



Commentary

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By International Crisis Group

Averting Violence around Nigeria's 2019 Elections

As election preparations get underway in Nigeria, conflict and insecurity in many parts of the country risk exacerbating intercommunal tensions and preventing a peaceful transfer of power. In this excerpt from our Watch List 2018 annual early-warning update for European policy makers, Crisis Group urges the EU and its members states to remain fully engaged during the election in order to curb violence and strengthen the country's democratic institutions.

Nigeria will hold national and state elections in February and March 2019. The presidential contest will pit incumbent President Muhammadu Buhari of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) against veteran politician and former vice president Atiku Abubakar of the main opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP). A credible and peaceful vote could strengthen Nigeria's democracy and help curb the violence blighting parts of the country. Yet Nigeria's polls are traditionally fraught contests. Over 800 people died in post-election violence in 2011. Next year's vote will take place amid conflict and insecurity in parts of the country that impede planning and deepen divisions among communities. Acrimony between the two major parties has delayed legislation and funds for the elections, which threatens to derail their smooth administration and raise risks of violence. Misgivings over the impartiality of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), particularly among the opposition and in the southern states, and concerns over the

neutrality of security agencies could also contribute to disputes before and after polling.

Concerted, sustained international attention helped limit violence during the 2015 elections and was crucial to the peaceful transfer of power. The 2019 vote is likely to demand similar engagement. The European Union (EU) and its member states should:

- Urge President Buhari to ensure that relevant offices of the executive speedily release all funds dedicated to INEC and the security agencies, urgently work with the National Assembly to approve the amended electoral bill and establish the Electoral Offences Commission (the body that will sanction electoral violations);
- Call on all political parties to stop inflammatory rhetoric, subscribe to and respect the revised Code of Conduct for Political Parties – a voluntary instrument governing the behaviour of parties and their supporters;
- Press parties to establish national, regional, ethnic and inter-faith forums in which candidates and their supporters publicly commit to peaceful campaigning and establish channels of communication and contingency plans to respond to inter-party violence;
- Support the work of the National Peace Committee, a group of eminent Nigerians committed to mediate electoral disputes, to bring together the presidential candidates, especially President Buhari and Atiku Abubakar,

to sign an accord ahead of the polls and publicly pledge to avoid violence, accept the election results or pursue grievances peacefully through lawful channels;

- Create a diplomatic forum in Abuja to coordinate messaging of Nigeria's foreign partners to President Buhari, political parties, candidates and security agencies, calling on them to act lawfully to prevent and mitigate violence and establish a high-level international working group, spearheaded by prominent statespersons with sway in Nigeria, that could intervene in the event of any major electoral crisis;
- Deploy an observer mission with a long-term presence to monitor the campaign, voting, counting and results tabulation;
- Consider threatening to impose travel and economic sanctions against political and other leaders engaging in or encouraging violence;
- Urge and, if necessary, provide support to INEC to intensify its public education campaigns, particularly to encourage voters to collect their permanent voter cards and to exercise their franchise.

“Win or Die” Politics and a Tight Presidential Contest

Presidential, Senate and House of Representatives polls are scheduled for 16 February 2019, in what will be Nigeria's sixth round of national elections since the transition from military to civilian rule in 1999. Voting for 29 governors (seven are elected at other times) and House of Assembly (state legislature) members in all 36 states follow on 2 March.

Of the 91 political parties registered to contest the vote, two are dominant – the ruling APC and the opposition PDP, which held power for sixteen years until Buhari assumed office in 2015. The presidential election will likely be a close race between Buhari and the PDP's

candidate, Abubakar, who was vice president from 1999 to 2007. That it will pit two candidates from the north against one another tempers some risks. Were Buhari to lose to a southern candidate, many northerners might have felt short-changed (according to informal power-sharing arrangements, the Nigerian presidency is supposed to rotate around different regions and alternate between north and south; because the northern president before Buhari, Umaru Musa Yar Adua, passed away while in office, southerners have held the presidency for almost three out of every four years since 1999). That said, it remains unclear how either of the two candidates and their supporters will respond to losing.

