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**Interim Statement by Hon. Dr. Pelonomi Venson
Former Foreign Affairs Minister of Botswana
Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group**

1 May 2026 | St. John's, Antigua and Barbuda

Background

1. The people of Antigua and Barbuda, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, members of the media, fellow observers, Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for honouring our invitation.
2. The Commonwealth is honoured to have been invited to observe the 2026 General Elections in Antigua and Barbuda. It was in response to that invitation from the government, that the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Hon Shirley Botchwey, constituted this Group to observe the electoral process.
3. The Group arrived in the country on 25th April and will remain until 6th May 2026 to complete its mandate. As Chairperson, I am honoured to lead a Group of eminent persons drawn from across the Commonwealth, including experts in election management, civil society, and the media.
4. Our role is to provide an independent, informed, and impartial assessment of the electoral process, in accordance with the laws of Antigua and Barbuda, and to consider all factors that may affect the overall credibility of the elections. We are also to assess whether the elections were conducted in line with the democratic standards set out in the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and the 2018 Revised Guidelines on Commonwealth Election Observation, to which Commonwealth member countries are committed, including Antigua and Barbuda.
5. I now have the privilege to present our preliminary findings, based on our observations and engagements with a wide range of stakeholders.
6. Our final report, which will include key recommendations, will be submitted to the Secretary-General and shared with the Government of Antigua and Barbuda, the Antigua and Barbuda Electoral Commission, political parties, and other stakeholders, as well as the public.



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7. For a contextual understanding and assessment of the pre-election environment, the Group met with the Governor General, Prime Minister, leaders of the three political parties participating in these elections, the Antigua and Barbuda Electoral Commission, police, media, civil society, including organisations representing women, youth and persons living with disabilities, as well as those promoting electoral integrity.

Pre-election

8. The pre-election environment was characterised by sustained and highly visible campaigning across constituencies, with the political parties maintaining active outreach through rallies, community meetings, and media engagement. The contest between the incumbent administration led by the Antigua and Barbuda Labour Party and the major opposition United Progressive Party shaped much of the public discourse.

Campaign

9. The Commonwealth Observer Group observed final campaign activities across Antigua and Barbuda, including rallies and political events in various constituencies. These events were peaceful, well attended, and reflective of active citizen engagement in the democratic process. The fundamental rights of candidates, political parties, and their supporters' rights to assemble and campaign appeared to have been respected.
10. The Group notes concern regarding the regulatory framework governing campaign finance. While stakeholders highlighted the importance of transparency and accountability in political financing, there remains limited formal regulation in this area. This issue has been identified by stakeholders as an area requiring reform and greater oversight. Previous Commonwealth Observer Groups have also made recommendations to strengthen campaign finance legislation. In this regard, the Group encourages relevant authorities, political parties, and stakeholders to consider measures to strengthen the regulation and transparency of campaign financing, in line with international best practices, to enhance public confidence in the electoral process.

Media

11. The Opposition parties raised concerns that they did not receive equal treatment on state-owned platforms, which they felt contributed to an uneven playing field during the campaign period.



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12. In contrast, privately owned radio stations and newspapers tended to provide more diverse viewpoints, although some were aligned with political or ideological interests, which could influence how news was framed. Observers did question the long-term effect of this environment if it remained unmonitored given the reality that political propaganda does polarise.
13. Observers noted that during the election period, there were instances of polarised and personal attacks exchanged between political parties and candidates on radio stations and across social media platforms. We would advise that this be discouraged through editorial standards and clearer guidelines for respectful political communication, particularly during campaign periods, in order to promote more constructive public debate.
14. It is good practice for media workers and journalists to come together in an association to further advance their professional interests, including the drafting and promotion of codes of conduct in collaboration with civil society. These codes should guide responsible reporting generally and during elections in particular, helping to strengthen ethical journalism and public trust in the media.
15. We consider that the revival of the media association, which is currently defunct, could provide a useful platform for coordination, professional development, and the reinforcement of ethical standards across the sector.

