

# **A Week of Hell**

**How Rebels Shattered the Innocence and Peace of a  
Nation—One Family's Story of Survival**

**Papa Faal**

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“Peace and stability is the bedrock for a nation’s prosperity.”

—Papa Faal

# Dedications

This book is dedicated in the memory of my late mother, Nday Jawara; my father, the late Muhammed Lamin Faal; my late aunt Futa Jawara; the late Pa Dawda Camara; my late stepfather, Sidina (Didie) Hydara; my late grandfather Sheriffo Jawara; my late uncle Buba Jawara; my late uncle Kaba Jawara; all those who paid the ultimate price in the abortive coup d'état of 1981 and their families, as well as all the Senegalese soldiers, deceased or alive, who defended our great nation in her hours of need.

# Disclaimer

The information in this book is the result of extensive research and interviews with those who lived through the ordeal of the coup d'état. Since the event happened more than thirty years ago, I have worked diligently to make sure the content of the book is as accurate as possible. Many of the names of the people involved in the event and their locations have been changed to protect their privacy.



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# Foreword

In *A Week of Hell*, Papa Faal puts a human face on the recurring, ubiquitous, and violent military coups d'état that plagued Africa—West Africa in particular—for nearly a thirty-year period, beginning in the 1960s. Violent military coups were commonplace in many parts of the developing world during the late 1960s and early 1970s; however, West Africa had become synonymous with the phenomenon. At one period in the mid-1980s, no more than four independent nations in West Africa had escaped violent and bloody military coups d'état, a scourge that undermined democracy and its institutions, thus stunting development. The question is: Why?

The basic explanation is that the departing colonial powers failed to prepare their subjects for self-rule. Some would argue that, in many cases, the departing colonial powers set in motion the jangling centrifugal forces that made it impossible for the various tribes and divergent groups to be loyal to the notion of a nation-state. Another explanation is that, in the Cold War era, these weak nation-states simply fought the proxy wars of the two major belligerents: the United States and the then Soviet Union. Since then, this topic has been overanalyzed, and while much progress has been made in turning the corner on military coups d'état, some of the simmering undercurrents remain dormant.

During that volatile period, the African media particularly had romanticized and dramatized the violent upheavals that gripped the continent. The media coverage filled the egos of overly ambitious young men with illusions of grandeur. At first, these men appeared on the scene, donning dark glasses and sometimes juvenile in behavior and appearance, claiming to have the quick answers to the nations' woes. In a year or two, these military men quietly shed their fatigues for sleek Italian business suits or

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custom-made *boubous*<sup>1</sup> with oversized necks, preaching the virtues of democracy, while the nation cascaded into chaos and more coups.

Papa Faal's story *A Week of Hell* is a human story that occurred in the Gambia in 1981, a story that has been both underreported and underanalyzed. However, it is the story of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of families all across West Africa who were caught in the cross fire and battle between "Big Men." The adage says that when elephants fight, the grass suffers; this has never been so true in Papa's case. Papa was too young to defend his family, but he was old enough to remember everything. He has been traumatized by those events and the actions of those evil men, led by Kukoi himself, and not a day goes by that Papa does not think about it. In many ways, this book has been therapeutic and a form of closure for him, showing, in the process, how the innocent get hurt and killed, properties and businesses destroyed, all for power and greed. In Papa's case, people like his grandfather Alhadjie Sheriffo Jawara were the productive citizens, the actors in the real economy, and their loss was the nation's loss. His great-uncle, the former president of the Gambia, Alhadjie Sir Dowda Jawara, was the face of democracy in that tiny country. Put yourself in Papa's shoes and experience *A Week of Hell*.

—Kebba Samateh

<sup>1</sup> Traditional gown or dress

# Introduction

I lay down flat on my back, on the cold concrete floor, with my fingers interlocked over my head. I was terrified and shivering. My adrenaline shot higher as the ground rumbled relentlessly under me with each explosion. It felt as though the world was ending. Each exploding *boom* got louder with every minute that passed as shells of fireballs left the muzzles of the Senegalese military tanks. The town of Brikama and its surrounding villages endured a full day under relentless siege and bombardment. Wailing voices of men and women filled the air, some in prayers and others in agony. Children screamed at the top of their lungs for an immediate cessation of the terrifying and incessant gunfire. No one dared raise their heads for fear of being hit by stray bullets or being crushed by the roof shaking above us.

My family, along with scores of other citizens who came to *Sefo*<sup>1</sup> Pa Sanjally Bojang's house for refuge, scattered on the floors of the dark rooms, hoping to see the light of another day. Outside, the streets lay bare as the Senegalese troops rolled freely but cautiously across the streets of Brikama, toward the capital, Banjul. The Senegalese troops brought to bear an overwhelming firepower in response to the rebels' last stand and ambush in Brikama. For seven days, the country loomed beneath the dark clouds of an uncertain future as she lay under siege in a battle for survival, struggling to avert the plight that already plagued other West African nations.

