



I. INTRODUCTION

1. On 24 June 2023, Sierra Leonean voters went to the polls to elect a President, Parliamentarians, Mayors or District Council Chairpersons, and Local Councilors.
2. Consistent with provisions of Articles 12 and 13 of the ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which mandates the Commission of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to provide assistance to member States conducting elections, the ECOWAS Commission:
 - Deployed a pre-electoral fact-finding mission, jointly conducted with the African Union (AU);
 - Provided capacity building for stakeholders on Dialogue and Mediation;
 - Conducted training on media in Election Reporting;
 - Had an engagement with the Chief Executives and Senior Editors of Media Houses on management of Election Reporting in partnership with the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL),
 - Provided financial assistance to the tune of USD 500,000, in support of the conduct of the general elections.
3. The purpose of the Joint ECOWAS-African Union pre-electoral fact-finding Mission was to assess the state of preparedness of the election management body and other critical stakeholders. In particular, the Joint Mission held discussions with the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL), the Political Party Regulations Commission (PPRC), the Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion (ICPNC), the Office of National Security (ONS), the Sierra Leone Police service, political parties, including the Sierra Leone

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Peoples Party (SLPP) and All People's Congress (APC), and Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDA), civil society organizations and representatives of Diplomatic Missions.

4. Based on its findings, the ECOWAS Commission deployed appropriate preventive diplomacy measures, including the facilitation of an interactive workshop on dialogue and mediation for political actors and stakeholders on peaceful elections, in partnership with the Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion (ICPNC). The Commission equally organized training for targeted media professionals in both print and electronic, including social media in three regions, namely: Freetown, Bo and Port Loko. This was followed up with engagements with Chief Executives and Senior Editors of Media Houses on Election Reporting in partnership with the ECSL, with the aim of addressing the challenges of disinformation, misinformation and mal-information.
5. In the build up to the 24 June 2023 election, and in furtherance of provisions of Articles 14 to 16 of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, the President of the ECOWAS Commission, **His Excellency Dr. Omar Alieu Touray**, deployed an Election Observation Mission (EOM) comprising 15 Long-Term and 80 Short-Term observers to Sierra Leone. The mission is led by **His Excellency Dr. Mohamed Ibn Chambas**, AU Special Envoy on Silencing the Guns, former Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel and a former President of the ECOWAS Commission. The Head of Mission is assisted by **His Excellency Ambassador Ansoumana Ceesay**, former Special Representative of the ECOWAS President to Liberia and Guinea-Bissau. The Mission is supported by a technical team from the ECOWAS Commission, led by the Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, **Ambassador Abdel-Fatau Musah**, and the Resident Representative of ECOWAS in Sierra Leone, **Ambassador Harouna Moussa**.

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6. The ECOWAS EOM is deployed with a mandate to observe the conduct of critical phases before, during and after electoral process, with a view to making critical recommendations for the improvement of the electoral process in the future. The EOM also serves as a rapid response mechanism for preventive diplomacy initiatives on challenges around the electoral processes.
7. The membership of the EOM is drawn from the ECOWAS Parliament, Community Court of Justice, the ECOWAS Permanent Representatives Committee, the Council of the Wise, Foreign Affairs Ministries and Electoral Commissions of Member States, as well as Civil Society Organizations.

II. CONTEXT OF THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS

8. The 2023 General elections are the fifth consecutive nationwide elections in Sierra Leone since the end of the civil war in 2002, and the second since the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL) completed its mandate in March 2014. It is also the second elections to be mainly funded and independently managed by the country. The country has also successfully navigated two transitions of power between a ruling political party and an opposition party, thus strengthening the country's credentials as a stable multi-party democracy in the West African region.
9. The 2023 General elections are taking place at a critical point in the political landscape of the region including lingering economic impacts of COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and three Member States suspended by ECOWAS over military take-over of democratic governments.
10. Following the passage of an amended Public Elections Act and the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act in 2022, the legal framework for the conduct of the 2023 General elections introduced some innovations to the

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electoral process, most significantly the obligation for political parties to ensure that at least 30% of candidates for elective offices are women. This signals a commendable commitment to increase women's participation and representation in politics and governance.

