

# BY-ELECTIONS AND COVID-19

“Safe and secure voting during the health crisis”



## Foreword:

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For these by elections the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission will be introducing a range of COVID-19 health safety measures at polling venues and also throughout the entire by-elections' process, from including the receipt of nominations, holding of ballot paper draws, the management of election materials, conduct of polls at all polling stations and at our counting centers.

Our introduction of these measures hinges on the need to limit or mitigate person to person interaction, prevent or mitigate the contamination of common objects by individuals use and prevent or mitigate individual's exposure to contaminated objects.

These measures are established to protect the community and whilst it is important to implement these measures the SIEC appreciates all electors, candidates and participants for their patience and adherence to the new measures especially in all our polling places and at our count centers.

If well executed and communicated, these health measures can significantly mitigate the risk of virus transmission and reasonably reduce people's fear of infection during the electoral process. This is expected to build confidence of the electorates which otherwise could drastically reduce their participation resulting in a low voter turnout which could undermine the legitimacy of results.

All recommended health measures are sanctioned by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services Oversight Working Group and will be collectively implemented with their support.

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## COVID-19 Electoral Health Measures for the by-elections

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This extract of a document outlines the ways in which the key processes in the operation of the by-elections will be modified or enhanced.

### **DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL OBSERVATION AND PARTY/CANDIDATE AGENTS ACCREDITATION**

The Commission is aware of the important role of the electoral observation as a key contribution to the confidence building of the electorate and the transparency and credibility of the processes. To this end, the EO aims to continue to have independent and impartial election observers during the pandemic and thereafter. Election observation can also identify challenges our societies and governance institutions adapt to the coronavirus pandemic while ensuring that responses do not compromise democratic principles, in an election.

The Covid-19 crisis has brought an additional component to the holding of democratic elections, which is the “safe and secure” nature of the elections, with regard to the health of all of those who are involved.

Given the cost of these additional measures, applications for the accreditation of observers will require information from applicants on the compliance of health measures and on the materials that will be allocated by their organization to the members of the observation mission.

The Covid-19 pandemic poses an additional challenge to the electoral processes and raises concerns for the holding of free, fair, transparent and peaceful elections, all while ensuring the safety of voters.

Necessary application of the health measures will affect election observation, candidate agents scrutinizing the election and observers both international and domestic must adhere to all measures. The Commission will demonstrate its support towards assisting any key observation in these upcoming by-elections to instill confidence to the election.

### **CANDIDATE NOMINATIONS**

Safety measures are similar to the measures taken at polling stations. . This includes social distancing, hand washing and sanitization, use of masks and gloves by election officials.

Candidates and nominators may approach the Returning Officer at the nomination center by making an appointment, when filing for nominations adhering to the above referred measures which are also to be applied to polling stations. At any time the maximum number of people including staff and candidates with 3 nominators to be inside a nomination center; is to be limited to not more than 8 people, no Candidate supporters will be allowed at the nomination centers.

Prevailing health advisory allowed for (gatherings of people) for a certain number of people will be considered unless no longer in effect while ensuring physical distance measures (1.5m distance) are enforced.



## **ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS (CAMPAIGNING GUIDELINES DEPEND ON PREVAILING GATHERING SITUATION)**

While electoral campaign by candidates and political parties are vital part of an election process and a democratic society, limitations of campaigning can be adopted given any prevailing health advisories with a view to prevent the gathering of crowds. Other alternatives to campaigning methods such as the use of traditional and social media will be encouraged. Accordingly, besides the national broadcasting avenues and radio stations, candidates may carry out their campaigning online, such as by holding live-streaming sessions through their social media platforms.

The Government through the Political Party Commission (PPC) may provide physical venues equipped with internet connectivity. To ensure equal access and impartial treatment, it is recommended that a procedure establishing how candidates can apply for its use and schedule for live-streaming at specific time slots throughout the day between a certain periods. These venues can be provided at a chargeable rate if need be, and should be used only for live-streaming sessions, and not for other recordings.

Political parties subsidized by the state for such media campaign can also be sought through by the PPC.

