SIERRA LEONE'S LARGEST INDEPENDENT OPINION POLL PREDICTS RECORD TURNOUT WITH OVER 30% OF VOTERS STILL UNDECIDED - AND A RUN-OFF ON THE CARDS

With only two days to go until polling day, a unique citizen-led independent opinion poll of almost 7,000 potential voters nationwide shows that almost one-third of voters are staying tight-lipped about their voting intentions, and suggests that a run-off between the incumbent, President Maada Bio and his main challenger, Dr Samura Kamara - is still possible.

The Sierra Leone 2023 Elections Opinion Poll was designed and implemented by Meraki Analytics SL Limited in collaboration with consortium partners– Data Mansah and SierraEye Magazine. Despite challenges, including being prevented by community leaders from conducting interviews in several locations, it is the largest national survey of registered voters in Sierra Leone.

It shows that basic human rights - having enough to eat, a job and education (48%, 44%, 36% respectively) - are the issues voters most care about, and puts sitting president, President Maada Bio in the lead with 38% saying they would vote for him, compared to 25% for APC candidate – Samura Kamara. However undecided voters (10%) and those who preferred not to disclose their voting intentions (23%) add up to more than one-third of all respondents. This was especially evident in Kambia (64%), Bombali (59%), Karene (57%) and Tonkolili (56%), with enumerators suggesting that respondents may have felt that they would be putting themselves at risk by providing the information.

Understanding of key elections-related issues remains very low, with most voters (64%) unaware of the new proportional representation system or that parliamentary and council elections will be held alongside the presidential election. Nevertheless, Sierra Leoneans retain their faith in the democratic process and a high voter turnout is predicted, with 98% of registered voters surveyed indicating their intention to vote.

President Bio has an approval rating of 49% among voters. His popularity is highest in Kailahun (88%), Pujehun (83%), Bo (82%), Bonthe (80%) and Kenema (79%). It is lowest in Western Area Rural (25%), Western Area Urban (24%), Port Loko (22%) and Bombali (22%).

Just under 60% of voters have complete or a lot of confidence in the credibility of the election. Nine percent are not convinced by the integrity of the process, and a significant 26% again refused to answer the question. However, most voters have indicated that they will accept the election results.

Joel Abdulai Kallon, founder of Meraki Analytics is survey design and analysis expert. He says that independent pre-election opinion polls such as this one, are vital to the democratic process, because they allow voters to express their opinion on a large scale and play a crucial role in shaping the narrative of election campaigns. “With speculation that the upcoming elections could be marred by voter apathy and/or potential election-related violence, we felt it important to provide an independent and statistically robust overview of what was happening on the ground. This Sierra Leone 2023 Elections Opinion Poll assesses voter readiness, attitudes, and perceptions in Sierra Leone and determines the citizen's voting preferences and the issues they would like presidential candidates to address if they win the elections. It was disappointing that we encountered distinct challenges during the process of data collection, and I would like to thank our enumerators for persevering, even when they felt they were in danger.”

Additional key findings:

- An estimated 741,254 registered voters had attended a political rally or campaign event as at the time of polling. That is 22% of all registered voters.
- The majority (56%) of registered voters who attended a political campaign event said they attended an SLPP rally, while 23% said they attended an APC event. The rest said they attended the rallies/campaign events of more than one political party.
- Radio is still the communication and information channel of choice with 57% of registered voters citing it as their main source of election-related information. Six percent of registered voters relied on information from a specific individual while 7% mentioned WhatsApp.
- Knowledge about key elections-related issues is still low, however. For instance, while 39% of registered voters said they had heard about the PR system, only 14% said they knew what it meant. Almost 34% of voters believe the elections will either be held exactly as was done in 2018 or that this time, voters will only be required to vote for the presidency.
- While more than a third of Freetown voters did not indicate their preferred candidate for the Mayor elections, 40% said they preferred APC’s Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr while 27% said they would vote for Mohamed Gento-Kamara.
- With the PR electoral system in place, the polls suggest a very high likelihood of a two-party parliament and local councils. It seems very unlikely that independent candidates and candidates from smaller political parties will win seats.

About the polling organisations:

- Meraki Analytics (SL) Ltd. is a data and technology consulting firm that specialises in high impact operational research, technical evaluation, training, data collection digitalization, and analytics. We provide an integrated approach to data discovery, mobilisation, and analysis through the application of relevant knowledge and tools that transform data into useful insights and help our clients make impactful decisions.
- Founded by Dr. Yakama Manty Jones, Data Mansah is a mobile-first network of volunteers in Sierra Leone using hybrid technologies to collect, analyse and share data for economic and social good. Data Mansah uses citizen science to collect, analyse, and distribute high-frequency and other data on topical issues.
- Sierra Eye is one of Sierra Leone's leading socio-political magazines aimed at informing the public of key political, social and economic developments. Founded in 2006 by Basita Michael.