



**European Union Election Observation Mission
Democratic Republic of São Tomé e Príncipe**

Presidential Elections, 19 July 2026

PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

São Tomé City, 21 July 2026

This preliminary statement of the EU Election Observation Mission (EOM) is delivered before the entire electoral process is complete. Critical stages remains, including the final results and the adjudication of possible petitions, which the EU EOM remains in the country to observe. The EU EOM is at present solely in a position to comment on observations undertaken to date, and will later publish a final report, including recommendations for electoral reform. The EU EOM may also make additional statements on election-related matters as and when it considers appropriate.

Summary

Peaceful and well-conducted election day but turnout falls highlighting the need for broader citizen participation and greater inclusivity.

- According to preliminary results announced by the CEN, Carlos Vila Nova won the presidential election with 55,94 per cent of the votes in front of Nito d'Abreu who received 41,42 per cent. The abstention was around 58,81 per cent, an historical low voter participation for São Tomé and Príncipe.
- The election took place in an unprecedented context in which the two leading candidates were associated with competing factions of the ruling political party, the *Ação Democrática Independente* (ADI). The unresolved leadership dispute within ADI affected electoral competition and the broader political environment, in addition to the decision made by the other main political parties not to field their own candidates.
- The legal framework provides for the holding of democratic elections and the respect of fundamental political rights, although inconsistencies between legal instruments and differences in their interpretation reduce legal certainty.
- Despite its temporary nature, the elections were efficiently organised by the CEN, with materials reaching polling stations on time. The CEN also successfully organised the training of polling staff and undertook voter education sessions.
- For the first time, and following a recommendation from the EU EOM in 2022, information from the voters' lists was retrieved automatically from the national identification card (BI) database. The voter register reached 142,674 voters, a 15 per cent increase compared to 2022. However, problems persist to ensure inclusivity, especially in the diaspora.

- The campaign was peaceful and festive, with fundamental freedoms being respected, and candidates being able to canvass freely. No incidents were reported. Campaign activities were dominated by events, motocades and walking activities organised by Carlos Vila Nova and Nito d'Abreu, who especially aimed to mobilise young voters.
- Despite limited human and financial resources, public and private media provided adequate coverage on campaign activities. Public broadcasters offered balanced coverage while the prime-time one-to-one interviews given to each of the four candidates helped voters be better informed about the different candidacies. Private media reported on campaign activities in a generally neutral tone.
- Rumours and misleading information circulated mainly through unverified social media accounts contributed to create an uncertain online environment, which also saw personal accusations and verbal attacks between the two ADI factions.
- Formal citizen observation activities, including some public reporting activities during voting hours, are not permitted. A proposal to involve civil society organisations as election monitors was unsuccessful.

The European Union was invited by the Government of the Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe to observe the 2026 presidential, parliamentary, local and regional elections. The EU EOM is led by Sérgio Humberto, a Member of the European Parliament from Portugal. The mission comprises a core team of 7 analysts who have been in São Tomé and Príncipe since 14 June, two Long Term Observers (LTOs) who have been present since the 26 June and 14 Short Term Observers (STOs) who have been present since the 12 July. In addition, the mission was joined by Locally Recruited STOs from the EU member states. Observers were drawn from 15 EU member states, as well as Canada.

The EU EOM assesses the whole electoral process against international obligations and commitments for democratic elections as well as the laws of São Tomé and Príncipe. The EU EOM is independent in its findings and conclusions, and adheres to the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, endorsed at the United Nations in October 2005.

Preliminary findings

1. Background

On 19 July, voters in São Tomé and Príncipe, including members of the diaspora living in Europe and Africa, went to the polls to elect the President of the Republic. In total, four candidates stood for election: the incumbent Carlos Vila Nova, who gathered support of several political parties including some sections of Ação Democrática Independente (ADI), Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe (MLSTP-PSD) and Basta; Nito d'Abreu, sponsored by the ADI and backed by former Prime-Minister Patrice Trovoada; Eugénio Tiny; and Miques João Bonfim. Former MLSTP prime-minister Jorge Bom Jesus initially launched his candidacy however did not receive party support and subsequently withdrew. This was a significant reduction compared to the 19 candidates that run in the 2021 presidential poll.

