

## **For Immediate Release**

### **2021 Presidential Election Preliminary Statement 5th December, 2021**

The Elections Watch Committee (EWC) is a partnership of 3 organizations and network members with different expertise and background collaborating to observe the 2021 Presidential Elections in the Gambia. The EWC includes the Peace Ambassadors - The Gambia (PAG), ACTIVISTA and the National Youth Parliament (NYP). This Committee is the decision-making body on all matters relating to the 2021 Elections Watch Project; PAG serves as the Secretariat of the Committee.

#### **Introduction**

This preliminary statement is based on reports that the Elections Watch Committee (EWC) has received from all 300 stationary observers deployed to polling streams proportionally nationwide as of noon on December 5, 2021. The statement also covers reports received from 60 collation observers deployed at constituency and regional collation centers.

On December 4, the EWC deployed 460 trained and accredited observers. This includes 160 mobile observers and 300 polling station observers. The 300 polling station observers have been systematically deployed based on a proportional distribution by constituency. This means that the proportion of polling streams observed by the EWC in each constituency and region closely matches the overall percentage of polling streams in each constituency and region. This proportional deployment enables the EWC to comment on the process nationally, drawing on data points from every constituency across the country. In addition, the EWC deployed 53 observers to the constituency-level collation centres and 7 observers to the regional-level collation centres to observe these processes. Appendix A provides a breakdown of the distribution of observed polling streams by administrative area.

The EWC has observed all key aspects of the electoral process beginning with the political party congress, voter registration, candidate nomination, and the campaign period. At each stage of this observation, the EWC released its findings about the respective process and issued recommendations to election stakeholders. On November 19 and December 2, the EWC released its updates on its findings on the campaign period reflecting the observation of its 53 constituency and 6 regional observers. Overall, observers reported that the campaign period was peaceful, political parties mobilized across the country, and civic and voter education efforts ramped up as the period progressed. However, the EWC also noted violations of the Campaign Code of Ethics including the use of government resources (such as government vehicles) and vote buying. Use of state resources and vote buying create an unlevel playing field between candidates and dilute the promise that political campaigns should be contested based on candidates' programs.

On election day, the EWC released a mid-day update on the set-up and opening process. EWC observers noted that polling stations mostly opened on time, had all essential materials, and party agents as well as security forces were present. However, the midday statement mentions a relatively high number of polling streams not accessible to people with disabilities. This preliminary statement focuses on the voting, closing, and counting processes. It also reflects reports from EWC's observers deployed to observe the results collation process conducted at collation centres located in each region.

## **Key Findings**

Based on reports from Elections Watch Observers deployed to polling streams in all 53 constituencies, Gambians turned out in visibly large numbers to select who will lead our country for the next five years. We commend all Gambians for their peaceful and orderly conduct and demonstrating their commitment to safeguarding our democracy. Some voters stood in line long into the night to cast their ballot tokens in a peaceful and orderly manner. EWC observers reported that the IEC polling officials generally followed procedures during the voting, closing, and counting process. EWC observers noted in some polling streams, a small number of voters' names were missing from the voter's list while in others, voters faced challenges in identifying their correct polling stream; however, a vast majority of Gambians were able to cast their ballot without issues. Party agents were present in all of the polling streams observed by the EWC, and did not object to the count in nearly all observed locations. While IEC officials in most observed polling streams complied with COVID-19 protocols by wearing face masks, there was insufficient social distancing and most voters did not wear facemasks in a majority of observed polling streams.

## **Voting Process**

Elections Watch Observers monitored the entire election day process at their assigned polling streams starting with the set-up and continuing through the closing and counting process. They reported in near real time using a unique observation checklist and coded text messages to a central database system at the EWC's National Information Centre.

Within their polling streams, Elections Watch Observers witnessed IEC staff generally following voting procedures:

- Elections Watch Observers in 98% of polling streams observed reported that pregnant women, physically challenged, and elderly voters were given priority to vote.
- In 99% of polling streams observed, all physically challenged or elderly voters were allowed assistance from someone of their choice when requested.
- In all observed polling streams, voters were always asked to present their voter's card before being allowed to vote
- Elections Watch Observers noted that the finger of every voter was marked with indelible ink in 99% of observed polling streams as required by the IEC guidelines.
- As per the electoral law, every voter received only one token in all polling streams observed.
- In 97% of polling streams, voters were able to cast their ballot in secret.

At least one IEC staff in 96% of polling streams were women, however, only 25% of observed polling streams had a woman as the presiding officer.

Polling stations with more than 800 registered voters are divided into multiple polling streams where voters queue to vote. In these polling stations, a Polling Assistant was assigned to help voters to identify the correct polling stream or queue. However, 9% of Elections Watch Observer reported that voters had trouble identifying the correct polling stream. In one instance in Busumbala, voters did not realize that they were in the incorrect polling stream until after 5:00pm, at which time they were not allowed to join the queue at the correct stream.

