



Preliminary Statement of the Botswana 30 October 2024 General Elections

2 November 2024

INTRODUCTION

In response to an invitation from the Government of the Republic of Botswana, the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) deployed an Election Observation Mission (EOM) to observe the Botswana General Elections held on 30 October 2024. ZESN joined efforts with the Electoral Support Network of Southern Africa (ESN-SA) and deployed a five-member team to observe voting in urban, peri-urban and rural areas around Gaborone. Prior to the Election Day observation, the team met with various electoral stakeholders.

The mission's main aim was to assess whether the electoral process in Botswana complied with national laws and to evaluate the alignment of the country's electoral framework with regional and international standards, principles, and best practices. This Preliminary Statement is a foundational output of the Mission, offering its initial findings and recommendations on the process thus far. It provides that the Botswana General Elections were conducted in a calm and peaceful atmosphere and largely adhered to national, regional and international frameworks. The observation and the Preliminary Statement underscore the ZESN and ESN-SA's dedication to advancing democratic integrity and transparent electoral processes in the region.

METHODOLOGY

The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) of Botswana facilitated the accreditation of the Mission, which was carried out smoothly and efficiently. As part of its methodology, the Mission engaged key Civic Society Organisations (CSOs) involved in the electoral process in the lead-up to Election Day. Subsequently, the Mission deployed two (2) teams to observe the polling day processes in Gaborone North, Central, South and Kgatleng Central, East and West.

The team assessed the Botswana elections based on compliance with the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections and Botswana's legal framework.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

Legal Framework

Botswana's legal framework for the October 2024 elections includes the Constitution of Botswana 1966, the Electoral Act, the Code of Conduct for Political Parties, the Code of Conduct for Observers, and the Code of Conduct for Private Broadcast Media. The Mission commends the progressive electoral law amendments done by Botswana, introducing changes to increase transparency in the election and guard against multiple voting on Election Day through the use of indelible voters' ink. However, some stakeholders raised concerns regarding the electoral-legal framework and called for a need to adhere to SADC guidelines and regional best practices on the counting process. The law in Botswana provides that after the close of polls, ballot papers are transported to the constituency centres for counting instead of the now familiar and best practice of counting at the polling stations immediately after the closing of polls. The Mission noted that this practice could constitute a source of tension in the event of a disputed election outcome.

Additionally, stakeholders raised some concerns that affected public trust in the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). For instance, by law, the IEC of Botswana is located within the presidency and thus reports to the Office of the President. According to stakeholders, this situation constitutes an affront to public trust in the Commission.

Voter Registration

Botswana has a population of approximately over 2.5 million, with 1.7 million being eligible to vote. In preparation for the 2024 General Elections, the IEC set a target of registering 1.3 million eligible voters. At the end of the voter registration exercise, the Mission was informed that the IEC had registered 1,038,261 million voters, which is 80% of the total population. A total of 2032 registrants in the Diaspora were registered for the advance voting.

Advance Voting

The Botswana Electoral Law provides for advance voting. To fulfil this legal obligation, the Botswana IEC conducted advance voting on 19 October 2024. Concerns indicating shortages of ballot papers at some polling stations were raised, resulting in a repeat voting process on 26 October 2024. The IEC, however, explained that the shortage was because those eligible for advance voting did not respond to its call for people to indicate their polling stations where they would cast their votes.

Opening of Voting Stations

The Botswana Electoral Law provides that polling stations should open at 6:30 a.m. and close at 7:00 a.m. for voting. The Mission observed the opening of voting stations in two (2) polling stations and noted that the opening procedure was adhered to.

Long and winding queues were observed in the early morning and at intervals throughout the day. The Mission observed that Tent A at South Gate of Glen Valley in Gaborone North,

polling began at 8:00 a.m. instead of 6:30 a.m. due to the late delivery of voting booths. The same station was further delayed by the Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC) party candidate, who demanded to know why there were two polling stations instead of one. At Tshwaragano B Polling station Naledi South District in Gaborone South Constituency, voting started 15 minutes late.

Despite the late arrival of polling booths at the Tent at South Gate of Glen Valley Polling Station, all the other polling stations observed had the necessary materials, such as ballot boxes, ballot papers, ink markers, voters' rolls, official stamps and ballot booths. In most stations visited, voters were able to cast their vote efficiently. However, in some polling stations, the process was a bit slow.

Most of the polling stations visited were situated in neutral venues, accessible to the majority of voters and were further secured by police officers who maintained a visible presence at the polling stations.

Polling Officials and Party Agents

Each station had an average of seven polling staff, mostly women. Polling officials were easily identifiable, as they wore the appropriate regalia. The Mission observed that Lady Mitchinson Primary School, Borwa Junior Secondary, Gaborone West Customary Court, Tloga Tloga Junior and Secondary and Itumelang Primary School Polling stations had 100% female officials. It is commendable that the officials were free to talk about their duties and responsibilities. The Mission also noted that the major contesting political parties had deployed agents at most polling stations who were also conversant with tracking processes as they unfolded.

