Freetown 15th June 2023: ECSL Conducts Early Voting, Amidst Concerns About Procedures and Compliance with the Public Elections (Early Voting) Regulations 2023

The Public Elections (Early Voting) Regulations of 2023 (Section 3) provide for application for early voting and the qualification of early voters; Section 4 provides for an early voters list, conditions for early voting, issuance of the early voter list to political parties on request and issuance of certificate to enable voters to vote.

NEW acknowledges that discussions on early voting for pilgrims were done at various stakeholder meetings with civil society, political parties, and other international organizations and that poll would only be limited to the presidential election.

However, given the above, NEW is concerned about the following;

Late Notification about the Early Voting
Information on the date for the early voting was communicated at a PPLC meeting held in Freetown on 14th June 2023, less than 24 hours to the commencement of polls on 15th June 2023. It was followed by a press statement by the ECSL dated 13th June 2023. Findings from our observers indicate that some voters were turned away because their names were not on the Voters’ List.

Non-clarity on the Early Voter List
Section 4 of the Public Election (Early Voting) Regulations of 2023, provides for an early voters list. NEW observed that early voter list was not exhibited and the number of voters for early voting disaggregated by district was not available. Best practice dictates that all voters’ list should be made public ahead of an election.

Lack of Transparency Around the Procurement and Printing of Ballot Papers
The ECSL confirmed that ballot papers for early voting were printed in Sierra Leone. They had earlier informed the PPLC meeting that, ballot papers printed in South Africa would arrive in Sierra Leone on Saturday, 17th June 2023. This means that ballot papers for the June 2023 elections have been printed in two different countries and potentially by two different companies. NEW is therefore concerned about the protection, custody, verifiability, transparency and accountability around the production of ballot papers printed in two different countries for the same elections.

Recommendations
NEW recommends that;
- ECSL make available information for public consumption on the service provider that printed the ballot papers for the early voting in Sierra Leone and how many ballot papers were printed for the voting exercise.
- There should be consistency in the management of all electoral processes to increase trust and public confidence.
• ECSL should ensure timely provision of information for every stage of the electoral process to allow adequate preparation by election stakeholders and effective participation.

• The ECSL should fully comply with all legal provisions as related to early voting.

Noting that the ECSL has the constitutional mandate to conduct these elections, NEW has formally communicated these concerns and recommendations to the Commission as a way to complement its effort to conduct free, fair and credible elections.

National E
lection 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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