



MEDIA REFORM COORDINATING GROUP-SIERRA LEONE (MRCG-SL)
MEDIA AND ELECTIONS
COVERAGE AND REPORTAGE ON THE SECOND PHASE OF VOTER
REGISTRATION FOR THE 2023 ELECTIONS



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The MRCG will continue to monitor and report on the electoral processes, especially on issues relating to the media and freedom of expression.

ABOUT MRCG

The Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) is the coordinating Secretariat for media reform, research and capacity building. It comprises Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), Independent Radio Network (IRN), Guild of Editors (GoE), Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL), Sierra Leone Reporters Union (SLRU), Sport Writers Association of Sierra Leone (SWASAL), Faculty of Communication, Media and Information Studies (Fourah Bay College), Ministry of Information and Civic Education (MoICE), Independent Media Commission (IMC) and the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC).

1. INTRODUCTION

During election periods, media monitoring provides benchmarks to judge the fairness of the election processes. It assesses the behavior of the media during various phases of the electoral processes and evaluates their compliance with international standards and local regulations on elections coverage. It helps to establish whether voters are adequately informed through the media for them to make a well-informed choice throughout the election cycle.

According to Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL), **1,345,176** eligible voters registered in the first phase of the voter registration from 3 September to 17 September 2022. The second phase of the voter registration of eligible Sierra Leoneans commenced from 20 September to 4 October 2022 in preparation for the Presidential, Parliamentary and Local Councils elections slated for 24 June 2023.

On 20 September 2022, the ECSL announced that **1,815 centers** will open for the second phase for all eligible Sierra Leoneans of voting age and those who will be 18 years old on or before 24 June 2023 (polling day) to participate in the ongoing voter registration. The Commission reminded citizens that centers will be opened right across the country in all 446 wards in every constituency and district in order for eligible citizens who did not make it in the first phase to find the nearest center in their communities. As part of its voter education, the ECSL encouraged eligible voters to take along the required documents for registration which included: a valid Sierra Leonean passport, previous Voter ID card, a National ID card, certificate of registration from the National Civil Registration Authority (NCRA), or valid Sierra Leonean birth certificate.

Elections in Sierra Leone are held every five years. The Constitution of Sierra Leone, Act No. 6 of 1991 mandates the Electoral Commission to register voters. Section 33 of the constitution provides that:

“Subject to the provisions of the Constitution, the Electoral Commission shall be responsible for the conduct and supervision of the registration of voters for, and of, all public elections and referenda; and for that purpose shall have power to make regulations by statutory instrument for the registration of voters, the conduct of Presidential, Parliamentary or Local Government elections and referenda, and other matters connected therewith, including regulations for voting by proxy.”

This report presents the role played by the media in the second phase of the voter registration process; it highlights impacts challenges and impacts of the second phase of the voter registration process and presents recommendations to the necessary authorities.

2. METHODOLOGY

This report utilized a qualitative and quantitative approach. Data were collected from documentary analyses, qualitative and quantitative content analysis of media publications and broadcasts.

3. MEDIA AND ELECTIONS

Since the end of the country's 11-year civil war in 2002, the media have played a pivotal role in covering and reporting on elections. The media have been very powerful in informing citizens about governance issues. The country's media have been playing a very crucial role in the electoral processes up to the 2018 elections. The Sierra Leonean media had a very crucial role to play in the elections, including reporting on the activities of elections management bodies like the ECSL and the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC).

A free, objective, independent, skilled and professional media is an essential component of any democratic society, hence professional journalism - both online and offline - serves a crucial role in democracies. Research has proven that, the media provides information that allows citizens to make informed decisions inside and outside the voting booth. It holds authorities to account for integrity, peace and fairness of an election. Journalists can also contribute to the electoral agenda by requiring politicians to respond to the public, and to focus on subjects of real public interest (UNESCO 2019). Therefore, the role of the media in today's political sphere is more important than most people even realize.

Free media have long been recognized as a cornerstone of democracy and play an important role in influencing political discourse during elections. Free and balanced, traditional media (print and broadcast) foster transparency and the dissemination of important electoral information. The rise of new media - such as social media sites, blogs, email and other new media platforms - provides further avenues and possibilities for participatory citizenship, information, knowledge sharing, inclusion and empowerment. Both traditional and new media can play a vital watchdog role, and serve as a campaign platform, a forum for public debate and as a public educator, ultimately strengthening democracy (Samer and Gallagher 2015).

