

## **Report on the Pacific Electoral Networks Meeting**

Acknowledgements Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to speak at this Conference and share with you the success of the first ever Pacific Electoral Networks Meeting that was held in Fiji.

Firstly, I would like to congratulate Mr. MARK on his appointment as the Commonwealth Electoral Network [CEN] Chairperson. I assure you of Fijian Elections Office [FEO] fullest support. I would also like to acknowledge my good friend Mr. Isaac Hassan for his excellent calibre of leadership of the CEN which will surely remain as an inspiration and an example.

I would like to share a brief background about Fiji before I proceed. Fiji was suspended from the Commonwealth following the removal of government by the military. That was the 4th coup in our history. Due to this suspension we were not around since 2009 in the CEN. We were reinstated following the successful conduct of the 2014 General Election.

Our first interaction after the 2014 General Election was on the working group meeting for the paper on New Media and Elections.

Following this meeting, the then Secretary General, Mr. Kamallesh Sharma visited Fiji and met with me at the FEO. In that meeting, I relayed to him about my 2014 experience and also relayed some experiences from elections I had observed and issues that were commonly raised in the Pacific region by my colleagues.

The discussion led to a brainstorming exercise as to how the Commonwealth's expertise could be used. It was agreed that the PEN meeting be developed as a concept and discussed further.

### **The Pacific Electoral Networks Meeting**

The Fijian Elections Office (FEO) in collaboration with the Commonwealth Electoral Network (CEN) and the Pacific Islands, Australia and New Zealand Electoral Administrators Network (PIANZEA) hosted the Pacific Electoral Networks Meeting in Nadi, from 9-11 May, 2016, under the theme of "Promoting Electoral Integrity in the Pacific".

The event was attended by heads of election management bodies from Commonwealth member countries which included Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Heads of election management bodies from non-Commonwealth member countries also attended the Meeting and these included Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Niue, Palau,

Republic of Marshall Islands, Timor-Leste and Tokelau. In total 18 countries from the region were present.

In addition to the EMBs, there was a very strong presence of international and regional organizations. The Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, the Melanesian Spearhead Group, International IDEA, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems [IFES], United Nations Electoral Assistance Division [Bangkok & New York], United Nations Development Programme Suva & Solomon Islands and UN Women.

The Meeting started on a strong note and was officially opened by the Attorney General & Minister responsible for Elections. In welcoming all the delegates to Fiji, the AG reflected on reality.

[And, I quote] 'It is rather difficult to discuss elections in a room full of people who are from the Election Management Bodies, Elections Offices, or are Supervisor of Elections because there are two perspectives when discussing election- the other perspective is that of politicians.'

'In my humble opinion, the person who is conducting the election, such as the Supervisor of Elections, the Electoral Commissioners or various other officials, need to take a very clinical view in respect of implementation and in ensuring that the entire electoral process has integrity.' [Unquote]

The Meeting reflected a commitment of Pacific election management bodies supported by the Commonwealth Electoral Network and PIANZEA, to working in a collaborative partnership in promoting electoral integrity in the region.

Mr. Martin did a presentation on the principles of election observation. This was one of the core presentations for the Meeting. It gave us, the Pacific EMBs, the opportunity to hear for the first time, from the Commonwealth, one of the world's leading election observation organizations, on the standards and principles of how it conducts of election observations.

I hope Martin can share his presentation to all present here as well because the paper contained very useful tips and minimum expectations from both sides. I personally found that session as the main take home session from the Meeting.

A core outcome from this session was the need to have a follow-up meeting with the EMB and the country reps on the implementation of recommendations in the observer reports. This will allow the EMB and the host country to firstly respond to the report as well as ensure continued interest in the electoral processes post election. Such a meeting also ensures that the host remembers it's responsibility and gives the EMB necessary support to

promote electoral best practice. At least, there can be a stop to recurring issues in the observation reports.

The meeting also witnessed presentations from international and regional organizations. IFES presented on Electoral facilities for persons with disabilities, International IDEA presented on its Risk management tool and the UN team sat in a panel on promoting electoral integrity.

The two-day Meeting provided a platform for relationship building and in-depth discussions on issues of mutual interest. A lot of us EMBs got exposure to these international organizations and specially to the very useful tools and resources they already had on offer. We were also able to build strong contextual understanding with these organizations to help build capacity in elections.

The PEN also became the precursor to another milestone event for the Pacific – the Pacific Regional Disability Rights Dialogue [PRDRD] 2016. This is where ladies and gentlemen, I take my hat off to Mr Hassan as he took out special time to attend this dialogue on its first day. His attendance gave the dialogue prominence and significant encouragement. A delegation from the PRDRD made a special lunch time recommendation to all the participants of the PEN recommending the pathways to the first step in enhancing inclusiveness in elections.

We deliberated on ways to strengthen electoral integrity in the Pacific, including promoting electoral best practice, the independence and impartiality of EMBs, capacity building and professionalism of staff. This is particularly important in advocating for continuing operations of and EMB.

We discussed a number of issues that are of particular concern and challenge in the Pacific including women's participation, independence and resourcing of micro and non-permanent election management bodies, and capacity constraints, all of which can have an impact on electoral integrity.

The outcomes statement was widely published including full page advertisements in Fiji by the FEO.

The funding arrangements of the Meeting were shared by the Commonwealth Electoral Network, PIANZEA through the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Fijian Elections Office.

Finally, we agreed that the outcome of the Pacific Electoral Networks Meeting be shared and presented at this Conference.

At this Conference, I would now recommend that the next step would be for the Commonwealth to invite Pacific Election Ministers to a forum and present the outcomes

statement for adoption as the first ever Pacific Goals on Electoral Integrity. If it wants greater Pacific coverage, Commonwealth can partner in such a high level event with Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

On behalf of the Fijian Elections Office, I would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude to the Commonwealth Electoral Network and PIANZEA for bringing the Pacific Electoral Networks Meeting to Fiji. Thanks also to Simon, Martin, Sarah, Jonathan and to our brother from the Region, Albert Mariner. Thank you all for your time.

**Mr. Mohammed Saneem [Fiji]**