



The Commonwealth

INTERIM STATEMENT

CHAIRPERSON OF THE COMMONWEALTH OBSERVER GROUP

HIS EXCELLENCY DANNY FAURE

FORMER PRESIDENT OF SEYCHELLES

Libreville, Gabon 14 April 2025

INTRODUCTION

1. Ladies and gentlemen, I extend a warm welcome to you, the people of Gabon, members of the diplomatic corps, the media and fellow observers.
2. Thank you for coming to this Press Conference, I will present the interim observations of the Commonwealth Observer Group on the electoral process. The final report, setting out our full findings on the entire process and our recommendations, will be submitted to the Commonwealth Secretary-General.
3. Ladies and Gentlemen, our Group was constituted by the Commonwealth Secretary-General, with expertise in election management, legal, media, youth and inclusion from various regions of the Commonwealth. We have been in Gabon since 4 April and will depart on 18 April 2025. Members of the Group have been appointed in our individual capacities, and 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. We are independent of the Commonwealth Secretariat, and the views contained in this statement and final report are ours.

4. The Commonwealth is honoured to be represented here through this Observer Group, noting that this election is a significant milestone for Gabon. The November 2024 referendum, in which citizens overwhelmingly voted for a new constitution, marked another significant milestone in Gabon's democracy, which the Commonwealth was present to witness. The referendum also marked our first observation process since Gabon joined the Commonwealth family in 2022 and forms part of the Commonwealth's larger commitment to walk with Gabon as it continues through its transition journey.
5. I wish to reaffirm the Commonwealth's steadfast commitment and solidarity with Gabon and re-assure its people of our continued support.
6. We acknowledge the efforts of the Gabonese authorities in organising this election and undertaking other initiatives, such as the national inclusive dialogue, as part of a series of programmes aimed at strengthening the country's commitment towards an inclusive and participatory democracy.
7. We also note that this election marks a series of electoral firsts for Gabon - this includes the change of candidacy requirements as it relates to Gabonese citizenship, to members of the military being permitted to stand for office, and the presidential term extended from five to seven years.

8. We deployed our observers on 10 April 2025 to various locations around Gabon, including Estuaire (Libreville, Akanda, Kango), Moyen-Ogooué (Lambarene), Ngounié (Mouila), Woleu-Ntem (Oyem), Ogooué-Maritime (Port-Gentil).
9. Prior to our deployment, we met with the Ministers of the Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Justice, as well as the President and members of the Constitutional Court, the National Commission on Human Rights, *Haute Autorité de la communication* (HAC), the diplomatic community, the UN, and representatives of a diverse range of civil society, representing women, youth, persons with disabilities, and media practitioners, to gain an understanding of the pre-election environment and preparations for this election. We also established working relationships and exchanged information with other international observers and citizen observer groups. This was to provide our group with a holistic and broad perspective of the electoral process.
10. I now have the privilege to present our preliminary findings which are based on our stakeholder engagements, assessment of the pre-election environment, and observations on election day, including the count.

PRE-ELECTION ENVIRONMENT

11. I would like to begin by highlighting a number of positive aspects of the environment in the lead up to these elections.
12. I commend the Ministry of Interior, and in particular, the National Commission for the Organization and Coordination of Elections and the Referendum, for successfully organising this election, in line with the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group's mandate to hold credible elections within a maximum of two years from 30 August 2023.
13. The generally peaceful atmosphere that has prevailed over the election period is laudable. The signing of a Voluntary Code of Conduct by most presidential candidates, with pledges to uphold the principles of peace, integrity, and respect for democratic institutions during the electoral period, facilitated by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), is noted. The Commonwealth commends such initiatives which promote peaceful elections and would encourage that it be upheld in both letter and spirit.

Constitutional and Electoral Framework

14. While the electoral framework largely provides for competitive democratic elections, it is noted that the new legal framework for these elections was enacted very close to the election date.

