

**Policy Brief:  
0003/09/17:  
Marking the  
Celebration of  
World Democracy  
Day**



**SIERRA LEONE: MANAGING AN INDEPENDENT ELECTIONS PROCESS IN A  
TIME OF ECONOMIC AUSTERITY**

**Introduction**

Sierra Leone is preparing for a notable date, the 7th March 2018 General Elections. President Koroma's second and final term will end at the close of 2017; Parliament dissolves on 7 December 2017, providing the country with a three-month period for nomination, campaigning and voting for presidential, parliamentary and local council candidates. The constitution emphasizes having genuine elections as a basis of authority for government and for peaceful transfer of power. However, despite three successful elections in the post-war period, managing democratic transitions remains a challenge. The upcoming election is therefore seen as a significant milestone for peace consolidation in Sierra Leone and more so, a test of the ruling All People's Congress (APC) party's democratic

credentials<sup>1</sup>. The governing party has repeatedly stated its commitment to holding elections on March 7th.

This briefing note goes beyond the verbal proclamations to examine government's financial and policy support to timely elections and the operational independence of the NEC. We conclude that Sierra Leone's current economic austerity is having a toll on the country's preparation for election.

**Context**

In a recent national survey of citizens' knowledge, attitudes and practices (STDC March 2017), 68 percent of voters expressed belief that the National Electoral Commission

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<sup>1</sup> The APC ushered one party rule in 1978 and governed independent Sierra Leone for the longest period without a peaceful transfer of power to an opposition party.

(NEC) will count their votes fairly. However, the recent wave of media attacks and parliamentary questioning of NEC by ruling party officials threatens to undermine this support. The ruling party has raised concerns around an alleged 39,000 registered voters (1.3% registered voters) that are supposedly misplaced and not reflected in the final voter registration figures. These accusations have revealed underlying tensions between NEC and the governing party. Even without seeing the voter register, the Deputy Majority leader of Parliament stated on BBC (Sept 2nd, 2017) that “an alarming 300,000 (almost 10% of registered voters) voters are missing from the register.” This was followed by a written protest on Tues. 13 September to NEC by the Secretary General of the ruling party about procedural breaches in the elections process. The civil society National Elections Watch (NEW) has also been accused by the ruling APC Secretary General in a radio interview (Radio Democracy Good Morning Salone 13th Sept) of siding with the opposition.

## **KEY QUESTIONS FACING THE 2018 ELECTION**

### ***1. Is Economic Austerity affecting the financing of the 2018 Election?***

Exactly 17 Months to the March 2018 election, GOSL announced austerity measures resulting from the economic challenges facing the country. The extent of the austerity and its effect on the running of government is only vaguely known to the public. In the August/September 2017 budget discussions with civil society, over 50 percent of MDAs reported that they only received their first allocation for 2017 in June, with quite a number, such as the Law Reform Commission, disclosing that they have not received monies from government since the beginning of the year. GoSL’s monthly fiscal statement on the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development’s (MOFED) website shows that Government’s current spending is primarily on salaries and some infrastructure projects. Elections thus appear to be only a tangential priority for the administration in an

imminent election year. NEC has received only 25 percent of the budget allocated to it by government as we go to press today 14th September 2017.

Out of the total budget of SLL320billion (approximately \$43 million) prepared by NEC for the 2018 election, Government committed to fund SLL209billion (\$28million) (see 2017 budget speech). According to the Ministry of Finance, 204 billion was available to NEC for boundary delimitation, voter registration, and education, candidate nomination and to conduct all elections including any presidential runoff. MOFED approved 5 Billion for office administration and rent for the entire period.

GOSL was aware that meeting its financial commitment to NEC is a challenge. MOFED therefore approved SLL72.9billion to cover election preparation activities from January to June; these activities include voter registration, bye elections and boundary delimitations, training and voter education. However, as at September 2017, NEC had only received SLL51bn of its first six-months allocation (which is 25% of the total elections budget). If not for the good relationships NEC has cultivated with suppliers over the years, the shortfall faced could have affected the voter education, data processing and exhibition process. Some of NEC suppliers (fuel, boat hire, rental of vehicle, porters, motors bikes, training and media) interviewed for this brief reported that they have all not been paid for services provided for the last 90 days.