11. Other novelties of the 2023 electoral reforms and process are the use of the Proportional Representation system for both the Parliamentary and Local Council elections. The ECOWAS Election Observation Mission, however, notes the general perception of trust deficits among stakeholders in the electoral process, especially with the introduction of the Proportional Representation system.
12. Using data obtained from the National Civil Registration Authority (NCRA), the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL) embarked on a voter registration exercise that involved verification of biometric data, for citizens already captured in the Civil Register, and the capturing of biometric data for eligible citizens who had not yet been captured in the Civil Register. At the end of the process in December 2022, the ECSL had registered three million, three hundred and seventy-four thousand, two hundred and fifty-eight (3,374,258) voters. The distribution of voters' cards was carried out between February and March 2023. However, there were complaints of some voters' cards having blurry pictures.
13. The election campaign period kicked off on 23 May 2023 and ran through to 22 June 2023. On 25 May 2023, all the Presidential candidates signed the Electoral Pledge, committing themselves, and their political parties, to upholding peace before, during and after the elections. The parties also agreed to use legal means to seek redress for any electoral disputes. The ECOWAS Mission notes that although campaign events were largely peaceful, there were some skirmishes between supporters of the two main political parties, the SLPP and

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the APC. The use of social media platforms to spread hate speech, misinformation, and incite violence was prevalent. The Mission noted reports of attacks against the offices and homes of political party members and leaders in some parts of the country, including the Secretariat of the All Peoples' Congress (APC) in Bo and the home of one of its members in Kono, respectively.

14. The Mission notes the relative freedom the media enjoy, with both the print and electronic media landscape in Sierra Leone offering plural and diverse platforms for citizens to have access to relevant information on the electoral process.
15. On 15 June 2023, early voting was organized for registered voters traveling to Mecca for the Muslim pilgrimage. Although the aim was to ensure that eligible voters are not disenfranchised by virtue of observance of their religious obligations, the exercise was marred by controversy owing to insufficient communication by the ECSL and the source of the ballot papers used. It should be noted that the ballot papers for the 2023 General elections were printed in South Africa and arrived in Sierra Leone on 17 June 2023.

III. ENGAGEMENTS WITH STAKEHOLDERS

16. Upon arrival in Freetown on 20 June 2023, the Head of Mission and his delegation held consultations with relevant stakeholders on the electoral process, including with the President of the Republic and candidate of the SLPP, H.E. Maada Bio, the APC candidate, Dr. Samura Kamara and other presidential candidates and political parties taking part in the election.
17. The Mission equally held consultations with the Chairperson and Commissioners of the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (ECSL) and the Political

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Parties Regulation Commission (PPRC), the Office of National Security (ONS), the Inspector General of Police and other critical stakeholders including Civil Society organizations and the National Early Warning and Response Mechanisms Coordination Centre (NEWRMC-SL). The pre-election meetings were to assess preparedness for the elections and concerns raised by some political parties and candidates. In particular, the ECSL assured the Mission of its readiness and commitment to conduct credible, free, fair and transparent elections in compliance with the electoral legal framework.

18. The Mission also held consultations with other Heads of International Election Observation Missions, including the African Union (AU), the Commonwealth, the European Union (EU), the Carter Center, the West Africa Elders Forum (WAEF), as well as the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel.
19. Following concerns raised by some stakeholders about violence and intimidation, alleged misuse of social media and modalities for the tallying and transmission of election results, the ECOWAS and AU Election Observation Missions issued a Joint Statement on 22 June 2023, calling on all stakeholders to be guided by the spirit of consensus building based on the rule of law and to adhere to the political parties' code of conduct. The Statement also urged the security forces to remain apolitical and professional in the discharge of their duties toward all citizens, cognizant of the rights of all under the Constitution of Sierra Leone. It further called on the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL) to remain impartial in the execution of its mandate, in the greater interest of all Sierra Leoneans, and for citizens and civil society groups to continue the pursuit of initiatives aimed at promoting peaceful elections and national cohesion.

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IV. ELECTION DAY

20. On Election Day, the Mission deployed 95 observers, grouped into 39 observer teams, in 15 Districts. The observers visited 337 Polling stations spread across both urban (44%) and rural areas (56%), and reported the following:

Opening of the polls

21. In a significant number of Polling stations visited (57.14%), polling staff and materials did not arrive before the scheduled start time of 7:00 am. Notably, at Polling Centre 16059 at Apple School field in Wellington, Freetown, where ballot papers were not available. Polling staff explained that the ballot papers had been taken to another Polling Center at Gideon Secondary School. Similarly, at Polling Unit number 3 of Methodist High School in Bo, polling staff arrived well after the official commencement time of 7:00 am. In addition, a Polling Centre at SOS International School at the Lumley Beach Road, election materials did not arrive until after 8:45 am, and even when they arrived the ballot boxes did not have covers, causing delays in commencement of the polls. These delays caused frustrations among some voters, who got agitated.
22. In 37% of Polling stations observed, polling commenced within the first hour while in 63% of cases polling started with considerable delays due to the late arrival of polling staff and materials.
23. Polling Centres were however easily identifiable to voters.
24. The atmosphere at Polling stations was generally peaceful with security agents present in 92% of the stations visited.



