

Chapter 6

Voting, Counting and Tabulation

Background

On Saturday 17 November 2012, Presidential, Parliamentary, Mayor/Chairperson and Local Council Elections took place across the Republic of Sierra Leone. Polling was scheduled to take place from 0700 to 1700 in 9,493 polling stations located at some 2,995 polling centres across the country. This compares to 2,702 polling centres and 6,171 polling stations for the 2007 elections.

Polling stations were established to service 300 registered voters as against 500 in 2007. For this election, 2,692,635 voters were registered during the period end January to end March 2012. In general, polling centres were located in schools or other public buildings. However, in some areas, polling took place in the outdoors, protected mainly by canvas or tarpaulins.

A Polling Centre Manager was appointed for each of the 2,995 polling centres. Each polling station was managed by a Presiding Officer, supported by nine other polling officials. Unarmed Sierra Leone Police were deployed to all polling stations across the country and Commonwealth observers noted their presence in each polling station visited.

Distribution of polling materials

The NEC distributed a range of materials to polling stations including ballot boxes, ballot papers and other polling materials. Sensitive and non-sensitive materials were delivered to most polling stations on 16 November. However, due to logistical difficulties, some materials were delivered late, in some cases on Election Day and in isolated cases, after the scheduled opening of the poll, resulting in the late opening of some polling stations. Such delays in opening polling stations were a concern as they were the main cause of voters' agitation at polling stations.

Key procedures for opening and voting

Opening

Prior to the opening of the polls, ballot boxes were displayed to all observers and party agents present to confirm that they were empty. Each of the four ballot boxes was then sealed with four plastic seals and the seal numbers noted in the polling place returns and witnessed by observers and party agents.

Voting steps

The Polling Centre Queue controller ensured that only voters with ID cards and authorised people entered polling stations; directed voters to the correct polling station; referred voters who did not have their ID cards to the Enquiry Officer.

Voters with correct ID were then directed to the Voting Identification Officer (VIO); voter's details were verified by the VIO from the Final Voters' Register (FVR); voter signed or marked by thumbprint against the FVR; VIO then directed voter to Ballot Paper Issuer (BPI) (1) for issue of Presidential and Parliamentary ballots.

BPI (1) checked whether voter's finger had been inked; if not, issued Presidential and Parliamentary ballots, validating each of the two ballot papers by stamping at the back on the top right-hand corner; BPI (1) pre-folded the ballot papers, opened them again and explained to the voter in a transparent and impartial manner how the voter should make his or her mark; BPI (1) directed voter to the voting screen to mark the ballot.

The Ballot Box Controller (BBC) (1) ensured that the voter deposited each of the ballot papers in the relevant ballot box (1 for Presidential and 1 for Parliamentary); BBC (1) directed the voter to Ballot Paper Issuer (BPI) (2), to collect the ballot papers for the Mayor/Chairperson and Local Councillor elections. BPI (2) performed the same tasks as BPI (1) except s/he issued Mayor/Chairperson and Local Councillor ballots.

The Ballot Box Controller (BBC) (2) performed the same tasks as BBC (1) as well as marking the left index finger of the voter with indelible ink. The voter then exited the polling station.

Assessment of opening and voting

Overall, Commonwealth observers reported that the actual procedures for opening of the polls were transparent and ran smoothly. However, the process in some polling stations was quite time consuming and led to some agitation amongst voters. In all areas observed, there were lengthy queues in place prior to opening, some voters reported that they had been in the queue for many hours with some even waiting overnight. *For the future, the NEC may consider advising voters that if they plan to vote early, then they should expect lengthy queues.* The observers noted that by mid-afternoon, most queues were non-existent and in many cases, very few or even no voters present after about 1600.

The Group was pleased to note the peaceful atmosphere of the elections and the patience of the people of Sierra Leone. The Group also observed that the turnout was high, that a large proportion of women and young voters, including nursing mothers and persons with disabilities, exercised their franchise and that no violence or intimidation was observed. However, the Group was concerned to hear from other reliable sources of disturbing

incidents of violence and intimidation against women at polling stations, and death threats against a senior woman political figure at her home.

