



Done. The various election mission observer groups yesterday issued their preliminary assessments of the Thursday's polls, which offered a number of key pointers.

BY FREDERIC MUSISI
musisi@ug.nationmedia.com

KAMPALA. International election observers gave Thursday's presidential polls a mixed bill of health with the European Union and Commonwealth groups describing it as short of being free and fair, while the African monitors praised the exercise.

The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU-EOM), who condemned the actions of the police prior to voting and on polling day, commended the voters' enthusiasm to participate in the election process, citing their active involvement in the campaigns and the long hours they queued up waiting to vote. The EU observers said this enthusiasm in the democratic process, however, was eclipsed by an atmosphere of intimidation and further concluded that the Election Commission lacks the required independence and transparency, which explains why "it does not have the trust of the stakeholders."

The various election mission observer groups invited by the government to monitor the 2016 presidential and parliamentary polls yesterday issued their preliminary assessments of the Thursday polls, which offered a number of key pointers.

"Yesterday [Friday], while the national tally centre was announcing the preliminary results of the presidential polls and the political parties were still following tallying and collecting data from their agents in the field, the police stormed FDC's party headquarters using tear gas and arrested the flag bearer Kizza Besigye and the party's leadership. This extensive use of police force was not acceptable," notes the EU-EOM chief observer Eduard Kukan in a statement.

"This is of particular concern, since the EU-EOM in its preliminary statement notes that the pre-election campaign was marked by a polarised discourse and an intimidating atmosphere, which was mainly created by state actors and which affected both voters and candidates," Kukan added.

The EU-EOM chief observer told journalists at Sheraton Kampala Hotel that despite making wide-ranging recommendations during the previous elections (2006 and 2011) in their reports on how to make the electoral process acceptable to everyone, the Electoral Commission had totally "learnt nothing."

"I saw the remarkable commitment of Ugandans to participate in their electoral process. Regrettably, the EC failed to communicate effectively steps that would have been needed to

Poll observers give mixed verdict



Left to right: Justice Sophia Akuffo, the head of AU Election Observers Mission, former Zambia President Rupiah Banda, the head of mission of Electoral Institute For Sustainable Democracy Africa (EISA) election observers, and former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, the head of the Commonwealth election observers after presenting their reports on the 2016 general election at Sheraton Kampala Hotel yesterday. PHOTO BY ALEX ESAGALA

overcome growing tensions caused by markedly delayed delivery of voting material," Mr Kukan said.

"Moreover, the decision to block access to social media on election day added overall uncertainty and unreasonably constrained freedom of expression and access to information."

According to the EU-EOM preliminary report, the EC clearly lacks independence and it is hard to trust it to conduct transparent elections. It [EC] "narrowly interpreted its mandate by limiting it to the organisation of the technical aspects of the elections. It also lacked transparency in its decision and failed to inform the voters and contestants on key elements of the electoral process in a timely and comprehensive manner," the EU observers stated.

The EU-EOM report also pointed out the intimidation and harassment of the Opposition and its supporters by police, the conduct of state broadcaster [Uganda Broadcasting Corporation] by denying Opposition air space, the orchestrated use of State resources and personnel for campaign purposes of the incumbent President Museveni, among others.

While the polls were conducted in a generally peaceful and calm environment in the various parts of the country, Mr Kukan noted that the National Resistance Movement's "domination of the political landscape distorted the fairness of the campaign and

state actors created an intimidating atmosphere for both voters and candidates, which continued in the days immediately following elections."

He EU also said the delays to deliver voting materials, deployment of police and military even around polling stations left behind a bitter taste on the voting exercise.

Speaking at the same event, the head of the European Parliament, Jo Leinen, who joined the EU-EOM to monitor the elections, observed that going back to two previous reports they had issued, "it was clear

the same recommendations had been made, were not acted upon, and it was likely the same recommendations would be made."

"These challenges, however, we hope will be resolved through a peaceful manner," Mr Leinen said.

When asked whether the elections would be rated as "free and fair" given all the cited deficiencies, the EU mission declined to give a definitive answer, preferring to say that it was up to the public to make that judgment after reading the observers' preliminary report. The mission said

it will continue observing the post-electoral environment and will issue a final report in April.

The Commonwealth election observation mission led by former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo, separately indicated that the elections were marked by a lack of a level playing field, an increased prevalence of use of money, alleged misuse of State resources, inequitable media coverage, and question marks hovering over the EC's capacity to manage the process.

Gen Obasanjo told journalists that "once again, these elections fell short of meeting key democratic benchmarks".

"While the presidential elections were competitive with regard to the number of candidates, practical restrictions on basic freedoms of assembly and movement affected the fairness of the campaign for Opposition candidates.

"Moreover, the overall competitiveness of the campaign was compromised by a lack of transparency with regard to campaign financing. The group noted with concern that the fusing of the State and ruling party in Uganda - highlighted by previous Commonwealth observers - had deepened, with a consequent adverse impact on political freedoms and further undermining any efforts to level the playing field for these elections," stated Gen Obasanjo.

Although Gen Obasanjo praised the large voter turnout and commitment to remain waiting in the queues despite some deliberate frustrations, he was noncommittal on discussing whether the EC final results can be deemed a fair representation of the people's will.

AFRICAN OBSERVERS PRAISE EXERCISE

In stark contrast, the African observers praised the exercise as having met "the minimum international standards of free and fair elections."

The Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (Igad) election observation mission that observed Thursday's voting only in the districts of Wakiso, Mukono and Kampala, commended the Electoral Commission for managing the "heavy task in the interest of the Ugandan people."

The head of the Igad election observation mission, Yufnalis Okubo, told journalists at the Sheraton Kampala Hotel that EC officials were "very competent and courteous" to run the electoral process but their

lean numbers undermined the supervision. Igad is a seven-member regional bloc comprising countries in the Nile Valley and Great Lakes region: Ethiopia, Uganda, Somalia, Djibouti, Sudan, South Sudan, and Kenya. President Museveni, who was announced winner for a fifth term until 2021, is a key player in Igad affairs. The African Union election observation mission led by Ghana's Sophia Akuffo, also said the polls were largely peaceful, despite the shortcomings such as the late delivery of election materials at polling stations.

"The AU mission wishes to underscore that thus impacted on the overall conduct of the polling operations, and caused anxiety and

tension among the voters and polling officials, which could have been avoided," Justice Akuffo.

The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (Comesa) election gave a similar verdict on the elections.

The head of the Comesa mission Ashraf Gamal Rashed and other African observer groups said security was adequately deployed to secure polling stations and their duties were performed in a proper manner.

The East African Community (EAC) mission led by former Tanzanian president Mr Ali Hassan Mwinyi said they were still monitoring the process and would issue a final report of their assessment.