Position Paper:
Redrawing The Gambia’s Electoral Boundaries for Fairer Political Representation

By: Dave Manneh and Essa Njie

Views do not represent that of CRPD but the authors
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Introduction

Designing laws and rules governing elections are crucial in any democracy. Guided by an electoral system, such laws and rules are not only important conditions for the conduct of credible elections but help in guiding the aggregation of the votes of citizens to determine winners and losers. To ensure the effective functioning and accountability of a democratic system, it is imperative to establish and maintain fair and accurate representation in the legislature. More precisely, within a parliamentary system, the concept of fair representation necessitates a balanced allocation that considers constituency population size. Proper boundary delineation is therefore integral in ensuring that representative democracy exists.

In its 2006 report, the Commonwealth Observer Group recognized the need for constituency redistricting in The Gambia. Although, in 2015, a redrawing of electoral boundaries did take place, leading to the re-demarcation of Serrekunda East constituency into Tallinding Kunjang and Latrikunda Sabiji constituencies; Serrekunda Central into Serrekunda and Bundungka Kunda constituencies; Kombo North into Sannehmentereng, Old Yundum, and Busumbala constituencies; and Kombo Central into Brikama North and Brikama South constituencies, this redistricting only created five new constituencies but was neither comprehensive nor did it respond to the Electoral Quota (EQ) benchmark. The EQ is a measure of the average number of electors per constituency that ensures fair representation. It is particularly important in countries where development funding and resource allocation are based on population size. Although, in The Gambia, the state does not allocate resources to constituencies, however, Local Government Areas (LGAs) with larger population tend to generate more revenues through market and compound rates collected by local government authorities. Equally, economic resources and the hotel industry are contributing factors for greater revenue generation per region. Ensuring an equal number of electors in each constituency amplifies every citizen's voice and promotes the equitable distribution of resources. This issue is being discussed further in the paper.

As The Gambia experiences substantial natural population growth and rural-urban migration, the disparities between its constituencies will only widen, making the adoption of the EQ/hypothetical mean approach increasingly critical. In response, this paper presents a comprehensive analysis of the need to redraw The Gambia’s electoral boundaries, emphasising the crucial role it can play in supporting a pluralistic democratic

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dispensation. Drawing on lessons from a 2023 process undertaken in the United Kingdom (UK) by the Boundary Commission for England as a best practice, and factors such as demographic changes, fair representation, and legal compliance, it makes a compelling case for The Gambia’s Electoral Management Body to undertake an urgent redrawing/redistricting of electoral boundaries based on EQ average of 17, 817 per constituency.7 This aims to create a resilient and responsive system that meets the needs of Gambians and aligns with democratic values and principles. The paper advocates that the number of constituencies in some Administrative Areas be increased while reduced in others, with a total of 54 constituencies instead of the current 53.

Population shifts

Electoral bodies must redraw electoral boundaries to keep pace with the dynamic nature of population distribution. As people migrate, rural areas urbanize, or experience natural population fluctuations, authorities must adjust the electoral map to reflect these societal changes. The UK 2023 boundary review set a global standard for addressing these shifts by establishing a 5% EQ range as a guiding criterion.8 Analysis of population data, a reflection of societal change, is crucial for ensuring proportional representation, within this 5% threshold.

A thorough analysis of the most recent electoral roll (2021 presidential election results) from the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), indicates that 60% of The Gambia’s voting population lives in two Administrative Areas: Brikama and Kanifing Municipality.9 In addition, the vote counts from the 2021 presidential election align with the 2013 population census by The Gambia Bureau of Statistics (GBOS), in showing that Brikama LGA holds the largest population (688,744), followed by Kanifing LGA (377,134), accounting for 37.1% and 20.3% of the total population, respectively.10 A new population census should have been conducted in April 2023, but postponed to April 2024 due to financial constraints.11 A new census is likely to reveal increased figures.