15. We nevertheless note and commend efforts at taking forward reforms, which include the enactment of the Electoral Code in January 2025; and the adoption and reintroduction of measures such as the creation of the Election and Referendum Control Authority (ACER) to enhance the conformity of the electoral process with the Electoral Code.
16. Our role as Observers is also to look at areas where we might be able to provide recommendations. In particular one of the aspects that we are still assessing is whether Gabonese citizens have been sufficiently sensitised through awareness campaigns of the provisions of both the Constitution and the Electoral Code, including voting procedures. We will reflect further on this and provide an assessment in our Final Report.

Election Administration

17. Prior to election day, the Ministry of Interior had provided assurances of its preparedness and readiness to conduct the election as scheduled, including the recruitment and training of polling staff, distribution of materials and other logistics. We noted that the National Commission for the Organization and Coordination of Elections and the Referendum was established to conduct the elections.
18. We note that the compressed timelines between the change of the legislative framework governing elections which include the adoption of the new Constitution, the enactment of the Electoral Code, and the date set for elections, were too short and were outside the

internationally recommended good practice of six months.

19. On the eve of election day, we noted that preparations for the elections were largely on track.
20. The short campaign period made the distribution of voter ID cards a challenge, necessitating the distribution at polling centres on election day. However, voters without official voter ID cards could still vote provided their names were on the voters list at that polling centre and that they were able to present either a passport or their national ID card.

Civic participation

21. We note that there have been ongoing and fairly commendable efforts to strengthen civic participation in Gabon, as it relates to the electoral process, and there has been capacity building support from various international partners, particularly the UNDP.
22. We note that updated voters' lists were prominently displayed at most, but not all, polling centres, allowing voters to verify their registration details.
23. The Group recommends that measures be considered to promote greater civic participation in the electoral process, by allowing longer periods for sensitisation and awareness raising in respect to the Constitution and legal framework.

The Campaign

24. The Group was able to observe some campaign rallies, including that of Ms Gninga Chaning Zenaba, the only

female candidate contesting this election. They were robust, and were organised in an overall peaceful and non-disruptive manner.

25. We commend all citizens of Gabon for ensuring a peaceful campaign. Though there were eight presidential candidates, the relatively higher visibility of one candidate in comparison to the others was noted by the Group.

26. It was also noted, that unlike previous elections, the campaign period was shorter and that would have impacted candidates' ability to visit all regions and to effectively campaign.

Media

27. The Group notes that the media landscape in Gabon has evolved over the past year, with media stakeholders experiencing reduced state interference in editorial content. This has led to the increase of the diverse perspective of online media outlets. However, traditional media, such as radio, television, newspapers, remained skewed in favour of the incumbent, which dominated airtime and prime-time coverage.

28. We acknowledge the existing regulations that provide for equal airtime for all candidates. We, recommend the strict enforcement of these rules to guarantee fair access to broadcast media and to maintain a level playing field for all candidates

29. The Group commends the fact that there were no internet or media blackouts as has happened in previous elections.

Electoral dispute resolution

30. The Group established that there were no pending matters in the courts that would impede the conduct of these elections. For this, we commend the courts.

31. We note that the Constitutional Court (CC) is authorised to deal with electoral disputes.

ELECTION DAY

Pre-poll procedures and opening:

32. Poll openings were peaceful and most opened within 45 minutes of the required time frame though there were isolated cases of longer delays. Our teams found that, in a number of polling centres, delays were attributed to incomplete pre-poll procedures, including the authentication of ballot papers by polling station staff.

Conduct of Voting:

33. While polling procedures were largely followed, with many polling staff carrying out their duties with diligence, there were variations in procedures at some polling stations. There were also some cases of voters not understanding some procedural steps. For example, some voters did not seal their ballot envelopes properly after voting or pulling apart the perforated edges of the ballot.

34. In the polling stations where the Group observed, we noted that voters with prescribed IDs were allowed to vote.

Queue management and priority voting:

35. We observed that queues at polling centres were orderly, though there were considerable variations on how voters were accorded priority. We noted that voters with disabilities were generally accorded priority.

