

**Wider issues in the political and electoral environment continue to cast a shadow on the electoral processes of the Maldives.**

Transparency Maldives thanks its observers deployed across the country to observe the Local Council Election held on 6 May 2017. With the support of 25 observers and volunteers, TM observed 19 ballot boxes in 10 atolls: Haa Dhaalu, Baa, Kaafu, Alifu Dhaalu, Vaavu, Laamu, Gaafu Alifu, Gaafu Dhaalu, Gnaviyani and Seenu Atoll.

In observing the Local Council Election, Transparency Maldives assessed both the election-day proceedings as well as the larger electoral and political environment. Transparency Maldives would like to express its gratitude to state institutions, civil society organisations and political parties for their contribution.

The following are the key findings we highlight based on our observation of 19 polling stations.

- For various reasons, in several of the ballot boxes, voting began later than 08.00 am, as announced by the Elections Commission. In 17 out of the 19 ballot boxes observed, voting commenced between 8.10 and 09.00 am.
- All necessary personnel and equipment were on site when voting began.
- Except for two, all ballot boxes had the presence of one or more representatives from political parties or candidates when polling started.
- Out of the 19 ballot boxes observed, one was placed at a different location from where it was initially assigned.
- Closing of polling was scheduled to 04.00pm, however close to this time, Election Commission announced to delay closing of polls to 06.00pm where polling started by 08.00am and to 08.00pm where polling started after 08.00am.
- Out of the 19 ballot boxes observed, a total of 12 voters were not able to vote because due to administrative issues such as their names not being on the voter registry.
- Out of the 19 ballot boxes observed, a total of 172 voters were assisted voters.
- The ballot boxes observed by Transparency Maldives did not encounter any disturbances, neither was voting process disrupted for any reason.

- Except for one, all ballot boxes had the presence of one or more representatives from political parties or candidates during the counting.
- Out of the 19 ballot boxes observed, 15 ballot papers had extra marks, and three voters showed their ballot paper before casting the vote. Studies conducted in the Maldives suggests that similar acts are measures to ensure that those offered money or gifts vote to the candidate/party who offered money or gifts.

The following are our key observations of the larger political and electoral environment.

- We note with concern that the 2017 Local Council Election was delayed on three occasions. While the first delay was the result of a Civil Court ruling following a case filed by the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM), the election was further postponed a second and third time by the Elections Commission. A key feature of democratic elections is for it to take place regularly according to a predetermined schedule. Failure to hold elections as specified in the law, and the decisions by the Elections Commission to delay the elections will affect public confidence in the institution and in the electoral process.
- This election took place amidst political turmoil, with all opposition political leaders either currently in jail, in exile or facing criminal charges. This hindered opposition political parties' ability to freely campaign in the run up to the election.
- Following the first postponement of the election, in February 2017, the fast-tracked amendments to the Local Councils Elections Act changed the requirements for candidacy in the election. This amendment allowed persons with previous criminal records to compete as candidates in the Local Council Election. Election delays coupled with such arbitrary legislative changes serve to undermine the credibility of elections.
- Transparency Maldives and previous observer missions have repeatedly noted the problem of high level of vote buying in the Maldives. This continues to be an unchecked nationwide electoral issue that affect the credibility and integrity of elections.
- We also note with concern that there were instances of misuse of state resources. For example, the Public Service Media (PSM) while denying coverage of opposition political campaigns, disproportionately covered political campaign events of the ruling party. Such actions not only undermine the integrity of PSM but also serves to provide the ruling party with an unfair advantage and precludes a level playing field.

- Unfair restrictions on freedom of assembly hindered the Opposition's ability to campaign. Opposition parties expressed concern regarding arbitrary restrictions on leasing out public venues and allowing opposition street rallies while similar restrictions were not placed for ruling party candidates.
- The Anti Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act passed in August 2016 placed severe limitations on media freedoms and restricted their ability to scrutinise election campaigns.
- As with previous elections, Transparency Maldives notes a disproportionately low number of female candidates contesting in this Local Council Election. We also note the lack of efforts by the State and political parties to increase female political participation in elected leadership positions.

In light of our findings we observed that the administrative processes during election day was marred by the the questionable decision by the Elections Commission to arbitrarily extend the voting time. We urge the Election Commission to undertake serious confidence building measures to strengthen the electoral process. Moreover, significant problems exist in the larger electoral and political environment which include; the lack of a level playing field for opposition political parties, severe and arbitrary restrictions on media freedoms, freedom of assembly and expression, all of which restrict political and campaign activities; vote buying and the misuse of public resources for political campaigning.

We call on state institutions to lead the efforts to create a pluralistic political environment, work inclusively and with sincerity to address these issues and to create an enabling environment, conducive to a free and fair presidential election in 2018.

We offer our congratulations to all the newly elected councilors..

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