



Report of the AVEOM Mission to the Timor-Leste 2023 Parliamentary Election

Australia East Timor Association

Victoria University

Victoria University Alumni Association, Dili

(AVEOM)



Photo 1: Watching the count in Atauro. Credit: Jon Faine

AVEOM Report Team:

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Preface

I am pleased to present this report on our successful AVEOM observer mission to Timor-Leste in May 2023. Earlier this year, President José Ramos-Horta asked me to form an election observer mission for the parliamentary election in May as I have observed Timorese elections since 2001. Perhaps he expected there would be fewer international observers this year.

I was particularly pleased that friends and colleagues who had not previously been to Timor-Leste were willing to participate. The value of observing an election in a different political system, and learning more about the vibrant democracy that thrives on our northern doorstep, was as valuable for our former politicians, lawyers and judges as it was for other participants, and opens opportunities for ongoing support.

I am glad to report that Timor-Leste's elections continue to be Free and Fair.

**Dr Jean McLean,
AVEOM Team Leader**

Introduction

AVEOM congratulates the people of Timor-Leste on a peaceful and successful 2023 parliamentary election. AVEOM also congratulates the Technical Secretariat for Electoral Administration (Secretariado Técnico de Administração Eleitoral, STAE) for efficiently conducting the election, and the independent National Elections Commission (Comissão Nacional de Eleições, CNE) for its effective organisation of the national tabulation of results and supervision of the electoral process. The election was held on Sunday, 21 May 2023, approximately five years after the last parliamentary election on Saturday, 12 May 2018.

The AVEOM observer mission consisted of 43 self-funded participants, comprising 20 from Australia, the Republic of Korea and the UK; 12 international residents in Dili; and 11 Timorese nationals. Twelve teams, each including at least one Tetum speaker, observed in over 50 polling centres in the municipalities of Aileu, Ainaro, Atauro, Baucau, Bobonaro, Dili, Ermera, Liquiça and Manufahi.

Purpose of the Observer Delegation

Impartial observation of the electoral process by international and national observers enhances election legitimacy by providing an evidence-based assessment of whether or not it is free and fair. Our mission was also an opportunity for Australians to learn more about another political system and its voting process. This was a joint mission with the Australia East Timor Association (AETA), Victoria University (VU) and the VU Alumni Association based in Dili. Participants included former politicians, judges and lawyers who were largely new to Timor-Leste, as well as those with a long connection to the country. International residents in Dili and Timorese observers joined our mission and made a valuable contribution. All AVEOM participants found it an inspiring and valuable experience.

Australia has a strong track record of independent and impartial election observation in Timor-Leste. Victoria University has sent observers to Timorese elections since the Restoration of Independence in 2002. Some AVEOM members also participated in previous VU missions and the Australia Timor-Leste Election Observer Missions (ATLEOM) in 2017–2018.

Other Observer Delegations

There were 218 accredited international observers in total, many of whom were from embassy missions that did not produce public reports. With 43 members, AVEOM was the largest independent international observer mission at the 2023 election. Other international missions included Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP), the EU Election Expert Mission, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and the G7+.

There were 2,430 national observers from 12 different organisations registered with STAE. The largest group was JPIC-OIPAS, the Justice and Peace arm of the Catholic Church, with 1,582 observers, followed by FONGTIL (the NGO Forum) and RENETIL (a youth and student organisation founded by Timorese students in Indonesia as part of the pre-independence resistance movement) with 325 and 259, respectively. Other national observer groups were from the Judicial System Monitoring Program (JSMP), the HAK Association and the Women's Caucus.

General Observations

Overall, AVEOM assessed voting and counting processes as complying with prescribed regulations and STAE instructions in almost all observed polling centres/stations. Observers described the overall atmosphere as calm, efficient and orderly. Both preparation for and conduct of the election were overwhelmingly in accordance with the rules. Nothing we saw affected, as far as we know, the outcome of the vote.

