

Interim Statement by
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Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group
(COG)

The Commonwealth of The Bahamas

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The people of The Bahamas, Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, the media, fellow observers, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you for honouring our invitation to this Commonwealth Observer Group press conference.

The Commonwealth is honoured to have been invited to observe the 2026 General Election in The Commonwealth of The Bahamas. Following an invitation from the Governor-General, the Most Honourable Dame Cynthia A. Pratt, the Commonwealth Secretary-General, the Honourable Shirley Botchwey, constituted our Group to observe these elections, the third occasion on which the Commonwealth has been invited to observe a general election in The Bahamas, following similar missions in 2017 and 2021.

Our team arrived in Nassau on 4 May 2026, and the Group will depart on 18 May 2026. As Chair, I am honoured to lead a small Group of eminent persons drawn from across the Commonwealth, bringing experience in electoral administration, law, politics, and the media. The Group is independent of the Commonwealth Secretariat, and we serve in our personal capacities. We are supported in our work by a team from the Commonwealth Secretariat led by Professor Michelle Scobie, Head and Adviser for Good Offices and the Caribbean and Americas Section.

It is a particular honour for me to return, having chaired the Commonwealth Observer Group for the 2021 General Election. This continuity has enabled the Group to assess not only the integrity of the current process, but also the progress made by The Bahamas in implementing recommendations from previous Commonwealth missions.

Our role is to offer an independent, informed, and impartial assessment of the electoral process, in accordance with the country's laws and Commonwealth values, considering all factors which may impact the overall credibility of the election.

I now have the privilege to present our preliminary findings, which are based on our engagement with a cross-section of stakeholders and on our observations since arrival.

Our final report, with key recommendations, will be submitted to the Commonwealth Secretary-General and thereafter shared with the Government of The Bahamas, the Parliamentary Registration Department, political parties, and other key stakeholders, as well as the wider public.

Let me begin with the pre-election environment.

Pre-election environment

For a contextual understanding and assessment of the pre-election environment, the Group met with the Honourable Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, leaders and representatives of the Progressive Liberal Party (PLP), the Free National Movement (FNM), and the Coalition of Independents (COI). We also met with the Parliamentary Commissioner, and senior officers of the Parliamentary Registration Department, civil society organisations involving women and youth groups, persons with disabilities, human rights groups, members of the religious community, the private sector, the media, as well as academia and with our counterparts from the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Electoral Observation Mission and the Organization of American States (OAS) Electoral Observation Mission. The Group also engaged with the Commissioner of Police and was briefed on the security arrangements for the campaign period as well as election day.

Legal and Institutional Framework

The Group notes that, in accordance with the recommendations of the Constituencies Commission, the House of Assembly Revision of Boundaries and Re-distribution of Seats Order, 2026 (S.I. No. 5 of 2026) created two additional constituencies, increasing the total from 39 to 41. The Group notes that the composition of the Constituencies Commission, responsible for this delimitation, is tilted in favour of the ruling party. The delimitation of constituencies under this arrangement has the potential to confer an unfair advantage in election outcomes.

We acknowledge the steps taken by the Government through the Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) Act, 2025 to modernise election administration, including the issuing of biometric voter cards.

On every election observer mission we have conducted in the Bahamas, strident allegations were made, primarily but not only by opposition parties, of partisan bias in the management of the electoral process including the registration of voters and the conduct of elections. While we have not been able to validate these allegations, we are firmly of the view that the independent and impartial control and management of the electoral system would play a significant role in strengthening and fostering public confidence in the democratic process. Accordingly, in our reports following the elections both in 2017 and 2021 we recommended the establishment of such an independent body.

Almost a quarter century has passed since the last referendum on the matter. This is sufficient time, we believe, for this issue to be revisited. The compelling value of independent control and management of the electoral system warrants it. In our final report we will put forward more detailed recommendations as to how this could be pursued to further consolidate the democratic credentials of The Bahamas and bring its electoral administration into closer alignment with international good practice. The Commonwealth Secretariat stands ready to provide technical support to this end.

Voter Register and Voter Education

The Group commends the Parliamentary Registration Department for the work undertaken to remove the names of deceased persons from the voters' register and for the introduction of the biometric voter card. We note that, by April 2026, the electoral register comprised more than 209,000 voters. Several stakeholders, however, raised concerns regarding ambiguities surrounding the transition between the existing paper voter card and the new biometric card. We were made to understand that in its initial rollout registration for the biometric card was optional. It is far more secure, efficient, and durable than the paper card and we recommend that the paper card be retired and the biometric card be made a requirement for future elections.

The Group also received complaints of alleged omissions from the register and the misplacement of voters in constituencies. We recommend that before the list is certified, a preliminary list should be made available by website so that voters would be able to verify that their name is on the list and assigned to the correct constituency. Adequate time and arrangements should be made for discrepancies to be rectified.

