



Papua New Guinea National Parliamentary Elections 2017
Interim Statement
by Rt Hon Sir Anand Satyanand
Chair, Commonwealth Observer Group

Delivered at Airways Hotel
Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea
10 July 2017

“DELIVERING AN ELECTION THAT IS COMPLETELY SATISFYING TO A COUNTRY AS COMPLEX AS PNG, IS A WORK IN PROGRESS.”

“The PNGEC needs to conduct an urgent review and lessons learned process immediately after this election and improve the accuracy of the common roll. Government should provide adequate and timely resources to enable the PNGEC to carry out its mandate throughout the whole electoral cycle. We are concerned with reports of incidents of election-related violence. We call on the security forces to uphold the rule of law and for everyone to exercise restraint while the process is ongoing. Our Group is of the view that despite the considerable challenges with the common roll, which was observed in all the four regions of the country, there were some positive aspects of the process and the results should reflect the wishes of the people who participated in the 2017 national elections.”

The Commonwealth Observer Group, which I led, arrived in Port Moresby on 17 June 2017, following an invitation to the Commonwealth Secretary General from the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea. The arrival of the Group followed a visit for planning and scoping I undertook from 24 – 26 May. We also deployed an Advance Team that has been in the country since 7 June 2017.

Our task has been to be independent and impartial in assessing whether Papua New Guinea’s 2017 electoral processes were in accordance with the country’s own legal framework, as well as with the various international commitments to which it is a signatory.

From the time of our arrival in country and until the voting commenced, we met with the Electoral Commissioner, some of the main political parties and independent candidates, the Police, PNG Defence Force, domestic and international observer groups, the Media Council, civil society groups including those for women and youth, Commonwealth High Commissioners, and some of the country’s international development partners, such as UNDP.

On 22 June, our six teams of two were deployed to all the four regions of the country, and observed polling stations across East New Britain and New Ireland, East Sepik, Morobe, West New Britain, Bougainville, Milne Bay, Madang, Eastern Highlands, Chimbu and Jiwaka. I remained in Port Moresby to cover the Central



Division and NCD. I also undertook short visits to Bougainville where I observed the polling in Buka, and to Mount Hagen, where I observed polling in Jiwaka.

Whilst on deployment, and prior to the opening of the poll, our teams met with local officials, members of the police, other observer groups, and members of the public, in order to build our understanding of the election process, political culture and election environment in these areas. On Election Days our teams observed the opening of polls, voting and the closing of polls. Some of the teams followed the ballot boxes in the urban areas from the closing of polling to the Police stations where they were stored overnight.

As we issue this statement we are cognisant of the fact that polling has not yet been concluded everywhere, and the count process is still ongoing with the final results to be declared. The aim of this statement is to provide our initial assessment of the electoral process, based on representations made to us and our direct observations.

Our key findings are as follows:

Logistics

Our Group recognises the tremendous challenges with logistics and significant finance required to prepare the country's elections. The terrain and topography of the country demands funding for a large-scale logistics operation to transport and safeguard the sensitive ballot materials. We appreciate the efforts of all those involved in delivering this election. The role of PNGEC and its partners is to be commended in this regard.

Legal framework for elections and the election management body

The PNGEC said it was confident of delivering a good election.

From our direct observation, while there was extensive variation of practice observed, it appeared that polling officials were moderately familiar with their responsibilities. The Group is of the view that an adequate training programme is required, and in advance of the next election, so that polling officials will become more efficient in undertaking their duties, and that outlined procedures are adhered to during the election period. Any allowance that is to be paid to poll workers and service providers should be organised in advance to prevent any repeat of what we have observed in this 2017 election.

Most of the polling officials we met carried out their responsibilities in a non-partisan manner. We commend the important role played by the scrutineers, who ensured transparency was maintained in most of the polling stations we observed. We approve of the actions of some Presiding Officers who ensured that the scrutineers were officially registered before they were allowed into the polling stations. However, scrutineers must adhere to their roles and responsibilities and should not hinder the progress of the count that is ongoing.



A key issue and challenge to this election has been the significant number of eligible voters whose names were not on the common roll. The Group was very disappointed to note that previous COG reports that highlighted the need to address this issue, have yet to be implemented.

