



MEDIA REFORM COORDINATING GROUP- SIERRA LEONE (MRCG-SL)

MEDIA AND ELECTIONS

COVERAGE AND REPORTAGE ON THE FIRST PHASE OF VOTER REGISTRATION FOR THE 2023 ELECTIONS



SEPTEMBER, 2022

TABLE OF CONTENT

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	3
ABOUT MRCG	4
1. INTRODUCTION	5
2. METHODOLOGY	5
3. MEDIA AND ELECTIONS	6
4. MRCG AND ELECTIONS	7
5. MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF THE VOTER REGISTRATION	7
5.1 APPROACHES BY MEDIA INSTITUTIONS	8
6. ECSL'S PUBLIC INFORMATION AND MEDIA RELATIONS APPROACH.....	15
7. SUCCESSES/IMPACTS OF THE MEDIA COVERAGE AND REPORTAGE ON THE VOTER EDUCATION	15
8. CHALLENGES IN COVERING AND REPORTING ON THE VOTER REGISTRATION ..	15
9. RECOMMENDATIONS.....	16
10. CONCLUSION.....	16

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) expresses its sincere thanks and appreciation to all those who supported the publication of this report on the first phase of the media's coverage of the voter registration exercise for the 2023 elections in Sierra Leone.

Special thanks to the MRCG's Programmes Unit for pulling this through: Rosaline K. Amara, Augustine S. James, Jonette-Ann M. O. Greene, Ishiaka Sannoh, Osman Sesay and the lead author, Francis Sowa (PhD) for producing the report.

The MRCG will also follow the second phase of the voter registration process to produce a comprehensive report at the end of the exercise.

ABOUT MRCG

The Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) is the coordinating Secretariat for media reform, research and capacity building. It comprises Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), Independent Radio Network (IRN), Guild of Editors (GoE), Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL), Sierra Leone Reporters Union (SLRU), Sport Writers Association of Sierra Leone (SWASAL), Mass Communication (Fourah Bay College), Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC), Independent Media Commission (IMC) and the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC).

1. INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone will conduct its next Presidential, Parliamentary, and Local Council elections on 24 June 2023. The proclamation of date for the Presidential election in 2023 was made by the Chief Electoral Commissioner and Chairman of the Electoral Commission Sierra Leone (ECSL) on 14 March, 2022 after consultation with the President.¹ The Office of the President in a press release on the 11 March 2022 announced the same date for the conduct of Parliamentary and Local Council elections. In readiness for the 2023 general elections, the ECSL on 24 August 2022 launched the 2022 Voter Registration Exercise at the New Brookfield's Hotel, Freetown. The voter registration is slated from the 3 September to the 4 October, 2022.²

Elections in Sierra Leone are held every five years. The Constitution of Sierra Leone, Act No. 6 of 1991 mandates the Electoral Commission to register voters. Section 33 of the constitution provides that:

“Subject to the provisions of the Constitution, the Electoral Commission shall be responsible for the conduct and supervision of the registration of voters for, and of, all public elections and referenda; and for that purpose shall have power to make regulations by statutory instrument for the registration of voters, the conduct of Presidential, Parliamentary or Local Government elections and referenda, and other matters connected therewith, including regulations for voting by proxy.”

The voter registration is part of the fulfillment of the functions of the Commission. It is done in two phases, the first phase is from 3 September to 17 September 2022 and the second phase from 20 September to the 4 October 2022.³

2. METHODOLOGY

This report utilized a qualitative approach. Data were collected from documentary analyses, key informant interviews and content analysis of media publications and broadcasts.

The following individuals were interviewed:

1. Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, President, Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ)
2. Ransford Wright, National Coordinator, Independent Radio Network (IRN)
3. Donald Theo-Harding, Chairman, Guild of Editors
4. Alimamy Lahai Kamara, Deputy Director- General, Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC)
5. Samuel Wise Bangura, Head of Production of African Young Voices (AYV)
6. Moses Lavalie, Head of News Room, Freetown Television Network (FTN)
7. Alfie Barrie, Staff, Star Television

¹ <https://ec.gov.sl/2022/05/19/press-statement-on-the-proclamation-of-date-for-presidential-election-in-2023-by-the-chief-electoral-commissioner-and-chairman-national-returning-officer-of-the-electoral-commission-for-sierra-leon-4/>

