

# Citizen engagement in Gambia: Enough to secure democratic gains?

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 348 | Sait Matty Jaw and Thomas Isbell**

## Summary

In December 2016, a little-known businessman backed by a coalition of seven political parties shocked Gambians by defeating then-President Yahya Jammeh at the ballot box. Adama Barrow's victory ended two decades of autocratic rule marked by the stifling of dissent and gross human rights violations ranging from arbitrary arrests to torture and extra-judicial killings. Under Jammeh, the 1997 constitution was amended 52 times, weakening democratic institutions while strengthening self-perpetuating rule (Mehta, 2019).

Since the change of government in 2017, Gambians have celebrated their new-found freedom of speech (Durmaz, 2019), and observers have cited the country's "rapid democratic gains" (Freedom House, 2019) and "largest overall improvement in Africa over the past years" (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2019). Jeffrey Smith (2020) of the Vanguard Africa Foundation said the Gambia "has bucked the broader trend of democratic backsliding, showing real improvement despite the challenging circumstances."

But recent government interference with the media, academia, and opposition activists has drawn charges of backsliding (Jobarteh, 2020; V-Dem Institute, 2020). The state has come under severe criticism for its handling of the "3 Years Jotna" (3 Years Is Up) protest movement, which demands that Barrow respect the terms of the Coalition 2016 MOU (memorandum of understanding) requiring that he step down after three years in a transitional presidency that would lay the groundwork for electoral reforms and new elections (Shaban, 2020). Following violent clashes between the police and protesters, the government declared the movement subversive, banned it, arrested 137 protesters, and charged the movement leadership (Freedom Newspaper, 2020; Reuters, 2020; Jallow, 2020). The government has also shut down two media houses and arrested four journalists for "inciting violence" (Jawo, 2020). According to Amnesty International (2020), despite gains in the country's human rights record, "the crackdown on protesters had alarming echoes of Gambia's brutal past."

Findings from Afrobarometer's 2018 survey in the Gambia confirm that citizens were enjoying greater political and civic freedoms in the early post-Jammeh era, although we do not know how these perceptions may have changed in response to subsequent government actions. The findings also shed light on how Gambians envision and practice democracy. Most want regular, open, and honest elections and value accountability more highly than efficiency in their government.

While many Gambians participate in community and political activities, two-thirds said they would never join a protest march. Few are in touch with their elected representatives, perhaps in part because they don't think their views will be heard.

## Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations of quality of life, governance, and democracy. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999

and 2018. 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.

