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## **Meet The Peoples' Tour or Political Campaign? Inside the State-Funded Efforts to Secure Incumbency in The Gambia**

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## 1. Introduction

Section 222(15) of the 1997 Constitution gives the President of The Gambia the constitutional mandate to “...undertake a nation-wide tour at least twice a year in order to familiarise himself or herself with current conditions and the effect of government policies”. Since the promulgation of this provision in the 1997 Constitution, this section has been widely politicized by both the past and present Presidents. In many cases, the ruling party will make use of this section to stage the “**Meet the Peoples’ Tour**” as it is widely known, right before elections to campaign for their party and candidates, which gives the incumbent unfair advantages to the oppositions. The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) in every electoral cycle, will publish the timeframe for political campaigns to commence. However, the “**Meet the Peoples’ Tour**” is always brought near to the campaign period, as it could be seen later in this document for the year 2021 and 2022. The tour is a state funded activity with the objective that the President and his cabinet ministers will tour the country to understand the living condition of the citizens and the effect/impact of government policies on the livelihood of the people.

However, the findings of this media monitoring revealed that the president and his ministers, in most cases, used the Meet the Peoples’ Tour to campaign for his re-election and the election of his party’s parliamentary candidates, instead of the intended purpose of the tour, thus defeating the purpose of Section 222(15) of the 1997 Constitution.

If state resources are used for political propaganda, especially during election periods, it will be termed as ASR (Abuse of State Resources). The use of ASR by incumbents can have negative effects on a country’s economy and its developmental programs. When state resources are diverted for political propaganda, citizens are denied the services that they have paid tax for and it as well impacts public administration efficiency. For example, in a letter dated March 11, 2022 with reference number OP 349/01/Temp/XV11/ (ACP-S), the Government Vehicles Control Unit (GVCU) under the office of the president, wrote to request government offices to make their vehicles and drivers available for the president to conduct his tour. This will have serious impact on timely public service delivery and efficient public administration.

In addition, ASR creates unfair political advantage to the incumbent which also defeat the general principle of “Free and Fair Elections”.

In this media monitoring report, the document will provide evidence of how the Meet the Peoples’ tour was used as a campaign platform instead of the intended purpose of Section 222(15) of the Constitution.

## 2. Methodology

To conduct this media monitoring report, we collected videos from trusted media outlets (including the state-owned media GRTS) with online presence. Three media monitors, with a supervisor, were trained and hired to conduct media monitoring of the Meet the Peoples’ Tour between 2021 and 2022. Media monitors were provided with questionnaires and indicators that will determine if a political or campaign for election was made by the President or his cabinet ministers.

The evidence collected by the media monitors were later reviewed and assessed by the Supervisor, which this document is entirely based on. The content of this document is thus based on evidence and not opinions.

### 3. MAIN FINDINGS

On September 16, 2021, less than three (3) months to the Presidential elections, the Meet the Peoples Tour was in Basse at the Basse Mini Stadium. During his speech, the President was heard calling for the electorates in Basse to re-elect his government in order to continue the development programs they have started in URR.

***“The projects we have started in this region are just the beginning. If you vote, come December 4, and vote for my government, we will continue the work in Basse in the next five years, and the Gambia at large.”<sup>1</sup>***

It is obvious from the above statement that the intention of the Meet the Peoples’ tour by the president and his cabinet ministers was more than just familiarizing himself on the condition of the people but to campaign for his re-election using state resources.

The purpose of cabinet ministers traveling with the President during this tour is to provide updates on developments that will be benefited by the people and as well take note of issues raised by the people that should be addressed by a particular line ministry. However, the Meet the Peoples’ Tour is a perfect opportunity for Ministers to show their political loyalty to the President. Several Ministers were heard using the platform campaigning for the President, instead of fulfilling the main purpose of section 222(15) of the constitution.

For example, on January 3, 2021, the election year for the Presidential elections, the Minister of Tourism and Culture, Hamat Bah, who is also the leader of NRP political party, which is a coalition member of the President’s ruling NPP. During his speech, he urged people to get their voter’s card, stating that it is their weapon. He also stated that President Barrow deserved a second chance to govern the country, as his first term was a shared presidency with the Coalition.

