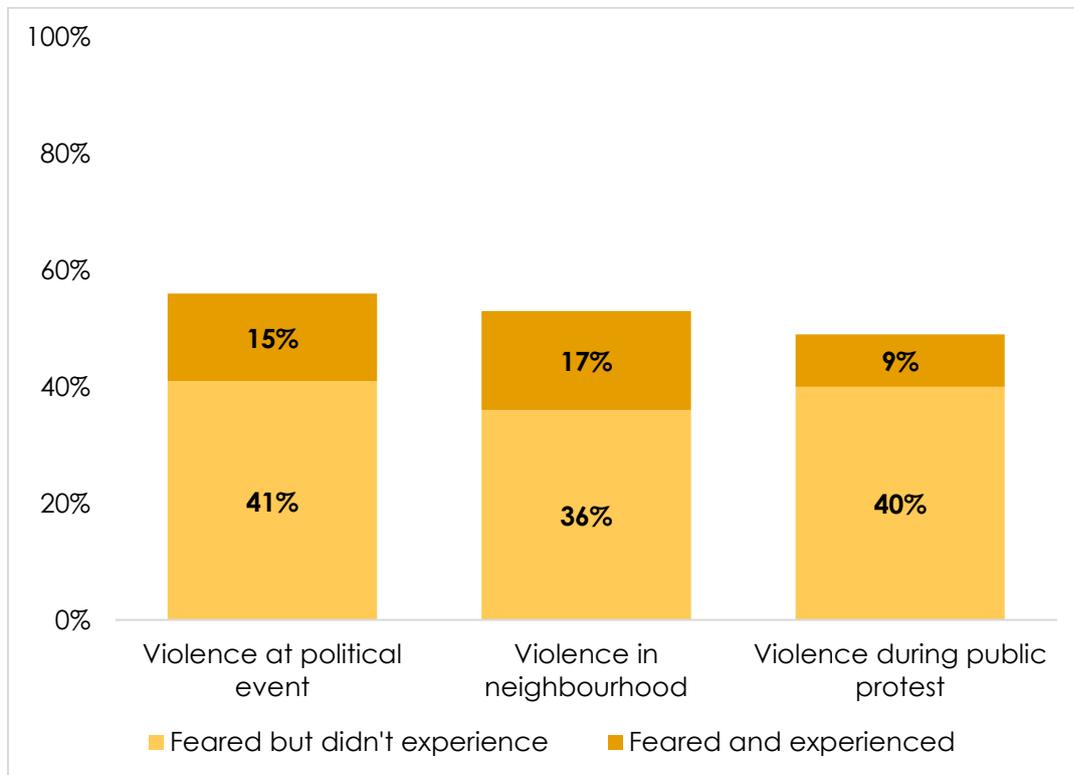
(Note: Respondents who had not requested police assistance in the previous 12 months are excluded.)

Feeling unsafe in the Gambia?

Although ECOMIG was intended to complement efforts of the police and armed forces in ensuring personal and political security in the Gambia, insecurity seems rife in the country. More than half (53%) of Gambians say they feared violence among people in their neighbourhood or village during the previous two years, including 17% who say they actually experienced such violence. Similar proportions say they feared violence at political events (56%, including 15% who experienced it) or during a public protest (49%, including 9% who experienced it) (Figure 5).

In addition, four in 10 respondents (40%) say they were victims of theft from their house during the previous year, while 36% say they felt unsafe walking in their neighbourhood (Figure 6). One in four (25%) feared crime in their home, and one in 14 (7%) were physically attacked.

