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PRESS BRIEFING

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Welcome to today's press briefing by the Consortium of Progressive Political Parties (COPPP). Ours is an alliance of opposition political parties that have decided to speak with one voice on critical issues of national importance upon which we have found common ground. We have come to the conclusion that our hard-earned democracy and the Rule of Law are under serious threat due to the increasingly autocratic tendencies of the current SLPP government observed over the past three years.

We believe that inclusive governance is an indispensable component of a healthy democracy and therefore political parties must be fully involved, especially through consultations, in the elaboration of policies and laws. Unfortunately, opposition political parties which represent over 50% of the voter population of this country have been systematically sidelined and ignored in the preparation of key policies and laws. One example is the Decentralization policy that was approved by Cabinet in December 2020. Although the Minister of Local Government and Rural Development claimed that there had been nationwide consultations on the policy, opposition political parties were never included in the consultations and only learned about it on national news and the electronic media. Another example: the Ministry of Information has been trying to propose a bill on cyber-crime since last year but never consulted political parties on it until Parliament ordered them to do broader consultations. At the meeting with political parties, the Ministry distributed copies of the draft bill to us with a promise to invite us to give them our reactions after reading it. This follow up meeting never happened and to our utmost disappointment we learnt that the Ministry took the Bill back to Parliament on Monday 19th April 2021 for enactment. Meanwhile, in an invitation to a workshop tomorrow Friday 23rd April 2021, political parties have been informed that "Pursuant to the directives of Parliament" the Ministry "has completed extensive consultations with all relevant stakeholders across the country." That the leadership of opposition political parties are not recognized as being among "relevant stakeholders across the country" speaks volumes of this Government's attitude to the opposition.

COPPP would also like to draw the attention of the press and the general public to the SLPP Government's constant breach of procedures and their regular practice of stampeding bills and other sensitive issues through Parliament without the benefit of thorough scrutiny and debate. It will be

recalled that just over a year ago, at the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic in Sierra Leone, Government declared a State of public Health Emergency; although the law demands and the opposition insisted that the regulations relating to the Emergency had to be tabled in Parliament, Government never brought the regulations until the expiration of the State of Emergency one year later. Another striking example of disregard for procedures is the mid-term census; while the law provides for the President to call for a national census whenever he deems it necessary, the correct procedure is for such a decision to be taken to Parliament in the form of a Presidential proclamation that would make the entire process legal. However, feverish preparations for this census had been made since November last year, a date fixed (December 2020), postponed three times, funds secured, consultants engaged and some materials procured, and yet no proclamation was made until some opposition members pointed out that the whole exercise would be illegal if it does not first get Parliament's approval. This explains in part the dramatic incidents in Parliament on 19th April 2021 and the Government's obvious embarrassment for having once again put the cart before the horse. Parliament is a house of debates where representatives of the people take an oath to defend the interests of their constituents and thoroughly examine issues so that they can make good laws. Parliamentarians must therefore have the freedom and ample time to speak from the floor irrespective of which party they belong to. Bulldozing bills through Parliament creates a whole series of bad precedents that will definitely come back to haunt us in the future.

This brings us to the drama in Parliament on 19th April 2021 when the Government finally brought the proclamation on the census to be laid in Parliament. This was a public hearing that was attended by a cross section of society including top executives of political parties. Although brawls and incidents of violence are quite common in legislative assemblies around the world, it is evident that the fracas in our Parliament on 19th April was totally unnecessary and could have been avoided if a short break had been taken for the required consultations with political party leaders as requested by the opposition. Instead of dialogue, what we observed was a Government side eager to impose and demonstrate its power: apart from limiting the opposition's opportunity to speak, they brought large numbers of police personnel into the hall who at some point used pepper spray and had to be thrown out by those who invited them; various tactics were used to scare away members of the public including turning off the lights in the hall and asking them to leave. We are also informed of another breach: that instead of presenting only the proclamation which is the correct procedure, other matters such as the cyber-crime bill were included in the order paper. The absence of the Mace when the proclamation was laid has also been challenged as being irregular. The entire episode on that day in Parliament sums up what we all know about this Government; their intolerant attitude towards opposition and a passion for bulldozing

CoPPP members are deeply concerned at the methods the government of Sierra Leone has used to give its ill-timed and unnecessary midterm census the cloak of legality. It seems clear the government is determined to bulldoze its way in spite of concerns raised by a majority of registered political parties in Sierra Leone. An underlying cause for concern for CoPPP members is the apparent unwillingness of the government to engage in genuine consultation and dialogue with those with opposing views on matters pertaining to national development. This undermines trust and leads to strong suspicions of a gerrymandering motive for this census that would undermine democratic principles and entrench the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party in power against the will of the majority of Sierra Leonean voters during the next general election. In fact, it has been alleged that the whole purpose of this census is not

about economic development as the international community has been led to believe but rather to create two new districts in the South Eastern regions and 17 new constituencies.

Copper members believe a census should not be a partisan political affair but a matter of national development underpinned by principles of transparency; sound technical methods; value for money; equality, justice, and respect for the rights of every citizen.

While we recognize the benefits of a census for the development of any country, we also realize that Sierra Leone remains deeply divided on the timeliness of this exercise just months before the commencement of the 2022/2023 elections. The three postponements so far indicate the unpreparedness of Statistics Sierra Leone, their technical limitations and the need for time to train their field personnel. There is also a significant lack of trust and political buy-in from the opposition in this particular census that may result in low levels of cooperation and affect the credibility of the exercise. Wisdom therefore dictates that the census be put on hold until after the next general elections when all Sierra Leoneans will be on board.

We also continue to advise Government to drop the idea of introducing non-partisan local council elections and maintain the hybrid system that allows for both political party and independent participation. As we have explained on various platforms, non-partisan local councils are basically a roundabout way of guaranteeing absolute control by the ruling party and setting the stage for a one party dominant system. The proposed Decentralization policy carries many interesting solutions including those related to fiscal management. However, the provision that seeks to eliminate political party participation at local level poses a dangerous threat to the stability of our multi-party democracy in Sierra Leone.

COPPP is not opposed to the introduction of a Cyber-crime law insofar as it protects the rights of citizens in a world that has become extremely insecure due to new forms of criminality that occur in cyberspace. However, we are concerned that ironically the draft Bill has the potential of making citizens more unsafe and insecure. It is absolutely necessary for a Privacy and Data protection law to be passed before the introduction of the cyber-crime Bill. The enormous powers given to State authorities like the Minister, the judge and the police to order searches, impound computers, determine punishment of crimes are all open to abuse. It will be dangerous for this Bill to be stampeded through Parliament and made law if all the necessary safeguards against possible abuses are not put in place.

In conclusion, we the members of COPPP, wish to emphasize our concern at the rapid pace with which the SLPP Government is reducing the democratic space, eroding democratic principles, transforming the police into a tool of fear and oppression, choking opposition and multi-party democracy in Sierra Leone. And at this point therefore we believe that it is time for His Excellency the President to step forward into his role as guardian of the State and President of all Sierra Leoneans irrespective of their political, ethnic, religious and economic background or situation. It is time for Mr. President to listen to what the opposition has to say to him. And in this regard, we have addressed a letter requesting audience with him. We want to discuss our concerns with him directly and to this end we shall be marching peacefully to State house to deliver the letter for the attention of His Excellency the President.

Thank you.