

## **CDD PRE-ELECTION REPORT: 2020 ONDO STATE OFF-CYCLE GOVERNORSHIP ELECTIONS**

### **Introduction**

On October 10, 2020, voters across 18 Local Government Areas in Ondo State will head to the polls to elect a governor, barely a month after the largely peaceful and credible conduct of the September 19, 2020 governorship polls in Edo State. In view of the commendable electoral outcome in Edo State, Nigerians in Ondo State and in other states in the country, are watching closely to see if the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the political parties, security agencies, voters and other actors playing critical roles in the conduct of the Ondo governorship elections on October 10, 2020, will acquit themselves creditably in a manner to consolidate the gains of the Edo elections, and further lay firm roots for democratic politics in Nigeria.

In view of this, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) through its dedicated Election Analysis Centre (EAC) has been observing and analyzing key processes in the Ondo State Governorship elections to determine the extent to which they substantially measure up to and conform with national, African and international codes and standards defining the conditions for free and fair elections. CDD is doing this, as it has been doing since 1999, through its network of stationary and roving observers, made up of researchers, civil society organisations, media organisations and citizens groups, to provide an objective, non-partisan assessment of the voting environment leading to the elections, on Election Day and immediately after the elections.

This Report documents CDD's preliminary findings and assessment of the pre-election situation leading up to the Governorship elections in Ondo State on October 10, 2020.

### **The Political Context**

Unlike the trend in recent governorship elections in Ondo State, where the political contest was a two-horse race between the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the political dynamics of the October 2020 race in the state is pointing towards a more competitive three-way race between the APC, PDP and the Zenith Labour Party (ZLP). The precipitating catalyst turning the race into a three-horse race was the defection from the APC of the current Deputy Governor of Ondo State, Hon. Agboola Ajayi, who is now the ZLP governorship candidate, first to the PDP, and then to the ZLP, after failing to secure nomination as the PDP's governorship flagbearer in the party's governorship primary elections. However, the internal wrangling in the APC following the governorship primaries led to the defection of Akeredolu's Deputy, Agboola Ajayi to the PDP in the hopes of clinching the governorship ticket.

The development has generated a complex web of alliances, intrigues and political maneuverings entangling the elections. For example, the Deputy Governor's defection created a third force, likely to hive substantial votes from each of the two major parties, the governing APC and the PDP, to affect the eventual outcome of the elections, especially as the Deputy Governor, Agboola Ajayi, who is from the Southern Senatorial District, picked his running mate, from the Central Senatorial District, which is also the district of the PDP governorship candidate.

Another important contextual issue is that it is coming closely on the heels of the Local Government elections conducted in the state on August 22, 2020. Despite the boycott of the elections by the major opposition PDP, the polls went ahead with the participation of fringe parties, such as the Social Democratic Party (SDP). At the end of the elections, all the 18 Local Government Council Chairmanship seats were won by the APC. The Local Council elections were marred by various incidents of violence, and a litany of electoral malpractices. There were reports of arrests of persons with ballot boxes stuffed with thumb-printed ballot papers. CDD observers on the ground reported that the illegalities and irregularities, which characterised the Local Council elections could dampen voter confidence in the Governorship election, although the local government elections were conducted not by INEC but by the Ondo State Independent Electoral Commission.

### **Political Elite Responsible For Lax Adherence To COVID-19 Prevention Protocols**

The Ondo State governorship election presents another opportunity to assess the resolve of INEC to enforce compliance with its election COVID-19 prevention protocols. In Edo State, there was lax compliance with COVID-19 protocols by stakeholders, including voters and INEC ad-hoc staff.

CDD observers have observed and reported widespread disregard and dismissal of the threat posed by the dreaded virus to public safety in the state. In public places across Ondo State, residents have been going about their business normally with very scant regard for the need to use face masks and observe social distancing. CDD observers report that the lack of seriousness to comply with COVID-19 prevention protocol by majority of residents in Ondo State, is partly informed by perception that infection rates have been dropping. There is also the challenge posed by the levity with which the political elite themselves have reacted to the risks that the virus poses for public health safety in the state. From what is apparent from the electioneering campaigns, there is scant regard or attention paid to the procedures and protocols put in place to stem the spread of the virus. For example, campaign events organised by the APC, the PDP, and the ZLP in Ondo State have shown little or no regard for COVID-19 prevention protocols.

CDD observers documented many instances where residents pointed at the quickness with which the State Governor, Akeredolu recovered from the virus as one of the reasons why they think it is not as potent as it is. Others stated they have not met anybody who died as a result of the virus. According to figures from the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), as at October 2,

2020, Ondo State had 1631 lab confirmed cases of COVID-19. The number of cases on admission stands at 50, while the number of cases discharged is 1545, and the number of deaths 36.

### **INEC Preparations**

A total of 1,822,346 registered voters are eligible to vote on October 10, 2020 during the governorship elections in Ondo State. INEC must be prepared to distribute electoral materials to all polling units in a timely and efficient manner to adequately cater to the registered voters showing up at the polling centres on Election Day. As the experience of the September 2020 governorship elections in Edo State shows, delays or logistic problems in the distribution chain of election materials can derail the timely arrival of election materials at polling units. One of the major factors responsible for the late arrival of materials in Edo State was subtle protest by ad-hoc staff against the nonpayment of sundry allowances, including for feeding and transportation, due to them. INEC must proactively resolve these issues to ensure they do not derail the smooth conduct of the elections on October 10, 2020. Although the Commission has announced its readiness to conduct hitch-free elections in Ondo State, the terrain in Ondo State will present its own unique challenges. CDD calls on INEC to take this challenge with all seriousness by properly mobilising its assets in order to avoid logistics problems, which could lead to the disenfranchisement of voters in certain areas.

