

Election Observation Report

2024 National regional and provincial elections

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1. Summary

This observation report covers polling stations in the Cape Town area of South Africa during the 2024 national elections. It is not intended to be representative and generalisable, but rather to offer a qualitative assessment.

The report recognises that the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) has been subject to budget cuts. It cannot be overstated how crucial it is to allocate sufficient budgetary resources that align with the mandated responsibilities of constitutional bodies. Failure to do so invariably leads to deficiencies in the timeliness and quality of services provided to the public. Escalating complexities additionally compound the strain on an already diminished budget allocation.

From our direct observation, it appeared that procedures were generally followed and voting itself proceeded smoothly once voters reached their assigned voting station. Although, at many stations, slow processes led to extremely long lines, and inefficient queueing processes were sources of frustration. These conditions are barriers to the exercise of voting rights.

While voting itself could be carried out, the lack of a well-orchestrated process presented concerns for maintaining a rights-respecting democracy. Improvements in planning, training, and resource allocation is required for future elections to ensure all voters can participate, especially if turnout is higher than 58.64%.

1.1. Direct observations were undertaken at these voter stations

- ❖ Cape Town Civic Centre, VD 97090241, 10:00 - 11:00 and 16:00 - 20:00
- ❖ Schotsche Kloof Primary School, VD 97090094, 11:15 - 12:00 and 15:15 - 17:15
- ❖ Hellenic Community Centre, VD 97090061, 14:00 pm - 15:00 pm

2. Categorised observations

2.1. Voter behaviour and experiences

Overall, voter queues were peaceful and voters were observed engaging with one another in a civil manner. For the most part, voters were courteous to IEC officials.

At Cape Town Civic Centre voting station, voters appealed directly to election observers, pleading for their intervention to speed up the voting process. This suggests that voters were experiencing significant delays and perceived a need for external intervention to rectify the situation.

Additionally, voters at Schotsche Kloof Primary School reported feeling unsafe due to electricity outages during voting hours. Electricity disruptions not only hinder the operational aspects of the voting process, but also contribute to the perceived safety of the voter environment.

Allegations of voter intimidation around the Schotsche Kloof Primary School were also reported to an election observer by a journalist. Voter intimidation, whether through direct or indirect means, undermines the principles of free and fair elections. Such allegations, if substantiated, would raise concerns about the ability of voters to cast their ballots without fear.

2.2. IEC staff numbers and behaviour

The number of visible IEC staff members on duty varied across polling stations, seemingly related to the number of voters assigned to the voting station. From observation, the staffing was perhaps

slightly insufficient for shift rotations and comfort breaks. Furthermore, the Presiding Officer at one voting station relayed that their staff did not have time to eat, which was affecting their ability to concentrate. This indicated potential issues with working conditions and staff welfare.

The behaviour of the IEC staff was commendable. Presiding Officers were polite in their dealings with voters and professional when explaining voting requirements. Although, one Presiding Officer reported incidents of verbal abuse from elderly voters whose voting was delayed.

At one voting station an IEC official repeatedly placed their hands inside the ballot boxes to compress ballots. No tampering was observed, but this practice should be strongly discouraged.

2.3. Presence and behaviour of political party agents

At the Cape Town Civic Centre the Presiding Officer conveyed how a political party initially set up their tent inside the polling station boundary. However, the Presiding Officer intervened to address the issue and have the tent moved. This example speaks to the proactive conduct of the Presiding Officers.

At the Schotsche Kloof Primary School one party agent was observed conversing with voters inside the voting station. This behaviour is concerning as it could be seen as an avenue for potential voter influence.

2.4. Presence and behaviour of security personnel

Security personnel were observed at multiple polling stations, alongside South African Police Service (SAPS). While most SAPS officers appeared diligent, some officers posed for photos with political party posters. This conduct raises questions about the professionalism of the SAPS officers assigned to monitor the electoral process.

At one voting station, security guards manned the entry to the voting station, providing instructions about the elections and ushering voters. However, these security guards did not have clear identification or name tags, and it was unclear if they were officially deputised for a role that one would expect an IEC official to undertake.

2.5. Length of lines

Observations from multiple voting stations indicate significant issues with the length of voter lines, resulting in prolonged wait times for voters to cast their ballots.

