

Maldives Parliamentary Election 2019

**Preliminary Statement by Hon Bruce Golding
Former Prime Minister of Jamaica
Chair of the Commonwealth Observer Group
9 April 2019**

Members of the media, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you for coming to this Commonwealth Observer Group Press Conference.

The Commonwealth last observed elections in Maldives in 2014: It is an honour to return to your beautiful country at such a seminal moment in your democratic history.

Following an invitation from the Elections Commission of Maldives to observe the Parliamentary Election on 6 April 2019, the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Patricia Scotland, constituted our Group. We arrived on 30 March and will depart on 13 April.

We are here because although Maldives left the Commonwealth in 2016, it applied to re-join the family in December 2018.

We are fully aware, therefore, of the implications of our report. It will be considered by the Secretary-General in her ongoing assessment of Maldives' commitment to the Commonwealth's values, which is a fundamental aspect of the membership process.

We reiterate what we said in our arrival statement: This is not a task we take lightly.

Our preliminary findings will be shared in the following manner: We will first provide our key findings on the pre-election environment, after which we will focus on our observations on Election Day. Finally, we will share our appreciation of the post-election stage so far, mindful that the results process is ongoing.

This holistic manner is in line with our mandate as underscored in the arrival statement we issued on 3 April 2019.

Let me state that in accordance with this mandate, we will be assessing this election according to the national, regional, Commonwealth and international standards to which Maldives has committed itself.

This is our preliminary assessment. Our final report will be submitted to the Secretary-General and will be made available to the public afterwards.

Let me begin by commending the people of Maldives for the peaceful and orderly manner in which they exercised their democratic right to vote on 6 April.

Once again, they have taken a step forward in consolidating their country's democracy. We challenge the leaders they have chosen to spare no effort in realising their aspirations.

The Pre-Election Environment

Since our arrival in Maldives on 30 March, we have had the opportunity of meeting a range of stakeholders including political parties, civil society and media representatives, the police, the Electoral Commission, diplomatic missions and international agencies.

On 4 April, members of our Group were deployed to various atolls, where they engaged with local stakeholders: Addu, Haa Alifu, Haa Dhaalu, Kaafu, Laamu, Malé and Thaa.

We have been greatly encouraged by the widespread feedback that ahead of these elections, the civic and political space in Maldives was significantly improved. Civil society and media representatives informed us that they felt freer than they had been in the past to express dissenting opinions without fear of repercussions.

We observed some of the campaigns in Malé and the atolls. These were conducted in a peaceful and vibrant atmosphere. The fundamental rights of candidates, political parties and supporters to assemble and campaign were broadly observed.

We note, however, that some concerns raised by previous Commonwealth Observers pertaining to the pre-election environment remain relevant.

These include: allegations of vote buying; the misuse of state resources, the need to develop a more effective regulatory framework for campaign financing; and the need to continue strengthening civic education. We will expand on these in our final report and offer recommendations to the relevant stakeholders.

Another recurring issue is the low rate of women's political participation in Maldives. Although women constituted a significant number of polling officials, we were disappointed that only 35 out of the 386 parliamentary candidates for this election were women. We note that the outgoing parliament had five women representatives out of 85 members.

Maldives' own laws, in particular the Gender Equality Act 2016, promote women's political participation. We encourage all political parties and the incoming parliament to make a special effort in promoting and facilitating the participation of women at all levels.

Above all, during our consultations in the pre-election phase we were struck by two recurrent views from our consultations: the need to enhance Maldives' independent democratic institutions; and to strengthen the rule of law and separation of powers between the judiciary, the executive and the legislature.

In any election, citizens' perception about the credibility and independence of their democratic institutions is crucial in instilling confidence in all aspects of the process. It is our hope that the incoming parliament of Maldives will prioritise these issues in an inclusive manner.

Election Day

Polls generally opened on time, and procedures for the opening of the polls were adhered to. The signage providing relevant instructions to voters were visibly displayed.

We were impressed by the confidence and professionalism of polling officials, a significant number of whom were young women. In some polling stations, almost all polling officials were women.

We were impressed by the use of tablets at some polling stations to expedite the identification of voters.

Monitors (media representatives), Candidate Representatives, Party Observers and Citizen Observers, were present, although in varying numbers at different polling stations.

Candidate Representatives and Party Observers had access to hard copies of the register, which they checked as voting proceeded. They engaged with polling officials in a collegial environment.

Voters' identification was properly checked. Voters were inked and provided with a ballot paper before proceeding to vote. The secrecy of the vote was ensured.

Women with babies, pregnant women, persons with disabilities and the elderly were given priority in many cases. Our Observers also witnessed voters being assisted.

The police presence was visible, helpful and discreet.

Before the scheduled close of polls, the Electoral Commission extended voting from 16h00 to 18h00 citing high temperatures and low voter-turnout.

We note that Section 43 of the Elections (General) Act gives the Electoral Commission the right to designate and announce the voting time. Consideration should be given to extending the voting period for the sake of predictability. Any ad hoc extension of voting time on polling day should be limited to unforeseen circumstances.

Voters who were still in the queue were allowed to vote at close of polls in accordance with the law. Closing and counting procedures were generally adhered to in an atmosphere marked by transparency and trust. Again, Monitors, Candidate Representatives and Party Observers cooperated with polling officials.

After the count, Candidate and Party Observers signed the results sheets, copies of which were pasted on walls in the polling stations.

Overall, the voting and counting process was peaceful and well organised. We commend the Electoral Commission for the smooth conduct of the polls and the quality of training demonstrated by the polling officials.

Post-Election

The day after the elections, our Observers revisited local officials and the police and reported that polling across the atolls we covered had proceeded with few minor incidents. Where we came across supporters celebrating their candidate's victory (based on unofficial results), these were conducted peacefully.

Observers in Malé visited the Election Management Centre, where the Results Centre was also based. We were impressed by the use of technology to collate and tabulate the results from all ballot box stations and the overseas votes. We were further impressed by the competent staff most of whom were, once again, young women.

We note that members of the National Advisory Committee on Parliamentary Elections, a body comprising registered political parties, civil society and a range of relevant stakeholders tasked with engaging the Electoral Commission, were granted access to the Election Management Centre. This is good practice.

The results process is still underway. We encourage the people of Maldives to continue demonstrating the commendable patience, tolerance and collegiality they have shown so far, while they await the official results by the Electoral Commission.

On the 6th of April, the Commonwealth was privileged to witness the aspiration of a nation for a stable, peaceful and inclusive democracy where rights and responsibilities under the Maldivian Constitution and laws are fully respected.



We are confident that this election will provide an opportunity for the leadership of Maldives and the newly constituted People's Majlis to strengthen the country's democracy.

Thank you.

For more information, or to organise media interviews, please contact:

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