Figure 5: Fear and experience of violence | The Gambia | 2018



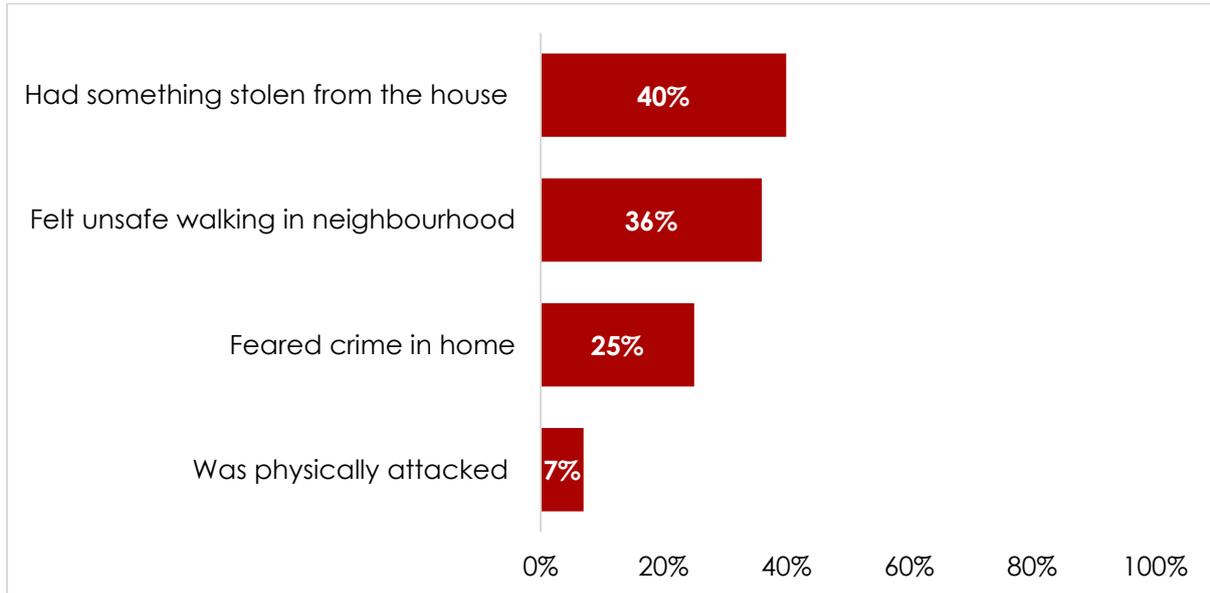
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether, in the past two years, you have ever personally feared any of the following types of violence. [If yes:] Have you actually personally experienced this type of violence in the past two years?

Violence among people in your neighbourhood or village?

Violence at a political rally or campaign event?

Violence occurring during a public protest or march?

Figure 6: Personal safety | The Gambia | 2018



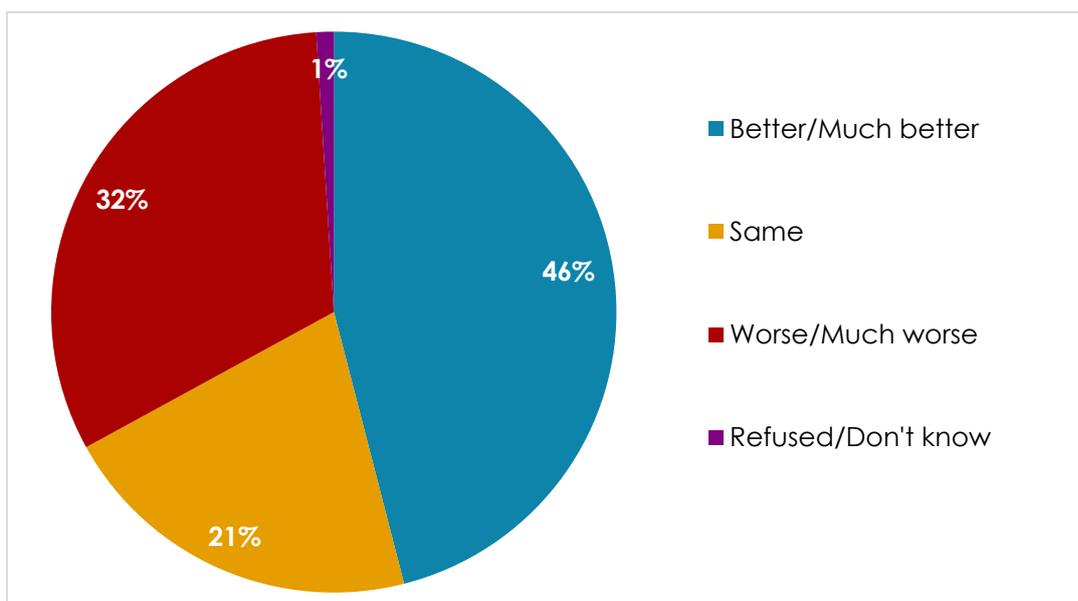
Respondents were asked:

Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighbourhood? Feared crime in your home? (% who say "just once or twice," "several times," "many times," or "always")

During the past year, have you or anyone in your family: Had something stolen from the house? Been physically attacked? (% who say "once," "twice," or "three or more times")