The total number of registered voters was 890,145 and the number of votes confirmed by CNE was 705,693. This represents a participation rate of 79.28 per cent, even though voting is not compulsory in Timor-Leste. For further election data see <https://www.cne.tl/ap2023/>

STAE Staff and Observers

Overall, we were impressed by the knowledge, dedication and enthusiasm of STAE officials, CNE supervisors, party agents (*fiskais*) and national observers. The *brigadas* (polling centre presidents), polling station secretaries and other STAE officials were confident in their decision making and clear about their responsibilities.



Photo 2: STAE staff during counting in Tibar
Credit: Emma Coupland

Staff handled problems efficiently and quickly. We noted that almost all of the STAE staff were in their twenties, including the *brigadas*. There was equal gender representation with around half being women, including polling centre presidents and polling station secretaries. Officials were well trained, took their responsibilities seriously, and the *fiskais* from the various parties respected them.



Photo 3: Observers' view blocked by bushes in Metinaro
Credit: Nancy Price

The majority of teams reported positively on the management of polling centres/stations, but there were some concerns. For example, at one polling centre the *brigada* limited *fiskais* and observer access to five minutes, while a *brigada* elsewhere allowed entry to *fiskais*, but not to observers. At another centre, observers could enter but not *fiskais*.

At several locations the view into the station was impeded. In Metinaro, observation was particularly limited by the station layout. OIPAS

observers and participants from other local groups complained because their position was below the level of the polling centre. Bushes further limited their line of sight, which made it impossible to track the voting process.

In most cases, polling staff did not ask the teams to fill in and sign observer attendance forms. In fact, it appeared that many *brigadas* did not seem to know such a form existed. *Brigadas* permitted photography in some places but not in others. In one polling station, the secretary allowed photos but the *brigada* overruled him to the contrary. Clearly practices were not uniform across polling centres.

One team observed police inside the 25-metre security personnel exclusion zone around polling centres/stations.

Polling Centres/Stations

Before every polling station opened, the station secretary read out the serial number for each pad of ballot papers, showed the empty ballot boxes to *fiskais* and observers, read out the box seal tags, and closed the ballot boxes in full view of not just the many *fiskais* but all in attendance – the entire village was able to watch in most places. At some polling centres there was a delay in allowing voters to enter.



*Photo 4: A voter is guided to the voting booth.
Credit: Ann Wigglesworth*

Most stations had covered windows where required and positioned the cardboard voting screens so that voters had their backs to a wall and were far enough apart. However, at one station, to reach a free voting screen, voters walked behind people who were already voting, and so could have looked at their ballot papers (although we did not observe this happening).

At another station, *fiskais* sat against the wall near the back, behind the voters, who could have shown them their ballot papers. Although we saw no evidence of any organised malpractice, more care is needed in some places with station layout.

Rooms with both an exit and an entry door worked best to avoid congestion through a single door. Small rooms made it more difficult to separate voters and observers. We noted that in some places lighting was inadequate, either because there were no lights or because they were not working.

There was no visible party campaign material within the vicinity of the polling stations, and official STAE signage was clear and well placed.

Access for People with Disabilities

STAE staff attempted to prioritise people with disabilities by positioning them at the front of the queue.



*Photo 5: Stairs to access the station at Baucau villa
Credit: Glenda Lasslett*

Officials allowed companions to assist disabled people to vote, but the physical barriers they encountered at polling centre/stations remained largely unaddressed. At many locations, physical access for people with disabilities was extremely difficult. Entry to one centre either involved stepping over a wide, deep, open drain or walking up steep stairs. At another location, people carried an elderly woman into the polling station.

One team noted an improvement in polling staff assistance to disabled people compared to previous Timorese elections. However, wheelchair access to polling stations and voting was often difficult due to physical barriers such as stairs.

Voting Procedures

It was deeply moving to see how seriously voters undertook their democratic right to vote. The atmosphere was optimistic and focussed. Most voters arrived early and the queues were orderly and quiet. STAE queue controllers gave priority to the elderly and mothers with children.

