



STATEMENT: RISK OF INCREASED VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA'S 2023 ELECTIONS



Nigerians were promised free, fair and transparent general elections in 2023, but what seems clear now is that the electoral process will be flawed and violent. However, action can still be taken to avoid the worst outcomes. Atrocities Watch Africa (AWA) and Global Rights call on the international community to pay close attention to the developments in the coming days and to take early action as needed to prevent escalation of violence.

Nigerians are heading to presidential polls this week. The elections are hotly contested between three candidates: former Lagos governor Bola Tinubu, representing the All-Progressives Congress (APC), former vice president Atiku Abubakar of the opposition the People's Democratic Party (PDP), and former governor of Anambra state, Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP). The process thus far has been fraught with hate speech and disinformation on social media, violence inflicted upon opposition party leaders, pro-democracy activists, and offices of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). There has been an inability to meet electoral benchmarks such as the registration of new voters in regions of the country plagued by insecurity and a high level of displacement. Conflict is ongoing in the northern and southern regions of the country, perpetrated by Islamic militants such as Boko Haram and armed groups, respectively. Amongst the three candidates, there is a small possibility that a run-off election will be required if no candidate wins the 25% of two thirds of states that electoral regulations dictate. Given the contentiousness of the context so far, it is not difficult to imagine that contestation could lead to further violence along the basis of ethnic and religious lines.

In a previous brief AWA and Global Rights analysed the key factors that may influence and determine the election outcomes,¹ among which increasing insecurity and violence and hate speech are seen as potential catalysts to igniting further violence during the electoral period.

Insecurity and fear of violence could suppress voter turnout, and 240 polling stations have already been deemed unusable due to their location in insecure areas.² This calls into question the legitimacy of the polls, although its impact on public reactions remains to be seen. Global Rights, under the auspices of the Community of Practice Against Mass Atrocities in Nigeria established the Incident Center for Election Atrocities which monitors hate speech as well as election-related violence. January saw an increase in election-related violence targeting of candidates as well as politically exposed individuals,³ with at least 15 abducted and 30 killed. There were at least six attacks at campaign rallies.⁴ INEC and police and military facilities have also been attacked. INEC recorded at least 50 attacks since

¹ Atrocities Watch Africa, "Nigeria 2023: a major test for democracy in need of critical support," 31 August 2022, <https://atrocitieswatch.org/publications/nigeria-2023-a-major-test-for-democracy-in-need-of-critical-support/>

² Reuters, "Nigeria won't use 240 new polling units due to insecurity - electoral commission," 14 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigeria-wont-use-240-new-polling-units-due-insecurity-electoral-commission-2023-02-13/>

³ This includes but is not limited to attacks on former politicians, candidates and politicians' staff, politicians' families, religious and traditional leaders, party supporters and security agents.

⁴ Incident Center for Election Atrocities, Monthly tracking of hate speech and election atrocities in Nigeria, January 2023, <https://www.nigeriamourns.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ICEA-report-JANUARY-2023-1.pdf>

the launch of the electioneering season, where electoral materials were destroyed and in some cases, civilians were killed or injured.⁵

Although there is violence and insecurity throughout the country, the Southeast raises cause for special concern. Governance failures have led to increasing insecurity and calls for Biafran independence.⁶ Recent incidents have instilled fear among voters. In January a group of gunmen destroyed campaign materials and announced that there would be no election in Biafra land at Nkanu West Local Government Area (LGA), Enugu State.⁷ Gunmen abducted and later beheaded Mr. Christopher Ohizu, the Sole Administrator of Ideato North (LGA) of Imo State, in a viral video. In the video, his abductors had threatened that there would be no elections in the South East region of the country⁸. Several incidents of violent attacks on opposition political rallies have been documented.

Security measures must be taken to ensure that citizens, especially women and internally displaced persons, can vote safely. Some women have been threatened, in some cases with sexual violence, in order to prevent them from going to vote.⁹ There are over three million people internally displaced in Nigeria.¹⁰ Conflicts in the north of the country have displaced more than one million people.¹¹ At least a further 1.4 million were displaced by floods and other natural disasters in the last quarter of 2022¹² and have remained displaced and live undocumented and in informal settlements across the country. Though the government has made arrangements for displaced people to be able to cast their votes, such provisions have only been made for those displaced that have been documented by the government, which could leave many undocumented displaced out of the electoral process.¹³ In a context of continuous violence, it is highly unlikely that official displacement figures represent the full scope of displacement.

