

AFRICAN UNION

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**AFRICAN UNION ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION TO THE 2018
GENERAL ELECTIONS IN**

THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE

COMMUNIQUE

Freetown, 9 March 2018

I. INTRODUCTION

The African Union deployed 40 observers including 8 long term observers who will continue to remain in the country to observe post-election developments.

This Statement is made taking cognizance of the fact that the electoral process is still ongoing with votes being tallied. The Statement presents the Mission's preliminary findings and observations up to and including the closing and counting processes on 7 March 2018.

A final detailed report will be released upon the conclusion of the electoral process and will be shared with the relevant Sierra Leonean authorities.

II. ELECTION DAY FINDINGS

On Election Day, the AUEOM observed the opening and closing processes in 18 polling stations and observed the voting process in 192 polling stations of which 55.2% (106) were in rural areas and 44.8% (86) in urban areas.

The Mission noted that the polling day processes unfolded peacefully and orderly.

The findings and observations of the AUEOM include the following:

(a) Opening of the Poll

The AUEOM observed the opening at 18 polling stations in 15 districts. The Mission coverage of polls opening counted 88.9% (16) of the polling stations in urban areas and 11.1% (2) in rural areas. Observers reported queues outside the polling stations prior to opening, while in some instances observers noted that voters were not properly directed to the appropriate polling stations.

The Mission also reported late opening at 38.9% (7) of the polling stations visited. However, voting began at no later than 7:30AM except for mayoral election at isolated places in Bonthe. The late opening was largely due to the late set-up of polling stations by officials and in one case, the late arrival of polling materials (ballot boxes, presiding officer's journal) at the Any Barray Court polling center in Bonthe.

All 16 teams of AU observers reported a peaceful environment inside and outside the polling stations with the exception of one (1) in Kroo House 16163 polling centre, Western Urban, where poor crowd control and visible campaign materials near the perimeter of the station was reported.

The AU observers reported that 88.9% (16) of the polling stations were easily accessible for the elderly and persons with disabilities (PWDs) while 11.1% were not due to stairs or uneven platforms leading to the polling station.

Ballot boxes were sealed correctly in every station where the Mission observed the opening; (in full view of party agents and observers).

The AU observers noted that the layout of the polling stations promoted an orderly voting and secrecy of the ballot. However, the AUEOM noted congestion of voters outside some polling centers and proximity of some polling stations in a given center thereby making it difficult for voters to identify their allocated stations.

(b) Voting Process

Observers witnessed voter's identities being checked against the voters roll and in 2.6% of the stations, voters were turned away mainly for being at the wrong station. In 99.5% of polling stations visited, the voters' left index finger was marked with indelible ink after signing the electoral roll as per the law. In instances where assisted voting was required, person chosen by voter and polling personnel provided the assistance in 85.4% of the cases.

No forms of irregularity were observed during the voting process except the case where Ballot papers were not placed in the ballot boxes by the voters themselves. Rather it was the Ballot Controlling Officers who were collecting the ballot papers from the voters and placing them in the ballot boxes after folding. This occurred at ***Kulafai Rashideen Primary School*** polling center, Western Urban, Western Region.

While observers reported sufficient polling materials in 98.6% of polling stations visited, the voting process was stopped in 2.1% of the polling stations due to insufficient materials.

Additionally, the Mission reported average participation of women as polling staff and low participation as party agents despite the higher number of women on the voter roll.

Observers were satisfied with the voting process in most polling stations, and the overall conduct of polling procedures was assessed as generally good.

(c) Polling Personnel

Most polling stations were managed by the correct number of polling staff (7) of which 41% were women. The observers also noted the high representation of young people among the polling staff.

The AUEOM reported that in most polling stations visited, the polling personnel performed their duties competently, adhering to procedures in accordance with the laws and electoral regulations of Sierra Leone.

(d) Party Agents and Independent Observers

The AU Mission observed the presence of political party agents and domestic observers at all the polling stations visited on Election Day. However, the Mission noted a low presence of women as political party agents.

The presence of domestic observer groups was noted at most polling stations visited by the AUEOM with the presence of women domestic observers amounting to 41%. In this regard, the Mission commends the presence of New Election Watch (NEW) observers who were present at all the polling stations visited.

(e) Security Personnel

Security personnel were present at most voting stations visited by the Mission, and remained present during the close and counting process. In some occurrences, their presence was not visible to the public (18.8%). AU observers described the security presence which was deemed sometimes insufficient as mostly 'discreet' and 'professional'.

(f) Closing and counting process

The AUEOM observed the closing and counting procedures in 18 voting stations of 13 districts in all regions. The Mission coverage of closing and counting covered 83.3% (15) in urban and 16.7% (3) in rural areas.

AUEOM observers noted that 94.1% of the stations visited closed at 5:00PM while 5.9% remained opened for 15 minutes to compensate for the late opening. The Mission observed that there were no voters in the queue at the closing of polls.

In all 18 polling stations, the count was conducted at the polling station adhering to the counting process in accordance with the laws and regulations of Sierra Leone. The Mission reported that 23.5% of the stations where the count was observed did not have adequate lighting. The counting was done in full view of party agents and observer groups and in all 18 Polling stations, no interference was witnessed in the

counting process. Moreover, there were no records of irregularities with the ballot boxes and no AU observer reported a discrepancy with the reconciliation.

The AUEOM observed the competence of the polling staff and party agents during closing and counting procedures as largely good.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the aforementioned findings and observations, the AUEOM makes the following recommendations in order to improve future electoral processes in Sierra Leone:

The Government:

- Consider appropriate affirmative action measures, including quotas, to enhance women's participation in the elective process.

Security Agencies

- Ensure security measures such as restriction of vehicular movement on Election Day does not affect the participation of voters in the electoral process.

The National Electoral Commission:

- Undertake measures to reinforce training of polling personnel;
- Review the voter education campaigns conducted for the 2018 elections and incorporate lessons to improve future elections;
- Calls on NEC to conduct the ongoing tallying process in an effective and transparent manner; and
- Regularly inform the people on the tallying process to avoid misinformation; as well as expedite announcement of results to prevent anxiety.

Political Parties and candidates:

- Refrain from using intemperate language and other forms of intimidation during the electoral process;
- Exercise restraint in their pronouncements and actions as they await the completion of the tallying process;

- Channel any disputes regarding the electoral outcomes through the appropriate legal channels as per the Sierra Leonean legal framework; and
- Create conditions to foster women's access to leadership positions within political parties.

IV. CONCLUSION

The AUEOM applauds the people of Sierra Leone for their commitment to upholding democracy as demonstrated by their patience and civil conduct on Election Day. Based on its observations and findings, the AUEOM considers the 7 March 2018 elections as largely peaceful and transparent until now.

The AUEOM concludes that the 2018 general elections were generally conducted in line with the national legal framework as well as the regional, continental and international standards for democratic elections.

As the National Electoral Commission (NEC) completes the final phases of the electoral process, the AUEOM implores all candidates, political parties and all Sierra Leoneans to preserve peace and security in the country.

Once again, the AUEOM congratulate the people of Sierra Leone for peaceful elections.

Freetown, 9 March 2018

Head of Mission

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