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Sierra Leone: Opposition cries foul after election

The Sierra Leone People's Party, the main opposition party in Sierra Leone, has accused the National Electoral Commission (NEC) of bias in favour of President Koroma's All People's Congress (APC) in presidential, parliamentary and local elections on 17 November.

Voting was carried out peacefully, and has been commended by observers, but allegations of irregularities have increased tensions as Sierra Leone waits for official results to be released.

"The Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) is dismayed at the extent of the irregularities which have come to light," said party Secretary-General Sulaiman Tejan-Sie on 19 November. Addressing reporters in the SLPP headquarters, Tejan-Sie spoke of a "catalogue of malpractices and the apparent unwillingness of the National Electoral Commission to address them".

SLPP accused the electoral commission of instructing people to vote for the ruling party, saying it has video evidence of the commission "directing voters to vote for specific candidates".

A pamphlet released by the SLPP also makes accusations of ballot-stuffing, as well as physical assaults on polling agents by state security services. It also accused certain NEC officials of allowing people to vote without voter ID cards.

President Koroma's APC has long faced such allegations from the rival party. Before the vote SLPP chairman John Oponjo Benjamin told IRIN: "There has been a lot of misuse of incumbency, so we are not going into these elections on a level playing field."

The SLPP's pamphlet concluded that the party was "only willing to accept results from an election that is considered credible... These unfortunate incidences not only have the potential to undermine the credibility of the election results but have the tendency to derail our effort to consolidate our hard-earned peace," it said.

On 20 November there were reports of a skirmish in the eastern town of Kailahun, with AFP news agency reporting that police used teargas to disperse a group of APC supporters celebrating victory based on unofficial results released by the Independent Radio Network. It is seen as crucial that official results are released as soon as possible to end any uncertainty and speculation. The NEC announced on 20 November it had tallied 75 percent of the votes thus far.

NEC spokesman Albert Massaquoi denied allegations of NEC involvement in election malpractices. "It is not our policy to do that," he told IRIN. "We are aware of some minor malpractices. But the commission is satisfied with the election process so far," he said.

ion - Sierra Leone's third since the end of an 11-year civil war - passed off peacefully, and was widely praised by observers. On 18 November UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon congratulated Sierra Leone on its "peaceful and largely orderly elections", issuing a communiqué stating: "The high voter turnout and the remarkable calm displayed by the country's citizens as they cast their votes are a clear manifestation of their desire for peace, democracy and development."

The statement also warned Sierra Leoneans against violence as they wait for the results. "The Secretary-General calls on Sierra Leone's political leaders, parties and their supporters to accept the will of the people and to put their country above any other interests so as not to jeopardize Sierra Leone's hard-won peace."

EU observers

Richard Howitt, head of the European Union Election Observation Mission in Sierra Leone, told reporters: "The EU preliminary assessment... records that so far in this election, there has been respect for freedom of speech, movement and universal suffrage."

He also commended the performance of the NEC. “Overall we find that NEC has been independent and has been impartial,” he said.

However, he acknowledged that there were shortcomings in the process, and said that the elections had been conducted on an “uneven playing field”. “Unequal access to resources clearly affected the campaign,” he said, explaining that APC had enjoyed 61 percent of airtime on the state broadcaster the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation, compared to 18 percent for SLPP.

He told reporters that his team had observed at least three cases of vote-buying by the APC, as well as one case of over-voting in Kenema, eastern Sierra Leone. But he clarified that this was an exception, not a trend. “We are asking the hard questions and will report all our findings in an unbiased way,” he told IRIN on 17 November.

The election, which pits President Koroma against former junta leader Julius Maada Bio, is seen as a critical test of Sierra Leone’s recovery 10 years after the end of the civil-war. President Koroma is widely tipped to win a second term in power, on the back of economic growth and extensive infrastructural improvements over the last five years.

If no candidate wins 55 percent of the vote the country will go to the polls again in a run-off next month.