

UA 40/22

AI Index AFR 27/5568/2022 of 5 May 2022

## **GAMBIA HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER AT RISK**

During his annual meeting with the Banjul Muslim Elders for Koriteh at the State House on 2 May 2022, President Adama Barrow accused human rights defender Madi Jobarteh of being a “troublemaker” who wants to bring violence into the country. It is believed that this assertion was made in relation to a recent social media post that Madi Jobarteh made calling for the removal of a government minister, due to alleged mismanagement of public lands. Such statements by the President put Madi Jobarteh’s safety at risk, and fundamentally undermines the right to freedom of expression in Gambia.

During a speech, the president accused Madi Jobarteh of being a “troublemaker” who wants to bring violence and burn down the country, and the media of being irresponsible for serving as a platform to Madi Jobarteh. In a society guaranteeing human rights, including the right to freedom of expression, such baseless attacks and accusations against human rights defenders and the media raise serious concern.

His recent statement has stigmatized Madi Jobarteh’s peaceful activism, and dangerously exacerbated the risks he faces in his personal and professional life, making him the target of threats, harassment and criminalization. Madi Jobarteh has already been threatened online and he faces a real risk of further harassment and physical attacks. There have been several incidents of journalists assaulted by supporters of political parties over the past few years, and these comments about Madi Jobarteh and the media risk adding fuel to the fire.

Human rights defenders play an essential role in standing up for freedom, opposing discrimination, repression, corruption and promoting social justice across West and Central Africa. Many face the risk of threats, harassment and physical violence by security forces and private actors.

### **Write to the President urging him to:**

- ensure the security of human rights defender Madi Jobarteh and ensure he can exercise his right to freedom of expression as guaranteed by the Gambian Constitution
- refrain from using language and sentiment that would stigmatize, and therefore endanger, human rights defenders and supportive media outlets
- promote the role of human rights defenders and the media in defending human rights and freedom of expression by taking effective measures to ensure that all human rights defenders can carry out their peaceful activities without fear of hindrance, intimidation, arbitrary detention or imprisonment, in line with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

**Write to:**

His Excellency Adama Barrow  
President of Gambia  
State house of the Gambia  
Banjul  
The Gambia  
E-mail: [info@op.gov.gm](mailto:info@op.gov.gm)  
Salutation: His Excellency President Barrow,

**And Copy:**

Embassy of the Republic of The Gambia  
5630 16th Street NW  
Washington, D.C., WA 20011  
USA  
Email: [info@gambiaembassy.us](mailto:info@gambiaembassy.us)

**Additional information**

The President's accusations against Madi Jobarteh were made during his annual meeting with the Banjul Muslim Elders for Koriteh on 2 May 2022 at the State House. Madi Jobarteh was accused of being a troublemaker and bringing violence to the country. These accusations appear to be in response to a social media post Madi Jobarteh made on 20 April. In the post, he called for the removal of the Minister of Lands, Musa Drammeh, because of alleged mismanagement of public lands. A few weeks before this post, the government confirmed some state lands had been allocated to the Vice President, several government ministers as well as private individuals after a leaked document circulated on social media. The government claims to have respected the law in doing so.

President Barrow's remarks in the same speech that media are contributing to the destabilization of the country by giving a platform to one of his leading critics, contravenes the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association which are guaranteed under section 25 of the Gambian Constitution. This is not the first time that Madi Jobarteh has faced harassment. On 30 June 2020, he was arrested and charged with false information and broadcasting under section 181A of the Criminal Code. On that occasion, he had stated during a Black Lives Matter protest he had organized that the government failed to investigate the killings of three Gambian citizens by police officers. The charges were dropped the following month.

After President Adama Barrow assumed power following the election in 2016, he vowed to carry out critical reforms to reverse the repression which characterized the government of former President Yahya Jammeh. Nearly five years later, despite some improvements, things have not changed so positively as expected, including the Gambia legislative landscape which has barely changed.

Although protection of the right to freedom of expression and other rights have improved since 2016, oppressive Jammeh era laws are still on the statute books such as some sections of the Information and Communications Act of 2009. These laws are still used to oppress human rights defenders, activists, journalists and civil society groups.

In December 2021, President Adama Barrow won the Presidential elections, becoming President for a second five-year term. This kind of statements, like the one against Madi Jobarteh, are a worrying indicator that the President may question and threaten human rights defenders, media and civil society activists for their legitimate work.