

OFF-CYCLE ELECTIONS IN BAYELSA, IMO AND KOGI: AN EARLY REFERENDUM



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OFF-CYCLE ELECTIONS IN BAYELSA, IMO AND KOGI: AN EARLY REFERENDUM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Bayelsa, Imo, and Kogi off-cycle elections are scheduled to take place on November 11, 2023. Off-cycle elections are held outside the general elections schedule due to circumstances such as death, resignation, impeachment, annulment of elections by courts, and many more. The forthcoming off-cycle elections in Bayelsa, Imo, and Kogi, which are scheduled to take place in the aftermath of the 2023 Nigerian general elections, hold a pivotal place in the country's democratic process. These elections provide a unique opportunity for a swift evaluation of the new government's performance so far and offer a referendum on how citizens in these states respond to the leadership of the recently elected administration. The outcomes of these contests will significantly impact the political fortunes of the parties involved and lay the foundation for the upcoming general elections in 2027. The 2023 Nigerian general elections marked an important milestone in the country's democratic journey, characterized by technological advancements, increased civil society participation, and identity-based divisions among candidates and parties. These factors influenced the election results and set the stage for the off-cycle governorship elections in Bayelsa, Imo, and Kogi.

As these elections will be held approximately 120 days into the tenure of new administration, they present a unique challenge for both the ruling party, led by President Tinubu, and the opposition, including the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the Labour Party (LP). The performances of the elected governors, including Diri in Bayelsa, Uzodinma in Imo, and Bello in Kogi, will be closely scrutinized, as these states experienced contentious and litigated general elections at the beginning of the year. Identity politics, zonal considerations, and violence continue to influence the electoral landscape, making it crucial for parties to strategize effectively. The absence of governorship debates and the winner-takes-all approach further complicate the decision-making process for voters, potentially contributing to increased cynicism in Nigerian politics.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) plays a crucial role in administering these elections, given the scrutiny it faced in the 2023 elections. The use of technology and electronic result transmission has been introduced, with some concerns regarding the recent Supreme Court ruling and the appointment of resident electoral commissioners. The public's perception of INEC's performance will be a defining factor in the credibility of these elections. In this report, the Centre for Democracy and Development examined the state of play of the governorship elections in the aforementioned three states. Specifically, it analysed the history of political contests, strengths of political parties, hotspots of political competition, factors that will influence the election results and the challenges for election administration.

INTRODUCTION

By the time the off-cycle elections in Bayelsa, Imo and Kogi take place, Nigerians will have experienced over five months of a new presidential administration. These contests will be held in the shadow of recent economic and political realities in the aftermath of the 2023 Nigerian general elections. As a result, they offer an opportunity for a quick referendum on the way citizens in these states respond to the performance of the new government.

Before the next general elections in 2027, citizens in Edo and Ondo (2024), Anambra (2025), Ekiti and Osun (2026) will elect their governors. Some of these elections will put paid to perceptions about the current administration and its performance. But, for Bayelsa, Imo and Kogi, the fact that their elections are held nine months after the 2023 general elections means that there is an early referendum on the government's performance and provides parties with a very important early contest to review their viability ahead of future contests.

The 2023 Nigerian general elections were an important milestone in the country's democratic journey. There were significant milestones recorded and glaring issues that were aggravated. The introduction of technology, through the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) to authenticate voters and the INEC Results Viewing Portal (IReV), in the record keeping process was laudable, as was the advent of polling and the increased participation of civil society in trying to drive more participation.¹ However, the nature of the candidacies also showed how divided the country remains along identity prisms. Ethnicity, religion, location and generation played an important role in the way candidates and parties were received during the elections. Furthermore, the nature of campaigning in Nigeria, with a focus on voter trading and increased information disorder, played a part in shaping the outcome of the election.

By the time the elections are conducted on 11 November, the newly elected governments will have been in post for over 120 days. The Tinubu administration removed the decades-long fuel subsidy, addressed the foreign exchange controls and also had to respond to a coup in neighbouring Niger. The government also dealt with strike actions from several industries and are also responding to policies from the preceding Buhari administration. Expectedly, it has also been in court to defend its mandate at the presidential tribunal after petitions by the opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Labour Party (LP), who have had to face and address internal challenges as well.

¹Daily Trust: <https://dailytrust.com/explainer-what-inecs-bvas-means-and-how-to-minimise-its-failure-during-elections/> ; Premium Times: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/587189-nigerias-2023-presidential-election-inside-the-opinion-polls-that-got-it-wrong.html>

Atiku Abubakar, former vice-president and PDP presidential nominee, has had to oversee a party reconciling with different power blocs. Notably, former Rivers State Governor Nyesom Wike, who led a group of five governors to oppose the party's nominee, has been named a Minister in the Tinubu administration and will have to reconcile working within a government when his party is still in federal opposition. Peter Obi, the LP nominee who was able to win states in the historically PDP stronghold of the South-South, while also defeating Tinubu in Lagos, will have to reconcile with leading a nascent party that remains untested with this level of federal support.

Each of the states being contested has levels of expectation for the different parties and any outcome other than a win will play a part in shaping the party's fortunes in future elections. It is why unlike conventional mid-term contests; this one is more than a referendum on governing party but also on the other parties and candidates who will seek to transfer their perceived legitimacy and political might on the candidates representing their parties in the elections. Historically, off-cycle governorship elections have also taken on a different level of interest because of the ability of the party to devote considerable resources to single states. While party's work with state governors to focus on securing their states during general elections, they often designate multiple governors to chair campaign councils for off-cycle elections in the hope of mobilising their resources and influence to win. This adds to the strain of administering these elections by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and other relevant security stakeholders. It adds to the expected do-or-die approach of the elections.

Expectedly, the nature of persisting and prevalent issues varies across states and will be different from the issues at the national level. The powers and responsibilities of state administrations are captured in the concurrent legislative list, with recent amendments such as one that allows states to generate electricity, reflected in the increased focus on state governors. In recent years, the influence of state governors in guiding political parties has also been well stated. All party chairs of the ruling APC have been former governors and all elected presidents have either been former military heads of state or former governors. As a result, governorship elections have taken on a more outsized and important role.

This paper seeks to review the state of play of the governorship elections in the three states. It will look at the background performance in these states and also analyse key issues affecting the possible performance of the parties in the states. It will look at the challenges for election administration and conclude with a look at what this off-cycle season portends for the future of Nigeria's democracy.

BAYELSA | 1,056,862 registered voters



Fig 1: Map of Bayelsa State with LGAs outlined

Bayelsa State poses an interesting governorship contest in November due to the presence of an incumbent governor seeking re-election and a former governor seeking a return to office. But the outcome of the elections could also play a very important role in determining the fortunes of Nigeria's different political parties and, ultimately, its political future.

Bayelsa, in the South-South zone, is one of the newest states in the country, having been established on 1 October 1996 out of Rivers State. It shares a boundary with Rivers State to the east, Delta State in the north and is one of several states to border the Atlantic Ocean. Its capital city is Yenegoa, which is home to the state's airport. It has eight local government areas and is the smallest state in the country by population, with an estimated three million citizens.

