

Bloodshed In Banjul

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How Half a Dozen
Middle-Class
Americans Plotted
to Overthrow an
Obscure African
Despot



With few weapons and an amateurish plan, a handful of middle-aged American immigrants who had made good lives for themselves over the course of decades—complete with careers, wives, children, savings, suburban houses, citizenship—attempted to topple the tyrannical ruler of the Gambia. The outcome was disastrous, both for the men involved and for the long-suffering citizens of the Gambia. What possessed these men to risk everything on a mission that was doomed to fail?

The six members of Alpha team stealthily approached the presidential palace. Njaga Jagne adjusted his hastily put-on camouflage fatigues as he rechecked his M4 assault rifle. He scouted out the approach to the palatial residence with his night-vision goggles and motioned for the rest of his team to follow.

Meanwhile, Bravo team was taking position facing the rear of the building. The team, led by Papa Faal, unloaded a heavy machine gun from a rented truck and set it up at the entrance to the emergency room of the Royal Victoria Teaching Hospital in Banjul, capital of the tiny West African country of the Gambia. The machine gun pointed across the street at the fortified rear gate of the Gambian State House, home of the Gambia's head of state, President Yahya Jammeh.

Both team leaders radioed back to Cherno Njie, leader of the small cabal bent on overthrowing the government of the Gambia. This was the moment they had all been waiting for. For 20 years, Jammeh had ruled the Gambia with an iron fist. A tyrant out of a caricature, a throwback to the African strongmen of the 1970s, he boasted that he would rule for "a billion years." On the crazy-but-not-overly-dangerous side, he posed as a fetishistic healer, claiming magical powers to cure AIDS, asthma and diabetes, and launched witch-hunts to root out enemy sorcerers. On the totally-crazy-and-dangerous-side, he massacred protesters and disappeared political opponents, crushing every suspected opponent, perceived or real, to his absolute rule through his feared intelligence service, all the while enriching himself at the expense of the people.

Now, this small band of revolutionaries would ignite the spark that would allow the Gambian people to retake their nation and prosper in a free-market society under open, democratic rule.

Or so they thought.

Alpha team dashed toward the front entrance to the State House. The fighters, military veterans all, raised their weapons and fired into



State House of the Gambia in Banjul.

the air over the roof, where they saw guards on duty. According to intelligence they had received, the presidential residence would be lightly guarded now, since Jammeh was out of the country. The attackers were hoping to surprise and overwhelm the guards, forcing them to surrender without casualties.

To their astonishment, a huge volley of fire was returned! Dashing for cover, the guerillas saw dozens of soldiers crowded on the roof of the State House. The guerillas had walked into a trap....

From Riches to Rebellion

To many Gambian-Americans, especially in the Austin, Texas area, Cherno Momodou Njie was a pillar of the community, a role model and a hero. He was the embodiment of the American dream. Born in 1958 to a family of modest means in Banjul, the Gambia (its official name is "Republic of the Gambia," although it is often simply called Gambia), he excelled in school and later found work in a local bank. At age



Njie receiving a civic award in 2011.

25, he immigrated to the United States in pursuit of better education and opportunity. He quickly acclimated to life in the US and was awarded a bachelor's degree from the University of Texas in 1987.

Njie went on to work for the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs for 10 years, and led a division that invested over \$1 billion in affordable housing developments before leaving for the private sector. In 2001, he established the Songhai Development Company, along with a sister corporation, CMB Construction. Today, they are each multi-million-dollar businesses.

Njie greatly appreciated the opportunities America provided. A shrewd entrepreneur with a strong work ethic, he tended toward conservative politics. "He criticizes extremists, hated Saddam, loves Israel," recalled one friend. "He has a commitment to market institutions, a deep commitment."

Although he achieved considerable financial success in his new country, Njie never forgot his origins. He was very active in local Gambian community events and causes, and he closely followed news and politics in his birthplace. His ethnic pride led him to name his development company after the indiginous Songhai Empire, which ruled over a huge territory in West Africa in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Njie was greatly disturbed in 1994, when the democratically elected Gambian president was overthrown in a *coup d'état* by 29-year-old military commander Yahya Jammeh. Instead of freeing Gambia from economic stagnation and political corruption as he promised, Jammeh instituted a brutally repressive regime. He spent 20 years solidifying his hold on power, building a cult of personality around himself, all the while living lavishly as the average Gambian languished in poverty.

The more Njie heard from fellow Gambians who had immigrated to the US, the more enraged he became. To his friends he seemed modest and mild-mannered, but inwardly he seethed. The idealistic millionaire contrasted his own success with the impoverished, hard-working subsistence farmers of the



One of the residential communities built by Njie's Songhai Development Corporation.



Gambia is known as a popular tourist destination for Europeans due to its beautiful beaches.

Gambia who were exhorted by President Jammeh to "grow what you eat and eat what you grow," while he himself pocketed foreign aid money, sent his daughter to an exclusive Manhattan private school, maintained a lavish 80,000-square-foot mansion near Washington DC... and simultaneously railed against Western imperialism.

Slowly, Njie began making contacts with other, like-minded Gambians around the US. Together, they began to formulate a plan whose audacity was only exceeded by its desperation. Cherno M. Njie himself would finance yet another coup in the Gambia, this time with the aim of bringing true democracy and prosperity there.

(Disclaimer: As of this writing, the events related here are *alleged* to have taken place, but Cherno Njie has pleaded not guilty to the US government's charges of conspiracy and is still awaiting trial.)