



Centre for Democracy & Development  
Centre pour la démocratie et le développement

## Nigeria 2023 Decides: Security Brief



## IN BRIEF

- Excessive force in response to protests, looting, explosions, battles, mob violence and attacks against civilians have all been recorded across Nigeria in the last year.
- Northern states are engulfed in long-standing violence with extremist jihadist groups, criminal bandit gangs, and other non-stated armed groups who are engaged in deadly attacks against local communities. In the south, civil unrest continues against the backdrop of ongoing violence between farmers and herders and secessionist agitators.
- Targeted attacks on Independent National Electoral Commission offices and staff pose a credibility security risk to the conduct of the 2023 polls. Recent attacks have predominantly targeted INEC facilities clustered in the southeast geopolitical zone.
- Nationwide fragility and instability provides fertile ground for non-state actors to be easily mobilised by political actors to perpetrate electoral violence.
- With the numbers of armed-non state actors in the country, the way the campaign has entrenched ethno-religious divisions and diminished popular trust in key institutions to deliver a credible election outcome, the risk of violence following the results remains high.

Nigerians will go to the polls in 2023 amidst a host of security challenges. All six geopolitical zones of the country are confronted by insecurity, which has led to the deployment of the Nigerian military in across the federation. Northern states are engulfed in long-standing violence with extremist jihadist groups, criminal bandit gangs, and other non-stated armed groups who are engaged in deadly attacks against local communities. In the south, civil unrest continues against the backdrop of ongoing violence between farmers and herders and secessionist agitators. Over half of the states experienced an increase in the number of conflict events in 2022, as compared with 2021, according to data from the **Nigeria Election Violence Tracker** a partnership between the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD). The situation is further complicated by fuel and currency scarcity which is increasing economic hardships on the more than 130 million Nigerians classified as multidimensionally poor.

The insecurity challenges have the potential to impact on the quality of the forthcoming elections. It could even determine whether elections will hold all across the country given the threat they pose to the security of voters, electoral materials, and poll officials across the more than 176,000 polling units. Targeted attacks on Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) offices and staff have been on the rise in the last year. With the numbers of armed-non state actors in the country, the way the campaign has entrenched ethno-religious divisions and diminished popular trust in key institutions to deliver a credible election outcome, the risks of violence following the results remains high.

## NORTH WEST NIGERIA

Northwest Nigeria is experiencing a complex, multi-sided and multidimensional conflict. At the centre of the conflict are ever-growing, opportunistic and autonomous bandit gangs. While the term rightly emphasises the economic and criminal incentives that have contributed to driving this phenomenon, recent indications also suggest the existence of political agendas and social and ethnic grievances among the leadership of some of the groups. Large swathes of Kaduna, Katsina, Zamfara, Kebbi and Sokoto are controlled by these bandit groups who share an animosity towards the central state and who are increasingly engaging and cooperating – sometimes through financial exchanges – with Islamists terrorist organisations. Ansaru elements operating in the northwest remain steadfast that elections will not be conducted in the areas under their control in parts of Kaduna, Niger and Zamfara states, with reports of forceful confiscation of permanent voter cards to ensure enforcement. In Zamfara state, where bandits control significant chunks of territory across several local government areas (LGAs), it will likely be these leaders who determine if or how voters cast their ballots. In previous elections, bandits have abducted and killed election officials who seek to enable voting in areas they control but ahead of the 2023 polls some bandit kingpins have offered their backing to opposition political aspirants, promising votes in return.

Increased military activities, part of Operation Hadarin Daji, have had some success in pushing back bandits in recent months. But they have also led to civilian casualties. In December 2022, an airstrike by the Nigerian military reportedly killed 64 people in Mutumji, a village situated in Maru LGA of Zamfara. The intensification of hostilities between state and non-state actors and the ongoing displacement of residents could shape the 2023 elections in the zone. Prior to the use of force, state governors had tried to negotiate with the bandits with mixed success, although it did lead to some level of peace in select LGAs of Zamfara state. However, sustained military operations now make similar negotiations unlikely.





