



The Commonwealth

Interim Statement of the Commonwealth Observer Group Commonwealth of Dominica 6 December 2019 General Elections

**Statement by Zainab Hawa Bangura
Former Foreign Minister of Sierra Leone
Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group**

Introduction

1. The people of the Commonwealth of Dominica, members of the media, fellow observers, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming to this Commonwealth Observer Group Press Conference.
2. This is an interim statement of our key findings, and a full report will be issued in the near future.
3. The Commonwealth Observer Group has been present in Dominica since 26 November 2019. We have been briefed by a wide range of stakeholders, including the President, The Prime Minister, The Leader of the Opposition, the Dominica Electoral Commission, the police, other political and civil society representatives.
4. We observed some of the final campaign events, the training of electoral officials and the 2 December 2019 Court proceedings before our teams were deployed throughout the country on 5 December 2019.

5. Key Findings

Pre-Election Environment

6. The 2019 General Elections in Dominica were dominated by narratives of electoral reform. Two main areas took centre focus:
 - Removal of deceased persons and ineligible voters from the current list;
 - Issuance of photo identification (ID) cards to electors to facilitate more accurate identification at the polls.
7. We noted with disappointment that there were incidents of violence during the run-up to polling day. The Group is of the view that violence has no place in the electoral process.

The Electoral Framework and Election Administration

8. The legal framework provides the basic conditions for a credible and competitive election. The 2019 General Elections were generally conducted in accordance with Dominica's legal framework.
9. We are aware of the concerns expressed about the process of drawing up the Voters' List used at this election. Based on our observations, we cannot give an opinion about this general issue, however, we can report that we observed very few instances of voters' identity being challenged in polling stations.
10. The Dominica Electoral Commission and its staff generally performed well in conducting polling and counting of votes in accordance with the provisions of the law.
11. For the 2019 elections, there was a high-level of focus on the Electoral Commission. Going forward, the effective functioning and the cohesiveness of the Electoral Commission should be a priority in the broader electoral reform agenda.

Electoral Reform

12. We note that there is no requirement for voters to prove their identity using an ID card, as is the case in many Commonwealth countries. We also note that the procedures for checking the eligibility of citizens living abroad were the subject of intense debate.
13. The observations of the Group are that voters who turned out were able to identify themselves satisfactorily to electoral officials and exercise their franchise.

The Campaign

14. Though we were unable to observe the full campaign period, our teams witnessed the final campaign rallies of the two main political parties. We noted that these final rallies were peaceful, colourful in nature, very well attended and with party leaders addressing enthusiastic crowds. In this regard, the fundamental rights of candidates, political parties and supporters to assemble and campaign were broadly observed.
15. Political parties and candidates signed an Electoral Code of Conduct facilitated by the Dominican Christian Council to promote peaceful conditions for the General Elections. It was therefore unfortunate that the language of violence was encouraged by some political actors and that there were outbreaks of violence. The right to peaceful protest is paramount, but, there is no place for violence in the electoral process.
16. In this regard, the Group welcomes various calls for peace, including the address of Prime Minister Skerrit to the country last night and welcomed his announcement that a National Commission for Electoral Reform will be established.

Participation and Inclusion

17. The Group lauds the increase in numbers of women candidates, but we were also informed that highly personalised verbal violence and abuse is still meted out to women candidates and supporters which discourages robust participation.
18. The Group heard from those we met that there is a need to rebuild youth confidence in democratic electoral institutions and processes.
19. Political Parties should increase the role of young people, women and persons living with disability within their structures, including encouraging participation as candidates.
20. The Electoral Commission generally did well on public education. However, there is need to have targeted public education that takes into account the diversity of Dominica's citizens.

Election Day

21. Our observers reported:
 - A peaceful and generally well-managed process on Election Day.
 - Voters were free to exercise their franchise.
 - Voters turned out early and in an orderly fashion.
 - The majority of polling stations opened on time, with polling staff, election materials, police officers and party agents present.
 - The secrecy of the ballot was generally provided for and polling stations were laid out as per instructions from the Electoral Commission.

- Commendable efforts to make polling stations accessible. However, in some cases the sites were not conducive to persons with physical disabilities
- A visible, unobtrusive and reassuring police presence during both polling and counting.
- Voters requiring assistance, including pregnant women, the elderly, those with disability were given preferential treatment at the polling stations.
- The majority of voters found their names on the voters' lists and were able to vote.
- At the close of polls at 17.00hrs, the majority of polling stations had no queues.
- The counts in general were transparent with election officials conducting the process in a deliberate and careful manner, following the prescribed procedures. There were, however, some inconsistencies in the application of procedures, particularly after the close of polls, for example with regard to the reconciliation process which should precede the counting of the votes.
- The tallying process largely followed stipulated procedures, though we note that the initial pace was slow.

Conclusion

22. It is our considered view that the results reflect the collective will of the people who voted, and that the 6 December election was conducted in accordance with the laws of Dominica.
23. We commend and congratulate all Dominicans who participated peacefully in an important civic exercise. We also congratulate the election authorities and polling staff, the political parties, the police forces and party agents for their respective roles in ensuring the success of the electoral process.
24. We were particularly impressed by the large numbers of women and youth who participated in the electoral process, not only as candidates and voters, but also as, polling staff, party agents and witnesses/observers.
25. It is our hope and expectation that the peaceful atmosphere that characterised Election Day will prevail. We therefore call upon all Dominicans, especially political parties, candidates and their supporters, to continue to show magnanimity and to uphold their commitments to peace with a spirit of national unity, peace and solidarity. We urge that any disputes be addressed through the available legal mechanisms.
26. Our final report will now be prepared and submitted to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, who will forward it to the Government of Dominica, the Electoral Commission, the leaders of political parties, and thereafter to all Commonwealth Governments. It will also be made available to the general public.
27. Finally, it is our hope that, by bringing this electoral process to a successful conclusion, Dominica will continue to serve as an inspiration for

Commonwealth small state resilience throughout our family of 53 countries and beyond.

Roseau, Dominica
7 December 2019

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Note to Editors

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 53 independent and equal sovereign states. It is home to 2.4 billion citizens, of whom 60 per cent are under the age of 30. The Commonwealth includes some of the world's largest, smallest, richest and poorest countries, spanning five regions. 31 of its members are small states, many of them island nations. Commonwealth countries are supported by an active network of more than 80 intergovernmental, civil society, cultural and professional organisations.

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