

Election Situation Room (ESR)

Local Government Elections for Chairpersonship/Mayoral 2023

Observation Report

Final Statement

**Introduction**

The CSO Coalition on Elections is at the vanguard of the cause of advancing the promotion of democratic values, practices, and process in The Gambia especially in the context of the ongoing democratic transition. As part of efforts at advancing Gambia's democratization process, the CSO Coalition engages in advocacy, mobilization, sensitization campaigns, and other civic activities around political participation in general and to ensure an inclusive electoral process. The CSO Coalition on Elections remains the premier domestic election observation body in The Gambia which comprises a total of national civil society organizations. The Coalition fielded a total of 130 domestic observers across the country for the Chairmanship and Mayoral election. The Coalition also set up an Election Situation Room ESR as the one-stop centre for coordinating the collation, analysis, and report of the observations from the field. Comprising team of data entry clerks, coordination and communication, analysts, fact checkers and decision makers. The Situation Room is supported by the United Nations Development Programme UNDP and Freedom House. The Election Situation Room operates from Paradise Suites Hotel in Kololi. The Coalition also works with the Election Watch Committee which also independently deployed observers across the country.

**Background**

The final stage of the 2021-2023 electoral cycle kicked off with local councilors across the country in April. This phase of the cycle concludes with Chairperson/Mayoral election held on May 20, 2023. The IEC announced 32 candidates for the election, comprising 21 party candidates, 11 independent, 2 women candidates and no candidates with disabilities. Following nominations, there were three withdrawals, no objection, and no rejection.

The elections register remains with 962,157 registered voters of which 57 percent are women and 43 percent men. According to IEC, at least 57 percent of the registered voters are youths between 18 and 35 years. The election is being held across the country in 1554 polling stations and in all the seven (7) administrative regions of The Gambia. The official campaign period for the Chairperson and Mayoral election ran from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> of May 2023. However, in practice there was no visible break between the Councillorship election and the chairmanship/mayoral election. The campaign period was largely peaceful, despite reports of fracas, mainly between the ruling NPP and the main opposition UDP.

Having deployed 130 domestic observers across the country for the chairpersonship/mayoral elections, the CSO Coalition on Elections demonstrates its continued commitment to free, fair and transparent elections as a key hallmark for building and strengthening democracy and achieving

good governance in the Gambia. The Coalition observed the election from the opening of polls, voting process, closing of polls, and counting of results. We have observed the election process in more than 300 polling stations across the country.

Following the conclusion of the polls, the CSO coalition on elections wishes to submit its observation report based on reports obtained from our observers. This report also highlights concerns and recommendations on the general conduct of the elections and related matters.

### **Opening of Polls**

We have observed that generally polls opened at the stipulated time of 8am and closed at the official time of 5pm. Generally, the procedures to follow in the opening of polls were followed by the IEC staff in the presence of polling agents, observers, and media. Security was adequately provided in most polling stations. Polling stations were found at the locations that they were officially designated to be. Generally, the opening of polls went off smoothly without any major incidences of disruptions, violations or delays reported.

### **Voting Process**

The voting process was generally peaceful and orderly throughout the country. In most of the polling centres observed, voter information materials were generally well displayed and there were no reports of shortage of voting materials, and ballot drums were appropriately sealed with the official red seals provided for that purpose.

Observers reported verbal altercations between supporters of the ruling NPP and the main opposition, UDP. Apart from Banjul, where incidents occurred, they were largely isolated. It is worth noting that all incidents that were observed were eventually put under control peacefully without any significant disruption or delay to the vote.

While we have observed challenges for wheelchair users in accessing some voting stations or booths, generally in most of the polling stations persons with disabilities, pregnant/breastfeeding mothers and the elderly were either assisted or given priority to vote.

Overall, the voting process was generally peaceful and calm.

### **Closing of Polls**

By and large, voting in nearly all the polling stations closed at the stipulated time of 5pm. Basic procedures were followed, and ballot tokens issued were accounted for.

### **Counting of Votes**

Overall counting took place at all polling stations after close of the vote. The process was smooth and peaceful. Results were announced loudly and, in some stations, we noticed that the results were pasted publicly.

We observed the presence of accredited persons including polling agents, media, and other observers during the counting process. The laid down procedures for the counting of votes were observed to have been generally followed across many polling stations where our observers were deployed.

### **General Opinion**

In the light of the above observations, the CSO Coalition is of the opinion that voting on the 20th of May 2023 for the Local Government Elections were free, peaceful and transparent. There have been no reports of intimidation, coercion, or denial of voters to cast their ballot, and all necessary voter information were available and voting centers were largely accessible to all categories of electorates.