In general, polling staff adhered to electoral voting procedures, but we observed occasional lapses in compliance. Several teams observed a practice by ballot paper controllers in busier polling stations to sign, stamp and even tear out several ballot papers in advance, rather than prepare each paper as a voter arrived. This is in breach of the rules, although it obviously reduced the processing time in stations with larger numbers of voters. However, in a centre where AVEOM observers checked ballot papers at 3pm, there were no pre-stamped papers remaining.

At one polling centre, staff were consistently slow finding voters' names on the electoral roll, which resulted in long queues outside and empty voting screens: at times all four booths were empty. However, at other polling centres, the staff marked the page where each letter of the alphabet started in the list to help find names more quickly. Three polling centres ran out of ballot papers and requested additional papers from another polling centre, resulting in voting delays.

As the 2023 election had no system for parallel voting, AVEOM is concerned that some people may have been disenfranchised. The requirement that a person must vote where they are registered meant that those outside their registered area on election day could not vote. AVEOM observed the problem at the national hospital (HNGV) where a number of patients and their families were unable to vote. Hospital staff registered outside Dili needed to return home to vote, leaving the hospital short staffed.

Voting regulations stipulate that people leave their mobile phones with the queue controller at the front of polling stations, although we observed inconsistencies in this practice. In one centre, voters took mobile phones inside and left them on a seat near each voting booth, as there was adequate space available. Globally, the proliferation of mobile phones with cameras is a challenge for the enforcement of ballot secrecy. Frisking people as they enter the polling station is intrusive and impractical (although we did witness this at one location) and so the system largely relies on trust. More consistent enforcement of the rule is required to ensure phones remain outside polling stations.



Photo 6: A voter leaves a mobile phone at the entrance
Credit: Ann Wigglesworth



Photo 7: Checking the voter register
Credit: Ann Wigglesworth

Ink controllers carried out their duties conscientiously, with most ensuring that ink covered the index finger to the knuckle, although several polling centres gave voters toilet paper to wipe off excess ink. However, in no polling station did we observe officials thoroughly checking for ink on voters' hands (any checking was restricted to the hand which presented the electoral card).

Vote Counting



Photo 8: Official shows the marked ballot paper at Beloi, Atauro
Credit: Karen Edyvane



Photo 9: STAE officials unfold ballot papers ahead of counting.
Credit: Susan Attrill

There were 17 parties contesting the election and each had a number from 1 to 17. Voters marked the box on the ballot paper next to their chosen party.

Officials conducted the vote count openly, patiently and efficiently, holding up ballot papers one at a time to show the mark (a hole made by a nail), and clearly announcing the number of the party for each vote. Staff manually tallied each vote next to the respective party number on sheets of butcher's paper stuck to the centre's wall. At some centres, the crowds watching from outside good-naturedly booed and cheered as officials read out the number punched on each ballot, but most people were quietly attentive. Challenges to counting were few, but STAE officials handled them openly and transparently when they occurred.

In polling centres with two or more stations, we recommend that counting takes place in each polling station rather than in the polling centre. In several centres, staff mixed the stations' ballots together before counting the unused, cancelled and abandoned ballot papers. The reconciliation count is to determine how many ballot papers should be in the ballot box after discounting the invalid ballot papers. Counting the votes in each station would not only save time, but it would also ensure there is more accurate reconciliation of votes and voter numbers. Counting by polling station would be a faster and more efficient use of STAE staff, some of whom had little to do during the count.

Post-election Tabulation and Results

The number of polling centres has increased by 66 per cent since the 2018 election, making reviewing and verifying polling centre records at the municipal tabulation centres a much longer process. Despite this, officials completed the task as legally required for STAE to deliver all municipal tabulation records to CNE two days after the election. However, we noted there may need to be additional technical assistance for adequate IT infrastructure and other resources to increase the efficiency of the process.

CNE's provisional tabulation of national results declared that the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT) had won 41.6 per cent of the vote, leading the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (FRETILIN) which won 25.8 per cent of the vote, followed by the Democratic Party (PD) with 9.3 per cent, Enrich the National Unity of the Children of Timor (KHUNTO) with 7.5 per cent, and the People's Liberation Party (PLP) with 5.9 per cent. No other party received sufficient votes to reach the electoral threshold of 4 per cent.

