



Commonwealth Observer Group Maldives Presidential Election

Interim Statement on the Run-Off Election

By The Rt. Hon. Owen Arthur
Chair of the Commonwealth Observer Group
30 October 2008

The Commonwealth Observer Group continued to follow developments between the two rounds of the election and was re-formed for the run-off election. The Group of seven persons was led by the Rt. Hon. Owen Arthur.

As recognized in our first round Interim Statement, this first ever multi-party and multi-candidate presidential election represented a vital element in the country's on-going democratization and reform process. In building on many of the positives from the first round, and addressing some of the negatives, this run-off election represented a pivotal moment in the country's continuing drive for democratic reform.

The process was credible overall and met many of the benchmarks for democratic elections to which Maldives has committed itself. The high level of transparency, inclusiveness, and the determination and interest of the electorate to participate in such large numbers stood out as positive features. Issues relating to the process of voter registration and compilation of the voter list, however, urgently need to be addressed.

It is vital that lessons are learned and that this experience is built upon, particularly with regard to the imminent Majlis elections. We are sure the Commonwealth will continue to support Maldives in this regard.

The decision by the Elections Commission to provide for 20 days rather than 10 days between the rounds was understandable. The problems with the voter list during the first round were substantial and there was a clear need to address some of the organisational aspects. The Group was very encouraged by the new initiatives undertaken by the Commission for the run-off election to address some of the shortcomings of the first round. This included using a new form of indelible ink and the provision of additional electoral staff, including voter list verifiers at the voting centres to speed up the voting process. All of these proved positive and effective initiatives.

It became clear prior to the run-off election that the voter list would again be a problem and a source of frustration for officials and the public. Whilst the Elections Commission struggled to

address the problems with the list, the unavoidable conclusion is that a serious problem remains. Whether this weakness related to the process of voter registration, the database of electors, management of voter data or the printing of the lists is yet to be determined.

The Group notes that the problem with the voter list was significantly reduced compared to the first round. The fact that it happened again, however, and that some persons on the list for the first round had disappeared from the list for the run-off election, was understandably a great source of frustration for those concerned. The Elections Commission expended great energy in trying to respond to each and every individual case, and managed to salvage the process overall despite the challenges it faced. For the future it is imperative to adequately provide not only for universal suffrage and the right to vote, but also the proper means for the exercise of that right. The ability of the Elections Commission to be flexible proved effective in this instance, but the effective management of elections requires more formal and predictable framework and procedures.

In our first round Statement we stressed that problems due to compressed timelines compromised some aspects of the election. The negative impact of these timelines continued and affected the voter list used for the run-off election. Ultimately there was inadequate time to get it right. Short-cuts will result in shortcomings, and this lesson above all others must be taken on board by those responsible for providing the legal and administrative frameworks for future elections.

The overall conduct of the campaign was generally orderly, but it is a concern that a number of incidents were reported in the lead up to the run-off between party supporters, including a small number of violent clashes. It was also noted that both parties used religion as a means to denigrate each other. This is a worrying trend and is contrary to Commonwealth principles of cultural and religious diversity, respect and understanding.

During the campaign for the run-off election the Commonwealth Observer Group heard many concerns regarding the alleged use of money and patronage to induce support. There were also allegations of pressure by the incumbent against public employees. These are worrying allegations as such practices are unlawful and can have a harmful effect on the environment in which an election is conducted.

On the day of the run-off election, Commonwealth teams reported a much improved process. Observers noted that polling officials were diligent in their duties and the speed of processing voters was much improved. The turnout of voters was again very high and people were patient and peaceful once more. The new indelible ink proved to be extremely reliable, providing greater confidence in the integrity of the process. The counting and tabulation of the votes were again conducted in a highly transparent manner.

A number of isolated incidents were reported, mostly linked to shortcomings in the voter list. In Fuvahmulah, for example, voters aggrieved at their exclusion from the voter list at one stage took over an election office. In a number of areas designated polling places had to be kept open late into the night to enable votes to be cast by persons resolving their registration issues.

The immediate post-election environment is calm and the results have been accepted graciously and with dignity by the out-going President and the President-elect. The country now has an opportunity to build on this experience towards an improved process for the scheduled 2009 Peoples Majlis election, taking a further step in creating a culture of democracy, and further consolidating democratic institutions and procedures in the Maldives.

We wish the people and the new administration well in their endeavour.

Information

The Commonwealth Observers for the run-off election were:

- Chair - The Rt. Hon Owen Arthur, Former Prime Minister (Barbados)
- Mr. Mohammed Irfan Abdool Rahman, Electoral Commissioner (Mauritius)
- Mr. Hendrick Gappy, Electoral Commissioner (Seychelles)
- Mr. Hanif Vally, Human Rights Expert (South Africa)

There was also a three-person staff team.

For the run-off election Commonwealth teams covered Malé, Addu/Seenu, Gnaviyani, Haa Dhaal and Haa Alifu Atolls. The teams covered 20 islands in total.

The Commonwealth Observer Group co-operated closely with the European Union, United Nations and Transparency Maldives, which also observed and assessed the election.

The Final Report by the Commonwealth Observer Group on the entire electoral process will be issued shortly and made available to stakeholders, Commonwealth Governments and on the website of the Secretariat: www.thecommonwealth.org

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