

**SIERRA LEONE GENERAL ELECTIONS 2018:
COMMONWEALTH OBSERVER GROUP INTERIM STATEMENT**
07 March 2018

**Statement by: HE John Dramani Mahama, Chair of the
Commonwealth Observer Group to Sierra Leone**

This is the Interim Statement of the Commonwealth Observer Group, and it is issued with the results process yet to be formally completed.

The Commonwealth Observer Group commends the people of Sierra Leone for the peaceful and orderly manner they went about the voting process on 7 March 2018.

The Group has been present in Sierra Leone since 28th February. Ahead of Election Day, we met with a broad range of stakeholders to gain a comprehensive picture of the electoral processes and environment. We met with the National Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (NEC), political parties, civil society, including women and youth groups, media representatives, the Office of National Security, Commonwealth High Commissioners and other national and international election observer missions.

On 5 March, our teams were deployed throughout the five provinces of Sierra Leone to observe the election preparations and the voting, counting and results process on Election Day. In the provinces, our teams also met electoral officials, political parties and the police at the district level to gain a more complete picture of the process and environment. Commonwealth teams also observed the final campaign events around the country.

Our observers reported that these elections were inclusive. We witnessed the participation of the elderly and disabled voters, and were encouraged by the presence of women and youth both as voters and officials. This participatory approach augurs well for Sierra Leone's democracy and development.

It is the Commonwealth's hope and expectation that the spirit of orderliness and peace, which has characterised the voting process, will prevail as we enter into the results phase.

The electoral environment on Election Day was conducive to the free exercise of the people's franchise and basic freedoms were respected.

The following is our initial assessment of the critical aspects of the election process and the electoral environment. Our final report, which we will complete before our departure, will be issued at a later date.

KEY FINDINGS

PRE-ELECTION ENVIRONMENT

With the emergence of some new political parties and candidates, the election campaigns were competitive and fiercely contested. Upon our arrival in Freetown, we were able to observe a few of the final political party rallies with supporters openly clad in party colours and campaign paraphernalia including billboards and posters highly visible. Many of the rallies observed occurred without incident. Following deployment, our teams also observed final rallies in some of the provinces where they were deployed.

However, during our briefings with a number of stakeholders, we were informed of some localised incidents of politically-motivated violence in the run-up to these elections.

Several stakeholders expressed anxiety about the abuse of incumbency, which could include the use of public resources, such as government vehicles and officials in support of the ruling party candidate.

A significant number of stakeholders also expressed concern about the independence, professionalism and capacity of the Sierra Leone Police to carry out their duties in a non-partisan manner. Several incidents were highlighted to illustrate this concern, many of which revolved around the disproportionate or inadequate responses to incidents.

However, it was also noted that several national and international stakeholders had been working to support and strengthen the capacity of the Police through trainings and capacity building programmes.

The Commonwealth Observer Group commends the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) for facilitating the signing of the Freetown Declaration, which I had the honour of presiding over.

We commend also the Presidential Candidates, their Running Mates and Political Parties for committing themselves to a peaceful process ahead of Election Day.

Our observers were therefore keen to see how some of these significant pre-election issues might impact the polls. Let me comment on some of these issues.

MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Most stakeholders expressed the view that the media in Sierra Leone is polarised, with outlets demonstrating a clear bias towards particular presidential candidates and parties.

It is the impression of the Team that both public and private media outlets in Sierra Leone allotted time and space to political candidates in a generally unbalanced manner.

The Group notes that the Public Elections Act 2012; requires that during the election campaign period, the national public radio and television stations are to provide equal airtime to each candidate and each political party.

Although there are more independent media outlets, the enforcement of this provision needs to be strengthened.

The Group further notes the existence of criminal libel on Sierra Leone's statutes and wishes to point out a general movement in most of the Commonwealth towards a system of peer and other systems of regulation.

ELECTORAL FRAMEWORK AND ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

The general elections of 7th March elections are the fourth multi-party elections to be held in Sierra Leone, since the end of the decade-long civil war in 2002. Significantly, it is the first elections to be managed entirely by national authorities following the departure of the United Nations mission in 2014.

The electoral framework provides the basic conditions for credible and competitive elections, with the requisite freedoms. Within this context, the competent management and administration of Election Day represents further progress for this country in the consolidation of its democracy.

The National Electoral Commission is the election management body responsible for the registration of eligible voters and the conduct of elections and referendums. For these elections, there was significant confidence in the independence and integrity of the institution and its processes. We commend the National Electoral Commission, and polling officials on duty for their professionalism and commitment exhibited on Election Day.

THE VOTING PROCESS

On Election Day, our observers reported that most polling stations opened on time with a few exceptions. The delays observed did not appear deliberate but seemed to be as a result of logistical challenges or misunderstanding of regulations.

For instance, the polling station where I personally observed the opening of poll was delayed by approximately 30 minutes because polling officials only began the opening procedures at 7:00am.

