

Antigua and Barbuda 2018 General Election

Interim Statement

*Issued by Mrs Janet G. Bostwick
Chair of the Commonwealth Observer Group*

22 March 2018

"The Commonwealth Observer Group commends the people of Antigua and Barbuda for the peaceful and orderly manner in which they exercised their right to vote on 21 March."

The Commonwealth Observer Group has been present in Antigua and Barbuda since 16 March. During this time, we met with a range of stakeholders, including the Prime Minister, the Antigua and Barbuda Electoral Commission (ABEC), representatives of political parties, the police, civil society groups including in relation to women, youth and persons with disabilities, and members of the media.

In advance of the election, we observed campaigning in Antigua by the major political parties by our presence at campaign events and through the media, including social media. We have collaborated closely with other observers in advance of and on election day.

Yesterday, 21 March, we observed polling for all 17 constituencies, including the polling for Barbudans. We were present for the opening of the polls, the casting of votes, the closing of the polls and the counting and transmittal of results.

The following is the Group's initial assessment of the main aspects of the election process and the electoral environment.

Key Interim Findings

General Summary

We congratulate the people of Antigua and Barbuda for turning out in high numbers to exercise their franchise. The election was conducted in a peaceful environment and in accordance with the laws of the country and with the principles of democracy as enshrined in the Commonwealth Charter. The voter turnout in Antigua and Barbuda, at over 76 percent, is an impressive demonstration of the commitment of Antiguans and Barbudans to the electoral process, although we note it is lower than the 2014 election.

We note that this election took place over a year earlier than constitutionally due. The Antigua and Barbuda Electoral Commission is to be commended for its efforts in preparing for and delivering a successful election within this timeframe.

Electoral framework and preparations

The Group is aware that since 1984 there have been only minor changes to the electoral boundaries of Antigua and Barbuda. Over time, with population growth and natural shifts in demographics, this has led to a large disparity in voter population. We further note that the Constituencies Boundaries Commission reported in December 2017 that it would not propose to amend the constituencies given the likelihood of an early election. This is an important issue, which we hope can be addressed well ahead of the next election.

The Group heard views raised by some stakeholders that the decision to centralise voter registration had impacted on the accessibility of the process. We welcome the news that the process has since been decentralised.

Campaign Environment

The Group observed campaigning on the island of Antigua in the lead up to election day. Overall, the campaign period was peaceful and rallies were festive. Party campaign materials were visible across the island and we observed candidates from the major political parties campaigning in the various constituencies.

In our briefings and our observation of the campaign through the media, however, attention was drawn to the surge of vitriolic and personal attacks exchanged between political parties and candidates. Although there have been efforts by civil society, notably the churches, over a number of electoral cycles to develop a code of conduct, these efforts had not succeeded in encouraging political parties to adopt a more positive tone.

Concerns were also raised about the lack of transparency and accountability regarding campaign financing. It is important that there is an effective framework for the funding, expenditure and campaigning of political parties and candidates, which might also encourage a more positive and policy-focused campaign.

Barbuda

Concerns were raised about the Electoral Commission's decision to conduct polling for all Barbus on Antigua, and the Group followed this closely. We sought the views of various stakeholders, including people from Barbuda, read the Court's judgement and observed the polling and counting for the constituency. The Group was pleased to see that arrangements were put in place by the Government and by candidates to enable those residing on Barbuda to travel to Antigua for election day, resulting in a voter turnout of over 87 percent.

Election Day

On election day, voters appeared to have a strong understanding of how to vote and a confidence in the voting process, and participated in a peaceful and orderly manner. We were impressed with the high level of professionalism and integrity displayed by polling officials, who appeared well trained and ensured that the polling process was well organised and that voters were able to cast their votes in

an orderly manner. Although we witnessed minor variations in practice, we were satisfied that this did not impact on the credibility of the electoral process or affect the outcome. The presence of police was discreet, ensuring a safe environment through which election officials could conduct the polling.

The Group commends the introduction of a gender and age tally sheet at polling stations, to enable the Electoral Commission to gather disaggregated statistics, which will help inform the conduct of future elections.

Physical access to polling stations provided for persons with reduced mobility was an issue, although we were pleased to see their needs were prioritised and that they were assisted by polling officials, agents and others to exercise their franchise.

The Group was pleased to observe the contribution made to the process by party agents. Those that we met observed the rules of the polling station and the direction of the presiding officer, and appeared friendly and cooperative amongst themselves.

The Group observed the close of the polls and counting processes in two constituencies, and noted that the results were published on the Electoral Commission website and through local media. The efficiency of the process could be improved if counting were to take place at the polling station immediately after the conclusion of the polls.

We were pleased to see the high level of participation by women on election day, including as polling officials, party agents and voters. Nonetheless, we were disappointed to note that only nine of the 53 candidates contesting the 2018 election were women, of whom only two were successful. We encourage efforts to enhance women's political representation in Antigua and Barbuda.

Conclusion

We will finalise our report over the next two days, including a set of recommendations for consideration by the Government of Antigua and Barbuda, to strengthen the country's electoral process.

Our report will be submitted to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, who will in turn submit it to the Government of Antigua and Barbuda, the Electoral Commission, Leader of the Opposition and political party leaders and other key stakeholders in the country.

We encourage the Commonwealth to continue its longstanding commitment to the people of Antigua and Barbuda, including through support to implementing the Group's recommendations where requested, and to maintaining peer-to-peer support through the Commonwealth Electoral Network.

It was a special honour for me, and the members of the Group, to be in Antigua and Barbuda for this important occasion. I would like to thank the people of Antigua and Barbuda for your warm hospitality and openness as we witnessed your expression of democracy.