

INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVERS MISSION

Solomon Islands General Election 2001

Date: Monday 10th December 2001

Solomon Islands December 5th Election Peaceful, Fair and Transparent

The International Election Observation Mission, comprising 72 observers, was established in Honiara on 13th November 2001 for the purpose of observing the December 5th Solomon Islands Parliamentary Elections. The Mission was coordinated by Mr. Graham Elson from the United Kingdom and deployed teams of observers to every province of the Solomon Islands.

During the pre-polling day period the Mission was able to observe the administrative preparations for the election and to consult with election officials, some of the political parties and some civil society groups.

The Mission commends the Electoral Commission for conducting its constitutional responsibilities in an organized professional and transparent manner. We were particularly impressed by the commitment and determination demonstrated by the Electoral Commission staff and its technical advisers in meeting the challenges of the task before them. Despite the many infrastructure and transport difficulties facing them, their hard work ensured that the election took place smoothly on time and substantially in compliance with the legal requirements.

The extensive voter education and awareness programme undertaken by the Election Commission impressed us. The Mission notes with particular interest the emphasis placed on the issue of voters not selling their votes.

However, the Mission has concerns about the registration process and subsequent compilation of the register of electors carried out by the Election Commission.

Whilst recognizing the vast improvements made in the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the register of electors, there were numerous instances of voters or whole families of voters being unable to vote due to their names being omitted from the final register of electors. The Mission recommends that for future elections improving the training, management and control of registration officers

in particular, and the registration process generally remains a key task facing the Election Commission.

All of the Mission's observers were impressed by the dedication and diligence demonstrated by the overwhelming majority of polling station staff in the conduct of their duties on polling day.

With one or two exceptions, the polling stations opened and closed at the appointed times. Our observers noted the orderly, calm and patient way in which the electors conducted themselves and the role of the police in assisting the smooth conduct of the polling.

The majority of our observer teams witnessed one or more polling station in the areas they were covering where the ballot boxes were not sealed in the prescribed manner. In most of these instances the paper seals had not been placed over the ballot box locks.

There were a handful of polling stations where observers were concerned that voters could not cast their vote in complete secrecy. They also observed a number of instances where illiterate or disabled voters were being assisted to vote by persons other than the Presiding Officers.

A number of other minor technical irregularities were observed in some polling stations. The Mission felt that many of these could be overcome with additional training of Returning Officers and polling station staff.

All observers reported that the polling stations they observed at the close of polling were closed in the prescribed manner. There were no reported instances of votes being cast after 5pm.

However, there were a number of reports of unauthorized persons being present inside the polling station after it closed. The Election Commission should ensure that unauthorized persons are not present in polling stations or during the transportation of the ballot boxes and election materials from the polling stations to the counting centers.

Most of the Mission's observer teams followed the ballot boxes and election materials during their transportation from the polling station to the counting centre. None of the Mission's observer teams reported any interference with the ballot boxes or election materials during their transportation.

At the counting centers the Returning Officers and their staff conducted the counting in a very meticulous and transparent manner.

However, it is the view of the Mission that the counting could have been conducted in a more expeditious manner without compromising the transparency of the process.

Of the more concern to the Mission however is the long delay, in many instances, between the completion of the count and the receipt of the official notice of the result by the Election Commission from the Returning Officer. This in turn lead to lengthy delays in the official announcement of the result to the nation by the Chairman of the Election Commission.

Whilst recognizing the communication difficulties here in the Solomon Islands delays of almost 48 hours between completion of the count and official announcement of the result by the Election Commission are unacceptable.

Such delays can raise understandable suspicion and speculation amongst the wider electorate that results are being changed or manipulated.

The Mission believes that the Election Commission should ensure that in future elections that necessary equipment and procedures are in place to avoid such communication delays.

The Mission suggests the Election Commission should include all the foregoing recommendations in its ongoing review of the election laws.

However, notwithstanding the problems and shortcomings highlighted in this statement, it is the view of the Mission that overall the outcome of these elections successfully represents the will of the people and that they were peaceful, fair and transparent.

These elections mark an important stage in the democratic development of the Solomon Islands. We wish the newly elected members of parliament and the people of the Solomon Islands every success in meeting the challenges ahead of them in the future political and economic development of their nation.

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