That same year was supposed to be the year of promise for the tiny African nation, the year of revival from the debacle of extensive economic contraction and drought that plagued the nation for the past several years. That year was supposed to be the year of hope for farmers

<sup>1</sup> Local chief

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across the nation, who prayed year after year for a healthy rainy season that would bring dead earth to life and allow their crops and livestock to flourish again. It was supposed to be the year of the Gambia's "sweet sixteen" birthday as she left behind the legacy and chronicles of untold stories of scars inflicted by centuries of colonial rule. The Gambia was ready to embark on a journey into the next decades with a series of policies that would ensure stability and prosperity for all. It was supposed to be the year of dreams, dreams for a brighter future and a nation that was never supposed to exist.

But on that hot summer day of July, all those bright dreams and high hopes, along with the nation's pride, came tumbling down under the weight of high-sounding, pseudorevolutionary rhetoric and flying bullets in the hands of madmen. The rebellion destabilized a well-functioning, democratically elected government, and in the process, the perpetrators held the entire Gambian nation, including my family, physically and psychologically paralyzed.

It all started in the early hours of July 30, 1981, when the nation awoke to a new paradigm, in familiar rhetoric heard only from afar. No, it was not the voice that called for devout Muslims to leave the comfort of their cozy beds and report to early morning prayers, nor was it a voice that called for national unity. It was a voice that brought chills to the spines of many nations before in that subregion of sub-Saharan Africa. It was a voice of an unwelcomed guest who more often than not was accompanied by winds of anarchy and instability. It was a voice of revolutionary rhetoric. Behind that rhetoric was the voice of Kukoi Samba Sanyang. Kukoi was a failed politician who ran in the 1977 general election in Foni District of the Gambia under the banner of the National Convention Party (NCP), led by the late Sheriff Mustapha Dibba, against the ruling People's Progressive Party (PPP) of my great-uncle Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara. Kukoi Samba Sanyang polled less than eight hundred votes out of tens of thousands cast in that election.

Embarrassed by his mediocre performance, Kukoi shamefully left the Gambia to find an alternate route to fulfill his hunger for power. In his search

for safe haven, he found comfort in the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. Gaddafi was a radical, rambunctious leader who actively tried to spread his brand of violent revolution across Africa, particularly in West Africa.

Gaddafi's mission had been to destabilize African countries in an effort to promote his influence and perhaps expand his own reign across the continent. He had been responsible for many of the coups d'état in the sub-Saharan African countries. Gaddafi maintained a terrorist training camp where he trained and equipped future revolutionaries who would one day go back to overthrow their own governments.

While the president of the Gambia was out in Great Britain on vacation and to attend Prince Charles and Princess Diana's wedding, Kukoi Samba Sanyang and his cowardly rebels gathered their miserly shotguns. In the dark hours of the night, they sneaked into the field force armory and stole several Kalashnikov (AK-47) weapons. They then went out and took control of Radio Gambia, the national airport in Yundum, and the state-house. They took the president's family hostage, which included my family, government ministers, political leaders, and some foreign dignitaries. They released and armed the nation's most dangerous prisoners in an effort to expand their strength. This unimaginable action of Kukoi and his bandits resulted in carnage, upheaval, and unprecedented anarchy in our great nation of the Gambia.

In the subregion of West Africa, where 55 percent of the entire continent's coups d'état happened, as well as over a third of all attempted coups and half of all coup plots, the 1981 Gambian abortive coup d'état was one more blow to an already volatile region. Between 1960 and 1985, thirteen out of the sixteen nations in West Africa had one or more coups d'état, an astounding statistic that shows the great political, social, and economic divide that held the region from prospering.<sup>2</sup>

The devastation of the abortive coup d'état in the Gambia that year by Kukoi and his movement was felt long after it was over. Scores of business-

2 Baffour Agyeman-Duah, "Military Coups, Regime Change, and Interstate Conflict in West Africa," *Armed Forces & Society* 16, no. 4 (Summer 1990): 547.

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es went bankrupt, leaving many families destitute. More than five hundred innocent lives had perished while mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and grandparents struggled to make sense of their loss in a sea of broken hearts. Innocent families like mine, along with many others, spent countless days on their heels threading village after village and household after household seeking refuge and fighting for our their existence.

The government of the Gambia implemented a series of economic policies geared toward pulling the country out of poor performance largely due to the drought and poor harvests. Following the abortive coup, the economy almost crumbled due to the millions of dollars' worth of damage to public infrastructure and private property, as well as the looted retail and financial sectors. In the end, the Senegalese intervention prevented the Gambia, once Africa's stablest nation, from falling into the hands of madmen like Kukoi Samba Sanyang and his cronies. Justice was subsequently done as many of those involved in the abortive coup d'état were brought to trial and jailed, although the scars inflicted by the rebellion on those who suffered the ultimate price through loss of life remain.