

***FREETOWN, Sierra Leone, September 9 (Infosplusgabon) - □ With just 6 months to the general elections in Sierra Leone, the nation's electoral body and the government are locked in a cold war with each other following the huge voter data loss by the National Electoral Commission (NEC), with government figures questioning the competence of the electoral body.***

Last week, an opposition figure, Jacob Jusu Saffa, was very vocal in support of the commission, describing NEC as competent enough to handle the 2018 elections. Deputy Information Minister, Cornelius Devaux, however, expressed disappointment and skepticism over the possibility of NEC conducting a credible election next year.

Sierra Leone is set to go to the polls by March 2018. In the recent voter register exhibition that NEC conducted across the country, thousands of voter information was missing, and ruling party Parliamentarians said “Up to 300,000 voter data was missing from this latest NEC voter registration exhibition,” Hassan Sheriff said in an interview this week.

However, a press statement that was released last night by NEC shows that 3,735 records of voters in Kono and the Western Urban district went missing but has been retrieved. The commission has guaranteed that all three million voters who were registered would be eligible to vote in next year’s elections. Strangely enough, since the release of the statement, NEC has been selective in the questions they answer. Selective enough to avoid an all-out confrontation with the government.

When the NEC Chair and some staff were summoned in Parliament last week to explain the cause of all the data problem, N'fa Ali Conteh put the blame on the machines that they were using during the registration. Some citizens have suggested that another reason for the data loss may have been a result of the cumbersome registration process that NEC conducted. Back in April NEC combined the voter registration with civil registration.

With regards to the concern about the machines, NEC said they were not responsible in procuring the machines. The biometric voter registration machines were ordered from a company named Smartmatic. The procurement was done by the National Civil Registration Commission (NCRA).

Sierra Leone is set to conduct its first biometric election in 2018, so reasonably some may understand the adjustment NEC technicians have to make to adapt to this new electoral software.

The most prominent election watchdog in the country has called out the government and accused it of underfunding NEC. Head of National Elections Watch (NEW), Ngolo Katta, said on TV on Thursday that perhaps mistakes like these could be avoided if the electoral body was well funded. "The government has to invest more in NEC, so they could conduct a proper elections," Katta said.

At a period where many have blasted NEC for their short fall, NEW has been a very vocal ally in defending the competence of NEC. This has been the case, even though NEW was among the very first body to criticize the voter exhibition process.

NEC on their own have been reluctant to openly complain about funding for the elections but there are indications that they might not be getting enough funds for the process. People who were employed during the registration process have still not been paid, both NCRA and NEC say they are waiting for the Finance Ministry to approve funds.

The government has always said it is committed to funding NEC for the elections. On their path, NEC has not been open about how that funding is coming along. The one thing both bodies have been open out, is conducting the general election on March 7 2018.

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