



### EDO GOVERNORSHIP ELECTION, OUR VERDICT

The September 19, 2020 governorship election in Edo State has held out, beyond expectations, encouraging prospects for the future of competitive party and electoral politics in Nigeria. Its generally peaceful conduct was a refreshing development. It points the way away from the “degeneration” that has historically been the country’s sad experience with electoral outcomes, and towards outcomes that significantly reflect the mandate of the electorate. In this respect, the election potentially augurs well for the future of democracy and development in the country, particularly given the determination shown by the electorate to protect their mandate and ensure that it counted in the critical penultimate months to the election day. In addition to the voters, the credible outcome of the election was due to the activities of various strategic stakeholders, particularly the Independent National Electoral Commission; and to the pace-keeping efforts of the Oba of Benin and the Abdulsalam Abubakar-led National Peace Committee, which worked and intervened firmly, under a very dire pre-election context that portended violent election conflicts. Their intervention helped to turn electoral “swords” into electoral “plowshares”.

However, the CDD finds it imperative to set this analysis of the election in the context of cultural, economic and political undercurrents, evident in the elections, that may, unless addressed urgently, turn the euphoria into a mirage that would evaporate, precipitating a reversal to the *status quo ante* of the country’s experience of seriously flawed electoral outcomes. An indication of the implication of the contextual undercurrents is the declining voter turnout trend in Edo State, shown in Table I for the period 2003-2020. The decline needs more careful and comparative analysis with the national voter-turnout trends over the same period to assess the impact not only of the use of high technology to sanitize voter registration and to diminish deliberate over bloating of accredited voters and prevent “ghost” voters but also of the increasing securitization of the voting process to deter eruption of violence on election day.

Table I: VOTER TURN OUT FOR EDO GOVERNORSHIP ELECTION, 2003-2020

Year	Voter turnout	Registered Voter
2003	78%	1,432,891
2007		
2012	40.5%	1,651,099
2016	32.3%	1,925,105
2020	25.2%	2,210,534

Source: Compiled by Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD)

## **Critical Process Issues**

A significant undercurrent which affected the electoral process was the controversial modality used for selecting the governorship candidates of the two major political parties. The acrimony that resulted from it created serious intra-party and inter-party fissures that cast an ominous pall over the peaceful conduct of the election. The second significant undercurrent was the political culture of a zero-sum approach to the competitive electoral process that tends to precipitate violent electoral conflict and to encourage the abuse of the power of incumbency for partisan party electoral advantage. The third undercurrent was the general poverty in the state, as well as in the country generally, and the high unemployment rate, particularly among the youth, that provided a pool from which political parties and their candidates drew to corrupt the electoral process, enabling them to ‘steal’ the people's mandate. These undercurrents continue to pose challenges for the competent and effective administration and management of the election by INEC to generate trust in the conduct of the election. It is to the credit of the INEC that, through its persistent investment in internal administrative reform and in the application of high technology to sanitize the electoral process, it has shown increasing capacity to address these undercurrents, in a manner to win the approbation and trust of the electorate, as attested to by the September 2020 Edo governorship election. A final point is the challenge posed for the conduct of the election during the COVID-19 pandemic, given the public health

## **Analyzing the Process Issues**

What follows provides a brief tentative analysis of the implications of some contextual undercurrents for the conduct of the election:

- a) The modality for candidate selection: this caused tension throughout the months leading to the election, reflected in defections from each of the major political parties; intra-party fractionalization; disputes over which factions were in control of party secretariats at the state and local government levels; and court adjudication of disputed party nomination processes for governorship candidates.
- b) Zero-sum political culture and abuse of power of Incumbency: Incidents of pre-election violence in Ikpoba, Okha, Oredo, Esan West, and Oriohomwon were directly related to the high premium placed on violence and intolerance induced by a zero-sum approach to electoral politics; as were directives to party chieftains and leaders to deliver their constituencies to the party candidates at all cost. State (federal and state government) resources were also deployed for political-party partisan advantage by the major parties.

However, the security personnel deployed for the election comported themselves and displayed professionalism in securing the electoral process on election day. This was a refreshing departure from the general experience, in past elections in the state and generally in the country, with the deployment of security agencies for partisan party-political electoral advantage.