² <https://ec.gov.sl/> <https://ec.gov.sl/2022/09/03/statement-by-the-chief-electoral-commiissioner-and-chairman-to-start-the-voter-registration-process/>

³ <https://ec.gov.sl/> and <https://ec.gov.sl/2022/09/03/statement-by-the-chief-electoral-commiissioner-and-chairman-to-start-the-voter-registration-process/>

3. MEDIA AND ELECTIONS

Since the end of the country's 11 year civil war in 2002, the media had played pivotal role in covering and reporting on the electoral processes up to the 2018 elections. The media had been very powerful in informing citizens about governance issues. The media have a very crucial role to play in the 2023 elections, including reporting on the activities of Elections Management Bodies (EMBs), the ECSL and the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC).

Free media have long been recognized as a cornerstone of democracy and play an important role in influencing political discourse during elections. When free and balanced, traditional media (print and broadcast) foster transparency and the dissemination of important electoral information. The rise of new media – such as social media sites, blogs, email and other new media platforms – provides further avenues and possibilities for participatory citizenship, information, knowledge sharing, inclusion and empowerment. Both traditional and new media can play a vital watchdog role, and serve as a campaign platform, a forum for public debate and as a public educator, ultimately strengthening democracy (Samer and Gallagher 2015).

There is little doubt that the media play an indispensable role in the proper functioning of a democracy. The most obvious role of the media in a democracy is that of a —watchdog. By undertaking careful scrutiny and disclosure of the functioning of the government and various arms of the state, as well as the performance of elected representatives, the media can arm the public with the information necessary to evaluate the sincerity and effectiveness of the people they elect into power and to hold them to account (Joseph, 2011).

In managing elections, Joseph (2011) continued, the media play three critical roles:

1. First, they provide information about the election to citizens. Since people's awareness about the election depends to a large extent on media content, journalists must report factually and fairly on the platforms and campaigns of all the participating political parties and/or candidates so that the electorate can differentiate between them and make informed decisions. The media must also provide interpretation and analysis of events and issues, often by creating space for the diverse opinions of a range of columnists and commentators. Another important task involves passing on information from the election commission to educate citizens on the basic facts and process of elections.
2. Secondly the media function as watchdogs on behalf of the public, keeping close tabs on the election campaign and the voting process. It is the media's job to report on any violations of the rights of candidates or voters (including the right to free speech), any corruption in election and voting procedures, any misdemeanor by political parties, and/or any signs of omission or commission by the election management authorities.
3. And, thirdly, the media need to serve as the voice of the voters. Elections are not just for politicians; they are, notably, an opportunity for ordinary people to speak up, to identify the issues they think need highlighting and why. Journalists must go out into the community to seek and provide a forum for the voices of ordinary voters who have something to say, especially those

who hesitate to voice their opinions on public matters in the public sphere or have been ignored or even prevented from doing so in the past (Joseph, 2011).

4. MRCG AND ELECTIONS

In the 2018 elections, the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) implemented a program on 'Promoting Professional Media Coverage and Conflict Sensitive Reporting of the 2018 Multi-Tier Elections in Sierra Leone' funded by the United Nations Development Fund (UNDP) as part of the 'Conflict Prevention and Mitigation during the Electoral Cycle in Sierra Leone' project. One of the components of the program was to set up and operationalize the first Media Situation Room in Sierra Leone. The Situation Room analyzed media contents of the 2018 elections and provided real time information on the media performance and provided mentoring and coaching that helped to provide broadcast and publication of unprofessional contents. As part of the program, there were training sessions across the country on 'Promoting Professional Media Coverage and Conflict Sensitive Reporting of the 2018 Multi-Tier Elections in Sierra Leone'. The training sessions enhanced and strengthened the skills of 500 local journalists (including editors and station managers) from regional media houses in Sierra Leone to provide professional media coverage and conflict sensitive reporting of the 2018 multi-tier elections in Sierra Leone. The participants were taught about the role of media amid conflict, both how it can prolong and exacerbate a conflict and its role in preventing conflict and promoting reasoned political dialogue; methods of conflict sensitive reporting and how to effectively and professionally report on the electoral cycles and adherence to the Independent Media Commission's (IMC) Guidelines on Reporting Elections (MRCG Reports 2019).