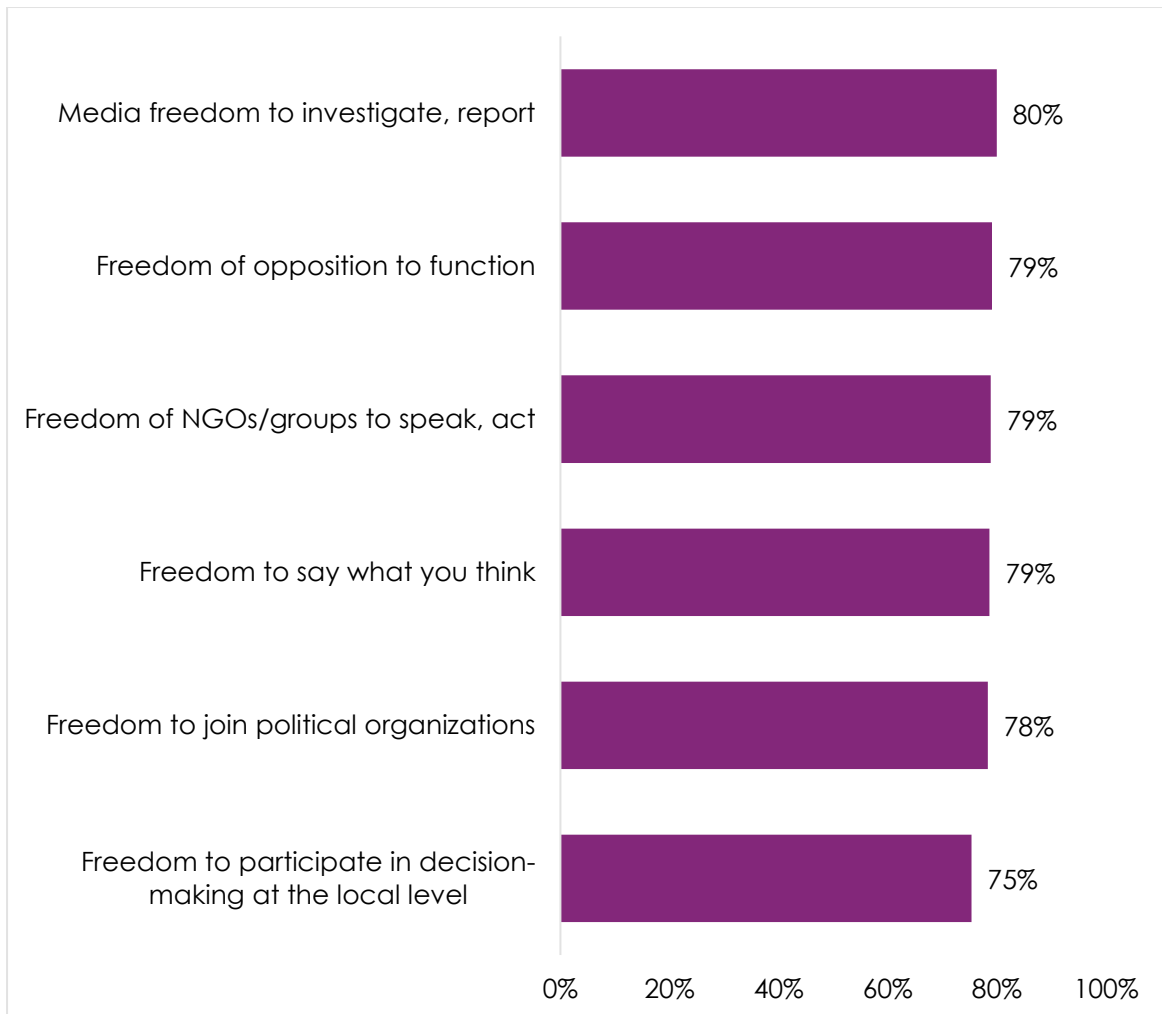
## Key findings

- As of mid-2018, Gambians widely reported greater political and civic freedoms than "a few years ago." Eight out of 10 said there was "somewhat more" or "much more" freedom for the media and opposition to function, for NGOs to speak out and act, as well as for ordinary Gambians to say what they think and join political organizations.
- Most Gambians want a democratically elected government (88%) and think accountability is more important in a government than efficiency (76%).
- More than two out of three Gambians said they discuss politics with friends and family "occasionally" (52%) or "frequently" (18%).
- More than half (54%) of Gambians said they are active members or leaders in voluntary associations or community groups.
- A majority said they had attended a community meeting (70%) or joined others to raise an issue (59%) during the previous year. Far fewer (24%) said they had joined others to request government action, although more than half (52%) said they would do so if they had the chance.
- Only about one in 20 respondents (6%) said they had participated in a demonstration or protest march during the previous year, and two-thirds (67%) said "would never" do so.
- One in five Gambians said they had contacted a member of Parliament (MP) (19%) or a local government councillor (22%) during the previous year.
- A majority of respondents said MPs (56%) and local government councillors (57%) "only sometimes" or "never" listen to what their constituents have to say.

## Improving freedoms (as of mid-2018)

At the time the survey was conducted, Gambians overwhelmingly said they were enjoying greater political and civic freedoms than "a few years ago" (Figure 1). About eight out of 10 respondents said they had "somewhat more" or "much more" freedom to say what they think (79%) and join political organizations (78%). Similar shares of Gambians said the media had more freedom to investigate and report (80%), opposition groups had more freedom to function (79%), and civil society groups had more freedom to speak out and act (79%). Three out of four respondents (75%) also reported improved freedom to participate in decision-making at the local level.

**Figure 1: Perceived increase in freedoms | The Gambia | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same?

*The media's freedom to investigate and report on government mistakes or to criticize government actions or performance?*

*The freedom of opposition parties or candidates to speak or hold rallies, state their views, or criticize the government?*

*The freedom of independent groups or non-governmental organizations to speak, hold meetings, or advocate their views freely, including criticizing the government if they choose?*

