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SiERRAEYE

*Press Release on No-Party Local Council Elections*

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Freetown, 22 February 2021– A 90-minute debate organised by SierraEye and the Institute for Legal Research and Advocacy for Justice (ILRAJ) on 13 February 2021 brought together panelists from across political parties to discuss the Government’s proposal to amend the Local Government Act.

Among other things, the proposals, which Minister of Local Government Tamba Lamina says are with the law officers’ department, seek to remove political party membership as one of the eligibility criteria for candidates to contest local council elections.

During the debate, the Publicity Secretary of the ruling Sierra Leone People’s Party, Lahai Lawrence Leema, said they believed that removing party politics from local council elections would foster development.

“We think that [removing] local government from being partisan to non-partisan will engender development at the local level and foster peace and development of the nation,” Leema argued.

He said that the rationale for the no-party suggestion for local council elections was “to foster development” because a party in power would tend to direct development programmes to areas with councils they control.

Citing surveys that he said were done with the involvement of civil society organisations and experts, Leema said there was overwhelming support for the move to remove political parties from council elections.

The Chairman and Leader of the National Grand Coalition (NGC), Dr. Dennis Bright, said a “no-party local government idea has very little or nothing to do with the development of communities. It is all about power and control. I can tell you that the reason why the ruling SLPP party wants to introduce this at this particular point in time is just to gain total control and power.”

Dr. Bright accused the government of “waiting to push it down our throats. Look! This non-party thing is just a roundabout way of getting rid of other political parties and then using the resources, the power, the influence and then glory of incumbency and to take control of all councils and use them as a launching pad for winning elections after elections.”

He said removing political parties from local council elections “will lead to total chaos and underdevelopment...When parties absorb people, it will reduce the number of people and ballot papers. When you have political parties, there are many you have now, but without

them, there will be no training ground for future members of parliament or leaders,” the NGC leader argued.

He criticized the consultative process that led to the proposals being put together saying: “If they tell you that they did such an extensive consultation even at the level of the councils, I think somebody is fooling you people if they are saying people are clamoring about this non-party inclusion.”

Dr. Bright said political parties were left out of it all: “You know what, when they prepared this report, political parties were left in the dark. We were only called as a party when we heard in the media that cabinet had started this decentralisation policy...and that was also when we were given a copy after and I think the S.L.P.P chairman also got the copy that same night”.

The Chairman and Leader of the Unity Party, Femi Claudius-Cole, said the whole thing did not make sense. “A no-party local government is bad for the development of the nation,” she argued.

She went on: “Political parties provide a degree of oversight and accountability, and removing them from the process will lead to chaos...a system of cronyism, nepotism, [and] bribery, leaving communities vulnerable to any rogue individual with money, support and a framework that provide community members who may want to contest for council seats”.

The former presidential candidate argued that removing political parties from council elections would be anachronistic because they “are the ones that are familiar with their communities, their problems and they have invested in their communities, but they do not have the means to contest, the financing to control, specifically women, youth and the physically challenged.”

She said political parties do not hinder local councils. “What will and does hinder development is not giving them their budgeted funds, not allowing them to hire, innovatively take away their duties to hire and to interview to hire their core staff. Those are the things that hinder community development. If the existing is not broken, why on earth are we trying to fix it?”

The debate was chaired by Umaru Fofana and the first SierraEye and ILRAJ debate in 2021.

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