The state is predominantly populated by the Ijaw ethnic group and the state is well-known for its contribution to the oil sector because of Oloibiri Oilfield, the site of Nigeria's first oil extraction. Perhaps as a tacit acknowledgment of this fact, most of the cabinet officials primarily responsible for petroleum have been from the state with Diezani Allison-Madueke serving as substantive minister from 2010 to 2015, Timipre Sylva serving as minister of state from 2019 to 2023 and Heineken Lokpobiri assuming the position in the incumbent Tinubu cabinet (2023).

BACKGROUND TO 2023

Prior to the 2023 general elections, the People's Democratic Party's (PDP) was able to count on 13 states and the FCT as reliable voter banks in presidential elections. Besides Plateau (North Central) and Taraba (North East), these states were all in the South East and South-South zones in the country. This 'Green Wall' meant that the PDP was able to ensure that most of its candidates met the 25% threshold while blocking opposition candidates from doing so in their zones. Similarly, prior to a wave of defections after the 2019 elections, seven of these states had reliably voted PDP candidates for governor, while Bayelsa was the eighth state to keep this record when the All Progressives Congress (APC) governor-elect was removed from office a day before his inauguration after the 2019 elections.

This trend changed during the 2023 elections. The support for Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) led to a reversal of fortunes for the party in its stronghold zones. LP swept to victory in all five of the South East states, so much so that no other party crossed the 25% threshold in any of these states. Similarly, LP was able to win three of the six states in the South-South (Cross River, Delta and Edo), while the APC was able to turn Rivers following the support of the then incumbent governor Nyesom Wike. Bayelsa is also now one of only three states - alongside Akwa Ibom and Taraba - to consistently vote for the People's Democratic Party's (PDP) nominee for president since 1999.

But the appearance of a PDP vice-like grip on Bayelsa can be deceptive. The state, home to former President Goodluck Jonathan, has since become a much more competitive state. And, in the midst of recent PDP performances and the maintenance of a PDP governor, it must be recalled that the APC actually won the 2019 governorship elections. It is now fielding a former governor, Timipre Sylva, who has contested in two elections and whose recent term as Minister of State for Petroleum will ensure he has maintained visibility ahead of the polls.

PDP has maintained a stronghold on the federal legislative delegation from the state. All three senators and five representatives are from the party and it is largely expected to maintain a decent showing in the coming election.

STRENGTH OF PARTIES AND CANDIDATES

There are 16 governorship candidates in the election – 14 male and two female. The contest is primarily expected to be a two-horse race between two governors seeking a second term – Incumbent Governor Duoye Diri of the PDP and former Governor Timipre Sylva of the APC. Both candidates are strong and expected to make a considerable showing in the race. However, there is momentum building around the candidacy of Eradiri Udengmobofa of the LP. He is expected to benefit from Obi’s impressive showing – finishing second in the state with 30% of the vote during the presidential election – as well as his previous role as a leader of the Ijaw Youth Council.

ZONAL CALCULUS AND VOTING PATTERNS

Elected Governors	Party	Term	Zone
Diepreye Alamiyeseigha	PDP	1999 – 2005	Central
Goodluck Jonathan	PDP	2005 – 2007	East
Timipre Sylva	PDP	2007 – 2012*	East
Henry Dickson	PDP	2012 – 2020	West
Duoye Diri	PDP	2020 – present	Central

*- Sylva was removed by court order in 2008 and 2012 which saw acting governors for several months.

Table 1 – List of elected governors in the Fourth Republic (Since 1999)


The battle for Bayelsa Central, the most populous of the three zones, will influence the race. PDP’s Diri, LP’s Udengs and the APC deputy governor nominee, Joshua MacIver, are all from the zone and will actively try to utilise their strongholds in the race. Diri, as incumbent governor, has also sought to ensure proper representation across the different zones – his deputy is a former Senator from Bayelsa West and the house speaker is from Bayelsa East. This effort will play a role in ensuring that there is solidarity in addressing the different factions within the party and the state. While Sylva, from the Eastern zone, would ordinarily be able to lean on a call for equitable rotation of the seat, there is the argument that the last Central-based governor (Alamiyeseigha) saw an Eastern successor (Jonathan) replace him before the end of his term.

		2019[1]	
Senatorial District	LGA	APC	PDP
		David Lyon	Duoye Diri
Central	Kolokuma/Opokuma	8,934	15,360
	Southern Ijaw	124,803	4,898
	Yenegoa	24,607	19,184
East	Brass	23,831	10,410
	Ogbia	58,016	13,763
	Nembe	83,041	874
West	Ekeremor	21,489	18,344
	Sagbama	7,831	60,339
TOTAL		352,552	143,172

Table 2: Declared results of the 2019 Bayelsa Governorship Contest

		2023[2]		
Senatorial District	LGA	PDP	LP	APC
		Atiku Abubakar	Peter Obi	Bola Tinubu
Central	Kolokuma/Opokuma	8,972	3,395	4,137
	Southern Ijaw	11,280	4,400	7,650
	Yenegoa	14,308	22,261	6,651
East	Brass	6,209	2,273	3,684
	Ogbia	6,392	6,721	8,444
	Nembe	2,334	1,807	3,005
West	Ekeremor	9,113	4,489	4,398
	Sagbama	10,240	4,629	4,603
TOTAL		68,818	49,975	42,572

Table 3: Declared results of the 2023 Presidential Result in Bayelsa



Using results from the 2019 governorship election would not show a proper and perhaps true state of play in Bayelsa. Lyon, from the vote heavy Southern Ijaw LGA, was able to establish a commanding lead over Diri, and swept the East zone. However, there were multiple reports that former First Lady Patience Jonathan was keen on punishing the PDP for abandoning her husband, while the former president himself was reeling from protracted stand-off with then incumbent Governor Dickson. It is why the 2023 presidential election results, with a more united party, show the strength of the PDP in the state and the challenge for the two major opposition parties.

Atiku Abubakar, and the PDP, were able to win the vote in five of the eight LGAs, especially the vote-heavy Southern Ijaw. Diri would be reassured that PDP won two of the three LGAs in the Central Zone and comfortably won both LGAs in the Western Zone. This would portend well for the governorship elections, where there is no Western frontline candidate in the race and where the incumbent deputy governor - a former Senator from the zone - would be relied upon to leverage his influence for the ruling party. Sylva, a prominent Eastern zone politician, will be expected to keep the APC's strength in that zone - two of the three LGAs were won by Tinubu in the 2023 elections

PDP and the stand

Before the unexpected Supreme Court judgment on the eve of the inauguration, there was palpable concern about the fate of the PDP in the state. An APC victory in the state of the former president, after he had been defeated for a re-election bid, would have been difficult to handle. Moreso, it would have presented a strong landing pad for the APC to encroach into a zone that had been reliably PDP. It is why Diri's eventual victory at the Supreme Court was necessary for the party to stave off opposition and maintain its firm grip. In the years since, Diri has maintained a strong level of support with fellow governors and politicians to endear him to the citizenry. He chaired the campaign council for the successful Osun 2022 governorship elections and also served as chair of the 2022 PDP presidential nominating convention. Lastly, he has been able to stay on good terms with former President Goodluck Jonathan, who had become estranged from Seriake Dickson – Diri's predecessor. While the party has largely been accused of neglecting its historical southern strongholds, he has united the state branch and will be well placed to secure a second term. This has averted a situation under Dickson where several cabinet members and advisers resigned to join the APC during the 2019 elections.

