Gambians vote in presidential election; longtime leader is expected to win

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BANJUL, Gambia Braving heavy rain and flooding in areas, Gambians voted for president Friday — dropping a marble into a bin marked with their candidate's color — in elections that longtime President Yahya Jammeh is widely expected to win.

Jammeh is seeking a third five-year term following the adoption of a constitutional amendment that gives victory to the candidate with the largest share of votes — no matter how slim the margin. Gambia has no term limits for the presidency.

The two challengers have promised to bring greater economic stability and democratic reforms to a country burdened by overwhelming poverty and accusations of political repression.

Polling stations — which stayed open about two and a half hours later than planned because of the rain — closed around 6:30 p.m. (1830GMT) and sealed drums of votes were transferred to counting centers. The electoral commission has said it expects some results by Saturday morning.

Jammeh seized power in a coup in 1994 and has ruled Gambia for 12 years, winning elections in 1996 and 2001 that opposition groups said were rigged. International observers disputed the 1996 vote but cleared the 2001 election as free and fair.

In 2001, Jammeh won 53 percent of the vote. In that ballot, a candidate needed to capture at least 50 percent to avoid a runoff.

Jammeh voted in late morning in the capital of Banjul, wearing his characteristic white robes and holding a Quran and prayer beads as he went into the polling station surrounded by a group of soldiers.

The president — who has a broad base of support — has promised that his re-election will bring more prosperity to Gambia and that he will work to attract high-tech businesses to the country.

"The turnout is good," Jammeh said after casting his vote. "I'm absolutely confident about the outcome."

Jammeh's two challengers criticized Jammeh's administration as they cast their votes in towns on the edge of the capital.

"Gambians want to live in a democratic state, a secure country that will cater for their welfare," said Ousainou Darboe, who in 2001 came in second to Jammeh with 33 percent of the vote.

Darboe also said he would address surging commodities prices. The cost of a sack of rice — a staple that can feed a family for weeks — has more than doubled in the past five years to about US$19.

Candidate Halifa Sallah, a university professor, said after casting his ballot that he might reject the results because HE had been refused a legally allotted broadcast on state television.

Gambia, which gained independence from Britain in 1965, is one of the world's poorest nations, dependent largely on peanut farming, fishing and tourism along its 80-kilometer (50-mile) coastline. The country has few natural resources and struggles to keep pace with Senegal, which surrounds Gambia on three sides.

The government declared a national holiday for the ballot, and businesses were closed throughout Banjul.

Voters waited in lines through the rain, holding brightly colored umbrellas. The downpour caused some streets to flood in Banjul. Women wrapped in brightly colored scarves waited among men wearing jeans, suits and traditional flowing robes.

A bell rang out every time a marble was dropped into a container, signaling a vote cast.

The marble voting method, used for decades, was originally meant to make voting easier for those who couldn't read. Three bins stood in the voting area — green for Jammeh, yellow for Darboe and gray for Sallah. The bins also were labeled with candidate names and pictures.

International critics have warned that restrictions on political expression and free speech leading up Friday's vote may prevent the election from being fair.

The U.S. cited political suppression when it pulled some funding to Gambia in June. Paris-based media watchdog Reporters Without Borders, citing numerous arrests of journalists, along with threats and surveillance, charged that press freedom has been so curtailed in Gambia that lack of information alone makes fair elections impossible.

Still, many Gambians are avid supporters of Jammeh, who has sought out international funding and has built roads, hospitals and schools throughout the country.

"He's development-oriented," said Saihou Samb, a 25-year-old insurance underwriter. "There are a lot of things I want to improve. I expect that Jammeh will do it." He said his relatives in his hometown of Farafenni told him they recently got electricity again, after it had been out for more than a year.

"I'm not supporting him blindly. I understand he has weaknesses," Samb said.

About 670,000 people out of Gambia's population of around 1.6 million are registered to vote, according to the electoral commission.

Gambia has set up nearly 1,000 polling stations at schools, offices and public buildings across the country. The commission has said between 250 and 300 international observers will watch over the election — mostly representatives from embassies and pan-African organizations. Britain and its former colonies have sent a team of 15 observers.

At one station, at least two people complained that they were not on the polling station list and were not being allowed to vote. It was not immediately clear if they had gone to the polling station where they were registered.

Much of Gambia's population are subsistence farmers, and the country's gross domestic product equals about $1,900 per person.

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Associated Press writer Rebecca Blackwell contributed to this report.

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