

## **PRESS STATEMENT**

### **THE CONSORTIUM OF PROGRESSIVE POLITICAL PARTIES (COPPP) CONCERNS OVER THE CONDUCT OF THE POSTPONED 'MID-TERM' CENSUS IN SIERRA LEONE, THE ENACTMENT OF THE NEW LOCAL GOVERNMENT POLICY AND THE CYBER CRIMES BILL 2020**

**31<sup>st</sup> March 2021**

We, the undersigned Political Parties are on record either individually or collectively for drawing the attention of all Sierra Leoneans and the international community to the consistent breach of due processes perpetrated by the current government. Letters, individual and joint party press statements and rejoinders have been issued in several instances pointing out abuses, infractions and infringement of rights, but no heed is paid to such concerns. The latest in the ever-growing stream of arbitrary actions is the attempt to force upon Sierra Leoneans a Mid-Term Census despite clear indications that Statistics Sierra Leone does not have enough time to conduct a credible and professionally executed nationwide census in less than 5 weeks from now (April 2021).

The All Peoples Congress (APC) party has already addressed two letters of concern to development partners stating fact-based reasons why credible census data cannot be obtained amidst the current level of preparedness of Statistics Sierra Leone. Due to its unpreparedness Stats SL has had to defer the census, reschedule the initial date to 19th April 2021 and has only just started to conduct key activities like cartographic mapping, piloting of the questionnaire and submission of report for same, recruitment, training and deployment of over 20,000 enumerators and field staff as well as recruitment of international consultants. Of primary importance is the conduct of cartographic mapping, a crucial antecedent to every census program which requires several months of preparation for a successful outcome.

In order to speed up the process, especially the collection of data, the Statistician General relies on the use of technology. To date he is yet to provide proof that Sierra Leone has the infrastructure to support its sophisticated application. Recent developments around the world have shown that advanced countries in the West are ill

at ease applying purely electronically-based technologies to national exercises. The United States during the elections of 2016 is an eloquent reminder. Hence they are in no hurry to dispense with paper-based processes, to avoid the myriad of unforeseen challenges like hacking, data corruption etc. For us in Sierra Leone we have to contend with a lot more than hacking to wit inadequate exposure and training as well as poor supply of services like internet and electricity that is worsening by the day.

We are making this statement as political parties, bearing in mind that the World Bank, the UN Agencies such as UNFPA and other Development Partners have contributed immensely to Sierra Leone's progress. However, we the undersigned Political Parties have learnt with keen interest from Statistics Sierra Leone that the World Bank has approved funding of Six million United States Dollars (UD\$ 6,000,000) for the proposed Mid-term Census. It will be a blunder of epic proportions if such a huge amount of money is used to prop up a process that is a rushed, high risk-venture leading inexorably to unreliable results. The probability of failure by far outweighs the justifications advanced for conducting a census midway instead of waiting for the ten-year cycle to end in 2025. Apparently, the decision of the World Bank to fund the mid-term census has emboldened Stats SL to move on with a census exercise that has drawn criticisms from many experts and stakeholders as it lacks the hallmarks of international best practice. The recent postponement of the enumeration exercise from December 2020 to April 2021 underscores the deficiencies in the planning of such an exercise, which is arguably the largest statistical activity undertaken in any country.

For the benefit of the general public we wish to state some of our concerns that have already been raised with some development partners and the serious technical failures bordering on the timing, preparedness, and credibility of the proposed Mid-term census process. The following are key challenges among others:

**Cartographic Mapping:** the fieldwork of the cartographic exercise should have been completed at least 3 months to the enumeration exercise to allow for office review and printing of maps for the Enumerators. Even though Stats SL has commenced field mapping exercises, we do believe that the time to complete such



exercise will not be adequate for enumeration to begin as planned. We are informed that Stats SL is relying on Geo-spatial software which the World Bank has promised to purchase under the project. However, such software will never replace the field mapping of the whole country into enumeration areas (EAs); and it will be disastrous if the technology fails us. As we write we are yet to determine whether all 20,000 tablets have been procured, programmed and tested for functionality.

**Inadequate Time:** we believe that they will need much more time to recruit and train 20,000 enumerators to conduct a credible census. Our concern is that the whole process is being rushed which seems to conceal an ulterior motive of the SLPP Government to interfere with the electoral geography and calendar and also gain undue political advantage over the opposition parties. One indicator of such a motive is the proposal to prolong the tenure of local councils from four to five years as contained in the Government's new Decentralization Policy which if implemented may be the first step towards extending the life of this SLPP Government. Several attempts on our part appealing to the government and Stats SL to defer this suspicious, wasteful and bound-to-fail census to ensure adequate preparation have fallen on deaf ears. We are therefore left with no option but to educate our membership and supporters on this issue, especially on the reasons why they should not participate in this flawed exercise that is wasteful and designed to ultimately undermine the electoral process and democracy in Sierra Leone.

