



REVIEWING UNDERCURRENTS, TRENDS, AND INSIGHTS IN THE 2023 NIGERIAN OFF-CYCLE ELECTIONS

A CDD Post-Election Report



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nigerians went to the polls for the third and final set of elections in 2023, with citizens in Bayelsa, Imo and Kogi electing state governors. These polls were conducted in the wake of contentious general elections that produced a new president, national legislators, and 28 state governors. Those elections unveiled different factors that played a major role in determining the outcome, with issues ranging from identity to institutions and the threat of insecurity. These latest off-cycle elections in the three states have again demonstrated the challenge of surmounting such divisive factors. This report unpacks major themes identified by analysts and observers in the field, with a focus on incumbency and individuals, identity, insecurity, institutions, inducement, information disorder, and impunity. It situates the result in the wider narrative of reviewing earlier elections and comparing findings, especially around voter turnout. Finally, it also looks at general findings and discussions worth taking place ahead of future off-cycle elections.



INTRODUCTION

Throughout 2023, Nigerians have been actively engaged in various electoral processes. The most recent elections, which took place on 11 November, saw citizens in three states—Bayelsa, Imo, and Kogi—casting their votes to choose their state governors, marking the year’s final electoral events in the country.

Since 2011, several measures have been introduced, stemming from amendments of the electoral act to innovative technology, which appear to show an upward positive trajectory in the conduct of elections in Nigeria. However, notwithstanding these improvements, there have been challenges that have since played a determining factor in the outcome of polls. These factors have dominated and shaped the reports that the CDD has issued since then. It is particularly worrying that several of these factors have remained prevalent in these recently concluded 11 November elections, even after the recommendations and statements issued after the preceding polls earlier this year.

This report unpacks CDD’s findings through the thematic areas of Incumbency & Individuals, Identity, Insecurity, Institutions, Inducement, Information disorder, Impunity. It closes by looking at the impressions from the results and what it portends for the Nigerian democracy before concluding. The report adds to the necessary national

conversation that follows an election period with the hope that such conversation leads to a considerably improved and ultimately representative democracy.



INCUMBENCY AND INDIVIDUALS

There were reported instances of incumbency being weaponized during this election cycle. Governors in Bayelsa and Imo were seeking re-election, while the shadow of the outgoing term-limited governor in Kogi loomed large over the process in that state. Reports that these governors bought out hotels, restricted access to large grounds from opposition parties and made it difficult for opposition candidates and parties to campaign in their states do not bode well for a robust democracy with a multitude of views and engagements. It might be worth further research on if this development to situate the extent to which incumbency might have played in the voter apathy reported in these elections.

Also, the 11 November off-cycle elections were largely dominated by a focus on individuals over ideology and the lack of debates to ensure citizens were aware of the proposals these candidates had for the future of their states. CDD's fact-checking team carried out extensive work in this regard, with major governorship nominees implicated in instances of information manipulation.

During the campaign period, many of these individuals were also involved in one process or the other that led to undue attention on their person and not on their candidacy. This led to distraction and confusion on the viability of their candidacies. The primary processes themselves led to nominees taken to court by aggrieved participants who clearly did not trust the party's internal resolution mechanisms. This failure of parties is further concerning since proposals to amend the constitution to allow independent candidacies did not pass legislative processes.



IDENTITY

During the 2023 presidential elections, the role identity played in conduct of the campaign was featured prominently in analysis reports. Of particular concern was the outsized role that it played, and continues to play, in Nigeria's politics to date. Subsequently, during the governorship elections, there were considerable calls by the different political parties for senatorial districts to be compensated for a lack of representation in these state houses.

In Bayelsa, this consideration fuelled campaign calls by the APC for the Eastern senatorial zone to produce the next governor, after a brief period by former President Jonathan and his successor Timipre Sylva. Similarly in Imo, there were calls by the PDP for a return to Owerri zone after its sole one-year period, by former Governor Emeka Ihedioha, was curtailed with incumbent Governor Uzodinma's win at the Supreme Court. There was a similar call by the LP for the Okigwe zone, led by its nominee who was a former senator representing the zone. This perspective was most visible in Kogi, where candidates from the Western senatorial zone, led by the PDP nominee and the zone's former senator, complained about never having produced a state governor. The concern that the ruling party selected a nominee from the same zone as the incumbent governor led to agitations about marginalisation that dominated the campaign cycle.

