



CENTRE FOR MONITORING ELECTION VIOLENCE

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தேர்தல் வன்முறைளைக் கண்காணிப்பதற்கான நிலையம்

Presidential Election 2019 – Final Statement on Election Day

This is the final statement by the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) at the conclusion of polling day, November 16, 2019, for the 2019 Presidential Election.

On polling day, CMEV deployed 650+ observers at polling centres, 70+ counting observers at counting centres, 100+ mobile observers, 82 field monitors and a team of 35 reporting, operations and mobile team operators at its Colombo Head Office.

This was the first Presidential election and third national election (following the 2015 General Election and 2018 Local Government Election) overseen by an independent Election Commission, as facilitated by the 19th Amendment to the Constitution. The lower numbers of election related violations reflect a greater capacity by the Election Commission to conduct elections in a generally free and fair manner. CMEV notes, however, that the Election Commission was notably more effective on polling day than during the campaign period; it will highlight specific issues beyond polling day in future reports.

The total number of incidents recorded at the close of polling at 5.00 p.m. was 196, a decrease from the total of 222 on polling day during the presidential election of 2015. There are overall reductions in incidents of direct violence such as assault and intimidation/threats. However, at least two instances of assault were reported, where victims were required to be hospitalised owing to the seriousness of their injuries.

The attack on buses transporting Muslim voters from Puttalam to Mannar – involving obstruction of the vehicles, and persons shooting at them – was the most serious incidence of violence on polling day. CMEV has written to the Election Commission asking to carry out a full investigation into this serious infringement of voters' safety and rights.

There are overall reductions in incidents relating to polling operations, such as issues with identity cards. Correspondingly, there are higher levels of violations relating to illegal campaigning, and undue influencing of voters at polling centres by party supporters. However CMEV notes a number of other worrying trends which require considered attention.

The campaign period was marred by an unprecedented level of fake news and racism evident in both mainstream and social media, and this spilled over onto election day. This content ranged from deliberately misleading voters on how to mark their ballot papers, to language that amounted to the incitement of racial hatred. CMEV is deeply concerned that the Election Commission was unable to prevent the spread of these messages and to take action when specific incidents were raised with them.

CMEV also received reports of Muslim voters wearing face coverings (burqas, niqabs and hijabs) facing difficulties voting, despite the Election Commission having issued a clear circular which requires face coverings to be removed only to the verification officer at the polling centre at the point of voting, and not while entering or queueing at the polling centre. While this does not appear to have been systematic, it does highlight the need for the Election Commission to see that its circulars are properly enforced.

The present election was also one that witnessed higher levels religious leaders in campaigning for specific candidates, within the rhetoric of national security and ethno-nationalism. While CMEV acknowledges these leaders have a right to political activism in their own capacity, it is concerned that places of religious worship and teaching, which often double as polling centres on election day, were used to advocate for certain candidates.

CMEV received commendable reports on election day of both election officials and police officers working to remove obstructions and barriers to people voting. In particular, a tense situation in Pallai between the Police and the Army on the placement of roadblocks on polling day was resolved by the Police in favour of removing the roadblocks. CMEV wishes to thank the election officials and police officers deployed on duty for this election.