

EU mission lauds ECB, private newspapers

Thimphu: The preliminary conclusions on electoral politics released by the EU Election Observation Mission on March 23 have lauded the Election Commission and the private print media in Bhutan.

The mission lauded the Election Commission for its "impressive job of carrying out preparations in a country complicated by geography" and the private print media for its "critical notes in the tone of coverage of the two parties." The government media's coverage was generally positive, noted the mission.

Both parties expressed confidence in the election administration at all levels, but commented that at times the ECB was overly strict in its application of the regulations, stated the preliminary conclusions.

Restrictions on minority language use during the campaign limited information available for voters in certain areas of the country. The practice of allowing voter education, campaign and election materials to be printed only in Dzongkha (the official language) and English is contrary to international best practice.

The exclusion of civil society organizations from engaging in activities related to the election process deprived the Bhutanese voters of a key source of independent information. In particular, domestic nonpartisan observers have an important role to play in safeguarding election integrity.

However, the National Assembly elections demonstrate a clear commitment of voters and state institutions to support democratic change in Bhutan.

The mission, that has been in the country since February 22 following an invitation from government, noted that the enthusiastic voter participation and commitment of state institutions

to support the democratic process provides a solid foundation for a credible democracy.

The mission's preliminary conclusions stated the election process generally met international standards for democratic elections, but fell short in certain areas.

"The legal framework provided

while the Election Bill provided a level playing field for contestants, certain provisions limited candidacy rights and did not permit legal redress to a court prior to the announcement of results.

Electoral rolls were generally seen to be accurate and included voter photos, an additional safeguard. At the same time, a large number of voters were not registered where they live, but in their hometowns, requiring voters to travel long distances.

The election allowed for genuine competition between the two registered political parties, PDP and the DPT. However, the party platforms were similar, leaving voters to make a choice based on the leading personalities of the parties rather than policy differences.

"Strict rules were imposed by the ECB on the campaign. All candidates had to limit their speeches to the party's manifesto, and only candidates were allowed to campaign," noted the mission.

The parties nominated 10 women candidates (of 94 total), of whom four were elected. Women actively participated as election officials and voters on election day.

Less coverage for DPT

Three of the four mainstream media organizations in Bhutan had dedicated their political coverage to the People's Democratic Party, according to media monitoring done by the European Union Election Observation Mission.

The BBS Radio, in its news editions, devoted almost 49% of its political time to the Druk Phunsam Tshogpa, while 51% was dedicated to the coverage of PDP. Similarly, the BBS TV gave 53% coverage to the PDP and 47% to the DPT.

The Mission noted that both BBS Radio and TV's coverage was largely positive.

Kuensel dedicated 52% of its political space to PDP and 48% to DPT. The tone of the coverage was generally positive.

Bhutan Observer gave 54% of its political coverage to PDP and 46% to DPT, with more critical coverage of the two parties.

Bhutan Times, on the other hand, devoted 68% of its political coverage to DPT and 42% to PDP. Bhutan Times' coverage had some critical notes in the tone of coverage of both parties.

The Mission noted that apart from the two private newspapers, election information was the almost exclusive prerogative of the state-owned media.

"The presence of the media continues to be limited. The media market is extremely limited and, as a consequence, the operating budgets for media are poor, thus hindering the private media from fully developing into independent sources of information," stated the Mission.

The team noted that the narrow interpretation of the election coverage rules by the Election Commission could have restricted a more lively and appealing coverage of the campaign by the media.

The Mission was led by Mr. Javier Pomes, member of the European Parliament, as chief observer, and has been in the country since February 22. The 15-member mission deployed by 13 EU member states went throughout Bhutan to observe and assess the electoral process in accordance with the international standards for elections.

On March 24, observers visited 60 of 885 polling stations in 12 districts to observe voting, counting and tabulation of the election disputes and petitions.

a solid basis and the election administration carried out its tasks efficiently. At the same time, voters were presented with a choice between two ideologically similar alternatives and regulation of the campaign hindered free political expression," stated the preliminary conclusions.

Turnout of 79.4% of the total registered number of voters indicates a genuine commitment to participate in the country's first democratic multi-party elections. Voting and counting were well conducted in the polling stations observed.

The mission noted that legal framework for elections generally met international standards; and

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