



PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

Professionally organised presidential run-off

Malé, 2 October 2023

This second preliminary statement of the EU Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) is delivered before the completion of the entire electoral process. Critical stages remain, including the final declaration of results and adjudication of possible petitions, which the EU EOM remains in the country to observe. The EU EOM is at present solely in a position to comment on observation undertaken to date, and will later publish a final report, including full analysis and recommendations for electoral reform. The EU EOM may also make additional statements on election-related matters as and when it considers it appropriate. This statement should be read in conjunction with the first preliminary statement published on 11 September last.

Summary

- On 30 September, Maldivians participated in a run-off poll to elect a president for the next five years. During the interval between the two rounds, the campaign was quiet but competitive, with a strong focus on personal voter outreach. While political freedoms of candidates and supporters were largely respected, the widely reported vote-buying may have unduly influenced the free choice of the electorate. Commendably, the Elections Commission of Maldives (ECM) improved public communication. Public media continued to allocate more time to the incumbent, while campaigning became more robust in social media, with increased disinformation.
- The incumbent, President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), competed with the Mayor of Malé, Dr. Mohamed Muizzu, of the coalition of the Progressive Party of Maldives and the People's National Congress (PPM-PNC). In the midst of the campaign, The Democrats proposed a referendum on the system of government, with their support for either candidate contingent upon support for the conduct of a referendum. The People's Majlis instructed the ECM to conduct a referendum in late October but, despite this, the substance of the referendum did not become a campaign issue.
- The presidential run-off was organised in an efficient and professional manner. Overall, there was increased transparency in election administration, which fostered public trust in the credibility of the process. The ECM intensified engagement with political parties through meetings of the National Advisory Committee (NAC) and made several decisions to address key areas of criticism. Refresher training for polling staff and increased voter education activities were conducted to ensure a good knowledge of, and adherence to, polling procedures.
- Voters had the opportunity to re-register to vote away from their registered address, which they did in significant numbers. While the ECM made efforts to increase inclusion, by extending the verification period, 22.5 per cent of the applications were rejected on varied grounds. The final number, of 38,763 re-registered voters, led to an increase in the number of polling stations in the greater Malé region. Throughout the process, the ECM provided extensive public information to counter criticism and suspicion of re-registration by political actors. A record number of SMS views of registration status by voters was recorded.

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- The campaign environment was quiet, with intensive door-to-door canvassing, and large rallies only as the campaign closed. Both teams adjusted their strategies, and propagated messages more critical of their opponent than before. Key themes remained unaltered, with the MDP emphasising stability and development and the PPM-PNC employing nationalistic notions of sovereignty and independence. Both candidates continued to make lavish financial pledges, often directed towards the individual benefit of voters, while voters expressed dissatisfaction with empty promises and revealed offers of vote buying. First-round contestants did not offer significant endorsements to either of the run-off candidates.
 - The Public Service Media (PSM) continued to blur the boundaries between the governmental functions and the campaign activities of the President. PSM News TV granted him 64 per cent, over 36 per cent for Dr. Muizzu in its news. PSM offered free airtime equally to candidates during prime time. Private TV channels continued to exhibit political bias according to their alignment with various political parties.
 - There was a significant rise in divisive discourse on social media platforms. Meta and X/Twitter were the pivotal platforms, disseminating both genuine and misleading information from social media influencers and a few online media. The digital space was rife with dubious polls, accusations of ID card falsification in the context of re-registration, and narratives about religion, revealing the spread of disinformation.
 - No woman has been appointed to the ECM since it was established in 2008. Women served as at least 70 per cent of polling station staff, but did not hold positions of authority in an equivalent proportion in election administration. Women continued to play a role in the campaign, with the wives of the candidates participating in the voter engagement activity of their husbands.
 - Election day was assessed positively. In polling stations observed, opening, voting and counting procedures were generally followed and polling staff performed in a professional and efficient manner. The secrecy of the vote appeared to be well protected. Polling stations were not all independently accessible to persons with reduced mobility. Overly restrictive instructions on the determination of invalid votes increased the number of ballots rejected, disregarding the clearly expressed intention of voters.

The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) has been present in the Maldives since 31 July following invitations from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Elections Commission of Maldives. The Mission is led by Chief Observer, Nacho Sánchez Amor, Member of the European Parliament (Spain). In total, the EU EOM deployed 40 observers from 18 EU Member States, as well as from Canada, Norway and Switzerland, across the country to assess the whole electoral process against international obligations and commitments for democratic elections as well as against the laws of Maldives. On the first election day, observers visited 124 polling stations in 52 islands, including in Malé and in 12 atolls to observe voting and counting. On the second election day, observers visited 119 polling stations in 56 islands in 14 atolls and the greater Malé area.

