



Pre-Election Observation Report

Nigerian Presidential Elections 2023 | February 24th, 2023

It is that time of the democratic process in Nigeria that the people will go to polls on February 25, 2023 (Presidential) and March 11, 2023 for (Gubernatorial). Elections are always a critical moment in the democratic lives of any nation when elections are held and Nigeria is no different. With all its benefits, during every election across the globe there is always a risk of pre-post electoral violence. As Nigeria looks to transition from the Buhari administration, the presidential election winner will inherit many challenges and opportunities. With many people in Nigeria feeling the economic shocks brought on by inflation, on one hand, these elections are a hope for the citizens to choose democratic leadership to put the country on the road to prosperity but on the other side, elections can also be a critical driver that exacerbates underlying tensions that often go unaddressed. With insecurity being a prominent problem throughout parts of the country, corruption, religious intolerance, and a lack of representation for women, young people, and persons with disabilities, continue to be barriers in Nigeria's electoral system. In the run up to the general elections, the monetary policy of the naira redesign by the Central Bank has led to the scarce availability of the Nigerian currency notes making it difficult for Nigerians to access cash to meet daily needs. This development has snowballed into protests against the Central Bank with banks being targeted by protestors in states like Ogu, Edo, and Delta.

Nigeria's Presidential election in 2019 did not live up to the expectations set by many of its citizens, resulting in the lowest voter turnout recorded since its transition to democracy in 1999. 2023 will be a chance for Nigeria to showcase how advances in the country's electoral system have increased access to voting for young people, women, persons with disabilities, and internally displaced peoples.

With more than 90 million registered voters recorded by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), transparency will be paramount in these elections. As candidates and political parties make their final push toward the finish, it is apparent that tensions are quite high going into election day.

As Africa's largest democracy, many around the world are waiting to see how Nigerians interact with new electoral laws and systems enshrined by the Electoral Act, 2022. Many of these new electoral laws look to streamline voter processes and strengthen voting integrity in Nigeria. The introduction of electoral tools like the Voter Enrollment Device (IVED), the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), and the Election Results Viewing Portal (IReV) are set to ensure elections are transparent and fair. As these tools are quite new, INEC is charged with the daunting task of making sure that these tools satisfy the electoral needs of the citizenry and political parties. As the election season comes to a head, political parties' actions leading up to election day and after will play a massive role in the prospects of election violence throughout the country.

With eighteen presidential candidates, including candidates from, the All Progressives Congress (APC), the Labour Party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the New Nigeria



Peoples Party (NNPP). Candidates have promised to handle security threats, change Nigeria's economic trajectory, create a platform for young people, and solidify country unity. Despite entering into peace accords by the Nigerian National Peace Committee, election violence continues to be a prospect shadowing the election season. With recent attacks on INEC offices, extremism impacting voter safety, and divisions fueling political tensions between candidates and parties, concerns of violence overtake much of the conversation on elections. As impassioned party supporters look to give their preferred candidate the advantage, political agents can spark an already highly combustible political environment. As insecurity threatens voter safety in many parts of Nigeria, it remains unclear how the Nigerian military might respond to pronounced violence in key regions. In response to potential violence, relevant actors have established situation rooms across Nigeria to analyze and disseminate information on major electoral developments. The south east & south south states like Engu, Imo, and Anambra have experienced incidents of violence against INEC officials and party officials. While the North west has continually recorded high-levels of voter turnout, violence looms large in states like Kano, Katsina, and Kaduna where election participation is high.

In the lead-up to the Presidential elections in Nigeria, the international community has continued to incorporate measures to support the Nigerian people's right to free and fair elections. The AU, EU, and US have announced major funding streams to support democratic processes in Nigeria and deployed election observers to oversee election matters on the ground. US Senators recently introduced S.Res.36, a resolution reinforcing the US's commitment to transparency in Nigeria's 2023 presidential election. Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Molly Phee recently visited Nigeria to oversee election preparations, while senior officials from the European External Action Service visited Nigeria to support the European Union election observation mission. As the world watches Nigerians cast their votes on February 25th, international partners like the AU, EU, and US have signaled their support for the Nigerian people in choosing their next leader free of violence, intimidation, and corruption.

