



# The Commonwealth

**Interim Statement by  
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Former President of the Republic of Seychelles  
Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group  
Sri Lanka  
21 September 2024**

The people of Sri Lanka, members of the media, fellow observers, members of the diplomatic corps, Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you for coming to this Commonwealth Observer Group Press Conference.

The Commonwealth is honoured to be in Sri Lanka to observe the 2024 Presidential Election, which had a record thirty-eight candidates contesting standing election. Following the Pre-Election Assessment Mission and the subsequent invitation from the Election Commission of Sri Lanka, the Commonwealth Secretary-General, The Rt Hon Patricia Scotland KC, constituted our Group. This also marks the Commonwealth's 200th election observation since it began observing in 1980.

We arrived on 14 September and will depart on 27 September. As Chair, I am leading a Commonwealth Group of fourteen independent and eminent persons drawn from across the Commonwealth. They are experts in law, politics, elections, gender, youth and the media. The Group is independent of the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Our role is to offer an independent, informed and impartial analysis of the electoral process, taking account of all factors which may impinge on the overall credibility and transparency of an election.

Prior to our arrival, members of the staff support team observed postal voting in Colombo on 11 and 12 September.

They observed pre-poll arrangements, voting and closing for postal voting.

I now have the privilege to present our preliminary findings which are based on our engagement with a cross section of stakeholders,



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assessment of the pre-election environment, polling day, and the count. Our final report with key recommendations will be submitted to the Secretary-General and shared with the Government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Commonwealth governments as well as other key stakeholders, and to the wider public.

Let me begin with the pre-election environment.

## **PRE-ELECTION ENVIRONMENT**

To understand the pre-election environment, our observers met with a wide range of stakeholders, including the Election Commission of Sri Lanka, the Attorney General, candidates and representatives of political parties and civil society. We also met the Senior Deputy Inspector General of Police, international and citizen observers, the media, fact checking organisations, and representatives from Commonwealth High Commissions in Colombo.

We commend the Election Commission of Sri Lanka for introducing some key reforms ahead of this election. These include the introduction of tactile frame (stencil) for the visually impaired voters, use of sign language at polling stations and the provision of identification cards for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs).

Sri Lanka has also strengthened its legislative framework with the introduction of the Regulation of Elections Expenditure Act

No.3 (2023). This is a welcome development; however, stakeholders informed the Group that the Election Commission lacked capacity to enforce this law and we hope that the Commission will take necessary measures to address this. We note the efforts by some Civil Society Organisations who were actively engaged in monitoring campaign expenditure.

We note that the Election Commission and other stakeholders including the media and CSOs have made significant strides in educating and informing citizens during this election cycle, surpassing previous elections. However, we have noted that there is a need for greater voter



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education, including dedicated educational programs demonstrating the preferential voting system, which led to confusion about how the system works, and how voters cast their ballots in order of preference.

Media freedom, as enshrined in the Constitution, has largely been respected, allowing the press to cover campaigns and elections without intimidation. Nevertheless, media ownership continues to shape the narrative around elections and key issues. To address this, we recommend the strengthening and enforcement of the media code of conduct, especially in regards to the provision of equitable airtime for all candidates.

As with recent elections, political parties and candidates continued to use social media for their campaigns. However, there were concerns about electoral violations on social media including misinformation and disinformation. We welcome the Election Commission's partnership with CSOs in addressing some of these concerns. We call on social media companies to work with the Election Commission and the relevant stakeholders to address these issues.

We observed several campaign rallies in Colombo and noted they were conducted in a peaceful atmosphere. The fundamental rights of candidates, political parties and supporters to assemble and campaign were broadly observed.

There were widespread allegations of the misuse of state resources in the lead up to this election. We were also informed of isolated incidents of physical and online intimidation.

On 19 September, our teams were deployed to all nine provinces of Sri Lanka: Central, Eastern, Northern, North Central, North Western, Sabaragamuwa, Southern, Uva and Western.

In these locations, we observed the pre-election preparations. In addition, we also engaged with several stakeholders including district



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election officials, political parties, the police, civil society and others to gain a deeper appreciation of the electoral process.

We observed the deployment of sensitive materials, and the setup of polling stations, counting and results centres.

## **ELECTION DAY**

### *Pre-Poll and Opening of Poll Procedures*

The pre-poll and opening procedures were meticulously followed at the stations observed. Polling stations opened on time and there were few voters on the queues at the start of the poll.

### *Conduct of the Polls*

Voting proceeded in a peaceful and orderly atmosphere. Most polling stations were divided into two or more streams which aided queue management.

In all polling stations visited, a sample of the ballot paper and relevant instructions were clearly displayed. Signage was also visibly displayed outside some polling stations.

The polling officials conducted their duties with professionalism, transparency, diligence and dedication. They were also helpful to voters, especially the elderly and PWDs.

### *Participation and Inclusion*

We note that there were no female presidential candidates in this election. We also observed that while women served as polling officials at most polling stations, Senior Presiding Officers were mostly male.

We were encouraged by the number of young women and men who turned out to exercise their franchise.

We commend the polling officials for giving priority to the elderly and PWDs. We also note that the tactile frame (stencils) for visually impaired were provided at some polling stations.



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In addition, we welcome the efforts of the Election Commission, in partnership with civil society and community leaders to identify polling stations in accessible locations that would enable PWDs to exercise their franchise with dignity and in accordance with legal provisions. Similar observations also apply to elderly voters. While we commend these

efforts, more needs to be done to enhance accessibility for these categories of voters.

## Party Agents

Political party and candidates' agents were observed in all polling stations. They conducted themselves professionally and were peaceful throughout the voting process.

## Security

We observed the presence of police in all polling stations, and they were professional.

## Secrecy of the ballot

Most polling stations were located at schools and buildings within religious sites. There was a lack of uniformity in the polling station layout, resulting in some polling stations compromising secrecy of the ballot.

## Citizen and International Observers

International and citizen observers were present at some polling stations. Our observers interacted with People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL), Center for Monitoring Electoral Violence (CMEV) and the European Union.



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## Close and Count

At the close of polls at 4:00 pm, most polling stations we observed had no queues. We observed that polls closed on time and once again the Election Officials managed the process meticulously and with dedication. Our observers followed the results process from polling stations to counting centres. I visited the Royal College counting centre where postal votes for Colombo district were also being counted. I also visited the national results centre at the Election Commission Secretariat.

Our observations of the counting process suggest that some voters did not fully understand the preferential system of voting. Most ballots indicated a single preference or the use of mixed symbols. In addition, the counting staff did not appear to be fully conversant with the process.

More needs to be done in building the knowledge and understanding of the preferential voting system in the electorate throughout the electoral cycle.

We will provide recommendations on how the processes might be further improved in our final report.

## **Conclusion and Post-Election Period**

It is our view that this election was credible and transparent.

I commend the people of Sri Lanka for turning out in their numbers in a peaceful and orderly manner on what was also International Peace Day. We hope that this peaceful environment will continue in the post-election phase.

Lastly, I extend my warm congratulations to the President and the people of Sri Lanka.

Thank you.



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