

ARRIVAL STATEMENT
CHAIR OF THE COMMONWEALTH OBSERVER GROUP
TO THE MULTI-TIER ELECTIONS IN SIERRA LEONE
HE Prof Yemi Osinbajo
Immediate Past Vice President of Nigeria
Freetown, 19 June 2023

Members of the media

Fellow observers

Citizens of Sierra Leone

It is a privilege to be here once again in Freetown... I am home.

Today, I am here not only as a neighbor and fellow African, but also, as a fellow Commonwealth citizen, standing for the precious values we all share: peace, democracy, the rule of law and good governance. It is an honor for me to Chair the Commonwealth Observer Group to witness the multi-tier elections taking place within the coming days, on 24 June.

Our 12-member Observer Group was constituted by the Commonwealth Secretary-General, The Rt Hon Patricia Scotland KC, following an invitation from the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone to observe the poll. Members have been drawn from across the entire Commonwealth, representing a wealth of experience, and include experts in law, politics, election administration, human rights, media and civil society. The Group is supported by a staff team from the Commonwealth Secretariat led by Linford Andrews Head of Electoral Support at the Commonwealth Secretariat.

I am sure I speak for all of us when I say that the warm welcome we have received in Sierra Leone has lived up to and even exceeded its reputation as the “Home of Hospitality”.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Commonwealth Secretariat has had a long-standing engagement with Sierra Leone dating back to its independence, when the country became an independent state within the Commonwealth in 1961.

The Commonwealth has observed every election in Sierra Leone since the end of the civil war in 2002, as well as the General Elections of 1996. In other words, the Commonwealth has been an enduring companion of the nation on this

extraordinary journey, witnessing the country's evolution into what it is today. Today, we recognize the significance of these elections to the people of Sierra Leone, the region and the global community - and we wholly appreciate the challenges they present. The gains achieved over the last two decades of peacetime is a testament to the democratic spirit of its people, and must be cherished, nurtured and leveraged for continued peaceful and sustainable development. That is why, as the Commonwealth Observer Group, we are honored to be a part of this important democratic process.

But let me be clear:

The Commonwealth Observer Group has no executive role; its function is not to interfere with, but to observe the process as a whole and to make recommendations accordingly. We will observe the pre-election environment, polling day activities and the post-election period, In particular we will consider whether the conditions exist for credible elections, including a fair election environment; whether public media has been impartial; the transparency of the entire process; whether voters are free to express their will; and whether the counting and results process is transparent. We will then report on whether the elections have been conducted in accordance with the standards to which Sierra Leone has committed itself, including its national law, and regional and international commitments.

In conducting our duties, we will be guided by the principles of neutrality, impartiality, objectivity and independence. As we are here in our individual capacities as responsible and experienced Commonwealth citizens, our assessment will be our own, and not that of any member government. That said, we have a very active period ahead of us.

Over the coming days we will be meeting stakeholders including the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone, government representatives, political parties, security agencies, civil society groups, citizen and international observer groups, diplomats, and the media. From the 22nd of June, we will deploy our observers in small teams across various parts of the country to observe the voting, counting and results process, as well as meet with other stakeholders in respective locations. On Election Day, we will observe the opening, voting, closing, counting and the results management processes. We will issue an interim statement on our preliminary findings on the 26th of June, before members of the Group depart Sierra Leone on the 30th of June. A final report will then be prepared and submitted to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, and subsequently shared with relevant stakeholders and made publicly available.

Friends, colleagues,

As you are well aware, this is a crucial and delicate period. It is my hope that our presence here affirms the unwavering support of the Commonwealth to this country and its democratic processes. The eyes of more than 2.5 billion people of the Commonwealth - more than 60% of whom are young people under the age of 30 - will be upon Sierra Leone. Watching, in solidarity and in hope. The peaceful and prosperous future of the nation lies in your hands. And in that future, violence, division and hate cannot play a part. The hard lessons that history has taught us through the tragic loss of lives and livelihoods - we cannot afford to repeat.

Therefore, as 3.3 million registered voters come forth to exercise their democratic right on Election Day, as this great nation expresses its will for its future, may peace, justice and national unity prevail above all. We enjoin all political parties and their supporters to uphold the commitments of the Electoral Pledge to free, fair and violence-free elections, signed by the political parties barely two weeks ago. And We encourage *all* citizens to do their part to ensure that a peaceful and credible process takes place on the 24th of June. As the Great Madiba, Nelson Mandela, once emphasized: It is not our diversity that divides us... only the division between those who cherish democracy, and those who do not. On behalf of the Commonwealth Observer Group, I wish the people of Sierra Leone well as they embark upon this election.

I thank you.