25. On average, there were about five (5) party and/or candidate agents present at the polling stations visited, with SLPP represented in 98% of Polling stations and APC represented in 94% of Polling stations.
26. There were domestic and international election observers from the African Union, European Union, National Elections Watch (NEW), Election Observers Network, Pentecostal Fellowship of Sierra Leone, and West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network.

Polling process

27. Almost 98% of Polling stations were set up in a way that guaranteed the secrecy of the vote. In few cases, however, such as at Polling station no. 4 of the Polling Centre located at Hockey Pitch 1 by football field pavilion in Wilberforce (Western Area Urban), the voting screen was placed such that it did not provide adequate cover for voters to secretly express their choice.
28. In general, voters were required to present their voter's card to cast their vote. Nonetheless, in 8% of Polling stations visited, observers witnessed voters being allowed to vote without their voter's card. Such voters either presented their voter registration slip or other forms of identity that tallied with the details on the voters' register. There were also cases, notably at Sierra Leone Grammar School in Aberdeen (Western Area Urban), Administrative Court in Kambia, and Port Loko Catholic Primary School (North-West Region), where voters who had voter's cards could not find their names on the Voters' register and were thus not allowed to vote.
29. Voting materials were generally available in sufficient quantities. However, in 7% of Polling stations visited, there was one type of electoral material or the other that was not available, such as indelible ink, Reconciliation and Results

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Forms (RRF), Gender Tally sheets, Tamper-evident envelopes (TEEs), and ink-pads.

30. It is also instructive to note that most of the polling stations visited the polling agents and officials were not easily identifiable as they had no official attire, neither badges to identify them.

31. With respect to inclusion, 63% of Polling stations visited were accessible to Persons living with Disability (PWDs). Observers also reported that there were tactile ballot jackets in 33% of the Polling stations.

32. Observers did not witness any active campaigning around the Polling centres visited.

33. A notable incident occurred at the Polling Centre located at U.M.C Primary School, Ropolor Road in Tonkolili, where the Ballot Paper Issuer 1 was only issuing ballot papers for the Legislative election and not the Presidential election. Chaos ensued at around 11:45 am when the APC District Youth leader came and noticed the situation. The ensuing chaos led to security agents intervening and stopping the process. Similarly, observers in Kono confirmed an attack on the APC Deputy Mayoral candidate, Mr. Sillah, by some youths in the area.

Closing and counting

34. Despite the delays experienced at the opening, 52% of Polling Stations visited closed on time. In the 13% of Polling stations where voters were still waiting to vote, they were allowed to do so.

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35. Security agents were present at the close of polls in 97% of the Polling stations observed.

36. In 84% of Polling stations visited, the lighting conditions when vote-counting commenced were adequate but as the process proceeded they deteriorated significantly. Sorting and counting of ballot papers was done at the Polling stations and in clear view of party agents and observers.

37. Reconciliation and Results Forms (RRFs) were filled out at the Polling station and party agents allowed to endorse them.

V. PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

38. The mission notes that despite some early challenges, polling generally proceeded smoothly and in a largely peaceful atmosphere, and eligible voters were able to freely participate in the process.

39. The mission commends the sense of patriotism exhibited by polling staff, the security forces, the general populace, who collectively played their parts in ensuring a peaceful conduct of the 2023 general elections.

40. The mission, however, expresses regret that major political parties pre-empted the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL) by rushing to announce their "victory" in the polls before the official announcement by the ECSL.

41. The ECOWAS Election Observation Mission wishes to appeal to all stakeholders, particularly the political parties, candidates and their supporters, the security forces and the general citizenry to remain calm and patiently await the announcement of the results by the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone.



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42. Similarly the Mission wishes to appeal to candidates and political parties to refrain from making any statements that may lead to a breach of the peace.
43. The Mission further urges the Electoral Commission to diligently, but urgently, work to ensure the timely release of the results to avoid any tensions.
44. The Mission reminds the candidates and the political parties of their commitment under the Election Pledge to use only lawful channels in addressing any disputes emerging out of the conduct of the 2023 general elections.
45. The Mission highly praises the patience and sense of patriotism so far exhibited by the vast majority of the electorate, and would wish to urge same display of high sense of maturity, whilst awaiting the official announcement of the results by the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone.

Done in Freetown, Sierra Leone, on 26 June 2023

H.E. DR. MOHAMED IBN CHAMBAS
HEAD, ECOWAS ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION