



The Commonwealth

INTERIM STATEMENT BY HON SATO KILMAN LIVTUVANU
CHAIR OF THE COMMONWEALTH OBSERVER GROUP
SOLOMON ISLANDS NATIONAL GENERAL ELECTION 2019

We commend the commitment of the people of the Solomon Islands for participating peacefully and in high numbers in their national general election, held on Wednesday 3 April 2019. We acknowledge the efforts of the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission (SIEC) in conducting the election following the adoption of the Electoral Act in September 2018. We observed some positive aspects of the process and recognised areas that could be considered to further enhance the country's democratic process.

The Group is of the view that the results of the 2019 national general election should reflect the wishes of the people of the Solomon Islands. We issue this statement as the count process is ongoing, with the official results yet to be declared.

Following an invitation from the SIEC, the Commonwealth Secretary-General deployed this Group to undertake this observation mission on behalf of the Commonwealth family. Our terms of reference are to assess whether the election was held according to the standards of democratic elections to which the Solomon Islands has committed, with reference to the country's own legal framework, as well as various international commitments to which the Solomon Islands is a signatory.

Prior to the deployment of our teams to different constituencies, we held meetings in Honiara with SIEC, some of the political parties, representatives of the media, civil society groups, representatives of women and youth organisations, other international observer groups and some of the Commonwealth High Commissioners. We also attended a security briefing organised by the Police Commissioner and received logistic support plans from the Commander of the Australian and New Zealand Combined Task Group (CTG).

We had teams deployed to Western Province, Isabel Province, Central Province, Malaita, Guadalcanal and Honiara City. On Election Day our teams observed the opening of polls, voting and the closing of polls.

The aim of this Interim Statement is to provide our initial assessment of the electoral process, based on representations made to us and our direct observations.

Legal framework and the election management body

This election was administered in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution 1978, the Political Parties Integrity Act 2014, and the Electoral Act 2018.

We welcomed the SIEC's decision to introduce pre-polling for the first time to allow polling officials and police officers involved with the elections to cast their vote. However, the Group noted that the registration period for pre-polling closed before the final appointments were made for all the electoral and police officers involved with the election.

The Group noted the new out-of-constituency registration arrangements. However, the lack of clarity around the definition of 'ordinarily resident' and where citizens can register and vote appeared to raise concerns. We also received several complaints about the absence of out-of-constituency voting arrangements that would have enabled workers involved with essential services, and others who reside and work in provincial capitals, including Honiara, to cast their vote without having to travel to their respective provinces.

Logistics and Security

Our Group commends the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) for the security and logistics plans put in place to ensure a peaceful environment for the national general election. We appreciate the logistics support provided to the SIEC and RSIPF by the Governments of Australia and New Zealand through the presence of the CTG.

The Campaign and Media Environment

Our Group observed some of the campaign activities in Honiara before teams were deployed to different provinces on 1 April 2019. We observed an energised campaign environment with large public rallies and lively party floats. The Group was not made aware of any restrictions on the freedoms vital to a campaign period, notably that of assembly and expression.

The Group commends the pre-election media training undertaken by SIEC and welcomes the positive role that the radio and print media played in raising awareness around electoral issues and processes, and in facilitating public debate. We encourage the SIEC and Media Association of Solomon Islands (MASI) to continue to collaborate to develop age, location, gender and disability inclusive approaches for ongoing information communication strategies throughout the electoral cycle.

Polling Day

Prior to polling day, teams met with Returning Officers in their respective constituencies and observed the distribution of election materials.

On polling day, voters turned out in large numbers. On the whole, the polling stations we observed opened on time around 7am. In many areas we observed high numbers of voters had already lined up before the opening of the poll.

Teams met with some of the candidate agents, domestic and other international observers, who were generally positive about the polling process.

The polling officials we observed carried out their responsibilities in a professional and non-partisan manner. We acknowledged the presence of the candidate agents, whose role it was to ensure transparency was maintained in the polling stations.

However, we observed several voters who struggled to find their names on the voter list. A few seemed uncertain about their designated polling station and in some cases voting screens needed to be more carefully positioned to ensure the secrecy of the ballot. There were inconsistencies in the way ballot boxes were sealed and labelled, and some teams noted tendered ballot papers had to be issued to a few voters whose vote was allegedly cast by someone else.

While some polling stations were not fully accessible, we observed that polling officials were ready to assist elderly and disabled voters.

Security presence at polling stations was adequate and contributed to the relatively peaceful and orderly environment in which the poll was conducted.

We commend the election officials, as well as RSIPF and Correctional Officers, for conducting their tasks in a professional manner.

The Count

The Group observed counts in several provinces and notes SIEC's efforts to ensure transparency, while still delivering on the guarantee that votes remain secret through new count procedures. However, consideration should be given to review the current procedures to increase efficiency.

Rural Constituency Development Fund (RCDF)

The Group noted that the Electoral Act (Section 125) defines the limit for election campaign expenses for each candidate. The Group noted candidates raised concerns around the use of RCDF. The Group's Final Report will comment further on this.

Women Candidates

26 women candidates contested the election. We encourage the SIEC and the Political Parties Commission to continue providing an environment that would encourage more women, including from diverse backgrounds, to participate and contest at the next general election. Greater consideration should be given to engage with women's civil society organisations and networks to identify the best way to achieve gender equality in political representation.

Domestic Observers

We welcome the participation of domestic observers in this election. We continue to encourage the SIEC and stakeholders to support domestic election observation, which is critical for the transparency of election processes and further consolidation of democracy.

Declaration of Results

Some results have been declared. The full declaration of results will be issued in due course and we hope political parties, candidates and citizens continue to display the patience they have so far exercised, to ensure the whole electoral process remains peaceful.

The Group will finalise its report with detailed findings and assessment on this national general election. This report will be submitted to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, who will in turn convey it to the Government of Solomon Islands, the SIEC, and other national stakeholders. It will also be made available to Commonwealth Governments, and to the public.

Conclusion

It has been a privilege for our Group to observe this important democratic process in the Solomon Islands. The country's journey in consolidating its democracy and development continues and the Commonwealth will work closely with the incoming Government and other development partners. We hope that our report and recommendations, if implemented, will continue to strengthen the Solomon Islands' electoral system and democratic institutions.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to everyone whom we have met and received assistance from in undertaking our duties, and especially the people of Solomon Islands for their warm welcome and hospitality.

Tank yu tumas.

Honiara

6 April 2019

**For more information, or to organise media interviews, please contact Sonali
Campion**

Email: s.campion@commonwealth.int Tel: +677 7249473

Note to Editors

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 53 independent and equal sovereign states. It is home to 2.4 billion citizens, of whom 60 per cent are under the age of 30. The Commonwealth includes some of the world's largest, smallest, richest and poorest countries, spanning five regions. 31 of its members are small states, many of them island nations. Commonwealth countries are supported by an active network of more than 80 intergovernmental, civil society, cultural and professional organisations.

Visit www.thecommonwealth.org