

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Elections Watch Committee (EWC)

2022 Local Government By-Election Preliminary Statement

(16th May 2022)

The Elections Watch Committee is a partnership of 3 organizations with different expertise and background – Peace Ambassadors - The Gambia (PAG), ACTIVISTA and the National Youth Parliament (NYP) – collaborating to observe the electoral processes in The Gambia. The EWC’s observation of the 2022 Local Government by elections builds on the EWC’s observation of the 2021 Presidential election processes such as the Voter Registration, the display of provisional list of voters, the candidate nomination, the campaign period and the 2021 presidential election day. The EWC has equally observed the pre-election period which include candidate nomination and campaign as well as the April 2022 National Assembly election day processes. Ahead of the 14th May Local Government by-elections in the four wards, the EWC has observed the candidate nomination process and the campaign period. The EWC equally deployed observers to observe the election day processes.

Introduction

This preliminary statement is based on reports that the Elections Watch Committee (EWC) has received from all 53 stationary observers deployed to polling streams proportionally across the four wards by the end of the day on 14th May 2022. The statement also covers reports received from collation observers deployed at the regional collation centers.

On May 14th, the EWC deployed 59 trained and accredited observers. This includes 6 mobile observers and 53 stationary observers. The 53 stationary observers have been systematically deployed based on a proportional distribution by ward. This means that the proportion of polling streams observed by the EWC in each ward closely matches the overall percentage of polling streams in each ward. This proportional deployment enables the EWC to comment on the process, drawing on data points from every ward across the country. In addition, the EWC deployed observers to the collation centres to observe these processes. Appendix A provides a breakdown of the distribution of observed polling streams by administrative area / ward. The EWC further deployed observers to the IEC collation centers to observe these processes.

The EWC has observed key aspects of this electoral process beginning with the campaign period and released its findings about the pre-election environment and issued recommendations to election stakeholders. On 13th May, the EWC released its update on the campaign period reflecting the observation by its 6 long-term observers. Overall, the Elections Watch observers’ reports during the campaign show that political parties and candidates conducted their campaign activities within the four wards with no restrictions. Observers’ reports also showed that the campaign had been peaceful. However, the EWC Observers noted the low presence of security personnel during campaigns and low sensitization of COVID-19 prevention messages.

On election day, the EWC released a mid-day update on the set-up and opening processes. EWC observers noted that polling stations mostly opened on time, had all essential materials.

Party agents as well as security forces were present. This preliminary statement focuses on the voting, closing, and counting processes. It also reflects reports from EWC's observers deployed to observe the collation process conducted at collation centers located in the IEC Regional Offices.

Key Findings

Based on reports from Elections Watch Observers deployed to polling streams in all four wards, Gambians peacefully participated in the Councilor By-elections and faced few challenges in casting their vote. The IEC polling officials generally followed procedures during the voting, closing, and counting process. Party agents were present in the vast majority of the polling streams observed by the EWC and did not object to the count in nearly all observed locations. However, COVID-19 protocols were largely not followed by IEC officials and voters.

Voting Process

Elections Watch Observers monitored the entire election day process at their assigned polling streams starting with the set-up, opening, voting, 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 Center.

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

- EWC observers reported that voters were able to easily locate their correct voting queue.
- Elections Watch Observers reported that the IEC polling officials generally followed procedures. In nearly all polling stations observed, voters were always asked to present their voter's card before being allowed to vote. EWC observers reported no cases of missing names in the voter list. They also did not observe any case of voter allowed to vote without a valid voter card or whose name was not in the list
- The finger of every voter was marked with indelible ink in all observed polling streams except one. Every voter received only one token in all polling streams observed consistent with the electoral law.
- In all of the polling streams observed, voters were able to cast their ballot in secret. Voters received only one token in all observed streams.
- Elections Watch Observers in nearly all observed polling streams reported that pregnant women, physically challenged, and elderly voters were given priority to vote and were allowed assistance from someone of their choice when requested.

Adherence to COVID-19 Safety Protocols

EWC reported low levels of messaging and adherence to COVID-19 health and safety protocols during the campaign period as well as on election day. EWC observed that all eligible voters were allowed to vote as mandated by the IEC regardless of adherence to the COVID-19 safety protocol. For the 14th May elections, EWC Observers noted inconsistent adherence to COVID-19 safety protocols and lower abidance to measures as compared to the National Assembly elections.

- 30% of Elections Watch observers noted that IEC officials wore face masks throughout the day.

- Observers reported that all voters wore a facemask in only 2% of observed polling streams. In 49% of the streams, none of the voters wore a facemask.
- In addition, only 30% of polling streams observed by Elections Watch Observers had sufficient social distancing throughout the day.

Closing and Counting Process

All polling stations observed closed on time and in all polling streams observed, In all polling streams observed by the EWC, IEC officials generally followed closing and counting procedures.

- In all polling streams observed, the presiding officer sealed the entry to the ballot drums at the end of voting and counted the unused ballot tokens and returned the tokens to the sack.
- 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 all of the polling streams observed, 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 all of the polling streams observed, Elections Watch Observers reported that the Presiding Officer pasted 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. 98% observed polling streams had at least one party agent present during the voting, closing, and counting processes. In particular, party agents from the NPP, UDP, PDOIS and Independent Candidates were present throughout the day at most polling streams observed by the EWC. 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 reported some incidents that occurred at their assigned stream. No incidents were serious or severely disrupted the election process. As noted in the EWC's mid-day statement, Elections Watch Observers reported four incidents related to disagreements between party supporters over canvassing for votes at the Polling Station.

Collation Process

The EWC deployed its observers to the two regional collation centers to observe the collation process and received reports from 4 out of 4 wards. All EWC observers and party agents were permitted access to observe the collation centers. The collation process was not postponed or interrupted at any time in any collation centers observed by EWC, and all polling station results were included in the collation result at all centers observed. While party agents were present at the collation centers, the collated results form was signed by the party agents present and a copy was given to all present party agents.

Preliminary Recommendations

To Political Parties and Candidates:

- Utilize the prescribed legal process to pursue any complaints or grievances.
- For future elections, ensure that party agents are trained on election procedures and understand their role in observing the voting and counting process.

To the IEC:

- Publicly provide polling stream level results in a machine-readable format in a timely manner as a measure of transparency. This includes the results from the presidential and National Assembly election which have still not been published on the IEC's website.
- Clarify and communicate collation procedures and locations in a more timely manner to ensure observers are able to fulfill their role in observing all the 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 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 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 / Ward	Distribution of IEC polling streams/stations		Distribution of Elections Watch Stationary Observers	
	# of polling streams	% of polling streams	# of EW observers	% of EW observers
Brikama – Marakisa Ward	28	26.2%	14	26.4%
Brikama – Sanyang Ward	58	54.2%	28	52.8%
Kanifing – Bundungka Kunda Ward	11	10.3%	6	11.3%
Kanifing – London Corner Ward	10	9.3%	5	9.4%
Total	107	100%	53	100%