AFRICAN UNION ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION TO THE 24 JUNE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE

PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

FREETOWN, 26 JUNE 2023
I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Republic of Sierra Leone held its Multi-tier Elections on 24 June 2023 to elect a President, Members of Parliament, and Members of the Local Council.

2. The Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AUC), H.E Moussa Faki Mahamat, deployed the African Union Election Observation Mission (AUEOM) led by H.E Hailemariam D. Boshe, former Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia and comprised of 50 Short Term Observers (STOs). The observers were drawn from African Ambassadors accredited to the African Union (AU), the Pan African Parliament, Election Management Bodies (EMBs), Independent Electoral, Academic and Governance Experts, and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) from 26 African countries.1 It was supported by the technical team from the African Union Commission and the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA).

3. Observers were deployed in 22 teams to six regions in Sierra Leone to observe key processes including the final phases of the electoral campaigns, Election Day and limited post-election activities.

4. The Mission engaged with key stakeholders, including the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL), Representatives of the Government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs), Candidates and Political Parties, the Political Party Registration Commission (PPRC), the Office of National Security (ONS) and the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), Members of the Diplomatic Corps, and the Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion (ICPNC).

5. The Mission was charged with the responsibility of observing, assessing and reporting on the preparations for the elections in line with the relevant international instruments for democratic elections including; the African Union (AU) Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections; the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG); the Principles for Election Management, Monitoring and Observation (PEMMO); and the legal framework for elections in Sierra Leone.

6. Through this Preliminary Statement, the Mission offers a summary of its key findings, conclusions and recommendations on the electoral process up to the closing and counting of the polls. The statement is issued while the collation of election results is still ongoing. The Mission will continue to closely follow the electoral process and provide a detailed final report within a month from the date of announcement of final election results.

II. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Context of the Elections

7. The 24 June election was the fifth to take place in Sierra Leone since the end of the civil war in 2002, and the third elections that were fully self-administered.

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8. Thirteen (13) political parties contested the presidential election, but the landscape was dominated by the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) and the All-People’s Congress (APC).

9. The electoral environment was characterised by heightened tensions and reported incidents of violence in some parts of the country.

10. The Mission was informed of high levels of misinformation, disinformation, fake news and hate speech mainly conveyed via social media platforms and radios.

11. The electoral context was also characterised by mistrust of the ECSL by some political parties with regard to its neutrality.

12. AUEOM commends Sierra Leone for implementing some of the electoral reforms in line with previous AUEOM recommendations.

III. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

13. The 2023 elections were conducted based on the following legal instruments of the 1991 Constitution (as amended as to 2008), 2022 Public Elections Acts (as amended 2023), 2022 Political Parties Acts, 2022 Gender Equality and Women Empowerment, 2022 Local Government Act and the other regulations and procedures.

14. The 24 June 2023 General Elections were conducted using both the First-past-the-post system to elect the President and Mayors, and the District Block Proportional Representation System.

15. The Mission notes key reforms in the Electoral Act, which introduced the District Block Proportional Representation (PR) system for the Parliamentary and Council elections; to promote women’s political participation and representation. The Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Act allows 30% of seats in public elections for women, while Persons with Disability Act 2011 covers the special needs of Persons with Disability in public elections. The Mission commends the introduction of the District Block Proportional Representation to promote broad representation of Sierra Leoneans.

IV. PREPAREDNESS OF THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION OF SIERRA LEONE (ECSL)

16. The Mission notes that the ECSL received the requisite funding to conduct the election on time and conducted all pre-election activities as per the election calendar. Despite delays in delivery of sensitive election materials, this did not significantly affect the roll-out of activities.

17. The Mission commends the ECSL for introducing the braille jacket specially designed to support the blind voters to effectively participate in the elections.

18. The Mission received reports that voters and stakeholders were not informed on time about the Early voting, hence only 231 voted. The Mission was informed that no observers were accredited to observe the Early Voting.

