

# Commonwealth Observer Group

Fiji Islands General Election

May 2006

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## *News Release*

### **STATEMENT ON THE COUNTING AND THE ELECTORAL PROCESS AS A WHOLE**

**Mr K D Knight QC MP  
Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group**

**'This was a credible election ... now the task is to face up to the  
challenge of representation based on ethnicity'**

*Mr K D Knight, Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group, issued the following statement on behalf of the Group this morning, Friday 19 May:*

"Having deployed across the country on 3 May, the members of the Commonwealth Observer Group have now returned to Suva. We met on Wednesday to discuss our impressions of the voting and the counting and the final stages of the campaign. Yesterday we began the preparation of our report to the Commonwealth Secretary-General with a discussion of our overall conclusions. I am therefore now able to supplement the statement I made on 14 May on the voting process with this further statement on the counting and results phase and the Commonwealth Observers' view of the process as a whole.

Our teams were present at all four counting centres and were allowed access to all parts of the counting and results process. Overall, our assessment is positive. The counts were generally careful, thorough, orderly and professional. Security was good. With their openness to party agents, observers and the media, they were also transparent. Above all, we believe that they produced accurate results. There were some administrative problems at all the centres. There were also minor variations in practice from counting room to counting room. However, the problems we encountered were not so serious as to threaten the reliability, integrity and credibility of the operation as a whole.

We are, however, concerned about the reported appearance of fifteen apparently unexpected ballot boxes at one count: in our view this should be thoroughly and expeditiously investigated and the results made public. It is also clear to us that - as with the voting process - improvements can and should be made to the counting and results process for the future. Once again it seems that there will be a high proportion of invalid votes, mainly because a significant number of voters ticked below the line rather than using numbers to indicate their preferences. Some voters also voted both above and below the line, which clearly indicates a lack of understanding. The Commonwealth Observer Group which was present for the 2001 General Election suggested that in view of the number of invalid ballots at that election there needed to be a "thorough review of the relevant arrangements". In view of the recurrence of the same problem this time we wish to underline the urgency of that proposal. We hope that the necessary overhaul can take place well before the next General Election.

We have a further major concern, with the overall design of the system. We admire the effort put in by the people involved, and their success in making this operation function. Each counting centre was a feat of advance planning, organisation and sheer hard work and, literally, it produced the results. However, the arrangements which the officials

were called upon to administer were cumbersome and complicated; as a result the pace was unnecessarily slow; and we suspect that counting this way is much more costly than it needs to be. We are sure that the counting and results system can be refined, streamlined and simplified for the future, without any loss of transparency and damage to the integrity of the process, and hope that after the General Election it will be reviewed to that end.

So far as the Commonwealth Observer Group's assessment of the whole General Election process is concerned we wish to make four key points:

- **CREDIBILITY OF THE GENERAL ELECTION:** we believe that at this General Election the conditions did exist for a free expression of will by the electors and that the results reflected the wishes of the people: this was a credible election; in coming to that judgement we have taken into account not only our direct observations of the campaign, the state of the register, polling, counting and results process but also the electoral environment as a whole; we will say more on this in our report.
- **RECOMMENDATIONS:** our report will also make recommendations concerning the independence, powers and capacity of the Electoral Commission and the Office of the Supervisor of Elections; the voter registration process; voter education; the postal ballot; the electoral system; the results arrangements; and the financial rules. We urge the Government to give serious and urgent consideration to these recommendations and to those of other observer groups. The problems highlighted at this election and in 2001 need to be addressed.
- **ACCEPTANCE OF THE OUTCOME:** there are procedures for challenges to particular results and political parties and others should use them if they have serious grounds for complaint. However, as stated above, our observation has led us to the view that overall this was a credible General Election. We therefore urge every institution and individual in Fiji Islands to accept the overall outcome and then to work together to create a culture of consensus and co-operation in the interests of all the people of this country.
- **ELECTIONS OFFICE:** the managers of this electoral process have been widely criticised and there is no doubt of the need for reform to the system. Nevertheless, we wish to commend the Supervisor of Elections and his team for the effort made at this General Election.

On Monday we will have completed our report and it will be sent to the Commonwealth Secretary-General. After he has provided copies to the Government, political parties and Commonwealth countries it will be made public on the Commonwealth web-site, [www.thecommonwealth.org](http://www.thecommonwealth.org).

We depart the Fiji Islands this weekend. It has been a privilege to be present for your General Election. We thank all those who have helped us and we wish the people of Fiji every success in the further development of your democracy.

Our concluding message is to urge you to not only keep your eyes on the detail of the 2006 electoral process but to focus them now also on the overall democratic architecture of this country. At its heart is the communal system of representation. As the 1997 Constitution makes clear, Fiji Islands needs to move away from representation based on ethnicity. How it will do so is the major political challenge before the people of this country. We venture the view that it will need focused, constructive and flexible dialogue amongst all stakeholders if a solution acceptable to the people is to be found. We trust that the State, political parties and the people will not ignore that challenge but will face up to it before Fiji Islands goes to the polls again."

**ENDS**

Suva, 19 May 2006

**FURTHER INFORMATION:** Christopher Child on 940 2531