



PRE-ELECTION ASSESSMENT REPORT

**ON THE RE-RUN AND VILLAGE HEAD
ELECTIONS IN WESTERN RURAL
DISTRICT AND THE BYE-ELECTIONS
IN MOYAMBA, BO AND KARENE
DISTRICTS**

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BACKGROUND

In December 2020, Sierra Leone will be having eight (8) elections across the country for various offices ranging from Village, Ward, and Constituency. Elections are significant moments in the historical development of a country's democracy. However, the country is experiencing a pattern of violence and repression in recent bye-elections, which in some instances had undermined the credibility of the polls. The National Electoral Commission (NEC), for the third time, has scheduled an election for Constituency 110 on the 12th of December, 2020. This is more than a year since the polls of the 24th of August 2019 were cancelled. The election was marred by political tension, rivalries, and outright violence leading to the destruction of sensitive voter materials, including ballot boxes and papers. Bye-elections will also be conducted on this same date in Bo (Ward 287 and Constituency 078), Moyamba (Ward 348), and Karene (Ward 226) Districts respectively. In Bonga Wharf, Ngarahun, and Mama Beach communities, bye-elections are set for Village Heads on the 5th of December 2020.

NEW is currently observing the pre-election atmosphere and had held stakeholder engagements in the five (5) localities including the Villages in the Western Rural District. The aim is to assess the political atmosphere, gauge citizens' readiness to participate in the upcoming polls, determine the readiness of security forces and overall preparedness of Elections Management Bodies (EMBs) ahead of the elections slated for 5th and 12th December 2020, respectively. The need for an independent opinion on the conduct of these elections cannot be overemphasized; as the current political environment in the country is very tense and strides must be taken to ensure that all players and stakeholders in the process execute their roles and responsibilities in accordance with the legal provisions. NEW believes that this will foster sanity and provide a credible process and outcome.

Therefore, this report will highlight the pre-election issues with an analysis of pertinent governance issues and peaceful coexistence in the communities where these elections will occur. The report's overall objective is to provide insights into critical issues to be addressed in advance of the 5th and 12th December polls.

FINDINGS

Western Rural District: Constituency 110

- Residents in constituency 110 expressed disappointment with the communities' lack of engagement and believe that community engagement meetings should have been held even before an election date is announced. According to them, there are looming issues that remain unaddressed. The problems identified include community tension, the non-arrest and detention of perpetrators of the 24th of August 2019 election violence, and the continued detention without any information of people who were arrested before the re-run election. All of these have the potential to affect the peaceful conduct of the upcoming re-run election.
- The importation of youths to cause mayhem during the election also featured prominently during meetings with community stakeholders. Citizens and community stakeholders believe that bringing youths into communities where elections are held is responsible for the violence in constituency 110. The people stated that individuals who perpetrated violence during the 24th of August 2019 re-run were not resident in the constituency.
- Citizens complained that after such imported hostilities in their communities, they are left to fix the problem.
- There is also growing mistrust of the SLP, as many people interviewed expressed fear and doubt over the institution's impartiality and independence in discharging their responsibilities. They cited that even though there was a massive police deployment during the re-run election of the 24th of August 2019, it did not deter the degree of violence on the day, and no one was held responsible. They further raised concern that those who were arrested for campaign-related violence before the re-run are still in police custody; and the police have not made any meaningful statement about them. Those who destroyed ballot boxes and other voting materials in the police's presence and were fully captured by video camera have not been arrested to date.
- Citizens are also concerned about the security of the re-run election. The police stated that they had held several meetings with the communities to discuss the upcoming election's security. They plan to further have community engagements, especially in areas considered to be hotspots. The police have given assurances that people who are not accredited and not residing in the constituency will not have access to the polling precincts, emphasizing that there will be no "sacred cow."