EWC observers noted that in 7% of polling streams observed, a few voters (usually one or two at a station) who had a valid voter card and who were at the correct polling stream were not allowed to vote because their names could not be found on the voter's list. Following the voter registration process, the EWC noted that the display of the voter's list was not well publicized or explained to voters, and as a result, very few voters were able to confirm that their name was on the voter's list, which could have prevented these votes from being disenfranchised. In three polling streams, the voter's name was eventually found on the list, but only after voting had closed at 5:00pm and they were denied the opportunity to vote.

### **Adherence to COVID-19 Safety Protocols**

The December 4 presidential contest took place within the context of new global concerns about a new COVID-19 variant. Elections Watch Observers noted inconsistent adherence to COVID-19 safety protocols.

- While 73% of Elections Watch observers noted that IEC officials wore face masks throughout the day, Elections Watch Observers also reported that in only 7% of polling streams did all or most voters wear facemasks. In 87% of polling streams observed, some voters wore face masks, and in 6% no voters wore face masks.
- In addition, only 19% of polling streams observed by Elections Watch Observers had sufficient social distancing throughout the day.

### **Closing and Counting Process**

In 57% of observed polling streams, there were still voters in the line at 5:00pm which shows the high turnout including towards the end of the day. In nearly all of these polling streams, voters in line at 5:00pm were allowed to vote. In some locations, such as polling streams in Sanneh Mentereng and Upper Salum, voting continued late into the night. In the latter, this was due to two polling streams being combined because only one stream had ballot drums.

In most polling streams observed by the EWC, IEC officials generally followed closing and counting procedures.

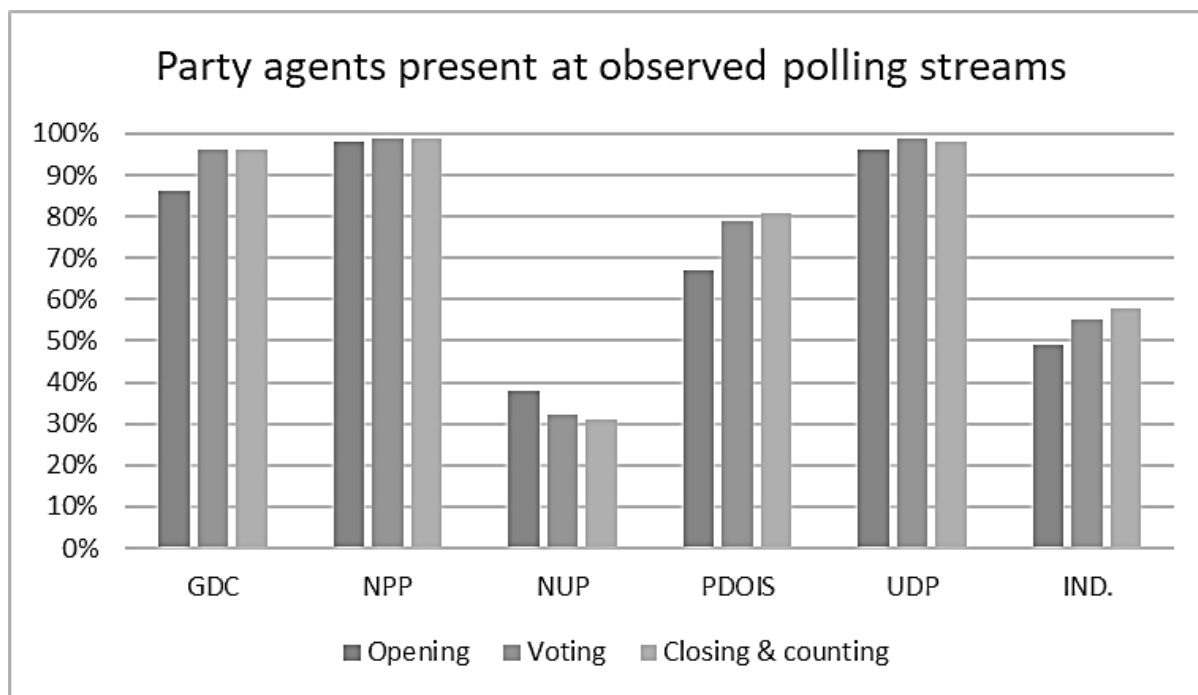
- In 98% of polling streams observed, the presiding officer sealed the entry to the ballot drums at the end of voting.
- Elections Watch Observers noted that the presiding officer counted the unused ballot tokens and returned the tokens to the sack in 99% of polling streams observed.
- After the completion of counting, the presiding officer in 99% of polling streams returned the ballot tokens to their respective drums and affixed the seals.
- In 99% of polling streams observed, all sensitive materials such as the Close of Poll Report and Counting Form were sealed in an envelope and signed by the Presiding officer and the party agents present.

In 3% of polling streams observed, Elections Watch Observers reported that the Presiding Officer did not paste a copy of the Count Form on the wall at the polling stream.