No political party filed an appeal on the results of the election. On 1 June, CNE submitted documentation for the provisional national tabulation results of the parliamentary election to the Court of Appeal. On 5 June,

the Court of Appeal certified the results, confirming the seats won as: CNRT 31, FRETILIN 19, PD 6, KHUNTO 5 and PLP 4. This result was gazetted in the *Jornal da Republic* Serie I N°. 20 E on 6 June 2023.

CNRT won 31 of the 65 parliamentary seats – 33 seats would have secured the party a majority. Therefore, CNRT needs to form a coalition with another party to command a majority in the parliament and be invited by the President of the Republic to form government.

Summary of Findings

1. From our observations, STAE and CNE professionally conducted a free and fair election.
2. STAE staff were largely well-trained and executed their duties to a high standard with notable enthusiasm. At least half of STAE staff were female, often including polling centre presidents and polling station secretaries.
3. The presence of CNE staff, *fiskais* from different parties, and national observer groups in each centre contributed positively to monitoring the election process and assuring transparency. *Fiskais* cooperated towards the common goal of a free and fair election.
4. Timorese voters were dedicated, good natured and enthusiastic. Many walked for hours to reach a polling centre. The government provided some transport for people to travel from Dili to their place of registration around the country.
5. Some people in Dili were unable to vote because they were registered elsewhere, including staff and patients in the national hospital (HNGV). The rejection of proposed 2023 parliamentary reforms to expand parallel voting procedures is regrettable and the decision would have reduced voter participation. AVEOM hopes this will be addressed before the next election – either by the introduction of parallel polling, or a review of the voter registration process to enable voters who have moved to update their registered address more easily – as some voters were disenfranchised in this poll.
6. STAE staff attempts to prioritise people with disabilities was inconsistent. Physical barriers to polling centres/stations for people with disabilities remained largely unaddressed. Although the National Parliament passed legislation to introduce a braille ballot paper, the new voting system was not adopted in time for the parliamentary election. AVEOM observers noted that physical access to polling stations remains a challenge to voters with disabilities.
7. Officials did not routinely conduct ballot reconciliation prior to counting at each polling station, or reconcile the 17 piles (1 per party) of ballots with the polling centre wall tally after the counting. The practice of reconciliation needs to be more consistently applied.
8. Where there is more than one station per polling centre, we suggest the practice of counting at each polling station. If counting occurred in each polling station rather than the polling centre, it would facilitate ballot reconciliation, save time, and enable all STAE staff to participate during the count.
9. The process of counting at polling centres was in compliance with the relevant law and decrees. However, the increased number of polling stations, combined with unreliable internet connections and IT issues complicated the announcement of results to the general public. Ahead of the next election the provision of enhanced technical support would ensure timely public access to provisional results.

Recommendations

1. Parallel voting or revising the process for voter registration needs to be addressed before the next election as some voters were disenfranchised in this poll.
2. AVEOM suggests more training for STAE officials in the application of rules regarding polling procedures, including checking for ink on fingers as voters arrive at the polling station, removing mobile phones, reconciliation of ballots at each polling station prior to counting, and providing suitable space for the *fiskais* and observers to view the proceedings.
3. AVEOM notes this election had no specific measures to facilitate voting for people with disabilities: for example, the proposed braille ballot paper was not available. Ramps for schools and public buildings should be part of standard building and renovation plans, both for general use and for future elections.
4. Subject to logistical considerations, we suggest that counting is conducted in each polling station rather than in the polling centre to facilitate a more efficient and timely reconciliation and counting process and to involve all available STAE staff.
5. We suggest that there is greater technical support to STAE and CNE to ensure timely public access to provisional results by the next election.