One of the recommendations from the 2018 initiative was that the MRCG's intervention should focus on all stages of the electoral processes. This report is part of MRCG's engagements on the pre-elections stage of the 2023 General Elections.

5. MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF THE VOTER REGISTRATION

The media in Sierra Leone developed series of approaches to cover and report on the electoral process since the pronouncement of the dates for the elections. In order for the MRCG to get a vivid understanding of the media's approach to the voter registration, it conducted series of interviews with stakeholders in the Sierra Leone's media industry, including journalists from various media houses. Our findings show that all of the media institutions have developed an approach to cover the voter registration.

The President of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, said that the media have played a very significant role in terms of informing citizens about the importance of voter registration and also encouraging people to register for them to become eligible voters for the general elections.

The National Coordinator of the Independent Radio Network (IRN), Ransford Wright, stated that IRN continues to contribute to peace, free, fair and credible elections in Sierra Leone, hence they

have been putting out quality and reliable information on the electoral processes, including the voter registration.

The Chairman of Guild of Editors, Donald Theo-Harding, said the print media are publishing various articles on the voter registration and monitoring the entire electoral processes.

5.1 APPROACHES BY MEDIA INSTITUTIONS

The Sierra Leone Broadcasting (SLBC)

The public service broadcaster, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), has been covering and reporting on the electoral processes. On the commencement of the exercise, the SLBC had a programme ‘Voter Registration Exercise.’ “It was the only nationwide TV and radio program (simulcast) on that event moderated by two presenters (male and female) hosting three guests (ECSL, All Political Parties Association (APPA) and CSO). All six SLBC stations in Makeni, Magburaka, Kono, Bo, Kenema and Kailahun took part in the programme. It was two hour forty minute program, starting at 9:00am ending at 11:40 a m., some twenty minutes after registration of the President.

“We got live TV reports from Kamakwie, Pujehun, Kailahun, Kono, Falaba, Portloko, Kambia, Bo and Kenema. 21 partner radio stations in the regions linked up including Universal Radio in Freetown. Our Outside Broadcast (OB) was also deployed giving live feed of the exercise and captured live registration of the President. Staffs at headquarters were deployed to capture centers around their localities.”⁴

The guests responded to issues with regards to registration criteria, the method of the registration process, voter education and challenges etc.

Table 1: SLBC’s coverage of the commencement of the voter registration exercise

Name of programme : Special program on ‘Voter Registration Exercise’					
Duration 2 hours, 40 minutes					
Guests, panellists, contributors				Issues discussed	Feedback
EMBs	Security sector institution	Social/political analysts	Others		
Deputy Director of Media - ECSL Team Lead, Coalition				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarification about the eligibility of voter registration Voter education for first time voters Required 	Text messages Vox pops etc.

⁴ Alimamy Kamara, Deputy Director-General, SLBC

of Election Observers				documents for voter registration		
APPA				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion on how the computers operate during the exercise. 		

Independent Radio Network (IRN)

The IRN's focus is to contribute to the conditions for free, fair and peaceful general elections in Sierra Leone.

“For us to be able to achieve that particular goal, we set out to ensure that quality reliable and impartial information is provided and there are citizens’ participation in the process. For elections to be free and fair, part of the components is for citizens to have access to credible and timely information.”⁵

IRN has a two prong approach in covering the voter registration: national simulcast from the IRN hub and supporting local radio stations to produce programs within their local contexts. There was no national simulcast by the IRN on the commencement of the voter registration exercise, but the coverage was done by the individual partner radio stations. IRN produced a jingle which was repeatedly broadcast across its member radio stations. IRN could not get enough funds to be able to rollout the national broadcast at the commencement of the process. It received a lot of calls from people on why it was not broadcasting. “One of the challenges is that IRN’s partnership with ECSL is not as strong as it used to be. But ECSL has commitment to IRN for providing information and accreditation.”⁶

IRN at the end of the first week of the voter registration organized its own programme with ECSL and NCRA serving as guests to enlighten the public about a lot of issues on the registration process.

