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PRESS BRIEFING

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POLITICAL CONTEXT AND INEC PREPAREDNESS AHEAD OF THE RESCHEDULED ELECTIONS

Last week, less than six hours to the presidential and national assembly elections due on February 16, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) announced its decision to postpone the general elections by a week, citing logistical challenges. Presidential and parliamentary elections were shifted to February 23, and gubernatorial and state houses of assembly elections scheduled for March 2 were moved to March 9.

Outbursts of disbelief, anger, frustration and resignation hovered around the country. Political parties took turns to lambast INEC for their obvious incompetence and almost immediately, numerous conspiracy theories from virtually all camps emerged. It was left to civil society and election observer missions to call for calm. The issue for Saturday's rescheduled elections is that INEC needs to demonstrate to Nigerians and the world that it is indeed ready to conduct free, fair and credible polls on 23rd February 2019 for the Presidential and National Assembly Elections and 9th March 2019 for the Gubernatorial and House of Assembly elections. Have they addressed concerns that certain sensitive materials which had already been deployed in various parts of the country ahead of the new dates been fully secured? Have electoral materials sent to the wrong States been retrieved and sent to the appropriate States? Has INEC taken advantage of the extra time provided by the postponement of the elections to rapidly and robustly address all weaknesses in project management, logistics management and public communication that were apparent as of last week?

For us at the Centre for Democracy and Development and the Election Analysis Centre, we have once again deployed our observers and experts on the field, conducted focus group discussions and interviewed stakeholders to gather and filter information. Our objective is to critically assess the political climate and INEC Preparations based on facts, discuss challenges, spell out implications and offer recommendations.

Our findings are as follows:

1. On the state of preparedness

In line with the demands of civil society groups and foreign election observers that INEC should provide regular updates to the public in the wake of the last-minute postponement, the Commission has lived up to expectation by informing the public through different channels, including the social media, media appearances on TV and radio and most importantly INEC chairman Prof. Mahmood Yakubu holding daily briefings since Monday, 18 February 2019 to inform stakeholders on the state of play.

During the latest briefing on 20 February 2019, Prof. Yakubu told the media that the commission been able to configure 98 per cent of about 180,000 Smart Card Readers (SCR) nationwide. It is necessary to re-configure the SCR to reflect the new date and time of elections.

The Chairman said INEC had identified six areas subsumed under three broad categories -- deployment of materials, movement of personnel and reconfiguration of smart card readers that needed to be addressed to ensure voting happens as planned. He affirmed that all issues concerning the delivery of materials were not only identified but also tackled head-on. Ballot papers, result sheets and some other non-sensitive materials are reportedly in their appropriate locations nationwide.

Furthermore, he told journalists that State offices have fully complied with the directive to invite stakeholders to the Central Bank to assess the retrieved materials initially deployed last week and to witness to the batching of materials according to local government areas.

INEC is therefore categorical that it has moved sensitive materials to the 36 states across the country as well as the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Also, Adamawa, Anambra, Benue, Ekiti, Jigawa, Katsina, Osun, Ogun, Oyo, and Taraba States have started moving materials to local government areas as of yesterday (February 20). It hopes to complete the deployment of sensitive materials before the end of today (February 21). Additionally, all Registration Area Centres (RACs) would be activated by 9 a.m on Friday, February 22, 2019, and re-training of ad-hoc election staff is now scheduled for Friday, February 22, 2019, according to INEC. Election staff are expected to move to their areas of assignment on Friday, too.

Despite these claims, we have reports that there are some missing or misplaced sensitive materials. In several instances, materials meant for particular geopolitical zones are only now making their way to different geopolitical zones. There have also been mix-ups within geopolitical zones. For example, some materials for the South West made its way to the South-South, North West to South West amongst several others. INEC must ensure that before Saturday all the missing or misplaced materials are rerouted to avoid shortfalls or any hitches.

On the matter of kits and tags for observers, we found out that they are available, but observers sometimes have to wait for too long to receive them. Also, these kits are being rationed. This is an indication that the Commission did not produce enough. Some elections observers and

journalists reported that they received jackets without caps, while some got caps without jackets for example.

It is important to note that INEC Resident Electoral Commissioners have been embarking on confidence-building mechanisms mostly through reassurances on radio and television stations of the Commission's readiness for Saturday's voting. While this could increase people's confidence in the system, the measure is not evenly spread across the country, and unfortunately, some States have not done so.