- c) The use of unethical non-conventional campaign strategies helped to shape perception, delegitimize the process and actors, while its characteristic use of hate speech instigated tensions and precipitated the eruption of violence. The combination of vote-buying and insidious influence campaign is changing the electoral outcomes.
- d) Poverty and unemployment: The scale of vote-buying and the brazenness with which it was carried out in the **open tainted the credibility of the election**. The high level of poverty, unemployment, and youth bulge in the state accounted for the development, although it is also indicative of the impunity which the political parties breached the electoral law.
- e) INEC: Although smart cards readers malfunctioned in several polling units, their overall performance was smooth across the state. We commend INEC for the introduction of the result viewing portal in improving transparency and accountability of the collation and declaration of results. We regard this innovation as a commendable practice in enhancing electoral integrity.
- f) Non-observance of COVID-19 Protocols: Generally, the COVID-10 Protocols that INEC outlined in its guidelines for the election, particularly physical distancing, were not complied it. This has far-reaching health implication for the public health safety.

## **Conclusion: Recommendations**

The foregoing summary of important undercurrents shaping the electoral process in the 2020 governorship election in Edo points to the urgent need to undertake electoral reform in the country. This is necessary to a) build on the gains of the election, and b) address some of the problems in the electoral process highlighted in the summary. The objective of such reform will be to strengthen electoral integrity and more broadly promote good governance in the country as a force for generating a national democratic political culture. It is clear from the Edo governorship election that, when encouraged and mobilized, citizens can serve as effective guardrail to protect electoral mandate from assault by anti-democracy elements.

Importantly we task INEC to concentrate on the duo of implementing her protocol on conducting elections during COVID 19 and improved voter education program. These are broad tasks that must be implemented ahead of the forthcoming Ondo governorship elections.

## **Box I: Recommended electoral and governance reform.**

### Modality for Selection/Nomination of Party Nominations for Executive/Legislative Offices

- a) Reform the country's party system to strengthen internal party democracy as a mechanism to ensure open, transparent, inclusive and democratic elections of party leadership and nomination processes for elective public political offices, and to ensure that political parties pay more attention to the nomination of women and youths as candidates and have equal access to leadership opportunities within party organizations
- b) Enact legislation providing conditions for political parties to get on the ballot during general elections.

### Diminishing zero-sum politics and abuse of power of Incumbency

- a) Reserve/consider cabinet-level and board appointments for political parties that secure at least 2.5% of national assembly/state assembly seats during the general elections.
- b) Establish an Electoral Offences Commission.
- c) Explicit legislation stating that agencies under the Executive that are involved in elections shall not be used to undermine free and fair elections. Such agencies include the security bodies and public service."
- e) "The provisions of the Electoral Act, which prohibit the abuse of the powers of Incumbency, including the misuse of official powers and resources should be strengthened and enforced through constitutional provisions or legislation for public interest litigation by civil society organizations and citizens
- h). Enact legislation to vest the power to deploy state resources and public servants, including the military, police and other security personnel in INEC, six months before the country's general elections as in India.
- i). Enforce and strengthen provisions of Electoral Act prohibiting the abuse of the powers of Incumbency, including the misuse of official powers and resources, primarily through the use of public procurements to serve as war-chest for electoral purposes.
- j). Remove the power of the President to appoint members of INEC and make their appointment subject to the process outlined and recommended in the *Report of the Electoral Reform Committee 2008*, and vest appointment of REC in INEC.
- k) Prohibit, under penalty public agencies, including the police and security agencies under the Executive that are involved in elections from being used for partisan political purposes to undermine free and fair elections. Such agencies include the security bodies and public service.

### Poverty and Unemployment

- a) Encourage compliance with Chapter II of the Nigerian Constitution and meeting the SDGs  
INEC:
  - a) Unbundle and reorganize INEC, as recommended by the Hon. (Mr.) Justice Uwais Electoral Reform Committee.
  - b) Change the modality for appointing members of the new INEC and reorganize it as recommended
  - c) Extend the use of high technology to promote, strengthen and sustain electoral integrity.