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# Electoral Dialogue Series Report

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# BACKGROUND

The Electoral Dialogue Series, an initiative of the Centre for Research, Policy and Development (CRPD), is a roundtable dialogue series that will bring together political party leaders, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), the Media and other key stakeholders in the electoral and political process. The dialogue series is a platform for stakeholders to engage in discussion on issues emerging from key electoral activities as the nation moves closer to the December 2021 presidential election. By tagging it as a series, the Electoral Dialogue CRPD is planned to be a continuous process that will hold the last Friday of every month leading up to the December presidential election and beyond. The meeting held on Friday, 25<sup>th</sup> June at the Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara International Conference Centre, Bijilo marked the first in the series.

The dialogue was attended by Political Party leaders and representatives from Alliance for Patriotic Re-orientation and Construction (APRC), Citizens Alliance (CA), National Reconciliation Party (NRP), People Progressive Party (PPP), National Unity Party (NUP), Gambia People Democratic Party (GPDP), Gambia Action Party (GAP), Alliance for National Re-orientation and Development (ANRD); Deputy Chairperson and Chief Electoral Officer of the IEC, Chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Chairman of TANGO, representative of the National Council on Civic Education, Chief Technical Advisor for the UN Electoral Assistance Office, representative of the media, and CSOs. The dialogue was moderated by Neneh MC Cham, a legal practitioner.

The dialogue commenced with an opening statement by the Executive Director of CRPD, Sait Matty Jaw, who thanked guests for honoring the invitation and stressed on the importance of dialogue during the electoral process. Following the welcoming statement, the Chairperson of TANGO, John Charles Njie, highlighted the need for political party leaders and Gambians to speak to each other in the context of mutual respect. He averred that when stakeholders talk in a friendly atmosphere, it encourages understanding and enhance peaceful relationships. In her opening remarks, Neneh MC Cham, Legal Practitioner and Rights Advocate highlighted the centrality of elections as a modality for choosing leaders and the upcoming Presidential elections being critical given that its successful and orderly conduct will enhance the advancement of Gambia's democratic transition process.

Following Neneh's remarks, Sait called upon Santhosh Cherooli Parambil, Chief Technical Advisor for the UN Electoral Assistance Office to officially open the dialogue. In his opening remarks, he stated that the business of national elections is the business of everyone and that the successful conduct of the election is the sole responsibility of Gambians and Gambian institutions. He reiterated the need for dialogue and the need for party leaders and their candidates to utilize the legal processes for the resolution of grievances that might have emanated during the electoral process.

After the formal opening of the dialogue, the electoral stakeholders present gave a presentation of observations made and emerging issues from the ongoing voter registration process at their institutional level. Following the presentations, the IEC addressed issues raised during the presentations and committed to considering all recommendations made by stakeholders. A summary of the proceedings is under stakeholder presentation sections.

# STAKEHOLDER PRESENTATIONS

## Political Parties Presentation

### **Alliance for Patriotic Re-Orientation and Construction (APRC) - Dodou Jah,**

Dodou Jah commended the IEC for their efforts in conducting the voter registration exercise. On the registration process, he stated that one of the most critical issues that has emerged so far is the question of citizenship and identity as it relates to who can be registered as voter. He also talked about the issue of the voter registration timeline and whether the IEC is considering extending the deadline. He also reiterated the need for a peaceful conduct of the December election and situated the centrality of IEC, party leaders and other stakeholders in the realization of a peaceful election.

### **Citizens Alliance CA - Dr. Ismaila Ceesay**

Dr. Ceesay reiterated the need for peaceful elections as it will have an impact on the legitimacy of the election results. He also emphasized the need for periodic meetings among stakeholders as a mechanism to build trust, mutual respect, and aid peaceful conduct of the elections. Dr. Ceesay also talked about the challenges of stalled reforms and how it has contributed to many issues confronting Gambia's democratic transition. He highlighted the issue of the mayoral attestations and stressed that if the constitutional and electoral reforms had been successfully concluded, some of the emerging issues such as the attestations could have been avoided. He also reiterated the need for party leaders to prioritize attending dialogues, noting that the absence of many party leaders in the gathering is a disservice to the nation.

### **National Reconciliation Party (NRP) - Famara Dampha**

Famara Dampha informed the gathering that his party deployed observers that are monitoring the process and progress of the voter registration exercise. He noted that his party will present a report of the observation exercise in which the major findings will be highlighted when the registration exercise ends. In rounding up his presentation, he talked about the need for parties to respect the rule of law, respect the role of the IEC and respect Gambians. He cautioned parties on the need to desist from attacking party observers as well as citizens on the basis of the arbitrary determination of 'who is a Gambian'.

## **People's Progressive Party (PPP) - Maimuna Sawaneh**

Maimuna Sawaneh informed the gathering that her party also deployed observers to registration units across the country and that there are not many issues for now. On the registration exercise, she talked about the need for more voter sensitization. She also noted the challenges faced by persons living with disability as it relates to ease of registration. She also implored the IEC to provide more registration machines for their officials in the field in order to facilitate their work and expedite the registration process.