A focus on identity should be expected in a heterogenous community as Nigeria's, and zoning can be seen as a way to ensure accommodation of all different groups when practised well. Yet, during these off-cycle elections, there were instances of candidates weaponizing ethnicity in an attempt to draw out their base. In Kogi, candidates made reference to their ethnic group and sought to castigate others in an effort to ensure strong turnout. When such utterances are made, the legacy of their impact goes on beyond the election and could be harmful for governance. It is advised that politicians be mindful of the power that their words have and that efforts be made to ensure equity in representation in leadership.



INDUCEMENT

Observers deployed by CDD widely reported attempts by party operatives to induce voters using both monetary and material items. These concerns, which were flagged extensively during the 2022 off-cycle elections in Ekiti and Osun, have become even more entrenched in the subsequent elections and were almost open and brazen during these 11 November elections.

In Imo, party agents offered voters cash incentives ranging from 1,000 to 3,000 Naira, while reports indicated even higher sums of 22,000 Naira in Bayelsa. Additionally, in the same state, there were troubling reports of INEC ad-hoc staff receiving money from party agents at PU 7, Ehime-Mbano LGA. Furthermore, in Kogi, individuals engaged in similar activities were arrested, including the LGA chairman of Igalamela-Odudu, who was detained with both cash and bullets in his possession. Inducement was not limited to money. Wrappers and rice were also shared in Southern Ijaw LGA of Bayelsa, which prompted concerns that the state government might have delayed the flood and subsidy palliatives to distribute during these elections including on Election Day.

The undue influence of money in elections has always played a role in the outcome of elections in Nigeria. Major parties, especially those with elected officials, are able to utilise access to funds to fuel their campaigns. Governors are often named as chairs of campaign councils, with the expectations that they will lead fundraising or devote state resources for this purpose. There is a great need for extensive political finance reform that will overhaul the manner that parties spend for elections and audit their accounts afterwards to ensure campaign limit thresholds are not passed.



INFORMATION DISORDER

Another troubling development of this election cycle was an awareness of the increasing impact that misinformation, disinformation, and fake news collectively referred to here as information disorder plays in the election process. While this is not new in politics, it has become a theatre of conflict due to the access that social media allows for bad actors to spread manipulate information. For instance, CDD's fact-checking team reported fake news circulating concerning the withdrawal of passwords to the INEC results viewing portal (IREV) for staff in Imo and some falsified instances of thuggery in Kolokuma/Opokuma LGA in Bayelsa with the aim of discouraging voters to go out and vote.

CDD Fact-checkers noted with concerns a trail of disinformation campaigns specifically targeting some candidates, even on the eve of the elections. These disinformation campaigns were similar to what was seen during the Ekiti 2022 governorship elections, where reports indicated that Social Democratic Party (SDP)'s Segun Oni had stepped down in favour of APC's Biodun Oyebanji. Noticeable instances reported during this cycle include the news that prominent candidates, such as PDP's Sam Anyanwu in Imo or SDP's Murtala Ajaka in Kogi, were no longer in the contest owing to voluntary withdrawal and disqualifications respectively.

A major incident of note was the news of pre-filled election result sheets found in Ogori/Magongo LGA and the impact that it played in how citizens responded to the vote in Kogi. The impact in this case can be quantified, with nine of the ten wards seeing the electoral process suspended. These developments mean that all stakeholders, from INEC and media houses to citizens themselves, must remain vigilant in fact-checking and reviewing information about the election process.



INSECURITY

Historically, Bayelsa, Imo, and Kogi have been marred by a variety of security challenges, which have had a significant influence on their respective off-cycle elections. These issues encompass a range of factors, including political violence, cultism, insurgencies, ethnic tensions, and separatist agitations. The combination of these security challenges posed considerable challenges leading to the 2023 off-cycle election.


Concerns were also raised about the seeming inability, or complicit nature of, security agencies in addressing the challenges that have become prevalent during these polls. There were reported instances in Agala Ogane PU, Dekina LGA in Kogi, where a person was reportedly shot and killed by military officials while fleeing in an attempt to snatch a ballot box. A similar scenario played out in Yenagoa, Bayelsa, where observers reported that a person was shot in Famgbe Community and that in PU 24, voting ended abruptly when thugs arrived and destroyed election materials at about 11:45 am. In the above polling areas, there were virtually no security officials.