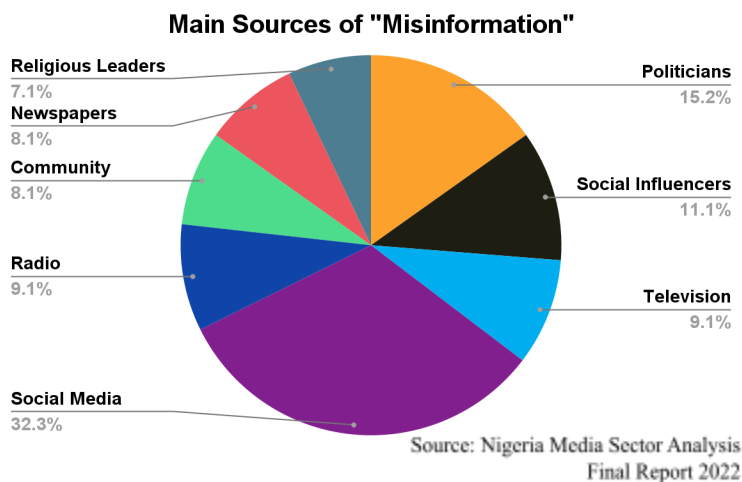
In the face of potential electoral violence in the Nigerian elections, Search for Common Ground calls on all Nigerian citizens, candidates, public officials, and security forces to disavow all forms of violence and hate speech. Nigerian citizens deserve the right to exercise their right to vote without the specter of repercussions or harm influencing their decision. Nigeria has the chance to signify to the world its democratic gains of the last 4 years, unfortunately, violence in the electoral process is a detrimental factor that can overshadow this momentous occasion in Nigeria's history. As we turn to election day, choosing peace over conflict will be paramount. Search has routinely engaged with policymakers and NGOs/CSOs on electoral preparations, prospects for violence, and the need for dedicated funding streams in the lead up to the 2023 Nigerian presidential elections.

Civil society in Nigeria plays a pivotal role in prevention of electoral violence through the implementation of initiatives aimed at promoting inclusive electoral processes for women, youth, persons with disabilities, internally displaced persons as well as sustaining democracy and ensuring government accountability. NGOs/CSOs in Nigeria work within communities to support numerous areas such as freedom of the press, freedom of religion, human rights, and empowering women and youth groups. By addressing conflict and supporting governance



structures through localized operations that bring together communities around shared ideals, CSOs are essential in Nigeria’s electoral process.

Search’s work in Nigeria looks to create and support peace architectures that address endearing divisions in social cohesion. By addressing multifaceted issues like the farmer-herder conflict, urban violence, ethno-religious tolerance, and access to justice, Search works to provide innovative ways to achieve lasting peace and stability. Civil society has played an outsized role in advancing electoral access and information ahead of the presidential elections in Nigeria. To support free and fair elections, Search works in the nexus of media and providing a factual alternative to misinformation/hate speech. Through a media sector survey conducted across nine states in 2022, 59% of respondents said the government is not doing enough to address hate speech. When asked about the primary sources of misinformation, 32% of respondents labeled the internet/social media as the primary source of misinformation.



Search works to dispel rumors/misinformation by offering factual alternatives. Similarly, Search promotes violence free political debate by mainstreaming a common ground approach across journalists and social media activists. Search for Common Ground tracks and responds to hate speech through its online and offline platforms to neutralise the risks of violence caused by emerging hateful trends in digital space as well as offline space. Through the Sustainable Electoral Engagement for Democracy Project (SEED) funded by

National Democratic Institute (NDI), Search has analyzed election-related hate speech online and produced monitoring reports on content-related trends. SEED also works to bring together journalists and media influencers on good reporting approaches, monitoring hate speech, and fact-checking during the 2023 election period.

