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EFSCRJ Calls for the Resignation or Removal of Imam Baba Leigh from the National Human Rights Commission

The Edward Francis Small Centre for Rights and Justice expresses grave concern over the reported tribalist remarks made by Imam Baba Leigh, a serving Commissioner of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), in which he stated that *“the Mandinka do not know anything and always like to be angry.”*

EFSCRJ considers this statement unacceptable, discriminatory, and fundamentally incompatible with the responsibilities, values and standards expected of a member of the National Human Rights Commission. To attribute a negative behavioural characteristic to an entire ethnic community is an unjustifiable generalization that stereotypes people solely on the basis of their ethnic identity. Therefore, Imam Leigh’s statements raise the fundamental question as to whether a person entrusted with protecting and promoting the human rights, equality and dignity of all Gambians can engage in tribal stereotyping and continue to command the confidence necessary to serve as a national human rights commissioner.

The National Human Rights Commission Act 2017 requires, under Section 5(2) that Commissioners to be persons *“of high morals and proven integrity”* who command public respect and have a proven record of respect for human rights. These requirements are not decorative qualifications. They constitute the ethical and institutional foundation upon which the legitimacy and credibility of the Commission rests.

Furthermore, the Constitution of the Republic of The Gambia establishes equality and non-discrimination as fundamental principles and requires public officers to conduct themselves in a manner that promotes confidence in the integrity of public office. A Commissioner of the NHRC therefore bears an especially high responsibility to uphold these principles both in word and conduct.

It is particularly troubling that these remarks come from a Commissioner of an institution that has itself studied and raised concern about hate speech and its consequences in Gambian society. The NHRC cannot credibly call upon political leaders, public officials, religious leaders, and citizens to refrain from discriminatory and divisive rhetoric while appearing to tolerate ethnic stereotyping from within its own leadership.

The Gambia is a multi-ethnic republic in which Mandinka, Fula, Wolof, Jola, Serahule, Serer, Manjago, Karoninka, Mankagne, Aku, and other communities have lived together and collectively built our nation. No ethnic group should be collectively labelled, stereotyped, demeaned, or treated as possessing inherently negative characteristics. Such rhetoric is particularly dangerous as the country approaches the December 2026 presidential election, when political competition and irresponsible tribal narratives have the potential to deepen division, prejudice, and hostility.

Freedom of expression protects robust debate, criticism and even speech that may offend. But freedom of expression does not exempt public officials from accountability for their words, nor does it entitle a national human rights commissioner to engage in discriminatory ethnic stereotyping without consequences for his suitability to occupy such a sensitive public position.





Consequently, EFSCRJ takes the position that Imam Baba Leigh's continued membership of the National Human Rights Commission has become untenable. We therefore call on:

1. Imam Baba Leigh to take responsibility for his remarks, publicly retract them, apologize to the Mandinka community and the Gambian people, and resign from the National Human Rights Commission.
2. The National Human Rights Commission to publicly address the remarks and clarify whether such conduct is compatible with the ethical, integrity and human rights standards required of its Commissioners. Silence risks undermining the credibility and moral authority of the Commission.
3. The appropriate appointing and removal authorities, should Imam Leigh decline to resign, to initiate the applicable lawful process under the NHRC Act and other relevant laws to determine his continued suitability for membership of the Commission, with full respect for due process.
4. All political, religious, and public leaders to desist from tribalist, discriminatory, inflammatory, and divisive rhetoric, particularly as The Gambia approaches the 2026 presidential election.

This is not a question of Imam Baba Leigh's ethnicity, religion, political opinion or right to free expression. It is a question of standards, integrity, accountability, and institutional credibility. The same human rights standards that the NHRC applies to citizens, politicians and public institutions must apply to its own Commissioners.

Human rights institutions derive their authority not merely from legislation, but from the confidence of the people that they serve everyone without discrimination, fear, or favour. A Commissioner who negatively stereotypes an entire ethnic community compromises that confidence and damages the institution he is entrusted to serve.

EFSCRJ therefore urges the NHRC and the relevant State authorities to treat this matter with the seriousness it deserves. There must be one standard for everyone. Those entrusted with defending human rights must themselves exemplify respect for human dignity, equality, and non-discrimination. Tribalism has no place in public service. Discrimination has no place in human rights institutions.

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