ANAMBRA ELECTION 2021:
LOW VOTER-TURNOUT EXPECTED AMID IPOB FEARS

ELECTION BRIEFING
Center for Democracy and Development (CDD), Abuja

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Scheduled to hold on 6 November, 2021, the gubernatorial election in Nigeria’s South-eastern state of Anambra has been the source of much consternation among observers and analysts.

Since Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999, a heightened degree of controversy has come to be associated with gubernatorial politics in Anambra, with the state having had two governors impeached, at least one sacked by the courts for being fraudulently elected, and another kidnapped by political opponents. As an off-cycle election, occurring in the second year after the presidential and most governorship elections are held, the Anambra State governorship has also typically attracted an additional level of scrutiny. In addition, the internal politics of the dominant parties in the state have long been riven by factional intrigue. Indeed, the courts having already been called on several occasions this year to mediate disputes within all three of the biggest parties contesting the election: the All Progressive's Congress (APC), the People's Democratic Party (PDP), and the All Progressive's Grand Alliance (APGA). Furthermore, while Nigeria’s electoral umpire the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was widely lauded for its conduct of the most recent governorship election held in Edo, the commission has historically battled significant logistical challenges and low levels of voter turn-out in the state, raising concern about the potential credibility of the electoral outcome.

However, overshadowing these perennial concerns have been two recent developments that appear to present a more fundamental challenge to the feasibility of holding the election altogether. The first of these is the dramatic emergence of the so-called “unknown gunmen” who are alleged to at least partially be armed agents of the separatist Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) Movement. Since October 2020, these often masked actors have conducted a series of arsons and armed attacks in Anambra and across the South-eastern states, targeting the offices, properties, and personnel of the police, the Nigerian Correctional Service, and other state security institutions as well as offices and equipment belonging to INEC. This overarching security concern has already
had an impact on electioneering, as parties have reportedly held fewer rallies and political meetings, fearing either the possibility of IPOB assaults or that political adversaries would take advantage of the situation to launch attacks.

Secondly, following the incarceration and forced repatriation of its leader, Nnamdi Kanu, in July, 2021, IPOB has repeatedly declared and brutally enforced sit-at-home protests that have grounded commerce and activities to a halt in the five states in South-east Nigeria in which the group is campaigning for succession. More directly, the group has threatened to impose a week long sit-at-home order, from the 5 - 10 November -- the date of Kanu's next court appearance -- unless their leader is released from custody with all charges against him dropped. While the group made a similar threat ahead of the 2017 Anambra election -- which nonetheless ultimately took place -- the fairly successful nature of its recent sit-at-home protests and the seeming emboldened posture of the group in recent times have elevated the risk that the IPOB may attempt to make good on its threat this time around. The combination of the insecurity, cynical political intrigue, and operational difficulties highlighted above have elevated the risk that the elections will either not hold or be of substantially poor quality. Reflecting on this multifaceted set of concerns, the following briefing offers a forward looking analysis of how these factors will likely shape the conduct and outcome of the Anambra 2021 governorship election.
The activities of so-called “unknown gunmen” and the sit-at-home order pronounced by IPOB appear to be the most significant factors that could affect the conduct of the election. The most recent armed attacks reported in the state occurred on 3 October, when unidentified gunmen allegedly attacked and burned down the offices of the Department of State Services (DSS) and Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC) in Nnewi, Anambra state. Similarly, on 30 September five police officers were reportedly killed and a police station set ablaze in Ajali, Orumba North Local Government Area of the state. On the same day, armed men along the Nnobi-Nnewi road reportedly attacked the convoy of Chris Azubogu, a member of the House of Representatives, reportedly killing a driver. Earlier, in May, the INEC office in Awka, was reportedly also attacked and a substantial quantity of election materials destroyed. This slew of “unknown gunmen” attacks in the state, often attributed to IPOB and seemingly targeting the key state institution involved in conducting elections, will sustain a heightened level of apprehension among INEC staff and the general public as the election approaches.

