

Maldives Presidential Election 2023

Preliminary Statement by H.E. Danny Faure, Former President of the Republic of Seychelles, Chair of the Commonwealth Observer Group, 11 September 2023

Members of the media, ladies and gentlemen:

Thank you for coming to this Commonwealth Observer Group Press Conference.

The Commonwealth is honoured to be in Maldives to observe this year's Presidential Election, which had a record eight candidates standing for election. This is also the first Presidential Election since Maldives rejoined the Commonwealth in 2020.

Following an invitation from the Elections Commission of Maldives and a subsequent Pre-Election Assessment Mission, the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, The Rt Hon Patricia Scotland KC, constituted our Group. We arrived in the week beginning 2 September and will depart on 15 September.

As Chair, I am leading a Commonwealth Group of eleven independent and eminent persons drawn from every region of the Commonwealth. The Group's assessment will be its own. It is not that of the Commonwealth Secretariat or of any Commonwealth member country.

We recall what we said in our arrival and other statements: We are here to support the democratic process and right to vote in Maldives, and will carry out our work with objectivity and impartiality. In accordance with our mandate, we are assessing this election according to national, Commonwealth and international standards to which Maldives has committed itself.

Today, we convey to you our preliminary assessment. Our final report will be submitted to the Secretary-General, shared with the Government of the Republic of Maldives and other key stakeholders, and then made publicly available.



Our preliminary statement today will proceed as follows: We will first provide key findings on the pre-election environment, followed by our observations of Election Day on 9 September. Finally, we will share our view of the post-election stage so far, mindful that the results process is still ongoing.

Let me proceed at the outset, by commending the people of Maldives for the peaceful and orderly manner in which they exercised their right to vote on 9 September. Our observers saw citizens across the Maldives: men and women, young and old, and people with disabilities, exercising their democratic rights with patience and civility.

The Pre-Election Environment

To understand the pre-election environment, our observers had the opportunity to meet a range of stakeholders in the week leading up to the election. These included political parties, representatives from civil society, youth and media, the Elections Commission, police, and judicial administration, and diplomatic missions.

On 7 September, members of our Group were deployed to various atolls, where they engaged with local stakeholders: including the Gaaf Dhaal atoll, Lhaviyani atoll, Dhaalu and Haa Dhaalu atolls, Seenu and Laamu atolls.

We have been encouraged by the feedback we received that the pre-election environment has been largely peaceful and that it affords the civic and political space to express dissenting opinions.

In our observations of some campaigns, both in Malé and in the atolls, we saw the campaigning being conducted in a peaceful and vibrant atmosphere. The fundamental rights of candidates, political parties and supporters to assemble and campaign were broadly observed.

We note, however, the continuing relevance of some of the concerns raised by previous Commonwealth Observer Groups about the pre-election environment in Maldives.

These include: allegations of vote buying; the misuse of state resources, the need to develop a more effective regulatory framework for campaign financing; the independence and regulation of the media; and the need to continue strengthening civic education. We will expand on these



issues in our final report, while also making recommendations to address them.

Two other recurring issues are the extent of women's and youth political participation in Maldives. We note that there were no women Presidential candidates in this election. We also note concerns about a lack of meaningful youth engagement and political participation.

During our consultations with stakeholders, two recurrent themes emerged: the need to enhance the independence of state institutions in Maldives; and to strengthen the separation of powers between the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary.

In any election, citizens' perception about the independence of the institutions of the state is critical for public confidence in a level playing field. It is our hope that the political leadership of Maldives, including the eventual winner of this Presidential Election, will prioritise the need to strengthen independent state institutions, while continuing to enhance the democratic and civic space in Maldives in an inclusive and holistic way.

Election Day

Opening of Polls

The opening of polls generally took place on time, and all pre-poll procedures were widely adhered to. We observed that voters queued up at polling stations in a peaceful and orderly manner. In polling stations we observed, relevant instructions to voters were visibly displayed.

Conduct of the Polls

We commend polling officials for their dedication, professionalism and diligence in the conduct of their duties. Polling officials were meticulous in conducting voter verification with the electronic tablet and the voters' register.

We were encouraged by the substantial number of female polling officials. In some polling stations, almost all such officials were women. We were equally impressed by the hourly updates provided by polling officials about the number of those who voted, disaggregated by men

and women.

Participation and Inclusion

We noted the presence of women and young people among both voters and polling officials. In most polling stations observed, priority was given to persons with disabilities (PWDs), elderly people, and pregnant women. We also observed some voters being assisted. We commend the Elections Commission for the introduction of the template ballot paper (stencils) for visually impaired voters.

We also observed polling at two prisons in the country.

Party agents and candidate representatives

Party observers and candidate representatives were present in all polling stations. We observed that they conducted their duties actively yet peacefully.

Security

The police were present at polling stations observed. They were unobtrusive and carried out their duties professionally.

Secrecy of the ballot

Most polling stations were in schools. In most polling stations observed, the polling station layout provided for the secrecy of the ballot. However, the positioning of some polling booths, for example in smaller rooms, could have potentially compromised the secrecy of the ballot.

Citizen and International Observers

We observed the presence of international and domestic (citizen) observers and monitors. We express our gratitude for their cooperation and exchange of views on the process.

Close and Count

We observed that voters who were still in the queue at close of polls at 4:00 pm were allowed to vote, in accordance with the law.

The closing and counting procedures were effectively followed, with a high degree of transparency.

However, noting the high number of invalid ballot papers in some polling stations, we recommend further improvements in voter education.

As Chair, I had the opportunity to visit the election management centre, where the tabulation centre and the coordination centre were also based. The use of technology to collate the results from all polling stations, along with verification mechanisms, is impressive.

CONCLUSION AND POST-ELECTION PERIOD

We commend the people of Maldives for the peaceful, calm and orderly manner in which they exercised their franchise on 9 September. I also wish to acknowledge the Elections Commission of Maldives and polling staff for the transparent and efficient manner in which the election was conducted.

We congratulate all Maldivians for their patience and commitment to democracy. We urge them to maintain the same commitment in the post-election period. We call on all those with grievances to address disputes through prescribed legal channels.

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Note to Editors

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