The presidential election took place in an unprecedented context in which the two leading candidates - Nito d'Abreu and Carlos Vila Nova, were associated with competing factions of the same political party, ADI. Internal disputes within the ruling ADI, evident since President Vila Nova dismissed Patrice Trovoada as Prime Minister in January 2025, have led to opposing claims as to who controls the party and remains one of the main political and legal issues affecting the elections. This unresolved leadership dispute within ADI extended beyond the party's organisation, affecting electoral competition and the broader political environment. The fact that the other main political parties did not field their own candidates and instead associated themselves to one of the two candidates associated to ADI reduced political plurality and may have led to disenchantment in sections of the electorate.

2. Legal Framework

São Tomé and Príncipe's Constitution provides for elections based on universal, free, equal, direct and secret suffrage, as well as on equality, respect for fundamental rights, and non-discrimination. The freedoms of expression, assembly and association are guaranteed. Furthermore, the legal framework incorporates international and regional obligations and principles subscribed to by São Tomé and Príncipe. The EU EOM noted that inconsistencies between legal electoral instruments and differences in their interpretation and application persist and reduce legal certainty.

The Electoral Law provides for freedom to campaign, equality of opportunity and treatment, and equal access to campaign means. Presidential candidacies are formally proposed by between 500 and 1.000 registered voters, although candidates may receive political support from parties. Public authorities must remain neutral and may neither favour nor disadvantage any candidacy.

Positively, new legislation that allowed for automatic and permanent voter registration was implemented for the first time. The national parliament also approved a new law governing the *Comissão Eleitoral Nacional* (CEN), which is pending presidential promulgation, and scheduled to enter into force on 1 January 2027.

3. Election Administration

The electoral process was organised jointly by the *Comissão Eleitoral Nacional*, with the support of the *Gabinete Técnico Eleitoral* (GTE), and the Constitutional Court, (TC) with complementary tasks corresponding to the judiciary and other State bodies.

The CEN remains a temporary institution which took office on 11 February, and whose mandate will end 30 days after the proclamation of the results. Appointed by the National Assembly (AN), the CEN is composed of nine members: the President, the Secretary General (an experienced electoral expert), four commissioners chosen by political parties with parliamentary seats, and three governmental representatives. All but one of the members are men. The CEN's role and capacity to organise elections remains weakened by its temporary nature.

The CEN was further supported by a commission in the Autonomous Region of Príncipe (RAP), six district election commissions (CEDs) across São Tomé and other diaspora ad hoc electoral commissions for Africa and Europe. Their composition replicates the mixed format with partisan and non-partisan members. District and the regional offices depend on direct instructions from the CEN to implement elections. The composition of electoral bodies and the role of candidate representatives (*mandatários*) allowed for an inclusive process in which candidates and parties were kept informed and involved in all relevant decisions.

Although press conferences enabled the dissemination of CEN activities, access to information by civil society and the general public remains limited. Almost no decisions are published on CEN social platforms or in the *Diário da República*. The CEN's main web portal is not active. Facebook is the usual CEN communication channel together with Instagram and Tik-Tok.

The Constitutional Court (TC) is the jurisdictional authority responsible for decisions on presidential candidacies, electoral disputes and internal political party litigation among others. Although TC judges enjoy fixed five-year terms and constitutional guarantees of independence and irrevocability, early changes in the TC's membership have been registered since 2017, when this body was created, the most recent one in February 2026. These changes have undermined the public's perception of the independence of the Constitutional Court.

Overall, electoral preparations were completed according to the CEN calendar. The commission received important technical support from Portugal including for the printing of ballot papers and results forms or the tabulation of preliminary results. Additional technical support was provided by the United National Development Program (UNDP), and by PRESE - *Projeto de Reforma do Sistema Eleitoral em São Tomé e Príncipe* and Aveiro University.

