



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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Interviewee: Abubakkar Koroma

Interviewer: Nealin Parker

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PARKER: This is Nealin Parker, I'm interviewing Mr. (Abubakarr) Koroma at the National Elections Commission in Sierra Leone. If we could just begin by your telling me what your position was and what your role was during the elections.

KOROMA: *I am the Senior Elections Officer for the southern region. I also double as a district electoral officer for Bo. Bo town is the second largest city in Sierra Leone after Freetown. I also coordinate all the district electoral officers within my region. In other words, I receive information from headquarters and I pass that information to them in addition to my role as the district officer in Bo.*

PARKER: Perfect. And were there other jobs related to elections that you held before this one?

KOROMA: *Before I was appointed Senior Elections Officer, I had worked in other districts. I was Assistant Elections Officer in the north in Tonkolili and I was District Electoral Officer in Pujehun, which is one of the districts also in southern region.*

PARKER: Perfect. Could you tell me how staff members were recruited at the national elections offices that you were overseeing?

KOROMA: *First of all there are permanent staff and we also have ad hoc staff. Now at the district level we have additional staff, and basically there are three. We have the district logistics officer, the district voter education officer, and the district training officer. Now these people were recruited from NEC (National Electoral Commission) headquarters. Of course part of recruitment procedures, after advertising, is to subject those interested to a test. Then the candidates were interviewed and probably the best were selected. But we also recruit people we refer to as ward coordinators for the local government elections.*

Of course last year they were called monitors, but for this local government elections they were referred to as ward coordinators, since the elections were on a ward basis. So we recruited them following the same procedures. First we had to advertise. Some of those who worked in the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections were rehired because they already have the experience. Those who did not work last year, we advertised for the positions, and then those interested took examinations or tests and then they were interviewed and the best were selected. Those ones we did recruit.

As you go down, you will see that in elections a large number of staff were also recruited, like voter registration staff and polling staff. These people were recruited by the ward coordinators, under my supervision.

PARKER: How did you keep from having partisan people recruited?

KOROMA: *Well, what we did is first of all we have a list of people who are blacklisted. These were people who worked for us before, but they committed crimes and fraud during the elections so they were blacklisted and we posted their names. We also distributed the list to the political parties and civil society, so that if they saw such people amongst us they could point them out.*

In addition to that, after every recruitment the names of the people recruited will be posted on our notice board, which is public. Anybody can raise a question and say, "Oh, this person is a senior member of a political party and holds this position and I don't think he will be good enough to work for you," because we believe that people who work for NEC, for us, should be impartial as well as

neutral. So we try as best as possible to avoid having people who are partisan working for us.

PARKER: Perfect. Was the staff size adequate for the election? Did you have enough staff?

KOROMA: *Definitely, yes, yes. We do have enough staff. Now, for example, for training we have the training officer, who is also assisted by a United Nations' training officer so basically we have two of them. As for logistics, we have a district logistics officer, as well as a UN volunteer who assists him in doing that kind of work.*

Now when it comes to registration, we have three people manning one center and they all do their work without any pressure. When it comes to polling day activities, we also have enough staff. We have a center manager who takes care of the center and a presiding officer who takes care of the station. In addition to the staff, we have a ballot issuer who gives ballots to the people. We even have queue controllers, who control the queues to ensure order. So as far as staff is concerned, we have enough staff to man all the activities in the process.

PARKER: Perfect. How did you monitor staff from a distance?

KOROMA: *That's very good. Now, first of all, there is a set time for operations. During the training of staff, we move from center to center. That is the time we have an opportunity first of all to meet with those who have been recruited. During training, we take time to talk to them and let them know what the commission expects of them. We also give them our contact numbers in case they face problems in the field. In addition to these measures, we work in close cooperation with civil society organizations like the National Elections Watch. When they see problems in the field they contact us. On polling day, some of the organizations have their own observers all over. If they see problems, they will call us and say, "Hey, this is what I have observed in this particular polling station in this town." Then we will be able to respond immediately. If it is a matter that requires security, we will inform the police, and the police will be able to move there almost immediately.*

PARKER: What steps were taken to protect poll workers from threats?

KOROMA: *We ensure that in every polling station there is at least one police officer. The police were given supports through UNDP (United Nations Development Program) to make sure that security personnel are deployed in every polling station.*

PARKER: What about not on the day, were there any other steps put in place to maintain their security?

KOROMA: *Yes, yes, steps were taken. During campaigning, the police were all over. They were giving support to ensure that security was maintained—you know in this part of the world sometimes violence erupts during campaigning. So the staff members were given support. Even at the NEC offices, we received security from the police. They were there 24 hours to ensure that there were no problems, because sometimes our offices can become places of threats. If people are not satisfied with what is going on, they sometimes come to the office to cause problems. But because security is there, those kinds of things do not occur. The police did a very good job in these elections.*