It is critical that adequate expertise and funding required by the PNGEC for creating a credible roll should be provided in a timely manner before the next election. The people of Papua New Guinea deserve better and eligible voters must be allowed to exercise their democratic right and participate in their national elections.

We recognise the fact that despite the shortcomings associated with the Common Roll, observed in all four regions of the country, political parties and candidates continued to participate in the elections.

The Election Campaign and Media Environment

Our Group was advised that the campaign for the 2017 elections was more subdued compared to previous elections. However, our Advance Team who arrived on 7 June 2017, observed a competitive and lively election campaign environment in several places, including the Highlands region. Large public rallies were held and were well attended. There were no reported restrictions on the freedoms vital to a campaign period, that of assembly or expression.

We note with concern a number of reported incidents of alleged vote buying, including through using state resources and provincial and district development funds made available to incumbents. These funds were alleged to have been used to buy voters' support or for projects to induce voters. The Group was advised that money politics has significantly influenced the electoral process and may have led to an uneven playing field for the parties and candidates in the 2017 elections. The PNGEC and the OIPCC should consider the formulating of campaign finance regulations through appropriate legislation.

The Group noted and welcomed the robust media in the country. The 2017 election period benefited from active reporting in print and on TV, radio and online media. The role of social media in this campaign, including via social networking sites and blogs, has increased in comparison to the last election. Concerns were expressed with some social networking sites that published defamatory material concerning certain candidates and political parties.

Election Day

We wish to congratulate the people of Papua New Guinea, who turned out in high numbers and early during the polling period to exercise their franchise in a peaceful manner. Most of the voters whose names were not on the roll shared with us their disappointment and claimed that their names were previously on the roll and they had participated in the 2012 elections.



It is our assessment that all aspects of the electoral process will need a thorough review by the PNGEC immediately after this election. A post-election lessons-learned workshop should be convened immediately after this 2017 election. The PNGEC should convene a series of these workshops with all the Returning Officers and Election Managers throughout the country.

Our Group's observations made it clear that apart from the polling stations at East New Britain and New Ireland, most of the polling stations opened late – usually around or after 1000hrs. Some polling stations were given fewer ballot papers than the expected number of voters. Generally, the distribution of ballot materials was not completed on time.

Generally, the polling staff appeared to be knowledgeable in following the layout of the polling station and voting procedures. The number of female polling staff seen was low. Scrutineers and domestic observers appeared to be generally satisfied with the polling process, although all expressed frustration and concerns with the significant number of names missing from the common roll.

Adherence to the secrecy of the ballot was clearly not consistent throughout the different provinces we observed. With regard to disabled voters, our assessment is it was evident that polling officials were ready to adequately assist disabled voters.

Security presence at polling stations appeared to be adequate. However, in some areas, some were perceived as intrusive, while in other areas they seemed to lack inclination to intervene. The group noted the high visibility of the security forces which may have contributed to the relatively peaceful and orderly environment in which the poll was conducted.

The Count

The count is still ongoing and our observations will be reflected in the final report.

Declaration of Results

We hope there will be a timely declaration of results and return of the writs to the Governor-General on 24 July. We urge political parties, citizens and other stakeholders to continue to display the admirable restraint and patience they have so far exercised. Those with grievances about the process may consider pursuing their complaints through the Court of Disputed Returns. We recognise that PNG has a very proud history of judiciary independence.

Before our departure from Port Moresby on 14 July, we will finalise a final report of our detailed findings and assessment on this national election. We will submit this report to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, who will in turn release it to the Government, the Papua New Guinea Electoral Commission, the Speaker of



Parliament, and the Registrar of Political Parties. It will also be made available to Commonwealth Governments, and ultimately the public.

Conclusion

Before I close, I would like to express the sentiments of our Group in feeling privileged to have been part of this important national process in Papua New Guinea. It is our hope that the report and recommendations, if implemented, would contribute to enhancing PNG's electoral system and democracy. We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to everyone whom we met and received assistance from, in undertaking our duties, and especially the people of Papua New Guinea for their warm welcome and hospitality in this beautiful country.