Deployment

16. Our teams were deployed across all 17 constituencies in Antigua and Barbuda. In these locations, we observed pre-election preparations and engaged with election officials, security personnel, and other stakeholders to gain a deeper appreciation of the electoral process and the broader pre-election environment.

Election Day

Pre-poll procedures

17. The Antigua and Barbuda Electoral Commission (ABEC) distributed election materials to all polling stations observed. Polling staff carried out the required pre-poll procedures in accordance with the prescribed guidelines.



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Signage

18. The Group commends the Antigua and Barbuda Electoral Commission for providing clear and helpful signage at polling stations to support the smooth flow and organisation of the voting process. The deployment of information clerks outside the polling station is laudable. We observed information clerks and other polling officials assisting voters upon arrival and directing them to their assigned polling stations, which contributed positively to voter experience.

Conduct of the Polls

19. Most polling stations were at schools, churches and community buildings. The layout at polling stations observed ensured the protection of the secrecy of the ballot.

20. Polling officials generally adhered to opening procedures and polling stations that we observed were opened on time. Voting was conducted in a peaceful and orderly environment. Polling officials are to be commended for carrying out their duties with professionalism and transparency.

Political Party Agents

21. Political party agents were present at many polling stations observed by the Group and conducted themselves in a professional manner.

Presence of Security

22. Security personnel, including members of the Royal Police Force of Antigua and Barbuda and constabularies, were present at polling stations observed and maintained a non-intrusive presence.



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Participation and Inclusion

23. The Group noted active participation of both men and women as voters. A significant number of polling officials and party agents were women. In particular, the Group noted that Presiding Officers were mostly women.
24. The Group observed that elderly persons and persons with disabilities were assisted at observed polling stations. Despite challenges to accessibility in some locations, the assistance provided by polling officials to persons with disabilities and elderly voters is commendable and contributed to greater participation.

Citizen and International Election Observers

25. The Group interacted with the CARICOM and OAS Observer Missions.
26. The Group commends the Antigua and Barbuda Electoral Commission for providing a comprehensive information pack to observers. This pack included detailed information such as polling station locations, the number of registered voters per polling station, age and gender disaggregated data. This initiative reduced the need for observers to interact frequently with polling officials and helped avoid any obstruction to the smooth flow of voting at polling stations. This is a highly commendable practice that contributes to greater efficiency in the electoral process.

Close and Count

27. At the close of polls at 6:00 p.m., most polling stations had no significant queues. Polling officials largely followed established closing and counting procedures in a transparent and professional manner.

Conclusion and Post-Election Period

28. The Group commends the people of Antigua and Barbuda for participating in the electoral process in a peaceful and orderly manner. We also commend the Antigua and Barbuda Electoral Commission, polling staff, political parties, security personnel, and the media for their respective roles in contributing to the overall conduct of the elections.
29. The Group notes the relatively short timeframe within which the Antigua and Barbuda Electoral Commission had to organise and conduct the elections, as well as the commitment demonstrated by its officials within a competitive



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electoral environment. We urge the appropriate authority to ensure that adequate resources and support are provided to enable the Commission to effectively discharge its constitutional mandate and considering that an election is a constitutional right to be accessed by all citizens, all effort must be made to ensure that all players are accorded equal opportunity to participate for democracy to indeed thrive.

30. The Commonwealth Observer Group extends its congratulations to the Honourable Prime Minister Gaston Browne on his re-election and swearing-in following the 2026 General Elections. The Group wishes the Prime Minister every success in his leadership and looks forward to continued efforts to strengthen democratic governance, uphold the rule of law, and advance the development of the nation for the benefit of all citizens.
31. The people of Antigua and Barbuda have once again demonstrated their commitment to democratic principles through their participation in the electoral process. Our overall conclusion is that the elections were conducted in a peaceful and transparent manner. The Group will provide detailed recommendations on how the electoral process may be further improved in its final report, which will be made public.
32. The Group further encourages the conduct of a post-election review to assess and implement recommendations made by observer missions.
33. We are grateful not only for the hospitality extended to us, but also for the opportunity to witness the vibrant democratic engagement of the people of Antigua and Barbuda.

I thank you once again.

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