*Your own freedom to say what you think about politics?*

*Your own freedom to join any political organization you want?*

*Your own freedom to participate in decision-making at the local level?*

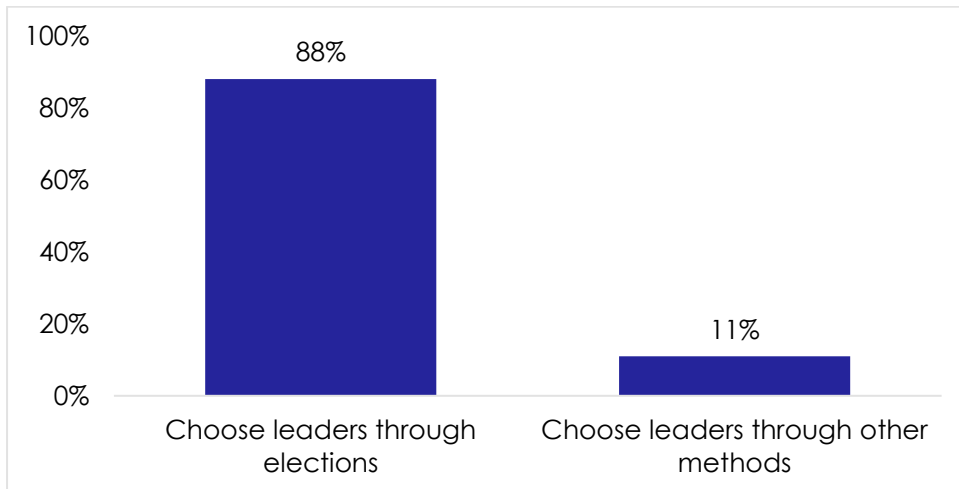
(% who said they had "somewhat more" or "much more" freedom)

### Support for accountable government

By large majorities, Gambians want a democratically elected government that is accountable to its citizens.

Almost nine out of 10 respondents (88%) said regular, open, and honest elections are the best way to choose their leaders (Figure 2). And three out of four (76%) said it is more important that the government be accountable to its people, even at the cost of efficiency, than that it "get things done" without input from citizens (Figure 3).

**Figure 2: Elections as the best way to choose leaders | The Gambia | 2018**



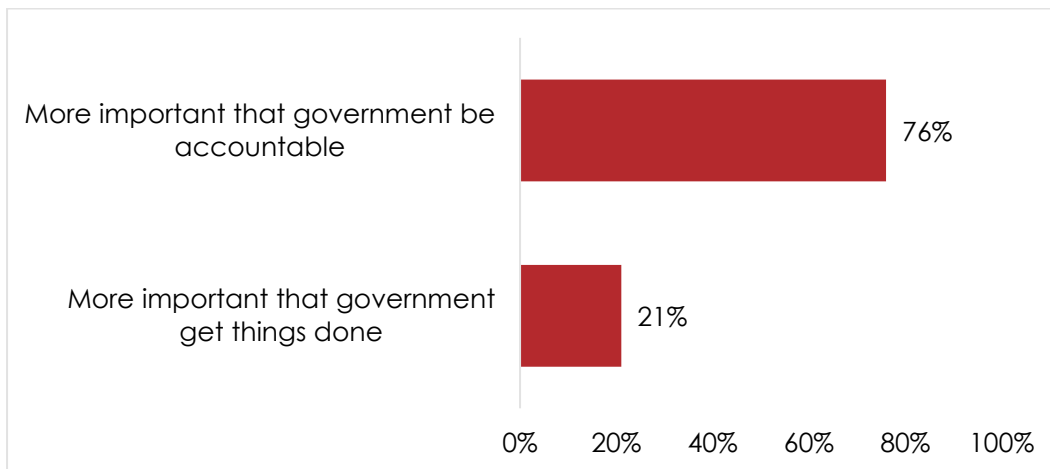
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

*Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.*

*Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.*

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

**Figure 3: Government accountability vs. efficiency | The Gambia | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

*Statement 1: It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if we have no influence over what it does.*

*Statement 2: It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if we have no influence over what it does.*

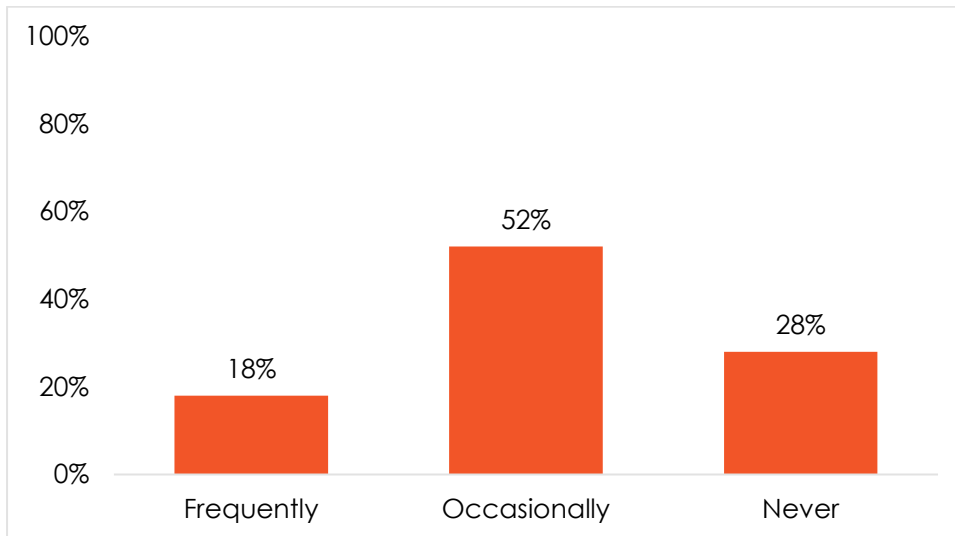
(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

