

PRESS RELEASE

June 19, 2023.

Call for Political Parties, ECSL, and Stakeholders to Foster Dialogue, Pursue Peaceful Conflict Resolution, and Mitigate Tension Pre- and Post-June 24 Election

The West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network (WADEMOS), embarked on a pre-election solidarity mission to Sierra Leone ahead of its forthcoming presidential, parliamentary, mayoral, and local council elections scheduled for June 24, 2023. The mission, which took place from May 15 – 18, noted the high level of mistrust coupled with the spread of misinformation and disinformation and hate speech against political opponents, suppression of the political and civic space, poor quality of the Voter ID Card, and low voter education on the electoral systems as some of the challenges characterizing the political environment.

WADEMOS' monitoring of the electoral environment subsequently shows an improvement in voter education and sensitization in support of peaceful and credible elections by all stakeholders. We recognize the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone's (ECSL) ongoing countrywide training of election officials, the enhanced sensitization of voters on the Proportional Representation (PR) system for the legislative and local council elections and mechanisms for post-election adjudication for parliamentary elections, and the campaign against election offenses.

WADEMOS similarly applauds the efforts of political parties to promote peaceful and credible elections with the signing of the Peace Pledge.

These notwithstanding, WADEMOS is deeply concerned with the high incidence of election-related violence, delays in the deployment of sensitive election materials across the country by the ECSL, the emerging issues surrounding the final voter's register, and the disaggregated list of voters for polling units, heightened tension and mistrust between the two main parties (All People's Congress [APC] and Sierra Leone People's Party [SLPP]), and particularly between the leading opposition party, the APC, and the ECSL.

We deeply express our concern regarding the escalating levels of intolerance and violence that have marred the electoral campaign from its inception. We strongly condemn the growing incidents of attacks and obstructions targeted at political opponents. The rise in intolerance and violence is troubling and undermines the principles of democracy, fair competition, and peaceful participation in the electoral process. Such acts of aggression not only pose a direct threat to the safety and well-being of political candidates and their supporters but also erode public trust in the electoral system.

Additionally, we are particularly concerned with the information gap, which has provided fertile ground for the proliferation of fake news and widespread misinformation, predominantly through social media platforms breeding mistrust and tension among citizens. This

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disinformation campaign poses a serious threat to the integrity, peace, security, and credibility of the electoral process.

Again, we vehemently condemn the incessant spewing of hate speech and the rise of ethnocentric, inflammatory, and incendiary language particularly through social media. It is with deep concern that we observe the normalization of this detrimental language within political discussions, rallies, and media interactions. We believe the normalization perpetuates harmful stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination (*as parties embark on ethnic-based campaigns*). While we continue to monitor the situation, these are early warning signs and triggers for conflict and election-related violence.

Recommendations

1. Despite the challenging context and tense environment for the elections, it is imperative that all stakeholders including political parties, the ECSL, media, and civil society work together to uphold the peace and stability of the country before, during, and after the election. To this extent, we call on all stakeholders to uphold the mediation and dialogue mechanisms defined in the election regulations and laws notably the Political Parties Regulatory Commission (PPRC) Act, the Public Elections Act of 2022, and the 1991 Constitution to address all complaints and petitions related to the election. All stakeholders must work collectively to uphold the peace and stability of the country.
2. As we mark the international day for countering hate speech (*18th June 2023*), we call on political party leaders and particularly the youth to uphold the peace accord and say no to hate speech to protect and secure the political environment – one that promotes decency, civility, and issue-based political discourse and dialogue, and advance democracy and development. Misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech threaten peace and security, disproportionately affecting those who are already vulnerable.
3. We implore ECSL to be consistent in the management of all electoral processes to increase trust and public confidence. ECSL must ensure timely provision of information for every stage of the electoral process to allow adequate preparation by election stakeholders and effective participation.
4. With few days to the elections, we call upon all political parties to prioritize peaceful and inclusive campaigns that focus on issue-based discussions and promote healthy competition. It is essential that they refrain from engaging in any form of violence, intimidation, or incitement, and allow voters to exercise their right by choosing who they wish to vote for.
5. Further, we urge law enforcement agencies and security personnel to uphold the highest standards of professionalism and impartiality during the elections as promised during our pre-election visit. They must carry out their duties with utmost integrity and ensure the safety and security of voters, candidates, and officials. It is imperative that

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security forces act without any form of intimidation or bias, avoid over-securitization and allow citizens to exercise their right to vote freely and without fear.

6. Lastly, we urge the ECSL to intensify voter education initiatives in the final days leading to the election. They must employ all communication channels, including traditional media, social media platforms, community outreach programs, and public service announcements, to disseminate clear and accessible information to voters, especially on the deployment of the PR and the full enforcement of the GEWE law.

We remain steadfast in our commitment to fostering a transparent, inclusive, and credible electoral process to sustain democracy and prevent further backsliding of democracy in the region.

WADEMOS will visit Sierra Leone from 20-26 June 2023 to observe the election-day activities and extend solidarity to civil society and Network members as well as election stakeholders.

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About WADEMOS Network

WADEMOS is a non-partisan, independent civil society-led transnational democracy solidarity network. The WADEMOS Network consists of over 35 Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) located in 15 countries in West Africa. WADEMOS mobilizes, coordinates, and leverages the collective power of civil society and other pro-democracy actors, resources, and opportunities within the West African Region to advance, defend, and reinvigorate democracy and promote democratic norms and reforms in the sub-region.

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