Rural-urban drift, informed by the absence of economic opportunities in rural Gambia explains the difference in population growth and registered electorates in comparison to the urban area. When drawing electoral boundaries in developing countries like The Gambia where economic opportunities are higher in the urban area than rural, the IEC

should consider population demographics. In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that many registered electorates in rural Gambia, especially those in Kerewan and Mansakonko LGAs, reside in the urban areas. This suggests a huge disparity in both population size and registered electorates. While these dynamics could change with increased development and service provision in rural Gambia in the future, to respond to current realities, there is the need to redraw the country’s electoral boundaries as things stand, to reflect population demographics, geographic features, and the principle of fair representation in a democracy.

As of now, the two most populated LGAs as per statistics from GBOS have only 19 representatives out of the 53 in parliament - 12 for Brikama and 7 for Kanifing Municipality. This is not reflective of their population share - a point that is further illustrated by a closer analysis of the 2021 presidential election voter register. It shows that, in Janjanbureh constituency in the Janjanbureh Administrative Area for instance, there are only 1,600 registered voters, while Kombo South constituency in the Brikama Administrative Area, has a staggering 62,399 registered voters. Another example is Banjul, with a low population size and voter roll (21,372), but three constituencies. The glaring imbalances in constituency sizes demand immediate attention to uphold democratic principles, safeguard political neutrality, and adhere to legal requirements.

Table 1: Average voters per constituency in each Administrative Area of The Gambia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrative Area</th>
<th>Number of Registered Voters</th>
<th>Number of Constituencies</th>
<th>Average voters per constituency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Banjul</td>
<td>21,372</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7,124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kanifing</td>
<td>179,800</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25,685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brikama</td>
<td>359,451</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>29,954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerewan</td>
<td>109,262</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15,608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mansakonko</td>
<td>54,456</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9,076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janjanbureh</td>
<td>119,606</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10,873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basse</td>
<td>118,210</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16,887</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A redrawing of the country’s electoral boundaries to address this would offer more balanced and fair political representation in the National Assembly for these urban voters, many of whom have migrated from rural areas for socio-economic reasons. Effective redistricting can also help prevent the marginalization of specific regions or demographic groups and foster diversity in political representation. Under The Gambia’s presidential system, presidential and legislative elections are independent, and voters elect a president through a popular vote for a fixed term. Consequently, the significant disparities in registered voters between constituencies do not affect the presidential elections. However, it does affect legislative elections in terms of fair political representation.

For a more equitable legislative election playing field, the equal distribution of voters from the national electoral roll to each constituency would see approximately 17,817 voters per constituency. However, it is noteworthy that the proposal to redraw The Gambia’s electoral boundaries does not mean each constituency must have 17,817 registered voters. Due to geographic features and other factors, certain constituencies would fall below this threshold or have a slightly higher number.

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A proposal for boundary redrawing

Banjul Administrative Area: Being the capital and with a mayor, it must have been thought necessary to have more than one constituency in Banjul; thus, making it an Administrative Area. However, to reflect the number of registered voters, which is 21,372 against the EQ average per constituency of 17,817, it would be necessary to merge the three constituencies - Banjul South, Central, and North into one.

Kanifing Administrative Area: Kanifing Administrative Area has over 60,000 more voters than Janjanbureh Administrative Area (which combines Janjanbureh and Kuntaur LGAs), yet, it currently has only 7 constituencies as compared to 11 in Janjanbureh. Given the 179,800 registered voters in this area, there is the need to redraw the boundaries to expand the current 7 constituencies to 10. Latrikunda Sabiji constituency which combines the communities of Latrikunda Sabiji, Fajikunda, and Abuko should be split into two constituencies. Having Serrekunda and Bakau as separate constituencies with voter populations of 13,969 and 13,869, respectively, compared to Latrikunda Sabiji constituency with a voter population of 36,851 is evidence of unfair representation. Equally, compared to Banjul South, with 6,248 registered voters, Serrekunda West has a voter population of 44,387. This significant disparity justifies the need to split Serrekunda West into three constituencies.

