

PhD candidate in the spotlight:

# Jimmy HENDRY NZALLY

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I am Jimmy Hendry Nzally, a PhD researcher in Political Science and coming from The Gambia, one of the smallest countries in mainland Africa. I hold a bachelor in Development Studies, two Master's programs i.e. one in African History from the University of The Gambia (UTG) and one in Linguistics and Literary Studies here at the VUB. My research is on Gambian Politics under the previous government of Yahya Jammeh. It focuses on Gender, Religion, Media and Politics from 1994 to 2017. For the first time since gaining independence from Britain in 1965, The Gambia never had a change of government through the ballot box until in 2016. Before that, there was a military takeover in 1994 under the leadership of lieutenant Jammeh, who lost in the December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2016 presidential elections through a coalition government in power. So, in my research I will deconstruct Jammeh in understanding the change, why it took so long, and what lessons could be drawn looking into the future for The Gambia?

## **Is there something you want to share with the VUB PhD Community?**

VUB is such a diverse campus which makes it especially appealing to international students. As a student who did his master's and now his PhD here at VUB I can attest to this fact. The Doctoral Schools promote very interesting seminars concerning research skills, mentorship, and counselling that can help one to settle down well throughout their PhD. Our lecturers, supervisors and staff are very welcoming and indeed professional for a conducive learning atmosphere. Therefore, I consider VUB as my home and my most valuable asset for both my personal and professional development. I quickly integrated and moved on from becoming a student to a student ambassador for our university. For instance, I had the honour to represent VUB in the 2016 Climate Change Summit in Marrakech, had lunch with King Phillippe of Belgium, spoke at the 2017-2018 academic opening – being the second international student to do so ever - and also delivered the valedictory speech at my graduation ceremony in the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017. I also

participated in numerous events including protests to demand release of our VUB Iranian professor detained in Iran, Ahmadreza Djalali. I founded the VUB Africa Student's Community (ASCOM) and I am the current chairperson of the International Student Platform (ISP). This university supports researchers both in their academic and student social life as part of creating responsible global citizenship and I am delighted to be part of it.

**What was your main motivation to start your PhD? Has working on your PhD changed that initial point of view?**

I strongly believe in education as the most powerful weapon to transform yourself and your country. So, coming from one of the most underdeveloped countries, I see further studies and now a PhD as a way to uplift myself and family out of poverty and a huge opportunity to contribute meaningfully into human deficiency in my country. Even though I am a self-funded researcher: of course, I wouldn't mind getting funded for the remainder of my PhD. My ultimate aim is to contribute meaningfully to the development of my country as a resourceful person. We have seen the high influx of young people leaving our part of the world due to economic migrations and the impact of brain drain is unprecedentedly high. And I think I can help in the development processes of our young people through education. For example, back home in The Gambia, I am a radio presenter as I have been into awareness creation, and I founded the University of The Gambia Leadership Fellowship to help train young people to become change makers through leadership, mentorship and entrepreneurship development. My aim is to transform the fellowship into an academy called The Gambia Leadership working specifically with young people who are early school leavers and are left alone in the streets, outside of any community.