### Citizen engagement

If accountable democratic government implies citizen engagement, how ready are Gambians for a democratic future?

In mid-2018, most Gambians expressed interest in public affairs. Asked how frequently they discuss politics with friends and family, seven out of 10 said they do so "occasionally" (52%) or "frequently" (18%), while about three out of 10 (28%) said they "never" discuss political matters (Figure 4).

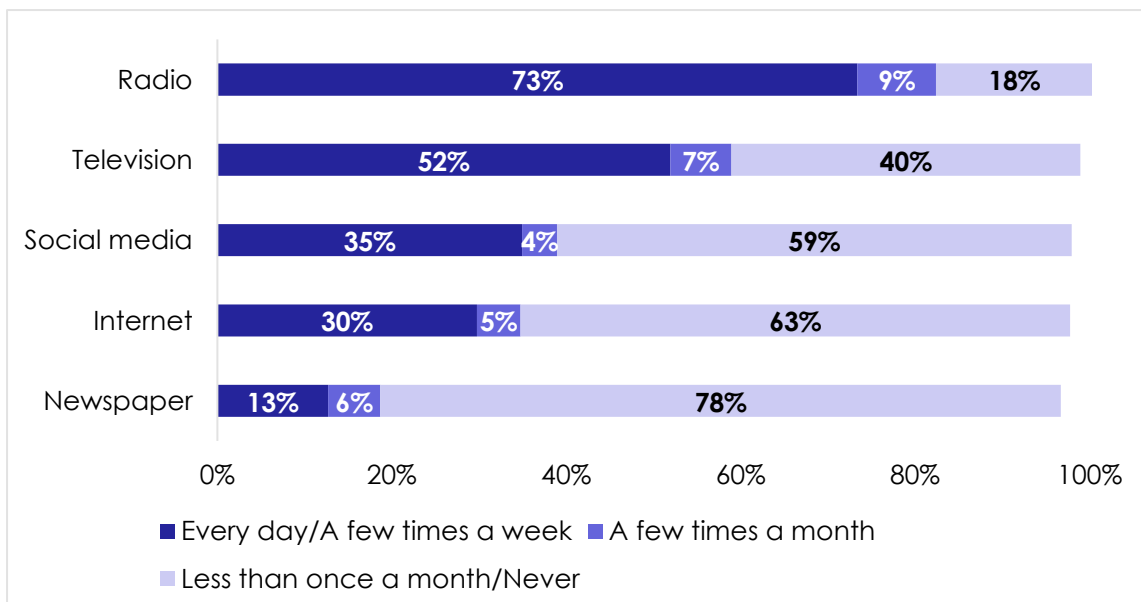
**Figure 4: How often discuss politics | The Gambia | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters frequently? Occasionally? Never?

Most Gambians also consume news on a regular basis. About three-fourths (73%) said they listen to news on the radio daily or “a few times a week,” while more than half (53%) said they get news regularly from television. Social media (35%) and the Internet (30%) are less commonly used as regular sources of news but are nonetheless a more frequent news source than newspapers (13%) (Figure 5).