### **Concerns**

Having noted the various aspects of the voting process, CSO Coalition has also observed the following issues of concern in various parts of the country:

1. While final voter turnout figures are yet to be available, our observers have however noted generally relatively low turnout at polling stations across the country.
2. The issue of access to polling stations especially for persons with disability also remains a recurring issue, which needs urgent attention. A number of polling stations have been noticed to be placed on higher levels without a ramp, hence the inability of persons using wheelchairs and other forms of disability aid being unable to independently access those stations. Furthermore, there are some polling stations whose curtains were found to be not complete, while others were rather transparent given the amount of brightness in the day hence limiting the secrecy of the vote.
3. Election laws require that voters cast their ballot and vacate the polling station, which should be occupied by only officially accredited persons during the voting process. It is however noted that in some polling stations non-accredited persons in party colors and vehicles were noticed hanging around the voting areas.
4. While the enactment of the Women Act 2010 was heralded as a major contribution to the strides the Gambia has been registering in the area of women's empowerment, the Coalition is however seriously concerned that only two women were able to obtain nomination and contest under the banners of registered political parties.

### **Recommendations**

As we draw the curtains of the electoral cycle of 2021-2023, and in light of the issues raised above, we wish to offer the following recommendations.

1. Noting that elections are very expensive financially, the electoral law need to be amended to conduct presidential, parliamentary, and local Government councils together. This will encourage high voter turnout and civic responsibilities of the citizenry.
2. Democracy is a system that generates and promotes divergent views for it to continue to improve itself, and consequently produce development, peace and security. In view of this, the CSO Coalition would urge the IEC and indeed the Government and the Opposition Parties to create the space and mechanism for dialogue so as to forestall any incidence of

conflict as we have seen in Banjul and other hotspot areas across the country in the course of the Councillorship and Chairperson/Mayoral elections.

3. The Coalition would like to re-echo the recommendation made in the previous elections regarding the political participation and representation of women. As a signatory to regional and international instruments coupled with the existence of national laws and policies that seek to promote the equality between men and women, and given the low level of women's representation mainly due to patriarchy and conservative socio-cultural beliefs, the CSO Coalition reiterates the following recommendations:
  - a. A national legislation establishes gender quotas in politics that allocate a percentage of nominations and seats in the National Assembly and Local Councils to women as measures that seek to increase women's representation;
  - b. That political parties institute a gender quota at party level that also set a number or percentage of nominations for women's election to representative bodies, as well as gain election to power and decision-making structures within political parties.
4. There is need for intensive and continuous civic education by the National Council for Civic Education (NCCE) to enlighten Gambians especially young people about the importance of elections in national development. It must be noted that democracy and good governance which provides sustainable development cannot be guaranteed in the absence of popular participation. The quality of leadership and governance in the country rests squarely on the level of citizen participation.
5. Still on the issue of low voter turnout, there is every reason to believe that part of this abnormality lies in the public's lack of or limited trust in politics, elected politicians, and democratic institutions such as the Executive, the Legislature, and local councils.
6. The tenure of the IEC Chair has been engulfed in controversy since 2017. The recent announcement that the term of the Chair has been extended to 2025 has raised more concerns. We wish to call on the Government to therefore review and address this issue with urgency to protect the credibility and independence of the IEC and the integrity of elections.
7. In this same view, we are disturbed by the lack of legal reforms surrounding elections. We are even more concerned that for many years now the Election Bill has not been passed at the National Assembly. The issues of attestation, diaspora voting, campaign financing and the timing and the combining of elections such as councilor and mayoral/chairperson elections among other issues are all pertinent to achieving high voter turnout, the attainment of free and fair elections and the upholding of the rights of all Gambians.

We wish to therefore call on the National Assembly, the Government, and the political parties to take urgent steps to ensure that the Election Bill captures all international electoral norms and best practices to ensure free, fair, and transparent elections.



In this regard, we wish to also call for necessary and urgent institutional reforms at the IEC in order to modernize its operations with the use of technology to become more effective and efficient in its conduct and oversight of elections and electoral stakeholders.

8. Both the CSO Coalition and other domestic observers of campaigns and the elections have noted electoral malpractices such as vote buying and use of hate speech and incendiary language which are contrary to the Election Act and the Code of Campaign Ethics in particular. We wish to therefore call on the Inter-Party Committee to strengthen its oversight and accountability stance against political parties and their supporters for such misconduct. In the same vein, we call on all political parties to ensure that their leaders and supporters abide by election ethics and law and refrain from acts that could undermine the peace, unity, and stability of the country.
9. To ensure inclusive elections, the need to address the needs of persons with disabilities should be a priority for IEC. We wish to therefore urge the IEC to engage The Gambia Federation of the Disabled as well as the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Welfare and CSOs to seek ways in how to better serve persons with disabilities to effectively take part in elections.

## **Conclusion**

The CSO Coalition on Elections commends Gambian voters for coming out to exercise their fundamental right to vote hence strengthen democracy and good governance in the country. We wish to state that the credibility and strength of our democracy rests on the quality and level of citizen participation. There cannot be good governance and sustainable development so long as most citizens do not vote in elections. We wish to therefore urge all Gambians who have reached the age of voting to endeavor to register and ensure they vote.

We wish to express our appreciation and commendation to the IEC for carrying out a successful election. Similarly, we commend all electoral stakeholders including the voters for their participation in this election. We appreciate all our partners – UNDP and Freedom House for providing financial and technical support and Elections Watch Committee and Fact-Check Center The Gambia for the huge resources and efforts they put in monitoring and observing elections. Together we can make elections better and democracy flourish in the Gambia.

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