



# THE GAMBIA BY-ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION

**SEPTEMBER 2005**

For further information, contact:  
Christian Hennemeyer  
IFES-Washington  
1101 15<sup>th</sup> St., NW, Suite 300  
Washington, DC 20005  
Tel: 202-828-8507  
Fax: 202-452-0804  
[chenhemeyer@ifes.org](mailto:chenhemeyer@ifes.org)

## **ABOUT IFES**

As one of the world's premier democracy and governance assistance organizations, IFES provides needs-based, targeted, technical assistance to extend the reach of democracy. Founded in 1987 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization, IFES develops and implements integrated, collaborative solutions in the areas of democratic institution building and participatory governance, which have reached more than 120 countries worldwide. IFES provides comprehensive assistance to developing and established democracies to strengthen 1) election planning and administration, 2) citizen participation, 3) judicial independence and open government, and 4) representative political participation.

## **OBSERVATION MISSION BACKGROUND**

In September of 2005, IFES deployed a team of two election experts to observe legislative by-elections in The Gambia. IFES-Nigeria Country Director Charles Lasham and IFES-Nigeria Programme Manager Anna Wiktorowska arrived in The Gambia on Saturday September 24, 2005. The team observed immediate pre-election preparations and polling activities for by-elections in four constituencies:

- Jarra West
- Sererekunda Central
- Upper Saloum
- Wuli West

In each constituency, the by-elections were contested by the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC) and the National Alliance for Democracy and Development (NADD).

## **PRE-ELECTION ACTIVITIES**

The IFES team met with a variety of election officials, international missions, and civil society organizations in the days leading up to the elections. The team was quickly registered by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and offered access to key electoral documents. The IEC voluntarily provided IFES with an election calendar; guidelines for the training of polling staff; details of the location of polling stations in each constituency; the IEC media and communication dramas aired on national radio and a schedule of political party rallies for each constituency.

During the pre-election period, meetings were held with the following individuals and institutions:

- Mr. Ndoni S. Z. Njie, Chairman of the IEC
- Mr. Kawsu Ceesay, Chief Electoral Officer, IEC

- Mr. Joseph Colley, Communications Officer, IEC
- Mr. Harry Sambou, Director of Operations, IEC
- Mrs. Safia, Director of Administration, IEC
- Interim commissioners and training officers in Sererekunda constituency
- Mr. Joseph D. Stafford, US Ambassador to The Gambia
- Mrs. C. Patricia Alsup, Deputy Chief of Mission, US Embassy
- Malik Jeng, Political Officer, US Embassy
- Jenny Fenton, Acting High Commissioner, British High Commission
- Andrew Jordan, UK Department for International Development (DfID)
- Gambian civil society representatives
- Commonwealth Secretariat representatives
- The European Commission
- The UNDP Resident Representative

The IFES team's deployment was coordinated with the observation teams from the Commonwealth Secretariat, diplomatic missions and domestic civil society organizations. On the basis of this coordination, IFES decided to observe polling in the Jarra West constituency and the counting of the votes in the Sererekunda constituency.

The IFES team also visited the site where election materials were stored for the Sererekunda constituency. Booths, glass voting marbles, drums and other materials were ready for distribution to all polling stations immediately prior to voting day. In addition, the training of polling staff was witnessed and an inspection of the counting centre for the same constituency was made.

On September 28, one day prior to polling, the Supreme Court issued a decision requiring polling station staff to suspend a previous practice whereby voters with voting cards whose names did not appear on the voter register were allowed to vote. Decisions taken this late in the preparations for elections, when training of polling staff has already taken place and voters have already been educated on the details of the process can often pose problems on election day. Accordingly, the team took special care to observe the implementation of this decision.