19. The Mission notes the absence of provision for Early Voting for Electoral Staff, security agencies and other essential staff on duty.
V. VOTER REGISTRATION

20. The Constitution provides for universal suffrage, with citizens who have attained the age of eighteen (18) being eligible to vote.

21. A total of 3,374,258 were registered, an increase of 195,595 from 2018. However, the Mission notes that the ECSL did not provide comprehensive disaggregated voter register data as requested by some electoral stakeholders.

22. Some stakeholders consulted raised concerns on the quality of the cards which did not show voters’ pictures accurately and the delay in delivering voters cards in some areas.

VI. ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

23. The Mission noted with concern that campaigns in some parts of the country were marred by politically motivated violence spurred by the general mistrust especially between the two main political parties (SLPP and the APC). Violence incidents included torching of party offices and physical attacks, resulting in injuries and a reported death in Freetown.

VII. SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

24. The Mission was informed that several measures had been put in place to ensure peace and security. Through the Office of National Security (ONS), a total of 17000 security personnel were deployed, drawn from the different security clusters of whom 80% were from the Police Force. The primary role of the security personnel was to ensure the safety of voters, stakeholders, and election officials, as well as election materials.

25. The Mission observed that elections took place amidst a politically tense environment and insecurity in some parts of the country, particularly in the strongholds of the two major political parties (SLPP and APC).

VIII. ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND ELECTION OBSERVERS

26. The Mission commends the active role played by various Civil Society Organisations in championing advocacy for reforms for marginalised groups, civic and voter education, peace initiatives and election observation.

27. The Mission also observed efforts by the CSOs in setting up of situation rooms to ensure peaceful elections through data collection, and efforts were focused on peace messaging, mediation all aimed at promoting a culture of political tolerance and dialogues.

IX. POLITICAL PARTY REGISTRATION AND NOMINATION OF CANDIDATES

28. In line with the legal provisions, the nomination of presidential candidates was conducted from 30 April to 09 May 2023. Out of the seventeen (17) registered political parties only 13 presented presidential candidates, of whom only one is female.
29. Three hundred (300) candidates were gazetted for the Parliamentary elections. The Mission noted that the final list of candidates was only gazetted on 20 June 2023 with only three days to the elections.

X. ELECTION DAY OBSERVATION

The Mission observed that voting was largely peaceful although a few polling stations experienced tension due to the late arrival of materials. The Mission however noted that voting was slow which could be attributed to inadequate training.

The AUEOM deployed 50 observers in 12 districts across the country, namely Bo, Bombali, Kambia, Karene, Kenema, Koinadugu, Kono, Port Loko, Pujehun, Tonkolili, Western Area Rural, And Western Area Urban.

On Election Day, the observers visited 219 polling stations to observe the opening, voting, closing and counting procedures in urban 44.3% (97) and rural 55.7% (122) areas.

a. Opening of polling
30. The AUEOM observed opening procedures at 17 polling stations across all six regions and 12 districts. The AUEOM noted that 53.9% (118) of the polling stations visited opened on time, at 07h00.

31. A total of 46.1% (101) of the polling stations visited by the AUEOM opened late due mostly to the late arrival of polling materials: 69.3% (70), poor preparations by polling officials: 27.7% (28), late arrival of polling officials: 5.0% (5), violence/security concerns: 4.0% (4), and other reasons: 9.9% (10) such as delocalisation of the polling station as the security personell could not contain the crowd.

32. There were controlled queues outside the polling stations visited before and during the opening of the poll. However, chaotic queues/poor crowd control and unruly voter behaviour were also reported in a few instances.

b. Election materials
33. Essential election materials were available in adequate quantity in 85.8% (188) of the polling stations visited. Essential materials such as Validating Stamps, Ballot papers, Register of Voters, Indelible ink, Ballot box(es), Security Seals, Tamper Evident Envelope, Presiding Officer’s Journal, and Polling Centre Manager’s Journal were missing in 15% of the polling stations.

