

Gambia: three journalists arrested as election campaign begins

Gambian authorities arbitrarily detained three journalists just days before the November 16 start of the two-week presidential election campaign, Human Rights Watch said. The authorities should appropriately charge or release the journalists and ensure that Gambian and international media can operate without fear of harassment or arbitrary arrest.



On November 8, officials from Gambia's National Intelligence Agency (NIA) arrested the director-general of Gambia's state television and radio broadcaster, Momodou Sabally, along with his colleague Bakary Fatty. NIA officers arrested Alhagie Manka, an independent photojournalist, on November 10. All three have yet to appear in court, in violation of Gambian law.

"The Gambian government's arrest of three journalists before the start of the presidential election campaign could have a chilling effect on the media's ability to fairly cover the election," said [Babatunde Olugboji](#), deputy program director at Human Rights Watch. "Intimidation and threats against the media need to stop for voters to be able to make informed decisions."

The December 1 presidential election will mark the fifth time that incumbent President Yahya Jammeh has sought a new five-year term since coming to power in a 1994 coup. Human Rights Watch [raised concerns about the fairness of the election](#) in a November 2 report.

Local activists told Human Rights Watch that Gambia Radio and Television Services employees believe that Sabally was

arrested because the station broadcast video footage of an opposition candidate's nomination at the time when the station was scheduled to cover an agricultural initiative led by the first lady, Zineb Jammeh. Fatty, a reporter at the station, was arrested at the station's headquarters on the same day as Sabally.

Gambian journalists reported that NIA officers arrested Manka on November 10, in a suburb of Banjul, the capital. None of the three detained journalists have appeared before a judge, despite a provision in the Gambian constitution requiring that anyone arrested or detained be brought to court within 72 hours.

During the two-week election campaign, Gambia's Independent Election Commission grants all parties the right to equal airtime on state television and radio. Several Gambian journalists told Human Rights Watch that they were concerned that the arrests would discourage the state broadcaster from ensuring fair and impartial coverage of opposition parties during the election campaign.

Gambia's election campaign began with 30 opposition supporters, including the leader of the United Democratic Party, the largest opposition party, serving three-year prison terms for their role in peaceful protests in April. Another 14 opposition activists are on trial in relation to a May 9 protest. Omar Malleh Jabang, a businessman and opposition supporter, was arrested and detained on November 10, and has since been held incommunicado without charge. An opposition leader told Human Rights Watch that Jabang had been providing financial and material support to opposition parties.

"Fair elections are only possible if all candidates and parties can freely campaign and journalists can report freely," Olugboji said. "The Gambian government and security forces need to allow everyone to make their voices heard during the election campaign."

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