The expected high level of insecurity and attacks, especially following the February general elections, were largely unmet and commend security forces for working to address this. But it is advised that there is an increased focus on security concerns before the election itself. Instances of the SDP campaign office in Kogi being burnt, the president of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) being detained in Imo and reports of clashes in Nembe LGA in Bayelsa should serve as lessons for security forces to learn about the need to be more proactive and mindful of their role as impartial arbiters of the election process.



INSTITUTION

The success of election is critically dependent on the conduct of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and other key election stakeholders. Such institutions play pivotal roles in ensuring the seamless conduct of the elections. INEC as a principal stakeholder is tasked with organising and overseeing elections. To perform their functions better, these bodies should prioritise transparency, professionalism, and impartiality. Timely and accurate voter registration, transparent ballot counting, and the secure management of electoral materials are essential to instill confidence in the electoral process. Observation from the off-cycle elections shows that INEC is faced with perennial deployment challenges. Notably, CDD's observations show that a substantial



percentage of polling units began voting well after the designated 8:30 am commencement time. This delay affected 65% of observed polling units in Bayelsa, 80% in Imo, and 40% in Kogi.

Security forces are responsible for maintaining peace and security during the elections. Therefore, reports of security personnel arriving late, and, in some instances, completely absent at the polling units remain particularly troubling. They should undergo specialised training in election security, focus on a non-partisan approach, and be held accountable for any abuses of power. Their presence should be reassuring rather than intimidating, promoting a safe and secure environment for voters.

Other important democratic institutions are political parties, civil society and the media. Political parties are pivotal stakeholders in Nigerian elections as they represent the interests and aspirations of various segments of the population. To improve their performance, political parties should prioritise internal democracy, transparency, and inclusivity in candidate selection, as well as conduct issue-based campaigns that address the needs of the electorate. Civil society organisations, including advocacy groups and watchdogs, played a crucial role in monitoring elections, advocating for electoral reforms, and ensuring transparency. They should continue to focus on building their capacity, fostering cooperation among various stakeholders, and providing accurate and timely information to the public. Their efforts can help keep the electoral process accountable and free from malpractice. The media serves as a critical link between electoral events and the public. To improve their performance, media organisations should uphold ethical standards, provide balanced and unbiased coverage, and conduct fact-checking to prevent the curtail the information disorder. Media literacy campaigns can also help the public discern credible sources of information.

Above all, the various arms of government hold a significant stake in the electoral process. Their primary responsibility is to provide the legal framework and resources necessary for conducting free and fair elections. To perform their functions better, the government should ensure the independence of electoral management bodies and the judiciary, uphold the rule of law, and allocate adequate funds for election preparation and execution.



IMPUNITY

Impunity in the conduct of elections poses a severe threat to democracy. Failure to hold accountable individuals and institutions abusing their power sends a dangerous message. When those responsible for election-related abuses, such as vote-rigging, intimidation, manufacturing and sharing toxic fake news, etc. go unpunished, it erodes the very foundation of democracy. It emboldens wrongdoers and undermines the trust of citizens in the electoral process. The Centre for Democracy and Development believes that accountability is not just a matter of punishing wrongdoers; it's about ensuring the integrity of elections and preserving the people's faith in their democracy. Without consequences for electoral misconduct, democratic values and principles are compromised, leading to a downward spiral of governance and social cohesion.

In the run-up to these elections, CDD observed instances of incumbency powers being abused in an effort to suppress opposition voices. Hotels were booked out to avoid lodging opposition party members. Access to promotional materials were restricted in certain areas and even public spaces under government control were limited to ruling parties. Such instances are worrying and speak to a wider culture of impunity and suppression.

Furthermore, impunity in electoral conduct can have lasting detrimental effects on the political landscape. When individuals and institutions are allowed to act with impunity during elections, it perpetuates a culture of lawlessness and undermines the rule of law. This, in turn, discourages political participation and leads to disenfranchisement among citizens who may feel their votes no longer count. As a result, it becomes increasingly challenging to build a thriving and inclusive democracy where the voice of every citizen is heard and respected. To safeguard the vitality of Nigerian democracy, it is imperative to address impunity in the conduct of elections, ensuring that those who violate the rules are held accountable and that the principles of fairness, transparency, and accountability are upheld throughout the electoral process.



