

**KINGDOM OF TONGA  
NATIONAL PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION  
16 NOVEMBER 2017**

**INTERIM STATEMENT**

**Hon Margaret Wilson DNZM  
Chair of the Commonwealth Observer Group  
Saturday 18 November 2017  
NUKU'ALOFA**

***“We congratulate the Kingdom of Tonga for participating peacefully and in numbers in their national election to decide their leaders in the next Parliament.”***

The Commonwealth Observer Group was invited here by the Government of the Kingdom of Tonga. Since our arrival on 9 November, we have been warmly welcomed by everyone we have met. Before the election, we met with the Prime Minister and members of his Cabinet, the Speaker of Parliament, representatives of the Nobles of the Realm, the Electoral Commission, candidates, civil society groups, women and youth groups, Tonga Media Council, and members of the diplomatic corps.

Members of our Group were deployed to Vava'u, Ha'apai, and here in Tongatapu to observe the poll, count and declaration of results. We have collaborated and worked closely with the observers from the Pacific Islands Forum, who were present in Tongatapu and 'Eua.

I was privileged to observe the process where the Nobles of the Realm elected their nine representatives to Parliament. This is a unique constitutional arrangement in the Kingdom and a process outlined in Tonga's electoral laws.

This is the Group's Interim Statement, providing an outline of our key observations and findings.

## Key Interim Findings

### *General summary*

The Commonwealth Charter “recognises the inalienable right of individuals to participate in democratic processes, in particular through free and fair elections in shaping the society in which they live.” We congratulate the Kingdom of Tonga for turning out in numbers to exercise their democratic right. The election was conducted in a peaceful environment and the voters demonstrated a good understanding and trust in the process. We found the election was conducted in accordance with Tonga’s national laws and the results reflected the wishes of the people.

The Group noted that this was the third election held under the amended Constitution 2010, as part of Tonga’s democratic reforms. We further noted that this election was conducted a year earlier than anticipated, following His Majesty, King Tupou VI’s decision to invoke Clause 38 of the Constitution to dissolve Parliament on 25 August 2017.

We encourage the incoming Government, the members of Parliament and all stakeholders to continue working together to strengthen the Kingdom’s democratic processes and engage in dialogue to clarify constitutional issues that would deepen the Kingdom’s democracy and promote the rule of law.

### *Preparations and election campaign*

The Group acknowledged and commended the work of the Electoral Commission in preparing the country’s election with short notice following His Majesty’s decision.

The Group observed campaigning in Tongatapu ahead of the 16 November election. Many candidates chose to promote their campaigns through the use of posters and with campaign ‘floats’ - large convoys of candidates’ supporters - which added a spirited and unique flair to the environment.

The Group commended the media for the positive role it played in creating awareness about election issues and the campaign. While some interlocutors raised access to the media as a potential

issue, it appeared that campaigning was lively and competitive, and candidates were generally able to convey their campaign messages to the public.

We welcomed the large number of women candidates that contested the election. We convey our sincere congratulations to the two female candidates who won their seats in Tongatapu and Vava'u, marking the first time two women will be represented in the Legislative Assembly concurrently. We encourage the women in Tonga to continue to participate in elections and pursue greater representation in the National Parliament.

### *Polling*

The Group was impressed with the high level of professionalism, integrity and efficiency displayed by polling officials, many of whom were women, during the election. These officials appeared well trained and ensured the polling process was well organised and that voters were able to cast their votes in an orderly manner.

Voters appeared to have a solid understanding of polling procedures and exercised their franchise in a calm and positive atmosphere. The Group was pleased to see a high turn-out of women voters at the election, as well as elderly and disabled voters who were assisted by the polling officials where necessary to ensure they were able to cast their votes.

We commended the support provided by the police, fire and correctional service personnel to the polling teams in all the constituencies we observed. Their presence contributed to the peaceful environment that enabled the people to exercise fully their democratic rights in the country's political process. The Group also welcomed the role that Town Officers and other local community leaders played in supporting polling teams in their task.

The Group recognised that none of the candidates had agents or scrutineers during the poll and count. This is testament to the trust and confidence the people of Tonga have in their electoral process.

### *Count and declaration of results*

The Group found the count to be efficient and methodical. Consideration could be given to make the count more transparent by allowing the voters to observe the process.

The result in each polling station was made public immediately after the completion of the count. Ballot boxes were then returned to the district offices and a final result was announced later in the evening by the Electoral Commission.

### *Conclusion*

We will finalise our report over the next two days and this will include the Group's conclusion and set of recommendations for consideration to strengthen the country's electoral process.

Our report will be submitted to the Commonwealth Secretary-General who will in turn submit it to the Government of Tonga, the Electoral Commission, Speaker of Parliament and other key stakeholders in the country.

The Commonwealth's long-standing commitment to Tonga's democracy and development will continue. The Kingdom's constitution has unique features which recognises its social, cultural and political structures. I encourage all citizens and the elected leaders from this election to continue working together in strengthening the Kingdom's democracy.

We note the process for forming the Government will commence shortly following the full declaration of results. We congratulate the Kingdom of Tonga on a successful election and convey our sincerest appreciation and best wishes to His Majesty King Tupou VI, the Nobles of Realm, the incoming Government and the people. It has been a privilege to lead this Group of Commonwealth observers to the Kingdom's national parliamentary election.

Nuku'alofa

18 November 2017