Brikama Administrative Area: This area currently has 359,451 registered voters; three times more than Janjanbureh Administrative Area, but only has one more seat. This is highly unrepresentative in the context of both voter population and population demographics. To represent them more accurately, it will be necessary to increase the number of constituencies in Brikama from 12 to 20, with some merging of existing constituencies alongside the splitting of others. This is also appropriate, considering that Brikama Administrative Area has a voter population twice that of Kanifing Administrative Area. Therefore, it would be rational and fair for the proposed arrangements to allocate 10 seats to the latter and 20 to the former.

In Foni, which currently has five constituencies but just 39,711 voters, there is the need for a return to the old arrangement of just two constituencies. This could be done by merging the current constituencies – Foni Brefet (9, 124), Foni Bintang (10, 969), Foni Kansala (9, 568), Foni Bondali (4, 767), and Foni Jarrol (5, 283) into Foni East and Foni West. Kombo South may also be divided into four constituencies, given its current voter population of 62,399, while Busumbala, Sannehmentereng, and Old Yundum constituencies, each with voter population of little over 50,000 as it currently stands, should each be divided into three constituencies. Kombo East with a voter population of 25,643 can be maintained as a constituency while Brikama North (36,755 voters) and Brikama South (37,720 voters) each split into two.

Kerewan Administrative Area: In this area, with a voter population of 109,262, fair representation would require that constituencies be merged without any being split, as currently, half of the constituencies do not meet the criteria of the hypothetical mean per constituency, of 17,817. Consider the constituencies of Jokadu (11,357), Lower Badibu (8,917), Central Badibu (9,475), and Sabach Sanjal (12,577)- a combined total of 42,326 registered voters. This combined voter roll is smaller than several single constituencies in Kanifing and Brikama Administrative Areas. Therefore, to achieve a more balanced representation, it would be necessary to redraw these constituencies. It would be ideal for

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13 This modelling draws on a breakdown of the 2021 presidential election data by Administrative Area against the number of voters
Lower Badibu and Central Badibu be merged into a single constituency. This would reduce the number of constituencies from 7 to 6.

**Mansakonko Administrative Area:** This area currently has 54,456 registered voters. This is smaller than the number of registered voters in Kombo South alone, yet it has six constituencies. To ensure a more accurate representation, the constituency boundaries should be redrawn and reduced from 6 to 3. This adjustment aligns with the hypothetical mean per constituency of 17,817. Jarra Central with a voter population of 5,981 and Jarra East with 10,996 could be merged, while Kiang East (5,053), Kiang Central (7,000) along with Kiang West (10,381) could be merged into a single Kiang constituency. Jarra West (15,045) could remain as it is.

**Janjanbureh Administrative Area:** With 119,606 registered voters, the adjustment required to align the area with the hypothetical mean per constituency of 17,817, would reduce the number of constituencies from 11 to 7. Constituencies like Janjanbureh with 1,600 registered voters, Niamina Dankunku with 3784, Nianija with 5030, and Niamina West with 5085 registered voters should be merged with other constituencies for fair representation as their voter populations combined are even less than the average 18,154.

**Basse Administrative Area:** With 118,210 registered voters, the hypothetical mean of 17,817 voters per constituency allows it to keep its 7 constituencies. Jimara constituency has the highest number of registered voters: 23,052, while Wuli West has the lowest, with 11,673 registered voters. Another justification to maintain the 7 constituencies is the fact that Janjanbureh Administrative Area has only 1,396 more registered voters than Basse Administrative Area. It is, therefore, only ideal that the two areas have the same number of constituencies for fairer representation. However, there is the need to embark on some boundary adjustments to ensure a more even spread of voters.

This redrawing of boundaries would better align the allocation of constituencies across The Gambia’s voting population as shown in Table 2 below. It would also increase the overall number of constituencies, based on the number of registered voters and a hypothetical mean of 17,817, from 53 to 54.