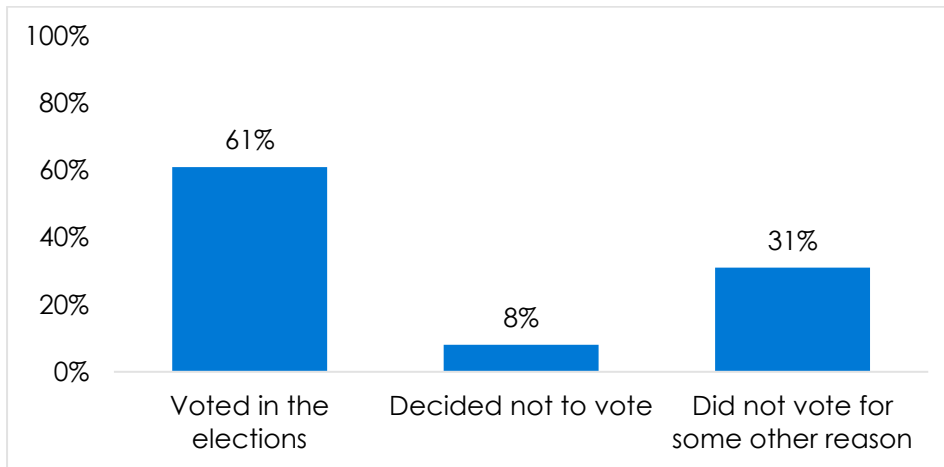
**Figure 5: News media consumption | The Gambia | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** How often do you get news from the following sources?

When it comes to participating in political and civic activities, six out of 10 respondents (61%) said they voted in the 2016 elections, while fewer than one in 10 (8%) said they decided not to vote. Almost one-third said they did not vote for some other reason, including being too young to vote (5%) or not being registered (10%) (Figure 6).

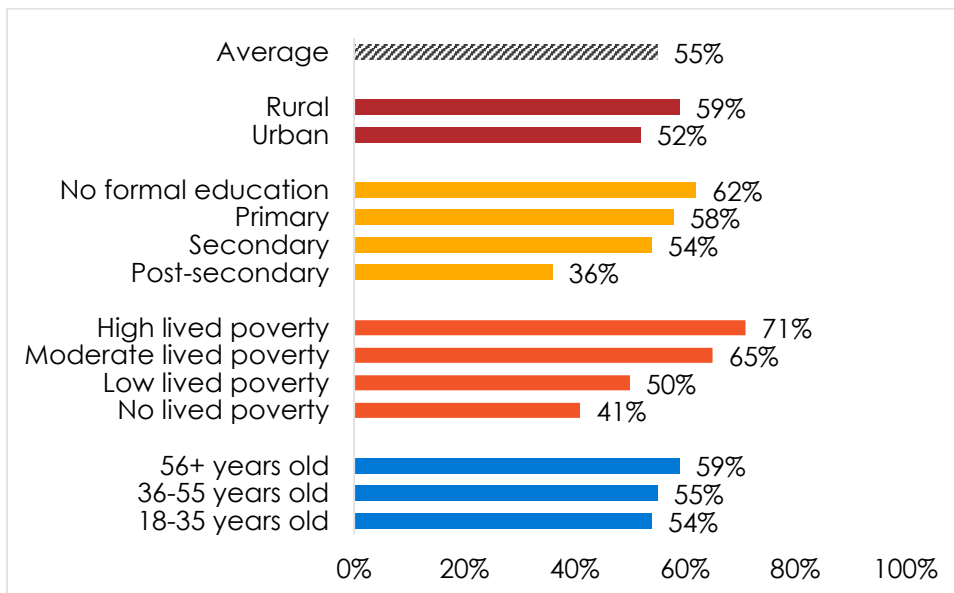
**Figure 6: Voting in the 2016 elections** | The Gambia | 2018



**Respondents were asked:** Understanding that some people were unable to vote in the most recent national election in 2016, which of the following statements is true for you?

On average, more than half (55%) of Gambians said they “feel close to” a political party, while 42% said they do not. Party identification was more common among rural residents (59%), citizens with no formal education (62%), and those who had experienced moderate (65%) or high (71%) lived poverty<sup>1</sup> (Figure 7). Conversely, a majority of Gambians who were economically better off (57%) and those with post-secondary education (63%) said they do not identify with a particular party.

