



## Press Release

for immediate release

### **Wide voter participation and citizen group engagement mark democratic headway, although fundamental legal reform remains a key concern**

**Banjul 06 December 2021** – On 4 December Gambian citizens showed their strong desire to be part of the democratic process by participating in the presidential election in great numbers. This built on the commitment of civil society throughout the election period to strengthening democratic headway. “EU EOM observers noted positively the transparency of the voting and counting process on election day. This was in contrast, however, to the opaque approach of the IEC at central level during the pre-election period,” stated Norbert Neuser, the Chief Observer of the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) and Member of the European Parliament.

On election day, EU observers reported from over 128 polling stations in rural and urban areas in all 7 administrative areas. The election day was found to be peaceful. While polling officials carried out the process professionally, some procedural gaps were noted during the voting and counting, which if not addressed could provide the possibility for misuse in future. The tabulation was accessible, and results were announced progressively by constituency, which promoted transparency, although disaggregated polling station results were not published.

Mr. Neuser stated that “The public standing of the IEC, which has been held in high esteem by stakeholders since the 2016 election, unfortunately has been diminished. During the candidate nomination process, the IEC accepted only 6 of 21 candidacies and did not allow for meaningful scrutiny”. The court ruled that the IEC had acted unlawfully on the exclusion of an aspirant.

The campaign environment was competitive and vibrant, and freedoms were largely respected. The EU EOM observed an advantage for the incumbent and, generally, a more uneven playing field for candidates. Weakness of campaign finance regulations led to the monetisation of the campaign.

While the ability to voice opinions openly has improved, the legal framework for the media continues to severely restrict freedom of expression. Disinformation on social media confused voters and defamatory rhetoric shrank the space for a fact-based debate.

The Chief Observer concluded by noting that “structural deficiencies and critical procedural and legal gaps require fundamental reform. The EU EOM will return to The Gambia to publish and present its final report including recommendations to contribute to improving upcoming elections.”

#### ***Note to Editors:***

*The European Union (EU) was invited to deploy an observation mission by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) of The Gambia. The EU Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) is independent from any EU institutions or Member States or government institutions and is committed to remaining neutral and abiding by the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and the Code of Conduct, as well as the laws of The Gambia.*

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