

7 April 2019

Press statement on the closing of polls for the 2019 Parliamentary Election

Transparency Maldives appreciates and thanks the nearly 350 observers and volunteers in our observer network, based in 20 atolls including resorts, industrial islands, prisons, and abroad in Colombo, Sri Lanka and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Without them this domestic observation would not have been possible.

Transparency Maldives believes that an independent observation effort at this scale promotes greater levels of trust in our electoral processes. Our observers played a crucial role in ensuring the transparency of electoral processes in the Maldives.

The methodology used for this observation was based on systematic random sampling. Our observers collected both qualitative and quantitative data and our approach allowed us to generate results from the sample to the entire population, within a margin of error. In this case our margin of error is less than +/- 1.61%.

The following are the key findings we would like to highlight:

1. Polling day

The election day processes were transparent and generally well-administered. We are happy to report that the election has been peaceful. TM congratulates Maldivian citizens for their spirited engagement in the democratic process.

The following are key findings which we would like to highlight from our observation:

97% of polling stations closed within the first hour of closing time.

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 85% of the polling stations. 1.7% of the total voter turnout were assisted voters.

Voting was temporarily halted in 6% of the polling stations. 85% of the cases were interventions at the direction of the Presiding Officer while 8% were interventions by an unruly voter.

We note that police entered 21% of polling stations. However, in 78% of such cases, interventions occurred at the invitation of the Presiding Officer as rules allow.

Candidates were represented during the counting, making the process transparent and adding to its credibility. Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) was represented at 87% of the polling stations during the count, while Jumhooree Party (JP) was represented at 31% of the polling stations with Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and Congress Party representatives present at polling stations were 37% and 18% respectively.

72% polling stations reported disputes relating to the validity of ballot papers while 0.3% of ballot papers were disputed by candidate or party observer during the counting process.

Despite the amendment to the Elections Act that nullified any ballot paper with additional markings apart from the tick against their preferred candidate, TMs observation reported 88% of polling stations where ballot papers have other marks other than a tick.

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

A survey conducted by IFES following the Parliamentary Election 2014 showed that 37% respondents were offered money or gifts for their votes personally, or have personally witnessed either a family member or someone else who has been offered money or gifts. Admissions about illegal activities such as this are usually underreported in surveys.

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

TM notes the declaration of assets by the MDP candidates and a few independent candidates as positive steps to improving campaign finance transparency. However, 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 election. 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.

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 35 women out of 395 candidates contested the Parliamentary Election, out of which only four were elected according to the provisional results. The Maldives is amongst the two countries ranked at 184 out of the 193 countries highlighted in the Inter-Parliamentary Union's index of parliaments in terms of gender balance. It is imperative that relevant authorities identify and address the barriers for women's equal political participation and work towards increasing women's representation in the Parliament.

5. Other issues

Additional issues that need to be addressed are:

1. Abuse of state resources and authority by successive regimes, allowing those in power to campaign at the expense of the public purse. Compared to previous elections, reports indicate reduced incidents relating to the job security and abuse of authority for campaign purposes.
2. 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.
3. Instances where secrecy of the ballot may be compromised when a few people are registered to outside their constituencies.
4. 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.

Transparency Maldives congratulates all winning candidates and urges all relevant actors to reform the electoral systems to improve and increase confidence in electoral systems in the Maldives.

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