



**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY  
TOM VENS, EU AMBASSADOR TO SIERRA LEONE  
ON THE OCCASION OF THE OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF THE RENEWED PARTNERSHIP  
WITH THE NATIONAL ELECTIONS WATCH (NEW)**

**‘Enhancing Domestic Electoral Observer organizations and Citizens Participation in  
Democratic Governance Reforms leading to the 2022 and 2023 electoral cycle’**

**Venue: Shangri La Conference Centre**

**Date: Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2020**

Your Excellency, the Vice President, Honourable Minister of Finance, Madam Chairperson of NEW, Acting Chief Commissioner of the National Electoral Commission, representatives of the NEW Strategic Management Committee, esteemed civil society representatives, members of the media, distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to join you for the official launch of this second partnership programme between the EU and National Election Watch, a partnership aimed at pushing forward governance reforms and democratization in Sierra Leone through **the active involvement of civil society organisations**.

Strengthening peace and democracy has been the principal aim of the European Union from its very outset 70 years ago. As a community of like-minded States, the EU also stands for the fundamental values of democracy and rule of law, which the EU promotes both internally and externally. In line with this vision, the EU aims to integrate the pursuit of peace and democracy in all its external actions, political and diplomatic relations with third countries and multilateral institutions. Strengthening peace and democracy has never been an easy task, and today’s Covid-19 crisis context poses further challenges. The prospect of a global economic recession and social instability have driven the EU to widen and intensify its efforts.

They have also led to a new vision for action revolving around the concept of 'resilient societies' based on the mutually reinforcing pillars of peace and democracy, and enhanced social accountability through the active engagement of civil society.

This project is funded through the **European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights**, a key EU grant facility designed to specifically support civil society to become an effective force for democratic reform, for peaceful conciliation of group interests and consolidation of political participation and representation. Strengthening the role of national civil society organisations in democratic processes is a central objective of the EU's development engagement with its partner countries. By building the capacity of civil society organizations, the EU ultimately seeks to support their role as independent democratic development actors.

His Excellency the President of Sierra Leone acknowledged both the role of civil society in fostering peace and good governance and the importance of engaging citizens when he recently invited civil society representatives at a Dialogue Forum at State House. The EU agrees with the President that *“each and every voice makes our democracy better and stronger”* and that *“an extra pair of eyes to identify and resolve structural imbalances and triggers of conflict will keep everyone safer.”*

Your Excellency, Mr Vice President,

I salute once again your presence today, as another clear token of the government's desire to strengthen its consultative relationship with civil society and we all look forward to your leadership in the coming days.

Our project with NEW comes at an **opportune moment** as it will contribute to both the preparations for the **2022/2023 elections** in Sierra Leone and the design and implementation of civic and electoral education programmes throughout the country. “At a time of crisis, it is even more important we rekindle efforts towards national unity by deepening citizens' knowledge on multi-party democracy and fostering values of national cohesion and political tolerance. And NEW is uniquely well placed to undertake the task.

The **uniqueness of NEW** as an organisation needs to be underlined here.

Unique for at least 2 reasons...First of all: As an umbrella organization of over 400 civil society organizations, NEW has a broad-based membership and a large access to citizens. Second: By contributing to ensuring freedom, fairness and transparency in past elections since 1997, NEW has gained in-depth and invaluable electoral experience and has firmly established its standing as the voice of civil society in Sierra Leone.

These unique strengths are also the reason why EU supported NEW in its key preparatory activities towards the 2018 general elections in Sierra Leone.

The EU believes that NEW is once again uniquely positioned to take on essential activities in the run up to the next elections. NEW will not only observe all election-related activities and national civil registration and voter registration operations, but will also monitor and advocate for the effective implementation of electoral observer missions recommendations. Through the project, NEW will contribute to deepening citizens' knowledge on multi-party democracy, elections and other political processes and mobilise the public to be better informed about the various ongoing governance priorities so that they too can contribute to the debate. Last but not least, NEW will also support the Government's efforts in containing the coronavirus with COVID-19 monitoring and awareness raising activities. With the daily increase in numbers, more people must be given the correct information. All Sierra Leoneans need to be prepared and protected by receiving the right information on the causes of the virus, how it is spread. False beliefs and misinformation need to be addressed. And closer attention must be put to ensure that the investments in the COVID-19 response are fully accounted for by the various actors.

Our collaboration with NEW should also be seen in the wider context of our **overall support to the governance sector** in Sierra Leone. Our primary focus is to implement **recommendations for reforms prioritised by the government** and the people of Sierra Leone as successively formulated in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, the Constitutional Review White Paper, the New Direction Manifesto, the National Development Plan, the recommendations following the Bintumani III Conference on Democratic Consolidation for Peace and National Cohesion and the Bo Peace Declaration.

These various documents reflect the national ambition and the will of the people of this country to ensure that tangible and practical reforms are implemented in relation to governance institutions, mandates and systems of Sierra Leone.

