



## NATIONAL ELECTION WATCH (NEW)

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### Press Statement for Immediate Release

#### ***Freetown, 13th December 2020: NEC Conducts Re-run and Bye-elections with No Incidence of Violence***

National Electoral Commission (NEC) on Saturday, 12<sup>th</sup> December 2020 conducted bye-elections in Constituency 078, Wards 287, 348 and 226 and Re-run election in Constituency 110. There was no incidence of violence in all 5 elections. The Re-run election of Constituency 110 was contested by the All Peoples Congress (APC) and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), In Constituency 078 the election was contested by the APC and SLPP and in Ward 287, the APC, SLPP and National Grand Coalition (NGC) contested the election. The Ward 348 election was contested by the APC and SLPP, whilst the APC, NGC, and SLPP contested in Ward 226. The elections in Constituency 078 and Ward 287 in Bo District; Ward 348 in Moyamba and Ward 226 in Karene District were as result of vacancies created by the deaths of the incumbents. The re-run election in Constituency 110, Western Area Rural District was first a court order after a petition. The re-run held on 24<sup>th</sup> August 2019, as a result of the court order was cancelled by the NEC due to violence and therefore necessitated the re-run on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 2020.

The NEC deployed senior staff members of the Commission to support the process at polling centres. The Commissioners themselves were on the field monitoring the electoral process. Elections materials and staff were in all polling stations in all 5 elections. NEC prior to the elections, held stakeholders consultations in all the Wards and Constituencies where elections were to be held and carried out voter education especially on valid and invalid votes. NEC also used the Political Parties Liaison Committee (PPLC) to sensitize political parties on the need for peaceful elections. NEC further formed the Election Conflict Prevention and Mediation Technical Working Group comprising Inter Religious Council of Sierra Leone, Eminent Women and Campaign for Human Rights and Development International (CHREDI) to serve as a conflict prevention and resolution body. Video clips of statements of commitment to elections peace and security from the APC, the SLPP, the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), Chairman of the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC), Office of National Security (ONS) and the Chief Electoral Commissioner and Chairman of NEC were circulated on Social media. Efforts were made by NEC to institute COVID-19 response into the management of electoral process.

NEW conducted a Pre-elections assessment study in all 5 election locations where the communities highlighted concerns ranging from; Lack of Community Engagement prior to the announcement of the new date for election in Constituency 110, Importation of Youths into Election Precincts to cause violence, Mistrust in the Sierra Leone Police, the Legality of the Re-run Election, Political Interference ahead of the Election, Intra-party Conflict and Paramount Chiefs Interference in Politics and Women's Political Intimidation and Marginalization. Report from the Pre-election assessment engagement was published and shared to all election stakeholders. NEW deployed 235 stationed observers in all 5 election locations (Constituency 110, 078, Ward 226, 287 and 348, in Western Rural, Bo, Moyamba and Karene Districts respectively). In addition, NEW deployed supervisors and roving observers who served as incident reporters and support the problem solving mechanism in our observation strategy. Reporting instruments were developed – Checklists and incidents reporting forms, and observers trained and accredited to report accurately their observation.

There was a strong presence of the SLP in polling centres in all 5 election locations. Senior police officers were also seen in all elections locations monitoring and managing security issues around the elections. The conduct of the SLP was generally professional. There were however instances where the police failed to enforce elections regulations bordering on movement of unaccredited persons and vehicles in elections centres. The SLP also failed to intercept vehicles with no registration plates and vehicles with covered registration plates plying the elections environment.

Other institutions or groups that observed especially the re-run election in Western Area Rural District were, the Diplomatic community coordinated by the European Union, Office of National Security (ONS), Human Rights Commission for Sierra Leone, West African Network for Peace Building (WANEP), Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC), Mano River Women's Peace Network (MAWOPNET), the media and other Civil Society Organizations.

## **Findings**

- The notion of elections including the just concluded bye and re-run elections has become highly repressive and shrouded in fear, undermining not only the tenets of democratic elections but citizens rights and freedoms.
- The persistent presence of high profile government officials and politicians in elections environment before and during polls continue to mount undue tension undermining sanity in elections.
- Abuse of incumbency by using state resources for partisan purposes continues to pose severe challenges for our elections and democracy.
- There was inconsistency in the rules guiding the campaigns and therefore enforcement was a challenge.
- The award of symbols continues to expose the weaknesses in intra-party democracy leading in most cases to undue tension and violence as was the case in the election of constituency 078 in Bo District.
- The use of money to compromise voters was prevalent and using development initiatives as direct incentives for votes was also at play.
- The pattern of taking photos of ballots by voters was predominant undermining the secrecy of the ballot.
- Both contestants in the re-run election of constituency 110 were women, which is an indication of women's participation in politics.
- The SLP is still not bold enough to enforce regulations around elections involving high profiled government officials and politicians.
- Distorting Voter Identity Cards for the purpose of impersonation is a growing trend in the elections landscape in the country.
- Voter turn-out at bye-elections has not been very encouraging.
- Void votes continue to be high after years of civic and voter education.

## **Recommendations**

NEW recommends that;

- Democratic institutions must step up civic and voter education for democratic coexistence and safe guard citizens choice at elections
- The review and enactment of the Political Parties Registration and Regulation Commission's bill be expedited to accord prosecutorial powers to the Commission to address issues of abuse of incumbency, campaign financing, intra-party tensions and control the conduct of political parties.
- Laws must be enacted to strengthen and guarantee the independence of the SLP to free them from undue control and compromise.
- NEC to outsource the component of civic and voter education to other institutions like the National Commission for Democracy and the Civil Society Organizations working on civic education.

***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.***

This Electoral Observation was realized with the financial support of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of National Election Watch – Sierra Leone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

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