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Press Statement for Immediate Release

Freetown, 4th October 2021: Koinadugu Bye-elections Marred by Widespread Political Intimidation, Incidents of Thuggery and Suspension of Tallying

The National Electoral Commission (NEC) conducted 2 Bye-elections for the Chairperson for the Koinadugu District Council and Councillor for Ward 155 on Saturday, 2nd October 2021. Generally, the Voting and Counting ended peacefully, but there were incidents of widespread and unprecedented political intimidation and thuggery ranging from the burning of ballot papers and other materials, disruption of voting process, disruption of counting process and running away with ballot papers and sealed ballot box, vandalization of vehicles, the use of vehicles without registration number plates, the movement of thugs from one centre to the other with motor bikes and disruption and suspension of the tallying process. Amidst all of these negative and undemocratic practices, the citizens of Koinadugu district came out and voted.

National Election Watch (NEW) commends NEC for the resilience exhibited in conducting the 2 bye-elections amidst a plethora of challenges that should have been avoided by the competing political parties. NEW further commends the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) for being responsive to the pre-election tensions by issuing a press statement admonishing all political parties to conduct themselves within the confines of the law. Despite these gallant efforts by these 2 Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs), the environment remained tense and ended up in the current predicament that reflects negatively on the country's hard-won democracy.

National Election Watch (NEW) observed both Bye-elections in line with its mandate to assess the extent to which standards of holding democratic elections as espoused in the 1991 Constitution, the Public Elections Act (PEA) of 2012 and other regional and international principles are adhered to. NEW was formally accredited by NEC and continued in this important aspect of electoral observation as has been the case in the past previous elections dating back to 2002.

NEW observed the entire process including opening, polling, closing and counting, tallying and what should have ended with the announcement of provisional results. NEW recruited, trained and deployed observers in all the 300 polling stations. NEW also deployed 21 supervisors and 4 roving teams of 3 each. Additionally, NEW undertook a pre-election assessment, to gauge the preparedness of EMBs, Election Stakeholders and citizens and issued a public statement that warned of the appalling intimidation and undemocratic tendencies shown by the political parties with the aim of disenfranchising the citizenry to enjoy their right by participating in the choice of their elected leaders.

Today, 4th of October 2021, NEW wishes to announce the following **Findings** in relation to the bye-elections in Koinadugu District:

- i. Polling stations were opened on time across the district.
- ii. NEC Staff were mainly youth with a fair balance of male and female.

- iii. Essential voting materials (such as ballot boxes, ballot papers, seals, voting booths, voter register, NEC stamps, indelible ink and Result Reconciliation Forms (RRFs) were available in all polling stations. Tactile ballot guide were available in some polling stations.
- iv. There were long distances between polling centres in areas outside urban centres. Some voters had to walk for more than 7 miles to access their polling centres.
- v. Hand washing facilities were available in all polling centres.
- vi. Temperature machines were seen in some polling centres.
- vii. The 2 contesting political parties (APC and SLPP) deployed agents in all Polling Stations.
- viii. Security personnel from the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) were deployed and visible in most polling centres and seen in some hotspot areas such as Kabala, Bafodia, Fadugu and Alkalia which had heavy police presence. However, in some polling centres, the presence of the police was thin.
- ix. There was an influx of 'imported' youth and political party stalwarts into the district on polling day.
- x. There were movements of thugs from one centre to the other with motor bikes in some areas of the district.
- xi. The use of vehicles without registration number plates, carrying unidentified youth and some of them wearing military camouflage.
- xii. Observers/Election Stakeholders included PPRC, Office of National Security (ONS), British High Commission Officials, Election Conflict Prevention and Mediation Group (ECPMG) and the Media.
- xiii. Senior NEC officials were also on the ground to support the process.

Reported Incidents

- a) At Centre Code 6048 Open Space, One-Mile Shanghai, polling station 3, the APC party agent protested over 3 dotted marks found on some ballot papers against the SLPP candidate voting space in one of the ballot books and insisted that the entire affected ballot book be cancelled. As a result, there was a standoff which stopped voting for a while. During the standoff, NEC made an attempt to clarify the dotted marks which went unheeded. In the ensuing event, Dr. Kaifala Marah of the APC then came to address the concern of the APC party agent by suggesting that voting be allowed to continue noting that, during the course of counting those dotted lines should not invalidate any ballot. Whilst both sides were trying to resolve this impasse, then came in the Deputy Minister of Political and Public Affairs, Mr. Amara Kallon and the Minister of Youth Affairs, Mr. Mohamed Orman Bangura. The 2 Government Ministers forcefully pushed people out of the polling station which compounded the chaos. In a related scuffle, the marshals who accompanied the 2 ministers vandalized the left driving mirror of the car belonging to Minkailu Koroma (Esq.) of the APC that was packed around the polling centre.
- b) At Centre Code 6047, RC Primary School Kabala, whilst voting was going on, a green Honda CRV Jeep speedily drove into the polling precinct that steered panic amongst voters on the queues. The police tried to stop him but he forced his way into the centre which triggered angry reaction from voters who pelted stones on the vehicle and completely vandalized it. The driver in question was arrested by the police for obstructing the voting process. Voting stopped for over 1 hour.
- c) At Centre Code 6115, RC Primary School Saint Balia, at around 3:30 to 4:00 pm, a group of unidentified youths on 8 motor bikes violently entered the polling precinct causing panic and forcing everyone to run for their lives including NEC officials, voters and community people. There was complete desertion of the polling centre. In the ensuing pandemonium, the thugs burnt down the voting

