NEW Condemns NEC’s Cancellation of Parliamentary Bye-Elections in Constituency 110 and calls for Immediate De-escalation of Election-related Violence in Sierra Leone

National Election Watch (NEW) frowns at the continued violence in elections and condemns the NEC cancellation of the Parliamentary Bye-Election in Constituency 110 in Western Rural District. NEC conducted 2 Bye-Elections in Ward 034 in Kenema District and Constituency 110 in Western Rural District on Saturday 24th August, 2019. Whilst the Bye-Election in Ward 034 was conducted in a calm and peaceful atmosphere, the one in Constituency 110 was marred by violence towards the close of polls resulting in the cancellation of the entire election.

NEW observed the entire process of both Bye-Elections including, opening, voting, closing and counting, and tallying. NEW deployed at least 2 observers per centre, in addition, 6 supervisors and 4 roving teams were deployed to cover both elections. NEW created a platform of all observers and supervisors in both locations for effective communication and incidents reporting mechanism.

Findings

- Polls in both Ward 034 and Constituency 110 started on time with NEC officials, security personnel, political party agents, observers and elections materials available.
- The process was observed by the Human Rights Commission Sierra Leone, Political Parties Registration Commission, National Commission for Democracy, Office of National Security, Strengthening Electoral Accountability and Governance, Council of Churches in Sierra Leone, U.S Embassy, European Union and several Media houses.
- Most of the polling stations set-up were orderly and allowed for smooth voting process.
- For the most part of the day, the elections were peaceful and orderly.
- At Sulpon Community Primary School, Wan Ose Centre No. 15074 polling was stopped for 6 hours (8:00am to 2:15pm) after the Sierra Leone Peoples Party agent complained that their voter register was not complete as names starting with letters K, L, M and S were missing. This was not the case for other political party agents. NEC had however earlier provided electronic copies of the Final Voters Register to all political parties who reproduced hard copies for their party agents. NEC rectified the situation and extended voting for the affected polling stations to compensate for the time lost.
- At around 4:00pm at Sarah Modern Preparatory School, Centre No. 15086, 4 SLPP party agents who were outside the polling station objected to a woman without voter ID card who had come to cast her vote because according to the SLPP party agents, the APC Party agent accompanied the said voter. A NEC staff in the polling centre made clarifications on the issues of voters without their ID cards. After which voters without ID cards including the voter in question were allowed to cast their ballot. A man who NEW cannot recognize and who throughout the day was being consulted by the SLPP party agents in the polling centre ordered voting to stop and started destruction of the ballot boxes and voting materials, after which a group of men rushed into the polling stations destroying ballot boxes and other election materials.
• Hon. Abdul Karim Kargbo of Constituency 077 Kaffu Bullom, Port Loko District serving as an All Peoples Congress polling centre coordinator was arrested by a civilian and handed over to the police on the allegation of carrying ballot papers.

• A black RAV4 vehicle with no number plate but with an inscription ‘CEO of Soja Team Paopa’ with the SLPP logo was plying the elections centres vicinities.

• In Ward 034 Kenema District, the polling centre location is not easily accessible to voters in Perri community. The polling centre is located in Joru, 5miles away from the Perri community that has the highest number of voters on the voter register.

Concerns
NEW is concerned that;
• Despite the heavy security presence and the invocation of MACP, polling stations were invaded and election materials destroyed and perpetrators not arrested.
• Elections are cancelled for incidents affecting only a polling station or centre.
• 93% of polling station results are already out in the public and this could compromise the secrecy of the voting pattern in the Re-Run election.
• Political parties are not doing enough to curb the violence in elections.
• Political party operatives are still using vehicles without license plates on elections day.
• Elections in the country have become characterized by unbridled violence and lawlessness.
• The continued deep animosity and political intolerance between APC and SLPP continues to undermine credible elections and democratic practices in Sierra Leone.
• The continuous re-run of elections and Bye-Elections is making it difficult for the participation of women, Persons with Disability and the youths because of the cost involved.

Recommendations
NEW Recommends that:
• Serious efforts must be made to de-escalate the political tensions and elections-related violence in the country by enforcing regulations forbidding non-voters or persons not accredited by NEC from entering vicinity of polling centres.
• The incidents of violence perpetrated in the Bye-Election in Constituency 110 be speedily investigated and perpetrators prosecuted.
• NEC and other EMBs to effect immediate electoral reforms to enhance peaceful conduct of elections.
• NEC to be consistent in their decisions regarding cancellation of polls.

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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