Preliminary Election Observation Report on the Timor-Leste Parliamentary Election that was held on Sunday 21st May 2023

Background of the election observation.

Following the g7+ (group of Seven Plus) observation of elections in Timor-Leste (2017, 2022) and Sierra Leone (2018), the group institutionalized the election observation initiative as part of its peer learning and ‘Fragile to Fragile’ cooperation program on 22 March, 2023 in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The g7+, as an Inter-Governmental organization of conflict affected countries that helps achieving Peace, and stability through peer learning, is already contributing to good governance, peace, development and democratic space in member countries; for
instance, Timor–Leste cooperation in Guinea Bissau and Sao Tome and Principe. The key objectives of this initiative amongst others include:

- Sharing of experiences in managing elections;
- Contributing to enhancing democratic consolidation, strengthening peace and development through election observation amongst g7+ members;
- Enhancing to improve Election Management Bodies (EMB) operations through its election observation recommendations

Introduction

The g7+ Election Observation Mission (EOM) comprising of 15 members (4 internationals and 11 nationals) accredited by STAE observed the Parliamentary Election of Timor-Leste held on 21st May 2023. The EOM took place during 15 – 27 May 2023.

The g7+ EOM observed pre polling activities: parliamentary debates by political parties and political party campaigns; polling day activities from a stand point of impartiality, independence, professionalism and objectivity which are in tandem with international best practices of election observation the world over.

It is also important to underscore that the g7+ EOM observed the parliamentary election within the confines of the electoral legal stipulation of Timor-Leste in reference to “Government Decree No. 17/202017 of 12th May 2017 (Regulations for the oversight, observation and media coverage activities for the election of Deputies to the National Parliament) which spells out the rights and observations of observers in detail”

Prior to polling, the g7+ EOM also had consultative engagements with the Election Management Bodies (STAE and CNE) of Timor-Leste in a bid to foster clarity and understanding on certain election procedures and to have a comprehensive knowledge on general preparations and effective collaboration of relevant stakeholders in the electoral process. Furthermore, the g7+ EOM participated in an international workshop organized by the CNE to share experiences from CPLP and ASEAN countries

The composition of the g7+ EOM on polling day was made up of 5 teams of 3 members each observing a total of 83 polling centres in 3 municipalities (Dili, Manatuto and Liquica). The methodology adopted for polling day observation was a checklist enabling the teams to observe opening, polling, closure and counting procedures and the general political environment at polling stations.

A. Pre – Election

i. Political Party Debates

1. The g7+ EOM observed that the political party debates were well organized and moderated, and fully participated by all 17 political parties which the g7+ EOM considered important for a healthy political society.
2. The g7+ EOM also noted that there was wider media coverage on radio, television and other social media platforms of these debates which gave opportunity to the public to follow the program live.

ii. **Political Party Campaigns**
3. The g7+ EOM observed the final political campaigns of political parties in Dili and noted that these campaigns were largely well organized and party supporters conducted themselves in a peaceful and law-abiding manner.

B. **The Polling Process**

i. **Opening of polls**
4. Opening procedures were generally intact at polling stations observed by the g7+ EOM wherein all materials, polling staff and party agents were present.

5. The g7+ EOM observed that polling officials were knowledgeable on opening procedures and were easily identifiable in their unique dress code and identification cards which is important for easy identification and distinction between polling staff, agents, voters and other officials.

6. The g7+ EOM also observed at few polling stations, officials taking of service oath which is consider a good practice bolstering polling staff commitment, dedication and transparency whilst on duty.

7. The g7+ EOM observed in polling stations the presence of national and international observers, media outlets, during the opening of polls at some polling stations.

8. Voting started on time at polling stations that were observed by the g7+ EOM

ii. **Polling**
9. Queues at polling stations observed were largely peaceful and voters to a greater degree were knowledgeable about the voting process.

10. It was also observed for most of the polling stations that mobile phones and other belongings of voters were not allowed inside the polling stations which is a reinforcement to guaranteeing vote secrecy.
11. The g7+ EOM observed that ballot paper controllers at most polling stations guided the voters in a professional and impartial manner to cast their votes. The g7+ EOM notes that this strategy is an effective tool to minimizing invalid votes and therefore commends STAE on this.

12. Assistant to voters with special need was given whenever necessary at polling stations observed.

13. Polling station layouts were generally conducive with the exception of very few with poor lighting conditions, access especially for persons with disabilities. In few polling stations, the g7+ EMO observed that ballot boxes and voting screens were isolated in small rooms or compartments creating a barrier for agent to effectively observe the process.

iii. Closure and Counting

14. The g7+ EOM observed that polling ended at 3 pm according to voting procedure.

15. Votes were counted in full view of party agents, observers, and voters.

16. Counting procedures were largely followed except for inconsistencies in some polling stations.

17. It was further observed that vote tallying by polling officials at times did not resonate with the parallel tallying of agents which in few cases warranted recounts, this is considered as time consuming.

18. Provisional results at polling stations observed were recorded on polling station forms, verified and signed by party agents and copies issued to them.

19. The g7+ EOM, however, observed that some polling centre results were not posted at the vicinity of polling centres for public consumption as stated by the STAE procedure.

20. At most counting stations, counting lasted till 9 pm or later at night particularly for centres with more voter rolls. It was, however, comparatively faster than the 2022 Presidential Election.

C. The Political Environment
21. The g7+ EOM of observed that the overall political environment around all polling stations was serene friendly and free from political violence, intimidation and influence.

D. Recommendations

A primary objective of the g7+ EOM is to help improve EMB operations through its election observation recommendations and it is encouraged that the responsible institutions to consider the following recommendations:

22. Political parties to encourage women to participate as representatives in political party activities as a way of broadening the political space for inclusivity and participation.

23. The g7+ EOM recommends for an improvement in polling official training.

24. It is recommended that counting be done at polling stations instead of polling centres.

25. The g7+ EOM recommends that there should be separate voter registers in each of the polling centres to prevent multiple voting.

E. Conclusion

26. The g7+ EOM reiterates that this is an initial assessment of the electoral process for the May 21st Parliamentary Election and therefore solicit the continuous cooperation of all political parties and state actors in Timor-Leste.