## **ELECTION DAY – SEPTEMBER 29, 2005**

The Gambia has an unusual and perhaps unique method of voting. Upon presentation of the voter card and confirmation that the voter appears on the voter register, the voter is given a colorless glass marble. This is taken to the polling booth where the voter drops the marble into a tube attached to a drum (ballot box) for the candidate of choice. The drums are painted in the colors representing each of the political parties, with photographs and names of the candidates attached to the respective drums. The voter places the

marble into the tube and it drops into the box. As it descends, the marble hits a bell, thus alerting the presiding officer that the voter has voted. As a result of this simple system there are very few 'spoiled' votes.

On election day, the IFES team observed this process in the Jarra West constituency. A total of eight polling stations in Jarra West were observed throughout the day. At each station, IEC staff managed the voting process in an efficient and professional manner. Representatives from APRC and NADD (one each) were present in each of the polling places and IFES interviewed both representatives at the polling stations visited. In all cases, they reported that elections had started on time (7:00 a.m.) and that the stations were well-managed.

Following discussions with other international and domestic observers, it was clear that the election was consistently well-managed throughout the four constituencies. The only negative observation to report is the presence of security personnel inside the polling stations. In all stations visited, security personnel were sitting at the same table as polling staff, often sharing the same bench. Upon questioning, the polling staff and the security personnel indicated that this was a normal practice in The Gambia and that it was intended to prevent any problems at the station. While it is accepted practice for security officials to remain in close proximity of the polling premises, international and regional standards only allow for their presence inside the station if called upon by polling staff or observers to assist in handling a particular disturbance.

IFES' observations regarding the implementation of the Supreme Court ruling on accepting voter cards from individuals not on a polling station's list were positive. The ruling put a stop to this practice and the IFES team was impressed with the way that the decision was communicated to polling station officials. When questioned, it was clear that the IEC had ensured the staff all knew about the ruling and that it was properly implemented.

## **COUNTING OF THE VOTES**

The IFES team witnessed the counting of the votes in the Sererekunda Constituency. The counting of votes is centralized at the constituency level, rather than being conducted within each polling place. A community hall was used in Sererekunda and this proved to be an ideal venue for the count. The process was highly transparent, with counting agents, domestic and international observers, counting staff, presiding officers, IEC senior staff and commissioners all present.

In accordance with IEC regulations, the count began only when all drums were delivered to the community hall. The presiding officer for each polling station read out details of the number of electors on the voter register, the number of marbles received, the number of persons voting and the number

of marbles that were not used. The officer then proceeded with unsealing the drums.

Drums were sealed with tamper evident uniquely numbered seals to ensure that their contents were not tampered with throughout the day. Prior to opening a drum, the presiding officer read out the numbers of the four seals as verified by polling agents. Candidate's agents then checked the seal numbers. The drum was then opened and its contents were counted. The marbles were laid out on wooden trays with 500 or 200 indentations so as to quickly and easily count the contents of each drum. The result from each drum was verified and the process repeated until all drums were counted. The numbers of votes for each candidate from all drums were then added together and the result decided.

Counting staff gave everyone present the opportunity to see each stage of the process. It is the most transparent counting method ever witnessed by the IFES team. The count was carried out in a professional manner. The only shortcoming of this exercise is that it is time consuming. The counting process overall was painfully slow.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The voting and counting processes were handled in accordance with the law and in a professional manner. The view of the IFES team is based on its own observations prior to election day and at the constituencies visited on election day. These observations were reinforced by those reported by other domestic and international observers.

There are calls in some quarters for The Gambia to move to a paper ballot. This has been resisted because of the high illiteracy rate within the country and because the current system works so well. It is the view of the IFES observers that the system should not be changed – if it is not broken do not attempt to fix it.

The IFES team does recommend, however, that the IEC examine ways to improve the counting process. While the accuracy and transparency of the process should not suffer as a result, the process could be sped up through appropriate amendments to the regulations and proper training.

Finally, the close proximity of security personnel to voting materials and polling staff should cease, as this practice can be intimidating to voters and is not necessary to ensure the security of the polling place.