



# ONLINE OPERATIONS:

Nigeria's 2023 social media election campaigns

Idayat Hassan

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The number of active social media users in Nigeria has risen from 27 million, in 2019, to 36 million ahead of the 2023 elections. But given the challenge of prevailing misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms, and the way such disinformation can permeate into the media more generally<sup>1</sup>, greater access to online information does not necessarily create more informed citizens. In fact, in Nigeria, it has confused the citizenry while entrenching pre-existing divides based on ethnicity and religion especially as malinformation, a deliberate sharing of genuine information with an intent to cause harm thrives in this election.

Ahead of the forthcoming polls, renewed sophistication and organisation in the push of disinformation has been observed with efforts generally focused on glorifying or delegitimising political candidates and undermining the credibility of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). At the same time online organisation remains largely informal, in part by design, with political parties driving disinformation behind the scenes through *unofficial* party accounts or hired influencers.

In 2023, in addition to the use of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp, TikTok, with its predominantly video content that can bridge educational divides, is playing an increasingly important role. So too are Twitter Spaces, which are recorded and then shared, as a podcast, across social media platforms in ways that increases listenership.

Cross-platform posting remains critical to understanding Nigeria's digital ecosystem as screen grabs or content from one platform can be shared across all others, broadening the reach beyond the number of direct users. Content also moves from online forums into offline spaces with soldiers of mouth spreading online content through streets talks, in motor parks and at newspaper stands.

This makes curbing disinformation very challenging in Nigeria. But at the same time these networks for the flow of information can also promote democracy. Civic awareness of the continuous voter's registration process and the importance of participating has largely been driven by a sustained

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1. <https://www.cddwestafrica.org/driving-division-disinformation-and-the-new-media-landscape-in-nigeria/>



online campaign in the run-up to 2023, while the platforms can be used to fact check and hold elected and aspiring officials to account. Finding a balance that accentuates these positives and diminishes the negative aspects must be a priority as the elections approach.

## KEY ACTORS

There are a multiplicity of actors working to muddy the water and make sorting fact from fiction difficult for Nigerians during this electoral season. For the first time, presidential campaign spokespersons, across all main parties, are pushing disinformation using their own social media handles. An analysis of breaches of the Peace Accord moderated by the National Peace Committee revealed more than 63% of the infractions were on social media. But it is not just party activists that are more directly involved, parties are again using networks of aligned supporters to win the ‘online war’.

In the 2019 elections, the Atikulated Youth Force, the social media team of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP)’s presidential candidate, and the Buhari Media Centre (BMC), with links to the All Progressives Congress (APC), dominated the online discourse. Such groups are still present in 2023, although part of the BMC has now evolved to centre around APC presidential candidate Bola Ahmed Tinubu, with his supporters identifying as being ‘BATified’. However, they have been supplanted in 2023 by Obidients - a name given to the supporters of the Labour Party (LP) presidential candidate, Peter Obi. They are the most active online actors in this election. In addition to promoting his candidacy, many have been accused of spreading disinformation. In fact, the candidate himself was compelled to call them to order in September 2022, after his presidential campaign was accused of using overzealous social media supporters to skew the narrative in his favour<sup>2</sup>. Obi also distanced himself from any engagement of his supporters in any malicious campaigns against his opponents in a series of tweets<sup>3</sup>. But such malevolent online campaigns engineered by all leading parties continue to be a prevailing feature of Nigeria’s information ecosystem.

The disinformation ecosystem has created lucrative opportunities, particularly for

2. <https://dailypost.ng/2022/08/10/caution-your-supporters-tinubu-warns-peter-obi-over-fake-news/>  
3. The candidate did a twitter thread cautioning supporters against the use of disinformation



youth. Some of the most prominent political influencers on social media, who are hired by political parties or individual candidates, earn up to N500,000 (US\$1200) a month, whilst those with smaller followings are likely to receive nearer N50,000 (US\$110)<sup>4</sup>. Though not all influencers are paid, those that believe that politicians have increasingly come to recognise the important role social media plays in politics and are investing more resources in it as a result. They argue that young citizens currently receive most of their information from digital platforms and that social media influencers even determine the direction and narrative taken by traditional media. This means that their influence extends beyond the online sphere, which is important, as traditional media, in particular local radio, still retains a strong influence in rural communities. Less prominent, but still important, are public relations firms such as Mint Reach who are playing an increasingly prominent role in handling the digital campaigns of frontline presidential candidates.