## **National Unity Party (NUP) - Baboucarr Bah**

Baboucarr Bah commended the IEC for the arduous task of coordinating the electoral process. He talked about the importance of dialogue and commends the CRPD for kick-starting the process through this dialogue meeting. He spoke about the need for political parties to lead in credible manner. More importantly, he talked about the need for party leaders to start engaging the media to sensitize its followers and condemn messages that can incite violence to ensure peaceful elections.

## **Gambia Peoples Development Party (GPDP) - Joseph Dacosta**

Joseph Dacosta talked about the need for party leaders to be physically present in such gatherings and how their presence will enhance the message of peace. He also informed the gathering that the GPDP has agents on the fields monitoring the voter registration exercise. He noted the need to dissuade party leaders and supporters from moving around registration centers in clear party's insignia noting that it creates room for intimidation and harassment of registrars. He also highlighted the need for party leaders and stakeholders in the electoral process to start speaking out against messages that can incite violence.

## **Gambian Action Party (GAP) - Alhaji M. Bayo**

Alhaji M. Bayo commended CRPD for the organizing the dialogue and the IEC for their good work on the registration process. He, however, noted that there are few critical issues that have emanated from the voter registration exercise. He stated that the most important of these are the issues surrounding citizenship and identity, and the stalled reforms. He highlighted that the credibility of the election and legitimacy of the results will be greatly impacted by the conduct of the voter registration exercise hence the need to get the process right.

## **Alliance for National Re-Orientation and Development (ANRD) - Momodu Jallow**

Momodou Jallow commended the IEC for the great job on the voter registration exercise. He expressed concerns on the limited number of registration centers available for citizens to register. He reiterated the need to extend the timeline for the voter registration exercise. He also reiterated the need for the IEC to strengthen its data collection capacity to ensure that data given out by the IEC is credible and factual. He also talked about the poor quality of voter's cards that are being processed at the registration centers and appealed to the IEC to improve the quality.

## Other Parties Presentation

Following the party presentations, the second segment of the dialogue focused on presentations and statements from other stakeholders.

### **Chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) - Emmanuel Joof,**

Emmanuel Joof commended the efforts of the IEC on the voter registration exercise. He talked about issue of citizenship and attestation especially as it relates to the mayoral attestations. He also reiterated on the need for the IEC to follow due process and the rule of law in all its activities. He also talked about the issue of the liberalized media environment and how social media is contributing to the charged atmosphere. He reiterated the need for party leaders to help spread the message of peace by talking to their party faithful, stalwarts and supporters.

### **Chairperson TANGO, Representing the CSO Coalition on Elections -John Charles Njie,**

John Charles Njie expressed his displeasure of party leaders asking the IEC and CSOs to work on voter's sensitization. He reiterated the need for parties to be at the fore front of voter sensitization and mobilization for the registration and the elections. He talked about the need for more room for dialogue, consultation and orientation on inter-party and inter-person communication. He reiterated that having an orderly and peaceful election is the role and responsibility of all Gambians. He also spoke about the need for the IEC to strengthen its data collection and data bank. He reiterated the need for IEC to focus on conducting credible and peaceful elections for the Gambia.

# IEC RESPONSES

Following the presentations, the IEC addressed issues raised during the presentations and committed to considering all recommendations made by stakeholders.

**Mr. Joseph Colley (Vice Chairman, IEC) and Samboujang Njie (CEO, IEC)**

In response to the issues raised during the stakeholder presentations the IEC representatives noted that the IEC is doing its very best to listen to and engage in consultation, communication, and dialogue with the population. They addressed the issues that had been raised and offered explanation where necessary. Here are some of the responses:

- **Quality of Voter's Card:** IEC noted that the data on the cards are captured and well documented and that cards that were defaced due to quality printing would be addressed.
- **Attestation:** IEC will ensure that all eligible citizens that present themselves for registration and possess the required documentation will be registered in accordance with the law.
- **Voter Registration List:** IEC Officials highlighted that the Voter's Register List is not final until validated by the court after all the due processes are followed.
- **Extension of the Voter Registration Process:** IEC stated that for there are currently no plans for extension of the registration period.
- **Accessibility of Persons Living with Disability (PWDs):** IEC stated that they have considered all concerns around the accessibility of PWDs and have provided all the necessary accommodation to facilitate their registration. The IEC also stated that they have recruited PWDs are part of their team.
- **Prosecution of Violators:** IEC stated that they intend to prosecute violators of electoral rules and regulations.

# ISSUES EMERGING AS CENTRAL TO DELIBERATIONS

The following issues emerged central to the deliberations of stakeholders

- Citizenship and Identity
- Controversy over the issuance of attestations to residents of Banjul by the Mayor
- Voter mobilization and sensitization on the ongoing registration exercise
- Fear of disinformation, misinformation and hate messaging on social media platforms notably Facebook and WhatsApp.
- Limited registration centers especially at the rural areas.
- Dissemination of peaceful messages through public dialogue, consultation, and communication.
- Application of and adherence to the rule of law in all of IEC activities.
- Credibility of the IEC in the electoral process.
- Absence of party leaders in such dialogues.
- Stalled reforms and its implications for the successful democratic transition process

To conclude the dialogue, participants reiterated the importance of multi-stakeholder dialogues and the need for the IEC to ensure the issues raised by stakeholders are addressed. Participants also highlighted the need to address issues around citizenship and identity as it has implications on the upcoming elections. Party representatives also committed to ensuring their party leaders are in attendance during such gatherings.

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