



STATEMENT OF THE JOINT NDI/IRI PRE-ELECTION ASSESSMENT MISSION TO NIGERIA July 20, 2018

I. INTRODUCTION

This statement is offered by an international delegation organized jointly by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI). The delegation visited Nigeria from July 12 - 20, 2018. The delegation's goals were to:

- Assess the current political and electoral environment in the lead-up to the 2019 general elections;
- Assess preparations for the general elections and offer recommendations to enhance citizen confidence in the process and mitigate violence; and
- Demonstrate international support for Nigeria's democratization process.

The delegation comprised: Dr. Pauline Baker, president emeritus of the Fund for Peace; Lauren Blanchard, specialist in African affairs of the U.S. Congressional Research Service; Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh, senior associate and regional director for Central and West Africa at NDI; Jan Surotchak, regional director for Europe at IRI; and Terry Tselane, vice chairperson of the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa.

The delegation met with senior officials of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), leaders of political parties, civic organizations, representatives of the media, and senior government officials. The delegation also watched the voting process in Ado-Ekiti during the July 14 Ekiti State gubernatorial election. The delegation expresses its deep appreciation to everyone with whom it met for welcoming the mission and for sharing freely their views on the electoral process.

The delegation notes that the 2019 presidential race and other polls in the states will likely be closely contested and take place against the backdrop of shifting political alliances and significant security concerns in many states of the Federation. In meetings with the delegation, many interlocutors reiterated Nigerians' strong commitment to democracy and their desire to ensure that every election is an improvement over the previous one, and that the polls are peaceful, credible, and further deepen the country's democratic practices. The team observed that the election management body – INEC – has undertaken several innovative steps to reinforce the integrity of the electoral system. However, continued efforts must be made by a cross section of Nigerian actors to enhance citizen confidence and participation in the process. Notably, the delegation heard repeated frustrations about the continued role that money plays in Nigerian politics, from how candidates are selected to how parties seek to influence voters. Nigerians with whom the delegation met also voiced concerns about the state of insecurity in parts of the country and how that could impact negatively on the election process.

Both NDI and IRI have deployed international election observation missions to all general elections in Nigeria since the 1999 transition from military to civilian democratic rule. The two Institutes are nonpartisan, nongovernmental organizations that support and strengthen democratic institutions and practices worldwide. They have observed collectively more than 200 elections in more than 50 countries over the last 30 years. NDI and IRI will conduct a second pre-election assessment mission to Nigeria in September and deploy a joint international delegation to observe the 2019 general elections.

II. POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Democratic gains over the past two decades. In the past two decades, Nigeria has seen significant gains in consolidating its democracy. Voters' expectations regarding the upcoming elections will likely be driven by their perceptions of progress in election administration since the 2007 polls.

Election administration improved markedly during the 2011 and 2015 general elections, in contrast to the electoral processes in previous years. INEC has taken steps to improve the organization and credibility of elections through innovations such as deploying members of the National Youth Service Corps as poll workers; introducing biometric permanent voter cards; deploying voter card readers (VCRs) to scan voter cards and validate fingerprints; and announcing results on an ongoing basis live on television, radio, and social media. Off-cycle gubernatorial elections have provided opportunities to foster best practices, as members of the delegation saw in Ekiti State where INEC combined accreditation and voting to shorten the time voters spent at the polling unit; applied enhanced software to increase the functionality of VCRs; and posted election results in polling units. An additional innovation in the lead-up to the 2019 polls is the introduction of continuous registration in an effort to increase the enrollment of new voters. The delegation heard that these measures aimed at improving the organization of voting and at raising confidence in the integrity of elections have led to a widespread perception of INEC as a fair and impartial umpire.

In recent years, competitive elections across the country have led to an *alternation in power* between major parties at the state and federal levels. Notably, in 2015, Nigeria experienced the first peaceful transfer of power since independence in 1960 from one ruling party - the People's Democratic Party (PDP) - to a then opposition party - the All People's Congress (APC). The elections were peaceful and their overall success increased confidence among Nigerians that credible elections matter.