At the opening of the polls, NEC officials largely followed the opening procedures and voting generally proceeded in an atmosphere of calm and orderliness, even if slow in some instances.

Generally, the layout of the polling stations was conducive to orderly voting. However, it was noted that some of the classrooms and polling tents, were too small to accommodate some of the initially large queues in an orderly manner.

Like other Observers, we were struck by the long queues in some polling stations. However, it seemed that the initiative by the Elections Commission to limit the Register at each polling station to 300 helped with the processing of voters.

We note the NEC's attempt to simplify the complicated process of voting in four different elections by using colour coded boxes and corresponding ballot papers. We observed that the polling officials responsible for guiding voters to place their ballots in the correct boxes played a critical role in facilitating this process.

We commend the contributions made to the process by party agents, as well as citizen observers and monitors, most of whom were young people. Party agents we met observed the rules of the polling station; were friendly and cooperated among themselves.

They frequently assisted the polling officials to find names in the register, and engaged constructively when a problem arose.

In summary, we wish to highlight the following positive trends that we observed on polling day:

- An encouraging turn-out
- A largely peaceful process
- A robust voter register
- Electoral processes were largely followed
- There was a very visible presence of party agents and citizen observers across the country, most of whom were young people
- An inclusive process with a balance of women and men playing their roles as voters and as polling officials. We further note that differently abled people as well as the elderly, mothers with young children, and pregnant women were assisted to vote.

We however note the following challenges during the voting process:

Queue Management at Polling Stations

We note that at some polling centres with multiple stations there was neither a queue controller nor a reference guide to assist voters with locating their exact station. This created some confusion amongst voters regarding the appropriate station and contributed to the slow pace of voting in some instances.

Vehicle Restriction on Election Day

We note the vehicle restriction and manned checkpoints instituted on Election Day. While it created a conducive security environment on the day, elections remain one of the most vibrant and participatory expression of citizens' democratic rights. While constructive, this measure could have disenfranchised some citizens and we therefore recommend that it should be reviewed for future elections.

The Sierra Leone Police

The presence of the police and in some cases heavily armed military personnel, to some voters appeared intrusive and intimidating. But the generally peaceful voting process is also a plus for the people of Sierra Leone and the security agencies.

However, the incident at Goderich, which resulted in tension between the Police and Sierra Leone Peoples' Party supporters, was an example of a post voting situation that could have been better handled.

The Police and military besieged one of the offices of the Sierra Leone Peoples Party for several hours over allegations of sophisticated IT equipment being used to hack the Electoral Commission's systems.

Although we were able to deescalate this situation, the disproportionate response coupled with the lack of trust in this institution remains of much concern, particularly as the process continues.

In advance of these elections, a joint communiqué with the Heads of other international election observation missions was issued. In this Communiqué we called for all participants in the electoral process to refrain from any acts or statements that could cause tension or intimidation, and adversely affect the peaceful and orderly conduct of the elections.

I reiterate our call to all Sierra Leoneans to allow the process to conclude in an atmosphere of peace, and urge all stakeholders to continue to conduct their duties in a professional manner and to use legal and lawful processes to address any electoral challenges.

CLOSING, COUNTING AND THE RESULTS PROCESS

At the close of polls at 5:00pm, our Observers reported that there were little or no voters in many of the polling stations, which previously had long queues. Those that were in the queue at the close of polls were allowed to vote as stipulated by law.

Our Teams followed the counting and tabulation at polling stations in a number of districts. The counting process was transparent, with invalid ballots being identified in a consultative manner among the polling officials and party agents. However, aspects of the process were inefficient and tedious.

We urge the NEC to explore ways of streamlining aspects of the counting process in future elections, while safeguarding accuracy and transparency. We further urge the Electoral Commission to provide adequate lighting to facilitate the counting process.

Our overall conclusion is that the voting, closing and counting process at the polling stations were credible and transparent. Our Teams further noted that where there were anomalies in the application of certain procedures, they were not of such gravity as to negatively impact the credibility of the closing and counting process. However, we are mindful that the tallying of results continues across the country.

CONCLUSIONS

Our observers reported that these elections were inclusive. We witnessed the participation of the elderly and disabled voters, and were encouraged by the presence of women and youth as voters and officials. This participatory approach augurs well for Sierra Leone's democracy and development.

However, we do note the decline and low representation of women contesting for high office. The team would recommend to Sierra Leone and other Commonwealth countries with such low representation of women in the political space to institute affirmative action such as the provision of voluntary or mandatory quotas, by the State or political parties to redress this under representation.

With women representing a little more than half of the population in Sierra Leone, the linkage between good governance and gender equality as a means of achieving sustainable democracy is quite clear.

Again, it is the Commonwealth's hope and expectation that the spirit of orderliness and peace, which has characterised the voting process, will prevail as we enter into the results phase.

The electoral environment on Election Day was conducive to the free exercise of the people's franchise and basic freedoms were respected.

We will provide recommendations on how the processes might be further improved in our final report.

Thank you.

Issued on 9th March 2018