Should candidates go on a campaign trail, candidates and parties must adhere to all hygiene practices and public health measures (wear face masks at all times, and should not take it off only while addressing groups while ensuring the social distance or to take photos).

Election campaign will be encouraged to be conducted through the use of media, with limited or no rallies or gatherings at all, and carried out with vehicles equipped with megaphones with a maximum of 5 people in only 1 vehicle.

Floating parades by candidates and supporters will be discouraged in these by-elections.

## **VOTER EDUCATION**

The Commission will endeavor to make all efforts so voters, candidates and their agents understand the new hygiene procedures including the safe distancing, the application of the indelible ink process without assistance of staff and the importance of complying with such instructions.

Voter education efforts will be made to reach out to all citizens, including voters with disabilities and those with low literacy levels. Graphics and visuals should be used when possible and, if a poster is used in a polling station, an audio option should be available for people who are blind or have low vision, such as verbal information from a poll worker. Education efforts could include, for example, special posters outside polling stations and public service announcements that detail hand-washing procedures, as well as the application of indelible ink process.

It is also worth noting that the Commission should also be prepared to react to any inaccuracies in implementing these health measures to the election process. The communication strategy will be reviewed accordingly from earlier versions towards means of



implementation, with an added layer of information sharing and voter awareness. Advocating mainly the Commission's efforts in demonstrating that this is for a safer election.

### **ELECTION OFFICERS RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING**

Recruitment of election officers, especially polling officials will forego as much as possible any paper-based applications, efforts will be undertaken to cater for online applications to be made. These are via the official website [www.siec.gov.sb](http://www.siec.gov.sb) or email [info@siec.gov.sb](mailto:info@siec.gov.sb) and directly to the HR department. The on-going upgrade of the institutional website and enhancement of IT skills of EO staff through the support of the SECSIP will contribute to facilitate submission of application and interaction with applicants. Terms of References (TORs) and application forms are reviewed to cater for adherences to the health measures.

A new set of polling officers will be embedded into the voting process to supplement the coordination and implementation of the health measures at the polling stations, these are the Queue Controllers.

Polling staff will lead all hygiene efforts in a polling station, an additional requirement to be instilled into these officers.

### **BALLOT PAPER DRAW, VOTE COUNT AND RESULTS MANAGEMENT**

Safety measures are similar to the measures taken at polling stations will be applied. In order to provide a safe environment with appropriate social distancing, we will utilize less people, in a more expansive area, to conduct ballot draws and counting of votes. These safety measures will mean that it might take considerably longer to conduct the verification and ballot count. Crowd control for people gathering around counting centers will have to be controlled during counting.

### **VOTING AT POLLING STATIONS**

#### **"TIME BAND" VOTING**

To decrease the footprint of voters across the polling hours, voters will be recommended to attend during the polling day to the polling station as per time slots allocated following alphabetical order as per the voter lists. Voters in order of their surname starting with A to M are at 7am to 12pm (5hrs), N to Z in the afternoon until 5pm (5hrs). However, as this is also a recommendation, voters may still cast their vote at any time when the polling stations are open. The voting time is unchanged on polling day, 7am to 5pm.

#### **ARRANGEMENTS FOR SENIOR VOTERS**

Those aged 65 and above and with chronic conditions will be allotted an earlier time band, between 8am and noon, and may be accompanied by one household member. Priority in the queues will be granted to seniors who choose to vote at other times of the day other than their allotted time bands.

#### **ASSISTANCE TO VOTERS WITH DISABILITIES & PREGNANT WOMEN.**

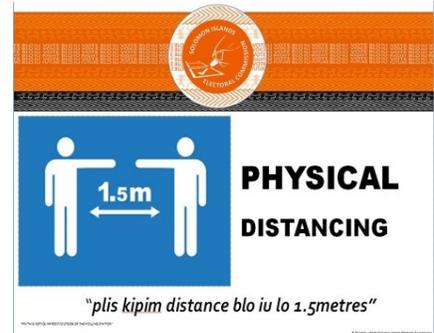
The queue controllers will also grant priority in the queues to these voters to "jump the line". These will include those in uniforms, the essential workers such as nurses, voters with



special needs, etc. A new procedure will be initiated to support those who need assistance in polling stations.

