



NATIONAL ELECTION WATCH (NEW)

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Press Statement for Immediate Release

Freetown Monday 26th October 2020: NEW's Position on the Postponement of the Mid-term Census

- 1.0 NEW has learnt with interest the recent announcement by Statistics Sierra Leone on the postponement of the Mid-term Census from December 2020 to April 2021. This development underscores the demerits of this exercise as earlier recognized and published by NEW regarding inadequate planning, timeliness, involvement of stakeholders and relevance.
- 2.0 It should be recalled that on the 21st July 2020, a proclamation for the conduct of a Mid-term population and Housing Census was made by His Excellency the President and slated for December 4th 2020. In his proclamation, the following reasons were advanced for the conduct of the first ever Mid-term Census in Sierra Leone;
"...in order to help us plan properly, ensure equitable distribution of resources, and foster economic and social development, Government has decided to conduct a Mid-Term Population and Housing Census across the country this year".
- 3.0 In response to this proclamation, NEW issued a press statement on July 29th 2020, stating its position and concerns thereof: *"NEW is concerned with the prioritization of this process NOW at a time when COVID-19 measures should be occupying the whole planning machinery and resources spent in that direction"*. Another concern raised by NEW in the Press Statement was: *"...Questions of non-inclusivity of all voices of the people (political groups, civil society etc.) as befitting democratic governance processes were abound and this announcement falls within that context"*. NEW further highlighted issues around the *"ever-growing trends of government actions that keep casting shadows of doubt on critical governance events and processes as it sets a negative tone to future works"*.
- 4.0 Following from the press statement, NEW engaged the leadership of Statistics Sierra Leone (SSL) in a formal meeting to communicate its concerns and reaffirm its position. Though the discussions went well, critical concerns raised at the meeting did not receive answers at the time rather the leadership committed itself to respond to those concerns in due course. NEW was immensely concerned that there's also no Government Policy Framework to serve as 'Basis or Reference Point' for the conduct of this Mid-Term Census such as the New Direction Manifesto (NDM), the Mid-Term National Development Plan, 2020 Supplementary budget and or the Strategic Plan of Statistics Sierra Leone (SSL).
- 5.0 The President's proclamation stated that *"Data from this Mid-Term Population and Housing Census will undoubtedly inform and guide the implementation of various development programmes including the 2019-2023 Medium Term National Development Plan (MTNDP) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)"*. NEW believes that the outcome of a Mid-term

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Census to be held from April of 2021 will not be available for public use till 2022 when the country shall be holding Local Council Elections and General Elections in 2023. This presupposes that the outcome of this census will not add any value to the development planning of this government as espoused in the proclamation. No government will re-focus its Development Plans in the 4th year and yield the desired results when all attention would be shifted to campaigning and/or implementing its development agenda as a matter of priority. NEW believes that service delivery should be prioritized instead.

- 6.0 **NEW further recognizes that clarity is needed on the required funding for this exercise.** Questions abound on who ‘the external institutions are’ and what funding stream is available for this exercise and whether any funding instrument will be laid before parliament? NEW calls on development partners who have committed to this exercise to make public all financial, material and technical support. We would also want to know why our development partners funding the Mid-term Census have prioritized a Mid-term Census over other competing national priorities at the heart of the electorate.
- 7.0 Additionally, the deferment of the Mid-term census to April 2021 has a likelihood of affecting the general elections calendar of 2023 i.e. according to law, NEC should have produced a voter register 6 months to elections which falls around 2022; consequently also, any data produced by a Mid-term Census will likely inform a Boundary Delimitation process that also has the tendency to affect the electoral calendar. This will come with additional financial requirements that would not necessarily have become an imperative at this time but will have been triggered by the legal consequences of this mid-term census.
- 7.1 Furthermore, SSL in its press statement dated 20th October 2020, gave the following reasons for the postponement of the Mid-term census: **“However, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the planned support from external institutions, the following areas of our preparations have been affected:**
- **Movement of high level technical personnel (International Consultants); and**
 - **Procurement of digital materials required for the census”**
- 7.2 Though NEW recognizes that COVID-19 is still in existence, NEW is however not sufficiently convinced with this reason advanced, owing to the fact that the proclamation for the conduct of a Mid-term census was done at the height of the pandemic in the country. While in the same vein, NEW also premised its position on prioritizing the fight against COVID-19 pandemic as against conducting a Mid-term census at that critical time in our country.
- 7.3 Also, owing to the fact that SSL has already established structures to ensure the conduct of the Mid-term Census and these structures will continue to be supported until the COVID-19 situation is conducive enough for the international consultants to travel and live in Sierra Leone and in the absence of a predictable end to the COVID-19 pandemic, NEW therefore recommends a cancellation of the Mid-term Census at least for this 2022-2023 electoral cycle.

In conclusion, NEW believes the spirit of the 1991 constitution which states: *“Sovereignty belongs to the people of Sierra Leone from whom Government through this constitution derives all its powers”*. Therefore, NEW reaffirms its commitment towards making governance processes participatory, inclusive, transparent and accountable to the people. Any continued pursuit of this futile exercise is a clear testimony of government’s abdication from the spirit and letter of this highly cherished constitutional provision. **In order not to go against the spirit of the country’s hard won democracy, NEW reiterates its call for this exercise to be called off and the resources allocated to pressing national development issues.**

This Project *“Enhancing Domestic Electoral Observer Organizations and Citizens Participation in Democratic Governance Reforms Leading to the 2022 and 2023 Electoral Cycle”* is funded by the European Union.

National Election Watch (NEW) is a coalition of local and international organizations in Sierra Leone with a common objective of supporting free, fair and peaceful elections. NEW will continue to observe all elections related activities and will report its findings accordingly.

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