



PROMISING START DESPITE HURDLES IN THE FIRST PHASE OF VOTER REGISTRATION

Press Statement on the First Phase of the Voter Registration Exercise

7th November 2024

About Chisankho Watch

To ensure credible, transparent, inclusive, and peaceful elections in Malawi, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), the Public Affairs Committee (PAC), the Gender and Justice Unit (GJU), and the Meeting Hub (mHub), launched the Chisankho Watch coalition, a citizen-led non-partisan election observation coalition. Chisankho Watch is dedicated to promoting meaningful citizen participation in electoral processes through evidence-based, innovative, and sustainable observation for all Malawians. The coalition will observe major electoral processes leading to the 2025 Malawi general elections.

Voter Registration Observation Methodology

Following the launch of the Voter Registration Exercise by the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC), Chisankho Watch set out to observe the 2024 voter registration process as part of its election observation activities leading up to the 2025 general elections. Overall, the coalition's voter registration observation exercise will entail the deployment of 151 observers and 33 district coordinators covering three regions and all 28 districts in the republic. The deployment of observers is guided by the planned MEC's phased registration schedule.

Chisankho Watch observers are accredited and trained to observe, collect, and transmit data about the registration process at the registration centres over the three phases and on three days in each phase (consisting of the beginning, middle, and end of the phase). Additionally, they report on the general political environment in their constituencies of deployment.

Phase 1 Deployment and Observation

From October 21 to November 3, 2024, the coalition trained and deployed 49 observers to registration centres in districts allocated in the first phase of the registration exercise. Before the registration process began, all Chisankho Watch observers were accredited by the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) per their guidelines for observers.

On the assigned three days (October 21, October 25, and November 2), observers were stationed at registration centres from 7:30 a.m. and remained there until 4:00 p.m. or whenever the registration processes ended for the day. In total, they observed activities in 49 registration centres.

This statement summarizes key findings based on 146 observer reports regarding the voter registration process and incidents that impacted voter registration efforts within their districts of deployment during Phase 1.

Findings

Provision of voter education and information for voter registration and NRB mass registration campaigns

Chisankho Watch notes that significant efforts were made to provide voter education and information across the three regions (Central, Southern, and Northern) during the first phase of the voter registration exercise. The Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) provided voter education and information in 96% of constituencies observed, followed by the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE) at 84% and civil society organizations (CSOs) at 84%. The media has been the primary channel used for disseminating voter information.

Additionally, Chisankho Watch observers noted sensitization efforts and mass NRB registration campaigns by the National Registration Bureau in most of the constituencies observed.

Opening of voter registration centres

The Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) announced that the voter registration process was scheduled to take place from 08:00 a.m. and close at 04:00 p.m. Based on the 146 reports submitted by the Chisankho Watch observers, 99% of observed registration centres opened by 8:30 a.m., with one opening by 8:45 a.m. Additionally, all Chisankho Watch observers were permitted to observe the process.

Set-up and accessibility of registration centres

Electoral processes should be easily accessible to special interest groups, especially persons with disabilities, nursing and pregnant women, and the elderly.

Based on observer reports, 47% of the observed centres could only be accessed by steps or stairs, with no ramps or lift present, making them inaccessible to persons with mobility challenges. Chisankho Watch also noted that in 61% of observed registration centres, the registration staff assisted persons with disabilities to register, while in 5%, there was no support. In the remaining 34% of registration centres, there were no persons with disabilities registered on the observation days.

Special arrangements, including dedicated seating and priority registration for the special interest groups (pregnant and nursing mothers, persons with disabilities, and the elderly), were made in 66% of the observed registration centres.

Some registrants not allowed to register

During Phase I of voter registration, 34% of the reports indicated that one or more persons were turned away and not allowed to register. Chisankho Watch notes that many of these instances were driven by citizens being unaware of the closing time of the registration centres as they had arrived after the centres closed.

Chisankho Watch also noted cases of citizens who had freshly registered for the national ID cards being turned away because the MEC system could not identify them.

Registration rate

Based on the Phase 1 observation reports, an average of 105 voters were registered per day at the centres. Of these registered voters, 59% were women, and 2% were persons with disabilities.

Table 1: Average Daily Registration Rate across the Regions

Region	Day 1 (Oct 21)	Day 2 (Oct 25)	Day 3 (Nov 2)	Average (Phase 1)
Central	92	154	104	117
Northern	37	48	60	48
Southern	127	139	87	117
Average	98	128	88	105

Security at registration centres

For Phase 1, Chisankho Watch observers reported that security personnel were deployed at all the registration centres.

Additionally, in almost all of the observed centres, there were no incidents of any attempts to intimidate, harass, or harm registration officials, potential registrants, political party representatives, or observers.

Election Management Devices

Data from Chisankho Watch reveals procedural compliance in Malawi's voter registration process, particularly in biometric and documentation protocols. Notably, in most of the registration centres observed, registrants had their photos and fingerprints recorded using Electronic Management Devices (EMDs). Moreover, the processes for pasting registration slips into the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) physical register and distributing Voter Registration Slips (VRS) were observed at most registration centres. Every registrant also signed the manual book.

However, Chisankho Watch identified a shortfall in on-site technical support for EMDs. Only 38% of registration centres observed had on-site technical assistance. This deficiency could lead to delays or challenges in addressing device malfunctions, potentially affecting process efficiency.

