



NATIONAL ELECTION WATCH (NEW)

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Press Statement for Immediate Release

Freetown, 29th March 2022: Bye-Elections in Constituency 005 and 073 Ended Peacefully with Political Parties Largely Complying with the Signed MoU Initiated By The Political Parties Registration Commission

National Election Watch (NEW) observed the just concluded bye-elections conducted by the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (EC-SL) in Constituencies 005 and 073 in Port Loko and Kailahun districts respectively and noted that both elections were peaceful and political parties largely complied with the MoU they signed that was initiated by the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC). Both elections ended peacefully without any major incidence of violence disrupting the process. There was only one breach of the MoU by the APC sitting Member of Parliament, Hon. Umpha Sorie Gbassay Koroma representing Constituency 114, Calaba Town, in Parliament. Hon. Umpha Sorie Gbassay Koroma went within the vicinity of Centre Code 10190 at Mamamah RC Primary School without accreditation. He was then asked to leave but he refused, a scuffle ensued and he was arrested by the police. Voter turnout was relatively low and long distances in-between polling centres, in some instances up to 15 miles especially in Constituency 073.

Vacancies in both constituencies occurred following the deaths of the then substantive Members of Parliament, Hon. Aloysious B. Ansumana and Hon. Ahmed S. Turay of Constituencies 005 and 073 respectively.

NEW's observation of the two bye-elections assessed the extent to which standards of holding democratic elections were complied with as espoused in the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone, the Public Elections Act 2012 and other regional and international principles and protocols. NEW recruited, trained and deployed 47 stationed observers, one in every polling centre i.e. 24 in constituency 005 and 23 in constituency 073, accounting for 100% coverage of all 47 polling centres. In addition, NEW further deployed teams of supervisors and roving observers in both constituencies to support the stationed observers and promptly move information about incidents to the relevant authorities for timely intervention. NEW observed the pre-election environment and the entire Election Day process; including the opening, polling, closing and counting, and the following day observed the tallying and announcement of the provisional results in both constituencies.

NEW noted the professional conduct of the EC-SL in the process; NEW also noted a well-coordinated deployment and observation of the two Bye-elections by International Partners and embassies, and recognised the value this adds to credible and peaceful elections.

FINDINGS

- i) Polling stations were opened on time in both constituencies (07:00 – 07:15hrs)
- ii) Polling station staff were mainly young people with a fair balance of male and female, but Polling Centre Managers (PCM) were mostly males.
- iii) Voting materials including ballot boxes, ballot papers, seals, voting booths, Voter Registers, EC-SL stamp, indelible ink and Results Reconciliation Forms (RRFs) were available in all polling stations. Tactile ballot guides were also available in most polling stations.

iv) Hand washing facilities were available in all polling centres but its use was not enforced though some voters used the facility.

v) The APC and SLPP political parties deployed two party agents in all polling stations in both constituencies but no party agent of the PDP party that contested in Constituency 073 was observed in all 23 polling centres.

vi) At Centre Code 1099, Muloma Women Development Association, Levuma Njeigbla in Constituency 005, there was a campaign poster in the Centre. Also at centre code 10187, Songo Court Barray, Polling Station 1, in Constituency 073, a voting booth was marked with Mayoral and Chairperson sticker.

vii) Voter turn-out for both elections were 46.0% (9,100 votes cast out of 19,775 registered voters) and 39.9% (7,159 votes cast out of 17,945 registered voters) in Constituencies 005, Kailahun district and 073 Port Loko district respectively.

viii) Distances in-between polling centres is relatively far, making it challenging for voters to access polling stations, especially for the aged, pregnant women and mothers with babies.

ix) In both constituencies, voters were transported to and from the polling stations; transports were provided mainly by political parties to mitigate the distance challenge.

x) At Centre Code 1094, Market Centre, Siama in Constituency 005, a police officer was doing the work of the Queue Controller.

xi) Preferential treatment in line with EC-SL guidelines was given to the aged, pregnant women and mothers with babies to vote.

xii) Several voters went to some polling stations for identification with expired voter ID cards, photocopied ID cards and National Civil Registration Authority (NCRA) registration slips to vote in both constituencies but when educated on which document to present, some went and brought the valid voter ID cards.

xiii) There was high police presence in all Polling Centres.

xv) Senior EC-SL staff including Commissioners were visible in both constituencies moving around election localities and timely responding to incidents as they emerged.

xvi) District level political party executives were seen representing their parties at events in the election process. The incident of movement around the polling environment of political party “heavyweights” on Election Day, that had been identified as the main cause for election violence was very minimal.

xvii) The Bye-elections in both constituencies were observed by other groups including the British High Commission, the European Delegation in Sierra Leone, the German Embassy, the Irish Embassy, the United States Embassy, Ahmed Tejan Kabba Foundation, Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone, Political Parties Registration Commission, Office of National Security, National Commission for Democracy, Election Conflict Prevention and Mediation Group, Civil Society Platform on Non-Violence Election and the media.

INCIDENTS

NEW observed the following incidents:

- 1) At Centre Code 1099, Muloma Women Development Association, Levuma Njeigbla, Polling Station 2, a middle age woman, Baindu Lansana, voted twice. On leaving the polling station after voting in the first instance, she said, she heard her name and so went back to the Voter Identification Officer (VIO) but informed him that there are several Baindu Lansana names in Bombohun village, where she was coming from and that she has already voted. The VIO still directed her to the Ballot Paper Issuer who gave her a ballot paper making her vote a second time. Upon voting, the Ballot Box Controller observed her finger was already inked. She was handed over to the police for further investigation. The EC-SL Commissioner for the Eastern Region arrived at the scene and upon investigation relieved the VIO of his responsibilities, replacing him with the Queue Controller. He was handed over to the police and the two were eventually transferred to the Daru Police Station.
- 2) At Center Code 10190, RC Primary School, Mamamah, a sitting Member of Parliament of the main opposition APC party, Hon. Umpha Sorie Gbassay Koroma, representing Constituency 114, Calaba Town, was roughly arrested by the police when he refused to leave the polling environment being that he was not accredited by the EC-SL.

RECOMMENDATIONS

NEW Recommends that;

1. Political Parties, PPRC and the Security apparatus ensure that Political “heavyweights” continue to stay away from Polling Centres to minimize incidents of violence and to ensure peaceful elections.
2. EC-SL to review the distances between polling centres to enable more people easily access the polling centres.
3. EC-SL considers the recruitment of more females at the Polling Centre Management level.
4. EC-SL and all other democratic institutions supporting Electoral Education design tailored voter education for the aged and rural voters.

CONCLUSION

NEW commends the leaderships of the political parties that contested the Bye-elections for ensuring that their members fully complied with the MoU, which they signed before the elections, especially the aspect of their senior members moving around with marshals in election localities on Election Day. This has been identified as a major source of violence during election and the high-level compliance of political party “heavyweights” led to the peaceful conduct of both Bye-elections.

NEW particularly notes the continued role of young people (male and female) as EC-SL ad-hoc staff supporting the electoral process in the field; this is a positive sign for democracy building and NEW encourages the youths to continue playing this role with high levels of integrity.

NEW further commends the prompt interventions of the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) and the EC-SL to address emerging issues before they resulted to full-blown incidents that would have disrupted the elections process.

NEW will continue to observe all elections and related electoral processes, and will report its findings to the public.

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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