

SIERRA LEONE MEDIA CODE OF CONDUCT

For reporting and coverage of the 2007 General Elections

1. Media Code of Conduct for the 2007 General Election agreed to on Saturday, 17 March, 2007 at Miatta Conference Hall, Freetown and signed by Editors, Managers and Proprietors of media and media-related institutions nationwide:

PREAMBLE

2. Given the desirability for a fair, peaceful and well-regulated election and the avoidance of the aggravation of ethnic tension and unnecessary political discord, we, practicing journalists and media owners agree and accept,
 - a. that a Code of Conduct for the Media – taken to mean newspapers, magazines, the Internet, radio, and television stations – generally respected and observed, will contribute to the holding of a free, fair and transparent general election.
 - b. to subscribe to, and, to the very best of our ability, to comply with this Code of Conduct and to take all reasonable steps to ensure its observance.
 - c. to subscribe to this Code of Conduct on the clear and unqualified understanding that the Government or any of its agencies, the National Electoral Commission (NEC) and the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC), will not impose nor seek to impose any prior restraint or censorship on any publication by the media.

CONDUCT OF REPORTING AND MEDIA COVERAGE

3. The Media in its coverage and reporting of the elections agree:
 - a. to refrain from the publishing or broadcasting of any matter with the potential for, or likely to promote or incite racial, tribal, or regional hatred, bias or contempt, or any matter with the potential for, or likely to, promote or cause public disorder, pose or become a threat to the security of the nation;
 - b. to refrain from ridiculing, stigmatizing or demonizing people on the basis of gender, race, class, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation and physical or mental ability;
 - c. to guarantee an equal coverage of both women and men candidates that will contest the elections and thus recognizing the role of women in the

Sierra Leonean society and the importance of their political participation to strengthen the democracy of the country;

- d. to hold themselves independent and free of any, or all, government and political opposition control and direction;
 - e. to hold themselves independent and free of any, or all, control and direction from any of the political parties officially registered to contest the elections;
 - f. to hold themselves free of any, or all, control and direction from any individual, group, or organization representing or promoting the special interests of any of the political parties officially registered to contest the elections.
4. The Media in the exercise of their constitutional right of free expression, and in recognition of their social responsibility, shall at all times endeavor to:
- a. provide a truthful, comprehensive, accurate, balanced and fair account of events in a context which gives them meaning;
 - b. serve as a forum for the exchange of public comment, opinion, discussion and criticism in a balanced and reasonable manner;
 - c. offer an accurate picture of the constituent groups, organizations and parties contesting the elections and of the society in general;
 - d. present and clarify, as far as possible, the goals and values of the constituent groups, organizations and parties contesting the elections and of the society in general.
5. The Media, in accepting the principle of "fair, truthful and balanced" reporting, recognize that:
- a. No story is fair, if it omits facts of major importance or significance and is therefore incomplete;
 - b. No story is fair, if it includes essentially irrelevant information, rumor or unsubstantiated statements at the expense of significant facts;
 - c. No story is fair, if it consciously or unconsciously misleads or even deceives the reader, listener or viewer;
 - d. No story is fair if it attacks personalities rather than issues.

6. The Media in accepting the principle of "accuracy and balance" in reporting, particularly during the period of campaigning for elections, acknowledge that omitting relevant facts and points of view from the reporting of major issues of public interest inevitably distorts the view of reality a journalist, reporter or broadcaster presents and so misleads and misinforms the public, and that the deliberate distortion of reality can poison the processes of democracy.
7. The Media undertake to deal responsibly and in a timely manner with any complaints received in respect to reports published or broadcast and containing errors of fact, and where, in their opinion, these are justified to publish or broadcast appropriate corrections.
8. Equal Treatment
In the period after the Signing Ceremony, and in the interest of even-handed treatment for all political parties, the media agree to treat equally all the political parties that have met the legal criteria for contesting the election.

The State owned media will make available to all the political parties their technical facilities such as basic studio, audio and video recordings for the production and presentation of articles and programmes, but not including the provision of editing, talent, or outside production or broadcast facilities, or reproduction and distribution for use by any other media organization.

