



## Rwanda Civil Society Platform Preliminary Statement on the 14-16 July 2024 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections in Rwanda

### Introduction

The Rwanda Civil Society Platform (RCSP) has conducted a comprehensive observation mission for the Presidential and Parliamentary Elections held on 15th to 16th July 2024 in Rwanda. This preliminary statement outlines our initial findings, observations, and recommendations based on our thorough monitoring of the electoral process.

### Background

Established in 2004, the Rwanda Civil Society Platform (RCSP) is an apex body of Rwandan Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) comprising 14 members. RCSP's mission is to act as a framework for exchange, strengthening solidarity and capacity of its members, to be the people's voice, and to defend public interests at national, regional, and international levels.

Since its inception, RCSP has consistently contributed to election processes in Rwanda, notably through election monitoring and submission of reports with constructive ideas and recommendations. These efforts aim to advance political rights, democracy, citizen participation, inclusive leadership, and accountability.

### Observation Methodology

Our observation mission deployed a total of 290 observers:

- 30 long-term observers operating countrywide
- 260 short-term observers stationed across polling stations in all 30 districts

Our observers underwent rigorous training and were equipped with comprehensive tools to monitor the entire electoral process, including:

1. The pre-election environment
2. Election Day procedures
3. The immediate post-election period

RCSP initiated its monitoring activities by observing pre-election processes, including:

- Election preparations by the National Electoral Commission (NEC)
- Registration of candidates
- Campaign activities



On Election Days, RCSP monitored all stages of the electoral process at various polling sites across Rwanda. District Elections Coordinators were entrusted with coordinating all observation activities, including the work of short-term observers within their assigned districts.

## Pre-Election Processes

### Institutional and Legal Framework

Rwanda has demonstrated a robust legal and institutional framework for elections. Pre-election processes were conducted smoothly under the coordination of the National Electoral Commission (NEC). The country has comprehensive laws and bylaws regulating the electoral process.

Key developments in the legal framework include:

1. A revised Rwandan Constitution passed by the Rwanda Parliament, enabling the synchronization of Parliamentary and Presidential elections for improved efficiency and cost-effectiveness.
2. The publication of Organic Law n° 001/2023.OL of 29/11/2023, amending Organic Law n° 001/2019.OL of 29/07/2019 governing elections, in the Official Gazette n° Special of 29/11/2023. This law provides for the organization, management, and conduct of the electoral process in Rwanda.

### Registration of Candidates and Campaigns

The National Electoral Commission (NEC) published the candidates' registration criteria and election calendar in a timely manner. The Commission, in collaboration with its partners, ensured these were scrupulously respected.

Both Presidential and Parliamentary candidates were received and registered by NEC in a transparent and orderly atmosphere. Out of nine individuals who submitted application files for presidential candidacy, three fulfilled the requirements, while five failed to meet the criteria. For parliamentary candidacy, 42 individuals submitted files as independent candidates, but only one independent candidate was retained after the vetting process. Campaign activities were conducted peacefully countrywide across all Districts.

To ensure fair coverage, candidates' campaigns were organized to avoid overlap in the same areas on the same day. While all candidates managed to cover the entire country, it was observed that the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) Inkotanyi campaigns were particularly prominent across the country. The 22-day campaign period, as stipulated by law, posed some logistical challenges, particularly for covering all 30 Districts. As a result, some Districts were merged for campaign purposes, especially for the RPF Inkotanyi.



## Media Coverage and Voter Education

The RCSP observation mission noted the significant role played by Rwandan media in promoting a transparent and inclusive electoral process. Both public and private media outlets and some online content creators provided extensive coverage of the electoral campaigns, offering balanced airtime to all presidential candidates and political parties. This equitable coverage ensured that voters had access to diverse political perspectives and campaign messages.

Media outlets also played a crucial role in voter education. Through various programs, including radio shows, television broadcasts, and newspaper articles, the media helped to inform citizens about the voting process, their rights as voters, and the importance of participating in the democratic process. These efforts contributed significantly to increasing voter awareness and preparedness for the elections.

## Campaign Incidents

While the campaign period was generally peaceful, our mission recorded a few isolated incidents. In one tragic event following an RPF Inkotanyi presidential campaign rally in Rubavu District, a supporter lost life due to overcrowding. The incident occurred as the rally was concluding and a large number of enthusiastic supporters were attempting to leave the venue simultaneously, resulting in a dangerous crush. The RPF Inkotanyi leadership, along with local authorities, swiftly responded to the situation, expressing profound sorrow over the loss of life and extending support to the bereaved family. This unfortunate event underscores the critical need for comprehensive crowd management strategies not only during political gatherings but also in their aftermath, to ensure the safety of attendees as they disperse.

In another instance, Presidential Candidate Frank Habineza reported challenges during his campaign activities. In Ngoma District, he encountered scheduling conflicts where two campaigns were inadvertently planned for the same area, contrary to electoral regulations. This situation highlights the importance of better coordination between electoral authorities and political parties to ensure fair and unobstructed campaigning opportunities for all candidates. Additionally, in Rulindo District, Habineza alleged that local businesses were instructed to close during his party's campaign, potentially limiting public engagement with his political message. These reports emphasize the need for continuous monitoring and prompt addressing of any actions that might impede the free and fair conduct of electoral campaigns.



## Election Day Observations (15-16 July 2024)

### Electoral Equipment and Compliance with Laws and Bylaws

Our observation mission found that the necessary and adequate equipments were available on time at all visited polling stations, demonstrating the National Electoral Commission's thorough preparation for the electoral process. Regarding the voter lists, our observers noted that they were up-to-date and accurately reflected the registered voters in each polling station's jurisdiction. The majority of voters were able to find their names and relevant details without difficulty, indicating that the voter registration and list compilation processes were largely effective. A significant voter turnout was observed for both Presidential and Parliamentary elections.

In cases where voters couldn't find their names on the list, the NEC had implemented effective contingency measures. These voters were verified using their identity documents and a USSD Code \*169#, after which they were allowed to vote using appendices. This measure, further emphasized by an NEC announcement on Election Day, ensured that eligible voters were not disenfranchised due to administrative oversights, thus upholding the principle of inclusive participation in the electoral process.

The composition and preparedness of election officials were noteworthy. Both male and female officials demonstrated good preparation, organization, and readiness to open polling stations on time. This gender-balanced approach not only promoted equality but also ensured diverse perspectives in the management of the electoral process. The officials' level of preparation was evident in their efficient handling of various aspects of the voting process, from voter verification to guiding citizens through the voting procedure.

Regarding polling site infrastructure, our observers noted that adequate provisions were made across the visited stations. There was sufficient space to accommodate voters comfortably, and essential materials such as ballot boxes, ink, tampons, shelters, and voting booths were provided in ample quantities. The availability of reporting templates at each station further indicated the NEC's commitment to maintaining accurate records of the voting process. This comprehensive infrastructure setup contributed to an organized and efficient voting environment, enhancing the overall integrity of the electoral process.

### Opening and Closing Procedures

The opening and closing procedures at the polling stations were observed to be in strict compliance with the electoral law, reflecting a commitment to transparency and rule of law. Before the commencement of voting, citizens were shown that the ballot boxes were empty, a crucial step in building trust in the process and dispelling any concerns about



pre-stuffed ballots. This practice, observed consistently across polling stations, set a positive tone for the day's proceedings.

Election officials adhered to the required protocols by taking oaths and completing all necessary documentation before the polls opened. This formal process not only fulfilled legal requirements but also reinforced the officials' commitment to conducting a fair and impartial election. The thorough completion of documentation also contributed to the overall accountability of the electoral process.

In terms of timing, the polls generally opened at 7:00 am and closed at 3:00 pm, as stipulated by law. This adherence to the prescribed schedule demonstrated good time management and respect for the electoral timetable. Immediately following the closure of polls, vote counting commenced, maintaining the momentum of the process and reducing opportunities for potential interference with ballot boxes.

It's worth noting that in some locations, voting extended slightly beyond the 3:00 pm closing time. This extension was implemented to accommodate voters who were already in the queue at the official closing time, ensuring that all citizens who had made the effort to come to the polls had the opportunity to cast their ballots. This flexible approach, while maintaining the integrity of the process, showed a commendable commitment to maximizing voter participation.

The consistent application of these opening and closing procedures across observed polling stations contributed significantly to the orderly conduct of the election. It provided a structured environment for voters and helped maintain the integrity of the voting process from start to finish.

## Security and Representation of Candidates

The elections were conducted in a safe environment at each polling station observed. No incidents of jostling or voter intimidation were reported by our observers.

Candidate representation in voting rooms was generally observed, with RPF Inkotanyi having the most widespread presence. Other political parties and independent candidates had representation to a lesser extent.

Special polling stations were established in some hospitals to facilitate voting for patients, caregivers, medical staff, and other essential service providers.

## Presence of Other Observer Missions

Our teams noted the presence of both national and international observer missions at various polling stations. This diverse representation of observers contributes to the transparency and credibility of the electoral process.

Among the international missions, we encountered observers from the East African Community (EAC) Election Observation Mission, and The African Union (AU) Election



Observation Mission, Observers from diplomatic Missions to Rwanda, bringing continental and global oversight to the process.

On the domestic front, we interacted with observers from other Rwandan organizations. Their presence ensured a strong local perspective in the observation process.

The presence of these diverse observer groups, alongside our own mission, provided multiple independent viewpoints on the conduct of the elections. This multi-faceted observation approach enhances the overall assessment of the electoral process and contributes to its integrity.

## Observed Irregularities

While the overall electoral process was largely smooth, our observation mission noted several irregularities that warrant attention. These issues, though not widespread, highlight areas for improvement in future electoral processes.

Observer access issues were noted in isolated cases, such as in Musanze at the Gahunga Polling station. Here, observers were initially denied access due to misunderstandings about required documentation. Election officials at this location claimed that the NEC badge was insufficient and demanded an additional accreditation letter signed by NEC, apparently unaware of the new approach implemented by the Commission. Such incidents, while not widespread, highlight the need for better communication and training of polling station staff regarding observer rights and accreditation procedures. In most cases, these issues were resolved through effective communication between RCSP district coordinators and local NEC representatives, demonstrating the importance of clear channels of communication during the electoral process.

Voter list discrepancies emerged as a significant concern at several polling stations, including those in Muhanga, Gasabo, and Ruhango Districts. A considerable number of voters were unable to find their names on the voting list, causing confusion and potential disenfranchisement. The National Electoral Commission addressed this issue by instructing polling officials to allow these voters to cast their ballots using appendix papers. While this solution enabled affected citizens to exercise their right to vote, it raises questions about the accuracy and completeness of the voter register. Such discrepancies could potentially impact the integrity of the electoral process and should be addressed in future elections.

The organization of voting for special groups, particularly persons with disabilities, revealed room for improvement. Our observers noted that some polling stations lacked adequate facilities to accommodate voters with mobility impairments, and there were instances where assistance protocols for visually impaired voters were not consistently applied. These observations underscore the need for more comprehensive planning and implementation of measures to ensure equal access to the voting process for all citizens, regardless of their physical abilities.





In some instances, our observers reported that NEC staff and volunteers displayed an unwelcoming attitude towards election observers. This behavior, while not universal, could potentially hinder the transparency of the electoral process. Observers play a crucial role in ensuring the credibility of elections, and their presence should be welcomed and facilitated by election officials. This situation highlights the need for further training of election staff on the importance of election observation and the role of observers in the democratic process.