Nigerians with whom the delegation met expressed *strong support for democracy*. This sentiment was also captured in the 2017 [Afrobarometer](#) survey, which showed that 72 percent of Nigerians agree that democratic elections are the best means of choosing the country's leaders. There is an expectation that the 2019 polls should see further improvements. Although there is a widespread desire to strengthen democratic culture in the country, many Nigerians are concerned about the over-personalization of politics and of the role of money in elections. Despite remaining challenges with competitive politics in Nigeria, the delegation was told by one interlocutor, "the only alternative to military rule is deepening democracy," a statement that reflects a widespread sentiment among Nigerians.

Significant security concerns. Nigeria faces security challenges from a number of non-state actors that, if unchecked, could disrupt the electoral process. Boko Haram continues to carry out terrorist attacks on communities in the North East. During its visit, the delegation heard

reports of the attack by the extremist group on a military base in Yobe. At the same time, the death toll from clashes between pastoralist and farming communities in the Middle Belt has risen since 2017. The conflicts are further exacerbated by illicit trade in weapons and stolen cattle by criminal gangs. In some circles, the inability of security forces to quell this inter-communitarian violence is given political and religious overtones. If not addressed, these security threats could erode confidence in government. Persistent insecurity and violence have led to very high numbers of internally displaced persons in the North East and Middle Belt that could pose specific challenges for the conduct of elections in the impacted areas.

III. FINDINGS SPECIFIC TO THE 2019 POLLS

Political parties, electoral alliances. The delegation's visit coincided with the emergence of new political parties and negotiations among political elites. Nigeria's political landscape is in a state of flux. There are currently 68 registered parties, and the number is expected to increase in the coming months. Many Nigerians with whom the delegation met, expressed frustration with political parties that for the most part are seen as very personality-driven and lacking internal democracy. For example, squabbles over the selection of convention delegates and leadership in the states has generated tensions within parties. Emerging political alliances are based mostly on personalities and agreements among political leaders, and do not necessarily reflect differences in policy preference or ideology.

Candidate selection process. In August and September 2018, political parties will conduct primaries to select their candidates for the 2019 elections. The delegation heard concerns about past practices that were not transparent and did not respect party constitutions. The delegation learned that, should candidates be imposed by party leaders through undemocratic means, such actions could lead to further fragmentation of political parties or result in intra-party violence, and further alienate voters.

The high cost of politicking and opaque candidate selection processes are particularly challenging for women, youth, and persons with disabilities (PWDs) to overcome. Nigeria has one of the lowest levels of women in elected office within West Africa and in the world (UN Women, 2017). Internal gender quotas included in party constitutions are generally not respected. The recent passage of the *Not Too Young To Run Bill* that reduced the minimum age for elected offices is seen as an opportunity for political parties to nominate young aspirants that reflect Nigeria's youthful population. The inclusion of youth, women, PWDs, and other marginalized groups would facilitate the emergence of a broad range of new leaders to reflect the ingenuity and dynamism of the Nigerian population.

Monetary incentives to voting. Nigerians expressed concerns to the delegation about an increase in the level and visibility of **vote buying**. Vote buying is an electoral offense; it also undermines the legitimacy of elections and weakens representative democracy. During the July 14 gubernatorial elections in Ekiti State, the *Watching the Vote* (WTV) group deployed citizen election observers to a representative sample of polling sites across the state and recorded that 8 percent of sampled polling units experienced incidents of vote buying or bribery on election day. Various individuals commented that poverty, disillusionment with the performance of elected representatives, and low civic awareness of voters contributed to the expansion of vote buying, particularly in off-cycle gubernatorial elections since 2015. The lack of enforcement of punishments for this electoral offense has allowed the practice to persist and grow. As one analyst stated to the assessment mission, "vote buying is a frightening development in our elections."

Election administration. The gubernatorial elections in Ekiti State provided an opportunity for INEC to again test recent changes to electoral administration. Citizen observer groups, including WTV and the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, highlighted administrative advances from previous polls, but also areas for further improvement. These include the need to enhance the ability of card readers to reliably verify voter fingerprints. In some cases, the re-registration of voters' fingerprints when they could not be recognized by the card reader led to slow moving queues and voter frustration. Delegation members also noted instances where the placement of the voting booth and the folding of the ballot did not guarantee the secrecy of the ballot. The delegation noted significant disparities in the capacity of polling unit officials to administer the counting of results. However, the consolidation of the accreditation and voting processes was a successful innovation that shortened the amount of time spent by voters at the polling unit.