APC and a familiar play

After losing the Supreme Court judgment, the party became more divided and fractured. Among the politicians who initially left state politics to focus on wider party dynamics was Timipre Sylva, former governor and candidate who emerged as Buhari's second-term Minister of State for Petroleum. In this position, with a role mostly occupied by indigenes of the state, Sylva was able to maintain a public profile and leverage connections to build a considerable political base and war chest. The result was his ability to dominate the APC primaries over the 2019 nominee David Lyon, who finished third, and Joshua MacIver, a former militant leader. To pacify that bloc, Sylva picked MacIver as his running mate but is currently in court following a petition challenging MacIver's eligibility. APC stalwarts are confident of a Sylva bid, but are also mindful that facing an incumbent governor has historically proven to be his undoing in the past – losing bids to Dickson before.

FACTOR

Information Disorder

A major concern about the 2023 elections is the role that misinformation, disinformation, and fake news are expected to play. During field assessment visits, several election stakeholders expressed concerns about the role that political parties were playing in the information space around the elections. Most parties use influencers and youth mobilisers to spread disinformation campaigns about opposing parties and candidates. Groups are utilising shared platforms with election officials, party officials and media groups to try and reduce the likelihood of misinformation, disinformation, and fake news affecting the conduct of the elections. Some chieftains alluded to the fact that women were also unfairly targeted during such campaigns. Lastly, literacy has been highlighted as a key factor in this space – because of this, it is likely such campaigns will be through word of mouth and less monitored platforms.

LGA HOTSPOTS AND KEY CONTESTS

Key contests in the elections will be the race for Nembe and Southern Ijaw, the two most populous LGAs. Southern Ijaw has long been referred to as the 'Kano of Bayelsa', owing to the well documented voting strength of the North-West state in national politics. Control of the LGA will be key in determining the outcome of the election, with reports of ex-militant factions expected to clash in the area. It remains to be seen if the use of BVAS will help deter similar incidents to the 2023 presidential election where some polling units saw their contests postponed to the next day. Lyon and Atiku won the contests ahead of being declared winners in the 2019 governorship and 2023 presidential races respectively.

The crisis in Nembe has already been well-documented, with clashes between forces loyal to Governor Diri and former Governor Sylva squaring off. Nembe is in Bayelsa East, a zone loyal to Sylva, but has seen a growing number of stakeholders align with Diri. There were reports attributing the insecurity in the areato the different militant and gang groups in the region. The ability of security officials to manage this will play a part in how much voter turnout is possible during the elections.

Of the eight LGAs in the state, Atiku was able to flip the prominent Southern Ijaw, Brass and Ekeremor enroute winning the 2023 presidential vote count in the state. LP will be looking to consolidate a presence in fairly populous Yenegoa, the state capital, while APC will be mindful that Ogbia and Nembe have been reliably in their column. Former President Goodluck Jonathan is expected to maintain a non-partisan and neutral position, but it does appear that there is no enmity between him and the current governor. This inference clashes with the position of former Governor Dickson, who has not come out emphatically to campaign for his successor owing to a reported rift between the two men. These individual relationships, as well as key contests, will decide the race.

IMO | 2,419,922 registered voters



Fig 2: Map of Imo State with LGAs outlined

Imo State is a state in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria, bordered to the north by Anambra State, Rivers State to the west and south, and Abia State to the east. It is the third smallest in area of the 36 states in Nigeria, but is the 14th most populous with an estimated population of over 5.4 million as of 2016.

After independence in 1960, the area of the present-day Imo was a part of the post-independence Eastern Region until 1967 when the region was split, and the area became part of the East Central State. Less than two months afterwards, the former Eastern Region attempted to secede in the three-year long Nigerian Civil War with Imo as a part of the secessionist, Igbo nationalist state of Biafra. The area was hard fought over throughout the war with Owerri and its surrounding area exchanging hands twice before Owerri was named the Biafran capital in 1969. The present-day Imo State was captured by federal forces in early 1970 with Operation Tail-Wind taking the city and ending the war. At the war's end and the reunification of Nigeria, the East Central State was reformed until 1976 when Imo State was formed by the Murtala Muhammed regime. Fifteen years afterwards, Imo State was divided with the eastern part forming the new Abia State.

BACKGROUND

On 14 January 2020, the Supreme Court overturned the 2019 election outcome that had initially declared Emeka Ihedioha as the governor of Imo State. The apex court ruled that Emeka Ihedioha, a member of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), did not secure the majority of legitimate votes during the governorship election held the previous year on 9 March. Instead, the Supreme Court directed that Hope Uzodinma, the candidate representing the APC should promptly assume the role of the governor of the state. In a landmark judgment delivered by Justice Kudirat Kekere-Ekun, the Supreme Court concurred that the results from 388 polling units were unjustly omitted during the aggregation of the final governorship election results in Imo State. Justice Kekere-Ekun further explained that when factoring in the outcomes from these 388 polling units, the governorship candidate of the APC garnered the majority of legitimate votes, making him the rightful victor of the election as per the assessment of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Considering these findings, Justice Kekere-Ekun, speaking on behalf of the entire bench, invalidated and annulled the improper proclamation of Ihedioha as the winner of the 2019 governorship election.

Imo, along with most of the Southeast, had been a reliable stronghold of the PDP. Prior to the 2023 elections, it had consistently voted for PDP presidential candidates, while most governors were also PDP members (Ohakim, who served a single term between 2007 and 2011 was elected as member of the Progressive Peoples Alliance (PPA) but defected to the PDP before his term ended). However, Rochas Okorochoa of the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA), defeated Ohakim and was elected as governor in 2011. Okorochoa led his bloc of APGA into the APC when it was formed in 2014, contested the presidential primary and was eventually re-elected as governor in 2015.

In 2023, Peter Obi won 77% of the presidential vote in the state. Despite that, APC won two of the three senatorial seats and four of the ten federal constituency seats. LP's was able to gain two, PDP was able to win three and the tenth was disputed.

Strength of Political Parties and Candidates

Candidates to the Imo state governorship election this year reflect the overall lack of inclusion in Nigeria's politics. All 17 governorship candidates are men, and only one is a person with disability. There are two women deputy governorship candidates, but that pales in comparison to the number of men on the list. The established frontrunners are incumbent Governor Hope Uzodinma of the APC, Samuel Nnaemeka Anyanwu of the PDP and Athan Achonu of the LP.

While Tony Ejiogu of APGA is unlikely to play a considerable role in the election outcome, the support of the Anambra State Governor might go some way in providing a stronger than expected contest. Lastly, retired Major-General Jack Keonyemere Lincoln of the Action Alliance (AA) is expected to gain some support and sympathy from some LP supporters who had planned to back him before his departure from the party ahead of the primaries.