**Figure 7: Feel close to a political party** | by socio-demographic group | The Gambia | 2018

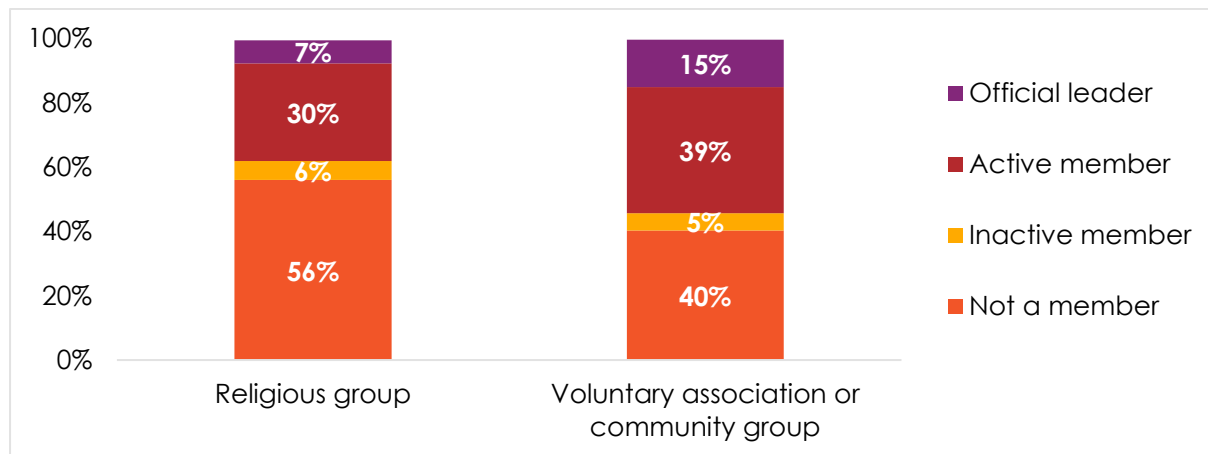


**Respondents were asked:** Do you feel close to any particular political party?

<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes, Dulani, & Gyimah-Boadi (2016).

Substantial numbers of Gambians said they participate as leaders or active members in religious organizations (37%) or other voluntary associations (54%) (Figure 8). Older Gambians, those with less education, and poorer respondents are particularly likely to be active in voluntary associations or community groups (Figure 9). For example, six out of 10 Gambians over the age of 35 are group members or leaders, compared to half (49%) of 18- to 35-year-olds. The gap is even larger between the poorest (77%) and best-off (43%) respondents.

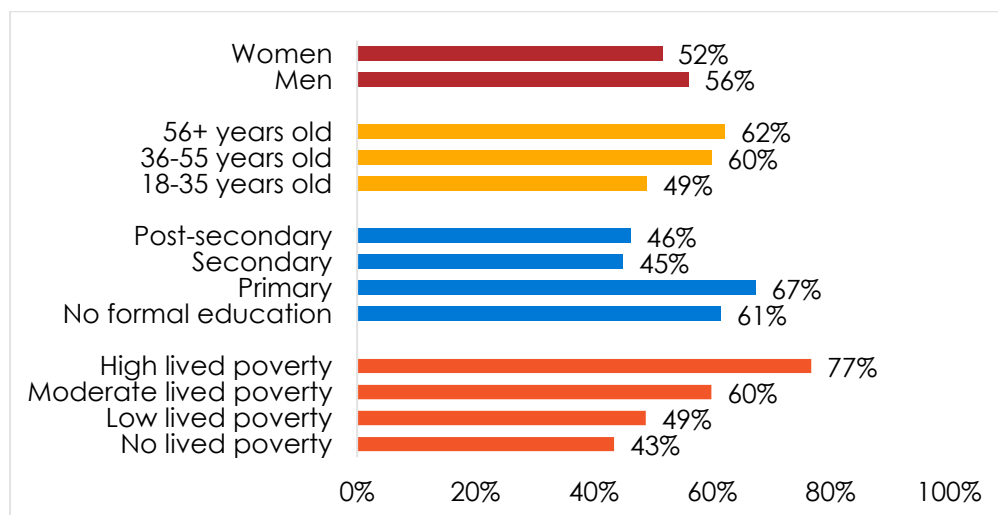
**Figure 8: Membership in religious or community groups | The Gambia | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Now I am going to read out a list of groups that people join or attend. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member?

A religious group that meets outside of regular worship services?  
 Some other voluntary association or community group?