In spite of these issues, our assessment based on Prof. Yakubu's briefings as well as verified information from thousands of our observers on the field, **we believe that the Electoral Commission is ready** for Saturday's vote. Nonetheless, there is a great deal of work to be done, including ensuring that issues concerning every aspect of logistics as well as the movement of materials and personnel from local government areas towards are completed without any further delays.

2. Welfare and security of Ad-Hoc Staff

Tens of thousands of graduates under the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) were deployed last week to serve in different capacities on the election day, including as Presiding Officers (POs) and Assistant Presiding Officers (APOs). Typically, they are entitled to a training allowance of 4,500 naira after a three-day training to prepare the corps members for their duties on election day. In total, they are expected to receive N30,500 for election duty. Although INEC claims that it prioritises the welfare and security of youth corps members, saying mattresses, toiletries, water, light and security were provided at each Registration Area Centre last Friday. Findings from our focus group discussions and reports from the media contradict those claims.

There are numerous reports of Corp members sleeping in open fields in the cold and relying on their mobile phones for light. For example, Corp members in Ilorin, the capital of Kwara state, had to protest before they got their allowances. Hundreds of elections ad-hoc staff posted to Ushongo Local Government Area of Benue also protested the delay in paying their transport allowance on February 16 before they got paid. The same happened in Kano State. In some states, Youth Corp members had to cater to their transportation to local government areas. A Corp member who preferred to speak anonymously told us that some of them did not receive the training allowance and spent between 1,000 to 2,000 naira out of their pocket to get to primary schools where they camped last Friday.

Besides ad-hoc staff expressing dissatisfaction with working conditions, we are apprehensive about the quality of some of them whose performance might constitute a challenge to the elections. We implore INEC to prioritise the retraining scheduled for Friday, February 22nd across the nation. Besides, INEC has to ensure that they provide sufficient security for them as most of the ad-hoc staff are unfamiliar with some of the areas they are posted to work and might be particularly susceptible to attacks and harassment.

In the end, INEC needs to, as a matter of necessity and urgency, avoid any delays in paying allowances and ensure that working conditions are safe and comfortable for the ad-hoc staff

because left unaddressed, these issues could lead to a shortage of election staff if those deployed begin to boycott their duties.

3. Redeployment of Police Officers

Police deployment has also been problematic. The deployments were announced on the 9th of February. Less than two weeks after the nationwide deployments, It is unfortunate to note that less than two weeks after these redeployments the Commissioner of Police for Akwa Ibom State Bashir Makama has been replaced by the Sokoto CP - Ibrahim Kaoje. In the same vein, the Deputy Commissioner of police, Mr Balarabe Sule, previously deployed to Zamfara has been redeployed once again to Kano for the election. He replaced DCP Bukar Made-Up, who served for only one week. Sule was former chief security of officer to Mr Ganduje.

4. The Political Climate

The postponement of the elections last week affected many people, particularly businesses and some voters who travelled hundreds of kilometres or even more to return to their polling units to vote. Some voters, unaware of the postponement also turned up in the morning to vote. It unclear whether some of those who travelled last week are willing to repeat the journey. It is important to note that some voters do not believe that the elections were postponed as a result of logistics challenges. There are speculations that there is a plot to rig the polls. The process of confidence building in the electoral process must therefore continue.

It is important to continue to challenge the enormous amount of hate and dangerous speech that are circulating. There is also a considerable amount of growing violence. For example, one Ifeanyi Ozoemena, chairman of the All Progressives Congress (APC) in Logara/Umuohiagu ward in Ngor Okpala council area of Imo state, was reportedly shot dead after overseeing a meeting in the ward on Tuesday night. In Kwara state, two persons were reported to have died as a result of a violent skirmish between supporters of PDP and APC at Ojoku in Oyun Local Government Area in Kwara South during a campaign rally early this week. Our observers have reported cases of intimidation as well as political violence in some states. For example, we received reports of politically-related violence at Qua'an Pan local government area of Plateau State involving APC and PDP supporters.

Thuggery is also a big problem in Kogi, particularly in Kogi Central and Kogi East, and since January the state governor, some commissioners and a few groups have been warning young people to desist from violence. In Obot-Akara Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) local chapters are engaged in a verbal war of blames following the killing of two people and the burning of 13 INEC vehicles convey election materials from INEC headquarters in Uyo on Sunday.