We also recommend that a robust public voter education campaign utilizing traditional as well as social media be conducted periodically and well in advance of an election period to encourage and facilitate voter registration and participation.

Campaign and Media

The Group observed a number of campaign activities in the closing days of the campaign in New Providence and Grand Bahama, including the final rallies of the major political parties. The rallies were generally peaceful, vibrant, and well attended, and reflected the energetic character of Bahamian political life. The fundamental rights of candidates, political parties, and supporters to assemble, to campaign and to communicate were respected.

Code of Conduct

The Group reiterates the recommendation of the 2017 and 2021 Commonwealth Observer Groups and urges the political parties in consultation with civil society to develop a Code of Conduct for Political Parties and Candidates. Such a Code should address the manner in which campaigns are conducted, standards of civility in public discourse and personal attacks on opponents on social media.

Campaign Finance

As in 2017 and 2021, the Group notes the continuing absence of a statutory framework governing the registration of political parties and the regulation of political contributions and campaign expenditure. This gap continues to undermine accountability and contributes to public cynicism regarding the influence of money in politics. The relatively small size of the Bahamian electorate in each constituency makes it especially vulnerable in this regard. We strongly reiterate the call of previous Commonwealth Observer Groups for the enactment of comprehensive campaign finance legislation. Ten years after this recommendation was first made by a Commonwealth Observer Group, its implementation has become more urgent.

Media Environment

The Group notes that press freedom is generally respected, as provided by the Constitution, and that the Bahamian media, across television, radio, print and digital platforms, actively covered the campaign and election-related issues. The vibrancy of private broadcasters and the country's print media is commendable.

The Group took note of the public disquiet surrounding governance arrangements at the Broadcasting Corporation in the period leading up to the election. We reiterate the recommendation of the 2021 Commonwealth Observer Group that the state broadcaster ensure equitable access and balanced coverage of all political parties and candidates during an election period, and we encourage the development of a clear and enforceable regulatory framework to this end.

The Group also received reports of the close relationship between the owners of private media houses and the main political parties and perceptions of biased reporting that

this created. The Group also noted the extensive use of social media platforms by political parties, candidates, and citizens. While social media has expanded the space for political expression, stakeholders raised concerns about misinformation and the tone of online discourse. We encourage continued dialogue among media stakeholders, regulators, and civil society on responsible online engagement.

The Group reiterates its earlier recommendations that private media consider the creation of an independent media association to support and regulate media professionals as well as the development of a media Code of Conduct that would foster greater accountability and fair coverage of election campaigns.

Deployment

Members of the Group were deployed across New Providence and Grand Bahama. In addition, the Group obtained briefings on arrangements in the Family Islands, including Abaco, Eleuthera and Andros, from the Parliamentary Registration Department, Returning Officers, party representatives, and other observer missions. In these locations, the Group engaged with election officials, party agents, police officers and voters to gain a deeper appreciation of the electoral process and the pre-election environment.

Advanced Poll

The Group commends The Bahamas for the longstanding provision of an advanced poll, which enables senior citizens, members of the uniformed services, election officials, special voters, the judiciary, students abroad, those who plan to travel abroad and Bahamians on diplomatic postings overseas to exercise their franchise.

The Group notes with appreciation the high level of voter participation in the advanced poll, which the Parliamentary Registration Department has described as unprecedented. However, the Group is concerned about the operational and logistical challenges that were widely reported during the advanced poll, including insufficient polling stations, extended waiting times at several stations requiring them to remain open well beyond the scheduled close, instances in which elderly voters were subject to prolonged exposure to the elements and confusion regarding voter assignment. The Group also took note of reports of some confrontational incidents at advanced polling locations.

We urge the Parliamentary Registration Department to draw fully on the lessons of the advanced poll in the conduct of any future electoral exercise, particularly with respect to the number of voters assigned to each polling station, crowd management, the

deployment of polling staff, signage, the timely availability of certified voter lists to political parties and Returning Officers, and clear communication with the public and with political parties on operational decisions.

Election Day

On 12 May 2026, our teams were deployed to polling stations across New Providence and Grand Bahama and remained engaged with Returning Officers and observer counterparts in the Family Islands. We observed the opening of polls, the conduct of voting, closing procedures, the count, and the preliminary transmission of results.

Opening of Polls and Signage

Polling officials at the stations observed by the Group generally adhered to prescribed opening procedures. The Group commends the Parliamentary Registration Department for the deployment of clearer signage and the presence of information desk officers at a number of polling locations which assisted voters in identifying their correct polling division. This practice is commendable and should be standardised across all polling locations in future elections.

Conduct of the Poll

Voting at polling stations observed by the Group was conducted in a peaceful, orderly, and transparent manner. Voters lists were available for consultation at information desks located at each polling centre. Polling officials are to be commended for the efficiency and professionalism with which they discharged their duties, often over a long and demanding day. Where minor procedural inconsistencies were observed, these did not, in the view of the Group, materially affect the integrity of the process.

