

September
2007

Elections Special

- SIERRA LEONE -

Search for Common Ground

On August 11, 2007, Sierra Leoneans turned out en masse to cast their votes for the country's next parliament and President, with a record turnout of 75.8%. The national elections marked a critical benchmark in Sierra Leone's transition out of its brutal decade-long conflict, and symbolize the consolidation of its peace, stability, and development. There were a few limited incidents of violence reported, particularly in the capital, however overall the elections were hailed as free and fair and a positive example to the region of how to conduct peaceful and transparent elections in the poorest of countries. In the parliamentary elections the opposition APC won 59 of a possible 112 seats, leaving the former ruling SLPP with 43 seats. None of the 7 presidential candidates secured the 55% of the vote necessary to win the election outright. Therefore a run off was scheduled on September 8 between the two main candidates from the APC and the SLPP. The highly charged second round resulted in a victory for former opposition leader, the Hon. Bai Koroma, defeating the SLPP Vice President Solomon Berewa, 55% to 45% in a contest that saw 477 polling stations invalidated because of turnout over 100%. Highlighting a process which is being hailed as an example to all of Africa, the National Electoral Commission (NEC) wrote: "There is no longer a place for fraud and malpractice in the Sierra Leone electoral system. The people of Sierra Leone deserve to exercise their rights in an atmosphere of freedom, fairness and transparency."



Voters queue up to cast their ballot on the morning of August 11.

What is IRN?

Established in 2002 specifically to support that year's national elections the Independent Radio Network (IRN) has grown into a national network of 20 community and private radio stations, with an office and production studio in Freetown. Each member station from the 14 districts in the country feeds local news to a central hub where news programming is packaged for simultaneous broadcast back across the network. In addition, member stations carry SFCG programming to inform and entertain their listeners on key social and political issues in their country. The IRN was developed by SFCG in partnership with the Media Foundation for Peace and Development and with technical support from the BBC World Service Trust with the long term aim of creating West Africa's first self supporting national public radio service.

In Sierra Leone, Search for Common Ground's (SFCG) strategy focuses on building capacity and establishing local structures that support a credible and free outcome in elections. In addition to supporting an extensive national voter education campaign, including first time uses of television and live constituency debates with parliamentary candidates in strategic locations and on the radio, SFCG focused its efforts on leading the development of the Independent Radio Network (IRN) and National Election Watch (NEW), a coalition of civil society organizations dedicated to elections observation. This special report gives an overview of SFCG's activities in partnership with IRN over the elections period

The Independent Radio Network and the Elections

The power of IRN to provide credible information to voters, reduce tensions and support democracy was at its height on election day. Since its inception at the last presidential elections in 2002, IRN has grown rapidly both in terms of membership and in its ambitions (see text box above). For the 2007 poll, SFCG and IRN strategically placed 420 roving election reporters into areas with high tension between rival parties, areas difficult to access, or places with no broadcast coverage. The reporters, who came from IRN stations and SFCG staff, were mandated to report to their own stations and live to national audiences through IRN on the conditions they found, and to monitor and investigate allegations of electoral fraud. Throughout election day, information was pouring in

Search for Common Ground in West Africa is a programme of Search for Common Ground, an international NGO working in the field of conflict transformation. For additional information on SFCG programmes in West Africa, go to the SFCG website, www.sfcg.org

from the field to IRN headquarters in Freetown, giving producers a clear view of how the elections were progressing nationally and feeding into a live rolling news service from early morning until mid afternoon, and again in the evening. With so many areas covered for the first time, and with the reporters able to report both through IRN and to their local radio station, ordinary people were in effect reporting to each other, providing authentic reports on the district activities that supported significant national trends and success stories; bolstering confidence in the process and the peacefulness of the outcome. Meanwhile behind the scenes, IRN producers in Freetown were making key decisions on the stories that should go on the air, balancing reporting news that people deserved to hear about their own country and making sure passions were not inflamed by news reports unreflective of the general trend around the country. Among the programming being aired by the IRN on Election Day were public service announcements reminding voters of electoral procedures and the need to bring their voter identification cards. While there were still an unacceptably high number of invalid votes from voters mistakenly spoiling their papers, officials at the booths turned back very few people for not having the correct documents, unlike at previous elections, enhancing the excited public mood around their opportunity to participate.



IRN volunteers take calls from Reporters in polling centres around the country reporting on the situation in their area.

By late morning on August 11, an inflammatory story broke that had potentially serious implications for the peaceful outcome of the election in Freetown, and its handling shows the cooperative power of SFCG and IRN in preventing real conflict in the country.

“IRN and Talking Drum Studio (are) charting the way forward for the media to be actively engaged at all levels of political processes in the country.”
Independent Media Monitoring Panel

From a police station in the capital, reports began to surface of a ballot box

found stuffed with papers and election materials. IRN rapidly dispatched a reporter to the scene who found youths already surrounding the station, and allegations flying that the government-controlled police were intervening to alter the result in the opposition stronghold of Freetown. IRN sent a second reporter to record the contents of the box on video, which turned out to be full of old training materials and not electoral ballots. IRN’s Executive Producer made the decision to put the reporters live on the air to explain the situation and the contents of the box to the nation. With voters around the capital glued to their radio sets, IRN proved its capacity to calm fears and set the tone on credible media reporting, which proved to be truly important in allowing for a peaceful and fair election.