Parties and candidates, both at national and subnational levels, also align with teams of keyboard/cyber warriors, sometimes supported by automated bots, to spread disinformation about opponents. In this current electoral cycle, some of these networks are posing as individual fact checkers or platforms<sup>5</sup> to add credibility to the claims. The diaspora is also playing an outsized role in spreading disinformation in this current electoral cycle. Viewed by Nigerians as highly trusted, and neutral, this often lends credence to the information they share. But many diaspora Nigerians are instead overzealous supporters of political parties, who are using social media to push disinformation in support of their preferred candidate.

## PLATFORMS FOR CONTENT

In previous elections text and pictures were dominant but, in 2023, the emphasis is more on real time livestreaming of audio and video content on social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. Despite a relatively small direct user base, TikTok has emerged as one of the most important platforms in the run-up to the 2023 elections given its ability to catch the attention span of people in just a few seconds, particularly youth; the way it facilitates promotion and rebuttal in an engaging

4. FGDs with influencers Abuja, November 22<sup>nd</sup> 2022, also reiterated during FGDs in January 2023.

5. One of these platforms is called Reporteria and was established in July 2022



way; and how easily content can be downloaded or shared across other platforms. One of the most popular political song challenges is one coordinated by Dauda Rara, a prominent northern political musician, and is called ‘*Jagaban Shine Gaba*’.<sup>6</sup> The challenge encouraged citizens to mime a song with creative videos and upload it to TikTok. Rara and his team of judges reviewed the entries and awarded 12 cars, 30 iPhones and selected a further 50 individuals to receive N100,000 (\$220) each.<sup>7</sup> Other political actors have also been promoting challenges that favour their candidates by offering gifts or rewards for those that generate the most viral content. Coupled with the TikTok’s fairly lax community guidelines and limited enforcement, these challenges can be used to push disinformation “without those responsible being penalised” in the view of one user<sup>8</sup>.

TikTok content also reaches individuals without an account through cross-posting, meaning that it can reach Nigerians with limited literacy when it comes to written text. It is much cheaper to send out jingles on TikTok, which previously had to be placed on radio and TV channels, and with phone sharing and cross-platform posting, the audience reached can still be significant. Candidates approaches to traditional media seem to be reflective of this. While there are 28 governorship races, only a handful of candidates are advertising on national media as previously was the practice. The same goes for the presidential flagbearers with only Bola Ahmed Tinubu currently running any adverts on four out of the five<sup>9</sup> leading national broadcasters.

TikTok’s growing prominence does not mean the other platforms are no longer relevant. Facebook is used to target older Nigerians and groups linked to professional affiliations, ethnic identities or religious constituencies. Twitter is a key setter of the agenda for both youth and the middle-class, with its debates and discussions often dictating the narrative for wider political discussion in the country. Twitter Spaces, in particular, are a much-used feature in Nigeria’s electoral politics. All political parties are organising almost daily discussions, hosted by hired social media influencers or party activists, in which efforts are made to delegitimise opponents, boost the profile of their own candidate and galvanise supporters and would be voters to cast a ballot. The oral nature of the discussions and the difficulty in moderating them, means that they have become places where disinformation is rampant. Recordings of Twitter Spaces are now being circulated as podcasts for the young and middle-class demographic to listen to as they commute to work.

Finally, WhatsApp remains utilised to coordinate election organisations, circulate audio and visuals, and has the largest reach in terms of direct numbers of users. Voicenotes remains critical,

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6. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0gNRuZcd8Hc>

7. KII Kano, 18 November, 2022

8. KII Abuja, 4 January 2023.

9. He is running adverts on NTA, Channels, TVC and AIT channels apart from Arise TV



especially in local languages, with content regularly played and replayed to an audience that has no direct online access. Other closed network platforms like Telegram are also increasingly influential. One account, that remains anonymous, but that has over 400,000 subscribers regularly shares information on election candidates, some of which is false. These closed spaces are also used to help organise campaign rallies and other large gatherings both online and offline. The latter is a concern given that separatist groups, such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), have Telegram channels where they talk directly to supporters, spread disinformation, recruit adherents and plan offline activities<sup>10</sup>.



