New Allegiances, Familiar Faces
A Preview of Edo’s 2020 Gubernatorial Election

CENTRE FOR DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT (CDD) PRE-ELECTION BRIEFING PAPER

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Introduction

As Edo State voters prepare to head to the polls for the 19 September gubernatorial election, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) is closely monitoring the democratic process. to ensure that the election meets minimum credibility requirements according to global norms and best practices such as:

- **Article 21(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,** which states that: everyone has a right to take part in the government of their country, directly or through chosen representatives, and

- **Article 21(3) of the same declaration which asserts,** “the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will be expressed in periodic and genuine elections, which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.”

CDD’s observation of the electoral process in Edo State, which is also informed by the guidelines of Nigeria’s electoral regulatory body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), will provide citizens, the media and other stakeholders with an objective, non-partisan assessment of the voting environment. The analysis will span the pre-election period, election day and the post-election period. CDD’s network of stationary and roving observers comprises civil society organisations, media organisations and citizens groups. Through these actors, we have, and continue to, closely monitor the major political and social events in the lead-up to next month’s poll. This paper documents our findings so far.
Challenges Posed by COVID-19 Pandemic

The 2020 Edo State gubernatorial election is the first major election that INEC will conduct since the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19). In addition to the disruption of lives and livelihoods, the pandemic holds significant implications for the electoral process.

As the virus has moved across Nigeria, since the index case was recorded on 27 February, the government has imposed lockdowns and curfews to curb its spread. Many feared that elections, which typically involve large crowds, would be cancelled until the end of the pandemic.

The electorate in Edo State will therefore vote at a challenging time. Figures from the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) indicate that as of 3 August 2020, the total number of samples tested for COVID-19 stood at 286,091. Of those, a total of 43,841 COVID-19 cases were positive; with 22,645 cases active; 20,308 cases recovered and 88 fatalities recorded. Edo State has recorded 2,311 COVID-19 cases, with NCDC data indicating that there are currently 335 COVID-19 patients in the state, with 84 deaths confirmed so far. This places Edo fourth among the 36 States and the Federal Capital Territory, in terms of the number of COVID-19 cases it has recorded.

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<th>Active Cases</th>
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<td>335</td>
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COVID-19 data for Edo State as at 3 August 2020
Source: Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC)
Nigeria’s Electoral Act 2010 as amended in Section 26 (2) empowers INEC to postpone an election

“where there is reason to believe that a serious breach of the peace is likely to occur if the election is proceeded with on that date or it is impossible to conduct the elections as a result of natural disasters or other emergencies.”

However, INEC has not decided to delay the vote, preferring instead to adopt a modified approach to ensure the democratic process is not adversely affected by the realities of the “new normal” forced on citizens and institutions by the pandemic. The Commission, in what comes across as a proactive and balanced response, invoked the powers conferred on it by

COVID-19 data for Nigeria as at 3 August 2020
Source: Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC)
Section 160 (1) of the 1999 Constitution as amended, by putting forward the “INEC Policy on Conducting Elections in the Context of the COVID-19”.

The policy provides a robust set of measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 during the election process. As part of the general protective measures, the guideline outlines INEC’s readiness to provide equipment and materials for sanitising hands and equipment at Registration Area Collation Centres, the Local Government Area Collation Centres and the State Collation Centres. Critically too, the policy stresses the mandatory use of face masks for all involved in the election process. The policy also states that methylated spirit and cotton wool will be provided for disinfection of the Smart Card Readers after the fingerprint of each voter is read and promises to supply infrared thermometers for use at Registration Area Collation Centres, the Local Government Area Collation Centres and State Collation Centres. Importantly too, the policy makes it clear the rules of physical distancing shall be enforced at all election activities including stakeholder engagement, trainings and when voters are queuing at polling units on election day.

The challenge facing the policy will be its implementation. The ability of INEC to manage the additional logistical requirements and the likelihood that staff recruitment may be adversely affected by ad-hoc staff being understandably reluctant to work during the pandemic, notwithstanding the usual risks of election violence, are all factors to be carefully managed. Citizen non-compliance with the COVID-19 protocol may also constitute itself as a serious challenge for INEC in implementing the policy. Edo State residents have only had a partial lockdown in response to COVID-19 and currently the wearing of face masks and adherence to physical distancing rules are not commonplace.