The 2018 elections marked the second peaceful transition from one elected leader to another. It is a milestone for the consolidation of democracy in Sierra Leone which provided us with valuable lessons to reflect upon. After the elections, the nation converged at Golden Tulip in October 2018 where a **National Task Force** was constituted **under the leadership of NEC to follow up on the Electoral Observer Mission Recommendations**. A number of priorities were agreed among the various recommendations issued by the 2018 electoral observation missions...The country needs to have a fixed date for the presidential elections so that there is predictability. Sufficient financial resources need to be provided to the Electoral Management Bodies in a timely manner. The income and expenditure of parties and candidates needs to be transparently accounted for. The conduct of voter registration needs to be clarified and mainstreamed with civic registration process to ensure inclusiveness and cost-effectiveness of electoral operations. Space needs to be

created in politics to allow for more women, youth and people with disabilities to be involved in political life and hold representative positions. Nomination fees for candidates and the time required for public servants to resign before standing in elections need to be discussed and standardised. The nation also agreed that the PPRC is a critical institution that needs to be strengthened in order to meaningfully fulfil its role.

Some processes have started since, but many have stalled.

Honourable Acting Chief Electoral Commissioner,

I salute your presence today, as a clear demonstration of NEC's continuous commitment towards inclusiveness and transparency in the management of electoral operations. The Electoral Commission engaged constructively with domestic and international observers and succeeded in ensuring a transparent, credible and well organised electoral process in 2018.

We all look forward to your leadership to ensure the National Task Force on the Electoral Observer Mission Recommendations swiftly delivers on its responsibilities. But we also look at the political leadership of the country to make sure that electoral reform is prioritised.

With just over a year to go, it is time to muster political will and apply concerted efforts to take forward the **agreed priorities within the electoral reform agenda**. We can no longer procrastinate. The people of Sierra Leone need concrete propositions to debate over and clear timelines for taking them through the democratic channels.

**NEW can help in this process and play an important facilitator role by engaging all key stakeholders involved.** The task will not be easy, but it is an essential one, which - if pursued with integrity, independence, impartiality and determination - will contribute to consolidate the quality of democracy in Sierra Leone.

Your Excellency, Mr Vice-President,

The vast majority of the electoral observers' recommendations call for legal reforms, systematic reforms efforts and political endorsement.

I am glad that a process has been initiated to define a roadmap of priority legal reforms to be tackled ahead of next elections. It is our hope that this process will contribute to the implementation of a revised electoral framework. Furthermore, it will be critical to build confidence, by all electoral stakeholders, in the system and conduct of electoral operations.

One area which calls for particular attention is the **voter register** which needs to be updated in due time for the local elections to be held mid-2022.

The Electoral Observation Missions deployed on the ground in 2018 did not detect systemic problems with the quality of the voter register produced by the NEC. Nevertheless, this process was far from flawless, exposed weaknesses and ultimately remained a source of contention during the electoral process.

The European Union Electoral Observation Mission issued a very clear key priority recommendation in respect to the voter register: *"Revisit the conflict in the legal framework governing the registration of voters and clarify which institution should be in charge of the voter register. The terms of interaction between the institutions responsible for the civil register and the register of voters should be clearly defined. A permanent, free of charge and constantly updated civil register, which would be a basis for the register of voters, could be in a long run a **more cost-effective** and sustainable alternative to the current practice of conducting a fresh voter registration exercise before each election"*.

I wish herewith to reaffirm EU's commitment to support both the National Electoral Commission and the National Civil Registration Authority in their efforts to implement this priority recommendation,

As European Union, we support the operationalization of a functional permanent, free of charge and constantly updated civil register, which would enable the update of a register of voters for upcoming elections. This shall considerably lower the costs of electoral operations, which at times of global crisis and economic recession shall be a welcome news particularly to the ear of Honourable Minister of Finance, whom I salute.

Going forward it will be essential that NEC and NCRA agree on a joint roadmap with clear timelines and responsibilities for all stakeholders in respect to the capture, extraction and dissemination of CRVS information required to ensure an inclusive and robust voter register – provide clarity in the terms of interaction and responsibilities between the institutions responsible for the civil register and the register of voters – **and communicate clearly with the electoral stakeholders and public at large.**

Your Excellency, Mr Vice President,

We know we can count on your leadership to guide these critical processes, with wisdom and long-term vision. Once again, it is fundamental to build confidence, by all electoral stakeholders and the citizenship at large, in the system and conduct of all electoral operations and this one in particular. **And NEW is uniquely well placed to support the institutions in doing so.**

The EU also looks forward to continue working with the government of Sierra Leone to make further progress on the **broader democratisation agenda**. Indeed, deepening the

democratisation process is not just about ensuring trouble free elections... To be effective, there is an opportunity to align those with other important reforms. Among those are: making progress on public sector and decentralisation reform processes, further strengthening parliamentary oversight procedures including review of the Standing Orders and the Parliamentary Service Act, revising the Political Parties Registration Commission Act and the Political Parties Constitutions, establishing solid mechanisms for interparty dialogue, consensus building and national cohesion, strengthening rule of law and repealing criminal libel and sedition laws.

All of this will help to create a space to work towards a more inclusive political landscape, to find a cohesive and more consensual space to address socio-economic development priorities and to reduce the risk that confrontational politics contaminate efforts towards state building and national development.

Let me conclude by reaffirming the EU's strong commitment to strengthening democracy and good governance in Sierra Leone. We all agree that this requires a vibrant civil society, who should actively promote national cohesion and help build credible and accountable institutions.

The EU is proud to extend its partnership with NEW.

I am confident that through this project, NEW will once more be able to contribute to a peaceful, participatory and credible electoral process, as well as to strengthened democratic institutions and political stability for the benefit of the people of Sierra Leone.

On behalf of the EU, I personally wish the project every success.

The European Union and NEW stand together with the Government and all key institutions involved in the electoral process, in support of national cohesion, peace and democracy for all Sierra Leoneans as the nation fights COVID-19.

Thank you.