ZONAL CALCULUS AND VOTING PATTERNS

Governor	Party	Term	Zone
Achike Udenwa	PDP	1999 – 2007	West
Ihedi Ohakim	PPA/PDP	2007 – 2011	North
Rochas Okorochoa	APGA/APC	2011 – 2019	West
Emeka Ihedioha	PDP	2019 – 2010	East
Hope Uzodinma	APC	2020 – present	West

Table 4 – List of elected governors in the Fourth Republic (1999 – date)

The 2019 election results showed a strong performance by Ihedioha, Uche Nwosu of the Okorochoa-backed Action Alliance and Ifeanyi Ararume of APGA. Expectedly, Uzodinma has used his time in office to considerably gather alliances and also ensure a stronger presence in the state’s permutations. This can be seen in how APC was able to weather the storm of the Obi movement in gaining the most seats in the national assembly contests. Yet, Imo presents an interesting situation as a bellwether of the impact of Obi’s political momentum. LP is expected to perform well in the state and a failure to do so may cast doubt on the viability of the *Obidient* movement during this presidential term.

All three prominent candidates are former senators and aptly capture the contest of zones in the state. Imo West, or the Orlu senatorial zone, has produced the most governors in Imo history and an Uzodinma win will result in the third two-term governor from the state. Its population strength aside, it has also been able to provide a pathway for candidates to seek the governorship. Uzodinma’s status as the most viable candidate from this zone should help in ensuring support from his kinsfolk. Similarly, Athan Achonu of Imo North will be expecting support from a zone disgruntled with the lack of strong representation at state level and is the sole frontrunner from the area. LP is also likely to deploy Obi for the campaign and rely on the goodwill he garnered during the elections to shore up his candidacy.

Imo East has barely held the governorship for a year and will likely play on this fact in seeking the governorship. However, there are two prominent candidates from this zone in the elections – PDP’s Anyanwu and AA’s Ogunewe. As a former senator, with the support of former Governor Ihedioha and a more established party, Anyanwu will be expected to gain more votes. Yet Ogunewe’s potential for an insurgent candidacy could play a major role in reducing the PDP candidate’s vote share from his stronghold.

Candidate	Party	Votes	Percent
Ihedioha Emeka	PDP	273,404	38.27%
Nwosu Uche	AA	190,364	26.65%
Ararume Ifeanyi Godwin	APGA	114,676	16.05%
Uzodinma Hope	APC	96,458	13.50%
Ohakim Ikedi	ACCORD	6,846	0.96%

Table 5 – Initially declared results of the 2019 Imo Governorship Contest

FACTOR

Insecurity

The Labour Party (LP) in the South East region has voiced apprehension regarding the forthcoming November gubernatorial election in Imo State, highlighting the distressing impact of insecurity on numerous residents. Chief Innocent Okeke, the National Vice Chairman of the party for the Southeast, conveyed concerns about the deteriorating security situation in several local councils, including Oru East, Oru West, Oguta, Orlu, Okigwe, Orsu, and Njaba. He pointed out that these areas have regrettably transformed into desolate locales due to the combined effects of insecurity stemming from both state and non-state actors. Okeke further underscored that this pervasive insecurity has the potential to significantly impede voter turnout and participation in the upcoming election.

PDP's gubernatorial aspirant raised his concern over the prevailing state of insecurity in Imo State and likened it to a Boko Haram State, lamenting its adverse effects on the investment climate and employment opportunities for the youth.² He urged the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to seize the upcoming Imo governorship elections as an opportunity to restore its tarnished reputation following alleged irregularities in the 2023 general elections. Senator Anyanwu, asserting that Imo residents had cast their votes in favour of the PDP in the 2019 governorship election, a result subsequently overturned by the Supreme Court in favour of Uzodimma, pledged to vehemently oppose any recurrence of such scenario should he be declared the victor. He underscored a collective commitment among opposition parties in the state to resist any form of electoral manipulation, irrespective of the perpetrator's political affiliation.³

The PDP gubernatorial candidate, who claimed sole sponsorship of the South East Development Commission Bill (unfortunately not assented to by former President Muhammadu Buhari) and the Customs Act amendment bill, emphasized his track record as a successful senator.⁴ He pointed to his extensive political experience, including serving as a two-time Local Government Area Chairman, two-time House of Assembly member, and a senator, as a testament to his understanding of the challenges faced by the people of Imo State.

Senator Athan Achonu of Labour Party, also voiced deep concerns regarding the escalating challenges of insecurity, poverty, and socio-economic issues that Imo State is grappling with in the lead-up to the forthcoming elections.

²Vanguard: <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/08/insecurity-imo-gradually-becoming-boko-haram-state-senator-anyanwu/>

³Punch: <https://punchng.com/uzodimma-lacks-popularity-to-win-imo-gov-poll-pdp/>

⁴PLAC NG: <https://placng.org/i/bill-seeking-to-establish-a-south-east-development-commission-passes-first-reading-in-senate/>

Senator Achonu, who previously represented Imo North Senatorial District in 2015 before his removal by the tribunal that same year, underscored the prolonged neglect of these issues as a source of profound apprehension. He further lamented that Governor Hope Uzodinma had seemingly shifted his focus to the federal capital, Abuja, to manage the state's affairs, primarily due to the worsening security situation. These remarks were made during a meeting with the press, where he hosted Imo State residents in Abuja over the weekend. Achonu also decried the ongoing deterioration of businesses and investments in the state, emphasizing their vital role in fostering development and enhancing the overall well-being of citizens in the entire South-east region.

Monetary Influence in Imo Gubernatorial Election

Concerns about the role of money in politics have been raised in Nigerian elections, including Imo State gubernatorial elections. Political parties and candidates often rely on financial resources to fund campaign activities, reach out to voters, and promote their agendas. However, there have been allegations of excessive spending, vote-buying, and the use of money to manipulate voters and election outcomes. Reports from organizations like the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) Nigeria have highlighted instances of vote-buying and inducement of voters during elections, including in IMO State. Vote-buying involves the distribution of cash, gifts, or other incentives to voters in exchange for their support. This practice raises concerns about the integrity of the electoral process and the influence of money on democratic outcomes.


Ahead of the upcoming 2023 elections, there will be a need to look out for individuals and party members who may seek to influence the direction of votes through vote buying or vote trading. It has already been noticed that there will be a key contest for the governorship seat in Imo state hence, it is expected that key factors such as money may play a huge role in determining the perspectives of the people and votes cast.

LGA HOTSPOTS AND KEY CONTESTS

In the context of the 2019 governorship election in Imo State, the political landscape was marked by a concerning level of violence. Accusations of vote manipulation and electoral fraud triggered protests and demonstrations in the area. In the run-up to the elections, there have been similar insecurity concerns in areas as diverse as Ehime Mbano, Umualumaku, Oru East, Ngor Okpala, Abor Mbaise, Ideato North etc.⁵ Recent instances, such as the arrest of the Nigeria Labour Congress president on 1 November in the state, give concern about the possible impact of insecurity in the outcome of the elections.