Fig 1 – Image of INEC fake press release alongside the rebuttal

For all social media platforms, the line between the online and offline remains blurred. For example, during this election campaign cycle, a letter on with the official INEC letterhead, and purportedly signed by the INEC spokesperson, was released claiming to commence the investigation of the APC presidential candidate on drug related charges. However, this letter was a forgery and it originated on WhatsApp, moved quickly across social media, and was read out on national broadcast platforms such as Arise TV<sup>11</sup>. There was never any investigation, nor was the statement issued by INEC, but in a rush to break the news, and possibly influenced by media partisanship, it became a mainstream story. The example given is an outlier, but social media more regularly serves as a source of content inspiration for mainstream media. It is common to find issues trending on Twitter being discussed on morning or evening debate shows as this is what the audience is looking to hear. In that sense media houses are bringing the online into the conventional media and into peoples’ homes. And when they invite so-called ‘political consultants’ as experts into their studios, they invite disinformation specialists. These individuals are often paid to peddle half-truths, promote conspiracy theories or attempt to legitimise false information flowing online.

10. KII Lagos, 5 January 2023

11. [https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/11/nbc-fines-arise-tv-over-fake-news-on-tinubu/#:~:text=The%20National%20Broadcasting%20Commission%20\(NBC,APC\)%20Senator%20Ahmed%20Bola%20Tinubu.](https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/11/nbc-fines-arise-tv-over-fake-news-on-tinubu/#:~:text=The%20National%20Broadcasting%20Commission%20(NBC,APC)%20Senator%20Ahmed%20Bola%20Tinubu.)



## DISINFORMATION TACTICS

Automation is a growing feature of the Nigerian online disinformation industry. Troll farms, and coordinated groups of bots promoting specific narratives, are used to share content through pre-agreed hashtags. According to our interlocutors, hashtags to follow and curated messages using hashtags are preapproved and shared for posting by leaders of troll farm networks.<sup>12</sup> Increasingly, Nigerians are also manipulating search engine results and hashtags. The manipulation of hashtags is used to boost the profile of a politician, for example, or to sell their agenda. Promoted posts can also aid in this regard, and as the increased funds for political campaigning reach social media influencers this tactic is likely to grow in prominence. Another aspect of hashtag manipulation in this election is the strategy of flooding hashtags to drown out opposing voices by posting irrelevant contents online under the same hashtag. While being used to bolster support or drive conversation, trends are also utilised as a tool to shutdown voices online.

It is also normal to see party stalwarts dominating or contaminating trending topics in such a way that the real news becomes difficult to decipher by using accurate videos but with false or out of context captioning. Videos are key to the spread of disinformation in the current elections, and along with pictures are the content most manipulated. Accurate videos can be mislabelled, inaccurately captioned or screen grabbed to relay a particular narrative, just as old videos are circulated with different captions or languages to disinform citizens. For instance, a video of a factcheck by France 24 of Peter Obi was falsely presented as France 24 calling the LP candidate out as peddler of fake news<sup>13</sup>. In short, many videos are often captioned in different ways to reflect different viewpoints making it easy to reconfigure reality to suit a particular narrative. With many users not even watching the content but sharing videos based on the conversation around it, these can circulate widely before being proved false.

Hiding behind online identities is increasingly a tactic deployed both by those spreading falsehoods and even by those looking to counter it. Hiding the identity of a user can enable that person to make outlandish claims with less likelihood of offline retribution under Nigeria's legal framework. For instance, there is growing evidence of accounts using 'ethnic names' to signal loyalty even if these accounts

12. FGD Abuja, 4 January 2023: KIIs held in Kano, Abuja, Lagos in November 2022

13. <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/truth-or-fake/20230116-nigeria-elections-2023-edited-video-of-peter-obi-goes-viral>





are actually operated by someone else. Deep fakes are another way that content can be pushed out in a way that obscures the individual behind it. Fabricated videos and audios are increasingly widespread in this election. An altered video of Elon Musk, owner of Tesla and Twitter, endorsing Peter Obi was just one example<sup>14</sup>. This endorsement is done to try and bolster the candidates record and acceptability globally.