***“You need to give Adama Barrow a second chance because the first five years of being president wasn’t his presidency, that was a shared presidency because of the Coalition, none of the plans were Adama Barrow’s plans.”<sup>2</sup>***

This is a political statement because it pertains to the leadership and governance of the country, specifically, the re-election of the incumbent. The minister is attempting to persuade the public to support the idea of giving Barrow a second chance as president and is providing a justification for why he believes Barrow should be given that opportunity. His fellow ministers also echoed his statement for the re-election of the president in several instances during the constitutional mandated Meet the People’s tour.

On September 29, 2021, in Brikama, Kombo Jambur, the minister of Gender and Children welfare, thanked President Barrow for his efforts towards empowering women in the country. While the Minister started her speech fulfilling her duty in providing updates of her Ministry during the tour,

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<sup>1</sup> Adama Barrow, Basse, EyeAfrica TV, 2021 [https://youtu.be/ZO2vWXqG\\_IIE](https://youtu.be/ZO2vWXqG_IIE) Timestamp (57:40-58:13)

<sup>2</sup> Hamat Bah, Foni Bondali, GTTV, 2021: [https://www.youtube.com/live/8\\_socIEiW-0?feature=share](https://www.youtube.com/live/8_socIEiW-0?feature=share) Timestamp (1:36:36 - 1:43:45)

specifically on the Women Enterprise Fund, she however concluded her speech calling for voters to give their votes to the President.

***“Thank you so much President Adama Barrow we can’t pay you, the only thing we can do is when it’s time for voting we come in large numbers and vote for you.”***<sup>3</sup>

The statement is political because it seeks to influence the behaviour of the constituents by encouraging them to vote for President Barrow in the next election. By expressing gratitude to Barrow and suggesting that voting for him is the only way to repay him, the minister is attempting to rally support for the president and to create a sense of obligation among the audience.

On September 29, 2021, less than three (3) months to the Presidential elections, the Meet the Peoples’ Tour was held in Brikama at Kombo Jambur. During his deliberation, the Minister of Youth and Sports, urged the youth of The Gambia to vote for President Barrow in the upcoming election, stating that he is young and had taken people of his age bracket to work with him. He stated that Barrow is the only one who could take the country forward and that all amenities had been provided during his tenure.

***“If you have a president whose thoughts are to keep you forward, form the same mobilisation you have here to vote for him (president) on December 4th. Youths of this country shouldn’t be allowed to be fooled, give him your votes.”***<sup>4</sup>

The minister’s deliberations are political statements because it is related to the upcoming presidential election at the time. The use of words such as "mobilisation" and "give him your votes" clearly indicate that the statement is aimed at influencing the political behavior of the audience. The statement is also intended to persuade the youths of the country not to be "fooled" by other candidates and to vote for the president instead.

The Minister of Tourism and Culture (the leader of the NRP party) was again heard on December 11, 2022 ahead of the Parliamentary elections emphasizing the significance of voting for President Barrow in order to achieve the development goals. He stated that if the NPP didn't have a chairman or councilor in the area, it would be impossible to achieve the developments that people are crying out for.

***“you (the community) are asking for roads, water and other things but how can you get those if you don’t vote for Councilors and Chairman (belonging to NPP) in the upcoming (April and May 2023) local government elections. If you don’t vote for Barrow candidate, these developments would nearly be impossible.”***<sup>5</sup>

The use of words such as "vote," "NPP," "chairman," and "councilor" clearly indicates the ruling party is using its incumbency, through the use of state resources to stage political campaigns for

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<sup>3</sup> Fatou Kinteh, Brikama, GRTS, 2021: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=603698880769241>, Timestamp (02:43:41- 02:44:47)

<sup>4</sup> Bakary Badjie, Brikama, GRTS, 2021: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=603698880769241>, Timestamp (1:13:45-1:27:22)

<sup>5</sup> Hamat Bah, Mandinaring, EyeAfrica TV, 2022: [https://youtu.be/WfYTrS\\_Uql4](https://youtu.be/WfYTrS_Uql4), Timestamp (02:03-2:51)

their candidates ahead of the local government election, masking it with the constitutional Meet the People's tour.

