

Voting over in contentious election battle

As the polls closed, Jamaican voters waited to find out who would be their next prime minister.

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MONTEGO BAY, Jamaica --

Hours after polls closed, election workers were still counting paper ballots in this Caribbean nation as anxious voters waited to find out who will rule Jamaica over the next five years.

The contentious campaign, complete with political mudslinging and thuggery by both sides, pitted the ruling People's National Party against the opposition Jamaica Labor Party. In power for 18 years, the PNP is trying to win an unprecedented fifth consecutive five-year term to give Prime Minister Portia Simpson-Miller her own political mandate.

With the country under a tropical storm watch for most of the day, Jamaicans braved long and slow-moving lines to cast their votes in the high-stakes race, where 146 candidates were vying for 60 parliamentary seats.

There was at least one confirmed shooting in a Kingston constituency, Director of Elections Danville Walker told The Miami Herald. No one was killed or injured, he said.

INTIMIDATION

Walker also reported some acts of intimidation, including two busloads of orange-clad PNP supporters who ventured into a neighboring constituency where they neither lived nor had the right to vote. Police were investigating the incident.

But despite the glitches, the head of an international observer mission commended the process, saying it was a sign the country had matured.

"Throughout the day, what we saw was a very committed voter population turning out," said Albert Ramdin, assistant secretary general for the Organization of American States, who led a team of 38 people from 13 nations to observe the balloting. "I believe that demonstrates a good thing for Jamaican politics and the Jamaican people."

The concern today is how supporters of the losing candidates will react and whether, after more than a year of campaigning and mudslinging, Jamaicans will be able to get back to some normalcy. "I want to see what the JLP can do," said David Smith, a 20-year-old student and first-time voter, casting his ballot at the Catherine Hall Primary School in west-central St. James district. "I've heard too much scandal in the PNP and I want better."

After a year of trailing the PNP in the polls, the JLP surged ahead in the final days of the campaign, with several pollsters and political observers predicting a JLP victory after seeing the huge voter turnout throughout the day Monday.

PERSONALITY CONTEST

With no ideological differences separating the two parties, and both pushing similar economic and social platforms, the campaign became less about issues and more about personalities.

The PNP portrayed Simpson-Miller as a down-to-earth mother figure and champion of the poor, and painted Golding as someone who could not be trusted. The JLP painted Simpson-Miller as an unrefined, stage-managed politician unsuited to rule Jamaica.

Both parties in the final day stepped up advertising, which some said contributed to the tense environment in some constituencies on Election Day.

"We can say that the electoral process in Jamaica has matured very well, but there are a lot of things that need to be done in the political process and those challenges need to be addressed by the politicians," Ramdin said.

Both parties attempted to portray themselves as reinventions of the old with fresh faces and fresh leadership.

"I have always voted for the JLP, however, this time around, I am impressed by Bruce Golding and the plan he has laid out for the country," said retiree Oswald Smith, 63. "I especially like the JLP's plan for the health sector, which would be free to all."