There is little doubt that the media play an indispensable role in the proper functioning of a democracy. The most obvious role of the media in a democracy is that of a —watchdog. By undertaking careful scrutiny and disclosure of the functioning of the government and various arms of the state, as well as the performance of elected representatives, the media can arm the public with the information necessary to evaluate the sincerity and effectiveness of the people they elect into power and to hold them to account (Joseph, 2011).

In managing elections, Joseph (2011) continued, the media play three critical roles:

Firstly, they provide information about the election to citizens. Since people's awareness about the election depends to a large extent on media content, journalists must report factually and fairly on the platforms and campaigns of all the participating political parties and/or candidates so that the electorate can differentiate between them and make informed decisions. The media must also provide interpretation and analysis of events and issues, often by creating space for the diverse opinions of a range of columnists and commentators. Another important task involves passing on information from the election commission to educate citizens on the basic facts and processes of elections.

Secondly the media function as watchdogs on behalf of the public, keeping close tabs on the election campaign and the voting process. It is the media's job to report on any violations of the rights of

candidates or voters (including the right to free speech), any corruption in election and voting procedures, any misdemeanor by political parties, and/or any signs of omission or commission by the election management authorities.

The media need to serve as the voice of the voters. Elections are not just for politicians; they are, notably, an opportunity for ordinary people to speak up, to identify the issues they think need highlighting and why. Journalists must go out into the community to seek and provide a forum for the voices of ordinary voters who have something to say, especially those who hesitate to voice their opinions on public matters in the public sphere or have been ignored or even prevented from doing so in the past (Joseph, 2011).

4. MRCG AND ELECTIONS

In the 2018 elections, the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) implemented a program on ‘Promoting Professional Media Coverage and Conflict Sensitive Reporting of the 2018 Multi-Tier Elections in Sierra Leone’ funded by the United Nations Development Fund (UNDP) as part of the ‘Conflict Prevention and Mitigation during the Electoral Cycle in Sierra Leone’ project. One of the components of the programme was to set up and operationalize the first Media Situation Room in Sierra Leone. The Situation Room analyzed media contents of the 2018 elections and provided real time information on the media performance and provided mentoring and coaching that helped to provide broadcast and publication of unprofessional contents. As part of the program, there were training sessions across the country on 'Promoting Professional Media Coverage and Conflict Sensitive Reporting of the 2018 Multi-Tier Elections in Sierra Leone'. The training sessions enhanced and strengthened the skills of 500 local journalists (including editors and station managers) from regional media houses in Sierra Leone to provide professional media coverage and conflict sensitive reporting of the 2018 multi-tier elections in Sierra Leone. The participants were taught about the role of media amid conflict, both how it can prolong and exacerbate a conflict and its role in preventing conflict and promoting reasoned political dialogue; methods of conflict sensitive reporting and how to effectively and professionally report on the electoral cycles and adherence to the Independent Media Commission's (IMC) Guidelines on Reporting Elections (MRCG Reports 2019).

One of the recommendations from the 2018 initiative was that the MRCG’s intervention should focus on all stages of the electoral processes. This report is part of MRCG’s engagements on the pre-elections stage of the 2023 General Elections.

5. MEDIA’S COVERAGE OF THE VOTER REGISTRATION

The media in Sierra Leone developed series of approaches to cover and report on the electoral process since the pronouncement of the dates for the elections. In order for the MRCG to get a vivid understanding of the media’s approach to the voter registration, it conducted series of interviews with stakeholders in the Sierra Leone media industry, including journalists from various media houses and election management bodies. The findings show that all of the media institutions have developed an approach to cover the voter registration. The major outcome shows that most of the challenges mentioned in the first phase of the voter registration exercise were addressed. Some were addressed before the start of the commencement of the second phase of registration, while others were addressed during the second phase of the voter registration.

One key recommendation from the first phase of the voter registration report was collaboration between ECSL and media institutions for a timely flow of information. ECSL on 23 September 2022 signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with African Young Voices (AYV) for coverage of the 2023 elections. Also as part of its partnership building the Sierra Leone Association of Journalist (SLAJ) executive paid a Courtesy Call on ECSL Chairman and called for cooperation on access and information integrity for the June 2023 Elections. SLAJ noted the importance of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between ECSL and SLAJ for easy access of information flow, managing disinformation, accreditation for all activities related to the electoral processes. The ECSL appreciated the effort of SLAJ and assured of effective collaboration with the media in all aspect of the 2023 elections.

