THE EMINENT PERSONS GROUP
CONTRIBUTION TO HIGH-LEVEL PREVENTION AND MITIGATION OF ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

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As part of its violence prevention and mitigation mechanism before, during and post elections, the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC), identified the need to create a panel of Eminent Sierra Leoneans who would support the Commission in Preventive Diplomacy interventions and Mediation.

The PPRC is mandated, under the Political Parties Act of 2002, ‘to monitor the affairs or conduct of political parties so as to ensure compliance with the Constitution, the Political Parties Act and the terms and conditions of their registration’. Additionally, it is ‘to promote political pluralism and the spirit of constitutionalism among political parties’. Sub-section 6d of the same Act specifically mandates the PPRC ‘when approached by the persons or parties concerned, to mediate any conflicts or disputes between or among the leadership of any political party or between or among political parties’.

The five-member EPG was selected following a selection criteria which stipulated, among other qualifications, that the members be drawn from a cross section of key stakeholder groups in society but that selection be based on individual credibility and gravitas. The group comprises three men, two religious leaders one an Islamic Imam and another a Canon, the third is a leading Media practitioner. Two female members were drawn from civil society and the Children’s Commission respectively. They were commissioned at a swearing-in ceremony presided over by the PPRC Chairman Justice Patrick Hamilton where each signed and recited the Oath of Confidentiality. This was at the close of a two-day induction programme (5-6 February 2018), facilitated by the International Mediation Advisor and with support from Madam Elizabeth Lwanga and Eminent woman from Uganda who shared her experiences and read out the charge to the EPG.

Following their induction, the PPRC Chairman and Commissioners paid courtesy calls on the National Electoral Commission (NEC); the Inspector General (IG) of Police and his team; and the Office of National Security (ONS) to introduce the EPG. All three institutions welcomed the establishment of this structure and attested that indeed all five members were people of good repute.

Recognising the importance of creating a link between this National-level structure and the Local-Level District Code Monitoring Committees (DCMC) as well as the need for the EPGs to meet the larger population; the EPG undertook a three-day (20-22 February 2018) familiarisation visit to 6 conflict hotspots1 accompanied by the PPRC Chairman and Commissioners. The objectives of the visit were: To introduce the EPG to the people and the District Code

1 Kambia; Port Loko; Makeni; Kono; Kenema; Bo
Monitoring Committees, a PPRC local-level peace building structure and; to gather evidence of any incidents of violence ahead of the March 7 Elections and any issues of concern that they would need to raise with Political Party leaders and other Key stakeholders.

To help reinforce understanding of their role and the context; the EPG participated in a simulation exercise where they were given a request to analyse the context and build three scenarios that would obtain upon announcement of results and to identify the most likely scenario. Based on this, they were to then design an intervention strategy placing emphasis on preventive actions that they would need to undertake before polling day, during the process and post to ensure that violence is averted. They were given a 12-hour turnaround time. Once the strategy was submitted, they were then asked to make contact with the key centres of influence who they would need in order to persuade Political Leaders to choose peace. It is gratifying to note that contacts made during this exercise are now proving useful to the EPG interventions and that their responsiveness to situations of potential violence is yielding good result so far.

Since their induction, the focus of EPG work has largely been preventive. They supported H.E John Dramani Mahama former President of the Republic of Ghana in stakeholder consultations and the hosting of the High-Level Dialogue with top leadership of Political Parties, which culminated in the signing of the Peace Pledge by Presidential Candidates on the 28th of February. They have since followed up with Presidential Candidates who did not attend the ceremony and secured the signatures of three of them including that of the ruling party APC flagbearer. Further, the stand-off between the Police and the main opposition party SLPP; which could have easy degenerated into violent confrontation after the police visited the offices of the SLPP with intention to search for ‘hacking equipment’ and were denied access; was resolved through the timely action of one of the EPG members who alerted the PPRC Acting Registrar of the stand-off. She, in turn, made contact with President Mahama’s team, who was now leading the Commonwealth Observer Mission. When President Mahama arrived at the premises, he was able to negotiate for entry for the police and subsequently resolved the impasse.
Another area of successful intervention has been the consultations they have held with Presidential Candidates following polling day where a number of them had, through press statements, registered dissatisfaction with the counting and tallying of results wherein some stated that they would not accept the outcome. The EPG and PPRC Commissioners have, since Friday, and over the weekend met with 5 of the Political Parties\(^2\) that have so far raised concerns and subsequently met with the NEC; ONS and the IG to discuss the concerns raised and to explore ways of addressing them such that peace is maintained. On its part, the NEC has already agreed and publicly announced that where Political Parties have evidence of malpractice, they will do a recount. They have also committed to a sample recount just so that they satisfy the Political Parties and ensure that they do not have any cause for rejecting the result.

Owing to good investment in preventive actions, the EPG is yet to receive requests for formal mediation. It is anticipated however, that this may be the case once the Parliamentary result in particular is announced if previous PPRC experience is anything to go by.

\(^2\) Rtd. Brig. Julius Maada Bio (SLPP); Alhaji Chief Samuel Sam Sumana (C4C); Alhaji Dr. Kandeh K. Yumkella (NGC); Dr. Samura Kamara (APC); Mohamed K. Mansaray (ADP)