

Date: 11 April, 2021

**Press Statement on the Closing of the Polling Stations for the Local Council And Women's
Development Committee Elections 2020**

The amendments to the Decentralisation Act in 2019 welcomed many positive changes to the decentralisation landscape in the Maldives, including ensuring the financial empowerment of local councils and Women's Development Committees and the inclusion of at least 33% women at the decision making level of the Local Councils. As the first Local Council and Women's Development Committee Elections since the amendment, this election marks a step towards the realisation of a truly decentralised system.

Election observation plays an important role in safeguarding election integrity and enhancing confidence in the electoral process. As such, Transparency Maldives trained and deployed 55 accredited observers equipped with standardized observation forms, observing 34 polling stations in 29 islands across 19 atolls. Transparency Maldives had established an Online Reporting Platform and Call Center to maintain contact with the observers in the field and receive real-time updates from them. The data and percentages are only representative of these 34 polling stations observed by the observers who reported through our online platform or was contacted through the Call Center by 05:45am on 11 April 2021.

The key findings of our observations are highlighted below.

Observation of the Voting Process:

1. General Observations

- In all 34 polling stations, voters carrying their official document and registered at the polling station were allowed to vote
- In 5 polling stations, Persons with Disabilities were assisted by party observers or monitors in the voting process.

2. Covid19 regulations during voting process

- In 25 polling stations, election officials were always wearing masks . In 8 stations, election officials were wearing masks most of the time. In one station, the election officials were sometimes wearing masks.
- Temperature of voters was always taken at 33 out of 34 polling stations.
- In all 34 polling stations, sanitizing arrangements were available.

Observation of the closing of the election process:

- Of the 34 observed polling stations
 - One (3%) closed before 17:50pm
 - Twenty four (71%) closed between 18:00 pm and 18:10pm.
 - Three (9%) polling stations closed between 18:11 pm and 18:30 pm.
 - Six (17%) closed after 18:31pm
- Between 17:00 - 18:00pm, 7 of the observed polling stations remained open for only Covid/quarantined voters and 20 polling stations remained open for all voters. Of the 8 polling stations that extended voting times beyond 6:00pm, 3 polling stations gave an extension for only Covid positive or quarantined voters while 5 stations gave the extension for all voters. During this time 3 stations reported a few cases of turning away voters who might not have got a chance to exercise the right of vote
- In 13 polling stations, all voters standing in the queue at the time of closing were allowed to vote. In 18 polling stations, there was no queue at the time of closing the polling stations. In three polling stations, voters in queue were not allowed to vote
- In all 34 polling stations, the ballot reconciliation was done thoroughly.

Observations during the Counting Process

1. General Observations

Of the 34 observed polling stations:

- One (3%) polling station reported disputes relating to the validity of the ballot papers by candidate or party observers during the counting process
- The counting process was not interrupted in any of the polling stations

2. Presence of Party Observers at polling stations during the counting process

Of the 34 observed polling stations:

- Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) observers were present at 31 polling stations
- Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) observers were present at 33 polling stations
- Independent candidate observers were present at 16 polling stations
- Jumhoory Party (JP) observers were present at 6 polling stations
- Maldives Democratic Alliance (MDA) observers were present at 2 polling stations
- Maldives Reform Movement (MRM) observers were present at 1 polling station
- Adhaalath Party (AP) observers were present at 2 polling stations

Observed Critical Incidents:

Critical incidents were reported to the TM Call Centre throughout the day. The major categories highlighted in the reports were issues in dispensing ballot papers, assisted voting and voter registry.

Major findings

- While some of TM observers faced minor issues in accessing the polling stations in the morning, access was good in general and these issues were resolved promptly and access was granted to all the observers.
- Voting procedures were properly followed and no issues were raised at any of the 34 observed polling stations with regards to voting procedures.
- Prior arrangements made by State institutions to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 were not effectively enforced across polling stations. Moreover, the inadequate coordination between the Health Protection Agency and the Elections Commission led to dropping the proposed arrangements for quarantined and Covid-19 positive persons to vote separately on Election Day, leading to confusion amongst voters and polling officials.
- The extension of voting hours for the general public till 6pm may have hindered the COVID19 mitigation efforts as COVID positive persons were expected to vote between 17:00 to 18:00 pm as well. While this decision was made public at (11:00 am) , it was poorly communicated with Elections Officials at polling stations leading to confusion around closing hours and other proceedings of the day.

During the electoral period TM also conducted Long Term Observation from 17 March 2021 to 9 April 2021, and Candidate Survey from 6 April 2021 to 8 April 2021 highlighting issues in the electoral environment and proceedings leading up to the elections. The findings of the observation and survey will be published in our Post Election Report, as well as our recommendations to strengthen the electoral regulations and framework in the country.

Transparency Maldives appreciates and thanks its observers network and volunteers across 29 islands. We believe that an independent observation effort promotes greater levels of trust in our electoral processes and our observers play a crucial role in ensuring the transparency of electoral processes in the Maldives.

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