Considering these potential complications, there is a need for INEC to immediately start strategically thinking about how they intend to implement the policy during the election. For instance, if a voter shows up at a polling unit without a face mask, how should ad-hoc staff respond to the situation.
without disrupting the elections? There is also a need to train INEC ad-hoc staff to enable them to understand what is required of them in the context of COVID-19 prevention on election day.

Political parties have also consistently not adhered to COVID-19 protocols. Close observation of recent campaign rallies by both the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) in Edo State showed the parties disregarding precautionary measures for COVID-19 prevention. CDD observers noted that while some campaign rallies in Benin City, which were televised to a national audience, observed protocols such as the wear of face masks and the observance of social distancing, political rallies in small towns and rural areas have largely ignored these requirements. The fact that politicians and their supporters do not wear face masks or maintain physical distancing during rallies cast doubt on the existence of coronavirus among voters. It remains to be seen whether the Commission will have the authority to insist that political actors, who are known for routinely disregarding election rules, should adhere strictly to the guidelines as conceived. It is also important to point out that the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the economic livelihood of ordinary citizens in Edo State, money already plays a significant role in Nigeria’s politics. The new circumstances, “COVID economy” therefore, heighten the susceptibility of voters and electoral officials to vote-selling and bribery, respectively.
Activities of Political Parties

The CDD observers in Edo State have seen an upsurge in campaign activities by political parties. Campaign rallies, consultation with partisan supporters, and canvassing of votes are some of the activities, which have dominated the electoral landscape since INEC gave the nod for campaigns to begin on June 21, 2020. Political parties are major stakeholders, whose conduct will be critical in ensuring the Edo State Governorship election is free, fair and credible. Unfortunately, since the return to democracy in 1999, political parties, and their candidates, have emerged as key drivers of the instability and volatile character which has characterised Nigeria’s electoral politics. After the milestone of the 2015 general elections, and especially since the conduct of the 2019 polls, there have been concerns about the downward slide in the integrity of the electoral process by domestic and international observer groups.

At the centre of the slide in the credibility of the process is the desperation by political parties to capture power, and by extension, the apparatus of the state, through manipulation or outright subversion of the election process. A close look at the ward results collation process during the 2019 general election highlighted the high level of opaqueness and lack of transparency which characterised the process. More recent off-cycle gubernatorial votes in Kogi and Bayelsa states were marred and severely undermined by
violence, blatant vote rigging and a general disruption of process. Although the Court of Appeal recently upheld the election of Governor Yahaya Bello of Kogi State, CDD observers documented widespread violence, disruption of voting and other forms of electoral malpractices which undermined the sanctity of the vote.

Worryingly the pre-election environment in Edo State is witnessing the same trend of intemperate rhetoric, mudslinging and character assassination, which characterised recent flawed gubernatorial elections. A lot of the tension is being generated by intra party struggles for the control of key structures ahead of the election. The election in Edo State comes on the heels of a major crisis, which rocked the ruling APC at the national level, leading to the ouster of National Chairman, Adams Oshiomhole, who hails from the state and was its governor from 2008 to 2016.

The fallout between Oshiomhole and his erstwhile political godson and incumbent governor, Godwin Obaseki has cast the election as a personal political supremacy battle between the godfather and his dissenting godson. Shortly before the dissolution of the APC National Working Committee, which he led, Oshiomhole allegedly influenced the Edo State Governorship Primary Screening Committee to disqualify Governor Obaseki from contesting on the APC governorship ticket. The political disagreement between Oshiomhole and Governor Obaseki came to a head with the disqualification of the latter from contesting in the party’s primary election on 12 June. Governor Obaseki reacted to his disqualification by defecting, along with his deputy, to the PDP a week later.

It is not only the APC that has had its internal squabbles or defections. The APC candidate, Osagie Ize-Iyamu, contested for the 2016 Edo State governorship election on the platform of the PDP. In his explanation of the reasons for his decision to return to the APC, Ize-Iyamu stated that the PDP had been in disarray, a situation he claimed made it
necessary for him to “return home” by re-joining the **APC**. In terms of geo-political origins within the state, both Obaseki and Ize-Iyamu are from Edo-South Senatorial districts and both candidates picked their running mate from Edo North Senatorial District, leaving Edo Central, as a key battleground for votes.