Citizen engagement in early phases of the election. While INEC indicated that over nine million new voters have been registered since 2017, many voters have not collected their PVCs. For example, approximately 223,000 of Ekiti State's over 900,000 registered voters, had still not picked up their voter cards before election day. According to INEC, about eight million PVCs nationwide have not been collected by voters. While continuous registration has made the registration process more accessible, the time required to return to collect PVCs or to change the location of voters' registration requires a significant commitment from voters and may present a particular barrier for women and PWDs.

Legal framework for elections. As in the lead up to previous elections, the Electoral Act is in the process of being amended in preparations for 2019. INEC believes that the bill to amend the Electoral Act recently passed by the National Assembly would strengthen its ability to ensure greater transparency and accountability in the political party candidate nomination process for all elected offices. Changes to the Electoral Act would also require INEC to make the voter register and election results electronic and accessible; increase the campaign period from 90 to 150 days; and extend the application of the Electoral Act to local government elections. However, Nigerian stakeholders expressed concern that if the election bill is not enacted soon, there will be insufficient time for INEC and other actors to implement the changes to the law and to effectively disseminate information about the changes to election rules and procedures to citizens.

Nigerians expect INEC to continue to enhance transparency and impartiality in the administration of the polls, and communicate openly and frequently with voters, political parties, and other relevant stakeholders. Most Nigerians with whom the delegation met voiced confidence in INEC's ability to deliver credible elections in 2019.

Social media and disinformation. As internet penetration deepens across the country, millions of Nigerians now access and share information via smartphones, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and messaging platforms such as WhatsApp. The 2017 Afrobarometer poll for Nigeria stated that 39 percent of respondents regularly consume news on social media. These platforms offer new ways for citizens to engage in political and electoral processes, and for political parties, INEC, and government institutions to share information with voters. However, some Nigerians are fearful that, if not used responsibly, these platforms could become vehicles for disinformation and hate speech. Disinformation (sometimes called "fake news") is the deliberate generation and dissemination of false information to manipulate public opinion and perceptions. Nigerians told the delegation that

social media is already rife with politically-related content that, in some cases, uses altered photos and videos. They also regret that the spread of rumors is facilitated by easy access to distorted news. Nigerians also told the delegation that disinformation, hate speech, and the denigration of opponents can heighten tensions and increase the potential for election-related violence.

Insecurity and election-related violence. Nigerians with whom the delegation met voiced concern that persisting insecurity and the threat of violence could dampen citizen participation in the 2019 elections, and prevent some voters from going to the polls. The Middle Belt, often seen as a swing voting geopolitical zone, is particularly affected by the ongoing deadly clashes between farmers and herders. Should the violence persist, INEC may face challenges in safely organizing polls in some parts of the country, and will have to accommodate voters who have been displaced from their homes, including 1.9 million IDPs in the North East. Contentious elections also heighten the threat for election-related violence. Stakeholders noted with concern the tenor of the political rhetoric during the Ekiti gubernatorial election. If political parties and candidates employ inflammatory rhetoric in upcoming elections, it could increase the risk of clashes between supporters of opposing candidates and distract attention from the issues that are important to Nigerian voters. Similarly, the perceived ineffective response by security forces to mounting farmer-herder violence could negatively impact the electoral campaign. Some Nigerians with whom the delegation met expressed concern at the high number of security agents deployed to state elections, and termed it as an excessive “securitization” of elections that could scare voters away from the polls. Nigerians expect their security services to be impartial and the onus is on these services to show a high level of professionalism.

IV. NIGERIAN LED INITIATIVES TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES

Despite the challenges listed above, the 2019 polls provide an opportunity for political parties, INEC, the government, media and civil society to build upon and expand the advances from past elections to ensure inclusive, peaceful and credible elections. Most Nigerians that the delegation met with are full of hope as they prepare for the elections, and take pride in noting that democracy has taken root in their country. The delegation noted a strong commitment by INEC and multiple civil society organizations to enhance citizen confidence and participation in the election as well as mitigate violence around the polls. As one Nigerian stated, “2019 will be the year of citizens.”

INEC communication and administration. INEC recognizes that expectations for the 2019 elections are very high. The Commission has done extensive planning in preparation for the polls based on their internal reviews of their performance in past elections. INEC has also worked with the National Assembly to improve the electoral framework. The amended Electoral Act is now only awaiting President Buhari’s signature to be enacted into law.