materials. This same group of marauders was also seen by NEW observers in Centre Code 6021, WSCL Primary School in Sakuta. They parked outside the polling Centre and continuously accelerated their motor bikes consistently, thereby causing panic. The Polling Centre Manager (PCM) was terrified and raised concern about the insecurity of the centre and requested that he needed security presence at the centre.

d) At Centre Code 6072, DEC Kagbasia polling station 2, during the counting process, there was an argument over the validity of a ballot. In the process, another set of unidentified youth, entered the polling station, captured the already counted and reconciled ballot papers in polling station 2, and also captured the sealed ballot box of station 1 in the same centre and carted with them. They also took away the mobile phones and observation documents belonging to the NEW observers on the orders of the SLPP party Agent, Alie Thoronka who was deployed at the polling station. The 2 NEW observers fled into hiding for their safety and have since reported the matter to the Fadugu police station.

e) At Centre Code 6082, RC Primary School, polling station 3, the SLPP Candidate for the Koinadugu District Council Chairperson election, Alhaji Sheku Koroma (also known as Chairman), entered the polling station accompanied by a SLP officer as personal guard. An argument ensued when the Polling Centre Manager (PCM) objected to why he (candidate) was at the polling station as that was not the centre where he was supposed to vote. This argument attracted a huge crowd of voters within the centre. In the process, the SLPP candidate physically assaulted a disabled deployed at the station as a party agent for the APC. He also attacked, physically assaulted and wounded another party agent of the APC who was trying to have a photograph of the scene. This centre was manned by a Chiefdom Police Officer who was indisposed to take any action.

f) The Tallying was suspended due to discrepancies in the entry of the results into the tallying sheet. During the tallying, these discrepancies were detected by Dr. Richard Konteh and Dr. Kaifala Marah of the APC on the results from Centre code 6096. The actual result in RRF forms were APC 101 and SLPP 69. But the figures entered into the tally sheet were 101 for APC and 169 for SLPP. This was verified by NEC and the actual figure in the RRF was inputted. The NEC staff who did the wrong inputting was immediately replaced. Later, another wrong input was also detected for Sewaia. This was also detected by Dr. Richard Konteh. NEC was trying to do verification on the second discrepancy by going through the NEC RRF forms when argument ensued between the APC and SLPP in the Tally Centre Hall. The police could not handle the impasse between the two parties. The Commissioner for NEC, Commissioner Edmond S. Alpha, called on the leadership of the two political parties in the Tally Centre, Napoleon Koroma (Esq.) for SLPP and Dr. Kaifala Marah of the APC, to calm down their membership so that they will proceed with the tallying process. He also asked that everyone should go out of the Tally Centre and five representatives of each of the parties be allowed in. The Commissioner then asked the police to take the necessary action but the tension was still rising. The Commissioner therefore decided to suspend the tallying process till further notice.

The following political stalwarts were present at the Tallying Centre; Umaru Napoleon Koroma (Esq.), Mantene Marah, Dr Richard Konteh, Dr Kaifala, Hon. Lamin Kabba and Hon Lahai Marah. Ordinary supporters of both political parties that had no role in the tallying process were allowed in the hall.

Recommendations

NEW recommends the following:

1. NEC to review the distances between polling centres to enable more people to easily access the polling centres.

2. Political party stalwarts and state functionaries who have no legitimate business in the election areas and are not accredited by NEC must stay away from polling centres on polling day. NEC should collaborate with the SLP on the number of accredited persons and verify their identity before allowing them in the polling precincts.
3. The SLP to deploy more than one police officer in each polling station. If Chiefdom Administration police officers are to be deployed, they must be given the requisite training on election policing.
4. The SLP to investigate arrest and prosecute owners of vehicles without registered number plates who were plying the polling areas where the elections were conducted.
5. The ONS, SLP and security agencies must ensure adequate security of all stages in the electoral process and specifically enforce the rules around accredited persons who should access the Tally Centre as the process has been moved from Koinadugu to Freetown.
6. The SLP to speedily investigate all incidents of political intimidation and thuggery and make their findings public and defaulters prosecuted in line with existing electoral laws.
7. NEW calls on the police to speedily recover the phones of the NEW observers.
8. The NEC Staff who entered wrong figures in the Tallying sheet must be handed over to the police for full investigations and take the necessary sanctions provided by law.
9. NEC must endeavour to train their staff on electoral ethics and integrity in order not to undermine the gains of our democracy.
10. NEC should take immediate steps to tally and announce the results of the elections in order to guarantee the trust of the electorates.

Conclusion

NEW encourages the electorates in Koinadugu District to remain calm and peaceful as we continue to monitor the situation.

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.

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