

REPORT ON THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN MALDIVES
MISSION 7-12 SEPTEMBER 2023

Day one 7 September 2023. My Qatar flight arrived in Malé Airport, the capital of the Maldives, about an hour later than scheduled. Good flight, bad food. A commissioner from the EMB in El Salvador who was on the same flight, partnered me during the observer mission.

The Elections Commission of Maldives (ECM) had officials waiting for us on the tarmac. They facilitated immigration and the issuing of visas most efficiently. We were assigned a liaison officer from the ECM. After transporting us to the Maargari Hotel in Malé city centre, we were left to ourselves.

In the evening, after a delicious dinner reminiscent of the flavours of Mumbai, we were escorted to the King Solomon Mosque about 300 meters away from our hotel. The night had brought on a new life to the city. Motorcycles buzzed around. Restaurants were opening. Sights, sounds and smells tested our senses.

At the King Solomon Mosque the briefing began with a welcome by the chairman of the ECM, followed by the head of the training division. She presented an overview of the electoral system in the Maldives through an effective slide presentation. The slides captured the essence of the messages without being wordy and cluttered.

Observers and monitors were informed that there were 8000 observers of which 165 were foreign delegates. The Maldives is made up of 21 administrative atolls or districts. Although 1192 islands constitute the Maldives, only 189 are inhabited and balloted. The population is 520 621 of which 282 395 are voters. Forty-two percent are youth voters between the ages of 18 to 35. Women Voters number 70358.

The ECM was established on 7 August 2008. Five members of the ECM serve for five years. Currently, there are only four members. We were

informed that the ECM enjoys strong public confidence. Polling stations can be found at all five jails in the Maldives. In past elections, the voter participation increased both in terms of candidates standing for election and people voting for them.

Interestingly, the ECM uses a template which it places carefully over the ballot for sight impaired voters. The use of this template is explained more fully in the handbook issued to observers and the video that followed the presentation. Later, on election day, I saw one of the templates (photograph submitted). Essentially, it is like a plastic sleeve usually used to organize documents, with the top and side open. The ballot is printed on the plastic and the paper ballot is slipped through the opening. Legislation was passed recently to enable voting in this way. Subsequently, there seems to be concerns about efficacy of the template for the long ballots anticipated for local government and parliamentary elections.

A video presentation followed covering the election day proceedings from the opening of voting stations to the counting of ballots. The video was designed, acted, narrated and recorded by the ECM employees. As a visual tool for training recruits and briefing the public it was excellent. It contained a depth of detail that dispensed with reading the law and manuals to appreciate the processes.

Making information about election processes accessible in this graphic way would minimize disputes, conflicts and mistakes about process, especially on election day. If the Electoral Commission (EC) of South Africa does not have such a tool or, even if it does, then it should view the Maldives video – which I requested should be loaded onto YouTube – with the aim of improving on the EC's training and briefing tools. I recommend the video highly.

Day two 8 September was a free day. Walking about, we noticed that the final hours of campaigning was in full swing in the city. Posters and buntings decorated the main streets. Motorbike parades and marches added to the festive atmosphere.

That evening I flew with my Salvadoran teammate and two Jordanian international observers to Fuvahmulah at about 12:00 pm. We landed there at 1:30 am.

Day three 9 September was voting day. We left our guest house accommodation, the Shark Lounge, at 7:00 am to observe the opening of the largest voting centre on that island. We returned to the hotel for breakfast. Thereafter we visited seven more voting centres, with a break for lunch and afternoon tea at the Shark Lounge.

The manual for international observers and monitors (submitted) and their video presentation at the initial briefing describe fully the voting day procedures. Here are my general observations which I later shared at the briefing by observers.

The voting was peaceful throughout. The ECM officials had been thoroughly briefed and were knowledgeable about their responsibilities and the processes they must apply. Mostly (95%) women served as ECM polling officials. They were mainly teachers and public employees. Only schools were used in the Fuvahmulah voting centres.

The voting centres were hygienic, airy and spacious. The paved or turfed areas around the voting centres were accessible to differently abled people. Although there were no ramps for wheel chairs, those voters were carried over. A significant number of differently abled people voted, assisted by family members accompanying them. Notices indicating the people who were regarded as differently abled, and who could vote with assistance were posted outside the voting stations. The notices were both graphically and verbally instructive.

Although several international observers occupied the observer seats at the voting stations, the observers that ECM invited were allowed in two at a time.

Stations voting with 800 or more voters were staffed by eight ECM officials. Stations with 500 registered voters or less were staffed with five ECM officials.

Mostly, a steady stream of voters passed through the voting stations. Each voter took an average of 1 to 3 minutes to cast their votes. At one station there were no voters being processed. At another station a Democratic Party representative informed us as soon as we entered the observer space that the voting was proceeding slowly, that the ECM staff were inexperienced and that a monitor had informed them that the ECM officials had been talking to voters. As a result they suspected that voters were being coached about who to vote for. In our view, his suspicions could not be taken seriously.