5.1 APPROACHES BY MEDIA INSTITUTIONS

The analyses below are done on some of the exclusive programs of radio stations monitored broadcast. However, as part of their daily flagship programs they discussed various issues on the voter registration process.

The Sierra Leone Broadcasting (SLBC)

During the second phase of the voter registration, the SLBC conducted series of radio and television programs on the registration process, including review of the first phase of the exercise and expectations of the second phase. There were also programs on voter and civic education, the challenges of the voter registration and security and political issues of the process. The tables show analyses of the programs of SLBC radio and TV,

Analyses of SLBC Radio

NAME OF PROGRAMME: MORNING COFFEE				
DATE: 20 SEPTEMBER, 2022				
DURATION: 3HOURS				
GUESTS, PANELLISTS, CONTRIBUTORS			ISSUES DISCUSSED	FEEDBACK
EMBs	SECURITY SECTOR	SOCIAL/POLITICAL ANALYSTS		
Raymond A.N George- Director of Media and Communication- ECSL		Joseph Sannoh-Team Lead Coalition Of Election Observers William Seiya- Pro, First & Second Time Voters Organisation	Review of first phase of registration and expectations for the second phase	Responses from guests and messages.

SLBC TV

NAME OF PROGRAMME: GOOD MORNING SHOW DATE: 21 SEPTEMBER, 2022 DURATION: 1 HOUR				
GUESTS, PANELLISTS, CONTRIBUTORS			ISSUES DISCUSSED	FEEDBACK
EMBs	SECURITY SECTOR	SOCIAL/POLITICAL ANALYSTS	Things observed during the first phase of voter's registration	Responses from guests and text messages.
Momoh M. Kanneh, Director of Education, ECSL Abubakar Javombo from NCRA		Joseph Sannoh, Team Lead from Coalition of Election Observer, and Arthur E. Pearce, NGC regional chairman and representative of Consortium of Political Parties	Imputing correct information of voter's registrants, Tackling challenges encountered in the first phase NGC dissatisfaction with the voter's registration process Challenges faced by first time voters	

Independent Radio Network (IRN)

The IRN continues to contribute to the conduct of free, fair and peaceful elections in Sierra Leone by providing news and information about the entire electoral processes, including voter registration.

NAME OF PROGRAM: UPDATE ON THE FIRST PHASE AND THE SECOND PHASE
DATE: 20 SEPTEMBER 2022
DURATION: 1 HOUR

GUESTS, PANELLISTS, CONTRIBUTORS				ISSUES DISCUSSED	FEEDBACK
EMBs	SECURITY SECTOR	SOCIAL/POLITICAL ANALYSTS	OTHERS		
Momoh Kanneh – Director-Voter Education - ECSL		Fatima Momodu – PRO All Political Parties Women Association (APPWA)		Turn out of people to register was impressive. Discussion on some of the reason why first time voters not registered. Update on steps taken to address issues for the first phase of the registration.	Text Messages

NAME OF PROGRAM: HOW DI VOTER REGISTRATION DAE GO NA DI COUNTRY
DATE: 23 SEPTEMBER 2022
DURATION: 1 HOUR

Abubakarr Javombo – Director of Operations National Civil Registration Association (NCRA)				Looked at challenges from the first phase and how it affected the registration process. Analyzed the changes in the second phase as compared to the first phase which is much better but the only issue they are still facing the	Text Messages were read
Sallieu Kamara – Spokesperson for National Elections Watch (NEW)					

				<p>with the first time voters.</p> <p>Clarifications on the issue of fake birth certificates, and encouraged the public to call the situation room if they are having problems registering with their birth certificate and it will be verified.</p> <p>Discussed and aired vox pop of interviews of people opinion on the partial lock down instituted by some Mayors in the Provinces so that people could go register.</p>	
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Analysis of Africa Young Voices TV

The African Young Voices (AYV) continued to use their program ‘Sierra Leone Decide 2023’ to exclusively cover and report the electoral processes.

AYV TV

NAME OF PROGRAMME: WAKE UP SIERRA LEONE				
DATE 20 SEPTEMBER, 2022				
DURATION: 1 HOUR				
GUESTS, PANELLISTS, CONTRIBUTORS			ISSUES DISCUSSED	FEEDBACK
EMBs	SECURITY SECTOR	SOCIAL/POLITICAL ANALYSTS	Review of first phase of voter registration challenges	Text messages were read during the program
Maksood Sesay, CEO of Center for Electoral and Civic Education.		Ahmed Sesay Esq, Member of APC Media Team,	The start of the second phase voter registration	
			How the voter registration process is done?	