In some areas, it was observed that the elderly, the disabled, pregnant women and nursing mothers were not given priority in the queues. *It is recommended the NEC makes the necessary procedural changes to rectify this in the future.* The Group noted positive steps taken to ensure a gender balance and a preponderance of youth among the ranks of polling officials, including those appointed as Presiding Officers. It was also noted that in some polling stations, disabled persons were employed as polling officials.

In many instances, the Group also observed voter confusion due to the lack of clarity as to whether they should queue in alphabetical order by surname or by the serial number of their Voter ID Card. *The Group recommends that in future, the method of queuing should be consistent across the country and that the voter education campaign should emphasise this.*

Due to the fact that four separate elections were being conducted on the same day, the voting procedures were somewhat more complex than those in the past. This fact, combined with limited voter education and literacy problems in some areas, meant that for many voters, the voting process was lengthy and confusing. The Group observed that some voters were taking up to ten or twelve minutes to complete the process. On this point, our observers were impressed with ability and patience of the polling staff in guiding voters through the process and fully explaining the procedures in detail to those who were not fully aware of the procedures. *Given that voter education commenced very late and appeared to have limited coverage, the Group suggests that for future elections, a comprehensive and wide-reaching voter education programme be developed and implemented well before Election Day.*

At all polling stations observed by the Group, there was obvious but unobtrusive police presence. Other international and local observers and political party agents were also present. In all polling places observed, the National Election Network (NEW) played a significant role in the observation process.

In many polling stations, the physical nature of the premises made it difficult for the polling place layout to conform fully with the guidelines issued by the NEC. However, in all polling stations observed by the Group, processes were put in place by Presiding Officers to ensure as far as possible the secrecy of the ballot.

Whilst the complex nature of the four different ballots, including the multi-member ballot for Councillors, made it difficult for the NEC to provide tactile voting templates for vision-impaired voters, the Group observed that there was a distinct lack of facilities to accommodate the needs of those with disabilities. *We urge the NEC, in consultation with the relevant representative bodies, to provide a more suitable infrastructure at polling stations to rectify this situation.*

On Tuesday 20 November 2012, the Chair, accompanied by some members of the Group, attended a meeting with senior representatives from the SLPP, including the flag bearer, at the SLPP Headquarters in Freetown. At this meeting, the SLPP made several serious allegations concerning alleged fraud and malpractice during the polling, the count and vote tabulation. These allegations included:

- NEC officials providing multiple ballot papers to APC supporters, allowing them to vote several times;
- NEC officials directing voters to vote for specific candidates;
- Security compromises whereby NEC officials observed people voting;
- Changing the results' return to increase the result for the APC Presidential candidate;
- SLPP party agents being forced out of, or denied access to some Tally Centres;
- Intimidation and assault on SLPP party agents in the Western area by State Security personnel and Government Ministers;
- Refusal by NEC officials to give SLPP party agents a copy of the Reconciliation and Result Forms upon conclusion of the count;
- Reports of tampering with 64 ballot boxes in Kono;
- Concerns around a shipment of ballot papers by UNDP charter flight from South Africa. It was alleged that the shipment contained several boxes addressed to London Mining which they suspected contained ballot papers. When the SLPP agents requested that these boxes be opened, their request was denied. The NEC officials advised that they would be opened at a later time and the agents would be advised of that time. However, it was claimed that the advice was not forthcoming and the boxes were opened with no SLPP agents present;
- Reports that party agents were not permitted to accompany polling officials during the movement of ballot boxes from the polling stations to the Tally Centres;

Whilst these allegations are of a very serious nature, the Group was not in a position to investigate and pronounce on these matters. In the meeting with the SLPP, the Group strongly urged the SLPP to urgently bring these allegations to the immediate attention of NEC and to seek to meet as soon as possible with the Chairperson of NEC in order to seek some early response to the issues raised. The Group noted that the Chairperson of NEC responded to these allegations on 21 November 2012.