Furthermore, the use of doctored chyrons or logos of reputable media organisations are being used by Facebook pages and other sites, particularly those that operate in local languages, to gain credibility for their inaccurate reporting. Related to this is the proliferation of blogs funded or operated by political parties and their activists. Some of these sites even produce partisan “fact checks” that favour their candidate to further muddy the water. Sites include Reportera<sup>15</sup>, Podium Reporters<sup>16</sup>, The Link<sup>17</sup> and Lagos Today<sup>18</sup>. These are made more believable by the fact that conventional media has been sharing video content and advertisements from candidates and parties that violates the Broadcast Code of Nigeria and the Peace Accord<sup>19</sup>, signed on by all the chairs of the 18 Nigerian political parties and their candidates, which prohibits the use of fake news, hate speeches and promotes issue-based politics.

## INSTRUMENTALISING INFORMATION

**D**isinformation is being instrumentalised to entrench pre-existing social cleavages around ethnicity and religion in the 2023 election campaign. This is accentuated by the fact that the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria are fielding presidential candidates - Peter Obi (Igbo), Bola Tinubu (Yoruba) and Atiku Abubakar (Fulani/Hausa). According to an interlocutor based in Abuja, “photoshopped scenes or old images are being recirculated or utilised to cast one ethnicity against the other and delegitimise opposition”<sup>20</sup>. An example was a picture of the APC vice-presidential candidate, Kashim Shettima, showing him with what was claimed to be members of the Islamist militant group Boko Haram. The image was circulated widely on Twitter, WhatsApp and was even referred to by a television morning show producer. A

14. <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/articles/crgd90yqvqo>

15. <https://reportera.ng/about-us/> established July 2022

16. <https://podiumreporters.com> repurposed in August 2022

17. <https://thelinkng.ng> Created 2022-07-22 Created 2022-01-13

18. <https://lagostoday.com.ng> created Created 2022-01-13

19. National Peace accord signed on September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2022

20. Focus group discussion 4 January 2023 with team of fact checkers and WhatsApp administrators.



factcheck eventually revealed that while Shettima was indeed sitting and having a meal with people, they were not Boko Haram members but nomadic Fulani parents whose children he had enrolled in secular schools in 2017<sup>21</sup>. With the APC running a controversial Muslim-Muslim ticket, this falsehood appears to have been designed to appeal to, and prey on the fears of, Christian voters.



*Fig 2 – Image of Shettima eating a meal with nomadic Fulani parents*

Disinformation is also being used to delegitimise institutions and candidates, thereby challenging their political legitimacy particularly in the eyes of the citizens. In the last few months there have been claims that INEC is involved with manipulating the voter register, hoarding permanent voter cards (PVCs) or that its chairman has been unceremoniously removed from his position. The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) social media war room investigated an image circulating on social media of a child who had a voter card showing him to be a 31-year-old. It revealed that the voter card is real, but a forensic analysis of the image using image and video verification tools reveals the image of the boy was manipulated. This kind of disinformation is preying on Nigerians distrust of institutions and previous problems with voters register and electoral system and aims to delegitimise the credibility of electoral outcome and cast a doubt on the election management body's ability to run elections.

Candidates have also been the target of delegitimising disinformation. References to Osama Bin Laden, former leader of terrorist group Al-Qaida, were used to suggest that APC Vice Presidential candidate, Kashim Shettima is involved with terrorism, while his principal, Bola Ahmed Tinubu has been depicted as Pablo Escobar, a notorious drug lord, over unproven rumours of his alleged involvement in drug trafficking dating back to the 1990s in the United States. These depictions are often in the form of videos or pictures. The health of the

21. <https://mobile.twitter.com/BBCAfrica/status/1615732008025563140>



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APC and PDP candidates has also been a particular area of focus in an attempt to throw into question their fitness for office. PDP candidate Atiku Abubakar was alleged to have been flown abroad for being sick, while Tinubu is accused of having Parkinson's or Dementia, a narrative that has been sustained by several missteps on the campaign trail.

