

## **Election Situation Room (ESR)**

### **Local Government Elections for Councilors 2023**

#### **Observation Report**

#### **Preliminary Statement**

#### **Introduction**

The Local Government Elections for councilors held on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2023 marks the final stage of the 2021 – 2023 electoral cycle. The mayoral and chairperson election scheduled for 20<sup>th</sup> May 2023 will be the final electoral activity for this cycle.

The IEC announced 367 candidates for the election comprising 299 party candidates, 68 independent, 58 women candidates and 4 candidates with disabilities. Following nominations, there were one withdrawal, one objection and one rejection. The official campaign period for the councillorship elections ran from 31<sup>st</sup> March to 13<sup>th</sup> April 2023.

The elections register remains at 962,157 registered voters of which 57% are female and 43% male. Fifty-seven per cent (57%) of the registered voters are youths between 18 and 35 years. The election was held in 1554 polling stations in the seven (7) administrative regions of The Gambia.

Having deployed 130 domestic observers across the country for the councilor 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. With support from the UNDP and Freedom House 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.

Our observation is guided by a set of checklists which are based on the electoral laws and the norms and standards for a free, fair, and transparent election. In light of our observation of the elections, we wish to therefore deliver our preliminary statement on the conduct of the elections on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2023 throughout the Gambia.

#### **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**

Our observation has indicated that the voting process went off quite smoothly and peacefully in almost all polling stations. Where incidents occurred which were isolated, these were eventually put unto control peacefully without any significant disruption or delay to the vote. The necessary voting information was on display to provide guidance to voters, while security continued to be available to ensure orderliness and calm. Generally only persons officially accredited to polling stations were allowed to remain inside the polling station. The voting was largely conducted in secret as required by law and best practices in elections. We have observed that election materials were adequately available as we have not observed any shortage.

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**

Polls closed at the stipulated time of 5pm in most of the polling stations we observed. Where voters were in the queue before closing time, they were allowed to vote as required by law. The laid down procedures for the closure of polling stations were observed to have been followed generally. These include the recounting and recording of unused ballot tokens, and the signing of the necessary reports by polling agents and the sealing of these documents in the envelope signed by both the presiding officer and the polling agents.

### **Counting of Votes**

At the close of polls, we observed that counting of votes commenced immediately. The polling stations were adequately set up with adequate space, security, and lighting to enable a smooth counting process. 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 followed. IEC polling agents had control over the ballot drums which were sealed. Counting officers loudly announced the polling station name and number, and the number of tokens received and issued. The counting officers took the steps to empty drums and display them to show they were empty, and ballot tokens properly arranged in trays which were then showed around. The number of votes were loudly announced, with votes for each candidate tallied in the results form, and accepted by all party or candidate agents.

## Issues and Concerns

1. We have observed a widespread low voter turnout. This issue raises concern about the level of civic education in our population to realize the importance of local government elections, and elections in general.
2. The timing of the elections during Ramadan is concerning as it serves as an inhibiting factor preventing voters from exercising their franchise.
3. Furthermore, the separation of the councilor elections from the election of mayors and chairpersons has been noted to be counterproductive and expensive. We are of the opinion that when these two elections are combined in one day it will serve to raise voter turnout significantly.
4. The tenure of the Chair of the IEC remains a recurring issue that has the potential to undermine trust of electoral stakeholders in the arbiter hence threatening the integrity of elections in the country.
5. The presence of non-accredited persons within polling stations and the display of party paraphernalia inside and around polling stations, although low, remain a recurring incidence in public elections.
6. We observed isolated cases of party supporters canvassing votes around polling stations. However, there was no significant interference with the voting process.
7. There were clashes in and around polling stations as well as within the community over the election although these were put under control without posing any disruption to the voting process. It however raises concern about the fact that voters and citizens in general would resort to acts of physical or verbal violence on the issue of elections.
8. Accessibility for persons with disabilities remains a recurring issue which has been raised by the Coalition since it emerged in 2006. It is concerning that IEC continues to position some polling stations or voting booths in places that are either sandy or on stepped platforms thereby posing challenges for voters using wheelchairs, crutches, and other forms of mobility aid.

## Recommendations

Considering the issues and concerns that emerged in our observation of the elections, we wish to submit the following recommendations.

1. There is need for intensive and continuous civic education by the NCCE to enlighten Gambians 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.

In this vein, it is also necessary to remind political parties that they have a duty to educate and encourage their supporters to go out and vote in order to build effective democracy and good governance. Similarly, CSOs especially those involved in election observation work should dedicate considerable amount of their resources to voter education.

2. 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. In other words, citizens have not been able to realize significant socioeconomic gains from their votes hence dampening their hopes and aspirations in elected officials and representative institutions. It must be noted that citizens do not vote for voting's sake. Rather, elections should serve as a means to bring opportunities, security and quality of life for people. In this regard, we wish to highlight and recommend that elected and representative institutions including political parties review themselves to ensure that they are indeed responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people in order to make elections a rewarding and meaningful exercise worthy of citizens' time and participation.
3. 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.
4. 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.

5. 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.
6. 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 for the huge resources and effort they put in monitoring and observing elections. Together we can make elections better and democracy flourish in the Gambia.

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**CSO Coalition on Elections**

16 April 2023

TANGO, Fajara The Gambia