NEW’s Position on the Repeal of Part V of the Public Order Act, Proclamation of a Mid-term Census and Funding for NEC.

1.0 Repeal of Part V of the Public Order Act

1.1 NEW wishes to join the domestic and international democratic community to applaud the repeal of Part V of the 1965 Public Order Act that once criminalized free speech and freedom of expression in Sierra Leone for all these years with terrible stories to attest that it was obsolete and not in tandem with the democratic dispensation the nation cherishes. NEW wishes to especially thank H.E the President, the Speaker and Members of Parliament, the Minister of Information and Communication, the leadership of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG), Society for Democratic Initiatives (SDI), all Civil Society Organisations, Development Partners and all other actors for their contributions in making this possible. Democracy, governance and the citizenry stand to win from this repeal.

1.2 NEW is also pleased with the enactment of the Independent Media Act of 2020 which will promote professional journalism and allow for a balance between rights and responsibilities in the pursuit of freedom of speech and expression. This Act is a move in the right direction at this time in the history of this great nation.

1.3 Nevertheless, NEW wishes to observe that laws and institutions are only as good as the integrity of people who implement them. To this end, NEW looks forward to a transparent, consultative and inclusive process for appointing the IMC Commissioners.

1.4 NEW also calls upon the nation to continue engaging proactively to manage the existing perceptions that the IMC Act has the potential of eliminating fair competition in the media industry and infringing on independent journalistic traditions of Sierra Leone. Contact and dialogue should continue so that the hard won media freedoms we are celebrating today become a living reality in our noble democratic dispensation.

1.5 These positive developments are a fulfilment of a key recommendation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, the Election Observer Missions (EOM) and aspects of the Constitutional Review Commission Report and address the heart of our governance configurations. NEW looks forward to the comprehensive attention for all outstanding governance recommendations from these processes so that the citizenry can have their say. As a civil society coalition, we remain vigilant to support opportunities and manage threats.

2.0 Proclamation of a Mid-term Census

2.1 NEW is concerned with the proclamation of His Excellency the President on the conduct of a Mid-term Census to take effect in December this year 2020. Whilst NEW agrees with the President on the value a census brings to national development, NEW believes that the reasons for such a process must be transparent and clearly communicated to the nation. Currently, the

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“gaps” of the last census have not been clearly outlined and explained and measures taken to avert the same explained.

2.2 NEW is concerned with the prioritisation of this process NOW at a time when Covid-19 measures should be occupying the whole planning machinery and resources spent in that direction.

2.3 NEW is fully cognisant of consequences of data emanating from credible national census, especially on critical governance processes such as elections. A lot of criticism emanated in the manner in which this exercise was done last time around. Questions of non-inclusivity of all voices of the people (political groups, civil society etc.) as befitting democratic governance processes were abound and this announcement falls within that context. NEW is concerned with the ever-growing trends of government actions that keep casting shadows of doubt on critical governance events and processes as it sets a negative tone to future works.

2.4 NEW calls government to use the time between now and the launch in December of this exercise to clarify to the citizenry the justification and methodology that will be used this time around so that the people can appreciate the shift, scope and approach. If this process is transparent and open to accommodating technical contributions that add value, its results will leave limited room for questions and contestations, especially those aspects dealing with governance matters.

3.0 Funding for the National Electoral Commission

3.1 Following from the above and recent engagements NEW has held with National Electoral Commission (NEC) and National Civil Registration Authority (NCRA) to ascertain governance processes that relate to the coordination of these two institutions, NEW wishes to categorically state that it is concerned and worried. The current level of progress with the civil registration process which would be the basis for NEC voter register is not adequate and timely.

3.2 NEW notes that preparations for the 2022 Local Council elections is already behind schedule and this is due largely to lack of funding to NEC and other related challenges. NEW also notes that there are Bye-elections that are long overdue with 2 constituencies (110 in the Western Rural and 078 in Bo District) having no representation in parliament, 2 Ward elections (Ward 348 in Moyamba District and Ward 287 in Bo District) and 55 Paramount Chieftaincy elections. Whilst COVID-19 poses a number of restrictions, NEW believes that the democratic rights can be situated within the COVID-19 protocols and therefore calls for funding to NEC and the conduct of all pending elections.

3.3 In order to ensure that the coming Bye-elections and period elections (Paramount Chiefs, Local Councils, Parliamentary and Presidential) are conducted in a free, fair, transparent, accountable and professional manner, NEC needs to be financially capacitated to begin its work NOW, especially on the critical matter of voter registration which remains NEC’s mandate as per the Constitution.

4.0 Conclusion

NEW is grateful to the continued show of citizens’ ownership of various processes shown by the many comments we monitor through our structure across the country and in various media channels. We wish this to be encouraged and continued. To that end, NEW will soon be commencing public discussion of current governance issues on various media channels to bring the citizens’ voices to the fore. We look to the support of all people of good will. We hope that the relevant authorities affected by the comments above will take proactive measures to address the observations and open up the space for communicating with the public.
This Project “Enhancing Domestic Electoral Observer Organisations and Citizens Participation in Democratic Governance Reforms Leading to the 2022 and 2023 Electoral Cycle” is funded by the European Union.

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. NEW will continue to observe all elections related activities and will report its findings accordingly.

Contact: Chairperson Marcella Samba Sesay 076984590, National Coordinator James Lahai 076962233, Spokesperson Sallieu Kamara 076613324

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