Vehicle restrictions as a security measure

For security reasons, a restriction was placed on vehicle movements on Election Day. Exceptions to this restriction included vehicles used to transport police, security personnel, accredited observers, media, political parties, candidates, emergency services and, of course, the NEC. The NEC advised that they had made arrangements for buses to be

available to transport electors to polling stations where distance or age or infirmity was a problem. The Group noted that the arrangements were far from satisfactory and only observed buses operating in the Freetown area. Up until polling day, there was a lack of clarity as to how the measures would work. Whilst some buses were observed, in general they were few and far between and many voters advised that the wait for buses was often longer than the wait in the queues to vote. Despite the obvious security advantages and contribution to a peaceful atmosphere on Election Day, the lack of regular and reliable transport has the potential to disenfranchise voters, particularly those in rural areas as well as the elderly, the disabled and the infirm. *The Group suggest that the NEC review these arrangements for future elections and ensure that whatever arrangements are put in place are clear and well publicised.*

Key procedures for counting

Closing

Polling stations closed at 1700. However, in some areas where material was late arriving, the group was advised that closing was delayed. The Group also observed one instance where a polling station closed on time at 1700, but it reopened a few minutes later to allow a group of late voters to cast their ballots. However, instances such as these appeared to be exceptions.

Closing steps

Screening – all four ballot boxes were opened to check if any ballot papers were placed in the wrong ballot box during the voting process.

Reunification – any misplaced ballots were placed in the correct ballot box.

Reconciliation – this involved checking that the number of used ballot papers plus the number of unused ballot papers was equal to the total number of ballot papers issued to the Presiding Officer at the commencement of polling.

Sorting – with the exception of ballots for Councillors (where multiple boxes were required to be marked by electors, all ballot papers from each ballot box were sorted by candidate).

Counting – the total votes for each candidate were counted and the results entered in the Reconciliation and Results Form.

During the five stages summarised above, the ballot boxes were opened before the screening process, closed and sealed after the screening process, opened before the reunification process and resealed after the counting process. At all stages, the processes were under the scrutiny of observers and political party agents, with seal numbers being

recorded and results entered into the returns witnessed by observers who were signing the results forms. Void (invalid) and spoiled ballots were separately counted and recorded.

Once the counting process was finalised and the results entered into the relevant returns, the results for each polling station were collated for the polling centre and posted outside the premises.

All materials were then packaged as specified in the instructions issued by the NEC and transported to the relevant district office.

Assessment of counting

Overall, the Group was impressed with the openness and transparency of the counting process. However, the steps involved were lengthy and laborious, particularly given that four separate elections were conducted. As the process was not underway in most places until well after 1700, the lack of power in most polling stations meant that the tasks needed to be undertaken by lantern/torchlight/cell phone light. Many polling stations reported not finishing until well into the night, many

as late as midnight. For polling officials, this meant an extremely long day with many working in excess of 18 hours without a break.

In all polling places observed by the Group, the transparency of the process was enhanced by the presence of observers and political party agents. The Group recognises that integrity at all stages of the process, particularly the sorting and counting and recording of the results is paramount to the integrity of the entire voting process. *However, the NEC may wish to review the procedures currently in place to in some way streamline the processes, without compromising transparency and integrity. One area that should be considered is amending the PEA 2012 to provide for polls closing earlier, for example, at 1500 or 1600. We understood that this was contemplated earlier by the NEC but prohibited by the current Act.*

Tabulation of results

At the conclusion of the counting process, the Presiding Officer completed an original and four carbon copies of the Reconciliation and Results Form for each of the four elections. Each copy of this form was sealed in a tamper proof envelope. The original copy of each return was forwarded to the District Election Officer (DEO) via Ward co-ordinators. The DEOs then forwarded the original copy to the relevant Regional Tally Centre for checking, verification and subsequent data processing using the method of double entry verification. Any results forms requiring further investigation or follow-up were set aside for this purpose.

Assessment of tabulation

The Group observed activity at the respective District and Regional Tally Centres on Sunday 18 November. The general impression was that they were well set up to efficiently handle the processing and tabulation phases of the election. The Regional Tally Centres were fully staffed, including data entry operators for input and double entry and a number of cells for checking and verification of returns or matters that needed to be followed up. The Group were impressed with the openness and transparency of all the processes, the obvious gender balance of the staff employed, including youth and persons with disabilities and the specific area set aside for observer co-ordination and queries. The centres were well secured by police and other security services and all persons seeking admission to the centres were required to sign in and out and surrender their relevant accreditation whilst present in the centre.

Whilst the Group did not observe any irregularities during their visits to the Tally Centres, we recognise that it is at this stage of the process, adequate security, vigilance and monitoring need to be in place at all times to avoid any possibility of irregularities.