



HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION OF SIERRA LEONE

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON POLLING DAY MONITORING OF THE 24TH JUNE 2023 MULTI TIER ELECTIONS

*Freetown International Conference Centre
Freetown, 26th June 2023*

The Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRCSL), pursuant to Section 7(2)(f) of the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone Act No. 9 of 2004 is the institution responsible for the protection and promotion of human rights of all in Sierra Leone. On 24th June, HRCSL continued rolling out its ‘**2023 Elections Preparedness Strategy**’ that has five pillars consisting of Monitoring (pre, during and post), Capacity Building/Training, Public Education, Complaints Handling (setting up our Situation Room) and Reporting.

One hundred and seventy (170) trained monitors comprising of Commissioners, staff, members from the District Human Rights Committee (a consortium of CSOs), Human Rights Working Group, volunteers and youth ambassadors were deployed nationwide to monitor the conduct of the elections on polling day, with the objective of assessing the enjoyment of human rights, being an integral part of the electoral process. Over 400 polling centres were monitored.

The HRCSL Situation Room, which was launched on 22nd June, remained active to receive calls and WhatsApp messages from our monitors and the public.

Information from the field, including 78 calls received at the Situation Room, attracted prompt actions through engagements with relevant stakeholders in the electioneering process.

A summary of the initial findings are as follows:

- ***Right to Participate:*** Section 31(1) of the Constitution of Sierra Leone 1991 states that “*every citizen of Sierra Leone being eighteen years of age and above and of sound mind shall have the right to vote, and accordingly shall be entitled to be registered as a voter for the purposes of public elections and referenda*”.

Additionally, Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) states:

“every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity... (a) To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives; (b) To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors” (with similar provision in Article 21(1) & (3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).



The Commission observed long queues of right holders at the various polling stations across the country waiting to cast their votes with enthusiasm in an atmosphere that was largely calm and peaceful.

- ***Freedom of movement*** was freely enjoyed by all as there was no obstruction of persons or vehicles. Citizens were seen freely enjoying this right as movements went unhindered across the country.
- ***Opening and Closing of Polling Stations:*** The polls were scheduled by the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (ECSL) to open at 7a.m. and close at 5p.m. The Commission observed that voting started between 7:05 a.m. and 10 a.m. at most of the polling stations. Stations that started late were related to challenges such as late arrival of election materials and in some instances inadequate number of ECSL staff to carry out their duties.

The Commission recorded few incidents of tensions at some polling stations largely due to the late opening. Some polling stations where voting commenced late had the time extended after 5 p.m. giving all the opportunity to cast their votes. The Commission did not receive any report of any voter being disenfranchised at the stations monitored.

- ***Priority Voters (Respect for persons with disability, pregnant women, lactating mothers and the aged):*** Staff of ECSL gave preferential treatment to persons in the named category by giving them earlier access to the polling stations in accordance with good practice.

Accredited observers, security personnel and other uniform workers who were registered to vote were also given priority to enable them vote early and undertake their duties at their assigned locations.

- ***Accessibility:*** Many of the polling centres were within easy reach of the communities they covered. However quite a few polling centres had rugged terrains or disability unfriendly stairs to enter the centres i.e. Buxton Memorial School, Charles Street and St. Theresa, Black Hall Road. Nevertheless, ECSL staff provided assistance to such persons to ensure they were able to cast their votes. At Christ Church Polling Center for e.g., a ramp was improvised by ECSL to allow wheel chairs access the center.
- ***Visually-impaired Voters:*** Tactile ballots guide for visually-impaired voters were available and displayed in some centres, but in others, the ECSL allowed a trusted person to accompany the voter to assist in the voting. This procedure allowed the visually-impaired voter to participate in the process, but compromised the secrecy of the vote.



- ***Maintenance of Law and Order:*** Security Forces were stationed at each polling centre monitored, with one or two armed OSD/military personnel around the precincts. Roving security teams were also seen and deployed at centres where reports of violence were received. Security personnel were found to be professional in the execution of their duties and they contributed in maintaining law and order in polling stations that were found to be very chaotic. The Office of National Security (ONS) and ECSL were very proactive in responding to calls from the HRCSL Situation Room on few skirmishes at some polling stations to which their attention was drawn.
- ***Identification of Polling Stations within the centres:*** At some polling stations there were no visible identification labels of voters and, there were also no ECSL officials to direct voters on which station they should find their names to vote. This caused confusion and tensions in some polling stations.
- ***Identification of ECSL personnel:*** Many stations did not have ECSL personnel with ID cards or wearing an ECSL overcoat. Upon enquiry HRCSL was informed that some staff expressed fear of wearing the ECSL identification materials, while others informed the team that it was due to un-availability of such. To some extent, this posed some challenges in identifying polling station managers to refer concerns. As a result, voters were left with no alternative but to seek assistance from observers who were clearly identified with the organizational overcoats.
- ***Violence against ECSL personnel:*** The Commission observed the inhuman and degrading treatment meted against ECSL personnel at some polling stations in the North and North-West.
- ***Observation of the voting process:*** The presence of Political Party Observers was glaring in every polling stations visited, notably were the APC and the SLPP. Other party representatives included NGC, NDA, ADP, CDP, UDM and representatives of independent candidates seen at few centres were allowed to observe the voting at each polling centre and make interventions during the process as and when necessary. They were also seen with the ECSL supplied FVR list, which they used to verify voters. The list provided was not sorted alphabetically within the surname, adding to delays in identifying voters with common surnames on the list.

Observers were also present for counting and tallying. Where agents were present, they signed the Results Reconciliation Form (RRF) as agents.



- **Other Observers:** Local, Regional and International (roaming) Observers were glaring and freely accessed polling stations countrywide. Notable among them were: West African Network for Peace (WANEP), Elections Observer Network (EON), Native Consortium, National Union of Photographers, Civil Rights Coalition, National Election Watch (NEW), Citizens Advocacy Network (CAN), West African Independent Observers Group, Kofi Annan International Peace Keeping Training Center (KAIPKTC), Women's Forum, Caritas, Council of Churches (CCSL) African Union, ECOWAS, Carter Centre, UN Women, European Union and the Commonwealth.

The other elections bodies, Office of National Security (ONS) and Political Party Regulations Commission (PPRC), were also seen roaming.

Media houses and journalists were seen moving freely to cover the situation on the ground.

- **Transparency of the voting process:** Almost all of the polling stations were openly situated. Counting of ballot papers commenced after the close of polls and were done in the presence of all political party representatives and accredited observers. In some stations there were insufficient RRFs and so the information was written on a sheet of paper and party agents signed and allowed to take a snapshot of the information. The RRFs were seen pasted on the walls of locations where voting took place which gave the opportunity to representatives from political parties and other observers to take snap shots for onward transmission.

Generally polling day was peaceful except for isolated skirmishes which were subsequently brought under control by the security forces.

HRCSL is therefore satisfied that despite the few issues identified, overall the right to participation was fully enjoyed by all rights holders at the centres monitored.

HRCSL takes this opportunity to congratulate all Sierra Leoneans for undertaking a peaceful election and also commend the Election Management Bodies (ECSL, the Security Sector, PPRC, ICPNC etc) and all the national and international observers for managing the elections and observing the process respectively.

END.

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