

***Statement issued by Hon Margaret Wilson DNZM
Chair of the Commonwealth Observer Group
Nuku'alofa, 13 November 2017***

It is an honour and a privilege to lead the Commonwealth Observer Group to Tonga's 2017 National Parliamentary Elections.

Our group was constituted by the Commonwealth Secretary-General Patricia Scotland, following an invitation from the Prime Minister of Tonga.

It is our task as observers to consider all factors relating to the credibility of the electoral process as a whole. Accordingly, we are charged with observing and evaluating the pre-election period, the poll, the count, and the declaration of results.

We will assess whether the elections have been conducted according to the national laws of Tonga and to Commonwealth standards to which Tonga has committed itself.

During our observation, we will not interfere with the process. We will act with impartiality, objectivity and independence. Each of us has been invited to participate in this assignment in our individual capacities and we do not represent the countries or organisations to which we belong.

This is the first national election in the Kingdom that the Commonwealth will observe. Our presence here in Tonga is part of the organisation's strong commitment to work with all the member states to support their national democratic processes. Credible and peaceful elections that enable citizens to choose their leaders is at the heart of the Commonwealth Charter, which was adopted by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 2012.

Since arrival, we have met with the Prime Minister, the Electoral Commission, some of the members of Parliament, civil society representatives, media council and the diplomatic community. Over the next few days we will continue to meet with a range of relevant stakeholders to the election process.

On Wednesday, 15 November, I will deploy teams to Vava'u and Ha'apai islands. I will observe the process here in Tongatapu. Our teams will observe the campaign, the poll, the count and the declaration of results. We will continue to work and consult closely with observers from the Pacific Islands Forum.

Our Group will issue an Interim Statement of key findings shortly after the declaration of results. Thereafter, and before our departure from Tonga on 20 November, we will prepare our final report. This report of our assessment will be submitted to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, who will in turn forward it to the Government of Tonga, the Ministry of Justice, the Electoral Commission, and other stakeholders in Tonga. The report will be made publicly available throughout the Commonwealth.

We encourage all registered voters in the Kingdom to turn up on Thursday 16 November to vote and participate peacefully in Tonga's national parliamentary elections.

Tanoa International Dateline Hotel

Nuku'alofa

13 November 2017

Note: *Copies of the Press Release issued by the Secretariat in London on 7 November outlined the composition of the Group and its Terms of Reference. Copies will be made available.*