



HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION OF SIERRA LEONE (HRCSL)

HRCSL'S INITIAL MONITORING REPORT ON THE CONDUCT OF THE 7th MARCH 2018 ELECTIONS

Background

The Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRCSL) in fulfilment of its mandate to protect and promote human rights and in a bid to ensuring a culture of respect for human rights in Sierra Leone, played a pivotal role in the electoral processes leading to the 7th March 2018 elections.

The Commission among many other things engaged communities and raised public awareness on the need to respect human rights for peaceful elections. The Commission also trained its Commissioners and staff, members of District Human Rights Committees (DHRCs) countrywide on monitoring human rights issues during the electoral process; held a National Consultative Conference on Human rights and elections and engaged the media on elections reporting and human rights.

HRCSL also monitored the campaigns and the conduct of elections of 7th March in order to ascertain whether human rights were adhered to or violated.

The undermentioned issues were the focus of the monitoring exercises during polling day:

Opening of polling station on polling day

The Commission observed that a large number of polling stations across the country opened on time as prescribed by the National Electoral Commission (NEC). However, there were delays in few areas due to administrative and logistical challenges but these did not affect the conduct of the elections in those areas.

Voter turnout

Voter turnout was impressive throughout the country; women and youth formed a greater majority of the voters.

Security of the Elections

The presence of security personnel was visible in almost all polling stations. In addition to the Sierra Leone Police, there were other security sector agencies such as the Sierra Leone Correctional Service, the National Fire Force and the Metropolitan / Local Council Police. The Military Aid to Civil Power (MAC-P) was invoked to help provide additional security throughout the country.



Freedom of movement

Vehicular restrictions were enforced by the SLP. The Government of Sierra Leone made some efforts by providing buses to enable persons access polling stations. However in some areas buses were insufficient and there were some delays of people accessing polling stations. The allowance of tri-cycles (Kehkehs) to ply the roads on polling day was plausible though the announcement of it being an exception to the restrictions was made very late.

Accessibility of polling stations by vulnerable groups and provision of assistive devices

Vulnerable groups such as Persons with disabilities, lactating mothers, pregnant women and the aged were largely given priority to exercise their franchise. Although NEC provided board ramps, there were polling centers that were not easily accessible to persons with disabilities particularly those on wheelchairs or crutches. Tactile ballot guides were available in all polling stations to aid particularly the visually impaired.

Presence of international and Domestic observers and party agents

Party agents of especially the All People's Congress (APC), the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the National Grand Coalition (NGC) were present in almost all of the polling stations. In some areas, agents for the Coalition for Change (C4C) and the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC) were seen in many polling stations monitored. Domestic and international observers were present. In particular, the National Elections Watch (NEW) had observers deployed in all stations monitored.

Exercise of the right to vote and be voted for

In general, the right to vote and be voted for, was enjoyed by the majority of registered citizens. However in a few places like Bonthe Municipality and some wards in Kenema and Pujehun, citizens could not vote for their local council representatives. However, NEC in a Press Release has assured these affected citizens that they would conduct their elections at a later date.

Right to privacy

The elections were to be done by secret ballot. However, this was a challenge as many stations were clustered and not effectively designed to enhance secret ballot.

Freedom of Expression and the Press

Generally, there was no report of censorship of the press and social media. Media houses including television and radio stations were very much in active discussion on topical issues during election day. There was also no report of arrest of any media personnel.

Freedom from arbitrary arrests and security of the person

There were no reports of arbitrary arrests of any persons even though there was a standoff between some security personnel and SLPP supporters at Goderich on allegations of hacking.



This was however resolved through the intervention of international observers. An incident also occurred at Brookfields but was later resolved by the intervention of the security forces.

The right to life

There were no reports of arbitrary killings and the taking of human lives on polling day.

Comportment of party supporters

Party supporters largely comported themselves by adhering to the rules and regulations of NEC. For instance, party supporters respected the prohibition on party colours and symbols on election day. In many areas monitored, party supporters returned home immediately after voting.

Management of the elections by the National Electoral Commission (NEC)

HRCSL commends the professionalism of NEC in the conduct of the elections and its openness, accountability and prompt response in handling some of the challenges that emerged on polling day, particularly the manner in which the issues of absence of ballot papers for Local Council elections in Bonthe, Kenema and Pujehun were addressed.

CHALLENGES

HRCSL noted the following challenges during its monitoring:

- Local Council elections not conducted in certain wards in Kenema and Pujehun. Also, Mayoral elections not conducted in the Bonthe Municipality;
- Some polling stations were not disable friendly;
- Late opening of some polling stations;
- Absence of some NEC personnel in certain polling stations;
- Inadequate government buses to mitigate the impact of the vehicular ban
- Too many polling stations crowded under one roof;
- Too many observers wanting to observe the validation and counting which caused delays in the counting process;
- Inadequate voter education;
- Secrecy of the ballot was compromised in some “open space” and crowded stations.

Despite these challenges, HRCSL notes that these did not undermine the conduct of the elections on polling day.

CONCLUSIONS

The Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone congratulates all Sierra Leoneans who participated in the electoral process and for the peaceful manner in which they conducted themselves during voting on 7th March. The Commission is particularly impressed by the



resilience and enthusiasm demonstrated by Sierra Leoneans in exercising their fundamental human rights as provided for by international, regional and local human rights instruments. Sierra Leoneans clearly demonstrated their overriding desire for development and the consolidation of democracy, human rights, peace and stability.

The Commission recognizes the work of the National Electoral Commission (NEC) and the security forces and applauds them for the satisfactory manner in which they carried out their duties during the electoral process. HRCSL also commends the media, civil society organisations, local and international observers, as well as the international community, for supporting and guarding the process.

The Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone calls on the general public to continue to maintain the peace and respect human rights and the rule of law as we await the final and official pronouncement of the results by NEC.

This is an initial report from the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone on its monitoring of the March 7th 2018 Elections. A detailed report documenting key findings and recommendations in the pre, during and post-election periods will be released to the public soon.

END

Signed

Rev. Dr. Usman Jesse Fornah

Chairperson

9th March, 2018