

WILL NIGERIA'S 2019 ELECTIONS BE PEACEFUL?

Warning Signs of Political Violence and International Preventative Action Needed

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Context

On February 16, 2019, Nigeria will hold its general election to select the President and National Assembly, followed by state-level elections in March. The prospect of electoral violence is serious. Tension is escalating between herders and farmers – leading to more than 1,800 deaths and displacing 300,000 people in 2018. In the past few months, security in the Northeast has also deteriorated, with increasing clashes between security forces and armed opposition groups as each group seeks to control territory and undermine the other party. Civilian impact includes heightened displacement, constrained movement and subsequent humanitarian needs.

Security agencies have also put pressure on dissenting voices, particularly in areas where there is strong support for the opposition party. Social and economic inequalities, ethnic and religious divisions, corruption and weak state capacity remain prevalent across Nigeria and contribute to the risks of election-related violence. In 2011, 800 people were killed in election-related violence.

Recent outbreaks of political violence have already taken place. In Kogi state, unidentified gunman shot dead the governor's aide and two others in a drive-by attack in November. In Kwara state, gunmen open fired at a convoy carrying leaders of the All Progressives Congress (APC) party, including an aspirant to the House of Representatives. In early December, alleged

political thugs attacked the ex-Minister of Commerce's residence in Jigawa state during a political meeting, wounding five people and damaging property. Also in December, four people were killed in clashes in Kano State after the governor began his reelection campaign.

Warning Signs

Some of the most concerning trends Mercy Corps is observing across the communities where the organization operates include:

Declining confidence in institutions

The electorate's declining confidence in institutions, including the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), political parties, armed security forces and media, may undermine election results. There are widespread concerns about the INEC's ability to oversee and administer free and fair elections. In early September, governors elected on the People's Democratic Party (PDP) platform passed a vote of no confidence in the INEC. Contested results or the perception of electoral manipulation may trigger violence in the post-election period.

Intra-party disagreements over candidates

Disagreements over candidates in the primaries created animosities within parties. Aggrieved candidates are likely to use violence and intimidation as election tactics during the campaign period as well as around the declaration of results. Concerted attempts at

mediation and reconciliation between feuding intra-party actors will be necessary to reduce this risk.

Proliferation of small arms and light weapons

The availability of small arms is increasing the intensity of violence in Nigeria, particularly between farmers, herders and criminal gangs in the Middle Belt region and the South. These small arms have already been used in political assassinations. Without an early strategy to tackle the proliferation of weapons, they present a significant risk for further escalation of election violence.

Disinformation and hate speech spread on social media

Politicians and parties as well as the public spread disinformation and hate speech on social media. The dangers of disinformation and hate speech go beyond triggering electoral violence – they also pose a threat to reconciliation after the elections, as well as longer-term peacebuilding efforts.

Security forces creating tension

In some communities, there are claims of security forces being used for political gains, including by intimidating and harassing the opposition, and preventing opposition supporters from freely campaigning or voting. There are allegations that the People's Democratic Party deployed this strategy leading up to the 2015 elections, and analysts believe these tactics will be repeated in 2019. The military has announced that in 2019 the National Army will support other security agencies to ensure peaceful elections. This move indicates an increased role for the military in the election process, which could increase the risk of violence in areas where relations with the military are already tense. A shortage of security forces due to military engagements in some areas and depletion in other areas may contribute to further insecurity.

Mercy Corps' election violence prevention efforts

Mercy Corps is reaching more than 50,000 people with election violence prevention activities through its peacebuilding programs in Northern and Northeast Nigeria, and in the Middle Belt.

In **Northern Nigeria**, Mercy Corps is working with religious leaders to develop scenario plans for their communities. Religious leaders have committed to monitoring polling stations and holding joint sermons at interfaith events to persuade community members to support a peaceful and fair election.

In the **Middle Belt**, Mercy Corps is inviting representatives of political parties to conflict prevention forums to form peace pacts with communities that are in line with local traditions.

In the **Northeast**, Mercy Corps is sharing positive civic engagement messages through local media channels and local governance committees.

International Action Needed

Diplomatic engagement by the international community, including support for local civil society organizations, was a key factor that contributed to Nigeria's first relatively peaceful transfer of presidential power in 2015. The international community, including the United States, the United Kingdom and other European governments, can still use diplomatic and foreign assistance tools to help ensure a credible and peaceful election. However, time for preventative action is running out. Recommended actions include:

- Deploying cabinet-level officials and senior diplomatic delegates to Nigeria to meet with all major party candidates. Delegates must communicate the expectation of a peaceful and credible election process and willingness to hold accountable individuals who incite

violence or vote tampering. Before the 2015 vote, the U.S. Secretary of State traveled to Nigeria to meet with the then-President and his opponent to encourage both parties to renew their pledge to refrain from inciting violence and vote rigging.

- Funding and empowering local civil society and media organizations working toward transparency and accountability to engage in electoral violence prevention through voter education, election monitoring and peacebuilding activities. This could include amplifying messages of non-violence and civic participation by high profile Nigerians.
- Providing elections security support to the Nigerian Government and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) at the same levels as 2015.
- Supporting international election observer missions that will release preliminary findings and recommendations to the Nigerian public and international community as quickly as possible after the election.
- Comprehensive electoral violence scenario planning between the diplomatic community and non-governmental organizations, including assigning responsibilities for responses if needed. This should follow the example set in 2015 through the Peace and Security Network. These scenarios and action plans should be completed in advance of the elections and communicated widely with stakeholders in Nigeria, the United States and other governments actively engaged in Nigeria.

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