The more direct actions and pronouncements of IPOB will also remain a significant threat to the holding of the polls. The fact that the group’s sit-at-home orders have, over the past 3 months, been greeted with a measure of public compliance particularly in Anambra state, suggests that IPOB’s threats to lockdown the state during the election are not mere bluster. Indeed, the election is of symbolic importance to the group for several reasons. For one, as indicated in the group’s announcement of the election boycott, IPOB views the polls as a substantial bargaining chip in its bid to have its leader, Nnamdi Kanu, released. In addition, given that Anambra state is considered the unofficial home of the movement, the election represents an opportunity for the group to either boost or diminish its credibility in the very context from which it draws much of its support. A successful boycott of the election will also greatly bolster the group’s claim to be tipping the scales of public opinion in the South-east away from state-level democratic politics and towards a region-wide demand for a referendum on Biafran independence.

However, despite these important factors, there are several overriding reasons why the election is likely to still hold. For one, since suspending the election due to insecurity will represent a significant blot on the federal government’s security credentials, the government is likely to substantially ramp up the presence of security agents in the state to ensure that the election holds. Already, the Nigerian police have announced the deployment of about 35,000 police personnel, as well as several senior police officials. In addition, while IPOB has called for the boycotting of elections both in Anambra in 2017, and across the South-east during the 2019 general elections, both orders were ultimately called off ahead of the election. This suggests that the group’s announcement of elections boycotts are reversible, and that the public is primed to take such threats with a grain of salt. However, the possibility that the election will be held amidst the boycott will elevate the threat of election day clashes between IPOB members and the police, weakening the quality and credibility of the electoral outcome.
While the usual drama of partisan competition in the lead up to the governorship election has been upstaged by the security developments described above, party proceedings have not gone without their own share of controversy, with possible implications for the conduct and outcome of the elections. APGA, the current ruling party in the state until recently had three candidates -- Chukwuma Soludo, Chukwuma Michael Umeoji, and Jude Okeke -- claiming to be the party's rightful flag bearer in the upcoming election, after all winning separate primary contests conducted under factional party bosses. Following a series of court suits and counter-suits, the Supreme Court affirmed Soludo, as APGA's gubernatorial candidate. Similarly, PDP, which dominated Anambra state politics until 2006, held two factional primaries producing two separate candidates: Valentine Ozigbo, and Ugochukwu Uba. The dispute within the PDP has also resulted in several court hearings, with the courts ultimately permitting INEC to recognize Ozigbo as the rightful PDP candidate. The APC, which lacks a substantial base in the state but is considered a possible contender due to its dominance at the federal level, had similarly controversial primaries -- with Andy Ubah emerging as the winner of direct primaries, only to be challenged in court by his closest rival, Dr George Moghalu, before INEC ultimately affirmed the former's victory. With the dust still settling from the whirlwind of legal disputes — and barring any last minute surprises — it appears that Chukwuma Soludo APGA, Ventile Ozibo of the PDP and Andy Uba of the APC will be the top contenders in the 6 November poll.
How do these candidates match up politically? The power of incumbency, the reputation of front-running candidates, and the reach and appeals of the contending parties all seem to hold the most weight in accessing the relative political prospects of the main parties and candidates. The power of incumbency appears to weigh in favor of APGA, with the party having produced an unbroken stretch of Anambra state governors since 2006. APGA's strength in Anambra state politics is also evident in the fact that it maintains 5 members in the House of Representatives and 24 out of 30 members in the State House. As the party that was formally endorsed by Odimegwu Ojukwu, leader of the Biafran secessionists in the 1960s, APGA can also draw on its historic reputation as an “authentic” Igbo party in an atmosphere of heightened ethno-national sentiment. Furthermore, as a former Governor of Nigeria's Central Bank, APGA's candidate, Chukwuma Soludo, will likely appeal to the segment of the electorate for whom technocratic credentials are valued.

In addition to its historic dominance, the PDP still boasts of a measure of control in Anambra state politics given that Anamba's two Senators (representing Anambra North and South) are both members of the party. In addition, it maintains 6 of Anambra's seats in the House of Representatives and 6 out of 30 State House of Assembly seats. The importance of Anambra state to the PDP is also evident in the fact that the state produced the previous PDP vice-presidential candidate in the 2019 election, former Anambra State governor Peter Obi. As the main national opposition party with ever dwindling governorship seats, the PDP will likely see the Anambra election as crucial for securing its hopes of mounting a compelling challenge to the incumbent APC party in the 2023 elections.