INEC representatives acknowledged the challenge of distributing uncollected PVCs, but have found innovative ways to increase the collection rate. The Commission is implementing its “Youth Votes Count” campaign involving music artists and comedians to reach young voters on university campuses. INEC indicated that the campaign resulted in higher rates of registration and PVC collection, and as a result, the Commission plans to expand the campaign. Also, Resident Election Commissioners (RECs) are going into communities with lists of voters who have not collected their PVCs, and are working with local leaders to encourage these voters to collect their cards. INEC has also adopted a PWD framework to

facilitate the inclusion of PWDs in elections, similar to its already existing gender framework.

INEC is seriously concerned about vote buying practices and is considering ways to address the issue. In the coming days the Commission said it will review the recent Ekiti polls and should any staff be found to have violated the Electoral Act, they would be prosecuted. INEC also acknowledged to the delegation the importance of coordinating and sharing information with relevant government agencies and other stakeholders in the election process. INEC has organized 180 elections since the 2015 polls, and for each of these met regularly with stakeholders. The Commission plans to intensify the frequency of such coordination meetings as the general elections approach.

Citizen engagement. The delegation heard from Nigerian stakeholders who said they anticipate youth participation in the 2019 elections to increase significantly. Young people, they said, have been galvanized by the *Not Too Young To Run* campaign, which resulted in a constitutional amendment that lowered the age requirements for presidential and gubernatorial candidates to 35 years old, and for state and federal representative candidates to 25 years old. This citizen-led movement demonstrated the power of Nigerian youth to influence their government, and has shown that the government can be responsive to citizens when they advocate for change. The onus is now on political parties to encourage and support young Nigerians who seek elected office.

Various citizen groups are also supporting women aspiring to elected office. For example, the *Nigerian Women's Trust Fund* and the *Women in Politics Forum* are training and raising the profile of women aspirants. The delegation was also encouraged by the new levels of advocacy and participation from the PWD community. For example, *Inclusive Friends Association* (IFA) through its *Access Nigeria* campaign have used data-based advocacy to lobby for reforms to increase the political participation of PWDs and the accessibility of the voting process. Some political parties have made considerable efforts to create leadership opportunities for women, youth, and PWDs.

Citizen monitoring of electoral processes. Nonpartisan citizen observers play an important role during elections by raising public confidence in the election process, deterring electoral malfeasance, exposing irregularities and providing citizens with important information concerning the integrity of the elections. For the 2019 elections, *YIAGA Africa* plans to deploy the parallel vote tabulation (PVT) methodology as part of its *#WatchingtheVote* (WTV) project. The PVT methodology provides an accurate qualitative assessment of the conduct of election day processes and near real-time independent verification of official results, which helps enhance confidence in the process. WTV will also deploy long-term observers during the pre-election period in order to capture timely and reliable information about electoral preparations and early warning signs of violence. The *Policy and Legal Advocacy Center* (PLAC) plans to convene more than 60 organizations as part of the *Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room* to observe the conduct of the 2019 general elections. Other groups, such as the *Center for Democratic Development*, plan to monitor disinformation in the media and conduct fact checking during the campaign.

Violence monitoring and non-violence campaigns. Nigerian youth organizations, including *Youngstars Development Initiative* (YDI), and musician 2Baba Idibia, are conducting the "*Vote Not Fight*" (VNF) campaign, which calls for youth's peaceful participation in elections. Through concerts, a peace pledge, social and traditional media campaigns, and

community-based peace ambassadors, VNF reaches out to individuals (particularly youth) who have historically been drawn into election violence either as perpetrators or as victims. Civil society, under the auspices of the *Peace and Security Network (PSN)*, are also closely monitoring for early warning signs of election-related violence, and working with stakeholders to identify and implement mitigation strategies. For example, PSN is preparing a high level event in September to coincide with the UN International Day for Peace, featuring the chairmen of APC and PDP and other keynote speakers, in an effort to have political leaders commit to promoting tolerance and avoiding hate speech in the upcoming electoral campaigns. Also, the *CLEEN Foundation* is conducting threat assessments in high risk states, working with security agencies to mobilize response strategies, and monitoring the conduct of security personnel at polling units.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

The delegation believes that with political will and through coordinated efforts, many of the above mentioned challenges can be addressed in order to enhance citizen confidence and participation in elections and also mitigate violence during and after the polls. In the spirit of international cooperation, the delegation therefore offers the following recommendations for review and consideration:

