

La'ó Hamutuk

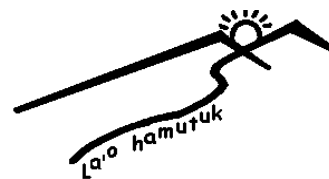
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Dili, 3 April 2017

To: Excellencies Director General of the Technical Secretariat for Electoral Administration (STAE), Sr. Dr. Acilino Manuel Branco, and President of the National Election Commission (CNE), Sr. Dr. Alcino de Araújo Barris

Subject: La'ó Hamutuk's Observation Report for the 2017-2022 Presidential Election

La'ó Hamutuk congratulates Timor-Leste's state institutions, particularly the Technical Secretariat for Electoral Administration (STAE) and the National Election Commission (CNE) for successfully conducting the presidential election for the period 2017-2022.

For this year's presidential election, La'ó Hamutuk received credentials from STAE to conduct observation during the election process, and we followed the campaign process as well as conducting observation at 16 polling centers in Dili and other districts during the election. This report contains the results of our observation, and gives some recommendations for improvement in the future elections.

Observations during the electoral campaign

La'ó Hamutuk followed the campaign process, which involved participating in campaigns/rallies, attending public discussions organized by campaign teams, and monitoring coverage of the election in newspapers and other media. Through our observation, we identified the following weaknesses:

The public lacked understanding of the responsibilities and roles of the President of the Republic. We noticed that only some of the candidates ran their campaigns and made promises to voters based on the constitutional roles pertaining to the President of the Republic, but other candidates made promises to voters not based on these powers. For example, certain candidates talked about revising the constitution, which is the role of the National Parliament, while some promised to give land rights to the citizens, whereas it is in fact the Government's role to execute programs based on the law.

The campaign period was too short. We noticed that allocating two weeks to the candidates to run their campaigns is not enough to allow enough space to talk to many people, and likewise voters did not have enough time to clarify concerns or doubts that they have about candidates and their positions. The candidates stayed within the allocated time and thus did not focus enough on discussing important issues with the voters to help them understand more about their positions before casting their votes.

There was a lack of in-depth discussions of the issues. We noticed that during the campaigns there were only speeches from the candidates and their campaign teams. La'ó Hamutuk produced a brochure which included key questions for voters to ask the presidential candidates, and we distributed this to the public. However, we did not see people using it to ask questions

or ask the candidates for clarifications because there was no space for asking questions. La'ó Hamutuk also distributed questionnaires to each of the candidates, but only candidate Ms. Maria Angela Freitas provided written answers to our questions.

To facilitate voters' access to information, La'ó Hamutuk organized a television program with Education Television (TVE) in which we asked candidates key questions relating to the roles of the President, and invited the presidential candidates to explain their vision, mission and planned policies. We appreciate that seven candidates participated in our program to share their vision and priorities with the community in Timor-Leste.

In addition to being broadcast live on TVE, La'ó Hamutuk live-streamed the interviews on the internet, and transcribed and translated them to post on our website for the public to access. Unfortunately, there were not many other forums for citizens to deepen their understanding of the candidates' positions on key issues. La'ó Hamutuk also produced a radio program from recorded interviews with candidates and distributed this to community radio stations to broadcast to the population so that they could follow the campaign process.

We appreciate CNE's initiative to gather the candidates for a debate for the public to watch; unfortunately, the program which was transmitted live by RTTL was not an ideal debate, but was mostly an event for the candidates to confirm or to provide answers to the questions that were asked by the moderators. We noticed that the program time was very limited and candidates did not utilize the time well in the limited time that was given to convey their key policy programs to the voters.

Observations during the voting period

The voting process went peacefully and according to the regulations. From La'ó Hamutuk's observation in the voting centers listed below, there were no violations or disturbances from STAE or CNE officials, even though many of the voting centers were in rural areas and dealt with large numbers of people. The police were also placed at the legally required distances to provide security.

Before the election, the commanders of F-FDTL and PNTL issued a joint statement saying that they would work together during the operation, but we did not observe any members of F-FDTL present at the voting centers.