Moreover, numerous voters reported having to wait in line for many hours before being able to cast their ballots. Such wait times are concerning as they could discourage voter participation, particularly for those with limited time, mobility constraints or health issues. Long lines also increase the risk of potential disruptions, which could compromise the conduct of the electoral process.

Although there was apparently an expedited procedure for elderly voters, there were no signs of IEC officials directing the elderly.

2.6. Lack of shade for voters

At several voting station locations, there were considerable lines with little to no shade available for voters, exposing them to the elements while waiting to vote. This raises concerns about the

voting experience, the potential for voter fatigue, and how different weather conditions might have affected voter turnout.

2.7. Accessibility for people with disabilities

Two of the three voting stations observed had poor accessibility for persons with disabilities.

2.8. Voting process efficiency

There appeared to be no discernible plan by IEC officials at voting stations to track the pace of processing voters, nor any assessment of whether the current pace could accommodate the assigned voters. This lack of real-time evaluation does not help anticipate bottlenecks or frustration among voters. Voters who had already made it inside the polling station and were nearly at the voters' roll were witnessed leaving after extended waiting periods. Once voters reached the voters' roll desk, the voting process itself seemed efficient.

Electricity outages at Schotsche Kloof Primary School hindered the voting process in the late afternoon, and voting administration had to be conducted by cell phone flashlights.

2.9. Number of voting booths

The number of voting booths seemed adequate for the voting stations observed.

3. Final assessment

There are many commendable elements to the conduct of the IEC during the 2024 South African national elections. On the ground, IEC officials were professional, polite, and repeatedly placed the voters' interests above their own. Presiding Officers were poised and calm. Aside from voter processing time, most of the matters discussed in this report do not diminish the integrity of the election, at least from our own sites and periods of observation. During the announcements of the results, the IEC followed its legal mandate. *From the information gathered, there is strong evidence that the 2024 South African national elections were free and fair.*

Some experiences in Cape Town are indicative of some of the challenges facing the country's electoral process. A recurring issue highlighted across multiple polling stations was the apparent lack of adequate staffing and resources. Reports of Presiding Officers facing verbal abuse from elderly voters and insufficient personnel for shift rotations point to the strain placed on the electoral workforce.

Furthermore, minor incidents such as party agents potentially influencing voters and security personnel overstepping their roles raise questions about maintaining a level playing field and protecting the electoral process. More briefings should be provided to party agents and security personnel to curtail these transgressions.

The requirement that voters only vote at the station for which they were registered, coupled with a vast difference in the resources available at certain stations, resulted in vastly different voting experiences between communities. Suspicions of unequal treatment between voting stations can be a source of misinformation about IEC favouring a group or community. The electoral process must be impartial and be seen to be unbiased.

Operational deficiencies were also noted, including the challenges around the systems for identification checks and confusion over procedures like inking. While seemingly minor, such

issues can create bottlenecks that disrupt the overall process. Inefficiencies are cumulative and undermine voter confidence in the electoral process.

These recommendations serve as a signal for areas requiring improvement. Ultimately, a well-funded and robustly supported electoral process is essential for upholding the democratic principles of free and fair elections.

4. Targeted Recommendations

4.1. Pre-election preparations

- ❖ Develop scientific queueing models and invest in more efficient processing capabilities;
- ❖ Slightly increase number of staff per site for shift coverage, and facilitate breaks;
- ❖ Consider adding more voting booths and splitting large volume sites for better throughput;
- ❖ Conduct accessibility audits of polling stations.

4.2. Staffing and training

- ❖ Ensure adequate rest periods and refreshments for election officials;
- ❖ Encourage Presiding Officers to adapt signage and instructions as situations require;
- ❖ Ensure clear roles and responsibilities for election officials and security personnel;
- ❖ All personnel interacting with voters should be clearly identifiable.

4.3. Operational procedures

- ❖ Provide clear instructions on ballot folding procedures;
- ❖ Reinforce procedures to prevent touching/handling of ballot boxes;
- ❖ Clarify and reinforce procedures for voter identification and eligibility checks.

4.4. Queue management

- ❖ Station an IEC information officer at entrances to assist and manage queues;
- ❖ Have roving information officers to manage crowds and defuse tensions.

Acknowledgements

Research ICT Africa's 2024 Election Observation Team consists of Dr. Scott Timcke, an IEC accredited election observer (stimcke@researchictafrica.net) and Zara Schroeder, support and online monitoring (zshroeder@researchictafrica.net) Both attended election observer training provided by the IEC.