

Sierra Leone is bracing up for elections. Or should we say we are well into the election season? The Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL) has published its calendar of activities, while the two major political parties have been very active in recent weeks. In fact, it appears we are set for a rematch between incumbent Julius Maada Bio of the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) and his 2018 rival, Samura Kamara of the APC. In that case, there will be scores-settling and point-proving, with very high stakes. We can clearly see that tensions will be high too. Whatever the case, Sierra Leoneans deserve peaceful elections. That is why we are dedicating this piece to reflecting on the role of election management bodies, state institutions and political actors who are charged with ensuring peaceful elections.

The ECSL is the key player in the June elections—at least in terms of the conduct of the polls. They will be leading the process and working with state and non-state institutions, as well as the political parties to deliver the elections. What that means, and very obviously, is that the way the ECSL conducts the polls will be critical. Critical to the legitimacy of the party that wins. Critical to the acceptance of the results by the parties and the general public. Critical to the future of democracy. And above all, critical to the peace and stability of the nation. In other words, the elections will be a serious test of the ECSL's ability to conduct fair elections. The behaviour of the Commission and its staff, especially those who call the shots, will go a long way in determining the outcome of the polls and what happens next. That is why it is important that the ECSL does its best professionally, working transparently and fairly with all concerned to deliver credible elections that will make them and all Sierra Leoneans proud.

As important as the ECSL's role is in the upcoming vote, their business is only to conduct the elections. It is the job of other state institutions such as the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC), the security sector and other election management bodies—to make sure that the elections can be considered successful. Like the ECSL, the behaviour of these other bodies will contribute to either making the elections successful or a disaster.

The PPRC being the regulator of parties occupies a very powerful position in national political processes and that makes them an equally important player. Yes, the PPRC does not conduct elections and its jurisdiction is limited to the provisions of the act of parliament that created the body. However, they are a cog in the wheel and like the ECSL, the polls will be a huge test of their mettle. Their ability to effectively and fairly regulate the parties will be significant in the temperature of the overall electoral process. The PPRC has so far been very bold and vocal,

exercising its authority as a regulator. It is the sort of posture you would want to see in such circumstances, but you would also expect a measured approach that also seeks to diffuse tensions and resolve issues within their mandate in a manner that is constructive and sensitive to their operating environment.

There is also the Judiciary which is invested with a lot more powers, wider competence and jurisdiction than the PPRC. Elections are a contest and disputes are bound to happen. The judiciary's role in ensuring that political and electoral matters are resolved without fear or favour will be crucial in determining the outcome of the polls. All eyes will be on them to see what role they play in making sure that Sierra Leoneans get fair and peaceful elections. Considering the level of scepticism and apparent low public trust, the Judiciary has an additional point to prove. The courts are where people go to seek redress. During the current elections cycle, there has already been an election-related case at the Supreme Court, while there are other political matters in the lower courts. We may be seeing a lot more cases of similar nature. The way they are handled will be imperative in the overall electoral process and will either contribute to peace or undermine it.

Away from the people in suit and tie, let us look at the role of those in blue and khaki—the security sector. They will be the ones securing the elections and that role has been questionable in past elections and in how their relationship with power is generally. Whether in the past or presently, security institutions, especially the police behave more like an instrument for the powers above. They are known to work very hard to satisfy the government of the day, often trampling or ignoring the rights of citizens as they do so. That behaviour will be very unhelpful to delivering what we can all consider peaceful, free and fair elections. While the ECSL and other bodies conduct the elections, it is the business of the security sector to ensure that the right conditions are there for free, fair and peaceful polls. How the police and armed forces (if/when they are called) participate in the elections will be important and could have serious implications for peace, stability and national cohesion. This is well documented in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report.

As we outline the role of the various election management bodies and other state institutions, it is also necessary to bring in the role of the political parties themselves and how their behaviour can either promote or undermine the nation's hope for peaceful elections. We are talking about the two main parties here—the APC and SLPP. It would be overly idealistic to think that the campaigns will be measured, and the contest will be decent. As we stated in the opening of this piece, the stakes are very high. In all of this, the parties and their candidates owe the

people free, fair and peaceful elections. Sierra Leoneans already go through a lot on a daily basis. We deserve to keep the peace that we enjoy today.

Whatever you are up to this weekend, we hope you enjoy it.

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