⁵ Ransford Wright, IRN National Coordinator

⁶ Ibid

Table 2 (a): IRN's coverage of the voter registration exercise

Name of programme: IRN Special Broadcast on the Voter Registration Exercise					
Duration: 1 hour, 30 minutes					
Guests, panellists, contributors				Issues discussed	Feedback
EMBs	Security sector institution	Social/political analysts	Others		
Director of Media - ECSL Director of Operation, NCRA			NEW (Marcella Samba-Sesay), PPRC Chairman, were interviewed. There were also reports from the Regions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update on the registration process and eligibility. Challenges from the voter registration and how the ECSL has been responding to the various issues. Update from the regions about the voter registration process. Explanations on the operation of the EC situation room Issues of citizens using fake birth certificate to register etc. 	Comments on INR's Facebook page, text messages were read during the program.

At the end of the first phase of the voter registration, IRN organised another programme on the outcome of the process.

Table 2 (b): IRN's coverage of the voter registration exercise

Name of programme: IRN's Review of the first Phase of the Voter Registration					
Duration: 1 hour, 45 minutes					
Guests, panellists, contributors				Issues discussed	Feedback
EMBs	Security sector institution	Political parties Social/political analysts	Others		
<p>Director of Electoral Education –ECSL</p> <p>National Coordinator - NEW</p>		<p>Ag. Public Relations Officer - APPWA</p> <p>Chairman NGC</p> <p>Interim Secretary General APC</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observations of the first phase of the voter registration. • High level of turnout by women, youth, and persons with disability. • Insufficient security personnel at some centers. • Issues of citizens without document. • Verification issues by religious and local leaders. • Challenges with the verification of first-time voters. • Technical issues with the machines. • Political interference from the ruling party. • Issues of accreditation of election observers. • Arrest and deletion of some first-time voters and party observers of APC. • ECSL to follow the law and do refreshers training for their staff. • The role of social media in voter education. • The opening of the other Centers for the second phase. 	<p>Comments on IRN's Facebook page; read during the program.</p>

Africa Young Voices

The African Young Voices (AYV) launched a program called ‘Sierra Leone Decide 2023’ which would exclusively cover and report the electoral processes. On the first day of the voter registration it ran an exclusive coverage of the process for the entire day.

Table 3: Analyses of AYV’s coverage voter registration exercise

Name of programme - Sierra Leone Decides 2023					
Duration: Various hours of broadcast during the day					
Guests, panellists, contributors				Issues discussed	Feedback
EMBs	Security sector institution	Social/political analysts	Others		
Director of Media and Communication - ECSL Director of Communication, Training and External Relations-PPRC	Deputy of Strategic Communication, ONS	Team Lead Consortium of Election Observers	Alhaji Marcus Bangura-Civil Society Activist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Political parties’ members to call on their supporters to register Duration of the process. Advice not to encourage underage to register Effectiveness of security personnel. Late dispatch of new voters registration machines to the centers. ECSL IT team’s readiness to address challenges of voters’ registration machines. Importance of free and fair elections. 	Text messages from the public and vox pop from members of the public.

Star Television

Star TV has a special program called 'Election Hour' that focuses on the electoral process. In every edition of the program, ECSL staff, National Elections Watch (NEW), CSOs, and media stakeholders take part.

Table 4: Analyses of Star's coverage of the commencement of the voter registration exercise

Name of programme : Good Morning Show					
Duration: 1 hour					
Guests, panellists, contributors				Issues discussed	Feedback
EMBs	Security sector institution	Social/political analysts	Others		
Deputy Director of Media - ECSL				<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Registration process and eligibility• Challenges of the voter registration and how the EC has been responding to those issues	No phone/text messages

Freetown Television Network (FTN)

Freetown Television Network told MRCG that though they do not have a specific program dedicated to elections, they have discussions on the voter registration in all their current affairs programmes.

Table 5: Analysis of Newspaper Publications on the commencement of the voter registration

The Independent Media Commission (IMC) records show that 31 newspapers were published on Monday 5 September 2022. The newspapers published various stories on the voter registration. The table below provides highlights of some of the newspapers' coverage.