IMPRESSIONS

Firstly, there was considerable compliance with uploading of the results on IReV. As at 5:30 pm on the day of the election, 47% of results for Kogi were uploaded, compared to 56% for Imo and 60% for Bayelsa. By 11:30 pm, this had increased to 85% for Bayelsa, 87% for Kogi and 89% for Imo.

While this compliance indicates an increased effort from the electoral body, there are still concerns about the use of IReV results by the electoral commission. As at around 10 am, when Imo's election was called for Hope Uzodinma, only 92% of results had been uploaded on the server, despite the expectation that there would be a premium placed on results on IReV.

Secondly, the results lay bare the differences and distinct divisions present in some states. In Bayelsa, APC's Timipre Sylva's wins came in two of the three LGAs in the Eastern senatorial zone, while PDP's Douye Diri won the other zones and narrowly won the third Eastern LGA, Ogbia, by a margin of just over 2,000 votes. There was a similar trend in Kogi, where eight of the nine LGAs that SDP's Murtala Ajaka won were in the Eastern zone, where his ethnic group are dominant. In both these elections, zoning considerations were amplified by ethnic groups that were dominant in these parts of the state. Expectedly, there might be concerns of these areas being marginalised by the new administrations.

Interestingly, all 27 LGAs in Imo were won by the incumbent governor. Any assumptions of his popularity or appeal aside, it is bound to be controversial that such an election with strong parties and candidates in the race was this one-sided. The three frontline parties all fielded three former senators, from the three different senatorial zones, which would lead to assumptions that their abilities to win their previous elections would make them strong candidates here again – which was not the case. Furthermore, the fact that parties with strong performances in previous elections would have no stronghold to report is surprising and unlikely. As recently as February, the Labour Party won the presidential vote in the state with an estimated 77% of the vote, leading to expectations that the party would be strong in the governorship election. The major parties were also fairly represented among the state's National Assembly delegation. In the Senate, APC won two seats, with LP winning the third, while APC won four of ten representative seats, with PDP winning three and LP winning two. This breakdown points to a fairly competitive electoral landscape, which was upended with the results from 11 November.

There were also widespread reports of results uploaded on IReV where elections did not take place, which implies that the results were predetermined. This was also referenced in the leaked pre-filled election result sheets in Ogori Magongo LGA in Kogi that INEC has announced investigations into. These instances speak to credibility issues around the results of the elections and could lead to some issues and likely litigation.

Thirdly, the voter turnout also showed that states outperformed the federal election. Kogi reported a 41% voter turnout in the governorship election versus 25% in the presidential election, showing a roughly 16% increase. There were fairly similar trends in Bayelsa, where the November turnout was 27 versus 16 in February and in Imo where November's turnout was 29 versus 20 in February. These trends point to increased engagement at subnational level, and it might be worth seeing if citizens in these states transfer this increased civic participation to holding their state leaders to account over the next term.



CONCLUSION

Elections have consequences, but perhaps a more important aspect of elections is ensuring that the processes that lead to the determination of new leaders are free, fair, and credible. To support government efforts, civil society and donor agencies have also played a key part in supporting the Nigerian nascent democracy. It is inspiring and reassuring that these groups continue to devote their time and efforts to ensure a robust democratic landscape and the entrenchment of civil liberties.

There are also wider questions about the legacy of the factors that CDD has identified. Issues around incumbency and identity have been prevalent in the past, but the rising level of information disorder, inducement and insecurity will likely lead to more apathy and disillusionment. CDD worries that the younger generation of Nigerians might see this as the 'status quo' with no desire or incentive to carry out the necessary work in correcting and changing the Nigerian democracy.

It is noted that there have been efforts to ensure an increased deployment of security officials and the introduction of technology in an attempt to ensure a balanced and fair election landscape. Findings also show that there have been efforts to ensure fair participation and an improved attempt to manage the logistical issues that have affected previous elections. In anticipation of upcoming elections, it is imperative that thorough introspection takes place across the nation. This introspective process must be comprehensive and must involve all levels of governance and encompass all electoral stakeholders. Through such rigorous self-examination, Nigeria can propel itself forward, working collectively to guarantee future elections that are genuinely representative and fair.

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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