

MALDIVES

MAKING THE VOTE ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE

The use of tactile ballot guides in the Maldives 2023 elections was assessed by the EU EOM as a significant step to the effective participation of visually impaired voters in the political life and an advance for inclusive elections.

The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) deployed in 2023 for the presidential elections, assessed the participation of persons with disabilities (PwD) in the electoral process and noted that **a significant advance towards the implementation of independent voting for persons with visual impairments was put in place with the introduction of a tactile ballot guide.** This represented a significant measure of **progress in the fulfillment of the rights of PwD**, as highlighted by the EU EOM.

For visually impaired Maldivians, voting used to mean choosing between losing privacy - by trusting someone else to assist them marking the ballot - or skipping from voting. That changed in the 2023 presidential election, when the Maldives introduced the tactile ballot guides for the first time: a plastic stencil with raised markers that aligns with candidate numbers, allowing a visually impaired voter to mark a ballot in full secrecy, without any assistance.

This breakthrough came after sustained advocacy by the Blind and Visually Impaired Society of Maldives (BVISM) which successfully engaged lawmakers to amend the electoral law just months before the vote, and a strong support from the Maldives Election Commission in implementing the reform.

Mr Hussein Shareef from BVISM, who also voted independently for the first time, shared:

“Knowing the secrecy of the vote, and knowing that I can cast my vote the way I want, it made me feel liberated.” According to Mr Hussein

Shareef: “In an election like this, it really matters that international observers, including from the EU, come and observe how the elections are conducted and give recommendations. It paves the way for progress in the electoral system.”

The EU EOMs always assess the principles of non-discrimination and universal suffrage, and accessibility as referred in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), ratified by the Maldives in 2010. The CRPD guarantees that citizens with disabilities have an equal right to participate in public and political affairs without obstacles in exercising their political rights, including the right to vote and to stand as a candidate.

For the first time in the Maldives, visually impaired voters could cast an unassisted ballot. The 2023 elections were for these voters a statement about dignity. It also reflected a greater commitment by the Maldivian authorities to inclusive elections. Here, a simple stencil made universal suffrage a real experience.

In the Maldives, the EU EOM emphasized the importance of accessibility: “Visually impaired persons exercised their right to vote independently using the newly introduced tactile ballot guide, a practice observed by the EU EOM in several polling stations” on election day. The EU EOM underlined the use of tactile ballots as a good practice and recommended its retention and expansion in future electoral cycles.

Despite this significant advance, the EU EOM noticed that a limited number of voters used the tactile ballot guides, very likely due to insufficient awareness among visually impaired persons about the new law.

In order to respond to the insufficient access of PwD to voter information and voter education, the EU EOM included in its final report a recommendation for the Maldivian authorities’ consideration:

“Enable independent access to the various stages of the electoral process, including through voter information and voter education and increased awareness raising for ECM [Elections Commission of Maldives] officials.”