**Figure 9: Membership in community groups | by socio-demographic group | The Gambia | 2018**



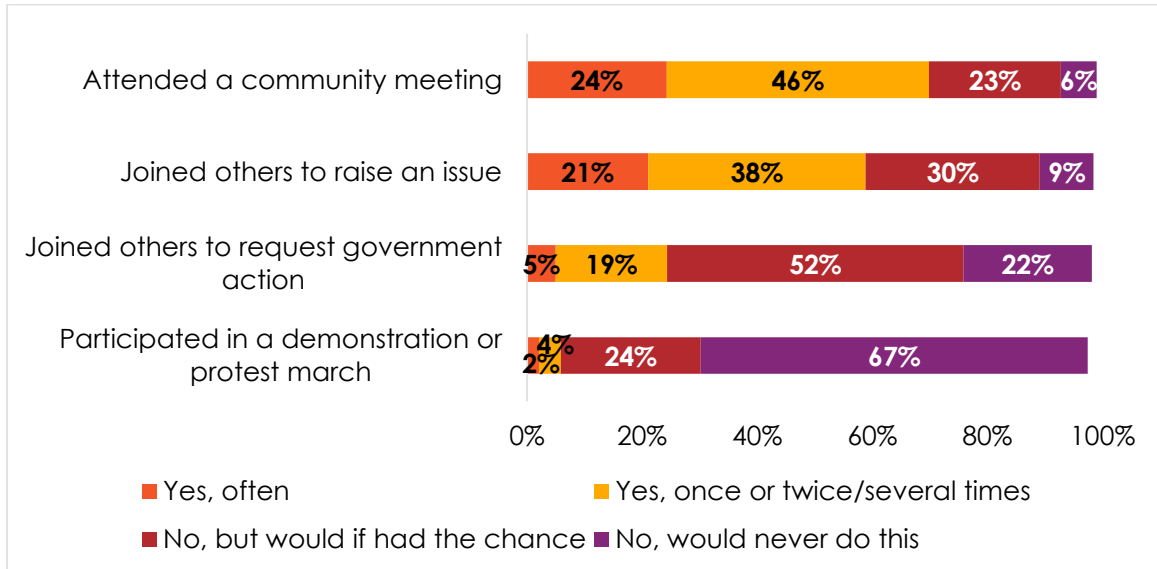
**Respondents were asked:** Now I am going to read out a list of groups that people join or attend. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member: Some other (not religious) voluntary association or community group? (% who said "active member" or "official leader")

Asked about various forms of political and civic engagement, a majority of Gambians said they had attended a community meeting (70%) or joined others to raise an issue (59%) at least once during the previous year (Figure 10). Far fewer (24%) said they had joined others to

request government action, although more than half (52%) said they would do so if they had the chance.

Only about one in 20 respondents (6%) said they had participated in a demonstration or protest march during the previous year, and two-thirds (67%) said “would never” do so.

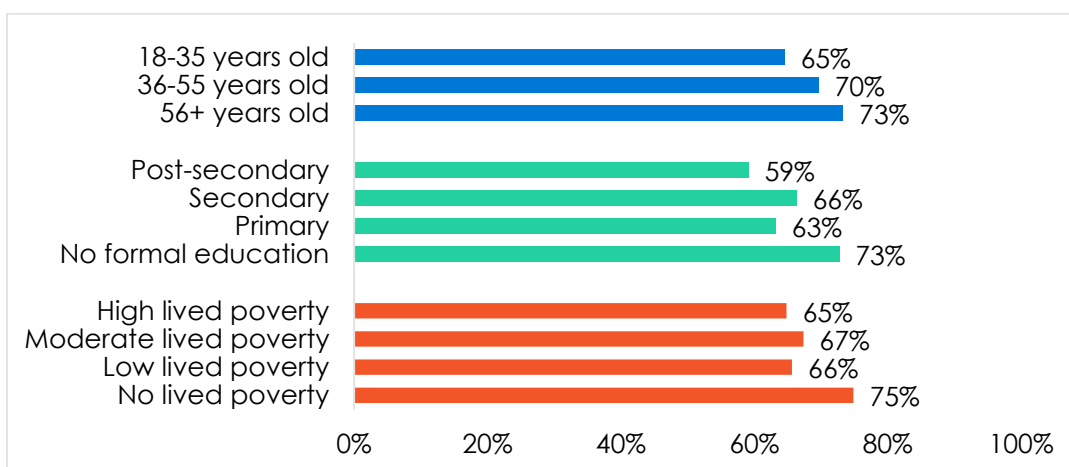
**Figure 10: Political and civic engagement** | The Gambia | 2018



**Respondents were asked:** Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance?

Looking at key socio-demographic groups, a majority in all groups categorically ruled out participating in protests. Older and less-educated respondents were particularly likely to say they would never join a demonstration or protest march, as were the economically best-off respondents (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: ‘Would never’ participate in protest** | by socio-demographic group | The Gambia | 2018

