

Press release on the Findings of the Pre-election Assessment ahead of the 2024 Parliamentary Elections

14 April 2024: Election observation is one of the most important activities conducted by Transparency Maldives in its efforts to strengthen the electoral system and increase people's confidence in elections. Since the first multi-party presidential election in 2008, Transparency Maldives has observed all national elections. Prior to fielding the nation-wide observation, TM conducts a pre-election assessment to review the electoral environment and provide recommendations to mitigate challenges for holding free, fair and credible elections.

In this regard, ahead of the 2024 parliamentary election, Transparency Maldives has prepared a pre-election assessment to understand the political and electoral environment. The main objectives of this report are to understand the political and electoral environment, assess the preparations for this year's presidential election, identify existing and potential challenges, and to review the electoral legal framework.

On 21 April 2024, the Maldives will hold the country's fourth multi-party parliamentary elections. The electoral legal framework for the parliamentary elections provides for minimum conditions for free, fair, and credible elections.

However, there are challenges and concerns for the upcoming elections, including recurring issues. The assessment in particular highlights three key issues:

1- The low number of women candidates, especially from the main parties: The Maldives is among the worst performers globally in women's representation in the parliament. It is also the worst in South Asia.

The low representation of women appears to be linked to the low number of women candidates fielded by major parties. Even the candidates who are successful at the party level tend to be socio-economically and politically more advantaged women, suggesting the intersectional barriers that exist. However, this assessment suggests that women from major parties are not less likely than their male counterparts in winning the votes of the general public. **Yet, there has been no improvement to the number of women candidates from the major parties of the day since 2009, when first multiparty parliamentary elections were held.**

2- Prevalence of vote buying and misuse of state resources for electoral gain: Misuse of state resources have been major issues of concern observed in previous elections, including the last Presidential Elections. Inauguration or completion of projects coinciding with election/campaign timeframe is also another aspect of this issue. A particularly concerning issue now has been the misuse of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) for electoral gain. These concerns exist during the current campaign cycle too. While the law prohibits the use of state resources for personal gain, there are several loopholes.

Vote buying is the other major issue. All stakeholders interviewed for this assessment raised concerns over vote buying taking place in the current election cycle. Some candidates interviewed claimed voters outright also asked for money and other benefits in exchange for their votes. However, lack of monitoring of vote buying and weakness in speedy and successful investigation and enforcement remain key challenges.

3- Continuing issues around substantive representation: As voters are allocated to constituencies based on the country's permanent address system, thousands of people vote for constituencies where they do not live normally. In other words, **they do not vote for the constituencies where they normally live and may have major socio-economic and political stakes. These include the thousands of people who have (permanently) moved to the capital Male.**

These also include most of the people in Male *Dhaftharu* register. While the EC's allocation of most of the *Dhaftharu* voters to two newly added constituencies in Male is an improvement, this random allocation does not fully address their concerns.

Recommendations:

- Political parties and other relevant actors should identify and address barriers for potential women at the political party levels and seek to increase the number, including through a voluntary quota system.
- Relevant actors, including the ACC and the MPS, should strengthen monitoring, investigation, and submission for prosecution, of incidences of vote buying and misuse of state resources.
- The Parliament should review and incorporate into law provisions in the ACC guidelines on the use of state resources by the incumbent government during the election period.
- Relevant actors, including the Parliament, should debate and review constituency allocation based on the permanent address system. Such a review should also take into account the issue of equity between urban centres, especially Male, and the rest of the country.
- Relevant actors also should review the current formula to determine the size and number of constituencies with a view of capping the growth of the size of the People's Majlis.

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