The EU EOM is independent in its findings and conclusions and adheres to the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation endorsed at the United Nations in October 2005.

Preliminary Findings

Background

On 30 September, Maldivians went to a run-off poll to elect their president for a five-year mandate in the fourth presidential election since the introduction of multi-party democracy. The run-off was contested between the incumbent, President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, supported by the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), and the opposition candidate, Mayor of Malé, Dr. Mohamed Muizzu, supported by the coalition of Progressive Party of Maldives and People's National Congress (PPM-PNC). In the first round on 9 September, Dr. Muizzu received the highest number of votes (46 per cent) and President Solih came second (39 per cent). The candidate of the MDP's splinter party, The Democrats, Ilyas Labeeb, supported by former President Mohamed Nasheed, achieved third place (7 per cent).

Electoral Administration

Enhanced transparency and significant increase in public information activity

During the period between the two rounds, ECM's communication with political parties increased through more frequent meetings of the NAC and individual meetings with political parties, as they requested. This engagement served to address criticism of some aspects of the conduct of the first round, related to the implementation of recent changes in voting procedures, and to counter the mistrust in re-registration for the second round expressed by major opposition parties. Transparency was enhanced.

On 12 September, immediately after the confirmation of the date of the second round, in response to the advice of the NAC, several decisions were taken on the conduct of polling, including to increase the voting time by one hour. It was also decided to modify the design of the polling booth to better protect the secrecy of the vote, while the orientation of the booth, a key issue of concern during the first round, remained the same. In addition, the location of 43 polling stations was changed to ensure a more spacious layout.

Heads of polling stations and their assistants were given refresher training, either online or in person, with an emphasis placed on determining the validity or invalidity of votes. Despite publicly expressed concerns, the ECM renewed their instructions on the determination of bold ticks (for example through repetition by voters) on the ballots to be invalid. Replacement ballot papers are not provided for by law, regardless of the mistake of a voter.

Following re-registration and the increase in the number of voters, 12 additional ballot boxes were created, raising the number of polling stations to 586. To reduce queues, the set-up of 99 polling stations, with more than 500 registered voters, was split into two. This required the deployment of 350 additional polling officials from the reserve pool. Polling materials were well-prepared and deployed on time.

Overall, the ECM operated efficiently, despite being challenged by severe time pressure. Increased mobilisation by the competing political parties led to a high number of new applications for observer accreditation. Due to the creation of additional polling stations, the accreditation process for party observers, candidate representatives and monitors (media) was finalised after the legal deadline of not less than 10 days prior to the election.

Voter information activities of the ECM increased significantly during this campaign period, which contributed to enhanced public trust in the process. Information materials were disseminated on social media platforms. There were also more frequent Facebook live sessions dedicated to the different aspects of the process, including polling. Overall, the EU EOM social media monitoring registered a significant rise in the ECM posts on Facebook.

Voter Registration

High number of applications for re-registration exacerbated time pressure

On 14 September, the Voter Registry (VR) was published, containing 282,803 eligible voters, including 409 first-time voters. A copy was provided to political parties and displayed at atoll/island focal point offices on the same day. For voters wishing to cast their vote in a location other than that used in the first round, the ECM announced a 49-hour period, from 15 to 17 September, for submission of applications for re-registration, online and through physical forms. The ECM received 50,047 applications, over 7,000 more than for the first round.

The ECM made laudable efforts to increase inclusion in the VR by phoning applicants and providing additional time for the submission of the required information, if requested. Nevertheless, 11,284 applications were rejected due to incorrect, duplicate, incomplete or unverifiable information having been submitted. Some 361 complaints were received from applicants. The EU EOM noted that more than 80 per cent of these complaints arose from rejections due to deficient information, such as invalid ID numbers or poor quality photographs.

The high number of re-registrations compared to the first round triggered some scepticism on the part of the two major opposition parties. The PPM-PNC questioned the credibility of the process, while The Democrats issued a statement calling for closer examination. None of the parties, however, submitted a formal complaint related to re-registration. The ECM made a number of press statements explaining the re-registration process in order to counter the suspicions articulated by critics. Their public information also addressed registration, encouraging voters to check their registration status by SMS. A record number of over 90,000 views of status in a day was registered.

Campaign Environment

The contestants focused on personal voter outreach against the backdrop of financial promises

Both teams adjusted their campaign strategies for the second round. Few rallies were held, with a focus on reaching every voter directly. Opposition candidate Dr. Muizzu aimed to visit the around 100 islands not reached before, in addition to intensified door-to-door and youth contact. The incumbent focused on specific interest groups and door-to-door visits too. Both camps made efforts to assist re-registration of voters who had not participated in the first round and also invested in telephone campaigns. The urban centres of Addu and, in particular, the capital Malé, where turnout for the first round had been below the national average, were the most contested parts of the country. The parties also campaigned overseas.