Carefully curated false narratives are also being circulated to glorify candidates seeking election by exaggerating their successes and ignoring any shortcomings. Linked to this is an increase in fake endorsement of candidates and exaggerated claims of decamping. For instance, the Sultan of Sokoto had to publicly debunk an endorsement of LP candidate Peter Obi, a piece of disinformation he claims was intentionally spread to coincide with the visit of the APC vice-presidential candidate to the Sultanate. The aim of such endorsement is to bolster the candidate's acceptability. In the case of the Sultan his endorsement could have huge implication. Asides from his being the most senior traditional authority in northern Nigeria he is also the leader of over a 100 million Nigeria Muslims as the leader of the faithful. In Nigeria voters listen to their faith leaders when deciding on who to cast their ballot for.

Malinformation will play an important role in the forthcoming election, with political actors playing on sentiments tied to previous historical issues to turn out particular bases. A prominent example involves the late Sardauna of Sokoto, former premier of the Northern region, who was killed during the January 1966 coup. Because most of the senior officers involved in that coup were Igbo from the South East, the video has been sent with accompanying messaging to encourage northern voters to avoid supporting a candidate from the same zone whose officers killed the beloved premier. Previous interactions between the major ethnic groups, and their geopolitical zones, have been weaponized to increasing effect in campaign messaging during this election cycle.

## INFLUENCE AND IMPACT?

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**S**ocial media is increasingly influential in the political realm, as evidenced by the fact that more politicians are investing more in social media as part of their election campaign than ever before. It is, more than ever, shaping the coverage of the campaigns of mainstream media, with social media influencers having an outsized role in setting the agenda. Whilst social media has opened avenues for citizens to engage more robustly with their prospective



representatives the volume of false information circulating online can also lead to citizen actions based on incorrect information especially considering the long time it takes for politicians or government bodies to respond with accurate information. Trust is a scarce commodity in Nigeria and this fact is only being exacerbated by the volume of misleading content online.

Disinformation can therefore potentially foster insecurity and violence post-election. It can be weaponised not just to dampen citizens trust in the electoral process but to incite violence around the announced outcome. Since the commencement of campaign one of the consistently trending hashtags has been #BVAS – a reference to the newly introduced bimodal voter accreditation system (BVAS). Narratives claiming that BVAS is controlled by the state, will not work in certain parts of the country, or has been preloaded are just few of the false narratives swirling online. There are justifiable concerns that the weaponizing of narratives around the BVAS distribution or functionality during the elections could have post-election implications.

Women remain more susceptible to online abuse than men. Just as they did in 2019, female candidates complain of being threatened and harassed online as they seek to conduct campaigns or even engage in political discourse<sup>22</sup>. Online trolls regularly abuse women, inclusive of activists, for being ‘unintelligent’, ‘angry’ or even ‘ugly’. Female respondents also spoke of how these men enter their direct messages to bully them or ask for sexual favours<sup>23</sup>.

## RESPONSES

There has been a coordinated response by Nigerian media and civil society platforms towards tackling disinformation in the 2023 electoral cycle. The establishment of the Nigerian Fact Checking Coalition in September 2022 has enabled 12 Nigerian media and civil society platforms to jointly investigate, author and disseminate fact checks, widening their reach. These coordinated actions can bolster information integrity during the elections. Compared to the 2019 general election, INEC alongside her partners is also playing a much more

22. KII with female candidates in Kano (28 November 2022) and Abuja (5 January 2023).

23. FGD with journalists, Lagos 18 January 2022



visible and proactive role engaging and training both online and mainstream media platforms across the country on the issue of disinformation. The Commission has also been active and engaged online – its Twitter account has over two million followers – and it is engaging tech platforms on moderation during the elections. But it can still do more.