Voting Procedures and Processes

The voting procedures were adhered to. However, there were some inconsistencies in the application of voting procedures, namely the handling and signing of voters' cards. Ballot papers were issued to voters in an efficient and secure manner. However, in some polling stations that the Mission observed, voters did not show the presiding officer the back of the ballot paper to disclose the official stamp before placing it in the ballot box, as stipulated in section 54(e) of the Elections Act.

The layout of the majority of polling stations visited was satisfactory. Properly positioned polling booths ensured the secrecy of the ballot. There was no evidence of ballot-box stuffing, as ballot boxes were opened and shown to voters, observers, and party agents before voting began. The Mission noted that Botswana still uses metallic ballot boxes.

The Mission observed clear signage outside the voting stations to facilitate smooth voter flow. Security agents were present at all polling stations visited by the team, and their conduct was professional.

Accessibility and Inclusivity

Most voting stations were accessible to individuals using wheelchairs and crutches and ramps were in place where necessary. Generally, the provision of chairs for nursing mothers and individuals with health issues was commendable. Additionally, special arrangements allowed the elderly and persons with disabilities to go in front of the queues, emphasising a commitment to inclusivity. Moreover, the presence of trained staff to assist those in need fostered a supportive environment. Clear signage pathways ensured that all individuals could easily navigate the voting area. These efforts facilitated participation and underscored as well as reinforced the importance of equal access to democratic processes for everyone.

Youth participation was noted, with young electoral officials demonstrating friendliness, courtesy, and good training. Significant involvement of youth both as voters and as polling officials was observed. Their professionalism contributed to the efficient management of the voting process. There was a mixed composition of the security officers at the stations visited by the Mission, with the inclusion of the young demographic being noted.

The Mission commends the women of Botswana for their participation as voters, polling staff, security officers and candidate delegates. Women constitute 54% of registered voters in Botswana. However, there is a low number of women contesting for political positions. Of 263 Parliamentary candidates, only 28 were women, constituting just 10.6% of the total candidates.

Voter Education

The Mission noted that voters demonstrated knowledge of their voting stations and fully understood what they were expected to do. Minimal incidents of redirected or assisted voters demonstrated this, highlighting the effectiveness of the voter education efforts done by the IEC and its electoral partners. Clear voter education posters with diagrams displaying the voting process helped guide polling staff and voters, facilitating smooth voter flow and order.

Closing of Polling Stations

The Mission observed closing at the Tent at the South Gate of Glen Valley Polling Station in Gaborone North. The station closed at 9:00 p.m. to compensate for delays in opening and allow voters to exercise their rights. The closing procedures were adhered to and were done transparently in the presence of party agents, police officers, and observers.

Despite the centralised counting process, ballot boxes and other materials were transported securely and were closely monitored and escorted by party agents and the police. The team observed that the handing over of ballot boxes was done in a transparent manner in the presence of party agents, observers and the police.

Counting Procedure

The Mission visited one Constituency counting centre, located at Ledumang Primary School, and closely followed and appreciated the handing over of ballot boxes. A rigorous verification exercise was observed before handing over the ballot boxes to the counting officials. The verified results were written on a flipchart and pasted on the wall in liaison with the party Agents.

The ballot boxes handing over and counting process was open and transparent, allowing observers, party agents and election officials to witness the entire procedure. The Mission noted that there were designated counting officers were recruited specifically for the counting of ballots.

Lessons Learnt

- Involving women and youth as election officials enhances their participation in electoral processes. This engagement empowers these groups and fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility towards democratic practices.
- Active and committed citizenry who were patient and waited as votes were being counted.
- Role of unarmed security officers who were not interfering and non-intimidating in executing their duties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on its findings, the Mission observed that the electoral process was conducted in a peaceful environment. The Mission recommends the following:

- The IEC should ensure that advance voting is conducted in a way that builds and promotes public trust in the Commission.
- To increase public trust in the process and the Commission, consider improving the administration of advance voting and the location of the IEC.
- CSOs must be empowered to engage in the electoral process meaningfully, especially as domestic observers. This can strengthen democratic processes, promote transparency, and ensure inclusive representation.
- Counting should be done at the polling station level, and results should be posted to the polling stations as a best practice. This will increase the transparency of the process and electoral integrity.
- Consider the use of translucent boxes, as this practice enhances transparency in the voting process.

CONCLUSION

Despite minor logistical and technical challenges, the Mission noted that the elections were conducted in a generally peaceful and transparent atmosphere. The efficient management and adherence to polling procedures, the participation of political party

agents, satisfactory gender representation among polling officials, and the involvement of youth contributed to the smooth conduct of the elections. The Mission concludes that the Botswana IEC was prepared and adhered to the electoral laws and, to a large extent, to the SADC Principles and Guidelines on the Conduct of Democratic Elections. ZESN and the ESN-SA hope peace prevails in the aftermath of the election. Ends//