### **Party Agents**

Party agents vigilantly monitored the entire process including set-up, voting, closing and counting. All observed polling streams had at least one party agent present during the voting, closing, and

counting processes. In particular, party agents from the GDC, NPP, and UDP were present throughout the day at most polling streams observed by the EWC. Party agents levied an objection to the Close of Poll report in only 1% of observed polling streams and to the Count Form in only 1% of observed polling streams. This demonstrates that party agents did not challenge the counting process in nearly all the polling streams observed. Party agents continued to be present at the collation centers as well.



### Critical Incidents

During the voting, closing and counting process, the Elections Watch Observers noted a number of incidents that occurred at their assigned stream. No incidents were serious or severely disrupted the election process. Most of the incidents reported related to disorderliness and frustration as voters waited in long lines to vote, tensions between voters waiting in lines, party agents who took issue with the application of procedures. These instances were all resolved and voting continued unhindered. One EWC observer reported an incident of vote buying occurring near a polling station in Banjul.

During the mid-day statement, the EWC highlighted an incident involving a security official using excessive force against a voter. The EWC passed along this report to the Police Commissioner for Kerewan, who promptly followed-up on the incident, including reaching out directly to the voter involved. The EWC commends the IGP's office for their responsiveness to act on the matter.

### Collation Process

In its pre-election statement, the EWC noted the lack of information concerning the location of collation centers and the collation procedures. The IEC did not publish collation centre locations until a day before the conduct of the polls; this created challenges for the EWC's plans for observing the process. Despite this challenge, the EWC was able to deploy 52 of 53 constituency supervisors and 7 regional coordinators to the collation centres located in each region. At least two observers told the EWC that collation was moved from the identified location to the IEC regional office.

33 of 52 constituency collation observers reported that their collation centre had opened by 10:00pm, with the remaining 19 opening after 10:00pm. 42 of 52 observers reported that security officials were present at the collation center. 50 of 52 observers at the constituency level reported at least two party agents present. However, two constituency observers in Janjanbureh reported that no party agents were present to observe the process. In 42 of 52 centers observed, party agents signed the result. In several of the centres where party agents did not sign the collation form, observers reported it was because party agents left before the completion of the process. According to Elections Watch Observers, one party agent in 1 of 52 constituencies opposed the collation results.

The EWC also sent observers to the IEC's Election House to observe the national collation process, but observers were denied access. Party agents were, however, able to observe the process.

### **Preliminary Recommendations**

Based on its observations and findings, the Elections Watch Committee makes the following recommendations:

#### *To Political Parties:*

- Utilize the prescribed legal process to pursue any complaints or grievances.
- Encourage followers to continue to maintain the peace and abide by the tenants of the Janjanbureh Peace Accord to which they have ascribed.

#### *To the IEC:*

- Publicly provide polling stream level results in a machine-readable format in a timely manner as a measure of transparency.
- Reduce the maximum number of voters in a polling stream to ensure voting does not extend into the night.
- More clearly identify the surnames included at each polling stream. This will help avoid voters being denied the opportunity to vote because they queued at a wrong polling stream.
- Clarify and communicate collation procedures and locations in a timelier manner to ensure observers are able to fulfill their role in observing the process. In addition, grant access to accredited observers to observe the national collation process.
- Reconsider the process for allowing those on official duty, and not just security officers and polling officers assigned to a polling station assignment, the opportunity to vote. This includes observers, the media, and party agents participating in the election process.
- Ensure all polling locations are accessible to all voters, particularly the elderly and persons with disabilities. In addition, take additional measures to make the process more accessible such as written material for the hearing impaired and listing the candidates' names in braille on the ballot drums.

#### *To the Media:*

- Continue to demonstrate professionalism in its reportage and ensure citizens continue to receive accurate information about the election process

To the Security Forces:

- Continue to demonstrate neutrality and professionalism in dealing with electoral related matters.

The Elections Watch Committee will subsequently release a comprehensive observation report that will capture recommendations for future electoral processes.

#### About the Elections Watch Committee

The Elections Watch Committee is a partnership of 3 organizations and other network members with different expertise and background collaborating to observe the 2021 Presidential Elections in the Gambia. The Elections Watch Committee includes the Peace Ambassadors-The Gambia (PAG), ACTIVISTA and the National Youth Parliament (NYP). This Committee is the decision-making body on all matters relating to the 2021 Elections Watch Project. PAG serves as the Secretariat of the Committee. The Elections Watch Project is being financed with assistance from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and technical support from the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI).

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#### Appendix A: Distribution of Elections Watch Observers

Administrative Area	Distribution of IEC polling streams/stations		Distribution of Elections Watch Stationary Observers	
	# of polling streams	% of polling streams	# of EW observers	% of EW observers
Banjul	36	2.3%	7	2.3%
Basse	198	12.7%	37	12.3%
Brikama	533	34.3%	103	34.3%
Janjanbureh	212	13.6%	43	14.3%
Kanifing	276	17.7%	53	17.7%
Kerewan	196	12.6%	38	12.7%
Mansakonko	103	6.6%	19	6.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1554</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100%</b>