On the accountability front, under provisions laid out in the Cyber Crime Act of 2015<sup>24</sup>, it is an offence to spread fake news, and this is punishable by an imprisonment of three years or fine of N7 million or both. Furthermore, the 2022 Electoral Act prohibits the use of intemperate, abusive, and slanderous languages during campaigns, sentiments further complemented by the provisions of the National Peace Accord, midwived by the National Peace Committee (NPC), which requires signatories to commit to the non-usage of fake news and intemperate language during the 2023 campaigns<sup>25</sup>. However, its provisions have been observed more in breach than compliance. The NPC found a total of 67 breaches of the Accord that centred on the misuse of social media<sup>26</sup>, but it has little enforcement capacity to seek accountability in these instances. That is not to say that there have not been some sporadic efforts to clampdown on online falsehoods. In Kano, leading TikTok users were arrested for producing videos accusing the Kano state governor of being corrupt in late 2022. They were charged for defamation and sedition, and sentenced to 20 strokes of cane, to sweep the court premises for 30 days and a fine of N10,000 each<sup>27</sup>. But such punitive measures are driven more by politics than a systemic approach to tackling disinformation online.

The response from social media companies has been mixed. Since the commencement of the electoral cycle Meta have consistently met with stakeholders in the electoral system both government and civil society. Besides the sponsorship of some fact checking platforms, they have offered training, engaged and even, in an unprecedented move, given accounts of some of the disinformation circulating on her platform. This is a good beginning but can be further bolstered by the swift removal of content and downgrading of algorithms. The closure of the Twitter office for Africa in Ghana means its moderation of the content will be limited during this election. In a volatile election where Twitter is a venue for organising, incitement and false information, a lack of moderation and takedown capacity means that the platform risks fuelling, rather than dampening,

24. Section 24(1)(b) of the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention) Act, 2015

25. National Peace Accord signed on 29 September 2022

26. Monitoring the Non- Compliance of the Political Parties on Issue- Focussed Campaign

27. <https://punchng.com/kano-tiktokers-to-be-flogged-for-abusing-ganduje/>



rhetoric and even violence. TikTok has also reached out to stakeholders such as INEC<sup>28</sup> to discuss content moderation in the forthcoming elections, but it will also face the challenge of delivering effective content moderation in the array of local languages spoken across Nigeria).

## CONCLUSION

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Pre-existing cleavages, identity politics and the insecure political and ethno-religious landscape of the Nigeria's democratic system engenders the spread of disinformation in the country. The users of the tools and platforms being used to peddle fake news online are increasing and becoming more innovative than in previous polls. With cyberwarriors, campaign spokespersons and political handles continuing to make the political environment toxic there are concerns that digital debates can even impact on national cohesion. But that is also because online debates are not just confined to the digital realm. Increasingly the links between the online and offline are blurred with online information influencing offline coverage in newspapers or on television and radio.

To address this, it is increasingly apparent that collaborative and multi-stakeholder approaches towards tackling disinformation, while at the same time strengthening more positive elements of social media to weaken the threat posed by digital disinformation, are needed. Tackling online disinformation requires addressing some broader challenges linked to democratic deficits and trust imbalances between citizens and the state. Social media companies also need to be more accountable in offering a more robust proactive regulatory role in moderating content, particularly in local languages, and by creating a more digitally informed and educated citizenry capable of discriminating between fact and fiction. This should be the focus not just of social media companies, but also civil society groups and media outlets who can work to educate their audience through fact-checking and civic education. In addition, technical support to government agencies on how to engage on social media platforms and manage proactive and strategic communication across board both offline and online to reduce disinformation is needed and can be part of gradual efforts to rebuild trust.

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28. KII with INEC officials, Abuja, January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Idayat Hassan is the Director of the Centre for Democracy and Development and an expert in development and security studies in the region. She is a senior fellow of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, and is regularly quoted and cited by international publications.

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Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa)  
Research Department  
16, A7 Street Mount Pleasant Estate (CITEC)  
Federal Capital Territory (F.C.T) Abuja  
[research@cddwestafrica.org](mailto:research@cddwestafrica.org)  
[cddabv@cddwestafrica.org](mailto:cddabv@cddwestafrica.org)

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16 A7 Street, CITEC Mount Pleasant Estate, Jabi Airport Road,  
Mbora District, Abuja, FCT



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