**Table 2: Constituency reallocation by electoral quota principle**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrative Area</th>
<th>Number of Registered Voters</th>
<th>Hypothetical Mean per Constituency</th>
<th>Current Number of Constituencies</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Banjul</td>
<td>21,372</td>
<td>17,817</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td>Kanifing</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>962,157</strong></td>
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**Reducing unfair representation**

The UK has demonstrated that the EQ system could serve as a useful tool for ensuring fair and equal representation in The Gambia’s democratic and electoral processes. Wherever possible, this system mandates that constituencies should have voter rolls within 5% of the EQ of 17,817. This means that each constituency should have no fewer than 16,926
electors and no more than 18,707. This standard ensures fair representation in each constituency. However, it is imperative to note that population demographics and geographic features differ from country to country; thus, boundary redistricting, as mentioned earlier in this paper, may not align with these exact figures per constituency. But it is necessary to redraw The Gambia’s electoral boundaries to allocate reasonable figures per constituency, address the huge disparities that exist, and ensure that voters are fairly represented in the national assembly.

When combined with fair redistricting, the EQ system can ensure that every community, irrespective of its location, receives adequate representation that reflects its population size - as the constituency voter count generally has a direct correlation to the population size. This is particularly important given the ever-expanding population of the West Coast Region. However, while the EQ system could significantly contribute to creating a more inclusive and representative democracy, it is equally crucial to remember that the success of such systems can vary, depending on the specific context and implementation strategies. As such, it is essential for the boundary commission to conduct periodic evaluations and make necessary adjustments.

Under the regime of military-turned-civilian president, Yahya Jammeh (1994-2016), it was the norm that regions and constituencies considered opposition strongholds were deprived of development projects such as road infrastructure. With a presidential and unitary system of government, The Gambia’s legislature does not have a say in the allocation of resources to various regions or constituencies. Although, central government is required to provide 25% of every council’s development budget, as mentioned earlier in the paper, various local government authorities, commonly referred to as Area Councils also generate revenues within their LGAs to initiate and implement development projects and provide services to residents. However, not only does parliament have oversight function over the executive, but also Area Councils through the presentation of their annual financial report to the Finance and Public Accounts Committee (FPAC) of the National Assembly.

The allocation of Constituency Development Fund (CDF) to elected representatives for development projects in their respective constituencies is indeed laudable, but it will be unfair to have the same amount allocated despite the huge disparities in population sizes. By maintaining a similar number of voters in each constituency, the state could potentially respond more effectively to its citizens and allocate resources more fairly. This approach could also ensure that development funding and resource allocation hinge on the needs of the population. Equally, extending CDF to nominated members in parliament could amount to wastage of public funds and encourage corruption. It is a fact that political loyalty is the determinant factor for such nominations and some of the nominated members do not represent a particular demographic group. The questions of spending and accountability then arise. While CDF is now a popular approach, it is imperative to put in place accountability mechanisms to ensure judicious spending of public funds so that constituents benefit through tangible development.

The EQ approach can also reduce the risk of future electoral gerrymandering. This is an arrangement mostly used by incumbent political parties to transmute a party’s voter strength to maximum seats in the parliament. At the same time, it reduces the voter strength of another party, normally the opposition, to win a majority of legislative seats. Intentionally done, through the splitting of electoral districts, gerrymandering creates a

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legislative body that does not represent the preference of voters. For example, when an incumbent observes that it has greater popularity in a constituency, they can propose for that constituency to be divided into multiple electoral constituencies, automatically giving itself more seats in parliament. This approach is not taken in opposition strongholds, as any further split of such constituencies by the incumbent would likely increase legislative seats for the opposition. In The Gambia, electoral boundaries were redrawn and increased to its current arrangement during the reign of Yahya Jammeh. For example, in Foni, Jammeh’s birthplace, saw its number of constituencies increased from two to five prior to the 1997 parliamentary elections, which guaranteed Jammeh and his party more seats in parliament.

Although a complex task, with the right approach, boundary redistricting can lead to a more inclusive and representative democracy and serve as a significant step towards ensuring fair representation. The potential benefits for the country’s democratic process are substantial. The implementation of an EQ and boundary redistricting will be a significant step towards ensuring fair representation in The Gambia.

