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International Day of Democracy 2026:
Defend Democracy, Uphold the Rule of Law, and Return Power to the People

On the occasion of International Day of Democracy, observed on 15th September, the Edward Francis Small Centre for Rights and Justice commends the citizens of The Gambia, civil society, the media, and political parties for embracing, exercising, and defending democracy over the past ten years.

This day is dedicated to promoting and protecting democracy as a system of governance rooted in human rights, the rule of law, accountable and inclusive government, and sustainable development. EFSCRJ was established to advance democratic governance in which the fundamental rights of every person are respected, protected, and fulfilled, enabling all citizens to live dignified and prosperous lives.

We stand for a system in which sovereignty belongs to the people, from whom the State derives its authority solely to serve the public interest using the resources entrusted to it. Our mandate emanates from the legacy of Edward Francis Small, who stood against British colonial rule more than a century ago to demand the right of Gambians to participate in determining how their affairs and resources were managed for their benefit and welfare. Under the battle cry, “*No taxation without representation*,” Edward Francis Small demanded representative institutions that were transparent and accountable to the people.

EFSCRJ therefore laments that, since attaining internal self-rule status in 1965 and subsequently becoming an independent republic in 1970, The Gambia has continued to fall short of fundamental democratic standards of transparency, accountability, inclusion, and responsiveness. More than half of the population lives in poverty, deprivation and limited opportunities despite the immense wealth and potential of the country. Six decades after independence, Gambians continue to endure violations of their civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights.

The exercise of fundamental freedoms remains restricted. Essential public goods and services are inadequate, expensive, and unreliable. Draconian laws remain in force, while public institutions and officials continue to abuse their powers, disregard the law and engage in corruption and the misuse of public resources without any consequences. Consequently, citizens face a high cost of living, unemployment and poor social services while paying more and receiving less.

Ten years after the end of dictatorship, EFSCRJ remains deeply concerned about the persistence of arbitrary arrests, the selective application of the law, the weaponization and politicization of public institutions that should be independent and professional.

We call the attention of the Government, political parties, civil society, the media, the business sector, and the wider citizenry to the weakening of democracy in our country. There is an urgent need for all stakeholders to act decisively to reverse this trend and build a truly democratic State that submits to the will of the people.

Widespread and unchecked corruption, disregard for court decisions, interference with independent institutions, abuse of power, the plunder of public wealth, discrimination against

and exclusion of women, persons with disabilities and minority groups, and growing political intolerance are serious threats to democracy. These practices are increasingly prevalent in our country, requiring citizens and all stakeholders to stand firmly against injustice, discrimination, and abuse.

EFSCRJ therefore calls on the Government to uphold the Constitution, obey the law and observe the democratic principles of transparency, accountability, inclusion, responsiveness, and fairness.

We call on all citizens to continue to speak out, stand firm, protest peacefully, engage public institutions and vote. Without active and informed citizens, democracy becomes weak and public officials become unaccountable.

We urge civil society to strengthen its watchdog role and the media to effectively discharge its constitutional duty to hold the Government accountable on behalf of the people. We call on political parties and leaders across all sectors of society to remain vigilant and to demand adherence to the rule of law and democratic principles by everyone, without fear, favour, or double standards.

In 2016, Gambians made a decisive choice for democracy and an unequivocal rejection of dictatorship. That historic decision must never be betrayed, reversed or taken for granted.

On this International Day of Democracy, EFSCRJ pledges to remain steadfast and uncompromising in defending human rights, constitutionalism, the rule of law and genuine democracy.

Democracy belongs to the people. Democracy requires vigilance. Democracy must deliver dignity, justice, and development for all.

2026 – The Year of Empowerment: Empowered Citizens. Accountable Leadership

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CENTER FOR RIGHTS & JUSTICE**
FREEDOM. EQUALITY. TRANSPARENCY. ACCOUNTABILITY.