As voting moved to a close at the end of Election Day, SFCG and IRN shifted to their second role: leading the independent media shadow count of electoral votes. With a team of database entry personnel backed by a group of volunteers manning phones at the Freetown hub, the 420 election reporters stationed across the country called in the unofficial voting results as they were announced and posted at each poll centre. Working at a pace of around 1% of total votes per hour, and despite suffering electricity blackouts that forced the phone operators to continue by candlelight, the result tallies were gathered and broadcast to listeners around the nation. As the counting process progressed and NEC began issuing consolidated results, SFCG and IRN adjusted their strategy and focused on managing expectations around the developing numbers. Overall, the variety of analyses provided by IRN on the results contributed to the people’s understanding of NEC percentages and the patience they exhibited while waiting for the final result by NEC. The approach of



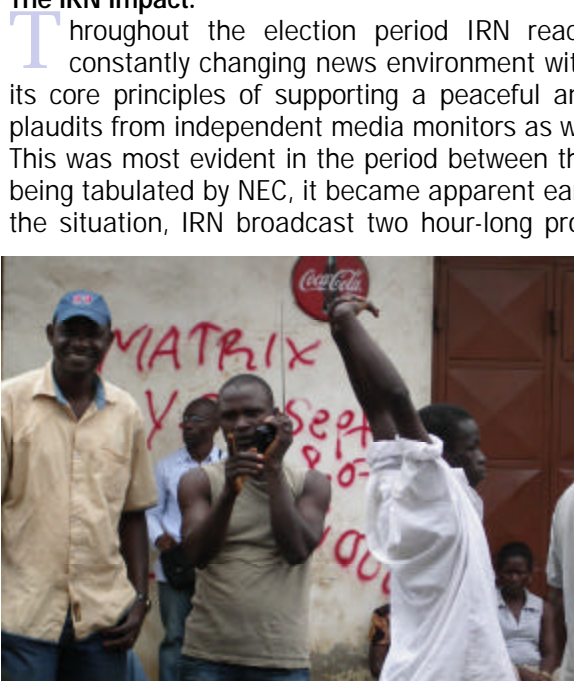
After a power failure IRN volunteers gather reports by candle light .

gradually releasing information in the period between polls closing and NEC's initial results five days later—three days in the run off—was a key element in reducing tension. It also sensitised supporters in areas heavily in favour of one party that the result would not go automatically their way, and prepared voters early on for the possibility of a run off. At the same time, it gave the public confidence that there was an independent watchdog monitoring the process in case the official results differed significantly from the individual counts. The IRN elections broadcasts were a real test of local media's ability to maturely and constructively contribute to the political process, without resorting to inflammatory propaganda. Their success provided further evidence that access to credible information helps prevent violent conflict.



Sierra Leone Country Director Ambrose James has his voting card checked by NEC officials at the entrance to the polling centre in Freetown.

The IRN Impact.



Excited; annoyed; bored. Youths queuing to vote in Freetown listening to IRN

Throughout the election period IRN reacted rapidly to the constantly changing news environment without compromising its core principles of supporting a peaceful and credible elections process. In so doing it won respect and plaudits from independent media monitors as well as providing a crucial resource to the people of Sierra Leone. This was most evident in the period between the first round and the run off. With the first round results slowly being tabulated by NEC, it became apparent early on that a run off was highly likely. Recognizing the volatility of the situation, IRN broadcast two hour-long programmes live each day, inviting leading political analysts and electoral experts on air to share their knowledge with the public, and ensuring that credible information and a clear voice was injected into the highly charged public debate. At the same time IRN continued to monitor the NEC tally in case it differed from their own. After the first round results were officially announced IRN acted to investigate concerns raised by the political parties, by cross checking allegations of irregularities with their reporters and independent observers such as the European Union Elections Observer Mission, and the ECOWAS Observer Group. Hassan Arouni, of the BBC World Service Trust and an IRN producer, noted that accolades which IRN received from NEC, political parties, observer groups and the public, were not just for its role in making the elections transparent, "but also for providing a level playing field for the actors in the presidential run-off, and to equally give the people an opportunity to know the conduct of the elections." More praise came from the Independent Media Monitoring and Refereeing Panel (I-MORP), which commended "the admirable roles being

played by media institutions such as ...Independent Radio Network (IRN), the BBC Trust, and Talking Drum Studio," in "charting the way forward for the media to be actively engaged at all levels of political processes in the country." In contrast, other media outlets were censured for "inciting violence, promoting hate, malice, tribalism and political intolerance."

At the time of publication planning for the inauguration of the new president of Sierra Leone was getting underway. IRN has decided to continue broadcasting for one hour per day over the next month, to enhance public understanding of the handover process and reinforce support for a peaceful transition. Overall, this election has presented Sierra Leone with the opportunity to make a paradigm shift in how the media, civil society and the public participate in the governance of their nation. SFCG will continue to work at the heart of this process until this goal is achieved.

SFCG in Sierra Leone is especially grateful for the support of these donors and partners:

