



Joint Press Statement

PRELIMINARY STATEMENT OF THE ESN-SA and the ZESN JOINT ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION TO NAMIBIA'S 2024 PRESIDENTIAL AND NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

29-November-2024

INTRODUCTION

The Electoral Support Network of Southern Africa (ESN-SA) and the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) jointly deployed a small delegation comprising experienced observation practitioners to Namibia's 2024 Presidential and National Assembly elections. The members of the Mission were drawn from Botswana, Eswatini, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The primary objective of the Joint Observer Mission was to evaluate whether the Namibian electoral process adhered to national laws and to determine if the country's electoral framework aligns with regional and international principles, norms, standards, and best practices. This initiative underscores the two organisation's dedication to advancing democratic integrity and transparent electoral processes throughout the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region.

METHODOLOGY

The accreditation process for the Joint Mission by the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN) was seamless. On Election Day, the joint Mission deployed its team members to Khomas, Otjozondjupa, and Hardap regions. The Mission conducted extensive research and met with a wide range of electoral stakeholders, including other international observation missions, members of the legal fraternity, media experts, and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) representatives. In its assessment of the elections, the joint Mission used various global, regional normative and legal instruments for democratic elections, such as the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections, the Principles for Election Management, Monitoring, and Observation (PEMMO) together with the Namibia's legal framework. The Joint Mission closely observed voting on 27 November 2024.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

▪ Legal Framework:

Namibia's legal framework for the 2024 Presidential and National Assembly elections includes the Namibian Constitution (Article 94B), Electoral Act No. 5 of 2014 (amended 2024), which prescribes the conduct of electoral processes, Public Procurement Act No.15

of 2015 prescribes various methods of procurement of goods and services and the State Finance Act No.31 of 1991 which prescribes the management of the budget.

In 2024, the Electoral Act was amended to broaden political participation by allowing public servants and members of national, regional councils and local councils to be eligible for:

- i Nomination as candidates for the National Assembly election.
- ii Members of the public service who attain the age of 55 years old on or before the date on which the results of the election are announced to resign or retire to become members of the National Assembly.
- iii Members of the public service to utilise their leave days to participate and be elected as members of the National Assembly.

▪ **Opening of Voting Stations:**

The Joint Mission observed the opening of polling stations in the Khomas region. These were characterised by long, winding queues well before opening, a testimony to the citizens' keenness to participate in the democratic process. Despite commencing polling late (after 8:00 am) at the observed polling stations, voting proceeded in an orderly manner. At Katutura Central Community Hall, polling commenced after a two-hour delay because the invisible and indelible ink arrived late. At the Old Municipality single-quarters polling station, polling commenced after a 30-minute delay as the polling officials waited for the voter verification device to switch on. At Roman Catholic Hospital, voting commenced on schedule as the polling station had all the required sensitive and non-sensitive election materials at the time of commencement of polling. At Windhoek Municipality Offices, polling commenced at 7:15 am with an average voter processing time of 5 minutes per voter.

▪ **Polling Officials and Party Agents:**

Each voting station had an average of 7 voting officials, with a notable predominance of young female presiding officers and youthful polling officials. The Joint Mission also noted that the major contesting political parties deployed agents at most polling stations that the teams visited in Khomas, Otjozondjupa, and Hardap regions. This deployment significantly bolstered oversight and transparency, ensuring the voting process was closely observed.

▪ **Voting Procedures and Processes:**

Procedures, including verifying voters' names on the roll, checking for ink on fingers, and stamping ballot papers with the ECN, were consistently followed, with a notable exception in some polling stations. Some polling officials halted the voting process whenever their voter verification devices malfunctioned instead of resorting to the use of the electronic voter's roll. This apparent lack of understanding of the redundancy provisions in the polling officers' training manuals and the Electoral Act caused unnecessary delays at some of the polling stations the team visited.

ECN provided clear signage at the polling stations to facilitate a smooth flow of voters at the polling stations. However, most of the polling stations commenced voting with only one polling booth, which presented a bottleneck in the processing of voters during polling. With few exceptions, all the polling stations visited commenced voting with only one polling booth, and presiding officers had to request an additional booth during the day. This impacted on the time needed to process voters.

On the one hand, polling officials exhibited confidence, conducted themselves professionally, and demonstrated competence during the administration of the polling stations. However, the polling itself was impacted by the lack of adequate support from Returning Officers who were expected to provide timely responses and assistance upon request by Presiding Officers. The Joint Mission notes the challenges that the polling officials experienced as a result of logistical inconsistencies at the national level.

Delays in Voting:

At some of the polling stations visited, voting was delayed due to various challenges, including ballot paper shortages, malfunctioning of the voter verification devices, and malfunctioning of the ultraviolet light detection devices. In some instances, presiding officers did not consistently follow the procedure that voters could be verified using electronic voter rolls in cases where the voter verification machine malfunctioned as was the case at Greenwell Bus Stop No 32 (opposite Evelyn court) where voting stopped for over an hour due to the malfunctioning of the voter verification device only to resume after the intervention of the Returning Officer assigned to cover the polling station.

The Joint Mission acknowledges and commends citizens' patience throughout the day, despite the logistical huddles and inconsistencies that impacted the voting process. The Joint Mission notes the ECN's acknowledgement of these logistical inconsistencies and the Commission's efforts to remedy them including the extension of voting at selected polling stations on 29 and 30 November 2024.