The violence is fuelled by an atmosphere of impunity created by the failure of the authorities to prosecute those responsible for committing the abuses that took place in previous elections.¹⁴ For

⁵ Africa News, "Electoral Commission office and police station attacked in Nigeria, one killed," 2 February 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/02/02/electoral-commission-office-and-police-station-attacked-in-nigeria-one-killed/>

⁶ Institute for Security Studies, "Violence in Nigeria's south-east demands a holistic response," 3 May 2022, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/violence-in-nigerias-south-east-demands-a-holistic-response>

⁷ Incident Center for Election Atrocities, Monthly tracking of hate speech and election atrocities in Nigeria, January 2023, <https://www.nigeriamourns.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ICEA-report-JANUARY-2023-1.pdf>

⁸ [Abducted Imo council boss beheaded after N6m ransom | The Nation Newspaper \(thenationonline.net\)](https://www.thenationonline.net/abducted-immo-council-boss-beheaded-after-n6m-ransom/)

⁹ Amnesty International, "Nigeria: Authorities must uphold human rights ahead of elections," 15 February 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/02/nigeria-authorities-must-uphold-human-rights-ahead-of-elections/>

¹⁰ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Nigeria, (updated 18 May 2022) <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/nigeria>

¹¹ [Displacement Tracking Matrix: Nigeria North-West and North-Central Crisis Monthly Dashboard #1 \(23 December 2022\) - Nigeria | ReliefWeb](https://reliefweb.int/displacement-tracking-matrix-reports/nigeria-north-west-and-north-central-crisis-monthly-dashboard-23-december-2022)

¹² [Nigeria floods: Hundreds killed and more than 1.4 million displaced | CNN](https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/27/nigeria-floods/index.html)

¹³ Human Rights Watch, "Nigeria: Impunity, Insecurity Threaten Elections," 6 February 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/06/nigeria-impunity-insecurity-threaten-elections>

¹⁴ Amnesty International, "Nigeria: Authorities must uphold human rights ahead of elections," 15 February 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/02/nigeria-authorities-must-uphold-human-rights-ahead-of-elections/> and Human Rights Watch, "Nigeria: Impunity, Insecurity Threaten Elections," 6 February 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/06/nigeria-impunity-insecurity-threaten-elections>

example, a committee previously set up by the Army to investigate allegations of violence and killings during the last elections has still not produced any findings and recommendations four years later.¹⁵

Politicians have resorted to the use of hate speech in the 2023 campaigns. Last month, the Speaker of Abia State House of Assembly referred to the candidate of the Labour Party as “a son of nobody who could be easily dealt with by his supporters”. This candidate was subsequently attacked.¹⁶ Hate speech proliferates on social media platforms, with social media effectively utilized by partisans and bots to spread messages online anonymously.¹⁷ This has been made worse by the spread of disinformation and fake news. These patterns may heighten tensions and intimidate voters, causing a further decline in the trust in the democratic process.

Whoever is deemed the winner of the presidential elections will face numerous challenges as insecurity in the country is increasing and the economy is plummeting. Inflation has been on the rise¹⁸ and over 40% of the population lives below the poverty line.¹⁹ If elections are marred by insecurity and not deemed credible, this could set off new waves of violence.

The outcome will have a huge impact on the future of Nigeria, but also in West Africa, which has witnessed a recent string of coups d'état.

The international community must keep a close eye on the electoral process and ensure international media focus. In particular, the international community should:

- signal that they are paying attention. The first step in influencing the electoral process will be to signal to Nigerian authorities that they are closely watching and monitoring the process.
- insist on key internationally recognized electoral standards governing free and fair elections.
- ensure international media attention and objective reporting, particularly as governmental interference in the media is significant in Nigeria and censorship has been problematic in the past.²⁰
- Increase consequences for disruptors. Quick responses and individual sanctions after Kenya's 2007-8 post-election violence is widely credited with limiting damage during the post-electoral period. International actors should stand ready to take similar action in Nigeria's case if needed.

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, “Nigeria: Impunity, Insecurity Threaten Elections,” 6 February 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/06/nigeria-impunity-insecurity-threaten-elections>

¹⁶ Incident Center for Election Atrocities, Monthly tracking of hate speech and election atrocities in Nigeria, January 2023, <https://www.nigeriamourns.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ICEA-report-JANUARY-2023-1.pdf>

¹⁷ Atrocities Watch Africa, “Nigeria 2023: a major test for democracy in need of critical support,” 31 August 2022, <https://atrocitieswatch.org/publications/nigeria-2023-a-major-test-for-democracy-in-need-of-critical-support/>

¹⁸ Central Bank of Nigeria, Inflation rates, <https://www.cbn.gov.ng/rates/inflrates.asp>

¹⁹ The Guardian, “40% of Nigerian population live below poverty line, says report,” 27 January 2022, <https://guardian.ng/business-services/40-of-nigerian-population-live-below-poverty-line-says-report/>

²⁰ Reporters Without Borders, 2022 World press freedom index, Nigeria, <https://rsf.org/en/country/nigeria>