

Commonwealth Observer Group

Interim Statement on the Nigeria Presidential and National Assembly Elections - 28 March 2015

Abuja, Nigeria - 30 March 2015

Statement by: Dr Bakili Muluzi, Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group to the Presidential and National Assembly Elections in Nigeria.

The Commonwealth was invited by the Chairperson of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) of Nigeria to observe the 2015 elections. Following an assessment mission from the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Commonwealth Secretary-General accepted the invitation and constituted an Observer Group of ten persons, supported by a team from the Secretariat. I am privileged to lead this distinguished Group, which was deployed in Nigeria initially from 7 - 13 February and again since 21 March 2015, following the re-scheduling of the elections announced on 7 February 2015.

At the start of our mission and subsequently, we met the Chairman and senior officials of INEC, the leading presidential candidates, other representatives of political parties, civil society, the media, and Commonwealth High Commissioners, as well as other international and domestic observers. Through these consultations, we have tried to develop a broader understanding of the political scene in Nigeria and the issues that preoccupy the stakeholders.

On election day, Commonwealth teams were based in Abuja, Benin City, Enugu, Ibadan, Kaduna and Lagos. Our teams met with Resident Electoral Commissioners and other INEC officials, police, domestic and international observers and other stakeholders at the State and local levels, in order to assess the situation in their respective areas. On polling day on 28 March, and thereafter, they observed the accreditation, voting and counting of ballots.

This is an interim statement, meant to provide an initial assessment of the electoral process as we observed it. We will shortly submit a final report to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, setting out our findings on the entire process and our recommendations in greater detail.

Electoral Framework and Management of the Process

We believe that Nigeria's 2010 Electoral Act (as amended), as well as the 1999 Constitution (as amended) provide the necessary conditions for INEC to function as an independent and impartial election management body. We understand that INEC proposed further amendments to enhance the efficacy of the electoral process.

Notwithstanding some challenges, the introduction of biometric Permanent Voter Cards is, in our view, a major factor in enhancing the integrity of the electoral process by ensuring that only eligible voters could cast ballots on polling day.

We however note with concern the low percentage of women candidates in the elections. We urge political parties to review the selection process to significantly increase the number of women positions of leadership and decision making.

It would also broaden participation if the minimum age requirements for National and State Assembly candidates were appropriately reduced.

We further note with concern that persons performing election duty and essential services on polling day are unable to vote and are thus disenfranchised.

The Campaign and the Media

The campaign by political parties was highly competitive and the closest fought contest since the return of democracy in 1999. While it was relatively calm nationwide, a number of states experienced troubling incidents of violence, including mob violence resulting in injuries and deaths.

We were concerned with the tendency of some senior politicians, activists and party spokespersons who resorted to highly emotive rhetoric which could be regarded as incitement to violence.

The Boko Haram insurgency severely affected the ability of candidates and political parties to freely assemble and campaign in affected areas.

The Presidential candidates are to be commended for signing a peace agreement, known as the 'Abuja Accord', on 14 January 2015, which was intended to deter their agents and supporters from resorting to violent means. This was reaffirmed by President Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari on 26 March 2015 under the auspices of the National Peace Committee. We commend the efforts of civil society groups, coalitions of young people and other stakeholders in pressuring competing factions to refrain from violence.

Nigeria has a vibrant press, with a plethora of private radio stations and newspapers providing an alternative to state media. The press gave the elections substantial coverage with most newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations devoting many broadcast hours and column inches to the party campaigns. However, some reports were biased and personality-driven.

Publically-owned media outlets, especially broadcast media, were clearly partisan. It was noted with concern that the flagship nightly television news on the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) channel was completely dominated by reports of the incumbent party's campaign rallies.

There appeared to be significant differences in the levels of spending between the main parties on advertising. Many advertisements were highly provocative, and

made accusations about opposing candidates and INEC which were potentially defamatory.

It is of concern that print and broadcast media were all too willing to publish and broadcast these lucrative adverts without censure by the regulatory authorities. Many newspapers published 'wrap advertisements' which looked like normal front pages, but were in fact paid-for advertising masquerading as news.

Given the extent of the inflammatory campaign comments, editorial articles and advertisements appearing in the media, it can be inferred that political parties simply ignored INEC's 2013 Code of Conduct for Political Parties, which prohibits such activities. In future, greater effort may be needed to moderate the tone of the campaign by enforcing penalties against offenders.

Accreditation, Voting and Counting of Ballots

From reports, a substantial percentage of polling stations experienced delays in the arrival of polling staff and election materials, resulting in late commencement of the accreditation and voting process. Despite these delays, the vast majority of voters were able to exercise their franchise.

The special process of accreditation of voters devised by INEC, including the use of biometric card readers and fingerprint identification of voters, was a response to the malpractices of the past, in particular the phenomenon of multiple voting. Substantial numbers of voters were however unable to be biometrically identified, but INEC exercised flexibility and pragmatism and authorised manual accreditation of voters in cases where biometric identification was unsuccessful.

The majority of the polling units we visited were inadequately located and laid out. In most cases, there was no protection from the elements. Some polling units were ill-equipped in terms of basic furniture and lighting.

In our observations, polling staff were, on the whole, sufficiently trained and carried out procedures in a transparent manner. Where there was uncertainty among polling staff, we observed that they sought consensus to arrive at decisions. Overall, however, training provided to polling officials needs to be enhanced to ensure greater consistency in the application of procedures, and make staff more aware of the correct modalities for each stage of the process.

The Group was impressed by the commitment and determination shown by the voters who turned out.

The Commonwealth Observer Group would like to commend the staff of the INEC and polling officials, the security services, domestic and other international observers for the dedication and commitment they displayed during these elections.

We commend the contribution made by the National Youth Service Corps, and tertiary students, whose members worked as ad hoc INEC staff for the elections.

These young men and women showed dedication, creativity and courage in helping to deliver a transparent electoral process, often in difficult conditions. They are a source of pride and hope for Nigeria.

We noted that agents of the main political parties were present at most polling stations. Recognising the current Nigerian political context, the Group is of the view that this helped to foster an environment of trust and transparency.

We commend the efforts of the Independent National Electoral Commission in conducting an election under very challenging circumstances.

Overall Impressions

The 28 March 2015 elections mark an important step forward for democracy in Africa's most populous country and a key member of the Commonwealth. Notwithstanding the organisational and technical deficiencies, the conduct of the Presidential and National Assembly Elections were generally peaceful and transparent.

There is certainly room for improvement and this will be reflected in the recommendations which the Group will make in its Final Report.

Full credit for the peaceful conduct of the elections must go, most of all, to the people of Nigeria. They, on the whole, demonstrated patience and maturity. We salute them and appeal to them to maintain the same commitment to peace in the post-election period.

Abuja, 30 March 2015

Media Contact:

Will Henley
Communications Officer
Commonwealth Observer Group
Tel: +234 9037548040
Email: w.henley@commonwealth.int

Notes for Editors:

The Commonwealth Observer Group was constituted at the invitation of the Chairperson of the Independent National Electoral Commission of Nigeria.

The Group comprises 10 eminent persons drawn from across the different regions of the Commonwealth, a voluntary association of 53 independent member countries. The Group includes electoral experts, current and former politicians and diplomats, and civil society and media experts.