- Whilst a number of electorates in Constituency 110 were prepared to vote on polling day, a small group of citizens was sceptical whether the election will take place as scheduled by NEC because petition cases are still in court, and they have not seen political parties and NEC coming to talk to them about the re-run.
- There are still unanswered questions on the cancellation of the 24th of August 2019 re-run elections, which has affected the level of trust from the community people. They stated that public money had been spent to conduct an election where people have destroyed sensitive election materials, but no action was taken. Political party stakeholders in the community clearly stated that the upcoming 12th of December 2020 re-run election is illegal. According to them, no justification has been provided to date by NEC regarding why the previous re-run election results were cancelled.
- There are also fear-mongering and anger issues, especially among women in the communities of constituency 110. Though apprehensive, the women have expressed readiness and willingness to go out and vote on the 12th of December. This time, they are pleading with NEC to declare a winner no matter the outcome because they are tired of continuous voting.
- Citizens also expressed concern about NEC's preparedness, especially on voter education and community engagement. In response, NEC pointed out that they have held a meeting with the District Security Committee (DISEC) to prepare for the re-run election on the 12th of December. A critical decision from the meeting was for NEC to meet with all candidates contesting the re-run and the Village Head elections in Western Rural District. NEC has increased the number of stakeholder meetings from one in the previous elections to several for the December elections.
- There is growing community tension and unrest in constituency 110, particularly in Goderich Village. On the 11th of November 2020, there was a standoff between the All Peoples Congress (APC) and Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) stalwarts over who should take the lead in completing the rehabilitation of the Goderich Village Community Centre. Additionally, officials of the National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA) went to the facility to assess the center's construction completion. The action almost disrupted the community's peace had it not been for the police's prompt intervention. Later NEW learnt that two people were detained at the Lumley police station for complaints made against them but were shortly released on bail on the same day after statements were obtained. The Sierra Leone Police (SLP) and the contesting candidates for both parties have agreed that work on the community center is halted until after the re-run election to reduce tensions. NEW released a press statement on the 11th of November 2020, as part of its Critical Incident Reporting.

- Citizens, political leaders, and stakeholders have raised concerns of alleged political interference from some members associated with the ruling party promising development initiatives to gain an undue advantage ahead of the constituency re-run election. Village Heads in constituency 110 were allegedly called to meetings and given similar development promises by high profile ruling party functionaries. The stakeholders engaged out-rightly pointed out that the Village Head position is apolitical, and they do not think they should be involved to pioneer campaigns for a constituency election.
- Ahead of the Village Head election, citizens and community stakeholders also raised concerns about incumbent Village Heads having the undue advantage as candidates in the upcoming election.

Bo District: Constituency 078 and Ward 287

- There were reports of intra-Party tension in Constituency 078 due to the award of symbols. In Nyagoihun Jimmy and Sumbuya towns, citizens revealed rising tension among the SLPP supporters. There were 6 aspirants for the SLPP symbol in Nyagoihun. After the award of the symbol, it was alleged that the losers were humiliated and their houses pelted with stones. They also alleged that the chiefs in Nyagoihun Jimmy and Sumbuya are siding with the candidate who won the symbol against the youths' will. There is also a threat of replacing the sitting youth leader in Lugbu Chieftaincy because he does not support the chief's preferred candidate.
- There are reported cases of malicious damage and assault at the Sumbuya police post resulting from violent activities during campaigns for the award of symbol for the election.
- The SLP is understaffed and poorly resourced, and there is hardly any communication on the plans for the election.
- Both NEC and Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) are mobilizing resources, strengthening partnerships for community engagement and voter education for the Paramount Chieftaincy election, and the bye-elections in Lugbu chieftaincy, Ward 287 and constituency 078 in the Bo District.

- Citizens also complained that some candidates contesting for Ward 287 election are being deprived of using community facilities, including the community center, to hold meetings and display posters and other campaign materials ahead of the polls. Such access has been granted to the ruling party candidates.
- Citizens are also concerned about the increase in hate speech by supporters of the various candidates in Ward 287; which has heightened tension, and a recipe for conflict.
- There are also concerns about low voter education. Additional concerns have been raised regarding the loss of voter ID Cards and whether such citizens will be allowed to vote in the upcoming election.
- Ahead of the Village Head election, citizens and community stakeholders also raised concerns about incumbent Village Heads having the undue advantage as candidates in the upcoming election.

Moyamba District: Ward 348

- The youths complained that politicians have been using them to perpetrate violence during elections and dumped them after the elections. However, they maintained that they have decided to abstain from any form of violence this time and that they will continue to preach peace ahead of the election.
- The women in the ward also complained of marginalization, allegedly by their men folks when it comes to contesting for leadership positions. According to them, men in the community commonly say that "a hen doesn't crow,"; meaning that women are only there in the communities to be seen and not to be heard.
- In the conversation with their representatives, the Inter-Religious Council in the district has advised contesting candidates to carry out their campaigns in a peaceful manner, encouraging them to be tolerant and regard themselves just as competitors and not enemies. These ongoing peace sermons in the mosques are meant to reduce tension in the communities ahead of the election.
- The SLP continues to prepare for the peaceful conduct of the December 12th election, and the Local Unit Commander (LUC) has assured the community people of their support, including working with chiefdom stakeholders, youths, and other state institutions.

