



NATIONAL ELECTION WATCH (NEW)

A Coalition of Civic and Non-Governmental Organizations 2 MIK
Drive Barracks Road Murray Town, Freetown. +232-76-737-231

nationalelectionwatchsl@gmail.com
www.nationalelectionwatchsl.org

Press Statement for Immediate Release

Freetown, 27th June 2022: ECSL Conducts Six Bye-elections on Saturday 25th June 2022; NEW observed No Major Incidence of Violence But There was a High Rate of Invalid Votes

The Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL) on Saturday 25th June 2022 conducted six bye-elections in Constituency 056 Tonkolili District; Ward 031, Kenema district; Ward 138, Falaba district; Ward 252, Port Loko District; and Wards 212 and 216 in Karene District. National Election Watch (NEW) observed all six bye-elections noting that there was no major violence but a very high rate of invalid votes across all election localities. The six bye-elections registered a total of 1,259 invalid votes. These bye-elections were as a result of vacancies due to various reasons in the constituency and five wards. In constituency 056, the Member of Parliament representing the constituency contested a Paramount Chieftaincy Election in one of the chiefdoms (Sambaia Bendugu chiefdom) in the constituency and won thereby losing his seat in Parliament. In ward 216 in Karene District, long absence of the substantive Councillor accounted for the vacancy. In Wards 031 in Kenema, 138 in Falaba, 212 in Karene and 252 in Port Loko districts, were all as a result of deaths of the substantive councillors.

NEW's observation of the six bye-elections was in conformity with provisions in the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone, the Public Elections Act 2012 and International, Regional and Sub Regional instruments guiding election observation to contribute to the conduct of credible free and fair elections. NEW recruited, trained and deployed stationed observers in all polling stations in Constituency 056 in Tonkolili district and in all polling centres in the five Wards where bye-elections were conducted. In addition, NEW further deployed teams of supervisors and roving observers in all election locations to support the stationed observers as part of their problem-solving mechanism by promptly moving information about incidents from the polling stations to the relevant authorities for timely intervention to avoid such incidents adversely affecting the outcome of the electoral process. NEW observed the entire activities in the conduct of the six bye-elections including a pre-election assessment of the elections environment and the entire Election Day processes of opening of polls, closing, reconciliation and counting, and the following day the tallying and announcement of the provisional results.

NEW notes the professional and efficient manner in which the ECSL conducted all six bye-elections and the presence of very senior members of the Commission including the Chief Electoral Commissioner who doubles as the Chairman of the Commission, Commissioner for Eastern Region and the newly appointed Commissioner for Northern Region. NEW equally notes the visible presence of both the Sierra Leone Police and personnel of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) and their professional conduct in maintaining peace and order but yet not obstructing or interfering in the elections process. NEW further notes an impressive and well-coordinated observation strategy of international partners, embassies with the visible presence of Heads of Missions. This effort added value to the credence of the election process in the constituency and some wards. NEW also notes the presence of other democratic institutions, civil society groups and the media.

FINDINGS

The following are key findings of NEW's Observation

- i. Polling stations opened on time
- ii. ECSL staff was mainly youth with more males deployed in Constituency 056 and more females in the Ward elections.
- iii. There were tactile ballot guides in some polling stations but NEW did not observe it being used.
- iv. All the political parties deployed party agents in all Polling Stations except in Ward 252, Port Loko district where the NDA party did not deploy party agents.
- v. In Constituency 056, Tonkolili district, Wards 252 and 216 in Port Loko and Karene districts respectively, it was only the APC party agents that had the Final Voter Register in polling stations which they used to cross check registered voters.
- vi. In Constituency 056, APC deployed senior party officials as party agents.
- vii. Voter turn-out in Constituency 056 was 50.6%, in Ward 031 Kenema district 38.7%, in Ward 138 Falaba district 48.0%, in Ward 252 Port Loko district 33.6%, ward 212 in Karene district 30.5% and in ward 216 Karene district also, 50.9%
- viii. Police and military presence was highly visible in all polling centres in Constituency 056, Tonkolili district and in Ward 138 in Falaba District.
- ix. In Ward 138, Falaba District, both APC and SLPP party agents displayed peaceful and cordial relationship and jointly resolved minor issues that occurred on polling day.
- x. Tallying of bye-election results was conducted without interruption for all the wards but this was not the case for the tallying of results for Constituency 056 in Tonkolili district. Some way in the tallying process, the two SLPP agents in the Tallying Centre handed over a letter to the tallying officers and left the Tallying Centre. Later on, another set of SLPP party agents different from the initial two came into the Tallying Centre. Just before the announcement of the provisional results, another four SLPP supporters entered the Tallying Centre. They requested that the announcement be put on hold as they had a complaint to make. They then brandished Results Reconciliation Forms (RRFs) which they claimed recorded over voting and some not signed by the Presiding Officer and their party agents. NEW was unable to verify the claim because they could not examine the said RRFs. The Regional Returning Officer informed that he will perform his duty of announcing the Provisional results but that they will look into the complaint afterwards.
- xi. There were other observers/Stakeholders in the field and they were the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC), Office of National Security (ONS), Election Conflict Prevention and Mediation Group (ECPMG), Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion, Civil Society Platform for non-violence in Elections, European Union Delegation to Sierra Leone, American Embassy, British High Commission, Irish Embassy and the Media.
- xii. Senior ECSL officials including the Chief Electoral Commissioner (CEC), the Commissioner for the Northern Region and Commissioner for the Eastern Region were also on the ground to monitor and support the process.

Concerns

From the observation of the six bye-elections, NEW has the following concerns;

- At Polling centre 7230 RC Primary School Kanigban with 3 polling stations, the former National Women's Leader of the SLPP, Madam Fatmata Sawaneh, entered the centre and

ordered the Polling Center Manager (PCM) of ECSL, to ask out all NEW observers from the polling stations claiming the NEW observers to be members of the APC party. The PCM consulted one of his line managers who instructed him to allow all accredited NEW Observers to stay in the polling stations and continue the observation of the elections.

- Noting that the 2023 elections will be in June, NEW is concerned about the difficult terrain that will be a hindrance to easy deployment of ECSL personnel, election materials, voters, observers and the supervisory component of the election exercise.
- NEW is also concerned about the poor internet connectivity and limited or no mobile phone coverage in some parts of the country as is the case in several locations where the bye-elections were conducted.
- The incidence of invalid votes was alarming in the six bye-elections as the number of invalid votes can change the outcome of an election.

Incidents

NEW observed the following incidents:

- At Centre Code 9026, Karene District, polling station 3, the SLPP party agent, asked the Presiding Officer (PCM) to relocate the ballot box to a position where all observers and party agents can see and observe. The APC party agent protested that, the SLPP party agents had no right to tell the PCM what to do. This resulted in a standoff which attracted supporters from both political parties. Voting was stopped for 9minutes. The issue was subsequently resolved and voting continued.
- At Polling Centre code 7225 M.CA Primary Konkrobaya in Constituency 056, a woman by the name of Marie Bangura was caught attempting to do multiple voting. She had voted in polling station 1 and went to polling station 3 to vote a second time. She was spotted by party agents and was handed over to the SLP by the ECSL officials for further investigation.

Recommendation

NEW recommends that:

- ECSL continue to exhibit neutrality and professionalism in the conduct of elections and continue to be proactive in managing incidences to ensure credible, free and fair elections.
- The ECSL and political parties should endeavor to step up voter education to reduce the incidence of invalid votes.
- ECSL should enforce the equal representation of political party agents at results Tallying Centres.
- NEW particularly notes the continued role of young people (male and female) as ECSL 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.
- The PPRC to continue their robust engagements with the election processes especially the conduct of the float parade that has contributed to peaceful Election Day environment.
- The ONS, SLP and RSLAF continue to maintain professionalism in providing security for subsequent elections.
- NEW commends the leadership of the various political parties that contested the bye-elections for conducting themselves in a peaceful manner and complying with the regulation banning the movement of unmarked vehicles and marshals/thugs in election localities on polling day.

- All political parties contesting elections to deploy agents in polling stations and Tallying Centres
- All political party candidates contesting elections to exhibit political tolerance and peaceful co-existence before, during and after polling

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.

XXX End XXX