The candidates' key messages remained unaltered, with the MDP emphasising stability and development, and the PPM expressing nationalistic notions of sovereignty and independence. However, both camps also engaged in negative campaigning, suggesting "discontinued development and the return of a repressive PPM government" on the one side, and alleging

“unfulfilled government promises, corruption and foreign intervention” on the other. Both parties continued to make financial pledges to the electorate, such as waiving student loans, raising salaries and social welfare allowances, reducing rents for social housing and increasing the price for fish. MDP continued to offer housing and land in the greater Malé region. Reports of systematic vote buying continued to be made against both sides. There were also credible allegations of voter suppression, to prevent voting for each opponent. Voter groups, including the youth, shared with the EU EOM their frustration with political parties and dissatisfaction with their policy proposals.

Contestants from the first round did not offer significant endorsements to either of the run-off candidates. Only Mohamed Nazim of the Maldives National Party, who had 0.86 per cent of the vote, offered his support to Dr. Muizzu. Other political figures re-positioned themselves. The MDP’s coalition partners, the Adhaalath Party and the Maldives Development Alliance, continued to support the incumbent, but the latter changed sides to Dr. Muizzu before election day. The Jumhooree Party leader Qasim Ibrahim left the decision on endorsement to the individual choice of party members. The Democrats stayed officially neutral, despite negotiating a referendum with the MDP.

On 13 September, The Democrats’ candidate, Ilyas Labeeb, tabled a motion in the People’s Majlis calling for a referendum on the national governance system, whether it be presidential or parliamentary. The party made their support for either of the run-off candidates contingent upon their agreement to the public consultation. Their initial proposal was to hold the referendum prior to the second round. Although objecting to this timing, neither MDP nor PPM-PNC opposed a referendum after the election. On 20 September, the MDP supported The Democrats’ resolution. The ECM subsequently announced that the referendum will take place on 29 October.

Despite the parliamentary decision that a referendum would be held within a month of the election, the substance of the referendum did not feature prominently in the campaign discourse. EU EOM interlocutors said that the timeframe is too short to undertake the consultation and voter education required for such a far-reaching decision.

Media

The public broadcaster continued to allocate more time to the incumbent in their programming, while major private broadcasters continued to exhibit political bias

The Public Service Media (PSM) fulfilled its legal obligation to provide equal free airtime to both candidates. However, according to EU EOM media monitoring, the PSM News featured the President in 64 per cent of its news coverage of the two candidates, while Dr. Muizzu featured in 36 per cent of this. Public media continued to emphasise the government’s achievements in dedicated programmes. Private broadcasters Sangu TV and Channel 13 joined forces to host a special programme entitled ‘#AskMuizzu’, allowing the opposition candidate to engage directly with voters in a live setting. Only Sangu TV provided equitable news and editorial coverage to both candidates, however overwhelmingly covered Dr. Muizzu’s campaign live.

The private media portrayal of the candidates progressively adopted a more negative tone compared to during the first round. Rajjee TV’s editorial and news coverage continued to favour the President, who received about 84 per cent of the total news coverage of candidates, compared to 16 per cent for Dr. Muizzu, who, along with the opposition PPM-PNC, was often portrayed in a negative light. Additionally, Rajjee TV exclusively covered the incumbent’s campaign live. Channel 13 continued to cover Dr. Muizzu’s campaign activities overwhelmingly, while

President Solih was featured with a negative tone. Neither of the candidates availed himself of offers for free airtime on the two monitored public radio stations. The incumbent featured almost twice as much in the news as Dr. Muizzu, at 63 per cent and 37 per cent respectively.

Voter information spots from the ECM were broadcast frequently only on the private Sangu TV, from the first day of the campaign. The messages advanced included the need to curb vote buying and to promote the participation of persons with disabilities. There were no specific advertisements aimed at informing the public about the voter re-registration process. On public TV, ECM officials continued to feature on a voter awareness programme “Votah Thayyaaru” and provided election-related information of public interest.

Social Media

A notable rise in information manipulation

Online campaign rhetoric was polarised, featuring misleading narratives about the rival policy platforms of the two candidates. Influencers, affiliated with political parties, disseminated disinformation concerning the presence of Indian troops in the Maldives, framing the run-off as a vote on sovereignty. The PPM-PNC levelled accusations at the ruling party, alleging an Indian military presence.

Meta and X/Twitter were the pivotal platforms in sharing both genuine information and disinformation to manipulate political discussions. Between 10 and 29 September, the EU EOM team analysed over 3,731 election-related posts, on X/Twitter and Meta, by the two candidates, political parties, media outlets, and social media influencers. Official party accounts shared campaign updates, including photos, videos, and Meta Lives, which garnered a total of 3.5 million views. At the same time, according to data from the Meta Ad Library, the PPM/PNC and their affiliated pages expended more than \$500 on Meta advertising. In contrast, during the same period, the MDP and their affiliated pages spent less than \$150 on Meta ads, a notable decrease from the first round.

Both major parties employed narratives about religion in their online posts to undermine their opponents and position themselves as the better option. These stories were often amplified by religious figures, with political ties, sometimes incorporating video snippets from campaign gatherings where divisive language was evident.

Numerous X/Twitter and Meta accounts of social media influencers disseminated false content, engaged in personal attacks, and propagated unsubstantiated accusations against both candidates. One online media outlet, Dhiyares, also seemed to orchestrate a coordinated disinformation campaign targeting the incumbent. Some social media influencers spread misleading polls and disinformation on X/Twitter. This activity intensified after the opposition accused the ruling party of being involved in the surge in re-registration applications, a claim that was denied by the ECM.

Participation of Women

Women were essential to the conduct of polling but occupied lower levels of responsibility

While women made a significant contribution to the conduct of the election, they were under-represented in the management of the process. Women comprised 77 per cent of polling staff in stations observed by the EU EOM on election day. Of 15 atolls visited by the EU EOM, thirteen of the focal points were men, comprising 87 per cent of the office holders, compared to two women, at 13 per cent. Of the 139 island focal points within these atolls, 100 of the focal points were men, comprising 72 per cent, compared to 39 women, at 28 per cent. No woman has been appointed to the ECM since it was established in 2008.

Women played an active role in the campaign, as speakers, mobilisers, and supporters, including the wives of the two presidential candidates, who were often seen participating on the campaign trails, sometimes organising their own events. While women and men attended campaign events for both candidates in fairly equal numbers, gender-specific messages or pledges were not prominent.

Polling and Counting

An orderly and well-organised poll

The EU EOM observed election day at 119 polling stations in 15 atolls and 56 islands, including 5 resorts. Opening was observed in 19 polling stations. There were no delays in the process, which EU EOM observers described as orderly and transparent. Procedures were adhered to and all required materials and staff were present in polling stations visited. EU EOM observers assessed the conduct of opening as very good.

Overall, EU observers assessed the voting process very positively. A well-organised election day proceeded peacefully in most islands, with some isolated cases of arrests, mostly related to violation of the secrecy of the vote, and one case of a vandalised ballot box. Queues were observed to be well-managed. Although a few incidents disrupted voting, closing proceeded on time. The electronic voter list verification and the transmission of provisional results were observed to work flawlessly.

Voting procedures were largely followed and polling staff performed in a professional and efficient manner in polling stations observed. Throughout the election day a large presence of party observers, candidate representatives and monitors (media) was observed, sometimes in excess of the numbers permitted by law. Monitors (media) acted effectively as party observers. Outside polling stations, political parties were identifying and tallying voters and organising their transportation. EU EOM observers also noted party observers managing queues and giving instructions to voters. These practices, including the partisan role of monitors, raised questions over the free choice of the voters and the effectiveness of legal regulations.

Secrecy of the vote was assessed to be well protected in 94 per cent of the polling stations visited, with only a few instances of lack of secrecy reported, due to inadequate layout of the polling station. EU EOM observers noted that persons with reduced mobility would not have been able to enter without assistance in nearly 40 per cent of the polling stations observed.

In most cases, counting was conducted properly. In two of the 15 polling stations observed, the process was assessed negatively due to procedural mistakes. The restrictive instruction of the ECM, on the determination of repeated or bold tick marks on the ballot paper to be invalid,

resulted in instances where the clear intention of the voter was disregarded, effectively depriving those voters of their vote. A number of invalid ballots also indicated patterns associated with protest voting. The ECM recorded a total of 3.19 per cent invalid votes, higher than the 2.14 per cent of the first round.

Citizen observers, principally Transparency Maldives (TM), were present in 45 per cent of the polling stations visited. For the second round, TM was able to deploy 490 observers, some 50 more than in the first round. Through its independent observation, public engagement, and continued commitment to enhancing the transparency of the electoral process, the organisation played a critical role in increasing public trust in the election process.

An electronic version of this Preliminary Statement is available on the Mission website maldives2023.eueom.eu. For further information, please contact: *Marek Mracka*, EU EOM Press Officer, Tel.: +960 796 0031 Email: marek.mracka@eueom-maldives2023.eu