A major factor remains how the different candidates are perceived among the populace. Despite the strong performance of the LP in the presidential election,

⁵Guardian Nigeria: <https://guardian.ng/politics/renewed-insecurity-killings-threaten-guber-poll-in-imo/>



Achonu is not expected to repeat Peter Obi's grip in the state owing to the governor's strong political machinery and the presence of strong alternative candidates. Ejiogu of APGA is expected to parlay his family's strong prominence in his zone, as well as the support of Anambra Governor Charles Soludo, in proving to be more competitive. Anyanwu, of PDP, might be bereft of the institutional support owing to perceptions that he is more aligned with Nyesom Wike, the former Rivers Governor and FCT Minister under President Tinubu. Low turnout is expected to dictate the outcome of the polls which might be determined by which party and candidate is able to bring out their supporters.

KOGI | 1,932,654 registered voters

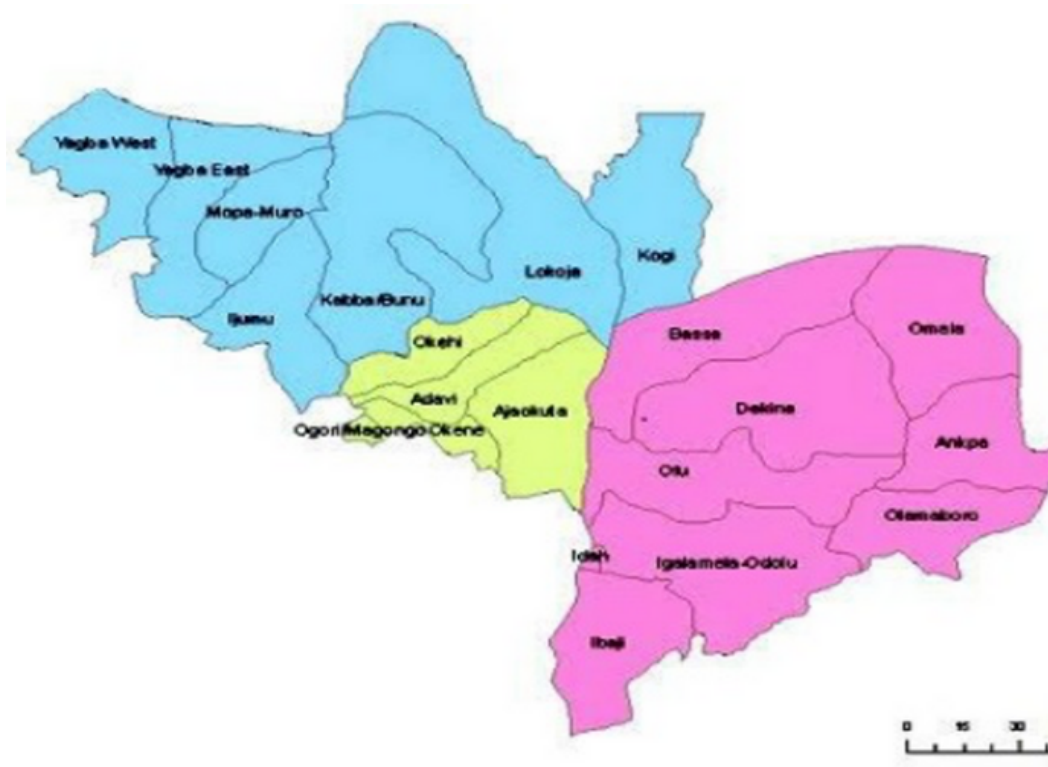



Fig 3: Map of Kogi State with LGAs outlined

The Kogi state off-cycle election presents similarly unique dynamics. Firstly, it is the only one of the three states where the incumbent governor is not on the ballot as a result of term limits.⁶ Secondly, the state's size and access to other zones – its size and location means that it borders nine other states and the FCT, the most in country – means that it is often seen as a significant bellwether of political fortunes and the desire to control it has led to ethnicity and religion being weaponised. Finally, the aforementioned landmass means that it poses a significant challenge to the smooth deployment of election logistics, transportation and security.

Kogi State is a state situated in the North Central region of Nigeria. It was established on August 27 1991, by merging portions of the Kwara and Benue States. According to the 2022 population projection, Kogi State has a population of 4,466,800.⁷ The capital city is Lokoja, which holds significance as Nigeria's former administrative capital during colonial times. Geographically, Kogi shares borders with Benue to the east, Anambra and Enugu to the south east, Edo and Ondo to the south west, Niger to the north west, Nasarawa to the north east, the FCT to the north and Ekiti and Kwara to the west. It is also home to the confluence of both Benue and Niger Rivers, making it a strategic location in agriculture and resource-related policies. It is home to several ethnic groups with the Bassa, Ebira, Igala and Okun among the most well-known.

⁶Daily Trust <https://dailytrust.com/voting-ododo-a-third-term-for-bello-saraki/>

⁷City Population https://citypopulation.de/en/nigeria/admin/NGA023_kogi/



The Igala, based mostly in Kogi East, have dominated the political landscape since 1991. The incumbent Yahaya Bello is the first and only Ebira to serve as governor since the state's formation, while the Okun have mostly produced deputy governors. The keen contest between these different groups has led to politically driven violence during elections.

Its demographic make-up is reflective of the country, with roughly 45% identifying as Muslims and 40% as Christians and the remaining practicing various traditional-based religions. As with every other state, it is divided into three senatorial zones and has nine federal constituencies. As at the last election, it had 3,508 polling units in 239 wards.

BACKGROUND TO 2023

Prior to Bello's win in 2015, the state had been a reliable PDP stronghold. Abubakar Audu, who had been governor during the Third Republic (1992 – 93) was elected in 1999 on the platform of the defunct All People's Party, but lost a re-election bid to Ibrahim Idris of the PDP. The party retained the governorship till a delayed election in 2015 which saw Abubakar Audu bid for a comeback in an election that saw him win the first round. Audu passed away before the second round was conducted and the party nominated Yahaya Bello to replace him on the ticket and jettisoned James Faleke, who was the original running mate in a decision that was widely contentious within the party.

The 2015 elections saw a significant realignment in the state's political structure. APC's Muhammadu Buhari won the presidential vote in the state and inflicted a first loss in the state for the PDP, which held on to two of the state's three Senate seats, with Dino Melaye, then of the APC, winning the third seat. It also split the House of Representatives delegation equally with the APC, with both parties winning four seats each. Before the 2019 elections, Melaye returned to the PDP and received the ticket to defend his seat.

The 2019 elections saw a consolidation of the APC's stronghold in the state, with Buhari retaining the state, the APC winning all three senate seats from the PDP and gaining six of the nine federal constituency positions. Of note was Leke Abejide's win as the sole ADC representative from the state, with the PDP taking two seats. In the 2023 general elections, APC's Bola Tinubu kept the state while the APC maintained all three senate seats and won six of nine seats, with the ADC winning two seats and the PDP one.