This is more so because ensuring election materials arrive in all parts of the state timeously is critical to prevent the spread of false narratives by politicians, who would readily capitalize on hitches in the voting process on Election Day to make insinuations that delayed arrival of the materials to certain places is part of a ploy to rig the elections. For example, it is imperative for INEC to make special arrangements for the timely distribution of materials and deployment of ad hoc staff to LGAs in riverine areas of the state, such as Ese Odo and Ilaje. Getting logistics right in the riverine areas of the state is key to preventing agitations, which could degenerate into the outbreak of avoidable deadly violence in the areas.

### **Issues Based Campaigns Despite Threat of Fake News**

On a positive note, CDD observers have reported a trend towards issues-based campaign as a prominent feature of the governorship elections. The people of Ondo State have displayed a strong determination to take candidates and their parties to task on their manifestoes for the social development, human security and industrial development in the state. Typical of the focus and tone of the debate is the debate on school fees and maternal health policy, as election issues. The intensity and the electoral value of the tuition fees issue contributed to the decision of the state government on August 26, 2020 to reduce tuition fees in the public educational institutions in the state, as an election winning strategy by the governor who is seeking reelection.

Another governance issue raised in the elections is about policy aimed at promoting the rights of women and girls, in view of the alleged scrapping of the free maternal care (Abiye) programme introduced by previous state government, by the current governor who is seeking reelection, resulting in the higher cost of healthcare for expectant mothers.

The trend towards issues-based campaign is a refreshing departure from the politics of personality cult and sectarian considerations that had tended to characterize and define previous election campaigns in the state. If sustained the trend bodes well for the nurture and development of a political culture of democratic accountability and robust popular engagement in the governance of the state. is being enhanced with citizens asking clear questions about performance with respect to specific programmes and policies.

### **Role of NURTW, cultists, pirates and militants**

CDD observation of the pre-election environment in Ondo State indicates that the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW), and the Okada Riders' Association will play a major role in the complex web of alliances, that will drive the elections. One of the worrisome realities is that NURTW, one of the major unions is perceived as a highly partisan association, which is reputed for using its power to corrupt the electoral process.

The closeness of the union to partisan interests could dent the credibility of the elections. The leaders of the NURTW in some sense would be fighting for their own survival because the tradition is that every NURTW Leadership leaves with any administration voted out. Incidentally, the NURTW is the body INEC relies on for transportation of electoral materials. This may create a problem for INEC in the area of getting materials to all voting areas in the state. Apart from the NURTW, militant groups such as the Okada Riders' Associations and pirates are other groups of actors whose activities can dent the credibility of the elections, particularly as a result of the increase in their activities in the riverine areas where armed groups have a history of making the areas ungovernable, and are reputed to have strong links with wider networks of militants in the Niger-Delta.

### **Vote buying**

CDD observers report that voter inducement is a feature of the elections, with instances of the distribution Ankara (textile materials), branded soap, slippers and money to induce voters. Voter inducement, although not peculiar to any local government, has been rampant across the state. CDD observers report that, as a result of rampant poverty, voters can be easily induced with material gifts to exchange their vote for money material gifts, especially in a political environment defined by the economic and social costs of the COVID-19 pandemic. .

## Media Access

The power of incumbency cannot be discounted when it comes to campaigns through and on the media by candidates and their political parties. CDD observers report that there are disproportionate more political advertising by the APC than by any other party. This advertising is particularly evident in the display of public billboards and campaign posters, and kindred advertisements and features on the state television and radio in the major towns and urban areas of the state. In addition, the state-owned media organisations seem to serve the incumbent so well to the extent that the PDP alleged that when advertisements are paid for by the oppositions, the advertisements are not aired. According to the PDP, the only media organisations accessible to the opposition in the state are Breeze FM, Crest FM and sometimes Adaba station which are all privately owned.

## Women Participation

CDD observers report that fears are expressed by women groups that the highly contentious and agitated tone of the electioneering campaigns could make the electoral terrain too heated to discourage women to come out to vote on Election Day. A respondent from the National Council for Women Societies told CDD observers that the highly competitive nature of the political terrain, brought about by defections and party realignments, has created personal safety concerns likely to discourage women from coming out to participate actively in the elections. To underscore the concern, she pointed to the August 2020 LGA elections in the state were characterized by ballot snatching and violent communal clashes in Ifedore LGA and Iyameta in Ikare, among other places, that left many wounded and taken to the hospitals. Reflecting on the experience of women during the local governments elections, she attributed the low voter turnout in the elections to the fear of violence.

Added to this, the incentive for women participation is very low. In the Ondo State House of Assembly, there is only one female member, who has been by the House of Assembly. The women groups further lamented that, although in the August 2020 LGA polls, one woman emerged as Chairperson in Ese Odo LGA, after defeating a male candidate from the Social Democratic Party (SDP), the participation of women in the elections was generally poor.

## Conclusion

The political environment in Ondo State is steadily proving a commodious one for peaceful conduct of the governorship elections in the state on October 10, 2020, although as some of the findings in this pre-election statement indicates there remain potential dark spots that must be eliminated or reduced ahead of the Election Day.

CDD is hopeful that INEC and relevant stakeholders in state and society particularly in Ondo State and in Nigeria generally will come together to address the dark spots and, doing so, brighten the prospects for the conduct of not only peaceful but also free and fair elections in Ondo, with commendable lessons learnt for future elections to enhance democracy and development in Nigeria.

### **THE CENTRE FOR DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT**

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