

INTERIM STATEMENT

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Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group*

Although the polls have closed in these landmark elections (except in one or two cases), the results process is still under way. It is therefore too soon to make a pronouncement on the entire voting and results phase of the elections. However, now that the people of Zambia have had their say, the members of the Commonwealth Observer Group would like me to make public, on their behalf, our initial assessment of the electoral process up to this point.

We deployed seven teams of two persons each on 25 September 2006, to observe the final days of the campaign and the voting phase of the elections in all the administrative provinces of the country. Prior to deployment, our group was briefed by the Electoral Commission of Zambia; political parties; civil society organisations; domestic and international observer groups; and Commonwealth High Commissioners and other international partners.

Our observer teams were present for the opening of polling stations and observed the voting process throughout the day at as many polling stations as possible. They also watched the closing of voting and the counting process. Where possible, they followed the process of conveying the results sheets and voting materials to the collating centres. Members of our group have been – and are – observing the final stages of the results process. Throughout the exercise, we have established working relationships and exchanged information with other international observers and domestic monitors. Our approach has been to cover a representative sample of the process so as to arrive at a broad overview.

Across the whole country the people of Zambia exercised their democratic rights with enthusiasm and in a peaceful and orderly atmosphere. There were some cases of delays in opening the polls due to logistical problems such as the late arrival of polling materials. But we were impressed by the commitment and professionalism of polling and counting officials, who for the most part were able to deal competently and satisfactorily with the few problems that arose during the polling and counting processes. Most electors were able to find their names on the voters register and only a few were turned away. There were security officers at most polling stations but their presence was neither intimidating nor intrusive.

We wish to congratulate the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) and its Chairperson for the efficient and transparent manner in which these polls were organised. All the indications are that these elections, in almost all aspects, represent a significant improvement on the 2001 polls. We also wish to commend the conduct of the Police and security forces. Except for a few isolated incidents, law and order was adequately maintained during the campaign without undue restrictions on the activities of political parties.

Democracy is a process requiring constant adjustments and nurturing if it is to take hold and prosper. In this context, we observed a number of deficiencies in the wider democratic process, which would need to be addressed in order to further strengthen and deepen the democratic culture in Zambia.

The 2006 Electoral Act and the Code of Conduct represent important steps forward. However, there is a need for greater clarity as to the respective remits of the institutions responsible for resolving election-related complaints.

Media coverage sponsored by ECZ and MISA Zambia chapter was balanced and equitable and the print media, including both private and government-owned newspapers, generally made serious efforts to be even-handed. However, we were disturbed by a tendency towards bias, in favour of the ruling party, on the part of the state-owned broadcaster (ZNBC) in its news reportage of the campaign.

We were also concerned that delays and other shortcomings in the process of issuing National Identity Cards may have contributed to the non-registration of some young people who would otherwise have wished to cast their vote. Every effort should be made next time to facilitate the registration of all citizens of voting age, especially newly qualified voters.

We understand that the constitutional review process would continue after these elections. This process might provide the opportunity for the people of Zambia to consider ways in which the country's democracy may be further strengthened. There is in particular a need for urgent efforts on the part of all stakeholders to significantly increase women's representation at all levels of national life in line with Commonwealth, SADC and other international guidelines and obligations.

Our teams will now observe the rest of the results process, so that we can assess if that phase as a whole has been conducted properly and therefore whether the outcome of the elections reflects the wishes of the people. We will therefore issue a further statement before our departure from Lusaka on 5 October 2006. Our report to the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth will elaborate further on these issues and will take into account not only our direct observations of the polling and the results processes but also the electoral environment as a whole.

We wish to take this opportunity to thank all those who have worked so hard in support of the democratic process in Zambia and to pay a handsome tribute to the people of Zambia, whose faith in democracy bodes well for the future stability and prosperity of the country.

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