### **The Local Government Policy**

At this point, we wish to reiterate our position on another policy that the SLPP Government seems to be hell-bent on inflicting on the people of this country basically to perpetuate their dominance and silence or eliminate opposition. In spite of all the cries by stakeholders for Government not to remove political parties from participation in local governance, we have learnt that the proposal to do so has reached an advanced stage of processing and could be forwarded anytime now to Parliament for legislation. And yet, this idea of non-partisan local elections is clearly unconstitutional; it goes totally against the mandate of political parties to "sponsor candidates for Presidential, Parliamentary or Local Government

elections" guaranteed in Section 35 (1) of the Constitution of Sierra Leone. The very same mandate of sponsoring candidates for "presidential, parliamentary and local government elections" is given to political parties in the law that established them: Section 11 (1) The Political Parties Act, 2002. It is clear that until and unless the Constitution is amended it will be illegal and unconstitutional for political parties to be deprived of their right to contest elections at the local level. Any Government that proceeds to do that will be displaying utter contempt for the Constitution to which it owes its existence and thereby projecting the image of one that has no regard for the Rule of Law.

In actual fact, the existing Local Government Act takes into consideration those citizens who may not wish to contest local elections under a political party and therefore provides for independent candidates alongside political party-sponsored candidates. This arrangement caters for all, and from the point of view of inclusion, disadvantaged groups such as women, youth or disabled can find their way onto the ballot either through sponsorship by political parties or other non-political sources. In other words the current system does not in any way prevent "grassroots participation" or "civic dialogue" or "inclusivity". It is therefore concerning and extremely suspicious that Government now wants to remove political parties completely from the picture. All the arguments advanced for non-partisan local elections and attributed to Local Government Ministry's "policy consultations" in which political parties were deliberately not included are so spurious and illogical that the real intention behind the idea becomes abundantly clear: the incumbent Government (in this case the SLPP) wants to use its powers, resources and authority to eliminate opposition parties and gain total control of local Government. And there is no better way for this Government to unfairly prepare for dominance in national elections than by weakening opposition party activity at the local level.

There are other problems relating to the required academic qualifications for election into local Government positions. The policy raises the qualification to run as councillor to a level that is above basic education. This qualification seriously undermines the policy's aim to be inclusive and non-discriminatory. Similarly, the



qualification for candidacy to the position of Mayor/Chairman is "at least a University degree." Interestingly, according to the Constitution of Sierra Leone, to qualify for election as Member of Parliament one only needs to be able "to speak and to read the English Language with a degree of proficiency sufficient to enable him to take an active part in the proceedings of Parliament." (Section 75 (d), Constitution of Sierra Leone, 1991). Considering the illiteracy rate in Sierra Leone, these qualifications effectively eliminates nearly 75% of the population from political leadership at local levels. There is therefore need to consider these qualifications holistically so that they can respond to logic and reason.

Political parties cannot sit back and watch a ruling Government openly violating the constitution in this way and unashamedly uprooting opposition from the democratic process especially at the local government level which is the traditional training ground for future national leaders. We cannot accept that this democracy for which so much sacrifice has been made by the citizenry, so much blood shed and so much hope invested should be gradually declining into a one-party system due to this Government's unquenchable thirst for control and political dominance; an attribute that comes out again in their latest proposal to slaughter the individual rights and freedoms of the citizens of this country commonly known as the 2020 Cybercrime Bill.

### **The 2020 Cybercrime Bill**

We the undersigned political parties are still going through the just introduced 2020 Cybercrime bill and must hasten to state as our initial reaction that we join the many voices both locally and internationally to call on the government to put on hold the 2020 Cybercrime Bill that has been taken to parliament for enactment into law, to allow for more dialogue, omission and additions where necessary, especially now that so many issues have been raised by citizens and organizations, including political parties. We registered this position at a meeting with the Ministry of Information and Communication held on Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> March 2021. The political parties have asked for copies of the Bill so that

we can individually and collectively make meaningful contributions to strengthen the Bill while ensuring that individual's rights, privacies and privileges are protected. It is our hope that the Ministry will adhere to our request to withdraw the Bill from Parliament until recommendations from political parties, organizations and individuals have been taken into consideration.

In conclusion, we believe that both the mid-term census and the new Local Government Policy are not statistical or democratic exercises at all, but rather political undertakings aimed at sacrificing our democratic gains at the altar of parochial partisan interest. We also believe that while we all agree that we need strong laws to protect us from Cyber-attacks and abuse of social media, such laws should focus on prevention rather than punishment and that the process of developing such laws that will have an impact on the livelihood, safety and security of all citizens must be inclusive and participatory.

We are worried that given the way the census is being rushed, they will end up creating fictitious figures. Therefore, funding such an exercise will amount to promoting a political agenda at the detriment of democracy and development in our beloved country. For these reasons, we are not in any position to encourage our membership and supporters to participate in this Mid Term census.

Long Live the Republic of Sierra Leone!

Long Live Multi-Party Democracy!



Signed:

No.	Party	Name of Signatory	Designation	Signature
1.	A.P.C	OSMAN FODAY YANSANEH	NATIONAL SEC-GENERAL	
2.	NGC	A. Dennis Bright	CHAIRMAN & LEADER	
3.	C4C	Tamba R. Sande	National chairman	
4.	PMDC	Tony B. H. Souza	Nat. Chairman	
5.	PDP	ARNOLD A. SMITH	NATIONAL LEADER	
6.	U.P.	Femi Claudius-Cole	National Chair person	
7.	CDP	GERIL TITULAH	National chairman	
8.	ADP	Nifagie Kabba	Dept Chairman	
9.	U.D.M	ARNOLD BENDU	Sec general	
10.	NURP	IBRAHIM KUMBASSA	Signed for Sec. Gen	
11.	UNPP	Arund Bangura	Sign for Sec Gen	
12.				
13.				

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