⁸This day <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2023/04/25/dino-my-emergence-as-governor-will-strengthen-kogis-unity>

ZONAL CALCULUS AND VOTING PATTERNS

Governor	Party	Term	Zone
Abubakar Audu	APP	1999 – 2003	East
Ibrahim Idris	PDP	2003 – 2011	East
Idris Wada	PDP	2012 – 2016	East
Yahaya Bello	APC	2016 – 2024	Central

Table 6 – List of elected governors in the Fourth Republic (1999 – date)

The rise of Dino Melaye (PDP) and Leke Abejide (ADC) has not just rekindled the aspirations of Kogi West advocates for power transition but has also addressed the call for a governor from the Christian community. Both Melaye and Abejide are Okun, originating from Yagba East and Ijumu council regions of the Kogi West Senatorial District, and share the Christian faith. Supporters of the power shift argument emphasise that Kogi East, predominantly Igala, has held sway for 17 years, while Kogi Central, with a majority of Ebira population, is nearing an eight-year tenure. In contrast, Kogi West has never elected a governor. These proponents assert that is not appropriate for a state as diverse as Kogi, advocating for a more balanced power arrangement. Conversely, some support a Christian governor, including former CAN chairman Bishop Emmanuel Ibenu, who argues that it is reasonable to seek a governor from the Christian community in a state that has witnessed five Muslim governors in its 32-year history.⁹

Ethnicity has always played a major role in the outcome of elections in Kogi State.¹⁰ Aside from the 1991 election that produced the late Prince Abubakar Audu as the first executive governor of the then young state, subsequent elections have been coloured by ethnic considerations. In 1991, the contest between Audu from Kogi East and the late Architect Stephen Olorunfemi from Kogi West was largely based on ethnic interests. Audu had contested on the platform of the defunct National Republican Convention (NRC), while Olorunfemi ran on the platform of the Social Democratic Party (SDP). While the Eastern zone voted massively for Audu, Olorunfemi controlled votes from the west, leaving Kogi Central as the battleground.¹¹ This scenario was repeated in 2007, when Kogi

⁹TheCable <https://www.thecable.ng/inec-approves-final-list-of-candidates-for-kogi-bayelsa-imo-guber-polls>

¹⁰TheGuardian <https://guardian.ng/politics/kogi-guber-ethnic-politics-violence-take-centre-stage/>

¹¹Vanguard <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/11/kogi-poll-ethnic-cards-on-as-bello-wade-battle-for-1-5m-votes/>

Central voted overwhelmingly for their own, in the person of Senator Salami Ohaire of the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), against Alhaji Ibrahim Idris of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) from the East, who received massive votes from his senatorial district, controlled majorly by the Igalas. Then, Kogi West became the free zone. Those elections also witnessed high-scale violence, leading to the loss¹² of lives and the destruction of property across the State.

Leading to the chosen successor of the incumbent governor, Ahmed Usman Ododo has chosen his running mate, Salifu Joel, from the Igala side to depict the voting power of that region. The incumbent governor has also left no stone unturned in seeking assurance from key stakeholders and senatorial zones to ensure his chosen candidate is elected as the next governor.

STRENGTH OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND CANDIDATES

Ahead of the polls, INEC approved 18 candidates to contest for the governorship position in Kogi state.¹³ Due to the strength of their parties and their personal popularity, the established frontrunners are the ruling party APC's Ododo Ahmed Usman; PDP's Senator Dino Melaye); Leke Abejide of the African Democratic Congress (ADC); Olayinka Braimoh of the Action Alliance; and Okeme Adejoh of the LP, and other contestants. The issue of parallel primaries held by different parties and the succession of candidates from the same party due to primaries held from different locations created a dispute amongst the parties. Parties such as the New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP), ADC and the LP held contentious primaries resulting in 'two flagbearers', while the primaries of the major APC and PDP were also shrouded in controversies. However, the 18 Governorship candidates comprise 17 men candidates and 1 woman.¹⁴ However, the contest will likely be a two-horse race between the PDP and the APC, with ADC showing some prospects of a viable third force. This is down to the strength of the parties in the state, the momentum of the PDP in flipping a senate seat through the courts and the strength of their performance in the recently concluded elections.

APC and the Power of Incumbency

The APC and its candidate, Ododo, heavily rely on the influence of the incumbent governor, Yahaya Bello. Both Bello and Ododo hail from the same Okene community and share close ties – with some sources going as far as naming both as relatives.¹⁵ It is expected that Ododo will benefit from the goodwill of Bello and as well suffer from the backlash of his administration. On the positive, Yahaya Bello has been praised for his commitment to promoting agricultural growth, generating employment opportunities and enhancing the State's revenue. Also, he received praises for including women in his cabinet.¹⁶ On the flip side, Yahaya Bello's tenure was marked by controversy due to allegations of promoting election violence, engaging in activities spreading misinformation about COVID-19 and

¹²EISA <https://www.eisa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/2007-journal-of-african-elections-v6n2-electoral-violence-nigerias-2007-elections-eisa.pdf>

¹³Vanguard <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/05/kogi-gov-ododo-melaye-abejide-in-three-horse-race/>

¹⁴Cable <https://www.thecable.ng/inec-approves-final-list-of-candidates-for-kogi-bayelsa-imo-guber-polls>

¹⁵Leadership <https://leadership.ng/apc-candidate-ododo-is-not-my-blood-relation-gov-bello/>

¹⁶<https://businessday.ng/news/article/bellos-administration-targets-agric-to-increase-jgr-in-kogi/>

vaccines, and new accusations of corruption.¹⁷ More so, he was often accused of sacrificing the development of the state for his presidential ambitions.¹⁸

Beyond the support of Yahaya Bello, APC as a party in Kogi has a good standing boasting of all three senators, six of eight Federal House of Representatives members, and 22 out of 25 State House of Assembly members in their fold.¹⁹ Despite the strong structure the APC, the party still battles cohesion with respect to zoning. For example, a former APC chieftain in Ankpa Local Government has resigned from the party and endorsed the candidate of the Action Alliance (AA) and others like Dr. Tom Ohikere, initially advocated for a power shift to Kogi West Ododo but only switched back in the interest of the party.

Ultimately, as the sole Epira candidate from Kogi Central, Ododo benefits from the strong solidarity of his kin, known for supporting their own in various competitions. This is would be playing a pivotal role especially because Kogi Central holds 25 percent of the registered voters in the state.²⁰

PDP and challenge of unseating

Besides the contested primary, the PDP has encountered setbacks in the state. The party's leadership is not only losing momentum but is also at an all-time low. The party's representation dwindled from one Senate seat and three House of Representatives seats in 2019 to zero Senate seats and just one House of Representatives seat in 2023. Out of the 25 State Assembly seats, they managed to secure only two. While Melaye has rapidly initiated efforts to reconcile with disgruntled party members and influential stakeholders, he faces the formidable task of overcoming the political influence of the Federal Government. Melaye had frequently taunted Tinubu during the presidential campaign, leading political analysts to speculate about a potential reprisal in the November 11 poll. Observers of the political landscape rank him lower than Abejide of the ADC in the western senatorial zone. This is hinged on the fact that Leke Abejide is a member of House of Representatives who has single-handedly brought African Democratic Congress (ADC) to limelight and currently won re-election for his second term back to the House of Representatives and Governorship candidacy of ADC. Also, they think Leke Adejide's chance could be very bright looking at his personal support for the presidential aspiration of the president prior to general election and his financial commitment to that cause.