The Group noted that voters were permitted to use alternative forms of photo identification, including passports and driver's licenses, in the absence of their voter identification cards, in accordance with the law.

Political Party Agents

Political party agents were present at the polling stations observed by the Group and generally conducted themselves professionally. They were engaged and were able to raise questions and challenges throughout the voting process as well as at the recount.

The cooperation between agents of different parties at most polling stations is commendable and reflects the maturity of Bahamian electoral culture.

Security

Police officers were present at the polling stations observed by the Group and conducted themselves in a professional and unobtrusive manner. The Group commends the Royal Bahamas Police Force, the Royal Bahamas Defence Force and other security agencies for their disciplined contribution to a peaceful election day.

Participation and Inclusion

The Group commends the voters for the discipline and patience they displayed at the polling stations observed. A high proportion of polling officials and party agents were women. We note, however, the continuing under-representation of women among candidates contesting the election for two of the three political parties and encourage all political parties to take deliberate steps to advance the political participation of women, in line with the country's national and international commitments.

We observed that persons with disabilities, elderly voters and pregnant women were given priority at some of the polling stations observed. This practice is commendable and should be standardised across all polling locations in future elections. The Group further encourages the Parliamentary Registration Department to collaborate with disabled persons' organisations to develop a standardised assistive voting protocol for future elections.

The Group heard from various stakeholders of the need to deepen youth confidence and participation in democratic and electoral institutions and processes. We recommend that measures be considered to promote greater civic participation, including through partnerships with civil society, schools, and tertiary institutions, and through sustained voter education between elections.

Election Observation

The Group interacted closely with the CARICOM Electoral Observation Mission led by Mr. Herman St. Helen, the OAS Electoral Observation Mission led by Ms. Sherry Tross, and with accredited diplomatic observers. The Group notes the absence of a sustained citizen-based domestic election observation mechanism in The Bahamas and encourages key electoral stakeholders to work toward the development of credible

domestic observation, which would further strengthen public confidence in the electoral process.

Presence of Party Agents

The Group observed several party agents, especially from the two largest parties, at all polling stations, and in tents outside the polling stations. They were professional in the conduct of their duties and there was close cooperation among the agents of different parties. They assisted polling officials to find names in the register and the level of maturity and positive engagement by party agents, which we had also seen in 2021 is to be commended.

The Group noted that many political party supporters were gathered beyond the one hundred yards limit as outlined in Section 98 of the Parliamentary Elections Act. However, some did not always adhere to this provision.

Close and Count

At polling stations observed, closing procedures were conducted broadly in accordance with the law and in the presence of party agents and observers. However, the use of stickers, zip ties and wax to seal envelopes and ballot boxes was not always efficiently or consistently applied across the stations observed by the Group. The Group will consider recommendations on such security features in its final report. The Group notes some inconsistencies in the sealing of ballot boxes and in the application of certain reconciliation procedures, on which we will provide detailed recommendations in our final report. The preliminary count was conducted in a transparent manner, with party agents and observers given the opportunity to witness the process.

CONCLUSION AND POST-ELECTION PERIOD

We applaud the people of The Commonwealth of The Bahamas for once again exercising their franchise in a peaceful and orderly manner. The Bahamas has a proud democratic tradition, and that tradition has once again been affirmed.

We commend the Parliamentary Registration Department, polling staff, the Royal Bahamas Police Force, the Royal Bahamas Defence Force, political parties, candidates, civil society, and the media for their respective contributions to the conduct of these elections.

We urge the Department, and the wider Government of The Bahamas, to strengthen engagement with all stakeholders, including political parties, civil society, and the media, to address the operational shortcomings identified, particularly those associated with the advanced poll.

This is the first election since 1997 in which an incumbent government of the Bahamas has been re-elected. We commend the Leader of the Opposition and leader of the Free National Movement, Mr. Michael Pintard, for his gracious concession and the Prime Minister and leader of the Progressive Liberal Party, the Hon. Phillip Davis, for his magnanimity in victory - both in the finest traditions of the parliamentary system that the Bahamas has practiced for more than 50 years.

Our final report will set out our findings and recommendations in greater detail. We encourage the Government of The Bahamas to give serious consideration to the establishment of an appropriate domestic mechanism to systematically review and act upon recommendations made by international observer missions, including those made by the Commonwealth in 2017, 2021 and in our forthcoming 2026 report.

I wish to take this opportunity once again to thank the people of The Commonwealth of The Bahamas for the warm hospitality extended to me and to members of the Group throughout our stay, and for the access and cooperation provided for our observation processes.

On behalf of the Commonwealth Observer Group, I wish the people of The Bahamas every success as they enter this next chapter in their journey as a stable democracy.

I thank you.

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British Colonial Hotel

Nassau, The Commonwealth of The Bahamas