Sierra Leone goes to the polls on Saturday 24th June 2023 to elect a President, Members of Parliament, Mayors/District Chairpersons, and Local Councilors. As part of its overall observation strategy for the June 2023 elections, the National Election Watch (NEW) recruited, trained and deployed 34 Long-Term Observers (LTOs) to systematically assess the pre-election environment in all 16 districts across the country. The summary of the pre-election environment below is based on the findings of the LTOs and analysis from NEW’s district structures.

NEW acknowledges that important steps have been taken by stakeholders to ensure a conducive electoral environment ahead of the 24th June elections. NEW applauds the signing of the Peace Pledge by all registered political parties, as an important sign of their commitment to peaceful and credible elections. Disagreements in elections are inevitable given that political power is at stake. Beyond participating in engagements, all stakeholders remained committed to dialogue even at the height of tensions during the campaigns. Such consistent participation in attempts to resolve issues through engagement was an indication of restraint, which at some moments de-escalated tensions at critical times.

NEW commends the actions of the Political Parties Regulation Commission (PPRC) and the Independent Commission for Peace and Social Cohesion to bring together the Electoral Commission Sierra Leone (ECSL) and the main opposition, All People’s Congress (APC) party, to discuss grievances on the electoral process. Efforts to resolve issues through such means are commended, although grievances remain unresolved. Additionally, the Political Parties Liaison Committee (PPLC) meetings provided functional platforms to address issues arising from the electoral process. The active participation of all stakeholders, particularly political parties, and the availability of the ECSL to explain many of their actions was a welcome development that generally provided citizens with information about the elections. Local and international actors have also played an important role in de-escalating tensions and supporting the conduct of credible elections. NEW recognizes the efforts made by security institutions to develop a strategy and plan for the elections.

However, compared to previous elections, the 2023 pre-election environment has been largely tense. NEW noted the prevalence of hate speech, political intolerance characterized by disruptions of political campaigns, and in some cases, the barring of political campaigns. NEW also observed incidents of interference in political campaigns by paramount chiefs and the endorsement of political parties by tribal heads. NEW’s LTOs observed 256 campaign events, 13% of which were characterized by hate speech. Widespread misinformation, destruction of campaign materials, and violence contaminated the campaign period to levels where dialogue among election stakeholders became necessary. If not addressed, the raised concerns will have a negative bearing on citizen participation in the elections ahead, and could potentially lead to instability. Such instability would be damaging to the developmental gains of the country and would have an outsized impact on marginalized groups, including women and people with disabilities.

Political dynamics over the past five years have been characterized by heightened tensions and sharp divisions among citizens along ethnic, regional and political party lines. Some electoral related matters, with a bearing on the 2023 elections before the court, are yet to be assigned and heard. It is critical that political actors, electoral stakeholders, security institutions, and citizens play their part in sustaining peace, stability, unity, and national cohesion during election day tomorrow.
NEW’s Experience in Elections Observation

NEW has twenty-one years’ experience in domestic elections observation, having observed every public election in Sierra Leone since 2002. NEW is implementing a comprehensive citizen election observation strategy for the June 2023 elections, including 34 long-term election observers, 750 Process and Results Verification for Transparency (PRVT) observers, 5000 regular observers, 22 incident reporters at district, regional, and national levels, and 12 tally center observers. Checklists are used to transmit observer data and critical incident reports, which are compiled and analyzed for trends across the country. The data serves as a basis for engagements with electoral stakeholders and the general public through reports and press statements. NEW’s observation interventions provide an independent voice on public elections and real time incidents reporting mechanisms that enhance conflict prevention and build public trust.

Conclusions

NEW observed the arrival at Lungi International Airport and distribution to ECSL district warehouses of sensitive election materials, including ballot papers. NEW is currently observing the distribution of election materials at polling locations. NEW is hopeful that this is a positive sign for the holding of elections tomorrow. Therefore, NEW calls on electoral stakeholders to implement the following recommendations:

To the ECSL – Maintain the current stance of availing themselves to dialogue with all stakeholders and the aggrieved to address emerging concerns about the electoral process. Comply with electoral laws and regulations to strengthen public confidence in the election, including actions that increase transparency, accountability, and inclusion.

To the PPRC – Continue facilitating ongoing dialogue that supports aggrieved parties to seek peaceful redress. Additionally, ensure non-partisan enforcement of the political parties code of conduct that regulate the conduct of political parties.

To the judiciary – Act swiftly and independently in adjudicating matters before the court that impact the June 2023 elections.

To political parties – Exercise restraint in expressing grievances and seek redress through legal and peaceful means.

To security actors – Discharge electoral security duties in a professional manner that encourages peaceful election engagement processes.

To civil society – As observers, we should adhere to the principles of citizen election observation, including maintaining non-partisan and objective conduct.

To the Sierra Leonean citizens – All registered voters should visit their registered polling stations between 7:00am and 5:00pm to vote for the political parties and candidates of their choice. Voters should conduct themselves within provisions of the law.

National Election Watch (NEW) is a coalition of local and international organizations in Sierra Leone with a common objective of supporting credible and peaceful elections.

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