Karene District: Ward 226

- In Batkanu, the SLPP candidate for the upcoming election reported intimidation in the community to the Paramount Chief and demanded a fair process ahead of the election.
- Citizens complained of a lack of voter and civic education ahead of the election, and the District Officer for NEC reported that they are set to commence voter education in the communities ahead of the election.
- The LUC in the Kamakwei Division expressed readiness to police the election and plans to hold meetings with the communities ahead of the polls.
- The youths complained that politicians have been using them to perpetrate violence during elections and dumped them after the elections. However, they maintained that they have decided to abstain from any form of violence this time and that they will continue to preach peace ahead of the election.
- The women in the ward also complained of marginalization, allegedly by their men folks when it comes to contesting for leadership positions. According to them, men in the community commonly say that "a hen doesn't crow,"; meaning that women are only there in the communities to be seen and not to be heard.
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RECOMMENDATIONS

- All stakeholders must make serious efforts to de-escalate the political tensions and election-related violence. NEW recommends that as a strategy to ensure calm in the upcoming elections, all stakeholders including the NEC, PPRC, SLP, ONS, National Commission for Democracy (NCD), Human Rights Commission Sierra Leone (HRCSL), community leaders, and the candidates should have a joint engagement in strategic communities especially hot spots areas.
- The SLP must enforce regulations restricting non-resident/non-voters or persons not accredited by NEC from entering the polling precincts.
- NEC should come out with a clear explanation of the rules of election cancellation to ensure consistency.
- NEC should inform the public on the procedures for voters who have lost their Voter ID Cards ahead of the polls.
- NEC should also clearly outline their strategy for the upcoming elections
- The SLP should be neutral and impartial in enforcing laws and policies and create a level playing field for all political actors.
- The SLP should inform the public about the status of the investigations regarding the 24th of August 2019 re-run election.
- NEW calls on the Office of National Security (ONS) and SLP to devise a clear strategy to maintain peace in constituency 110 re-run election, constituency 078, and the local council elections, before, during, and after the polls.
- As a strategy to ensure calm in the upcoming election, NEW recommends that all stakeholders including the NEC, PPRC, SLP, ONS, National Commission for Democracy (NCD), Human Rights Commission Sierra Leone (HRCSL), community leaders and the candidates, should have a joint engagement in strategic communities, especially hotspots areas.
- NEW strongly believes that development must not be politicized and call on all public officials to desist from using development initiatives meant for national growth for votes.

All Paramount Chiefs and Village Heads should keep away from party politics to ensure community peace and cohesion.

The National Election Watch (NEW) is a coalition of over 400 Civil Society Organizations, National and International Non- Governmental Organizations, observing, monitoring, and strengthening public elections processes. NEW collaborates with EMBs and other stakeholders to ensure free, fair, and credible elections in Sierra Leone. The coalition is neutral, independent, and works to promote citizens' participation in electoral processes in Sierra Leone. The NEW has established structures at national, regional, district, and chiefdom levels that position the institution to observe and monitor national public elections. NEW is currently supported by the European Union (EU).

METHODOLOGY

Apart from NEW's ongoing observation, five teams embarked on the pre-election assessment in the localities mentioned above. Two teams covered Western Rural District headed by the Regional Coordinator and District coordinators; Constituency 078 and Ward 287 in Bo District was covered by the Regional and District Coordinators. The District Coordinator and Secretary covered Ward 348 in Moyamba District, and the District Coordinator and Secretary covered Ward 226 in Karene District. These teams engaged the different stakeholders identified above and shared their findings.

Targeted Communities

The following communities were targeted in the pre-election assessment.

- Western Area Rural District
- Constituency 110
- Bonga Wharf, Ngarahun, Mama Beach Communities.
- Bo District
- Constituency 078
- Ward 287
- Moyamba District
- Ward 348
- Karene District
- Ward 226

Target Groups

- National Electoral Commission (NEC)
- Office of National Security (ONS)
- Sierra Leone Police (SLP)
- Political Parties Candidates
- Village Head Candidates
- Local Party Stalwarts/stakeholders
- Village Heads
- Paramount Chiefs
- Community youths
- Women's Leaders
- Market women
- Religious Leaders

Areas of focus

The pre-election assessment focused on the following;

- The knowledge of the people about the upcoming elections and preparation for the elections.
- Citizens/Stakeholder perception about the elections.
- Citizens/Stakeholder concerns ahead of the elections
- Citizens/Stakeholder expectations for a peaceful outcome of the elections.
- Citizens/Stakeholders expected roles to ensure the peaceful conduct of the elections.
- Lessons learnt and challenges by Citizens/Stakeholder/election management from the last election
- Election management/security preparedness ahead of the elections (early warning and conflict prevention).
- Level of engagement with the community and candidates by Election Management Bodies (EMBs), security ahead of polling day.

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