Raymond Nathaniel George, Director of Media and Communication of Electoral Commission Sierra Leone		Abubakar Joe Sesay from SLPP	Documents needed for the voter registration Reviewing first phase of voter's registration process Political parties observation of voter's registration process	
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Analysis of Radio Democracy 98.1 fm

NAME OF PROGRAMME: GUD MORNING SALONE				
DATE: 20 SEPTEMBER 2022				
DURATION: 1:45				
GUESTS, PANELLISTS, CONTRIBUTORS			ISSUES DISCUSSED	FEEDBACK
EMBs	SECURITY SECTOR	SOCIAL/POLITICAL ANALYSTS	Discussion on the first phase of the Voter's registration process and some of the challenges from the process.	Text messages were read during the programme
Mohamed K. Konneh – Chief Electoral Commissioner ECSL		Joseph Sannoh-Team Lead Coalition of Election Observers William Seiya- Public Relations Officer, First & Second Time Voters Organisation	ECSL plans to do boundaries delimitation. Encouraged first time voters to call the situation room of NCRA if they are rejected even though they have authentic birth certificates so they could be verified.	

Analysis of Epic Radio

<p align="center">NAME OF PROGRAMME: EPIC MORNING SHOW DATE: 21 SEPTEMBER 2022 DURATION: 2 HOURS</p>				
GUESTS, PANELLISTS, CONTRIBUTORS			ISSUES DISCUSSED	FEEDBACK
EMBs	SECURITY SECTOR	SOCIAL/POLITICAL ANALYSTS	<p>Addressed the issue of people using fake documents to register.</p> <p>Update of the first phase and what to expect in the second phase of registration.</p>	<p>Text messages were read during the program</p>
<p>Amadu Juana Kamanda – Deputy Director Information Education and Communications NCRA</p> <p>Raymond George Director of Media and Communications ECSL</p>		<p>Programs Manager Campaign for Good Governance</p>		

Analyses of provincial radio stations during the voter registration:

The MRCG also monitored the programs of some of the provincial radio stations in the Eastern and

<p align="center">NAME OF PROGRAMME: GOOD MORNING SIERRA LEONE DATE : 20 SEPTEMBER 2022 DURATION: 1 HOUR 30 MINUTES</p>					
GUESTS, PANELLISTS, CONTRIBUTORS				ISSUES DISCUSSED	FEEDBACK
EMBs	SECURITY SECTOR	SOCIAL/ POLITICAL ANALYSTS			
Atiue Jalloh- Voter Education and Training officer ECSL; Sahr Foday-Ag Regional Head NCRA.				Outcome of the first phase of the voter registration	Text messages were read

Northern regions.

Analyses of Eastern Radio, Kenema

NAME OF PROGRAMME: WAKE UP SIERRA LEONE DURATION: DURATION: 1HOUR DATE: 21 SEPTEMBER 2022				
GUESTS, PANELLISTS, CONTRIBUTORS			ISSUES DISCUSSED	FEEDBACK
EMBs	SECURITY SECTOR	SOCIAL/POLI TICAL ANALYSTS	Who is qualified to be registered? The processes involved in registering.	Text messages were read during the program
		Hon.Francis Amara Kaisamba, Joseph Maada Kpulun, NGC south/eastern region coordinator, and mayor Thomas Baio of Kenema city council	Challenges with new registrants and the venues	

PRINT MEDIA

The table below shows some newspaper headlines during the second phase of the voter registration exercise

Name of Newspaper	Headlines on Elections	Key Source
Premier Media	COPP urges ECSL to engage political parties on voter registration	COPP
Night Watch	Registration Frustration	APC Opposition Leader in Parliament – Chernor Maju Bah
The Satellite Newspaper	To weed out underage people from the voter registration... ECSL, NCRA, SLP to mount verification exercises	ECSL
The Exclusive Newspaper	Extend voter registration – COPP urges ECSL	COPP
Global Times Newspaper	Voter registration phase one ... 1, 345, 176 voters registered	ECSL
Independent Observer	36 arrested over alleged registration malpractice	AIG Brima Jah – SLP