Fewer than half (46%) of Gambians say their personal safety from crime and violence has improved compared to "a few years ago." One-third (32%) say it has gotten "worse" or "much worse," while two in ten (21%) say it has remained the same (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Perceived personal safety compared to a few years ago | The Gambia | 2018

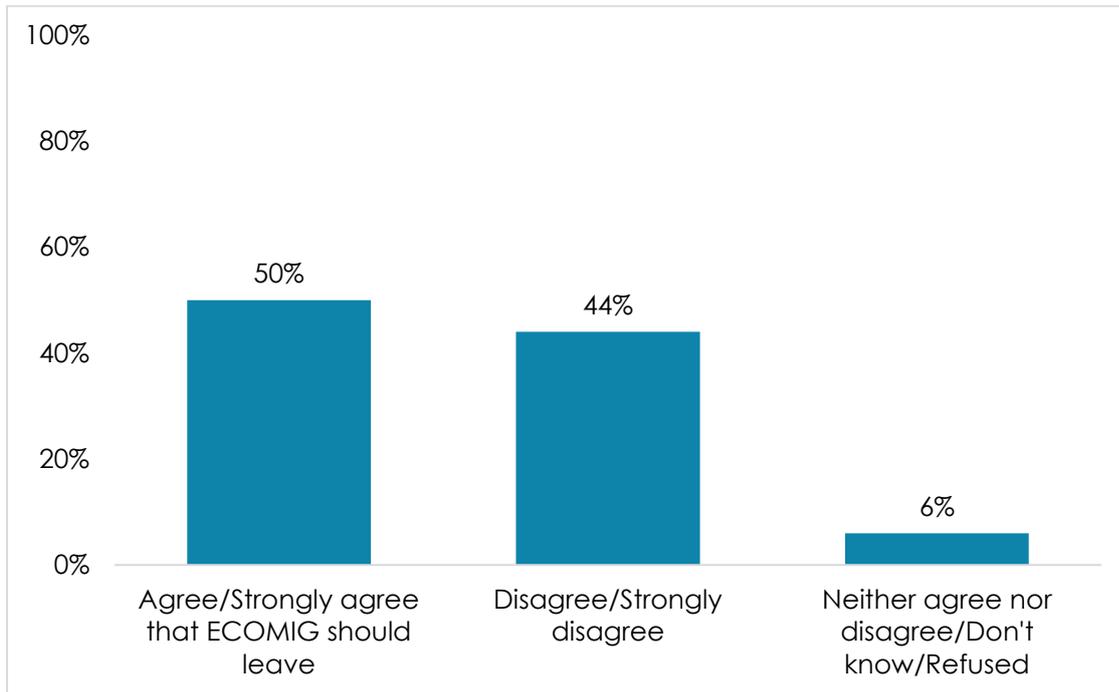


Respondents were asked: *Please tell me if the following things are worse or better now than they were a few years ago, or are they about the same: Your personal safety from crime and violence?*

Time for ECOMIG to leave?

Gambians are divided as to whether it is time for ECOMIG to leave and for the Gambia Armed Forces and police to take charge of security matters in the country. Half (50%) of all citizens “agree” or “strongly agree” that ECOMIG has served its purpose and should leave, while 44% “disagree” or “strongly disagree” and want ECOMIG’s stay extended (Figure 8). The disparity shows that while many Gambians may be regaining confidence in the armed forces and the police, there is still a significant proportion who are reluctant to leave security matters solely to them.