Melaye expresses his mission as one aimed at liberating the people of Kogi from Yahaya Bello's misrule. He underscores that the existing infrastructural projects in the state were initiated and completed during the tenure of PDP governors, confidently asserting that the party is poised to regain power based on these achievements. He argues that the advancements made by the PDP over 13 years of governance far outweigh the eight years of mismanagement under Governor Bello's administration. Melaye even wittily refers to the State's first-ever flyover as

¹⁷Sahara reporters <https://saharareporters.com/2021/01/19/covid-19-vaccines-meant-kill-us-%E2%80%93-kogi-governor-yahaya-bello>

¹⁸Vanguard <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/01/yahaya-bello-five-years-in-office-five-years-of-humanitarian-disaster-by-austin-okai/>

¹⁹Vanguard <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/08/kogi-guber-adeyemis-key-loyalist-ohikere-declares-support-for-ododo/>

²⁰<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/05/kogi-gov-ododo-melaye-abejide-in-three-horse-race/>

merely a "centre table."²¹

ADC and a viable third force

Leke Abejide, the ADC candidate, is expected to secure a significant portion of votes from the western region of the state under prevailing circumstances. Through his well-received initiative of covering WAEC fees for students in his Yagba Federal Constituency,²² Abejide not only won a convincing second term in the National Assembly elections on February 25, but also expanded his influence to another Federal Constituency, Kabba-Bunu/Ijumu, where his party secured victory. He also played a pivotal role in delivering victory for his party in the Yagba West state Constituency. Despite the ADC's comparatively weaker organisational structure, Abejide's popularity compensates for this deficiency. He previously triumphed over APC and PDP in their strongholds within Yagba Federal Constituency through coalition building. His strategy involves rallying disenchanted members from other parties to support his electoral success, which he plans to also employ in the gubernatorial election. Reports suggest that the ADC is in talks with Muri Ajaka of the APC for a potential deputy position for Leke. The combined efforts of Leke, Muri, and other disaffected members from PDP and ADC could potentially yield an unforeseen outcome in the election.²³

On the other hand, the opposition ADC appears to have a positive relationship with the present. Abejide even formed a support group, the Asiwaju Confluence Campaign Organization (ACCO), to contribute to Tinubu's success in the February presidential election, showcasing his connections within the opposition party despite being a first-time National Assembly member. Abejide also has a close association with Jigawa State Governor Badaru. The influence of these factors on his chances in the election remains to be seen.²⁴

²¹<https://tribuneonline.ng/kogi-will-be-liberated-from-yahaya-bello-apc-dino-melaye/>

²²Business Day <https://businessday.ng/politics/article/twists-and-turns-in-kogi-as-politicians-position-for-off-season-guber-poll/>

²³TheGuardian <https://guardian.ng/politics/kogi-guber-poll-another-season-of-ethnic-politics-endorsements/>

²⁴Vanguard <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/05/kogi-gov-ododo-melaye-abejide-in-three-horse-race/>

			2019[1]		
Senatorial District	LGA	Number of Registered voters as of November 2019	APC	PDP	
			Yahaya Bello	Musa Wada	
Central	Adavi	105,906	366	64,657	
	Ajaokuta	73,836	5,565	17,952	
	Okene	131,166	139	112,762	
	Ogori-Mangogo	6,032	2,145	3,679	
	Okehi	82,180	478	36,954	
East	Idah	56,743	13,962	4,602	
	Ibaji	76,575	10,504	12,682	
	Igalamela/Odolu	65,129	11,195	8,075	
	Ofu	88,958	12,264	11,006	
	Dekina	166,165	16,575	8,948	
	Ankpa	142,912	28,108	11,269	
	Olamaboro	82,973	8,155	16,876	
	Bassa	58,892	9,724	8,386	
	Omala	66,368	14,403	8,473	
	West	Kabba Bunu	74,789	8,084	15,364
		Koto Karfe	53,590	9,404	14,097
Yagba East		2,784	7,546	6,735	
Yagba West		41,443	8,860	7,868	
Lokoja		137,301	11,045	19,457	
Mopa-Muro		23,030	3,581	4,953	
Ijumu		59,578	7,585	11,425	
TOTAL	21	1,596,350	189,704	406,222	

Table 7– Declared results of the 2019 Kogi Governorship Contest

Prior to the 2023 Presidential elections, The Independent National Electoral Commission said Kogi state has 1,932,654 registered voters, 1,813,741 number of collected PVCs and 118,945 uncollected PVCs.

SECURITY

Kogi State presents worrisome dynamics due to a combination of historical data and its current security situation. A sobering report from the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) revealed 10 fatalities and 79 incidents of violence and election fraud across Kogi State's 21 local government areas in November 2019. Regrettably, these brutal assaults are resurfacing in the lead-up to the 2023 off-cycle governorship election in the state. The use of political thugs and security officials for electoral violence is well entrenched in the state. For example, during the presidential and national assembly elections held earlier this year, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) threatened to cancel the polls in Dekina local government because of violence. A few weeks after the political party primaries, political violence and violent rhetoric spiraled and have remained unabated, especially between APC, PDP and the SDP.²⁵ On Saturday, June 3, the convoy of Governor Yahaya Bello was attacked by gunmen along the Abuja-Lokoja highway, with reports of injuries to some of the governor's aides.²⁶ On July 9, thugs attacked the SDP campaign office near Paparanda Kpata market, vandalising billboards featuring President Bola Tinubu and the SDP's gubernatorial candidate, Yakubu Ajaka. Similarly, armed individuals, including those bearing weapons, ransacked and damaged Radio Kogi Ochaja while physically assaulting on-duty staff members and security guards.

Political violence in Kogi state largely dovetails with a dangerous level of inter-ethnic, social and resource-based contestations. Beyond political violence, Kogi battles growing active terrorist cells within its territory. Reports have shown that there have been terrorists in the state for over a decade. Investigations by HumAngle revealed that Jama'at Ansari Al-Muslimin fi Bilad Al-Sudan, popularly called Ansaru, an al-Qaeda affiliate that broke away from Boko Haram in early 2012, had been in Kogi State, until 2016 when one of its leaders, Khalid al-Barnawi, was arrested in Lokoja, the capital, months after some security breaches²⁷. This might have put to rest the suspicion of terrorist cells in the state for some years until their recent resurgence. In recent times, ISWAP has carried out several attacks in Kogi. On September 13, 2021, the group struck a Medium Security Custodial Centre in Kabba, freed over 200 inmates and killed two security personnel. Security experts pointed at ISWAP to have likely carried out the attack, though the group didn't claim responsibility. Terror attacks in Kogi state have been unabated since April 2022. On April 3, 2022, a group of terrorists attacked a police station in Adavi, Kogi State, killing three officers after a gun battle. It is also one of the states at the epicentre of the farmer-herder conflict.

