Polling day processes well administered and transparent, but wider issues of money politics threatens to hijack democratic process

PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

MALE -- (23 March 2014) -- Transparency Maldives (TM) appreciates and thanks all observers and volunteers in our observer network, based in 20 atolls and Colombo and Kuala Lumpur. The observers were key to the success of the observation. TM hopes that an independent observation effort at this scale has instilled greater levels of trust in our electoral processes. The results we report are based on random sampling and are generalisable to the entire country.

1. Polling day

The election day processes were transparent and generally well-administered. We are happy to report that the election has been peaceful with just one reported incident of violence inside a polling station. TM congratulates Maldivian citizens for their spirited engagement in the democratic process.

The following are the key findings which we would like to highlight from our observation. 83.52% of polling stations closed within the first hour of the normal closing time of 4:00 p.m.

Voter registry was overall very clean, with a very few cases where people were not able to vote because their names were not on the voter registry or their details did not match. Assisted voters were spread across 84.1% of the polling stations.

Voting was temporarily halted in 2.4% of polling stations. 75% of these cases were interventions at the direction of the Presiding Officer while 25% were interventions by an unruly voter.

We note that the police entered 12.35% of polling stations. However, in 100% of such cases, interventions occurred at the invitation of the Presiding Officer as the rules allow.

Candidates were well-represented during the counting, making the process transparent and adding to its credibility. Maldivian Democratic Party was represented at 89.4% of polling stations during the vote count. Coalition parties were represented at 88.8% of polling stations during the vote count. Only 5.9%
of polling stations did not have a party/candidate observer present at the opening of the polls.

Unresolved disputes were reported at only 5.3% ballot boxes at the time of announcing results.

However, TM calls on all actors to take immediate measures to address wider issues, including vote buying, lack of transparency in political finance, abuse of state resources, barriers for women’s equal participation in the electoral processes, and bring long overdue reforms to the electoral legal framework.

2. Vote buying

In a survey conducted by TM in the run up to 2013 presidential elections, 15% of respondents reported that money or other incentives were offered in exchange for their vote. Admissions about illegal activities such as this are usually underreported in surveys. TM’s long-term observation indicates that vote buying may be even more widespread in the parliamentary elections than other elections.

Inability of state institutions to prosecute vote buying due to gaps in the electoral legal framework, lack of coordination, and buck-passing between the relevant institutions have allowed rampant vote buying to go unchecked.

TM recommends to all relevant institutions to monitor, investigate and prosecute vote buying through implementation of the existing legal provisions and recommends to the Parliament to bring urgent reforms to the laws to better address the issue.

3. Lack of Political and Campaign Finance Transparency

Deep flaws in the standards, practices and poor oversight have led to the lack of transparency in political and campaign financing in elections, including the parliamentary elections. When political parties and individual candidates do not fully disclose where they get their money from, it is not clear who funds them, what their potential conflict of interests are, and, thereby allows vested interests to override public interest when elected as MPs. Similarly, Transparency International’s Global Corruption Barometer surveys for the Maldives continue to indicate a crisis of public trust in the Parliament. Increasing campaign financing transparency in parliamentary elections is crucial to hold parliamentarians to account, in order to prevent the hijack of the institution by vested interests and regain public trust in the Parliament.

TM recommends addressing the gaps in the electoral legal framework and implementation of existing provisions to facilitate public scrutiny, ensure periodic reporting and an effective oversight mechanism for political finance.
4. Women Political Participation

Only 23 women out of 302 candidates contested the Parliamentary Elections, out of which only five were elected according to the provisional results. The Maldives is currently ranked 129th place in the Inter-Parliamentary Union’s index of parliaments in terms of gender balance. Relevant authorities should identify and address the barriers for women’s equal political participation.

5. Other Issues

Additional issues that need to be addressed are:

Abuse of state resources and authority by successive regimes, allowing those in power to campaign at the expense of the public purse;

Constituency delineation legal framework and processes that result in assignation of voters to constituencies not based on their domiciled residencies, robbing voters of effective representation;

Instances where secrecy of the ballot may be compromised when a few people are registered to outside their constituencies (for example, 2,947 cases of single voters; 1,070 cases of two voters; and, 502 cases of three voters);

Lack of effective long-term voter and civic education on issues such as vote buying, political finance transparency and equality of women in political participation; and,

Uncertainties arising from the role of the judiciary in elections and, in particular, the 16-point guideline issued by the Supreme Court. TM reiterates that the guideline does not improve upon the technical aspects of the election and recommends that any concerns the guideline intends to tackle be addressed through legislative reforms and within constitutional boundaries.

Transparency Maldives congratulates all winning candidates and urges all relevant actors to reform the electoral systems to increase confidence in and improve electoral systems in the Maldives. A final report on the findings with recommendations will be published within a month of conclusion of elections.

ENDS

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