On October 1, 2021, the minister of Gender and Children welfare reiterated her gratitude towards President Barrow at the Never Again Arch Pavillion, in Banjul just like she did in Kombo Jamburr. She stated that Gambian women should reciprocate his (president's) help by voting for him in the upcoming (December 4, 2021) election. The Gender Minister used the platform to highlight that women make up 52% of the population and 56.7% of voters, and therefore, they hold the key to decide who goes to the State House.

***“We (women) have the key to who comes to the State House and the women are ready to open it for President Barrow for no one can do what he has done for us.”<sup>6</sup>***

The minister's statement specifically highlights the role of women in this political power dynamic, suggesting that they are a key player in determining who becomes the president. Moreover, the minister praises President Barrow's achievements, implying that he is the best choice for leadership in the country. This suggests that the statement is aimed at mobilizing women voters to support her boss, President Barrow.

On October 1, 2021, just two (2) months to the Presidential elections, the Meet the Peoples' Tour was held in Banjul at the Arch 22 Pavillion. The Minister of Environment, Climate Change and Natural Resources (as it were at the time) Lamin Dibba, praised President Barrow and urged the people of The Gambia to give him a chance for a second term. He stated that if given the opportunity, Barrow would move the country to a level that would become the admiration of the entire world.

***“...so, this shows that he's the right candidate for this position and we believe that if Gambian people give him the chance for a second term, they will see something unprecedented not only in the subregion but in the whole of Africa.”<sup>7</sup>***

Several other ministers, village heads, women association and other influential people were mobilized and given the platform during the meet the people's tour, most of whom were visible campaigning for the incumbent. In the March 2022 Meet the People's tour, aspirant NPP (ruling party) Parliamentary candidates were being campaigned for by the President's party and cabinet minister, this ultimately works out for the NPP as they rise from having zero elected Parliamentary candidate in 2017 (before the formation of the party) to winning the majority seats of the 2022 Parliamentary elections.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The constitutional objectives of the Meet the People's tour in many instances were compromised by both cabinet ministers and the president. The constitution mandates the tour to take place at least twice a year, however the timing of the tour by the ruling party is near perfect. For example,

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<sup>6</sup> Fatou Kinteh, Banjul, GTTV, 2021: <https://youtu.be/IOmYhWeTyHI>, Timestamp (02:25:33 - 02:31:21)

<sup>7</sup> Lamin B Dibba, Banjul, GTTV, 2021: <https://youtu.be/IOmYhWeTyHI>, Timestamp (39:36 - 40:19)

in 2021, the second-leg of the tour was in September 2021, and it ended just a month before the official start date of the presidential political campaign. This is similar to the 2022 first-leg of the Meet the People’s tour which was staged in March 2022, less than a month for the April 9, 2022 Parliamentary elections and most seriously, it coincided with the campaign period for the Parliamentary election.

It is confident to say that this constitutional mandate tour has been and continues to be used as an advantage by incumbents (past and present (1997 to date)) to use public funds, take vehicles from public offices for political campaigns, especially ahead of elections. The incumbents have less to worry about funding their political campaigns if they have the Meet the Peoples’ tour’s expenses guaranteed by the budget. The political campaign period in The Gambia during an electoral cycle is very short, usually less than a month, and some candidates won’t be able to reach certain voter population, with the tour, the incumbent can tick the boxes of communities that have been already reached during the tour and aim for other voter population during the political campaign, thus reaching a wider voter population.

The question to answer is whether the Meet the People’s tour was entirely politicised by the President and his cabinet ministers? Of course, not. The President in many instances received development concerns from communities, he and his cabinet ministers provided updates on ongoing projects, visited/inspected farms and other community development projects, calling for peace and stability etc.

However, as seen in section 3 of this paper, the Meet the People’s Tour has become a state funded political activity used by the incumbent for political propaganda, which violates section 222(15) of the 1997 Constitution.

**5. Recommendation**

As the Gambia continues its constitutional and electoral reform process, based on the history of politicization of the Meet the People’s Tour by both the Jammeh and Barrow administration, political stakeholders, especially the National Assembly should reconsider abolishing the Meet the People’s Tour for the advancement of democracy and electoral fair play.

The Meet the People’s tour could be replaced with Participatory Budgeting where experts from different line ministries will have direct interface with constituents to collect concerns and address these concerns in the formulation of their budget. This is more cost effective and it bridges the gap between the government and the governed in designing community developmental solutions