Stakeholders participation

The coalition observed the participation of different electoral stakeholders, mostly political parties and civil society organizations. Based on the observer reports, an MCP monitor was present in 86% of the registration centres observed, DPP monitors were present at 92% of the centres observed, UTM monitors were present at 62% of the centres observed, and other party monitors (not MCP, DPP, or UTM) were present at 60% of the centres

observed. Monitors from other parties hailed from AFORD, NCP, NPP, PDP, UDF, and Independent. Additionally, citizen observers, primarily from the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE), were present in 74% of the registration centres observed.

Inclusion

In addition to observing the presence of the major stakeholders in the voter registration processes, Chisankho Watch also observed the participation of women as party monitors, CSO observers, registration officials, and security personnel. Based on Phase 1 observer reports:

- 41% of the MEC registration officials and 24% of the registration supervisors were women.
- 52% of security personnel were women.
- 53% of MCP, 51% of DPP, 38% of UTM, and 37% of other party monitors (not MCP, DPP, or UTM) were women.
- 40% of the CSO observers were also women.

However, the data highlights several areas of concern regarding the inclusivity and accessibility of the registration process for Persons With Disabilities (PWDs). Based on Phase 1 observer reports:

- 2% of MEC officials were PWDs.
- Only 9% of political party agents were PWDs.
- 61% of MEC staff provided assistance to PWDs as needed.
- 53% of observers reported that information about the registration process was communicated in accessible formats to PWDs.

These findings underscore the need for enhanced inclusion in political participation, staff preparedness, and communication practices to ensure full inclusion and participation of PWDs.

Critical Incidents

During Phase 1, Chisankho Watch verified 12 critical incidents. The most significant incidents were as follows.

Citizens refuse to register in Kasangamala Registration Centre, Karonga District

Residents living near the Kasangamala Registration Centre in Karonga district refused to register to vote for 10 of the 14 available days. This decision resulted from perceived inadequate communication from the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) regarding constituency allocations and boundaries. Chisankho Watch reported that residents had previously petitioned the MEC to move their registration centre from Nyungwe to Karonga South for better representation. However, when voter registration opened on October 21, they found they were still assigned to the Nyungwe constituency, causing frustration over the MEC's lack of responsiveness. Intervention by civil society organizations in the district motivated residents to register, but this occurred towards the end of the registration period.

Undue coercion and inducement of citizens to register

Chisankho Watch expresses concern over reports of undue coercion of citizens in the voter registration process. In Nkhotakota district, verified reports indicate that citizens were required to provide their voter registration slips to enroll beneficiaries in social protection programs. Similarly, in Salima and Ntchisi districts, incidents were reported where registrants exchanged their registration slips for food items, such as maize and other handouts. Chisankho Watch notes that these practices corrupt the electoral environment and constitute voter bribery, which is an offense under Section 41 of the Political Parties Act (2018)

Misinformation about the voter registration process

Chisankho Watch noted reports of misinformation regarding voter registration in the Chiradzulu Nguludi and Karonga South Constituencies. There were claims that taking fingerprints during the electronic voter registration process implied that individuals had already cast their votes for the 2025 general election. This misinformation may have discouraged some potential registrants from participating in the registration process. This situation highlights the need for continued robust voter education.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Chisankho Watch commends the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) for its efforts during the first phase of the voter registration process. This phase was generally conducted in a relatively peaceful environment, with electronic management devices (EMDs) functioning effectively. We hope that these positive aspects will carry over into the next phase.

However, Chisankho Watch has also identified some areas for improvement to ensure that as many eligible voters as possible have the opportunity to register. This includes implementing robust and targeted voter information campaigns to counter misinformation about the registration process, addressing incidents of coercion and inducement related to voter registration, and resolving any grievances stemming from the boundary demarcation process that might affect the overall registration efforts.

As we move to the next phase of the voter registration process, Chisankho Watch offers the following recommendations:

To the Malawi Electoral Commission:

- MEC should establish open channels for grievance redress, enabling communities like Kasangamala to have a forum for addressing their concerns.
- MEC should install or ensure all registration centres have ramps to provide barrier-free access for individuals using wheelchairs or with limited mobility.
- In the subsequent stages, MEC should deploy targeted voter information campaigns to improve citizen awareness and address misinformation about voter registration.

To the National Registration Bureau:

- The National Registration Bureau should quickly establish additional registration centres to comply with the high court's decision and ensure all eligible voters possess the necessary NRB slip required for voter registration.

To Political Parties:

- Political parties should encourage their supporters to participate in the following phases of the registration process without undue influence or coercion.
- Political parties should desist from spreading misinformation and disinformation that discourages their supporters and eligible voters from registering.

To Civil Society Organisations and Faith-Based Organizations:

- CSOs and FBOs should continue supporting MEC's civic and voter education efforts to enhance registration and counter misinformation and disinformation in subsequent phases.

To the Registrar of Political Parties:

- The Registrar of Political Parties should investigate and, where confirmed, hold political parties accountable for the inducement and coercion of eligible voters during the registration process.

To the Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare:

- There should be a clear separation between social protection programs and electoral processes to prevent political bias or coercion. Ensuring eligibility for social protection based solely on socio-economic criteria, not voter status, is critical to maintaining fairness.

Finally, Chisankho Watch encourages Malawians to participate in the upcoming voter registration exercise and urges registered voters to protect their voter registration slips to prevent misuse and unauthorized access.

Chisankho Watch will continue to monitor the subsequent phases of voter registration and provide timely reports to stakeholders.

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