Participation and Inclusion

36. The Group noted that there was largely gender balance among polling staff. However, our group noted that, there was an under representation of Persons with Disabilities in the locations they observed.

37. There is limited or no disaggregated data on the inclusion of women, youth and person with disabilities in the electoral process and this would be recommended for future endeavours.

38. The Gabonese authorities deserve commendation for their progressive decision to allow prisoners on remand to exercise their right to vote. This move demonstrates commitment to democratic principles and inclusivity, ensuring that even incarcerated individuals retain the fundamentals of civic participation.

Presence & Representation at Polling station

39. Representatives of presidential candidates were not found at all polling stations and, in the cases where they were present, they were found predominantly to

be representing the incumbent. Overall, polling staff were diligent in the conduct of their duties. We noted, and commend, the increased numbers of citizen observers deployed for this election. We also noted the robust representation of ACER in all of the polling stations visited.

Security presence:

40. The Group noted a significant security presence at polling stations and in our final report we will speak further on this. We acknowledge the role played by various law enforcement agencies in securing the polling centres and maintaining law and order.

Citizen and international observers:

41. Both citizen and various other international observers were seen at several polling centres. We would like to express our gratitude to all international and citizen observer groups we met both prior to and on Election Day for the cooperation and exchange of views on the unfolding process. The Group however notes with concern, the inconsistent and varied levels of access and treatment by law enforcement and electoral officials.

Secrecy of the ballot:

42. The setup of polling booths, or improvised temporary structures, largely assured the secrecy of the ballot.

Situation Rooms

43. As Chairperson, I visited the situation rooms operated by various civil society organisations monitoring various aspects of the election. These initiatives should continue to be encouraged, as they enhance transparency and provide a national perspective on key data emerging from the electoral process, especially on election day. This enhances confidence in the electoral process.

Close and Count

44. It was observed that those who were in the queue at the 6pm close of polls were allowed to vote. There were other instances where the polls closed late for various reasons including late openings.

45. The close and count was done in public and was methodical. We experienced several instances where members of the Group were asked to observe the counting process from outside the polling stations through windows. This is contrary to the Electoral Code, which provides that observers are allowed to witness the counting and tabulation processes inside polling stations.

46. The group also notes that while counting had barely commenced, there were already official projections in place of voter turnout and participation rates. The group cautions on the communication of statistics before final verification as this could potentially undermine trust in the process.

CONCLUSIONS AND POST-ELECTION PERIOD

I commend the people of Gabon for the largely peaceful, calm and orderly manner in which they cast their vote on 12 April 2025.

47. The people of Gabon have once again demonstrated patience and commitment to their democracy.

48. We appeal to them to maintain the same commitment in the post-election period, which would be crucial, when Gabon prepares to return to the polls for the legislative and municipal elections.

49. We do acknowledge that there were challenges and in our final report, we will be making specific recommendations. This will include the need for enhanced training and clearer guidelines for polling staff and the more effective management of the electoral process within polling centres.

50. It is the view of the Commonwealth Observer Group that this election appeared largely transparent, was peaceful, and conducted in accordance with the established legislative framework of Gabon, and that citizens were able to freely exercise their franchise.

51. We congratulate and commend the people of Gabon for exercising their right to vote and reaffirming their faith in the principles of democracy.

52. On behalf of this Group, I would like to encourage the candidates and their supporters to exercise patience and restraint, and to show magnanimity as the results phase is being concluded.

53. We would encourage that a post-election review be conducted and consider the establishment of an appropriate home-grown mechanism to review all recommendations proposed by both citizen and international observer missions. We would encourage the Commonwealth Secretariat, other international partners to remain ready to provide any support deemed necessary, in close consultation with relevant stakeholders in Gabon.

54. We will continue to follow the process and our Final Report containing our conclusions and recommendations will be made public in a few weeks.

55. We trust that our work will contribute to the strengthening of democracy, good governance and the rule of law in Gabon.

56. It was a special honour for my team and I to be in Gabon at this historical and pivotal time. We thank you for your warmth and hospitality.

57. I thank you.

Ends.