Also, although some STAE officials made minor errors, this was mostly due to their limited experience in organizing an election, and generally the voting process went well all the way to the final counting of the votes and transporting ballot boxes to the district tabulation centers.

Observations regarding security during the election

PNTL and F-FDTL were responsible for ensuring security during the presidential election. We observed that during the press conference held by the two security agencies before the election,¹ the commander of F-FDTL said that the military would intervene with force if necessary, which we consider to be very strong language for the public, and also creates the possibility that soldiers could violate people's rights in the event of a confusing or difficult situation.

Even though no violent actions like this occurred during the election process following this statement by the military, we still believe that such statements do not promote the freedom or

¹ <https://www.pntl.tl/pntl-no-f-fdtl-sei-garante-seguransa-eleisaun-jeral/>

human rights of the citizenry within the democratic process, and that they could affect people's motivation and freedom to participate in rallies or other campaign events to hear about each candidates' programs.

La'o Hamutuk's observers would like to congratulate PNTL and F-FDTL for their professionalism in carrying out their work during the presidential election.

A note on voter participation

According to the law, voters can vote in the Suku (village) which is listed on their electoral card. This Law has negatively impacted the population's participation in the electoral process, in particular students, business –people and those who live in Dili but are registered in other districts. Some of these people did not have enough time or money to go to the place where they were registered to vote, and therefore they could not exercise their right to vote. We believe that this was a major factor in a high percentage of registered voters failing to vote, which, according to CNE's provisional report, was 28.84% (or 214,337 people).

Conclusion and Recommendations

La'o Hamutuk appreciates the work of STAE and CNE in successfully organizing this presidential election. We believe that all Timorese people should be proud that this is the first time that we organized our elections without assistance from the United Nations, and that it went very well.

In order to improve future elections, La'o Hamutuk offers the following recommendations to STAE and CNE:

- Strengthen civic and voter education for citizens, so that people can understand the importance of elections, thereby reducing the number of people who don't vote and improving the quality of the election.
- Strengthen communication with candidates and their teams in order to reduce the possibility of manipulations or promises to the people that do fall within the competence of the president.
- Give more time for electoral campaigns to provide an opportunity to candidates to express their vision and mission in more detail, and to provide the public with enough opportunities to get clarifications from the candidates.
- Create rules or mechanisms which do not oblige voters to go back to their home district to vote. Election policies should make it easier for citizens to exercise their rights, not become an obstacle to them.
- We appreciate STAE and CNE's progress, particularly in establishing voting centers in three cities abroad, and we recommend that the Government and electoral bodies will study how to implement a system that makes it easy for any of our citizens to vote, no matter where they are.
- Continue to increase the capacity of officials who control and facilitate the elections and improving their understanding of electoral systems such as vote counting, and improve their ability to oversee the process and deal with complaints.
- Ask the commanders of F-FDTL and PNTL to avoid making statements that don't respect human rights or people's freedom. We believe that the best way to address illegal actions is through the judicial process, not by promoting militaristic solutions.

Voting centers observed by La'o Hamutuk:

1. Sagadate Primary School
2. Atelari Suku Head Office
3. Lavateri Suku Head Office
4. Fatuhada Basic School
5. Faról Basic School no.1
6. Kampung Alor Suku Head Office
7. Tibar Suku Head Office
8. Railaku Town Primary School
9. Shallom Training Center
10. Aituri Laran Primary School no.5
11. 30th August Pre-secondary School
12. Selo Kraik Suku Head Office
13. Bairo Pite Pre-secondary School no. 4
14. Bebonuk Basic School
15. Bebonuk Shalom School
16. Tuana laran Basic School No.3

Observers:

1. Juvinal Dias
2. Celestino Gusmão Pereira
3. Niall Almond
4. Mariano Ferreira
5. Pelagio Dou tel
6. Maximus Tahu
7. Pamela Sexton
8. Marta da Silva
9. Ricarda Martins
10. Martinha Fernandes

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