

ELECTIONS WATCH

THE GAMBIA

Elections Watch Committee (EWC)

Local Government Elections (Mayor and Chairperson) 2023 Preliminary Statement

21st May 2023

The Election Watch Committee (EWC) is a partnership of 7 organizations with different expertise and background – Peace Ambassadors-The Gambia (PAG), ACTIVISTA, National Youth Parliament (NYP), Think Young Women (TYW), Beakanyang, Peace Hub – The Gambia (PHTG), and The Gambia Federation of the Disabled (GFD) – collaborating to observe the electoral processes in The Gambia. The EWC’s observation of the 2023 local government elections was built on the EWC’s observation of the 2021 Presidential election including the Voter Registration process, the display of a provisional list of voters, the candidate nomination and campaign period, the 2021 presidential election day and as well the 2022 National Assembly elections. Ahead of the May 20 local government (Mayor and Chairperson) elections, the EWC has observed the candidate nomination process, the campaign period and now the elections.

Introduction

This preliminary statement is based on reports that the Elections Watch Committee (EWC) has received from all 104 stationary observers deployed to polling streams proportionally nationwide and 14 mobile observers at collation centers by the end of the day on 20th May 2023.

The EWC has observed major key aspects of the electoral process beginning with the political party candidate nomination and the campaign period. At each stage of this observation, the EWC released its findings about the respective processes and issued recommendations to election stakeholders. On 12th May, 2023 the EWC released its update on the candidate nomination process. On 19th May, 2023, the EWC released its updates on its findings on the campaign period reflecting the observation by its 14 regional observers. Overall, observers reported that the campaign period was peaceful, political parties and candidates mobilized across the country with no restrictions 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), vote buying and issuing out gifts. Use of state resources and vote buying create an unlevel playing field between candidates and dilute the premise 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, procedures were followed, and party agents as well as security forces were present.

Methodology

The EWC has deployed 128 trained and accredited observers, which include 104 stationary polling stream observers, 10 mobile observers, and 14 regional coordinators. Stationary polling stream observers have been systematically deployed based on a proportional distribution by constituency. This means that the proportion of Elections Watch Committee stationary observers closely matches the overall proportion of the IEC polling streams in each constituency and administrative area. For example, 34% of polling streams where Elections Watch Committee observers are deployed are in Brikama and 34% of overall polling streams are in Brikama. This proportional deployment enables the EWC to comment on the process nationally, drawing on data points from every constituency across the country.

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

Additionally, the EWC deployed its 14 regional coordinators to observe the collation process at the IEC's 7 regional collation centers.

Key Findings

Based on reports from Elections Watch Observers deployed to polling streams in all administrative areas, Gambians peacefully participated in the Local Government elections and faced little or no challenges in casting their vote. The IEC polling officials generally followed procedures during the voting, closing, and counting process. Party agents were present in all of the polling streams observed by the EWC, and did not object to the counting in any of the observed locations.

Voting

Process

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

- Elections Watch Observers in all of the polling streams observed 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.
- Elections Watch Observers reported that the IEC polling officials generally followed procedures. In all polling stations observed, voters were always asked to present their voter's card before being allowed to vote, voters were able to cast their ballot in secret, and the finger of every voter was marked with indelible ink, and every voter received only one token in all polling streams observed consistent with the electoral law.
- In all of the polling streams observed, voters without a valid voter card or whose name was not on the voter list were not allowed to vote.
- In about half of the polling streams observed, polling officials, security officers, and party agents had election duty certificates that allowed them to vote.

- In addition to party agents, other observer groups were present at the majority of polling streams with EWC observers during the voting process. Local leaders were present at some polling streams observed.

Closing and Counting Process

Most polling streams observed by the EWC closed on time. In polling streams with EWC observers, voters in queue by 5:00 pm were allowed to vote. In addition, in polling streams observed by the EWC, IEC officials generally followed closing and counting procedures.

- All 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 all of the polling streams observed.
- After the completion of counting, the presiding officer in nearly all of the polling streams observed, returned the ballot tokens to their respective drums and affixed the seals.
- In almost all 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 nearly 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. Nearly all observed polling streams had at least two party agents present during the voting, closing, and counting processes; more than half of the polling streams observed had more than three party agents present. EWC observers noted that party agents from all major political parties and independent candidates were present throughout the day at polling streams observed. Party agents did not present an objection to the Close of Poll report or to the counting of ballot tokens in any of the observed polling streams.

Collation Process

The EWC deployed 14 regional coordinators to observe the collation process at the 7 IEC Regional Collation Centers and received all reports from its regional coordinators. All EWC observers and party agents were permitted access to observe the collation centers. Other observer groups and media were also present at about half of the collation centers observed. The collation process was not postponed or interrupted at any time in any collation centers observed by EWC. Generally, the IEC officials followed the collation procedures in all the centers observed. During the collation process, there was a few instances of discrepancy reported, which was resolved by the IEC Officials. While party agents were present at all collation centers, some observers noted that some party agents did not wait for the completion of the collation process and thus did not sign or collect the collated results form at the end of the process.

Preliminary Recommendations

To Political Parties and Candidates

- For future elections, ensure that party agents are properly 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.
- 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.
- In future elections, the IEC should provide Election Duty Certificates to Domestic Observers and the Media to facilitate their deployment and observation efforts.

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.

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%	3	2.9%
Basse	198	12.7%	11	10.6%
Brikama	533	34.3%	36	34.6%
Janjanbureh	212	13.6%	17	16.3%
Kanifing	276	17.8%	17	16.3%
Kerewan	196	12.6%	13	12.5%
Mansakonko	103	6.6%	7	6.7%
Total	1554	100%	104	100%

About the Elections Watch Committee

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