## **SOUTH EAST NIGERIA**

The forced incarceration of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) leader Nnamdi Kanu in 2017 marked a significant inflection point in the trajectory of secessionist conflict in the southeast that first re-emerged a decade ago. The pronouncement in early 2020 of the launching of the Eastern Security Network (ESN), a paramilitary organisation attached to IPOB was a further escalation point. Opposition and human rights groups have accused the network of carrying out human rights violations and victimising political and ethnic minorities. IPOB's pronouncement later in the same year of sit-at-home protests - which garnered a significant degree of public compliance and have continued to date - further emphasised the group's growing self-confidence as well as the waning public legitimacy of the state amid repeatedly brutal state-led security operations in the region. But IPOB is not a coherent whole. In fact its factionalisation into three distinct groups - the Autopilot led by Simon Ekpa, the Directorate of State of the Indigenous People of Biafra led by Chika Edoziem and the Uche Mefor and Asari Dokubo co-founded Biafra Defacto Customary Government - could have significant implications for the elections as each tries to outdo each other when it comes to violence.

In the campaign period there has been an increase targeting of political actors and INEC. On 16 December, an LP candidate was murdered in Imo state, reportedly when unidentified gunmen invaded his residence. Whilst two members of the APC were killed on 20 January when armed men raided a community meeting in Ebonyi state. INEC and infrastructure have been targeted in Imo, Anambra and Ebonyi states during the campaign period. In fact, two-thirds of all the attacks on INEC in Nigeria in the last six months have been in the southeast. In the most violent incident, four people were reportedly killed during an armed attack on the INEC headquarters in Owerri, Imo state on 12 December. On 1 February, an unidentified armed group attacked the INEC office of Idemili South LGA, Anambra state destroying 729 ballot boxes, 243 voting cubicles, and 256 election bags. This disruption, along with the threat of IPOB issuing a call to boycott the election over the continued detention of Nnamdi Kanu could have a major impact on voter turnout in the zone.

## **NORTH EAST NIGERIA**

Boko Haram and its splinter group, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), has sustained a conflict against the Nigerian state that has lasted over a decade, causing over 35,000 deaths - 350,000 when second-order effects are counted - and left more than two million internally displaced. Despite the death of a long-time Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau in May 2021, jihadist insurgents in the northeast continue to pose a significant security challenge with ISWAP now the dominant force after killing Shekau, occupying his strongholds in the Sambisa Forest in southern Borno and recruiting many of his former fighters. But fighting between extremist group factions continues, with clashes in Damboa and Konduga LGAs on 9-10 February leading to deaths on both sides. The Nigerian military remains engaged with jihadist groups in the northeast and has looked to take advantage of these divisions. In January and February, the army claimed to have killed hundreds of militants in Borno state in a series of attacks.

## **NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA**

Nigeria's north-central states continue to grapple with pastoralist-farmer conflicts that have long marred the region and led to recurrent violent and displacement. These conflicts have implications for the elections beyond the displacement of citizens, given how politicians have historically mobilised ethnic support during campaigns, especially as the north-central zone is by far the most ethnically and religiously diverse geo-political zone. Over the last two decades, longstanding political tussles between predominantly Christian indigenous groups and Muslim Hausa-Fulani have spiralled into episodic large-scale violence, with Plateau state at the centre. In November, Niger state was a hotspot for militia violence, with multiple reports of militias attacking, vandalising, and looting from residents and farming communities. In late January in Benue state, armed Fulani pastoralists attacked Makurdi, allegedly killing eight civilians.

## SOUTH WEST NIGERIA

Traditionally considered Nigeria's most peaceful region, the southwest has not been spared from the recent upsurge in inter-communal tensions and unrest. While there had previously been pockets of insecurity - primarily of a criminal nature or tied to moments of heightened political competition - the southwest has largely been spared the worst of ethno-communal, sectarian, or other forms of chronic unrest since the resumption of electoral politics in 1999. But rising insecurity as a result of the intensification of conflict between farming and herding communities which has seen an influx of herders moving further into the region because of insecurity and environmental changes in the Sahel region is changing that dynamic. It has turned localised and often criminal attacks - including kidnappings, killings, arson, and rape - into a more generalised atmosphere of inter-communal division and mistrust. Leading to both increased community "self-help" approaches and the mobilisation of non-state armed groups, such as cult groups, at the local level. Cult groups have historically been hired to commit violence against political opponents around elections.

## SOUTH SOUTH NIGERIA

The relationship between cult gangs and political actors is well structured and strong in south-south states like Rivers where political actors and contestants of various political officers are often members of the cult themselves. In these instances, access to political power has become a tool not only for the servicing of ethnic and religious interests but also that of the cult in the state. In previous elections, militant leaders in the south-south played key roles in deciding who got elected to political offices. Some have now become political godfathers themselves, sponsoring candidates to elective positions by means of wealth acquired from their control of illicit oil bunkering economy and social capital secured from the communities they are from. Militant leaders in the region have the potential to influence the outcome of the elections in an area which has remained a theatre for violent conflicts and youth restiveness for the past three decades.