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- PARKER: The media during this period, was the media government controlled or independent? Were there lots of radio stations or only one?
- KOROMA: *There were several radio stations. In fact the majority of them were independent, not government controlled. Interestingly, the coverage of government controlled media sources is poor. So in fact, it is the independent media that has wider coverage and that is the one people listen to more. In fact, in Sierra Leone, like in Bo where I was, the UN radio is a major source of information for the people, in addition to the independent radio station.*
- PARKER: How did the NEC use media, either radio or newspapers or things like that?
- KOROMA: *To be very frank we do not. Here in Freetown, maybe the chief of outreach will tell you, most times they will call press conferences. They will invite members of the print and electronic media in the same room to brief them and they will write about it. For us in the districts, we deal with the radio stations more because print media is almost nonexistent. During the peak of elections, we use the radio stations. We would go to the radio station and spend one hour per week or every two weeks to talk to the people. We also entertain phone-in programs. If the program is one hour, we discuss issues for 30 minutes and for the next 30 minutes we allow the people to make calls. They ask their questions and we respond to them. Luckily for us in Bo, at least we have a few radio stations.*
- PARKER: Was there any effort to use new media, meaning the internet or cell phones or things like that? I think probably not internet, but cell phones as a way to distribute information.
- KOROMA: *No. No. It was limited to cell phone use - if we were in the radio station we would ask people to make calls through cell phones. They would call and ask questions or make their comments and we would respond to them. That's the way we used cell phones.*
- PARKER: And what sources of information do you think people relied upon to make their voting decisions?
- KOROMA: *Our business is just to tell them procedures, right? Now the political parties and the candidates also use the media. They use the radio stations heavily in their campaigns, because the radio stations are not expensive considering the number of people they're able to reach. Sometimes they hold community meetings in the neighborhoods and in the villages to reach the people. But the use of the radio station in particular is very, very wide. All parties scramble for airtime during the election period.*
- PARKER: Was that regulated at all? Was there any sort of political parties must each have this amount of time for air coverage?
- KOROMA: *The radio stations give airtime—it is regulated. But these radio stations are commercial radio stations. If you go and pay, they are not worried about that. As long as you pay, they will give you airtime. In fact they sometimes do it in such a way that within a one hour slot, they invite all the political parties to come for free. All of them come and sit together. That is what they do. What you come and pay for is different, but what the radio stations give as their own support to the process is given equally among political parties.*
- PARKER: Perfect. In terms of election disputes, were there any disputes that came up in your region, election disputes?

KOROMA: Yes, those things are almost inevitable.

PARKER: Could you tell me what the process was for dealing with them?

KOROMA: We have what we call the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) and one of its responsibilities is to mediate between the political parties. For us, we always have a member of NEC in each district who represents us in that committee. We have what we call a District Monitoring Committee. Now if there is an issue amongst the parties, they will call meetings to address the issue, and they will call the leadership of the parties concerned. They will talk to them. They will mediate between them and ensure that things are resolved amicably.

PARKER: How well did that function?

KOROMA: I think it was excellent, because during this period we did not have a situation that went out of hand.

PARKER: That's fantastic. Were there penalties that people put on people for violating?

KOROMA: Well, most times it is just to name and shame them. If somebody does not follow the code of ethics, people will say it publicly in meetings. For example, there was a time when some Paramount Chiefs were kind of intimidating people. So a meeting of Paramount Chiefs was called in the region and the regional officer of the Political Parties Registration Commission was very strong on the Paramount Chiefs. She was telling them that this is what we have heard, and we have confirmed it and we will not be ashamed to say it. It was said publicly. Some of the chiefs were a bit angry but their colleagues had to apologize and admitted it was true that some of these things being said were correct. They said it is not all of us but some of us are doing it, so we will talk to them and ensure that these things will not happen again.

So one of the measures they take actually is just to name and shame them in public gatherings or on radio. I think it has been working.

PARKER: Were you part of creating the messages in terms of voter and civic education that you distributed to the people?

KOROMA: I was not part of the printed messages. But at our own level, since I was in charge of my own districts, I was part and parcel of the messages that we created. In fact, I was always on the radio with the voter education officer to ensure that we were able to reach the people, because voter education was a critical factor in the last elections. We had complaints prior to the election that people did not understand polling procedures or the wards. So we had to make it a priority to reach the people.

PARKER: Were there any groups of people that were particularly hard to reach?

KOROMA: Yes. There are some people who live in very remote areas, where even the radio stations don't cover them. Even communication like cell phone coverage is limited. For those kinds of people, we have to go there physically and talk to them, but otherwise we are unable to reach them by phone or by radio.

PARKER: Were there steps taken to work particularly with women and youth or other kinds of marginalized groups?

KOROMA: *Now, there were steps taken particularly to work with women. In fact, in these elections the women received more support than in any other elections I have seen in this country. This is because there were several organizations that came to promote the women candidates, like NDI (National Democratic Institute) and IFES (International Foundation for Electoral Systems). These organizations poured out a lot of money just to ensure that women were given a chance.*

PARKER: Do you think it was effective?

KOROMA: *I think so, because the political parties increased their quota on women candidates. Also the results show that there is an increase in women councilors compared to the last local government elections.*

PARKER: Do you think in the next election if IFES and NDI are not here that the quotas will still remain and that there will still be higher participation of women?

KOROMA: *We live in a society in which the people need to be constantly reminded. I think if IFES and NDI continue to do it, it will be helpful. But if they ignore the issue, I think it might be difficult.*

PARKER: The final question is, what do you think was the role of this election in the democratic development of Sierra Leone?

KOROMA: *This election is very, very important because local government elections matter most for the grassroots people. Like councilors, they represent people in the interior, who are not represented in Parliament. Regarding the contribution of these elections, let us note that these elections were conducted with little support from the international community. Also, it is also the first time, or perhaps the second time, that elections have been conducted in the absence of the UN peacekeeping force. The peaceful nature of the elections and the acceptance of their results has gone a long way in building democracy in Sierra Leone. It also shows the level of maturity of the commission and the people. The NEC is now in a position to administer credible elections which are acceptable to the people of Sierra Leone. That is very, very important. People now have confidence in the commission as one of the institutions responsible for building democracy in Sierra Leone. I think that is very good for us.*

PARKER: I want to thank you so much for this interview. Your information was very helpful and, as I said before, if you have any questions, you have the card with you with all the information, so thank you again.