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A fight over who controls of the Edo State House of Assembly, which has been an ongoing battle since the 2019 general elections has also heightened tensions. On 17 June 2019, the Edo State House of Assembly was controversially inaugurated with only 10 out of the 24 members **inaugurated**. Those sitting and making laws for the state were said to be loyal to Obaseki while the remaining 14 legislators who remain loyal to former National Chairman, Oshiomhole were excluded from the legislative process. On August 3, there was a crack in the ranks of the pro-Obaseki lawmakers when Yekini Idiaye, deputy speaker in the pro-Obaseki legislative camp and two other previously pro-Obaseki legislators declared support for the governorship bid of Ize-Iyamu. This raised the number of legislators in the pro-Oshiomhole-Ize-Iyamy camp to 17. Idiaye was subsequently **impeached** by six lawmakers in the pro-Obaseki House for his actions.
On 6 August, the day after Idiaye’s impeachment, security operatives cordoned off the premises of the Assembly as news started making the rounds that there was a ploy by 17 pro-Oshiomhole lawmakers to take over the Assembly and elect their own leadership. Later that day the pro-Oshiomhole lawmakers announced they had met at an undisclosed location and impeached Frank Okiye, the Speaker of the of the pro-Obaseki faction of the House. Although the impeachment did not take place in the Assembly, and the mace, which is the symbol of legislative authority was not in the possession of the pro-Oshiomhole lawmakers, they have continued to insist that Speaker Okiye has been kicked out. This tussle over control of the Assembly has further polarised the state and worsened the already volatile political situation. One that has not been improved by the intervention of the Attorney General of the Federation, who ordered the Inspector General of Police (IGP), Mohammed Adamu, to provide security for the APC lawmakers.
Dearth of Issue-Based Campaigns

CentreforDemocracyAndDevelopment (CDD) observers report that instead of issue-based campaigning, the political parties and their candidates have largely focused their messaging around praising their preferred candidate, while impugning the character of the opposing party candidate. From the camp of the APC, derogatory commentary focusing on the alleged forgery of academic certificates by Obaseki have been repeated on the campaign trail. During an 2 August appearance on Channels TV, Oshiomhole, doubled down on the often repeated claims that Obaseki was parading forged credentials, and was therefore unfit to occupy the office of governor.

Obaseki has also used the media to publicly talk about his relationship with his predecessor, who he accused of imposing his decisions on the party structure in the state in an interview with Channels TV on 21 June. The Governor said:

“our quarrel has been that we are doing things that are outside the constitution of our party. The logic of democracy is that it’s the people that should drive democracy. Democracy should be built bottom-up, and not top-down. Democracy should start from the base. In the last four years, we in Edo have restructured our party, we have built from the unit, through the wards, through the local government (areas), and to the state. And the executive at every level are in harmony. Our party is very strong in the state and the quarrel is that the party is not allowed to make its decisions from the base, decisions are imposed from the top, and that’s not auguring well; it’s creating disharmony within the system.”

The rift between the two men, who have collectively governed the state since
2008, has dominated the conversation in the media. This focus on personalities, instead of the core issues of governance, has overshadowed the real debate about what programmes and policies should be implemented to make life better for the people of the Edo. The S.I.M.P.L.E Agenda of Ize-Iyamu, which is the mnemonics for: S – security and social welfare, I – infrastructure and urban development, M – Man power, P – public & private partnership, L – leadership by example, and E – employment and the PDP’s “Forward ever, backward never” campaign have provided limited concrete details on how they intend to deliver their stated objectives, or how they will raise the funds to pay for them.
Abusive Actions

Since the start of the campaign there has been rampant defacing or outright destruction of campaign billboards. The trend, as documented by CDD observers on the ground, is that in PDP strongholds, APC campaign billboards are targeted and defaced, while in areas with larger concentrations of APC supporters, PDP campaign billboards are defaced.

