



NATIONAL ELECTION WATCH (NEW)

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Preliminary Statement on polling day electoral process

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Polls closed across the country yesterday for the 2012 Presidential, Parliamentary, and Local Government Elections. National Elections Watch (NEW) deployed observers in all 14 districts of Sierra Leone to cover the process. Overall, the assessment of the opening procedures was relatively good. With over 800 polling stations reporting, in the vast majority of cases, adequate security agents, NEC staff, and voting material and equipment were available. However, NEW notes with concern long delays in poll openings in many areas, including due to lack of voting material and polling station staff failing to arrive on time. NEW observers also indicated that in most cases the polling station location was appropriate and the layout of the station was well-organised. However, NEW wishes to signal its concern about complaints about the quality of voting booths and overcrowding inside stations, which may have compromised voter confidentiality in certain instances.

With regards to the voting process, data from NEW observers was largely positive. In over a thousand polling stations reporting, the overwhelming majority signaled that voter confirmation procedures had been followed, that campaigning was largely absent from polling station areas, that voting procedures were properly followed, and that the process was orderly. NEW would like to signal concern, however, at certain irregularities, in particular insufficient ballots available and in an incident in Koinadugu where a missing Final Voter Registration List was reconstituted on the spot. Additionally, incidences of high tension in the Western Area were observed.

As concerns the poll closing procedure, NEW notes with grave concern that its observers reported that only 66% out of 620 stations allowed voters who were waiting in line at closing time, 5PM, to vote. This constitutes a serious breach of fundamental voter rights, as electoral law provides for them to be allowed to cast the vote so long as they are in the queue at the polling station by closing time. Considering the long delays in opening in many locations, it was particularly important that polling station officials respected the rights of those citizens who turned up to cast their vote.

All indications are that voter turnout was high across the country, with a turnout of 83% from 457 stations reported by NEW observers. The data available from 747 polling stations further indicates that women's participation in the elections was highly significant: women constituted 56% of voters in these stations, with an average of 131 women voting at each station.

Voters with disabilities were estimated at 2.2% of the voting population in 739 polling stations that NEW observers reported from, with an average of 5 voters per polling station.

NEW observers indicated that the counting process was quite smooth: with data from 346 stations available, there was an average of almost 2 security staff and 4 political party agents at each station to monitor the process. Observers

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reported from 334 stations that in 97% of cases the counting process was orderly and that in 99% of cases it was open and all party agents and observers were able to observe procedures. In 78% of cases from 318 polling stations, there was consensus among party agents on the void votes. Out of 339 polling stations reporting, in 86% all party agents present signed the final vote count.

Currently, there is not enough results data available to comment on the results and the tallying process is ongoing. 9493 stations in total are to provide their vote counts to produce the final result.

NEW commends the stakeholders involved in the electoral process for the largely peaceful atmosphere observed across the country. NEW commends the Independent Radio Network for its consistent and reliable coverage of the elections process, and the media as a whole, for its largely cooperative role.

NEW commends the security forces on their role in pacifying the process and quelling isolated incidences of violence. NEW also commends political parties for preventing institutional violence and encourages them to continue to appease their supporters as the results come in and to peacefully accept the final tally.

NEW commends the positive attitude of the citizens of Sierra Leone, which was reflected in the high turnout and peaceful conditions observed, in spite of movement restrictions imposed on them. NEW also recognizes the efforts of citizen observers in their tireless efforts to monitor the process and wishes to express particular gratitude to its own observers across all 14 districts of the country. However, NEW reminds accredited observers from other electoral management bodies that elections observation carries strict standards of neutrality to ensure credibility and reminds them of the importance of being non-partisan in their efforts.

NEW also thanks international observer colleagues for their efforts in working towards ensuring the transparency of the polls.

In spite of logistical problems noted in the opening procedures, NEW commends NEC on the institutional neutrality demonstrated in its conduct of the electoral process so far. Data on the electoral process from NEW observers is largely positive across the country. However NEW call NEC's attention to several outstanding issues, in particular the disenfranchisement of voters and procedural irregularities observed.

As the tallying process continues, NEW urges all Sierra Leoneans to maintain the spirit of peace that has characterized this election. Interested persons can consult www.salonevote.com for the data collected by NEW observers throughout this process.

NEW is grateful to the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) for the funding to enable the operationalization of the Citizen Situation Room and also to Search for Common Ground for the provision of electoral technical advice.

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