Political leaders have been fuelling the tension. The PDP Presidential candidate, Abubakar Atiku, has accused the Buhari administration of trying to disenfranchise voters to ensure that low voter turnout. Senator Godswill Akpabio had accused the INEC officials of colluding with Akwa

Ibom State Governor Udom Emmanuel to manipulate the elections. President Muhammadu Buhari, on his part, said INEC's "incompetence" was unacceptable. However, nothing brought much more furore than his comment at the emergency meeting of the APC on Monday when he said anybody who tries to snatch ballot boxes or engage thugs to cause disturbance would do so "at the expense of his life". The PDP quickly condemned it and called his statement a "direct call for jungle justice".

However, what does the electoral act (2010) say?

Section 129 subsection (4) of the electoral act in particular addresses this issue:

It reads: (4) Any person who snatches or destroys any election material commits an offence and is liable on conviction to 24 months imprisonment.

Section 128 of the act warns that anybody who acts in a manner that disrupts the elections "commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a maximum fine of N500,000 or imprisonment for a term of 12 months or both."

Section 131 stipulates a fine of N1 million or imprisonment for a term of 3 years for anybody who uses force, threats, violence or restraint.

On Monday, INEC backtracked from its initial position that campaigns had ended and gave political parties the leeway to resume campaigns again, the APC and PDP largely dominate much of the campaigns we have observed so far. Moreover, it is important to point out that even that is not evenly spread across the country, with our observers reporting a few campaigns mostly through radio and television but in just a handful of states.

5. Boko Haram Terrorism and Insecurity

On the day the election was postponed, Boko Haram militants attacked Buni Yadi in Gujba local government of Yobe state. This attack has further raised speculations and fear amongst citizens that elections may not hold in the local government. It may be recalled that Gujba was one of the affected local government in the 2015 general elections. Our further interrogation also reveals that even INEC is only requesting its personnel to report only on Friday, 22nd to know the state. Gujba is the local government of the APC governorship candidate in the 2019 general elections. Boko Haram has also conducted attacks since the postponed elections, the first in Borno was the attack in Maiduguri mosque, this is followed by the killing of loggers in a forest ten kilometres from Maiduguri.

The level of insecurity in the country is impacting on the deployment of officials for both observer groups and INEC.

Away from Boko Haram, armed banditry, especially in Zamfara state, might affect voting. This crisis is gradually becoming a big problem across the northwestern region. We also received reports of kidnappings in Shiroro and Raffi LGAs of Niger state as well as recorded cases of

security issues across local governments in Katsina state even though no stories of violence came from that end. The elections could be slightly marred by insecurity.

Recommendations

Based on our assessment and review, we propose the following recommendations:

1. INEC must address the status of the payment of the last week payment of ad-hoc staff to avoid staff shortage
2. It is essential and necessary to review security plans for volatile states such as Borno, Yobe, Adamawa and Zamfara states
3. While it matters that security is provided during the election, it is equally important that the authorities responsible are careful and do not unduly deploy excessive security during polls that might frighten voters and depress voting numbers.
4. Police should refrain from re-deploying their personnel a few days into the elections
5. INEC and all relevant stakeholders must engage in voter mobilisation to stave off apathy
6. INEC should increase its confidence-building measures particularly at the state levels

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7. We enjoin the civil society organisations and media to remain vigilant and without partisanship observe all deployment processes, monitor all aspects of the polling from opening to the collation phases.
8. we call on the political stakeholders to not just talk peace but make and walk peace.
9. We implore our young people to shun violence in the coming days.

Conclusion

We call on INEC to demonstrate to Nigerians and the world that it is indeed ready to conduct free, fair and credible elections on 23rd February 2019 for the Presidential and National Assembly Elections and 9th March 2019 for the Gubernatorial and House of Assembly elections. INEC Must immediately address concerns that certain sensitive materials which had already been deployed in various parts of the country ahead of the new dates been fully secured? Have materials sent to the wrong States been retrieved and sent to the appropriate States? Has INEC taken advantage of the extra time provided by the postponement of the elections to rapidly and robustly address all weaknesses in project management, logistics management and public communication that were apparent as of last week?