Politico	As phase one ends... Western Area tops registration Dozens arrested over I.D Card Falsification	ECSL Boss AIG Brima Jah- SLP
The Calabash Newspaper	ECSL debunks allegation of foul play in procuring electoral equipment and system	ECSL
News Age	Hijacking voter registration exercise for campaigning ... MRCG calls on ECSL and PPRC to warn political parties	MRCG – National Coordinator
Concord Times	AYV, ECSL signs MOU	ECSL, AYV
Awoko	VR system allows bye-pass for special needs people - ECSL	Raymond George - ECSL
Voice of Salone	First time voters faces setbacks in registration process	Registrant
Independent Observer	ECSL partners hold training on election risk management	ECSL commissioner North (Abubakarr M. Koroma)

6. ECSL'S PUBLIC INFORMATION AND MEDIA RELATIONS APPROACH

The ECSL on the 19 September 2022 issued a press statement informing the public about the update of the field data captured at the end of the first phase on the voter registration. The Commission announced that the first phase ended on the 17 September 2022 and the second phase would start from the 20 September to 4 October 2022.

The provisional first phase registration data based on report from 80% of centers recorded nationally, was that a total of 1,345,176 citizens registered in the first phase across the country. The ECSL reminded the public to call the situation room at 838 as it has been actively receiving calls from all over the country and promised to continue to provide that service throughout the registration period.

According to Electoral Commission Sierra Leone press statement dated 3 October 2022, the second phase of the voter registration exercise was very successful, and the Commission was satisfied with the turn out and the data collection process. The Commission stated that they took cognizance of the initial challenges encountered with the setting up of equipment and deployment of staff which delayed the opening of some centers across the country in the first phase of the registration process. In rectifying the challenges, the ECSL proclaimed the extension of the voter registration process by two (2) days from the 7 - 8 October 2022 and the extended period was limited to all 1,815 registration centers of the first phase. The Commission stated that it would use the two (2) days period (5 - 6 October 2022) for reconfiguration and deployment of equipment and staff.

6.1 MRCG'S INTERVIEW WITH ECSL

In an interview with ECSL, they confirmed that, the Commission was satisfied with the way and manner most media houses reported on the second phase of the voter registration process across the country. The Commission noted the efforts of the media in educating voters on how to vote, updating

the public on the progress of the voter registration, providing space for political parties to air their views, reporting on the challenges of the voter registration, and scrutinizing the voters' registration process from the part of EMBs to ensure fairness during the process. The ECSL called on the media to remain independent in electoral reportage.

In order to have a proper flow of information, the ESCL told MRCG that they created WhatsApp group for media houses in all the regions, conducted regular press briefing and put out releases, MOU was signed with some media institutions and election hour programmes done in some media houses. They ECSL said it encountered some challenges in countering misinformation from some media houses as they refused to get the side of the Commission on sensitive issues. There were plans for ECSL to train station manager and editors on election reporting and to sign an MOU with SLAJ.

7. SUCCESSES/IMPACTS OF THE MEDIA COVERAGE AND REPORTAGE ON THE VOTER EDUCATION

- The media were able to effectively perform their role in educating and informing the public on the essence of voter registration process.
- The signing of MOU between ECSL and AYV for coverage on the 2023 electoral process.
- IRN produced its own jingles on voter registration that was broadcast in all partner radio stations across the country.
- Production of flyers by IRN on civic education.
- The ECSL has improved its relationship and collaboration with the media.

8. CHALLENGES IN COVERING AND REPORTING ON THE VOTER REGISTRATION

- Though the ECSL improved on its relationship with media, yet some journalists encountered difficulties in accessing the ECSL for interview.
- The issues of accreditation for both journalists and some political parties was an issue.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- ECSL to engage with community radio stations in the provincial areas.
- ECSL to ensure that the journalists get accredited for the remaining electoral processes.
- ECSL to ensure a cordial relationship with the media.
- ECSL and PPRC to ensure that political parties abide by the electoral rules.
- ECSL to work with SLAJ to counter disinformation during the elections
- ECSL to sign an MOU with SLAJ for media coverage and ensure that journalists work with the framework of the law as well as to ensure journalist security.
- Journalists should be impartial and objective in reporting electoral processes.
- International organizations to support the training of journalists to improve their reporting on the 2023 elections.

10. CONCLUSION

This report has highlighted the relevance of the media in contributing to the electoral processes, including voter registration. The MRCG is pleased with the steps taken in working with the media in the second phase and the remaining electoral process. Therefore, the MRCG hopes to see a cordial relationship between ECSL, SLAJ and media institutions. It is believed that if journalists are capacitated they can sensitize, educate and give out credible information to the public. This will ultimately contribute to the country's democracy, peace and security.