SEED utilizes other localized methods, such as radio programs on election-related matters, such as the importance of inclusive elections, the dangers of hate speech, and civic education. These radio programs often feature the voices of women, young people, persons with disabilities, and more.

Search connects the ways socioeconomic crises impact elections and vice-versa. By working in Nigeria on issues like the farmer-herder conflict, religious engagement, urban violence, and access to justice, Search views the 2023 Nigerian elections as a culmination of underlying issues coming to the forefront of Nigerian society. As voting begins in Nigeria, here are a few key trends to look out for during the electoral process.



Election Trend Outlook

▪ **Post-Election Violence:**

- ⇒ Election violence continues to loom large in people's minds as voting is set to commence. Early warning systems have indicated less pre-election violence than in past cycles, but this does not mean there will be no election violence. As the presidential election takes place on February 25th, election dynamics can quickly change due to competing results, election deniers, and political instigators.
- ⇒ The prospects for election violence can be quite different based on the different areas of the country. For instance, election insecurity in Borno or Kebbi states due to violent extremism differs from the election violence initiated by militancy in Cross Rivers or Bayelsa.
- ⇒ As results come into the IReV portal, violence may come from candidates and supporters unwilling to accept election results. INEC and the federal government of Nigeria must be ready to counter misinformation and malign electoral actions that jeopardize election integrity.
- ⇒ It is unclear how the Nigerian military and police forces will respond to deep levels of violence. As security forces look to maintain stability in highly volatile areas, an over-militarized response could lead to further barriers to voting in key areas.

▪ **Electoral Disputes:**

- ⇒ As candidates react to the electoral environment as polls close on February 25th, the likelihood of challenges to election results is high. Electoral arbitration of disputes will be key to supporting transparency in the system. The Nigerian judicial system must investigate accusations of electoral mismanagement adequately to satisfy those with electoral grievances.
- ⇒ Mitigating electoral disputes will reduce the possibility of candidates pushing false election narratives. Resolution of disputes must be done in public and supported by credible evidence.
- ⇒ INEC and the Nigerian judicial system will be a primary focus of those looking to disrupt electoral processes. Communication between governing institutions and the broader Nigerian public will be critical to boosting confidence in election results. As we've seen in past elections in Kenya and Malawi, electoral disputes can be a major driver of electoral instability.

▪ **Economic Hardship and Naira Scarcity:**

- ⇒ As a backdrop to the election season, economic hardship is front of mind for many Nigerians. Inflation has made food prices, cooking oil, and other vital commodities skyrocket. With these hard economic times in Nigeria, many are



worried that malign actors will utilize money to get people to commit malicious acts for political gain.

⇒ With the move to a cashless economy, Naira availability is still very low. Many people, especially those in rural areas, cannot get and use cash. The lack of money in circulation has created an environment where people are desperate to acquire funds and could push more people to engage in vote buying or vote swapping to make much-needed cash.

▪ **Young People in the Electoral Process:**

⇒ 2023 will be the first general election since the highly socialized ENDSARs movement. ENDSARs was a movement that was driven widely by young people. As a response to police violence in Nigeria, ENDSARs quickly became a movement against the status quo in Nigeria. As young people took to the streets to rebuke the government, young people are just as impassioned by chance to reset the course of Nigerian politics.

⇒ Social media will be a central tool in organizing young people in the upcoming elections. As some candidate supporters interact with spaces like Facebook or Twitter more than others, it is clear that young people are energized heading into the presidential election. The language and information shared on social media spaces could be significant drivers of instability in the country.

▪ **Possibility of a Run-Off:**

⇒ If no candidate receives the majority of the electorate in the presidential election, top candidates will head into a run-off for the presidency. With the exclusion of candidates who are not the top candidates from the initial general election, how will their supporters respond to having to vote for a candidate they did not support during the election season? Attention will be on impassioned supporters who may look to subvert a run-off election in response to their first preferred candidate not receiving enough votes.