

## GAMBIA'S OPPOSITION UDP WINS ABSOLUTE MAJORITY FROM JAMMEH

**BANJUL, Gambia:** The Gambia's longtime opposition won an absolute majority in parliamentary elections, easily defeating the party of ousted leader Yahya Jammeh, results announced Friday showed. Official results announced by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) showed the United Democratic Party (UDP) won 31 of the 53 available elected seats in the country's National Assembly. "(I) hereby declare the final results as follows: UDP won 31 seats; APRC (Jammeh's party) won five seats," IEC chairman Aliou Momar Njie declared at the commission headquarters.

Five more seats are appointed by the president to give a total 58 seats in the chamber, giving the UDP a two-seat majority. Turnout was low at 42 percent, Njie said, saying more civic education was needed to persuade people to come out and vote in legislative polls. The UDP was one of seven parties who united to propel President Adama Barrow to power in December last year, but that coalition broke apart for the legislative election.

The party has long considered itself a government-in-waiting, and Barrow was UDP treasurer until resigning to become the flag bearer candidate for the coalition. Their victory is likely to make it easier for Barrow to get a raft of promised reforms passed, with UDP leader Ousainou Darboe a personal friend and longtime ally of the president. Lamin Dibba, a senior UDP official, said the vote put the party in a strong position to make major changes in The Gambia. "It's increased our confidence and I think in the near future it will be very easy for us to form a government," he told AFP by phone.

Our first priority will be to look at the constitution, he said. "We will also ensure that the national assembly will give the nation the power to operate rather than the president," referring to Jammeh's frequent use of executive orders to push through laws. Jammeh's Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC) meanwhile suffered a stunning reversal, going from 48 seats to just five overnight—a result that revealed the deep anger felt by former supporters and critics alike at the actions of the regime.

An expected surge for the Gambia Democratic Congress (GDC), an upstart party which did not join the coalition, failed to materialize, with the youth-led movement gaining just five seats. Smaller parties who joined the coalition took 11 more seats, and one independent candidate took a seat. The Gambia's National Assembly was long decided for acting as a rubberstamp for Jammeh's decisions, but hopes are high for a revitalized chamber.—AFP



**GAMBIA:** The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) Chairperson Aliou Momar Njie announces the elections results at his office in Banjul yesterday.—AFP



**CAIRO:** Syrian Mohamed Amin, 43, who fled his country with his family due to the war, measures a baking-oven at a make-shift bakery set up on the balcony of his apartment in the Egyptian capital Cairo.—AFP

## SYRIAN REFUGEES SETTLE IN EGYPT, GIVE UP ON WEST

**CAIRO:** After fleeing to Egypt from the war devastating their country, more Syrians are abandoning migration to the West fearing racism and culture shock, and instead are settling in Cairo. Mohamed Amin, 43, had considered Egypt a gateway to Europe when he arrived five years ago. He has since changed his mind, put off by accounts from fellow refugees who made it to the Netherlands and Canada.

"There is racism, and Western culture is very different from our Muslim and Arab culture even if the quality of life is better," said the father of four who owned two bakeries in the Syrian town of Muadamiyat al-Sham. He is now trying to supplement his income with a bakery he set up on his apartment balcony. Ayman, who requested his full name not be used, said he was shaken by a January shooting in a Canadian mosque that killed six worshippers. "When I heard about the (Quebec City) attack, I felt unsafe and worried. At least here I can go to the mosque safely."

### Illusions

The two men are among the 120,000 Syrians in Egypt registered as refugees with the United Nations. The Egyptian government estimates there are altogether half a million Syrians in the country. Going back to Syria at the present is also not an option. The conflict has killed more than 320,000 people, uprooted more than half the population and forced over five million to flee abroad since it erupted six years ago, and it shows no sign of abating.

Amin says he will not leave Egypt "except to Syria when things settle down". "I don't feel like a refugee in Egypt. The language, norms and traditions are the same," he said. His mother-in-law, Umm Haitham, agrees. "I feel like I'm living in my country. Since the start I was for staying in Egypt." Mohamed Fawaz, 44, said he "held a temporary job waiting for the day the (UN refugee agency) informs me of the travel deci-

sion". But those who made the move "warned me of the illusions around travelling to Europe", he said.

Fewer Syrians also have been trying to migrate illegally to Europe in dangerous Mediterranean voyages that have claimed thousands of lives. "Fewer Syrians are leaving now. Syrians represented one percent of those arrested attempting illegal migration in 2015, which is a sharp drop compared with 2013 and 2014," said Tarik Argaz, a spokesman for the UN refugee agency UNHRC.

The lower numbers are due to "good treatment by the Egyptian government and (the Syrians') acclimatization as well as problems in Europe towards refugees", he said. That does not mean Syrians do not face hardship in Egypt. Thousands had arrived in Egypt under the Islamist president Mohamed Morsi

who ruled between 2012 and 2013. After his ouster, police cracked down on Syrians who were seen as supportive of the Islamist leader.

### Why leave?

But an Egyptian official who requested anonymity said: "In any case, Egypt will not tell them (Syrians) to leave, no matter how long they stay." The official said the government is now allowing family reunification requests after years of rejecting them for security reasons. Lawyer Youssef al-Mataani says the number of Syrians approaching him to assist with resettlement documents has dropped. "I used to receive about 10 Syrian families each week to help accelerate resettlement legal procedures. The number declined in the last few months and has reached zero at the moment," he said.—AFP

## UN IMAGES: 18,000 DESTROYED STRUCTURES IN SOUTH SUDAN REGION

**NAIROBI:** United Nations satellite images obtained by The Associated Press show at least 18,000 structures have been destroyed in the Yei area of South Sudan. It is one of the most significant caches of evidence of widespread destruction in the country's civil war. The Yei region has become an epicenter of fighting between government and rebels after a peace deal collapsed in July. The UN has highlighted the area for its risk of genocide, and an AP reporter late last year during a visit to Yei saw charred bodies with their arms bound.

The UN satellite images show how population centers like Yei, Morobo and Bazi have been mostly devastated. In parts of Kaya and Morobo towns, nearly every building is in ruins. The images do not show who is

responsible for the destruction, but monitors of South Sudan's peace deal said last week that in most instances in Yei, "buildings were deliberately set on fire by government forces." A spokesman for President Salva Kiir, Ateny Wek Ateny, called the satellite images "exceedingly rubbish."

"Where are the people? That means that 18,000 families are dead or are displaced," Ateny said. Government officials have blamed rebels and wildfires for the destruction in Yei, the peace deal monitors said, adding that investigators found that unlikely. Satellite imagery is increasingly being relied on by investigators to document destruction during South Sudan's three-year civil war, which has killed tens of thousands and sent more than 1.7 million people fleeing the country.—AP