Of the three main contending parties, the APC appears the most disadvantaged in incumbency terms, boasting no Anambra representatives in either the State Assembly or either of the two houses of federal parliament. Given its association with the Buhari administration, which has historically been deeply unpopular in the South-east, the APC will have a steep hill to climb in respect to winning popular support ahead of the election. What remains unclear is the extent to which the APC candidate's having previously served as a state governor (albeit for 14 days before being removed by the Supreme court) will pull in his party's favor. Nevertheless, given its continued dominance at the federal level and since the party exerts influence over the security forces and other levers of state, it would be premature to entirely write off the political prospects of its candidate, Andy Uba.

Finally, a much smaller party the Young Progressive's Party (YPP), boasting a single Senator in the National Assembly has emerged as a potential contender with the Senator, Ifeanyi Ubah, putting himself forward as the YPP's Gubernatorial candidate. Ubah belonging to a united and relatively untainted political platform might make him a potential wildcard in the coming polls.
However, in addition to the security climate, whether or not party appeals and the reputations of candidates will have an influence on the electoral outcome will be shaped by the credibility of the electoral process, especially as it regards INEC’s capacity to conduct a free and fair election. INEC has made some noteworthy strides in its preparations for the Anambra polls. Chief among these has been its introduction of Bi-Modal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) -- a voter accreditation technology that uses both fingerprints and facial recognition -- to replace its previous fingerprint-only accreditation technology, the Smart Card Readers (SCR). It is expected that the BVAS will both add to the credibility of the accreditation process and reduce the number of instances where a voter is disenfranchised due to the failure of the SCR to scan a set of fingerprints. In addition, as part of a national drive to increase the availability of polling stations, INEC has provided over 1,000 additional polling units in Anambra, making balloting both more accessible to voters and less likely to be encumbered by lengthy queues. Such innovations, as well as INEC’s introduction of online voter registration, have partially aided in reassuring the public of the commission’s preparedness to conduct credible elections.

However, the commission has been affected by the wider climate of insecurity, not only in the form of direct attacks to its offices and equipment, but also through losing working days amid the enforced sit-at-home orders. Nevertheless, INEC has asserted that it has recovered from the earlier cited attacks on its facilities and should be in a position to organize polls. This is fairly conceivable given previous experience gained in 2015 and 2019 by INEC and security agencies in holding elections in highly conflictual regions, including in parts of Borno and other North eastern states threatened by terrorist insurgent groups. The fact of this being an off-cycle election will also make possible the substantial deployment of Civic and Election observer groups from elsewhere in the country, which will contribute to reinforcing the integrity of the polls. While the ongoing training of electoral officers and ad hoc staff will also contribute to shaping the conduct of the elections,

INEC’s wider record of preparations suggests that the commission is likely positioned to carry out an at least moderately credible poll.
Conclusion: Apathy and a weakened mandate?

Despite the likelihood that elections in some form will be held in Anambra on 6 November, it is also likely that the context of insecurity, a measure of latent public support for IPOB’s cause, the heavy deployment of security forces, and the acrimonious political competition leading up to the poll will depress voter turnout, leading to an even higher level of voter apathy than has typically been witnessed in Anambra elections. This is a concerning outlook for several reasons. The first is that high voter abstention rates mean that instances of election malpractice such as vote-buying or rigging -- which have proven impossible to eradicate in Nigerian elections -- will have an even more dramatic impact on the final outcome. Secondly, the heightened possibility of low voter turnout risks weakening the mandate of Anambra’s next governor, given the likelihood that he will be elected by only a fraction of the entire voting population.

Such a circumstance will serve to increase the already high degree of alienation a substantial proportion of citizens feel towards the state, as indicated in the emergence of non-state armed groups such as IPOB and the “unknown gunmen”. Finally, high-levels of voter abstention would likely also serve to reinforce the argument repeatedly advanced by groups such as IPOB that the Nigerian electoral system is fundamentally flawed and needs to be jettisoned as a whole. In light of the worrying repercussions of a failed, or widely boycotted election, it behoves relevant stakeholders to exhaust all reasonable avenues to ensure that the democratic franchise of Anambra voters is protected and delivered.