## ELECTION IMPACTS

### *INEC a target*

In recent years, offices of Nigeria's INEC have often been the target of violent attacks. The Nigerian Election Violence Tracker has recorded at least 134 incidents involving INEC offices and staff between 2019 and 2022. Among these events are lootings, arson attacks, shootings, as well as abductions and assassinations of electoral officers. Attacks in 2022 and 2023 have predominantly targeted INEC facilities clustered in the southeast, which has been home to over two-thirds of the total events recorded since the start of 2021. The violence has continued in 2023. Four attacks on INEC facilities were recorded during the first half of January. To give an example of the damage these attacks can cause, according to an official press release by INEC following the December 2022 attack on its Abeokuta South LGA office, 904 ballot boxes, 29 voting cubicles, 30 megaphones, 57 election bags, eight electric power generators and 65,699 uncollected PVCs were completely destroyed. In addition to the southeast, risks of attack on INEC personnel and materials on election day remains high in the northwest due to the wider lack of security.

Wider instability also poses obstacles for the transportation of materials and other election logistics. The Inter-Agency Consultative Committee on Election Security has raised alarm that insurgency across the country could undermine the conduct of the 2023 general elections, with states and regions already weakened by state fragility becoming flash points. Ensuring that these areas are reached, and that the more than 3 million internally displaced Nigerians are able to cast a ballot will also be important for longer term security, as it will reduce any sense that a winning candidate was imposed on them in an election, they were unable to participate in.



### *New Threat from Naira Scarcity*

On 11 November 2022 a Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) press release announced a Naira redesign, demonetisation, and the introduction of a new cashless policy. The implementation of these commitments has not only unsettled political and electoral calculations and permutations but has directly impacted citizens, with the scarcity of cash creating long queues at banking institutions, leading to protests in Ondo, Oyo, Ogun, Edo and Delta states. These macro monetary policies were principally meant to preserve the integrity of the Naira, reduce the significant amount of cash in circulation outside the banking system and its use for criminal activities, and strengthen the economy by controlling spiralling inflation and corruption. The CBN initiative could play a key role in supporting Nigeria's quest to conduct credible polls and fight corruption but with the lack of cash in circulation it could in fact increase the risk of citizens being susceptible to vote buying. Despite the potential benefits of the CBN's initiative there is palpable frustration and anxiety among citizens, with the inability to access cash having grounded many small businesses, further increased daily hardships and ironically made voters more susceptible to selling votes. The frustration being felt by citizens should not be underestimated and can be exploited by political actors to further encourage instability.

Furthermore, without cash, and coupled with prevailing fuel scarcity, many citizens will be unable to travel for the elections, increasing the risk of low turnout and undermining the credibility of the outcome. Additionally, and critically, INEC will encounter an additional array of challenges to deliver the elections. Local printing of materials and other sub-contracted services have already been affected by the cash shortages. INEC will also find it extremely difficult to effectively deploy logistics and staff to remote locations. It normally pays transporters and provide resources for more than a million ad-hoc staff in the 8,809 political wards in cash. Security operations, which also rely heavily on cash for their operation, may also be affected and this could impact on the ability of INEC to hold polls in states across the federation in a safe and secure setting. Even if these resources do arrive in time many security agents and even ad hoc election staff, facing challenges brought about by Naira and fuel scarcity and wider economic hardship, will be more susceptible to being bribed or manipulated.

### *Violent political competition*

In the months leading up to general elections in Nigeria, violent events involving political parties tend to increase as contestation intensifies within and between groups vying for power. Ahead of the February 2023 elections, violence targeting political party supporters has trended upwards. In the last quarter of 2022, violence targeting political parties reached its highest point since the previous general election in early 2019. In total there have been 60 attacks recorded on political rallies, resulting in nine fatalities since the start of campaigning on 28 September. Some of these actions are taken by armed vigilante groups working at the direction of state governors. Groups such as Yan Sakai, the Civilian Joint Task Force, Neighbourhood Watch, Amotekun and Ebubeagu have been, and can be, deployed by political actors to perpetrate electoral violence. The arming and mobilisation of non-state actors by political figures for election purposes could further worsen the state of insecurity in the country as post-election these groups could utilise the financial and military resources acquired to further perpetuate criminality of all forms including kidnapping, banditry, armed robbery and militant insurgency. While the insecurity they create itself portends dangers for the ability to conduct credible elections, politically sponsored violence could also be a determining factor in the outcome and acceptance of the polls.



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