▪ Voter Turnout and Youth Participation:

The turnout of voters was very high at most of the polling stations visited with youth constituting the majority of those in the queues. Overall, the commitment to participate in the voting process was evident in the time the average voters spent in the queues, and how voters came prepared to spend considerable time in queues by bringing their chairs and umbrellas. Even though the queues were mostly long and slow-moving the Police Officers managed the queue in a very professional manner.

Outside Polling Station environment

In all polling stations visited, the Joint Mission observed that there were no campaign materials or activities observed within a 500-meter radius of the polling stations in accordance with the electoral code of conduct.

▪ **Accessibility and Inclusivity:**

Most voting stations were accessible to individuals using wheelchairs. However, height-adjusted voting booths were absent for persons of short stature or on wheelchairs. Special provisions were made for voters with special needs, such as nursing mothers, individuals with health issues, the elderly and persons with disabilities. This category of voters was either given priority at the queues, or a separate queue was created for them. Further, was also provided to the virtually impaired voters who required such support.

▪ **The Media Environment:**

The Joint Mission appreciates the media's role in informing the public and educating voters. The Mission acknowledges that Namibia is one of Africa's open environments in terms of respect for press freedoms. Despite this, meetings with interlocutors from the media sector expressed a gap between the media freedoms provided for and the ability of political contestants to take full advantage of both traditional and emerging (social media) platforms when canvassing for votes from the electorate.

▪ **Civil Society Organizations:**

Very few of the polling stations observed had domestic election observers. Interlocutors that were met by the Mission ahead of the elections expressed the dire funding situation that many CSOs and Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) were facing in the country. The low visibility of these organisations may have harmed their ability to play their watchdog role in the service of safeguarding democracy and essential freedoms in the country.

The Joint Mission notes with concern the limited role that CSOs played in providing oversight of the electoral processes, which in turn impacted their ability to strengthen citizens' confidence in the electoral process.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR THE JOINT MISSION

- The Joint Mission acknowledges the exceptional patience that voters demonstrated throughout the election day and the additional two polling days.
- The Police conducted themselves professionally and managed the voters in a manner that was respectful and courteous to the voters.
- The ECN engaged electoral stakeholders continually throughout the pre-election period providing updates to fill information gaps that may have arisen when implementing key aspects of the pre-electoral phases such as the General Voter Registration and voter education. Closer to the elections and on polling day the ECN updated electoral stakeholders through press statements.
- The logistical challenges encountered in getting essential voting materials to the polling stations where they had run out need to be improved.
- The collaboration of various Namibian media and CSOs provided voters with reliable and unbiased information on key issues and equipped the public with the skills they needed to identify election misinformation.
- Existing legal provisions permits voting outside the constituency where they are registered to cast a vote during the Presidential and National Assembly elections.

This has had the unintended consequence of increasing the logistical burden for the ECN concerning the distribution of ballot papers in tandem with the anticipated movement of voters. Mobile voters exacerbated the situation as they moved across constituencies looking for polling stations with fewer queues, making it harder for ECN to predict where additional ballot papers would be needed.

- The online accreditation of observers was commendable as it reduced the logistical burden for those invited to observe the elections. The comprehensive observer briefing packs produced by the ECN were highly informative.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of these observations, the joint ESN-SA and ZESN observation missions make the following recommendations:

- The ECN needs to ensure that spare voter verification devices and ultra-violet light detection machines are available to replace those that may malfunction on election day.
- The ECN needs to re-evaluate the adequacy of polling stations and booths in areas with a high density of voters.
- There is a need for more effective training for Returning Officers on managing and being responsive to requests from presiding officers at the polling stations.
- There is a need for political parties and their candidates to fully utilise available media platforms to canvass for votes and to educate voters on the issues that their parties and candidates stand for.
- There is a need to secure adequate vehicles for Returning Officers to allow for quicker response times when delivering additional sensitive and non-sensitive election materials upon request.
- There is a need to consider improving the electoral system by establishing a polling station-based registration and voting system. This would enhance the ability of the ECN to predict the possible turnout at each polling station and thus provide adequate sensitive and non-sensitive polling materials for each polling station.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the delays in polling occasioned by some shortages in essential voting materials such as ballot papers and malfunctioning of some voter verification devices, the voting process was largely orderly, transparent and generally smooth. Despite the logistical inconsistencies at the national level, polling officials, who were predominantly female and youthful conducted themselves exceptionally well, demonstrating competence and a high degree of professionalism. The Joint Mission encourages the people of Namibia to remain patient during the extended voting period and the ongoing results verification and collation processes. The Mission notes that the logistical inconsistencies experienced during the elections fell short of voters' expectations as expressed by the voters who interacted with the Mission during the observation.

The Mission, also notes the ongoing voting processes in some regions where selected polling stations are open on 29 and 30 November. The Mission will closely follow the ongoing processes, and the immediate post-electoral period and issue a more comprehensive report with recommendations for consideration by the ECN and other electoral stakeholders.

About ESN-SA

The Electoral Support Network of Southern Africa (ESN-SA) is a regional network of 15 non-governmental organisations working in the area of elections in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. It was established in January 1998. More information is available at <https://www.esn-sa.org/>

About ZESN

Formed in 2000, the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) is a coalition of 37 Non-Governmental Organizations committed to coordinating elections-related activities. ZESN's primary focus is to promote democratic processes and ensure fair elections in Zimbabwe. More information is available at <https://www.zesn.org.zw/>