A roadmap for reform
The current government, with active participation of all relevant stakeholders (the executive, parliament, IEC, National Council for Civic Education-NCCE, GBOS, and Civil Society Organizations) should aim to redraw the boundaries transparently and impartially to ensure a more equitable electoral process. This process, as well as its outcome, is crucial to avoid accusations of gerrymandering and an undermining of the fairness of the electoral system. Implementing measures such as independent oversight and encouraging public participation are necessary to guard against any undue political influence.

Complying with the legal requirements for the regular review and redrawing of electoral boundaries is also crucial in The Gambia’s pursuit and strengthening of democracy. Section 50 of the country’s 1997 Constitution gives the IEC the power to redraw constituency boundaries. In 2001, the National Assembly passed a constitutional amendment that called for the creation of a boundaries commission, which would redefine constituencies and set out the criteria for demarcation. Despite this legislative requirement, the government has not established the boundaries commission. Since a new constitution is yet to be passed, this paper therefore urges the current administration to apply the 2001 amendment and create a boundary commission, tasked with the review and redrawing of the present electoral boundaries for fairer political representation.

Conclusion
As The Gambia transitions from authoritarian rule to democratic governance, legal and institutional reforms are necessary to strengthen the country’s democratization process. Democracy cannot be strengthened in the absence of fair political representation, especially in the legislative branch of government. This position paper argues that the current electoral boundary definition clearly manifests unfair political representation and

needs to be redefined to not only fulfil the criteria for fair political representation but strengthen democratic governance in the country.

Drawing upon comparative insights from international best practices, the paper proposes a tentative approach for the proposed constituency delimitation process. It argues that the redrawing of The Gambia’s electoral boundaries should be part of efforts to sustain a democratic system that is representative, fair, and responsive to social changes. It explores key considerations for boundary delineation, including demographic changes, equitable representation, and legal compliance. Using EQ/hypothetical mean per constituency, the paper justifies redressing population size and registered voter disparities to ensure a more equal balance of registered voters per electoral constituency. To achieve this, the paper advocates that the number of constituencies in some administrative areas be increased and in other areas reduced, and argues for a total of 54 constituencies instead of the current 53. In short, it argues that, to effectively capture the dynamic socio-demographic landscape of The Gambia, a meticulously planned electoral boundary revision is imperative.

Next steps
To achieve the desired outcome, the following next steps are proposed:

- Implement the 2001 constitutional amendment and establish an independent boundaries commission committed to transparency and political neutrality, to safeguard against gerrymandering, voter suppression, and unfair representation. The executive and parliament should ensure this is implemented.
- Conduct an exhaustive demographic analysis, incorporating the recently updated electoral roll, prevailing population shifts, and trends, while simultaneously considering factors such as ethnolinguistic diversity to ensure equitable representation during the redistricting process. The IEC and GBOS should be the key actors in this exercise.
- Engage in comprehensive public consultations and awareness creation to gather feedback on proposed redistricting plans and ensure that they reflect the needs and concerns of community members. It is also important to employ constituency sizes as practical parameters, ensuring that they are as equal as possible while considering other relevant factors such as geographic compactness and population density. The IEC should lead this exercise together with NCCE and civil society. The role of the latter two will help inform and educate citizens on the importance of such an exercise for democratic governance.
- Establish a transparent and systematic legal framework governing the periodicity and procedures of electoral boundary reviews that ensure congruence with democratic principles, foster a foundation for fair representation, and incorporate robust mechanisms for public participation. This becomes the responsibility of the executive, parliament, and IEC.
- As part of the electoral boundaries review process, consider the creation of constituencies or at least, a constituency outside of the country that would facilitate the extension of franchise to diaspora Gambians. The executive, parliament, and IEC should play this role through the needed electoral reform.
References


The Alkamba Times (2023, April 7). The Gambia’s 2023 Population and Housing Census has been postponed due to financial constraints. It has now been deferred to April 2024. Retrieved January 15, 2024 Gambia’s 2023 Population & Housing Census Postponed due to financial deficiency | The Alkamba Times