In total some 358 polling stations (PS / *assembleias de voto*) were set-up on election day. Some 287 polling stations in São Tomé and Príncipe are mostly located at public buildings including schools. A total of 71 polling stations abroad were listed mostly in Embassies, Municipality Buildings and cultural centres. Polling station staff members are composed of presidential candidates' appointees.

The CEN organised training sessions for election commissioners, and judges responsible for tabulation among others, which were successfully delivered. Some 1700 PS staff were trained a few days before election day.

In light of the high abstention of 58,81 per cent, improved CNE and civil society actions to encourage election information and voter participation are needed. Voter education activities delivered by the CEN targeted specific groups such as political parties, religious leaders, journalists, *motoqueiros* (motorcycle riders) and *palaiês* (female street vendors). A broader assistance project to enhance voter participation also targeted persons with disability, youth and women.

4. Voter Registration

The electoral register listed 142,674 voters, of whom almost 15 per cent belong to the diaspora. The district of Água Grande accounts for almost a third of voters, followed by Mé-Zóchi, with just over a fifth of those registered. Portugal is the third-largest electoral area, with almost 10 per cent of registered voters, surpassing the other districts and the RAP. The number of Santomean's living in Portugal has increased significantly in recent years, with an estimated 46,000 having moved there,¹ while only some 13,000 voters were registered. A combination of factors, including recent migrations, legal status for residency in Portugal and the actual impact of CEN fieldwork (*brigadas*), could have contributed to limited coverage. Compared to 2022 figures, the number of eligible citizens increased by approximately 19,000 voters.

The electors could take advantage of the opportunity to confirm and correct their registration status ahead of the September elections.

For the first time, and following a recommendation from the EU EOM in 2022, information from the voters' lists is retrieved automatically from the national identification card (BI) database. While the new voter registration system is a positive development, there is room for improvement in different areas, such as a more comprehensive update of voting addresses for citizens who have recently emigrated or moved. A voter registration law was passed in April to regulate this new process. Voters can check their details via a dedicated CEN web service. While the CEN perceives the new automatic registration as an accomplishment, more access to information was desirable for voters who needed to update their data.

5. Candidate Registration

Presidential candidates must be São Toméan by origin, be the child of a São Toméan father or mother, be over 35 years of age, hold no other nationality and have permanently resided in the country during the preceding three years. Presidential candidacies are submitted to and adjudicated by the Constitutional Court under the Electoral Law and the Organic Law on the TC. Legal certainty is affected by differences between the provisions of the two laws and by inconsistencies in their interpretation. In 2022, an exorbitant blanket fine of €15,000 was imposed on all 19 presidential candidates for late or failed submission of campaign finance reports, for the first time. This could explain why fewer candidates contested the 2026 election.

The TC admitted five candidacies and rejected that of Domingos "Nino" Monteiro, affirming that he had not demonstrated that he met the constitutional requirement of being the child of a São Toméan father or mother. Monteiro's case highlighted the importance of ensuring that constitutional eligibility requirements are interpreted and applied predictably and consistently, on the basis of objective, reasonable and non-discriminatory criteria, in accordance with international human rights standards governing political participation and non-discrimination.

The TC initially rejected candidate Jorge Bom Jesus' late withdrawal and confirmed his candidacy, but subsequently annulled that decision and accepted the withdrawal. Under the Electoral Law, a candidate may withdraw only up to 24 hours before the opening of the draw to determine the order of candidates on the ballot paper. The draw took place on 23 June, while Bom Jesus announced his withdrawal on 29 June.

The names of all five initially admitted candidates - Miques João Bonfim, Carlos Vila Nova, Nito d'Abreu, Eugénio Tiny and Jorge Lopes Bom Jesus - remained on the ballot paper,

¹ Agência para a Integração, Migrações e Asilo. <https://aima.gov.pt/pt>

although Bom Jesus was no longer a contestant in the election. To avoid wasted votes, more information could have been made available to voters regarding the withdrawal of candidate.