The Federal Government of Nigeria should:

- Intensify efforts to address insecurity in many parts of the country.
- Reiterate to all security services their constitutional obligation to be professional and impartial in guaranteeing election security for all citizens and political contestants.
- Enforce the law in regards to illegal activities such as vote buying on election day wherever it occurs.
- Ensure sufficient time for INEC to implement electoral changes by signing into law the Electoral Act (Amendment) Bill before August 16, in accordance with the ECOWAS protocol to which Nigeria is a signatory.
- Approve and obligate INEC's requested budget in a timely manner and ensure other government agencies involved in the election process receive sufficient and timely funding.
- Ensure that agencies such as the National Orientation Agency (NOA) that have responsibilities for civic and voter education receive adequate and timely funding to support peaceful, inclusive and credible elections.
- Establish the Electoral Offenses and Political Parties Registration Commission as soon as possible to enhance the accountability of political parties with regards to the funding of campaigns and other activities.

The Independent National Electoral Commission should:

- Increase efforts to encourage voters to register before the close of continuous voter registration on August 17.
- Undertake an extensive campaign to raise voter awareness on the need to collect PVCs before the next elections.
- Pursue technological advances that could allow for the issuance of PVCs upon registration.
- Continue to improve the card reader technology and inform voters of its efforts.
- Ensure consistent application of voting procedures by polling officials with regards to:
 - Arranging of the polling unit to ensure voters cast their ballot in secret;
 - Folding the ballot paper;

- Allowing voters in the queue when the polling unit closes to vote;
- Clarifying the criteria for invalidating ballots; and
- Using consistent counting procedures.
- Fully implement its PWD framework to ensure the voting process is more accessible to PWDs.
- In coordination with security services, enforce the law in regards to illegal activities such as vote buying that occur at polling units on election day.
- Track and publicize political party compliance with commitments on gender representation in leadership positions and on candidate lists within the party.
- Enhance communication strategies to better match how Nigerians consume information, such as through community radio and social media using infographics and short videos.
- Release early sample ballots to facilitate voter education efforts.

Political parties should:

- Conduct transparent and democratic candidate selection processes that adhere to their by-laws and policies.
- Make concerted efforts to encourage and support women, youth, and PWD candidates beyond providing free nomination forms.
- Initiate issue-based campaigns that address national priorities, such as security, the economy, and governance.
- Conduct voter education campaigns and disseminate messages of peace and tolerance among their supporters.
- Respect the rule of law, including INEC guidelines for political parties, especially provisions against the use of violence and of speech that could incite violence.

Civil society should:

- Begin voter education efforts early in the election process. Work closely with government agencies such as INEC and the NOA to inform voters about the election process, including the collection of PVCs, how to vote, and keeping the peace.
- Educate voters on their civic responsibilities and the value of their vote, emphasizing that vote buying can be tantamount to vote rigging.
- Continue to pursue advocacy efforts with INEC, NOA, and political parties to enhance the participation of women, youth, and PWDs.
- Working closely with the media, explore avenues for monitoring, exposing, and countering disinformation and hate speech.
- Draw upon strategies used in recent successful advocacy efforts such as *Not Too Young to Run* to engage political parties on issues important to Nigerian voters.
- Continue monitoring the election process, disseminating impartial findings, and advocating for improvements to election integrity.
- Consider early initiatives to mitigate tensions between contestants, such as the Abuja Accord facilitated by the National Peace Council in 2015.

Media should:

- Report accurately, responsibly and professionally in line with the media code of conduct in order to foster civil discourse.
- Fact-check and verify information before publishing and avoid supporting or republishing outlets that spread disinformation.
- Organize candidate debates in coordination with civil society to enable information sharing with voters and policy discussions.

The international community should:

- Provide timely support to Nigerian civil society to enable groups to begin voter education, citizen engagement, citizen election observer, and violence mitigation campaigns early in the election process.
- Message regularly to the main political actors and parties to uphold the rule of law and commit to the holding of peaceful elections.

NDI and IRI will continue to observe the electoral process and plan to deploy a second pre-election assessment mission in September and will issue additional statements as appropriate. The two Institutes will field joint international election observation missions for the 2019 general elections. NDI and IRI will cooperate with other international observation missions and Nigerian citizen observer efforts in accordance with the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Nigerian law.

xxx

The delegation's work was funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).