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Koya bye-election registers low voter turn-out

National Election Watch (NEW) observed the bye-election conducted by the National Electoral Commission (NEC) in ward 257, Constituency 072 in Koya chiefdom, Port Loko district, on Saturday 20 April 2019. The vacancy occurred following the death of the then substantive holder, Councilor John Sonpeter, on 26 January 2019. NEW recruited, trained and deployed 27 permanent observers, ensuring one hundred percent coverage of all of the 27 polling stations in the ward. NEW further deployed its North Western regional leadership to serve as supervisors and roving observers, as well as to observe the tallying process at the NEC Tally Centre in Masiaka.

Summary of our observations

- The election was conducted in a calm and peaceful atmosphere and the entire polling process was open and very orderly for which we applaud the NEC, Office of National Security (ONS) and the Sierra Leone Police (SLP).
- Out of the 17 registered political parties for the March 2018 elections in Sierra Leone, only 5 political parties fielded candidates for the bye-election. They are the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP), Unity Party (UP), Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Republican National Independent Party (ReNIP), and Revolutionary United Front Party (RUPP). The All People’s Congress (APC) and National Grand Coalition Party (NGC) conspicuously did not participate in the bye-election.
- Polling stations were opened before 7am and voting started at exactly 7am and closed at 5pm.
- There was low voter turn-out in all the polling stations across the ward evidenced by the fact that out of a total of 8,140 registered voters, only 2,244 turned out to cast their votes. As at 4 O’Clock PM on polling day for example, only 172 people had voted at polling centre code 10213 at Kulafai Rashiden Islamic Primary School in Masiaka out of 1,109 registered voters; 436 voted at polling centre code 10210 at Ahmadiyya Muslim Primary School in Masiaka out of 1,550 registered voters; whilst only 57 voted at polling centre code 10209 in Rotifunk out of 897 voters on the register.
- NEC carried out two stages of reconciliation after the closure of the polls in all polling stations. The first reconciliation was done before the opening of the ballot boxes and the second reconciliation was done after the opening of the ballot boxes. Both exercises were carried out in the presence of party agents, observers and security forces.
- Abu Bakar Bangura of the SLPP polled 1,008 votes and he was duly declared winner of the bye-election by the NEC, followed closely by Santigie Sesay of the UP with 1,000 votes. There were no objections or challenges to the process or its outcome by any of the contesting political parties.
- There were no accredited high profiled political party representatives as it were with the ward 196 re-run bye-election in Tonko Limba chiefdom on 9 March 2019. But the deputy minister of Basic Education and Senior Secondary School, Mrs Emilia Gogra, and Sierra Leone’s Ambassador to Guinea, Ambassador Alimamy Hassan Bangura, separately and at different occasions entered

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polling environment at the Community Centre in Masiaka and Ahmadiyya Muslim Primary School also in Masiaka without accreditation from the NEC. NEC officials, however, eventually asked them politely to leave the polling vicinity and they did.

- Though five political parties fielded candidates for the bye-election, only the SLPP and UP had party agents in all the 27 polling stations in the ward.
- The bye-election was observed by several organizations and institutions, including ONS, Political Party Registration Commission (PPRC), Council of Churches Sierra Leone (CCSL), British High Commission, Eminent Women’s Network and the media.

Our recommendations

In light of the above, NEW recommends the following:

- PPRC facilitate dialogue with the aggrieved political parties and other relevant stakeholders to find a way out of the current political impasse that caused the boycott of the bye-election by both the APC and NGC.
- NEC and PPRC to engage political parties to enable them know the importance, relevance and the need for them to deploy party agents in polling stations during elections.
- Political party leaderships strongly advise their members to stop entering polling environment during elections when they are not duly accredited to do so by the NEC. It could be a recipe for chaos.
- NEC, PPRC and ONS continue to monitor and enforce all rules and regulations covering the conduct of elections in the country and the MoUs political parties signed with PPRC and other Election Management Bodies (EMBs) regardless of who is involved.

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 and will report its findings accordingly.

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