CDD has observed several instances the use of government vehicles for the purpose of campaigning. This is in flagrant disregard for the provisions of the Electoral Act as amended which makes it clear that no person shall provide for the purpose of conveying any other person to a registration office or to a polling unit any government vehicle or boat, or any vehicle or boat belonging to a public corporation except in respect of a person who is ordinarily entitled to use such vehicle or boat and in emergency in respect of an electoral officer. The Act goes states that any person who contravenes the provisions of this section; shall be guilty of an offence and liable on conviction to a maximum fine of ₦500,000.00 or to imprisonment for six months or to both. But CDD observers regularly spot public vehicles being used for the purpose of campaigns; a 28 July rally hosted by deputy governor Phillip Shuaib, saw him arrive in a long convoy of government vehicles.

APC supporters have also reported to our observers that they are being coerced to withdraw their support for their preferred candidates through threats to revoke long held land allocations. APC supporters in Agbede town, Estako West local government alleged being a victim of political persecution as work on their previously approved building under construction was stopped allegedly on account of their insistence to support their preferred candidate. The Electoral Act, in Section 131, has robust provisions to cause an
investigation and redress of these kinds of complaints but, as usual, its provisions are being ignored.
A War of Words

DD observers have found candidates and key figures of the two major parties have been using a lot of hate speech and derogatory and intemperate language during the campaign so far. On 26 July, Oshiomhole in a speech to supporters made a comment, which portrayed Obaseki as a “green snake,” which ought to be killed:

“As they say, he is a green snake under green grass. Now the summer has come; the green is getting brown and we can now see the snake. When we see the snake, what do we do? We kill am,” he and his supporters shouted. This type of expression falls into the category of hate speech and has the potential to incite overzealous supporters to perpetrate violent acts.

APC candidate Osagie Ize-Iyamu, in a viral online video, is seen addressing a group of youths, who appear to be his die hard supporters as his “election lions and tigers.” The candidate is also heard telling them that their influence on the election goes beyond a single one polling unit: “After doing your unit, you will move to another unit. In fact, you will move to other wards. Some of you are so dangerous you will move to other local governments.” The APC candidate subsequently promised to handsomely reward them for their efforts. Such words are undoubtedly capable of influencing partisan supporters to violently disrupt the electoral process for monetary gain.

But the APC candidate is not alone in the use of intemperate, divisive and inciting rhetoric. The PDP candidate, Governor Obaseki, while addressing supporters at a recently televised campaign event, declared that nobody had the monopoly of violence:

“Nobody has a monopoly of violence. If they (APC) want violence, we
As party candidates and key party figures deploy violent and charged rhetoric capable of inciting supporters, CDD observers have reported that their foot soldiers across the state, especially in rural communities, have also been exchanging verbal abuses, hate songs and chants, capable of provoking violent confrontation at a localised level.

This sort of divisive language was the trigger for the 25 July clash between supporters of the APC and PDP in Kings Square in Benin, the Edo State capital. Clashes occurred after party supporters sang abusive songs to insult their perceived political adversary during a courtesy visit by Obaseki to the palace of the Oba of Benin. Reprisal chants and then a free for all fight between the two partisan camps then followed.

Another noticeable trend in the pre-election period is that after clashes by the foot soldiers, the leading political actors, especially party spokespersons and campaign council leaders who should be urging calm and suing for peace continue to stoke tensions by making further inciting claims to validate the actions of their supporters. After the 25 July clash, both APC and the PDP campaign teams immediately issued statements to justify the actions of their supporters and blame the other side for the violent, which left 10 people with gunshot wounds.

Asides the July 25th violence which erupted King Square in Benin, there have been several minor skirmishes and near violent incidents especially when rival party supporters are on campaign processions. Our observations and interactions have suggested that there is a stockpiling of small arms and light weapons in the state.

CDD documented open display of arms during one campaign rally in Okpella town, in Etsako East local government area

will show them violence; if you see anybody smashing any car because my sticker or poster is in the car, let us know, and we will show that person that we are in government.”
and raise concerns that further, and more deadly skirmishes, are likely as the elections gets closer.
The two leading political parties have established platforms to spread false news and disinformation on social media. The tension in the electoral space in Edo State is being fuelled by this weaponisation of fake news and disinformation online. While the bulk of supporters of the two major parties campaign offline at rallies and other campaign events, organised groups of rival party supporters are busy using social media to amplify the messages being generated on the ground. The partisan social media influencers are creating an avalanche of false news to discredit opposition candidates, key party figures and families linked to the election. Most of the disinformation being peddled is targeted at inciting hatred or the rejection of major party figures. Identity politics in the context of the ethnic origins of candidates and party figures is a prominent feature of the false content being disseminated according to CDD observers.