Figure 8: Time for ECOMIG to leave? | The Gambia | 2018



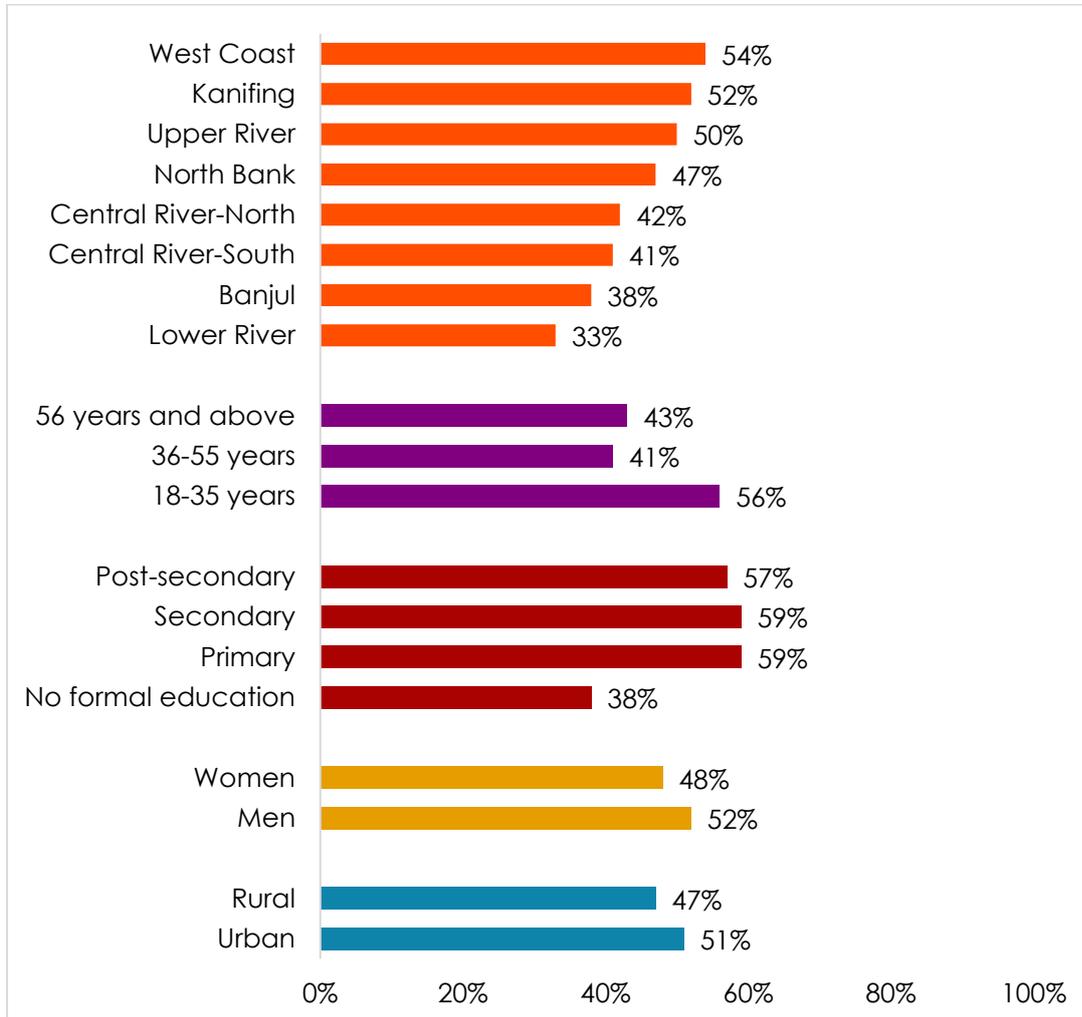
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: The ECOWAS Military Intervention in the Gambia (ECOMIG) has served its purpose. It is time they leave for the Gambian Armed Forces and Police to take charge of security matters of the country.

The call for ECOMIG to leave is strongest in the West Coast region (54%), where several disputes between local residents and the Senegalese ECOMIG contingent have been reported. For instance, ECOMIG soldiers have been accused of killing one protester and injuring others in Kanilai, Jammeh’s village (AllAfrica, 2017), as well as harassing and denying residents the right of free movement (Gambia News Today, 2018).

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A preference for an ECOMIG exit is stronger among educated Gambians (57%-59%) than among those with no formal education (38%). Men (52%) and urban dwellers (51%) are slightly more likely than women (48%) and rural residents (47%) to prefer that the regional military forces leave. And young adults (56% of those aged 18-35) are considerably readier for an ECOMIG departure than their elders (41%-43% of those aged 36 years and above) (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Time for ECOMIG to leave | by socio-demographic group | The Gambia | 2018



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: The ECOWAS Military Intervention in the Gambia (ECOMIG) has served its purpose. It is time they leave for the Gambia Armed Forces and Police to take charge of security matters of the country. (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

Conclusion

Notwithstanding past tensions between the army and citizens, a majority of Gambians say they trust the Gambia Armed Forces and believe that the military protects citizens from external and internal security threats. But citizens are divided as to whether ECOMIG should leave and let the army and police handle the country's security issues. And substantial proportions of the population experience insecurity in their neighbourhoods and at political events. For the government, the challenge will be to address the uncertainty surrounding ECOMIG and develop an exit plan that does not leave a security vacuum in the country.

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Sait Matty Jaw is Afrobarometer project manager for the Centre for Policy, Research and Strategic Studies at the University of the Gambia. Email: saitjaw@gmail.com.

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