

NATIONAL ELECTION WATCH (NEW) REPORT ON DOMESTIC OBSERVATION OF VOTER REGISTRATION

Introduction

The National Election Watch (NEW) is a coalition of civil society groups for domestic election monitoring. Through the technical and logistical support of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the Civil Society Movement Sierra Leone (CSM-SL) and the Centre for the Coordination of Youth Activities (CCYA)/Talking Drum Studio (TDS) trained 233 of their members and deployed them nation-wide to observe the voter registration. Another member of the Coalition, the CCG also monitored the process, using a slightly different methodology. CSM and CCYA monitors were each given a number of standardized forms (instrument of observation) that formed the basis of reporting what they observed. A total of 1585 registration centres were observed nation-wide. As far as possible, monitors were spread out into the various chiefdoms/wards of the country using the data sheets on registration centres obtained from the NEC. The CGG deployed a team of 14 trained and NEC accredited monitors across 11 districts. Monitors worked from January 24th to February 10th inclusive, and visited 1046 centres. They covered over 55% of the centres in certain districts and over 90% of chiefdoms in others. They did not aim to make a scientific appraisal of the registration process, but rather to uncover, analyse and make public key problems and constraints by combining conventional monitoring with deeper investigations of key problems and qualitative analysis of their findings.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS BY CSM AND CCYA MONITORS

Timeliness of Opening Registration Centres: More than half of the centres observed were open on time. A few were not open on time while the others were not open at the time of the observation.

Presence of Security

Apart from the Western area which had a small but significant security presence, all the centres observed had virtually no security presence.

Presence of Party Agents: For over 70% of the centres observed, there were no party agents.

Cases of Intimidation: Hardly any cases of intimidation were observed in all the centres.

Location of Centres: The majority of the centres were strategically located and easy to find.

Availability of materials: Barely half of the centres observed had adequate materials. Significantly, there were cases of centres closing for days because of lack of materials.

Application of Ink: For over 70% of the centres observed, ink was applied properly.

Ineligibility: In very few cases persons not eligible to vote were being registered.

CONCLUSION

On the whole the registration exercise went on peacefully in spite of the serious administrative and logistical difficulties.

Recommendations

- * NEC should ensure that the right calibre of persons is recruited for all aspects of the election process and that they are properly trained to carry out their job, especially for polling day.
- * NEC personnel must be provided with the necessary logistics and materials.
- * NEC should carefully edit the registration forms and verify the voter list to make sure that all anomalies are corrected.
- * NEC should adequately provide their personnel with materials for various aspects of the election. On the basis of data collected from the Voter Registration it should have become obvious that the voting population is unevenly distributed. Therefore, the mistake of sending flat number of materials to all centres should not be repeated on polling day.
- * NEC should place emphases on improving the coordination between its offices and field officers
- * Political parties should endeavour to deploy their agents at the various polling centres.
- * UNAMSIL to provide technical and other support for NEC operations in the provinces, especially remote communities far away from field offices.
- * Voter education efforts should be intensified on the part of all

stakeholders including civil society groups, NEC and NCDHR.

CGG's ANALYSIS OF THEIR FINDINGS

The registration process failed to give hundreds of thousands of Sierra Leoneans a realistic opportunity to register because of a lack of public education and a combination of significant administrative problems and resource constraints. We met widespread ignorance of what the process was about, how it worked or even that it was going on. The blame for this failure to educate and mobilise voters lies partly with the political parties and civil society, but the lion's share must fall to NEC. On the administrative/resource side, we observed hundreds of centres that were forced to close or prevented from functioning properly because of various 'hiccups', from the absence of registration forms and ink, to a lack of transportation, tables or remuneration for the registrars. The extent to which these problems stemmed from poor administration or a lack of resources is currently unclear. Equally, the degree of responsibility NEC should bear for these failures as opposed to its international advisors and funders is a question that needs answering. The net result however is that, even by NEC's own projections, between 500,000 and 1,000,000 Sierra Leoneans have been denied their right to vote in May because they were not registered in February.

The extension period suffered from the same supply shortages and personnel errors that kept registration from functioning during the normal period. In Kenema, our monitors visited 37 centres during the extension, of which 30 (81%) were closed, and in Kono the registrars spent the entire extension demanding their delayed remuneration. Our monitors found little evidence that anything had been done to address the complaints that created the need for an extension in the first place.

We saw no evidence of high-level sabotage or corruption of the process. There was widespread underage and multiple registration, particularly in Bo and Makeni, but neither appeared systematic nor to favour any particular region. Both could have been largely prevented by better administration of the registration process.

Finally, some registrars, community leaders and members of the public made significant efforts and personal sacrifices to ensure the process worked effectively, educating citizens, travelling long distances to work or to register and being vigilant about underage and multiple registration. However, many officials were more interested in petty, personal concerns than doing a good job and many citizens appeared unwilling to expend even small amounts of time or energy to participate in their country's democratic process.

Recommendations

The problems in the registration process must be investigated in detail to minimise the chance of repeating them. We can only learn the proper lessons when key actors - NEC, IFES, international donor institutions, civil society & the political parties - recognise the depth and scope of the problems, identify causes, and generate effective responses. We therefore call on:

- * NEC and the international community to analyse the causes of the administrative/resource problems and honestly acknowledge the extent to which different actors were responsible. They should produce a plan of action that specifically addresses how they will avoid a repetition of these problems on Election Day.

- * The police to prioritise the investigation of all small scale and systematic abuses of the registration process. If they find that any agents were behind the underage and multiple registrations, those perpetrators must be prosecuted before the elections.

- * NEC, Paramount Chiefs, civil society groups and others to launch massive public education efforts about the exhibition period of the registration rolls and subsequently about the election itself. People must be encouraged to challenge any errors on the exhibited rolls so that the final list can be as legitimate as possible.

- * The people of Sierra Leone not to use administrative problems as an excuse for disengaging from this vital national election. We all must take the initiative and demonstrate the patience to make this system work.