Annex 1: Election Results Gazetted in *Jornal da Republica*

Jornal da República

Total de eleitores registados	890.145	
Total eleitores de participantes /votantes	705.693	79,28%
Total votos validamente expressos	692.521	98,13%
Total de boletins abandonados	26	
Votos em branco	2.698	0,36%
Votos nulos	10.387	1,47%
Votos rejeitados	61	0,01%

Votos obtidos por cada partido concorrente:

Partidos concorrentes	Votos obtidos	%
1. Partido Desenvolvimento Nacional (PDN)	597	0,1%
2. Partido Libertação Povo Aileba (PLPA)	3.272	0,5%
3. Partidu Libertação Popular (PLP)	40.720	5,9%
4. Partido Democrático (PD)	64.517	9,3%
5. Kmanek Haburas Unidade Nacional Timor Oan (KHUNTO)	52.031	7,5%
6. Partido Os Verdes de Timor (PVT)	25.106	3,6%
7. União Democrático Timorense (UDT)	1.256	0,2%
8. Partido Unidade e Desenvolvimento Democrático (PUDD)	21.647	3,1%
9. Partido Republicano (PR)	1.558	0,2%
10. Unidade Nacional Democrática da Resistência Timorense	1.023	0,1%
11. Frente Revolucionária do Timor-Leste Independente (FRETILIN)	178.338	25,8%
12. Congresso Nacional da Reconstrução Timorense (CNRT)	288.289	41,6%
13. Centro Ação Democrata Timorense (CASDT)	3.170	0,5%
14. Movimento de Libertação Popular Maubere (MLPM)	642	0,1%
15. Partido Socialista Timor (PST)	2.415	0,3%
16. Partido Democrata Cristão (PDC)	1.262	0,2%
17. Associação Popular Monarquia Timorense (APMT)	6.678	1,0%

Mandato obtidos segundo as listas de concorrentes dos partidos políticos que obtiveram pelo menos 4% do total dos votos válidos:

Partidos Políticos	Cadeiras cada Partido
1. Partido CNRT	31
2. Partido FRETILIN	19
3. Partido Democrático (PD)	6
4. Partido KHUNTO	5
5. Partido Libertação Popular (PLP)	4
Total de cadeiras	65

Figure 1: Results of the election, as gazetted in *Jornal da Republic Serie I No. 20 E*, 6 June 2023

Annex 2: List of STAE-Accredited AVEOM Observers

AVEOM International Visitors

Dr Jean McLean (team leader)	Victoria University Honorary Fellow, AETA Vice-President
Dr Ann Wigglesworth (coordinator)	AETA Secretary, Victoria University Honorary Fellow
Glenda Lasslett (coordinator in Dili)	AETA President, Friends of Baucau committee member
Dr Michael Leach	Professor in Political and International Relations, Swinburne University of Technology
Nancy Price	Friends of Suai committee member
Dr Peter Brent	Electoral Regulation Research Network member
Rob Hulls	Director, Centre for Innovative Justice, RMIT
Anne Richter	Art historian
Robert Richter	King's counsel
Jon Faine	Vice-Chancellor's Fellow, University of Melbourne
Dr Trina Supit	Researcher/ writer, Friends of Maliana committee member
Martin Foley	Former minister in the Victorian Government
Charlie Rozencwaig	Magistrate
Ian Gray	Former chief magistrate
Jessica Klingender	Member, Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal
Edward Bagnall	Election consultant
Emma Bagnall	Graduate student
Susan Attrill	Senior employment consultant
Victoria Marwick Smith	Lecturer, Charles Darwin University
Professor Karen Edyvane	Marine biologist, Charles Darwin University

International Observers Resident in Dili

Dr Helen Hill (facilitator in Dili)	Honorary Fellow, Institute for Sustainable Industries and Livable Cities, Victoria University and Visiting Fellow, UNTL
Andrew Patching	HRN advisor
Heidi Arbuckle	Team Leader PASK, Asia Foundation
Terence McCaughan	Advisor to Plan International Timor-Leste
Marion Brand	Nurse
Hugh Collett	Business owner
Annie Sloman	International development practitioner
Dr Catharina Williams Van Klinken	Director, Centre for Language Studies, Dili Institute of Technology
Robert Williams	Adjunct Senior Research Fellow, University of Western Australia
Emma Coupland	Freelance writer, researcher and editor