Name of newspapers	Headlines on elections	Key sources
Premier News	Electoral Commission Urges Citizens to Register	Chief Electoral Commissioner
The Times	Voter Registration Exercise Plagued with Challenges	Chief Electoral Commissioner
The Satellite	Massive Voter Registration	ECSL
Salone Times	Go and Register to Change or Support Government in Power	President Julius Madda Bio
Night Watch	Scant Voter Registration Information	Concern Citizens
Public Review	ECSL Boss dilates on voter registration exercise	Chief Electoral Commissioner
A-Z Newspaper	In Makeni: Voter Registration commence with intimidation	Chairman – SLPP Northern Politicians
Awoko	Process Slow because of one computer – Registrants Say	ECSL Central Manager
The Future Media	As APC Raises suspicion ... SLPP allegedly manipulating ECSL operations and systems	The APC Party
Equality Now Newspaper	Go and register: first phase of nationwide voter registration in Sierra Leone commences	ECSL
Global Times newspaper	2023 election...President Bio and Spouse register to vote	President Bio
Awareness Times Newspaper	Chief Electoral Commissioner Declares commencement of voter registration exercise.	Mohamed K. Konneh, Chief Electoral Commissioner
New Vision Newspaper	SLPP, APC Fight	APC and SLPP members
The Exclusive Newspaper	2023 Election, Bio Vs Samura	

6. ECSL'S PUBLIC INFORMATION AND MEDIA RELATIONS APPROACH

As at the time of publishing this report, the ECSL had not responded to the MRCG's requests for an interview on its approach to working with the media for the ongoing electoral processes, particularly the voter registration. However, the ECSL's website has documents indicating its approach to public information. It has a situation room receiving and processing information and a toll free line (838) from mobile companies. ECSL has held press conferences on the voter education. It also developed an accreditation guideline for observers, which includes media. For media institutions (Print and Electronics), both national and international media houses are accredited by ECSL. There is a Code of Conduct for accredited observers

7. SUCCESSES/IMPACTS OF THE MEDIA COVERAGE AND REPORTAGE ON THE VOTER EDUCATION

The media have meaningful contributions in the following ways.

- Providing forums for the ESCL to engage people about the electoral process, including the voter education.
- Informing the public about the need for voter registration and also educating them about the significance of the exercise.
- Nationwide coverage of the voter registration process.
- IRN produced its own jingles on voter registration that is broadcast in all partner radio stations across the country.
- Highlighting some of the 'red flags' in the voter registration process that are not in line with electoral laws.

8. CHALLENGES IN COVERING AND REPORTING ON THE VOTER REGISTRATION

The coverage and reportage of elections by the media have not been done without its own attendant problems.

- Lack of release of timely information and sharing by ECSL to media practitioners.
 - Logistical challenges for media institutions to meet the operational costs to cover and report on the elections.
 - Lack of capacity building for media practitioners to effectively report on the electoral processes.
 - Poor knowledge of use of mobile journalism.
 - Mobility, weak internet, faulty phone lines.
 - Unavailability of ECSL accreditation for journalists to access registration centers.
 - Inadequate funding h to roll out sustained national programs for particularly IRN which has a niche in elections reporting.
- Political parties 'skew' and use information to their interests, which they want the media to publish and broadcast, and thereby affecting the voter registration process. 'There is the 'politicisation' of the voter registration process. Politicians are putting out mixed messages containing information on voter education and campaigning for their political parties.

- Weak partnership with ECSL on the voter registration process. ‘ECSL only signed MoU with few media institutions’.
- ECSL did not distribute jingles to be broadcast on particularly community radio stations. “This is the first time ECSL jingles are not on majority of community radio stations.”

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- ECSL should be more open and easily accessible and to ensure timely release of information.
- Mobilization of resources for national media organizations and institutions, including SLAJ, IRN, IMC, SLBC and MRCG, to cover, report and monitor the elections. Donors should provide support to national media institutions cover, report, train reporters and monitor the electoral processes.
- The ECSL and the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) should engage Political Parties to desist from including campaign messages in the ongoing voter education exercise.
- Capacity building for media practitioners.
- The media should not be seen as a tool, but rather a key partner and player in the electoral processes.
- ECSL should improve on its relationship with the media.
- The EC-SL should more public education on voters’ registration process
- Journalists should be impartial in their coverage and reportage on the voter education process.

10. CONCLUSION

This report has highlighted the relevance of the media in contributing to the electoral processes, including voter registration. The ECSL should ensure a cordial relationship with the media, address the challenges in the first phase of the voter registration and implement recommendations for the second phase and the other aspects of the electoral processes. If journalists are capacitated they can sensitize, educate and give out credible information to the public.