### **SAFE DISTANCING**

All voters must abide by the 1.5m social distance rule at all times, in and around the polling station. Election officials and polling agents will also be seated 1.5m apart from each other. When presenting of ID cards for identification, cards will be placed on the table rather than handing over of ID cards directly to polling officers, from a certain distance.



Voting screens will also be separated apart from each other.

Attendance at polling stations must be limited to eligible voters only, and socializing at polling stations is to be avoided. Voters should not bring non-voters to the polling stations like children or non-voting family members and friends. Voters whom have already cast their votes will have to leave the polling station premises.

### **HYGIENE PRACTICES**

No handshakes, no chewing of betel nut and no smoking in and around the polling station parameters. When coughing or sneezing voters are to use elbows and not palms of hands. Handwashing or the use of hand sanitizers will be conducted before entering the polling station.

#### **INDELIBLE INK APPLICATIONS/PAPER TOWELS**

The indelible ink will only be held by the polling officer. The voter will only need to insert his or her little finger into the bottle for 5 seconds without touching the bottle. Paper towels will replace yellow cloth used in polling kits. Garbage bags will be provided to dispose these paper towels. Polling staff will direct voters to deposit the paper towels in a garbage bag.

#### **SOAP AND WATER**

Entering the vicinity of the polling stations, voters should wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water for at least 20 seconds and then completely dry their hands before joining the queue of voters. All polling stations will have a white bucket with a tap to wash their hands.

#### **SANITIZER GEL**

Before entering the polling station, the Queue Controller will ensure that each voter is hand sanitized with a sanitizing gel before he or she enters a polling station.

Voters will approach the entrance to a polling station and self-apply the gel to sanitize their hands prior to entering a polling station and must allow hands to completely dry, even before presenting their voters' ID of voters and prior to any ink application. If a voter ID card is presented to the polling official, cards are to be



placed in a tray in front of the polling official. Voter will be identified on the voters list and the card to be returned by collecting it from the tray.

### USE OF PENS

Voters are encouraged to bring their own pens to the polling station to mark their ballot papers and leave the polling stations with their pens.

Pens provided at the polling station will be sanitized after every use. Those voters who do not have a pen will be given a ballot paper together with a pen. After the use of the pen to mark the ballot paper, the voter will drop the pen in a provided tray before placing ballot papers into the ballot box. The voter will then exit the polling station.

### MASKS & GLOVES

Election officials will wear limited protective gear for these by elections. These will include masks and gloves at all times during the polling day. Observers, candidates and agents must provide and wear own masks.

Since no masks will be provided for voters, they will be encouraged to wear own masks, come to the polling station and will need to lower their masks during identification and leave polling stations with their masks on.

### POLLING STATION QUEUE MANAGEMENT & DISTANCING

Queue Controllers (QC) will man the entries to all polling stations. QCs will be responsible to manage the queue and will ensure voters undertake hand-washing with portable hand-wash stations, all voters' will self-apply gel hand sanitizers before entering a polling station. Barrier tapes and floor markings will be used to allocate the queueing of voters and to mark the no go zones within polling stations. Adherence to the 1.5m distancing will be enforced on any queue and sitting arrangements in and around the polling station.



There will be only 5 voters in a polling station at any one time, apart from polling officers, observers and candidate agents that may also be present. The number of observers and candidate agents will be determined by the sitting arrangements in compliance with the 1.5m social distance measure.

### SIGNS AND POSTERS

All polling station information signs and posters will be reviewed to include the health measures and to inform voters of the new steps involved in making a safe and secured vote to prevent health risk related issues. Signage about hygiene and social distancing will be prominent in the polling place for voters and staff.

The How-To-Vote poster will portray the processing of voters at each contact points in the polling station with the health measures. The polling station posters will also include posters provided by the Health Ministry along with any brochures needing dissemination to the public.



Each electoral venue including election provincial offices, nomination centers, polling stations and counting centers will have COVID-19 kits pre-packed and distributed along respective election materials. Kits will include masks, gloves, hand sanitizer gels, alcohol based disinfectants, soap etc.