6. Campaign Environment

The campaign began on 4 July and ended at midnight on 17 July, with 18 July designated as a day for reflection. Overall, the campaign environment was peaceful and festive, with fundamental freedoms being respected, and candidates being able to canvass freely. No incidents were reported.

The campaign was dominated by Carlos Vila Nova and Nito d'Abreu. The two front-runners participated in public events and primarily aimed to mobilise young voters. Large billboards and posters depicting the respective candidate were visible in the capital. The two other candidates had limited campaign activities.

Campaign activities were quite varied, with candidates favouring traditional forms of campaigning such as neighbourhood meetings, marches and door-to-door canvassing, lunches and, in general, services provided to the public. Some larger events gathering supporters were also observed. Campaign posters displayed in the communities and capital were exclusively from Nito d'Abreu and Carlos Vila Nova, who were the only ones to use the terrain for political campaigning.

The presidential election took place in an unprecedented context in which the two leading candidates were associated with competing factions of the same political party. The unresolved leadership dispute within ADI highlighted the importance of internal party democracy, transparent decision-making and effective mechanisms for resolving intra-party disputes.

7. Campaign finance

The Law on Political Party and Campaign Finance stipulates the submission of campaign accounts to the Constitutional Court within 90 days of the official proclamation of results.

Although the law establishes donation and campaign expenditure limits and empowers the TC to conduct inspections and audits, it does not require regular, periodic scrutiny. Consequently, oversight tends to occur *ex post facto*. Some stakeholders have expressed concerns about the traceability of campaign resources and the apparent unequal financial capacity of those taking part in the elections. The legal framework does not ensure sufficient transparency, accountability, or effective oversight.

The National Electoral Commission announced its intention to investigate on reported inaugurations of public works and distributions of public goods during the period in which such activities are prohibited under the Electoral Law.

8. Traditional Media

Freedom of expression, including media freedom, was generally respected during the campaign. Despite limited human and financial resources, public and private media provided adequate coverage on campaign activities conducted by candidates across the districts. Radio was the main source of information for voters. No print media currently operate in the country.

The EU EOM Media Monitoring Unit observed that public broadcasters, *Televisão de São Tomé* (TVS) and *Rádio Nacional de São Tomé e Príncipe* (RNSTP), offered balanced coverage of the campaign through a dedicated segment in their evening news programmes. The TVS conducted prime-time one-to-one interviews with each of the four candidates, which were subsequently rebroadcast, enabling voters to become better informed about the different

candidacies. In addition, TVS organised a presidential debate attended by all four candidates, which was simultaneously broadcast by the RNSTP, the radio station with the widest national coverage. During the more than two-hour debate, all four candidates agreed on the significant consequences of corruption for the country. Private media reported on campaign activities in a generally neutral tone.

As required by the Election Law, public broadcasters allocated free airtime to the presidential candidates.² Public and private media contributed to voter information and education by broadcasting messages encouraging electoral participation and informing voters of each candidate's position on the ballot. The CEN's public outreach efforts across different communication channels were limited. Some voter information messages were broadcast on the public radio station, while only a few related posts were published on the CEN's Facebook page.

9. Digital Communication and Social Media

Candidates used the online environment primarily to amplify their campaign activities, with Facebook emerging as the main platform for political communication. Three of the four presidential candidates maintained dedicated campaign pages on Facebook. The EU EOM Social Media Monitoring Unit's analysis showed that most posts published during the official campaign period depicted activities such as walks and rallies across the districts, while offering limited information on candidates' political programmes. The campaign's messaging largely focused on showing voters how to identify each candidate's position and the corresponding box on the ballot.

Official communication and political campaigning were largely conducted through unverified Facebook pages. This fragmented information environment undermined the reliability of online content and hindered Internet users' ability to identify verified sources. These challenges were further increased by the absence of fact-checking initiatives by civil society organisations or international partners.

Rumours and misleading information circulated mainly through Facebook discussion pages and groups supporting the two main presidential candidates, contributing to uncertainty among voters. The online campaign was also marked by personal accusations and verbal attacks between the two factions that emerged from ADI's internal division.