Contrary to Articles 123 and 124 of the 2024 election regulations, our observers faced challenges in accessing vote tallying centers at the district level. This lack of access to the consolidation process at district levels is a significant concern, as it limits the ability of independent observers to verify the accuracy of vote tabulation. Transparency at all stages of the electoral process, including vote tallying, is crucial for maintaining public trust in the election results.

## Recommendations

Based on our comprehensive observation of the 2024 Rwanda General Elections, the Rwanda Civil Society Platform puts forward the following recommendations to enhance future electoral processes:

To address the discrepancies observed in voter lists, we recommend that the National Electoral Commission enhance its voter list management processes. This could involve implementing more rigorous data verification procedures, conducting more frequent updates of the voter register, and leveraging technology to improve accuracy. Additionally, the NEC should strengthen a user-friendly online portal where citizens can verify and update their registration information well in advance of election day. These measures would significantly reduce the number of voters who face difficulties on election day, ensuring a smoother voting process and enhancing overall electoral integrity.

We strongly advocate for the strengthening of voter education programs to ensure citizens are well-informed about the voting process and their rights. This could include more extensive use of various media channels, community outreach programs, and partnerships with civil society organizations to disseminate accurate and timely information. Particular emphasis should be placed on educating voters about the importance of verifying their registration status before election day and understanding the procedures for election day voting. Enhanced voter education will contribute to a more informed electorate and potentially reduce confusion at polling stations.

To improve accessibility to election observers, we recommend enhanced training for NEC staff and volunteers to understand the purposes and roles of election observers. This training should stress the importance of election observation that is to ensure transparent and credible elections. The NEC should also consider developing clear, written guidelines for polling station staff regarding observer access and rights, which can be easily referenced on election day. Improved cooperation between election



officials and observers will contribute to a more transparent and trustworthy electoral process.

Developing more comprehensive plans for facilitating voting among special groups, particularly persons with disabilities, is crucial. We recommend that the NEC conduct a thorough assessment of polling station accessibility and implement necessary modifications to ensure all voters can access voting booths comfortably. This may include providing ramps, ensuring adequate space for wheelchair users, and training polling staff on assisting voters with disabilities without compromising ballot secrecy. Additionally, the consistent availability of tactile ballot guides for visually impaired voters should be ensured across all polling stations.

Strict adherence to regulations regarding observer access to vote tallying centers at all levels is essential for maintaining transparency and trust in the electoral process. We recommend that the NEC review and reinforce its policies on observer access during the vote tallying process, ensuring that accredited observers can monitor all stages of vote counting and tabulation, from polling stations to district and national levels. Clear communication of these policies to all election officials and security personnel is crucial to prevent any misunderstandings or unwarranted restrictions on observer access.

Given the logistical challenges posed by the 22-day campaign period, we propose that the relevant authorities consider extending the campaign period beyond 22 days to 35 days in future elections. A longer campaign period would allow candidates to cover all districts more effectively, potentially reducing the need to merge districts for campaign purposes. This extension would provide voters with more opportunities to engage with candidates and their platforms, contributing to a more informed electorate and a richer democratic discourse.

Lastly, we recommend implementing more rigorous training for NEC staff at polling stations to ensure they can confidently share appropriate information with observers and manage various election day scenarios this contributes significantly enhance the overall quality and credibility of the electoral process. There is also a need to assign at least one NEC staff or volunteer able to communicate with various observation missions in official languages other than Kinyarwanda .

## Conclusion

The RCSP observation mission will continue to monitor the post-electoral period, including the finalization of results and any subsequent legal challenges. A comprehensive report with detailed findings and recommendations will be published in due course.

We commend the efforts of all stakeholders, government including the electoral authorities, security organs, political parties, and civil society organizations, for their role in facilitating a largely peaceful and organized electoral process. The RCSP remains





# RWANDA CIVIL SOCIETY PLATFORM - RCSP

committed to supporting Rwanda's democratic journey through constructive engagement and impartial observation.

Done at Kigali, on 17 July 2024



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