9. Equal Access to Paid Political Advertising
Media organizations acknowledge their obligation to provide equal access and opportunity to all political parties without discrimination, to purchase space in newspapers and prime time on radio and television stations to promote their respective views during the period of electioneering. In this regard, the media will make available to contesting political parties full information about space and time availability for advertising and their published advertising rates to be available to all public relations firms, advertising agencies and the proposed Independent Elections Media Monitoring and Refereeing Panel to be established for the purpose of monitoring adherence to the Code of Conduct and these Guidelines.
10. Coverage on Polling Day
The Media agree that no coverage of any campaign activity by the political parties shall take place for a period to begin 24 (twenty-four) hours prior to the opening of Polling Stations on the day of polling and continue to the close of Polling Stations.
11. The Monitoring of Media Performance
The Media agree to the establishment of an **Independent Elections Media Monitoring and Refereeing Panel** (see separate proposal) for the overall purpose of being a point of reference for the submission of complaints about performance in the reporting and coverage of events during the election campaign. The Panel should be integrated in the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), with

the requisite resources empowered to monitor and receive complaints and pronounce on the performance of the media. The Media agree to publish the findings of the panel on all complaints received by it.

12. The Media agree that the terms of reference, functions and structure of the Independent Elections Media Monitoring and Refereeing Panel as well as the articulation of sanctions and other measures aimed at improving performance should be formulated by the media organizations which have signed the Media Code of Conduct and stand ready to work collaboratively with the SLAJ and the NEC to achieve the objective of a functional Independent Elections Media Monitoring and Refereeing Panel.

PUBLIC AND COLLECTIVE SUBSCRIPTION TO THE CODE

13. We the undersigned representatives of the Media hereby publicly and collectively subscribe to this Code of Conduct.

| No. | Media organization | Name of representative | Signature | Date |
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Annex : GUIDELINES

1. “Inciting Racial Hatred and Promoting Public Disorder.

Media outlets may not censor, or edit any material or materials submitted by political parties, or their agents, for either free, or paid for, publication in newspapers or

broadcast on radio or television stations. However, media organizations observing the law and exercising editorial judgment in favor of good taste and a respect for public safety and decency, should refuse any material submitted by political parties, or their agents, likely to be hateful, ethnically offensive, to promote public disorder or threaten the security of the State. In all cases of such refusal, the concerned political party must be immediately informed of the reasons for rejection, and, assuming that time permits, the concerned party, or its agent, must be given the opportunity to modify the rejected material in order to conform to acceptable legal, moral and other standards.

2. “Accuracy and balance”

The two main characteristics in reporting, accuracy and balance, distinguish professional journalism from unprofessional, and journalism from propaganda. Both these ingredients are necessary for citizens to gain a full and realistic picture of the issues during election campaigns, as well as of their local, national, regional and international environment. Democracy, which requires the active participation of informed citizens, depends on journalists and broadcasters to keep citizens informed about major issues.

- a. Accuracy requires the verification (to the fullest extent possible) and presentation of all facts that are pertinent and necessary to understand a particular event or issue, even if some of the facts conflict with a journalist’s, or a broadcaster’s particular beliefs and feelings;
- b. Balance, or impartiality, requires the presentation of all the main points of view or interpretations of an event or an issue, regardless of whether the journalist, reporter, broadcaster, editor or the audience agrees with these views.

3. “News Reports and Current Affairs programmes.”

All media organizations agree that news reports and current affairs programmes may, at any time, subject to the Media Code of Conduct, deal with any issue, cause, organization or individual. However, given the large number of contesting parties, coverage of election campaign events and other related issues will be limited by the capacity of media outlets to assign staff for these activities. The allocation of free and paid-for time and space for political parties to present their views in the media is a response to this constraint. Editorial judgments, therefore, continue to rest solely with the respective media. These judgments aim to subscribe to the highest principles of impartiality, fairness and integrity, always separating fact from interference in matters of political and other controversy and supported by eye-witnessed and attributable official statements and other sources to corroborate facts in particular stories.

4. “Political activities of media functionaries and the likelihood of charges of bias.”

Media organizations agree that individual owners, full-time staff members, part-time employees or other individuals contracted to write, produce or present articles, scripts, programmes, commentaries or other media material intended for public dissemination and who (a) are publicly identified as candidates for election to Parliament or Presidency; or, (b) hold office in a political party, are likely to be open to charges of bias. Accordingly, media organizations agree that such individuals will, in the performance of their functions, refrain from using their media for the purpose of promoting political objectives during the period beginning with the date of signature of the Media Code of Conduct and its accompanying Guidelines, and ending the day after the results of elections will have been declared.