### ***2. Is the Merger of the Civil and Voter Registration affecting Elections preparation?***

Both the managers of the Sierra Leone’s voter register, the National Civil Registration Authority (NCRA) and NEC agree on the point that some data has been misplaced<sup>2</sup>. However,

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<sup>2</sup> See Interview with head of NCRA in Global Times Wednesday 13 Sept; Also see NEC Press release on 6th Sept

this does not mean that the biodata of registrants is lost or cannot be retrieved as data was recorded in no less than three places. So what then is the (perceived) challenge with the registration data? We note several areas of concern below.

First, combining voter and civil registration for the very first time was bound to raise challenges for the 2018 elections. Making voter registration a job for both the NCRA and NEC has meant that voter registration is not the exclusive domain of NEC. Consequently, NEC does not have total control over the exercise as in previous elections. For example, the Venezuelan service provider hired for voter registration was contractually accountable to NCRA who largely determined the type of information collected, such as thumbprints.

Another major issue was the logistical challenges that managing such a huge data posed. The transmission of data from field kits to the central server using low/no speed internet was challenging. NCRA used internet service to transmit data from over 3,300 kits deployed nationwide. Some machines could not transmit in areas with low connectivity. Kits were also moved from area to area leading to some slippages in transmission.

One would expect that NEC's past experience in voter registration would have led to a quick turnaround in the production of the 2018 voter register, particularly as 95 percent of the current staff at NEC also conducted the 2012 election. However, in this instance, NEC and NCRA data management systems were housed separately. NCRA's central server is at its office in Freetown while NEC's server is at Wellington in the East end. They both had to rely on a slow internet connectivity for transmission of information from NCRA to NEC which took a lot of time. In 2012, NEC used 800 machines to capture information from voters. Unlike in 2017 where data from the field were transmitted via internet, NEC used USB sticks to collect data at registration points and transported to Freetown. The speed of delivery of NEC was consequently faster.

Clearly, the merger of the two registration processes presents lessons that elections management arrangements need to note and build on instead of politicizing the lapses.

### ***3. Voter Register and Retrieval of Missing Data***

The dominant narrative in these past few weeks is that data for 39,000 voters is missing. Through explaining how missing data was handled in previous elections, this brief shows why this is not a big problem. Retrieving missing biodata of registrants is not new to Sierra Leone. There were similar issues in 2007 and 2012. However retrieval was easier at the time because registration kits were exclusively controlled by NEC at its Wellington warehouse. It was easier to trace and recapture missing information as the kits were not housed in two separate locations. For missing data cases, a particular form (Form 1B) was given to petitioners to fill for re-registration in the case of data loss. The then NEC Commissioner Madam Thorpe used this information collected on Form 1B and continued to update the voter register in consultation with election stakeholders. This lesson can be useful for handling missing data under the current system.

### ***4. The Operational Independence of NEC***

Another challenge NEC has faced is the lack of operational independence, which if government is not careful, can lead to some concerns about NECs credibility in the 2018 polls. This brief highlights three ways NEC's operational independence is compromised:

- a) The uncertainty of state financing of elections and its impact on the timeliness and quality of work as discussed earlier;
- b) Overcrowding of the electoral calendar with activities such as redistricting and creation of new chiefdoms that are not crucial to the success of the 2018 polls which stretched staff time. The NEC does not seem to have absolute control over the electoral calendar. For example delineation of constituency and ward boundaries had to be done twice

- because new districts were created after the first boundary delineation was completed.
- c) There has been on-going uncertainty of the job security of the NEC boss. A ruling party MP and supporters have called for his resignation, accusing him of incompetence while sections of the media have called for

restructuring of the institution to purge some staff in its middle and senior management cadre. Furthermore, the governing party has issued a statement of concern over NECs work without any admission that the merger of NEC and NCRA registration processes placed extra burden on the organization.

### **Recommendations**

1. Government should as a matter of urgency prioritize spending of all election activities.
2. There is a need for a multi stakeholder dialogue on elections. During this dialogue, all parties must be made to understand the challenges inherent in the current context and agree on multilateral solutions. The current NEC stakeholder forum should be used for such discussions.
3. NEC public relations need to be forth-coming on information sharing on challenges facing the 2018 elections.
4. PPRC's programme on tracking hate messages should go beyond personality attacks by aspirants and their supporters and include misinformation and tabloid sensationalism that could derail the electoral calendar. Unsubstantiated statements such as "loss of data for 300,000 voters" coming from a political leader could undermine the authority of an EMB.
5. The ruling party in particular should embark on confidence building activities in the electoral process, address mistrust and recognize its role as a major stakeholder in maintaining the peace in Sierra Leone.
6. All political parties and the PPRC should educate its supporters and the general public about the current transition to a new administration and the role of political parties in respecting the wishes of the electorate.
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