

CSO Coalition on Elections – the Gambia

Preliminary Statement – April 6th, 2017 National Assembly Election

The CSO Coalition on Elections - The Gambia is a homegrown national platform established in 2006 to facilitate civil society participation in national affairs. With a membership of about 20 Civil Society Organizations, the CSO Coalition on Elections seeks to participate and influence public policy through elections monitoring and observation.

For the purpose of the 2017 National Assembly elections, the CSO Coalition operationalized an Election Situation Room (ESR) with funding inter alia from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the European Union (EU) to observe, report, analyze and facilitate responses to violent threats, voter corruption, compliance to electoral code and human rights abuses to the peaceful conduct of election. The ESR serves as one of the mitigating factors of electoral violence pre, during and post election.

- The CSO Coalition developed election monitoring indicators to monitor the national context of the pre-election phase
- Identified risk areas based on hotspot mapping analysis across the 7 regions of the Gambia
- Trained and deployed 30 election conflict monitors nationwide to monitor the pre-election context
- Established a National Election Early Warning and Response Group (NEEWARG) composed of imminent persons, the IEC, the police and CSOs to discuss, develop and recommend response strategies to violent threats
- Trained and dispatched 200 short term domestic observers nationwide in all regions of the country to observe the opening, voting, closing, counting and collation processes on poll day
- Received data from conflict monitors and observers in the field to the situation Room through telephone communications from the observers, Early Warning WhatsApp platform, SMS messages and in person

In this regard the CSO Coalition wishes to submit its initial observation report based on reports obtained from our conflict monitors and domestic observers. This report also highlights concerns and recommendations on the election and related matters.

Campaign Period

The pre-election monitoring focused on political intolerance, hate speeches/inciting languages and non-compliance to campaign code of ethics by political parties during the campaign period. Whilst the campaign process and period was generally violence free, we observed cases where there were clashes between party supporters of different political parties, provocative and violent communication along tribal lines, involvement and interference of civil servants in the campaign process and non-compliance to campaign code of ethics.

Polling Day

We observed voting on Election Day at five stages and here is our observation report.

1. Opening of polls

Basic procedures for opening of polls were observed and information on how to vote were posted outside the polling station. Polling staff and party agents of the candidates were present and there was adequate security.

Voting opened on time in most polling stations. We observed in some polling stations voting opened much earlier and we cite the case of Kotu Community Center, Serrekunda West Constituency, where polls opened before 7:30 AM.

2. The Voting process

The voting process was generally peaceful and orderly throughout the country. There were no reports of shortage of voting materials.

3. Closing of polls

By and large, voting in nearly all the polling stations closed at the stipulated time.

4. Counting process

Counting took place at all polling stations after close of polls. The process was smooth and peaceful.

5. Collation centers

Tabulation at the collation centers were generally swift.

Concerns

- Low voter turnout in comparison to the Presidential election
- Campaigning and canvassing from door to door on polling day (UDP militants in Tallinding and Bundung were involved)
- Some polling booths were found to be dark and inadequately lit resulting in clashes in some places
- The material used for the polling booth in some places was transparent, compromising the secrecy of the ballot
- In some instances, party agents were found to be wearing party colors
- Instruction on how to vote was pasted outside the polling station, however, the names and codes of polling stations were not pasted outside in most polling stations
- It was observed in many polling stations, that police officers were present inside the polling stations
- Voters alleged to be non-Gambians were impeded from voting

Recommendations

- Strengthen and empower NCCE to efficiently and effectively conduct civic education nationwide on a continuous basis. The NCCE should be provided with adequate technical and financial capacity to carry out their mandate.
- In constructing the polling booths and identification of polling stations, cognizance should be taken about accessibility for the elderly and the differently abled.
- NCCE and CSOs should include as part of their awareness campaign, functions, mandates, roles and responsibilities of different elected officials.
- The Gambia belongs to all its citizens, therefore, creating racial divide or promoting disharmony on grounds of religion, race or ethnicity is dangerous for our peaceful co-existence. Therefore, the CSO Coalition on Elections recommends civic education and advocacy for adherence to section 91 of the Elections Act.
- The CSO Coalition on Elections would like to re-echo the recommendation made in the previous election regarding the political participation and representation of women. As a signatory to regional and international instruments coupled with the existence of national laws and policies that seek to promote the equality between men and women, and given the low level of women's representation mainly due to patriarchy and conservative socio-cultural beliefs, the CSO Coalition on Elections reiterates the following recommendations:
 - That a national legislation establishes gender quotas in politics that allocate a percentage of nominations and seats in the National Assembly to women as measures that seek to increase women's representation;
 - That political parties institute a gender quota at party level that also set a number or percentage of nominations for women's election to representative bodies, as well as gain election to power and decision making structures within political parties.
 - IEC should draft legislation to impose penalties for violations of Section 91 /92 (Election Campaign Ethics) and Section 70 (Prohibitions on Polling Day)
 - Political parties should raise awareness among supporters and agents as to their obligations and responsibilities on polling day, and reiterate that the IEC is the only body mandated to prevent anybody from voting according to the Election Act.
 - IEC should ensure that non accredited persons are not allowed to loiter around polling stations after voting as stipulated in the Act.

CSO General Opinion

In light of the above observations, the CSO Coalition on Elections is of the opinion that the National Assembly Election on April 6th, 2017 in the Gambia was generally transparent, free and fair.