²⁵Businessday: <https://businessday.ng/politics/article/worrying-signs-as-pre-election-violence-threatens-kogi-guber-poll/>

²⁶The Nation: <https://thenationonline.net/kogi-gunmen-attack-yahaya-bellos-convoy-injure-security-aides/> HumanAngle:

²⁷<https://humanglemedia.com/niger-kogi-terrorists-new-haven-what-you-need-to-know/>

LGA HOTSPOTS AND KEY CONTESTS

In the dynamic political landscape of Kogi State, certain local government areas (LGAs) hold significant sway over gubernatorial elections. Lokoja, the state's capital, plays a central role in shaping the political course of the entire state. As the political and administrative hub, Lokoja's decisions and voting patterns can have a symbolic impact, setting the tone for other LGAs. Furthermore, its capital city status garners considerable media attention during elections, magnifying its overall influence. Lokoja's diverse population, reflecting various ethnic backgrounds, serves as a critical focal point during elections.

Okene, with its substantial population, wields considerable electoral power, and candidates recognise its pivotal role in determining the overall election outcome. Its status as an economic hub, teeming with diverse commercial activities, amplifies the significance of promises related to job creation, business opportunities, and economic development in swaying the electorate. Kabba/Bunu LGA is renowned for its politically active populace who are well-informed and actively engaged in the electoral process. Situated strategically, this LGA becomes a key battleground, and candidates prioritise campaigning here due to its potential to influence the overall election's outcome. Adavi LGA's reputation for agricultural activities means that addressing issues related to agriculture, rural development, and farmer welfare is essential for candidates to secure support. Engaging with the youth population is pivotal, given their significant role in shaping electoral outcomes.

Idah, with its historical and cultural significance, holds a unique place in the electoral landscape. Winning the support of Idah's sizable population is crucial for candidates who recognise the influence this LGA wields. Ankpa LGA, home to various ethnic groups, necessitates careful navigation of diversities to secure a broad support base. Promises related to infrastructure development, road networks, and basic amenities resonate with Ankpa's voters. Ofu LGA's strategic location marks it as an important battleground for candidates aiming to build a strong electoral coalition. The presence of educational institutions leads to a concentration of young, educated voters who significantly influence the election. Ijumu LGA's history of political activism and engagement means candidates must address the concerns and demands of politically conscious citizens to succeed. Anyigba, home to Kogi State University, boasts a large student population capable of significantly shaping election outcomes. Promises related to education and policies affecting students become focal points for the electorate, making Dekina a crucial watchpoint during elections.

These LGAs, with their distinct characteristics and political significance, are central in shaping the outcome of the Kogi State off-cycle gubernatorial election. Candidates keenly focus on these key hotspots, recognising that winning their support is pivotal in securing electoral victories in the state. An interesting question will be which of the candidates that Kogi East, known as a kingmaker in this race, backs.

CONCLUSION

INEC has announced that approximately 5.4 million registered voters will be able to vote in the upcoming off-cycle elections in all states. Expectedly, this should be a much more straightforward process for INEC to oversee but, as we have seen, there are many distinct variables in the different states handling elections.

Ultimately, these elections form the first referendum on the Tinubu presidency. However, they will also be a review of the performance of the ruling parties in the various states. Neither Diri in Bayelsa nor Uzodinma in Imo were initially declared winners of their elections – Uzodinma assumed office after a year of Ihedioha in Imo, while Diri was declared governor by the Supreme Court on the eve of David Lyon’s inauguration. As a result, these governors will be seeking to win an election outright and in the aftermath of very contentious and litigated general elections. Likewise, Bello’s performance will be paramount in the outcome of the governorship contest, especially since the APC’s pick was his nominee.


Regrettably these elections will still be dominated by the same strands of identity politics that played a role in the February general elections. Zonal considerations are always paramount and, alongside the likelihood of representation in government, they play a role in how most citizens will vote. Most campaigns have not highlighted clear-cut policies or attempts to distinguish responsibilities between federal and state governments, which has further blurred how likely citizens will be able to tell which promises are feasible or not.

Sadly, violence and electoral malpractice will still play a part in the outcome of the elections. Incumbency powers, at different levels, and control of certain key strongholds are likely to make or mar the election and affect the outcome. This will play a role in handicapping opposition candidates and affect how the outcome of the election will be accepted. Furthermore, with a month to the elections, there have been no governorship debates with the major candidates. This only serves to deprive the electorate of the knowledge needed to make a well-considered decision. It could also be candidates following the template established by the president during the 2023 election cycle. Finally, the winner-takes-all and do-or-die manner of Nigerian politics means that candidates and parties are likely to expend significant amounts and costs to ensure control of key states in the political dynamic. Institutions have not proven to be as inoculated from the realities of

⁴Songhai Advisory: <https://www.songhaiadvisory.com/blog/2023/5/9/elections-2023-liberia-opposition-leader-names-running-mate>

⁵The New Dawn Liberia: <https://thenewdawnliberia.com/crack-in-plp-support-for-cdc/>

⁶Analyst Liberia Online: <https://analystliberiaonline.com/monrovia-drowns-in-blue-seas-cdc-justifies-one-round-victory/>



overreach by political parties and office-holders and, coupled with recent disillusionment with the election result, might result in increased cynicism and a jaded approach to Nigerian politics.

An important factor remains the role that INEC will play in administering the elections. The electoral commission received significant scrutiny for the outcome of the 2023 elections and while some laudable steps were made, including the introduction of technological innovations in the process, expectedly many Nigerians were disappointed with the several logistics and procedural challenges that affected the polls. The much-anticipated introduction of the BVAS, highlighted as a game changer, was also marred by the technical glitches that prevented its immediate deployment during the presidential elections in February 2023. Expectedly, many will see these polls as the last chance for the electoral commission to address the plethora of complaints raised after the elections. Already, INEC Chair Mahmood Yakubu has pledged that results for the elections will be uploaded on IReV, with the results transmitted electronically.²⁸ Yet, some worry if the recent ruling of the Supreme Court, that the Electoral Act has no provision for the mandatory electronic transmission of results, might put paid to this promise. Furthermore, the confirmation of several resident electoral commissioners nominated by President Tinubu has drawn some criticism with some perceived to be loyalists of the ruling party.²⁹ These updates, while not directly linked to the elections, might be cited among concerns if there are issues with the elections.

Despite these concerns, there is optimism that a renewed interest in civic engagement will lead to more interest in the election. More organisations are engaging in fact-checking the contestants and there is a push to highlight the significant gender inequity in these campaigns. Despite the considerable progress to be made, there has been some respite from INEC and the Electoral Act. These elections will play a major role in shaping how younger Nigerians interact and embrace politics in the future. There might also be an increased awareness at the lopsided gender imbalance among nominees for governor in these states and increased scrutiny in the run-up to these elections. While this is a referendum on the state of Nigerian politics, it is also an opportunity for a reminder of the importance of this necessary civic duty.

²⁸Guardian Nigeria: <https://guardian.ng/news/results-of-kogi-bayelsa-imo-elections-to-be-transmitted-electronically-inec-clarifies/>

²⁹Premium Times: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/637979-tinubu-appoints-apc-loyalists-as-top-inec-officials.html>

ABOUT CDD

The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) was established in the United Kingdom in 1997 as an independent, not-for-profit, research training, advocacy and capacity building organisation. The purpose was to mobilise global opinion and resources for democratic development and provide an independent space to reflect critically on the challenges posed to the democratisation and development processes in West Africa.

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