One example is a viral post circulating on WhatsApp in which the former APC

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1 CDD will Publish a Separate Report on the Use of Disinformation in the Edo Election
Chairman, Adams Oshiomhole is alleged to have said that Benin people automatically become puppets when money is thrown at them. The post, which has no verifiable source, has been repeatedly cited by PDP supporters on the ground as an indication of Oshiomhole’s hatred of Benin people. Without stating it, the subliminal message to voters of Benin origin is that they should reject the candidate of Oshiomhole’s party.

Another example of disinformation is a blog post circulating online claiming access to the medical records of one of the APC candidate. In the post, on an obscure blog site, the candidate is alleged to have been infected with HIV, while his wife is accused of diverting drugs from public hospitals to enable him manage the ailment. Governor Obaseki has also been targeted by peddlers of online misinformation. One story carried by a national daily alleged there was a rift between Obaseki and his deputy over non release of campaign funds, a claim that was vehemently denied by both. There has also been content circulating on social media claiming the governor’s wife is not supportive of his ambition.

Facebook, WhatsApp Nairaland, and Twitter are the most popular platforms for sharing fake news. Information from these platforms is then moved offline into rural communities, with party the canvassers identify hotspots – beer parlours, bars, transport hubs to go and spread the messages. This unverified, and sometimes deliberately misleading, content being spread by rival factions is capable of misleading the electorate, and undermining the peaceful and orderly conduct of the election.
Conclusions and Recommendations

On the basis of CDD’s observation of the pre-election environment, there are clear early warning signs which point to challenges that could jeopardise the electoral integrity if not urgently addressed. Apart from the threat posed by COVID-19, the attitude of the political parties, the inciting rhetoric and the role of fake news, misinformation and disinformation are all capable of constraining participation in, and undermining the integrity of, the election.

CDD hereby proffers the following recommendations to stakeholders involved in the Edo State gubernatorial electoral process:

1. **CDD calls on INEC to intensify its efforts in the area of training of ad-hoc staff to understand the new measures for COVID-19 prevention, and how to implement those measures at the polling unit level. This is in addition to reinforcing a firm understanding of their roles as impartial agents in the conduct of the election.**

2. **INEC and partners must commence voter education that clearly communicates her procedures for conducting the polls during the COVID-19 to voters**

3. **CDD appeals to political parties, their candidates and supporters in Edo State, whose antics have precipitated a tense political atmosphere, to immediately begin taking steps to de-escalate the growing tension ahead of the vote. CDD further urges the parties to focus the conversation on development and government issues that they would seek to address if elected to office. CDD further notes that it is unhelpful to the governance process for candidates and key party figures to focus on personalities, and portray the
election as personality contest, rather than an opportunity for the people of Edo State to determine their core governance priorities, and the leader to help realise them, in the next four years.

4. CDD recommends that where politicians actions and utterances incite violence, law enforcement agencies should move in, investigate and bring to justice, any political actor, irrespective of partisan affiliation, who runs afoul of extant provisions of the Electoral Act.

5. On the threat posed by fake news, CDD calls on INEC, political parties, the media, CSOs and community groups to engage the electorate in conversations, which highlight the problem of fake news and educate voters on how to identify and discountenance fake news, misinformation and disinformation. Such programmes should also incorporate peace messages to reduce the tension and build voter confidence in the electoral process.

6. CDD calls on the electorate in Edo State to understand that the 19 September presents an opportunity to vote for credible leaders capable of implementing programmes and policies to solve problems. Voters should choose the leaders they want, not sell their votes to the highest bidder.

7. CDD calls on traditional and religious leaders to desist from making political statements or from publicly expressing support for any political parties and their candidates. Such public statements could deepen the tensions that already characterise the election.

8. CDD calls on stakeholders to facilitate the signing of a peace treaty by political parties and their candidates ahead of the governorship election.
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.
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