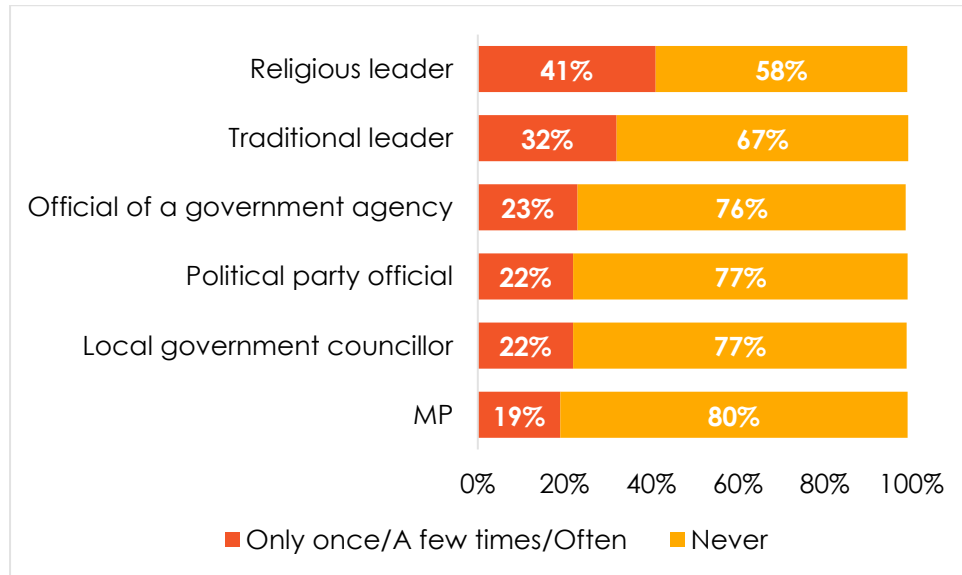


**Respondents were asked:** Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance: Participated in a demonstration or protest march? (% who said they “would never” do this)



Despite their strong preference for accountable government, only about one in five Gambians said they had contacted a member of Parliament (MP) (19%), a local government councillor (22%), a political party official (22%), or an official with a government agency (23%) during the previous year (Figure 12). Gambians were more likely to contact religious leaders (41%) and traditional leaders (32%).

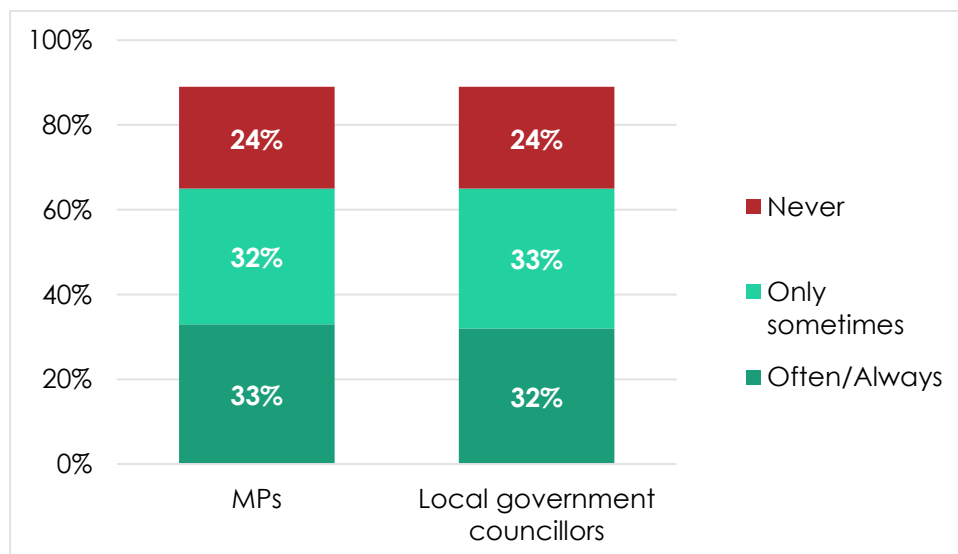
**Figure 12: Contacted officials | The Gambia | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views?

One possible reason that relatively few citizens contact their elected officials is that they don't think their views will be heard. Only one-third of respondents said that MPs (33%) and local government councillors (32%) "often" or "always" do their best to listen to their constituents, while a majority said they "never" or "only sometimes" listen (Figure 13).

**Figure 13: How often do elected officials listen? | The Gambia | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what people like you have to say?

## Conclusion

The Gambian government's response to the recent 3 Years *Jotna* protests has renewed debate about the state of the country's post-Jammeh democracy. While citizens' perceptions in mid-2018 confirm gains in freedom, some critics argue that the Gambia is now sliding back toward autocracy.

Gambians clearly want a democratic, accountable government, and have a substantial basis of citizen engagement to build on. As of mid-2018, most citizens were not interested in protest action, perhaps in part due to fear of violence that accompanied past protests under Jammeh.

One notable finding is that most citizens had no contact with political, government, and party leaders. This disconnect could be reduced through civic awareness raising and platforms where elected officials listen to what their constituents have to say.

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