PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES PLEDGE PEACE AHEAD OF THE MARCH 7 GENERAL ELECTION

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On Wednesday 28 February 2018, Sierra Leoneans were able to follow the live coverage on three television broadcasting stations and three radio stations broadcasting in 10 local languages as well as live streaming on Facebook as nine of the 16 Presidential Candidates; including the only female Presidential candidate signed a Pledge for Peace and Non-Violence a week before the March 7 General Elections. This was a first for Sierra Leone.

The Peace Ceremony was preceded by a High-Level Breakfast Dialogue with Political Party Leadership (Chairmen, Secretaries General; Presidential Candidates and their Running Mates at Radisson Blu Hotel in Freetown. All 17 registered Political parties were in attendance. The event was organised by the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) which 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’.

In November 2017, mindful of the need to invest in preventive efforts in order to mitigate violence, the PPRC re-activated the District Code Monitoring Committees (DCMC) in all 16 Districts. Their role is to monitor compliance with the Political Parties Code of Conduct which all Parties signed to in December 2017. In addition, they act as local level peace committees and comprise of 34 representatives from different sectors including women, youth and persons with disabilities as well as the security sector and the PPRC staff in that district. The Commission however, noted that at the National level, there was

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no structure to do preventive work and serve as mediators in support to the PPRC especially with regards to high-level mediation. As such, the PPRC saw it fit to establish a 5-member group of Eminent persons drawn from Religious leaders, the Media, Business and Women’s groups; two of the members are female. All these were efforts to prevent violence at the local and National Levels.

However, recognising the pivotal role that Political Leaders play in the prevention of electoral violence and the strategic importance of engaging them to take a decided stand against violence; coupled with the need to ensure that tolerance is demonstrated by all 17 contesting parties not just during the campaign period but after polling day; the PPRC extended an invitation to His Excellency John Dramani Mahama former President of the Republic of Ghana to dialogue with Party Leaders. Celebrated for his uncharacteristic act of conceding defeat as an incumbent after losing the election in 2016, He was deemed best suited to undertake this task. Prior to the High-

Level Dialogue, President Mahama commenced his three-day visit with consultations with Key stakeholders including Security Sector, The National Electoral Commission; Civil Society; Members of the Diplomatic Corps and Political Parties to familiarise himself with the issues of concern. He then took the opportunity to share his own experience in addressing some of the concerns raised by political parties and to remind them that regardless of whether or not the conditions were fully conducive for the conduct of a free and fair elections, in their view; they as leaders, still had a moral and a political obligation to assume full responsibility for condemning and shunning violence as well as admonishing their supporters to do the same. Further, he reminded them that there will only be one President emerging out of this contest but that all of them and their supporters could emerge as winners if they chose peace and collaboration in governing to ensure a prosperous, inclusive and just Sierra Leone. He then proposed that Presidential Candidates demonstrate this commitment by crafting the Presidential Peace Pledge, which all 17 Political Parties accepted. A draft pledge was shared for their input and all parties then adopted it with very minor amendments. It is this pledge that was read out and signed at a moving Peace Ceremony that evening presided over by President Mahama.

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