

Introduction

Ahead of the May 20, 2023, Mayoral and Chairmanship Elections, Gambia Participates deployed 53 long-term observers to observe and report the outcome of the nomination processes and the general pre-election environment. On election day, a total of 207 observers were deployed, 154 of those served as stationary observers and 53 as mobile observers in all the 53 constituencies of The Gambia. Prior to their deployment, our accredited observers were well-trained and equipped to independently observe the pre - and election-day activities. These preliminary findings are based on the reports from our observers deployed in all parts of the country.

46.6% of the voter population turned out for this election, which is a significant improvement compared to the 29% voter turnout in the same election in 2018. Gambia Participates continues to reiterate its call to the National Assembly to consider legislation to harmonize the conduct of elections and have the presidential and parliamentary elections conducted on the same day and local council, mayoral and chairmanship elections on the same day; conducting all these elections on the same day could potentially improve voter participation and reduce the cost of elections.

This election was contested by 29 candidates (6 political parties and 23 Independent candidates). We commend the IEC for the timely release of election results as expected by voters, in less than 24hrs after the end of the polls, declaring the duly elected Mayors and Chairpersons. Gambia Participates commends those voters who showed up to participate in the election and commends the IEC and security agencies for providing the enabling environment and opportunity for citizens of The Gambia to exercise their rights to vote.

GP is however, concerned about the low participation of women as candidates in our elections and reiterates its call to political parties to fulfill The Gambia's commitments to the Protocol of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, which the country ratified, by introducing systematic changes to their internal structures that guarantee the participation of women in at least 50% of elected offices. Gambia Participates urges the government and political stakeholders to consider legislation in the constitutional reform process that will guarantee the inclusion of more women and persons with disabilities in our electoral and democratic processes.

This report is an update on the Mid-day situational statement issued on Saturday, May 20 and it is based on verified reports received from 153 observers in polling stations where Gambia Participates had deployed observers.

Election Day Preliminary Findings

Voting Process

1. In 84% of polling stations where persons with disabilities were present, they were allowed priority voting ahead of other voters. The elderly at 98%, pregnant women or nursing mothers at 91% and sick persons at 73% of observed polling stations, were allowed to vote ahead of other voters in the queue.
2. 18% of polling stations observed were not in locations that are accessible to persons with disabilities.

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Adherence to election procedures

3. Potential voters were asked to show their voter cards before being permitted to vote, their fingers were checked for indelible ink and their fingers were all marked with indelible ink after voting, no voting by proxy was allowed as details of every voter were checked against the voters' roll in all polling stations observed.
4. Gambia Participates observers reported that the polling officials and security agents conducted themselves professionally and in a non-partisan manner in most of the observed polling stations with one exception referred to earlier midday statement.
5. The voting process was concluded before 5:00 pm in 24% of the observed polling stations and by 5:30 pm, the voting process had finished in all the polling stations observed.

Misconduct at polling stations

6. In 3% of polling stations, observers reported that party agents attempted to influence polling officials. These were observed in the Former Senegambia Garage Polling Station in Serekunda West, Mayork Health Center Polling Station in Foni Bondali, Nemakunku and Old Yundum Bantaba Polling Stations in Old Yundum.
7. In 5% of polling stations, people were seen canvassing for votes (i.e., asking voters to vote for a particular candidate) around the polling stations. Specifically, these were observed in 22nd July Square and Bethel Church polling stations in Banjul Central, Gidda polling station in Lower Fulladu West, Mauritania School polling station in Bundungka Kunda, Lamin St. Peter's Primary School polling station in Busumbala, Nemakunku and Old Yundum Bantaba polling stations in old Yundum.

Counting Process

8. In all of the observed polling stations, polling officials arranged the ballot tokens on the counting tray and the filled counting tray was shown to the party agents, and observers present.
9. In 3% of polling stations, there were incidents of harassment and intimidation of polling officials, party/candidate agents or observers during the counting of ballot tokens. These were observed in Marche Ngelew polling station in Serekunda, Jinack Kajata Bantaba polling station in Lower Niumi, Medina Bafuloto Market polling station in Upper Niumi and Gunjur Kunkujang Bantaba polling station in Kombo South.
10. In 17% of polling stations, voters crowded the polling officials during the counting of ballot tokens.

Announcement and posting of results

11. For those polling stations where party agents were present, the party agents signed and received copies of the official results. Party agents for Independent Candidates signed and received copies of the election results at 53% of polling stations, NPP polling agents signed and received copies of the election results at all observed polling stations and at 99% of polling stations, UDP party agents signed and received copies of the election results.

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12. In 99% of polling stations, the official results were posted in a place to ensure it was visible to the public.

Recommendations

1. The National Assembly is encouraged to prioritize legislation to harmonize the conduct of elections as this will help alleviate voter fatigue and make elections more cost-effective in The Gambia.
2. For future elections, security agencies should prioritize the safety of voters and officials by ensuring orderliness around polling stations and that polling officials are not crowded or prevented from carrying out their responsibilities, especially during the opening, voting and counting of votes.
3. Vote buying and voter inducement are becoming more prevalent in our elections and more needs to be done by authorities to sanction vote buying. Vote buying reduces citizen confidence in elections and for this to be addressed, the IEC must work with law enforcement and anti-corruption bodies to deploy sufficient officials during electoral campaigns and on election day to detect, deter and punish acts of electoral clientelism.

Conclusions

Now that this phase of the election is over, Gambia Participates encourages stakeholders to create platforms for engagements and foster harmonious relationships and consensus building on electoral reforms priorities. Stakeholders should consider undertaking a comprehensive review of the elections and all statutory electoral reforms to reflect emerging trends and gaps in election management. The IEC should prioritize the relocation of polling stations that are in inaccessible locations. The IEC is encouraged to enhance and facilitate open communication with political parties, civil society, security services, media and other election stakeholders on a regular basis throughout the electoral period. These entities bring different perspectives to elections, and collaboration among them can build trust and improve the electoral process.

With only three (3) years ahead of the next election cycle, Gambia Participates calls on the IEC, National Assembly and political stakeholders to expedite the electoral reform process and in this reform, introduce new and secured technologies to ease election administration and access to timely election results. It is only appropriate to commence electoral reform now, given the electoral administrative hiccups observed in this just concluded electoral cycle.

Gambia Participates call on the IEC to commence the process of constituency delimitation and creation of additional polling stations to promote equity and facilitate voter participation in elections. The country deserves additional polling stations in view of the country's exponential population and demographic shifts.

Gambia participates will continue to engage in the post-election phase as we collaboratively work towards ensuring the needed reforms to make our elections better. Gambia Participates profoundly appreciates the hard work and commitment of our many observers who passionately observed the election on behalf of the people of The Gambia and our Data Entry Clerks who worked tirelessly in ensuring quality and accurate data are reported by our observers. Gambia Participates extends its thanks to the International Republic Institute (IRI) for the technical and financial support towards making this observation mission possible.

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Signed
Marr Nyang



Executive Director
Gambia Participates