10. Political Participation of Women

The adoption of the Parity Law 11/2022 represents an important step towards greater gender equality in political life. However, the absence of women candidates contesting the election represents a setback compared with previous elections. There is the need to address structural barriers faced by women in party leadership, candidate selection, campaign visibility and access to political resources.

The absence of an Ombudsperson institution continues to limit the availability of an independent non-judicial mechanism for the protection and promotion of fundamental rights, including in relation to electoral participation, discrimination and access to remedy.

² One candidate's material included explicit images of victims of the November 2022 events, contrary to the Electoral Code of Conduct and Ethics and other applicable national legislation. Although candidates bore full responsibility for the content of their free airtime, no additional safeguards were in place to ensure compliance with applicable legislation prior to broadcast.

11. Citizen and International Observers

Formal citizen observation activities, including some public reporting activities during voting hours, are not permitted. A proposal to involve civil society organisations as election monitors was unsuccessful.

International observer groups included the African Union, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP), the Group of Seven Plus (g7+), and the Network of Electoral Administrative and Judicial Bodies of Portuguese-speaking Countries (ROJAE-CPLP).

12. Polling, Counting and Tabulation of Results

Election day went smoothly and peacefully. EU EOM observers visited 104 polling stations in all districts and the Region of Príncipe, covering 60 per cent of the circumscriptions. For the 12 PS observed for opening, half of them had a delay of up to 30 minutes mostly due to polling staff's unpreparedness.

During voting hours, EU EOM observers visited 97 polling stations, accounting for more than one third of the total number of polling stations in São Tome and Príncipe. Voting procedures were largely respected and integrity measures applied. Polling station staff carried out the procedures independently and with no intervention of candidate agents. EU EOM observers reported that the partisan composition of the polling staff was mostly respected. Queues were rare.

EU EOM observers noted that the polling station composition in general was fairly in terms of gender balance, but the position of President was occupied by a woman in only one third of observed cases. For other positions, there were slightly more women than men. Most observed polling stations were accessible to voters with reduced mobility, who were given priority in the voting queue, together with pregnant women and mothers with children.

Authentication of voters was mainly based on the BI and indelible ink was used to prevent double voting. Until approximately 13:00h, the CEN database to check the voters list and polling stations remained inactive. Some instances of persons with difficulties to find their polling centres or not registered as voters were noted. In 46 per cent visited PS there were instances of voters being turned away from a polling station for not being in that voters list. Interlocutors continued to mention that some practice of '*banho*' took place on election day.

Closing and counting

Closing and counting was observed in 11 polling stations and evaluated positively in all of them. Queues of voters were identified in two of them. While all 11 polling stations closed at 18:00h, following instructions given to PS staff during the trainings, the law remains unclear on whether closing time should be 17:00h or 18:00h.

Counting in the observed polling stations was orderly and transparent. No complaints were lodged. Results protocols (*editais*) were posted outside of all 11 observed polling stations.

Results tabulation

Six *Assembleias de Apuramento Distritais*, together with the regional one for Príncipe and another one for the districts of the diaspora, perform the tabulation based on the results forms from all polling stations. Their operations started the day after polling day. EU EOM observers were present in tabulation centres at the start of the process, and will follow the proceedings

during the next days. Once started, tabulation progressed slowly, but in a transparent manner everywhere. Party delegates were present at tabulation centres and procedures were generally followed.

The CEN conducted a provisional national results tabulation in its premises in São Tomé based on polling station tally sheets, which were initially sent to CEN via WhatsApp and handed over on paper later on. The processing of the provisional results process took place transparently, albeit slowly, mainly due to inaccuracies or lack of clarity in data from results forms. Candidate representatives were not present. The CEN announced preliminary results in the morning of 20 July without providing district and polling stations breakdown. Turnout was significantly lower than five years ago.

An electronic version of this Preliminary Statement is available on the EU EOM website:
saotomeeprincipe2026.eueom.eu

For media enquiries, please contact: Alessandro Gori, EU EOM Press Officer

Tel: + 239 90484220 Email: alessandro.gori@eomsaotomeeprincipe2026.eu