Commendably, the security presence was discrete and unobtrusive. One, two but not more than three were visible. They were friendly to the voters. The only weapon noticeable seemed to be a Tazer carried in their back pockets.

We returned to the first voting station that we observed in the morning to witness the closing and counting of the ballots. The voting station closed on time. There was a brief argument between an ECM official who closed the station and a few members of the public. The official stood his ground. Those in the queue were allowed to vote.

Counting commenced after 4:30 pm and continued until about 7 pm. It could have been speedier if more polling officers sorted and counted the ballots. The percentage poll at Fuvahmulah exceeded 80%.

The weather was overcast and humid. A swimming pool provided the team some respite from the heat. The Shark Lounge guest house was comfortable and clean, the meals modest but adequate. Taking meals together built camaraderie.

Day four 10 September was a free day. After a late breakfast we were driven to see sights. Our first stop was a small lake. All four observers and liaison officers enjoyed paddling in little shaded boats in pairs. Then there was canoeing.

We flew back to Malé, arriving after the gala dinner at the Crossroads Resort began. The Vice-Chairman of the ECM courteously met me at the police ferry stationed at the airport. My Salvadoran partner preferred to return to Hotel Maagiri.

In Miami Vice style, I was sped off to the dinner, expecting any moment to see the bald head of Danny De Vito bobbing in the dark waters. I had barely found my seat when I heard my name called. Dressed in tackies and jeans I was representing the EC at a gala dinner. Mustering as much dignity as I could, I went on stage to receive a gift, a model boat, for the EC. A young Maldivian group entertained the diners. Some ECM staff took to the dance floor. Dinner and music under a cloudless starry sky and being surrounded by soft water lapping at the shore justified the Maldives as the popular honeymoon destination that it is.

Day five 11 September started with a briefing by observers of the ECM at their offices. The Commonwealth and EU Observers who had attended the initial briefing were not in attendance. I was informed (unofficially) that they had their own briefing. Also not in attendance were our Jordanian counterparts who reappeared at dinner.

The report I presented more or less covered my summary above. Other representatives who reported included representatives from the United Kingdom, the Philippines, Georgia, Japan and Sri Lanka, who led the observer mission.

All the speakers commended the ECM. Sri Lanka noted that the election results had been received peacefully without protests and demonstrations. From this he concluded that the elections were not only free and fair but also credible. He suggested that it would have been helpful if a meeting of the observers had been arranged before voting day; meeting for the first time at the briefing did not allow for thorough discussion.

Issues for improvement included steps to speed up voting by having two queues so that both voting booths are used simultaneously. Counting could also be expedited if, instead of only three polling officers, others

could join in instead of sitting around idly. Ramps should be constructed for better wheelchair access. One observer noted that a few of the assisted voters appeared not to require assistance. She asked that this aspect be scrutinized more closely.

Immediately thereafter, the observers addressed a press conference chaired by Sri Lanka. Unexpectedly, I found myself briefing the media about the observers' impressions. Others followed me with their inputs. No questions came from the media.

A full account of the mission will appear from the report being compiled under the leadership of Sri Lanka. The above is my personal diary of the mission. Photographs, the briefing booklet, the results and any other documents of interest will be passed on to the EC for distribution and filing.

End of mission formalities.

Miscellaneous

A few miscellaneous observations will complete my report.

Humility appears to be culturally ingrained amongst the Maldivians. The entire demeanour of the Commissioners and staff of the ECM exuded calm, courtesy, modesty and service. Commissioners travel in their own transport, some even using a motorbike. Only if there is a security warning would there be a police escort, as there was recently for the chairman. The ECM has hard working people committed to the tasks at hand.

Observers were treated as VIP, and assigned liaison officers who were temporary recruits, primarily to manage our security and logistics. Commendably, we were not pampered. We were chauffeured in a four seater Toyota Corolla sedan with air-conditioning. Anything larger might not have been able to navigate the narrow streets of Fuvahmulah. ECM covered the costs of lunch and dinners for the entire duration of the mission. Alcohol was excluded. As an Islamic state, alcohol is restricted.

As in any election there were glitches in the logistics; however, none were calamitous in this election. The number of rejected ballots is immaterial in the context. Maldivian law, we were informed, is precise about the marking of the ballot. It must be one (not more) tick (not any other mark) in the space provided.

As for the braille ballots, the Vice-President personally went to centres to train the visually impaired; still, some had difficulties in voting. Notwithstanding the glitches, the elections were conducted in accordance with the law of Maldives – of which we were informed – and international best practice.

The total poll dropped about 10% to 79% in this election. An explanation I heard is that some in the governing party abstained from voting, in anticipation (if not precipitation of) the ensuing runoff. The runoff will be at the end of September. As I exited immigration at the airport, the officer waved me off with “see you soon!”

The observations about Maldives must be filtered through the fact that its population is just over half a million; only eight candidates populated the ballot paper and we saw what we were shown. We are indebted to the ECM for exposing us to this experience.

Dhaya Pillay