VU Alumni and Timorese Observers in Dili

Dr Joao Noronha	President of the Victoria University Alumni Association
Joao Carlos Freitas (facilitator in Dili)	Consultant
Filomena dos Reis	Peace activist and scout leader
Fidelio da Costa	Director, Asosiasaun Fuan Saudavel Timor-Leste (AFSTL)
Vidal Campos Magno	Project manager, <i>Ba Futuru</i>
Maria de Ceu Soares	Facilities manager, United Nations Development Program
Natalicia Chang	School teacher
Carlos Ramos Freitas	School teacher
Jezunio da Costa Ximenes	Lecturer in English at the Theological College of the Protestant Church Timor-Leste (IPTL)
Octavio N. Correia Corte-Real	Team member, AFSTL
Ivo Cesario Da Costa Correia	Team member, AFSTL



Photo 10: AVEOM members in Dili Credit: Australian Embassy team

Annex 3: Polling Stations Where AVEOM Observed

Aileu

Aileu Vila, Selo Kraik, Sede Suco Selo Kraik
Aileu-Vila, Fatubosa, EP. No.4 Daisoli
Aileu-Vila, Lahae, Postu Sisca Erluli
Aileu-Vila, Leqitura, Sede Suco Leqitura

Ainaro

Maubise, Maulau, ETV Bere-Moli
Ainaro, Soro, EBC Soro

Atauro

Beloi, EP. Beloi
Biqueli, EP. Biqueli
Vila-Maumeta, EP. Vila-Maumeta

Baucau

Baucau, EPC Sao Domingos Savio
Baucau, EPP No.1 Central
Baucau, EPP Tirilolo
Baucau, EPS No.3 Vila Nova
Baucau, Triloca Sede Suco
Baucau, EPP Buruma
Laga, Tequinomata, EPP No.4 Samaguia

Bobonaro

Maliana, Lahomea, Gimnasio Maliana (GOR)
Maliana, Odama, EP Odama
Maliana, Ritabou, EP Ritabou

Dili

Cristo Rei, Becora Dili Prison (mobile station)
Cristo Rei, Becora, ES. Herois da Pátria Becora
Cristo Rei, Culuhun, Guido Valadares National Hospital (mobile station)
Cristo Rei, Hera, EBF Mota-Quik
Cristo Rei, Hera, EP No.4 Hera
Cristo Rei, Hera, Escola Teknika Hera
Cristo Rei, Hera, Sede Suco Hera
Cristo Rei, Metiaut, EP Filial Metiaut
Cristo Rei, Metiaut, Metiaut Sede Suco
Cristo Rei, Metiaut, Sede Suco
Dom Aleixo, Bebonuk, EBF No.2 Bebonuk
Dom Aleixo, Tasi Tolu Sede Suco
Dom Aleixo, TK Lisbutak
Dom Aleixo, Manleuana Sede Suco
Metinaro, Sabuli, ES Sabuli 20 de Setembro
Metinaro, Sabuli, Sede Suco Sabuli
Metinaro, Wenunuc, EBC. No.1 de Metinaro
Metinaro, Wenunuc, EBC. No.2 Manuleu
Metinaro, Wenunuc, EBF Wenunuc
Nain Feto, Santa Cruz, EPC Nu'u Laran

Ermera

Talimoro, Gleno Vila, ES Nino Konis Santana
Railaco, Lihu, EP Railaco Vila

Railaco, Railako Kraic, EP. Railaku Kraic
Railaco, Railako Kraik, EB Railaku Kraik
Railaco, Suco Samalete, EB Samalete

Liquiça

Bazartete, Mau-Meta Sede Suco
Bazartete, Tibar, Escola Infantil Turleu Tibar
Bazartete, Lauhata, EP Epelu
Bazartete, Tibar, EB Beduku
Bazartete, Tibar, EB Fahi Teen
Bazartete, Tibar, EB Tibar

Manufahi

Turiscai, Caimauc, Sede Suco Caimauc
Turiscai, Manumera, Sede Suco Manumera
Turiscai, Manumera, Sede Komunitario Telero