34. The AUEOM also noted the late arrival of the materials which caused the late opening of polls in some visited polling stations.

35. While Ballot boxes were sealed properly in 94.5% (207) of the voting stations visited, the leads (covers) of the ballot boxes were not matching the boxes which were incorrectly sealed particularly in 11252 SDA Primary School Sembehun polling station in Bo district.

a. Polling stations
36. The AUEOM noted that most polling stations were easily accessible to the voters. Where accessibility was challenged (34.2%), polling station ground not levelled or flattened appropriately,
crowds obstructing the entrance, and polling stations located upstairs were reported as the main causes.

b. Election personnel
37. The opening process raised concerns about the training of the polling personnel and their preparedness as 66.7% of AU observers reported late opening of polls due to poor preparation. The polling staff were not easily identifiable and shortage of the ECSL kit and was reported.


c. Observers and party/candidate agents
38. The AUEOM noted the presence of other international observers and citizen observers in most stations visited. The participation of citizen observers contributed to enhancing the credibility and transparency of the electoral process.
39. The AUEOM noted that party and candidate agents were present at most polling stations visited and could carry out their mandate without hindrances and with a high degree of tolerance.

d. Participation of women and youth
40. The AUEOM noted the participation of women and youth as polling officials and as party/candidate agents.

e. Voting procedures
41. Voting proceeded uninterrupted in most polling stations visited throughout the day. Where there was an interruption (5.5% (12), it was due to bad weather, insufficient materials, or unrest.
42. The secrecy of the vote was guaranteed in most polling stations visited. The AUEOM noted that priority and assistance were extended to persons living with disabilities (PWDs), the elderly, expecting women, mothers with infants, and other persons with special needs.
43. Despite a few cases during closing and counting where security officers were inside the polling stations, the AUEOM noted that they conducted themselves professionally.

f. Closing of the polls
44. Most stations (78.6% (11)) closed on time, at 17h00. All voters in the queue at the closing time were allowed to cast their vote. The stations that opened late closed also late to compensate for time lost at the opening.
45. The Mission reported that there were voters in the queues at the closing of polls in centres visited, and they were allowed to cast their vote.

g. Counting of votes
46. Closing and counting processes took place in a generally peaceful atmosphere.
47. Observers reported compliance with the closing and counting procedures at the majority of polling stations. However, in Njala Campus polling center, Bo district in the Southern region, certain steps were skipped such as the reconciliation of ballots. In the same polling centre, unused ballots were also left unattended and unsupervised on the table at closing.
48. There was insufficient lighting during the counting. However, the Mission noted efforts by ECSL to provide a mini solar lamp at all polling centres.

49. All the necessary documentation at the end of the processes was completed and results were published at most polling stations and candidate agents provided with a copy of the results form.

XI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

50. Overall, AUEOM observed that elections were conducted in a generally peaceful, transparent, and credible manner, up to the counting on polling day, despite reported incidents of violence particularly during the pre-election period.

51. The AUEOM commends the people of Sierra Leone for their enthusiasm, commitment and resilience to express their will at the polls and their unwavering commitment to maintaining democratic stability.

The Mission further proffers the following preliminary recommendations for consideration in improving future electoral processes:

- The government should put in place measures to ensure the peace and stability of the country to safeguard the security of all citizens.
- The ECSL adopt continuous improvement and transparency in engaging stakeholders to avoid mistrust and enhance confidence in the electoral process.
- Provide comprehensive voter register data to allow for targeted interventions in the electoral process to improve participation.
- Provide the gazetted list of candidates before official campaigns season to allow them sufficient time to campaign.
- The ECSL to make provision for Early voting for ECSL staff, media and security personnel working on election day.
- Political parties should refrain from violence, hate speech and any other acts that could undermine the stability of the country.
- Channel electoral disputes through the legally instituted mechanisms under the law.

I Thank you!