

# **CONSORTIUM OF PROGRESSIVE POLITICAL PARTIES (COPPP)**

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## **PRESS STATEMENT ON THE RECENTLY CONCLUDED KONADUGU DISTRICT BYE ELECTION**

**THURSDAY 14<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2021**

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The Consortium of Progressive Political Parties (COPPP) wishes to express grave concern over the conduct of the recent Bye Elections in Koinadugu District for Chairman of the District Council and for Councillor of Ward 155 in the same District. According to complaints by both political parties that contested the election (APC and SLPP), a press statement by the National Elections Watch (NEW) which is arguably the most important elections monitoring organization in Sierra Leone and several other reports, these elections were marred by violence, considerable vote rigging and results manipulation.

Once again, both the Electoral Commission (EC) which is responsible for the administration and conduct of elections and the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) which is mainly in charge of security at elections, stand accused of performing woefully to the extent that the conduct of these elections and results have been challenged by all parties and judged as not being fair or credible.

In light of these facts, COPPP would like to make the following observations:

Most, if not all previous bye elections conducted by the EC since the 2018 elections have been at the level of ward or constituency. This is the first bye election within this period that has been contested at the scale of a whole District (with a population of 204,021), consisting of four constituencies and eighteen wards and simultaneously within a ward in that same district. And since the nation is gearing up towards the holding of a highly sensitive round of elections in 2022 and 2023, these Koinadugu elections were a great opportunity for the new EC administration under the leadership of Mr. Mohamed

Konneh to demonstrate their competence and ability to handle large scale elections, and in any case convince the electorate that they are fit and ready to correct the mistakes EC has made in the past.

Secondly, last September, the EC organized a conference on electoral legal reforms, inspired by recommendations made by international and national observers of the 2018 elections. At that EU/UNDP sponsored conference a very serious critique based on statistics was made by one of the panelists, that the current composition of the EC staff, especially at the level of Directors and District elections managers was heavily biased in favour of the South and Eastern regions, implying that it was composed mainly of people planted there allegedly by the SLPP government to rig elections in their favour.

The reports of EC staff involvement in irregular practices in Koinadugu and endeavoring to rig the elections even to the extent of tampering with the results in favour of the SLPP at the final tallying centre, appears to confirm the fears and suspicions of members of the opposition: in order to continue to stay in power the current Government has captured the Electoral Commission and, given its current composition, this body's capability to conduct a free, fair, credible and transparent election in 2022 and 2023 is no longer possible.

Based on the behavior of Government officials in previous bye elections such as resorting to violent acts including the destruction of ballot boxes in the Constituency 110 and Tonko Limba bye elections, the attack on an opposition Parliamentarian in the Samu bye election, the storming of polling stations and disruption of tallying in the Koinadugu elections, it is now clear that for the SLPP the 2022/2023 election is going to be a do-or-die affair, and that these bye elections for them are something of a dress rehearsal that indicates how far they are ready to go to win at all costs. To say the least, this posture by a sitting regime has very grave implications for national security and unfortunately it appears as if at the moment no one, not even the moral guarantors and the international community are able to stop this Government from taking us to the brink.

Furthermore, as if to confirm its grand plan to influence the conduct of the next elections, the Government has stepped up its direct control of the electoral process by appointing the Chief Minister as Chairman of an Elections Steering Committee, a role that guarantees the SLPP Government exclusive control over the preparation and general organization of the forthcoming elections. It is difficult to see how a Chief Minister whose survival depends on his party's re-election can provide impartial, disinterested and independent leadership of the committee that steers the planning and execution processes of the next elections.

Lastly, in regards to elections violence, the pattern that has evolved in the post-2018 bye elections is for those individuals close to the ruling party that participate in acts of violence, such as destruction of ballot boxes and burning of ballot papers at polling stations, to go scot free. Government officials who were caught on video smashing ballot boxes at Constituency 110 were never charged to court and senior police officials present at the scene or who "managed" the situation, have since been promoted. This ineffectiveness of the police in preventing or stopping electoral violence at the hand of well-connected public officials or regime supporters contrasts sharply with their brutal and bloody efficiency in dealing with opposition demonstrations where many young protesters have lost their lives to police

live bullets. Today, the people of Sierra Leone are living in a state of fear and intimidation not only due to the high-handedness of the police but because of the presence of armed military personnel everywhere, sending ominous pre-election signals of death and doom.

We at COPPP are of the view that a stitch in time saves nine and that now is the time to take corrective action that will restore some trust and confidence in the electoral process. We therefore make the following recommendations:

1. That in order to ensure fairness, impartiality and a level playing field, the Chief Minister should give up his current position of Chairman of the Elections Steering Committee and be replaced by the Minister of Political and Public Affairs with a representative of the donors as co-chair.
2. That an evaluation meeting between political parties, the Electoral Commission, the Sierra Leone Police, the Judiciary, the EU, UNDP and relevant civil society organizations be convened urgently to review the recent Koinadugu elections with a view to assessing the Electoral Commission's and the security system's ability and preparedness for the conduct of free, fair, transparent and credible elections in 2022/2023.
3. That a regional and ethnic audit of the Directorate and District managerial staff be conducted so as to reassure the public that there are no imbalances that should warrant suspicion that the EC staff has been populated with SLPP agents and operatives.
4. That a general assessment be conducted on the independence of the Electoral Commission from Government control
5. That all political parties, especially the two oldest parties, deliberate and agree on a framework for making a direct commitment to the nation in regards to their respective share of responsibility in protecting Sierra Leoneans from harm and on safeguards to prevent the country from sliding into another crisis as a result of their conduct in the forthcoming elections.

In light of the foregoing statements, COPPP hereby declares its availability and looks forward to discussing these recommendations further with the Electoral Commission, Development Partners, Civil Society and any other partner that may be interested in learning more about our position on this issue.

Signed (on behalf of COPPP):

Dr. Dennis Bright:

Ms. Femi Claudius Cole: