



CONSORTIUM OF PROGRESSIVE POLITICAL PARTIES
PRESS BRIEFING ON THE ON-GOING VOTER REGISTRATION PROCESS

16th September 2022

Greetings to you, members of the Press and to all the other guests invited here either to give testimonies or share stories about the on-going voter registration exercise in Sierra Leone.

The Consortium of Progressive Political Parties (COPPP) would like once more to engage the Government, Civil Society organizations, the general public and our development partners as we normally do whenever the country is in danger of losing its grip on freedom and democracy leading to situations that can affect the peace and security of Sierra Leone.

The members of COPPP would also like to commend the extraordinary enthusiasm demonstrated, efforts and sacrifices made so far by citizens all over the country to register to vote in the forthcoming general elections. We do acknowledge and respect the commitment of the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (ECSL) in setting up the necessary structures for voter registration across the country. In addition to mobilizing our people to go out and register, our parties have also been monitoring the conduct of the registration and we have some serious concerns over some aspects of the exercise. We would like the ECSL and other related bodies to act promptly on these issues as we advance into Phase II of the process.

First-time Voters Nightmare

Section 24(1) of the 2022 Public Elections Act clearly states that:

“A Registration Officer may, in satisfying himself that a person is entitled to be registered as a voter, request from the person any of the following”-

- (a) A birth certificate or other such document issued under the authority of an enactment*
- (b) A naturalisation certificate*
- (c) The testimony of a member of the Local Council in the area of his residence*
- (d) National Identification Number*
- (e) A statutory declaration giving particulars of a person's birth*
- (f) Any other satisfactory evidence of the person's entitlement to be registered as a voter*

In support of this law, the ECSL produced a set of guidelines named the ECSL Procedures Manual For 2022 Voters Registration. Included in this manual is a sample “Witness Form” which is to be used, if a birth certificate is not available, by a Paramount Chief, Tribal Head, Town Chief, Section Chief, Village Head, Religious Leader, Head of Educational Institution or Councillor to confirm that the potential registrant is: A. a Sierra Leonean; B. at least 18 years old; and C. Ordinarily resident in the area where he/she intends to register.

However, ECSL has now decided that **only original birth certificates** would now be accepted at ECSL registration centers because of some issues relating to fraudulent registrants, fake birth certificates and potentially unreliable verifications.

Whilst we recognize and acknowledge that ECSL has experienced challenges with the Witness Form verification process, it is our view that these challenges can be addressed through continued communication and public engagement of the consequences of fraudulent verification. Of course, there will always be challenges with any system but the response to those challenges must not be to disenfranchise thousands of first-time voters who are not in the NCRA database and who do not have birth certificates.

Furthermore, the ECSL cannot change the provisions of the 2022 Public Elections Act without going back to Parliament. In Section 24 (1)(c), the Public Elections Act does not place a restriction on the number of people that can be verified by Local Councillors per day. It is reasonable that Local Councillors (and other stakeholders identified in the ECSL Witness Form) will know many first-time voters in their communities and that the provision of BECE and WASSCE certificates by these young people will support the Local Councillors' abilities to complete the Witness Forms.

As a result of the directive to accept only original birth certificates at registration centers, the whole experience of registering to vote has now turned into a nightmare, especially for first time voters or for "*sans papiers*" citizens who are without a birth certificate or other identification documents. In the Western Area and other northern regions hundreds of young first-time registrants or people without birth certificates are being packed in a corner and ignored, or simply ordered to go away. There are many reported cases of arrests of first-time registrants whose birth certificates were considered to be fake by the ECSL staff. In at least two cases, the arrested youth were only released after an amount of one hundred new leones was paid as bail or bribe. These young people who are being brutalized and thrown into jail are simply trying to be citizens, trying to take part in this critical aspect of the democratic process for the very first time. Some of those who tried to enjoy their democratic right to protest and air out their grievances have fallen under a rain of bullets. Now, those who just want to vote and try to register are being harassed, thrown into jail or forced to buy their freedom. This is not right!

Birth registration: it is no secret that the culture of registration, especially of vital statistics such as births, deaths, marriages, divorce, etc. is not as strong in our African countries as it may be elsewhere. In fact, those who will be turning eighteen in 2023 and therefore eligible to vote, were born in 2005. In that year, according to the World Bank Completeness of Birth Registrations, only 48% of births in Sierra Leone were registered. The campaign by the NCRA for Sierra Leoneans to get used to registration is an on-going one and it is inappropriate to use the voter registration process as an excuse to penalize those who do not have papers yet.

Although NCRA has confirmed that delayed birth certificates can be obtained, the practicality and the costs of having hundreds of first-time voters travelling to NCRA's offices to apply for birth certificates places a significant obstacle in the paths of first-time voters who are not already in the NCRA database. Whilst this might nevertheless be achievable in urban Freetown, it will certainly not be possible in rural areas in other parts of the country, thus disenfranchising thousands of first-time voters and others not in the NCRA database (for example those living in urban informal settlements who have experienced disasters and therefore do not have any forms of identification).

Unequal treatment: interestingly, most of the reports being received of obstacles for first time voters who want to register are coming from the Northern and Western regions of Sierra Leone. Reports from the Southern and Eastern regions (particularly Kenema, Bo and Pujehun districts) show that first time voters are not having the same difficulty of being identified, even without a birth certificate. Elders, councilors, religious leaders and neighbours are identifying and confirming the eligibility of first-time registrants without any problems. This leads us to take very seriously the assertions of a senior member of the SLPP, as video-recorded and disseminated in the social media, suggesting that their control of this voter registration will be the key to their winning the 2023 elections.

Slowness: another issue is the sluggishness of the process especially in the North and West which we consider to be deliberate. Long hours are being lost due to malfunctioning equipment and sometimes shortage of receipt

books! ECSL staff are finding any excuse to prolong the process and frustrate registrants in these regions where opposition parties have a firm foothold. In these regions, and particularly in urban areas, young people have proved to be strongly opposed to the current regime and there seems to be a palpable fear on the part of the ruling party of allowing them to register in their numbers.

There are therefore so many issues with the conduct of the registration process that we propose the following:

1. Parliament should invite the ECSL to discuss all the anomalies and complaints coming from a significant percentage of potential voters.
2. That Parliament investigates the issue of faulty machines to ascertain if there are any procurement lapses that should be further probed.
3. The ECSL should immediately convene a meeting of the Political Parties Liaison Committee to hear reports from political parties about the registration process and take on board their concerns and suggestions.
4. That the ECSL commits to a policy of “No eligible voter left behind” and consequently prepare for an extension of the registration process.
5. That very clear directives are given afresh to the registration officials so that their decisions are not left to discretion.
6. That the Police are warned not to interfere with the voter registration process and limit their role to maintaining decorum at the queues and in the centers
7. That the issue of first-time voters and birth certificates be the subject of a special review so that the non-possession of a birth certificate is not made a deterrent for voting.

The political parties at COPPP once again commit ourselves to work assiduously towards the success of this registration process and remain open to collaboration with all concerned to this end.

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