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EFSCRJ Calls for Impartial Enforcement and Reform of Local Councils

The Edward Francis Small Centre for Rights and Justice welcomes the publication of the Commission of Inquiry Report and the subsequent Government White Papers on the conduct of Local Government Councils. The Report and the White Papers collectively lay bare a systemic, multi-layered collapse of financial governance, accountability, and institutional integrity across The Gambia's municipal and area councils.

EFSCRJ is deeply concerned by the Inquiry's findings on how councils managed the money and property entrusted to them. Residents paid rates, market dues, and licence fees, yet councils repeatedly failed to account for collections or show how expenditure served their communities. The Commission documented unauthorized allowances, diversion of development funds to pay salaries and debts, and multi-million-dalasi overdrafts obtained without ministerial approval.

Suppressed collections, deleted revenue entries, undocumented cash handovers, and advances left unaccounted for made it difficult to trace public money. Some councils bypassed competitive tendering, split contracts, and paid contractors without verifying delivery. The inquiry also exposed political patronage and nepotism in recruitment, unauthorized land allocations, outdated valuations, and incomplete asset registers. In several councils, elected leaders intervened in payments and procurement while oversight committees remained inactive. Evidence of bribery, contractor inducements, and the use of council funds for private or political purposes show the cost of ignoring audit warnings.

In EFSCRJ's assessment, these findings illustrate how entrenched corruption, mismanagement and abuse of office have become endemic in both central and local government governance. The political change of 2016 offered an opportunity for reform, but weak political will at the highest level, continued interference in local administration and central authorities' failure to act on known violations have undermined that opportunity.

EFSCRJ is equally concerned that a report submitted on 11 May 2026 reached the public, alongside the Government's White Papers, only weeks before the 5 December presidential nominations and election. Citizens deserve an explanation for that timing, particularly when decisions arising from the inquiry may affect electoral participation and public confidence in the fairness of the contest.

The Government must also explain why it called on the respective councils to remove Kanifing Mayor Talib Ahmed Bensouda, Banjul Mayor Rohey Malick Lowe and Kuntaur Chairperson Saikou Jawara when the Commission's recommendations concerning them did not expressly call for their removal from elected office. A fitness review leaves the outcome open. A direction to pursue removal tells a council what outcome the executive seeks. The seriousness of the findings warrants action, but the white papers do not adequately explain why the Government escalated the sanctions in these cases or why comparable oversight failures elsewhere drew different responses.

EFSCRJ urges the Government to implement the Commission's recommendations fully, with due diligence, impartiality, and transparency. It should publish the criteria used to determine sanctions, explain each departure from the Commission's recommendations, and respect the

right of every affected person to challenge an adverse finding. Accountability must reach those who authorized unlawful expenditure, those who benefited from it and those in local and central government who had the duty and authority to act but failed to do so.

The report makes an urgent case for local government reform. While the Constitution calls for decentralization and a high degree of local autonomy, the Local Government Act leaves councils heavily dependent on central government decisions. In practice, the Ministry responsible for local government and the Local Government Service Commission can intervene in staffing and other routine matters in ways that undermine the authority of elected leaders. Residents are left to hold their councils accountable for decisions made elsewhere. This blurring of responsibility allows inefficiency, corruption, and abuse to persist. EFSCRJ calls for a review of the Act to give councils the authority to fulfil their mandate, with clear limits on central intervention and effective public oversight.

The Edward Francis Small Centre for Rights and Justice stands in solidarity with the Gambian people, whose resources have been plundered by those entrusted to serve them. We will continue to monitor the implementation of these White Papers and advocate for a local government system that is truly accountable, transparent, and responsive to the needs of its citizens.

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