Fraught relations between the two major parties, based not on ideological differences but largely on the struggle to capture power and access to state resources, pose several challenges. Disputes between President Buhari and leaders of the two houses of Nigeria's legislature, who both defected from the APC to the PDP in July 2018, seriously delayed the legislature's approval of funds for INEC and security agencies (though that approval has now been granted and Buhari should press relevant ministries to quickly release funds). Frosty relations also are continually stalling much-needed amendments to electoral legislation. The failure to adopt those reforms, particularly to enshrine in law the use of electronic card readers intended to curb fraud, would jeopardise the transparency of and confidence in polls, and heighten risks of post-election disputes.

Voters are sharply divided between Buhari's supporters who believe his government is fighting corruption and delivering on its 2015 pledges, and those of Abubakar, who largely view Buhari's performance as a catalogue of failed promises. Increasingly acrimonious exchanges between the parties, aggravated by hate speech, including from some party leaders, and fake news (particularly in social media), are progressively charging the atmosphere. A tight contest, with the candidates running neck-and-neck, would increase incentives to rig and to use

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violence to suppress the vote in rivals’ strongholds. A close result, particularly one with no outright winner in the first ballot (a candidate needs 25 per cent of votes in two-thirds of Nigeria’s 36 states to avoid a run-off), would significantly heighten the risk of violence.

As in the past, parties and candidates are approaching the elections with a “win or die” mindset, largely because of the huge financial rewards associated with holding political office in Nigeria. Recent state governor elections, particularly in Ekiti and Osun states, saw many instances of abuse of incumbency, widespread vote buying and other illegal voter inducements, dissemination of fake news and hate speech on social media, and acts of violence, as widely reported in the Nigerian media and also by election monitors. Incidents of political thuggery are likely to increase, with some candidates threatened with abduction and even rape of their relatives.

Local power struggles also threaten bloodshed in several states. In Kano state, former Governor Rabiun Musa Kwankwaso (now a senator) has been in a fierce battle with his former deputy, incumbent Governor Abdullahi Ganduje. In Rivers state, a long-running rivalry between former Governor Rotimi Amaechi and incumbent Governor Nyesom Wike is compounded by local grievances within each of the three senatorial districts. Similar power struggles and resentments in several states could lead to heavy clashes among supporters of politicians and parties as elections approach.

Election Preparations and Institutional Neutrality

Building on its successful administration of the polls in 2015, INEC has taken important steps to further improve election preparations, notably by formulating its first Strategic Plan (2017-2021) to guide its work from an early stage. But

its efforts face multiple challenges. Foremost among them are delays in finalising the legal framework for the vote, largely the result of the friction between the executive and legislature.

For instance, INEC remains uncertain whether several provisions in earlier versions of the electoral reform bill, which were intended to improve election administration and transparency, will be retained in the final bill that is still stuck between the federal legislature and President Buhari. This continuing uncertainty undercuts preparations for the polls. In addition, INEC’s commendable drive to increase voter participation has registered some 14 million new voters since 2015. But 10 million of them have not collected the cards they need for voting. The enthusiasm of many Nigerians who registered for the first time after the successful 2015 elections appears to have waned, with many now too apathetic to pick up their voter cards.

INEC and security agencies responsible for the elections also face questions regarding their independence and neutrality, though little evidence of bias has been produced. The fact that INEC’s leader, along with those of the police, domestic intelligence agency and Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), are all northerners like Buhari – though from different states and with no direct ties to the president – has fuelled conspiracy theories, particularly in the PDP’s southern strongholds, about plans to manipulate the election’s outcome in Buhari’s favour. PDP stalwarts view actions of the EFCC and police, for example, as favouring Buhari’s ruling party and aimed at intimidating opposition leaders and charge these bodies with partisanship. That Abubakar is also a northerner helps counter these perceptions to some degree, but does not fully allay the opposition’s fears of institutions leaning in the APC’s favour, particularly in governorship and legislative

contests. Such fears increase the likelihood of disputes and potentially violence.

Security Challenges

Election preparations are taking place amid complex security challenges that are overstretching the Nigerian security forces. The long-running Boko Haram insurgency still plagues parts of the north east. While the fourteen local administrative units held by Boko Haram in early 2015 have been recaptured by government forces, some areas, especially in Borno state, remain under the group's control or vulnerable to attacks. One branch of Boko Haram, calling itself the Islamic State of West Africa Province, has regrouped and in recent months launched a series of attacks, including on military targets in Borno.

Herder-farmer violence, which claimed over 1,300 lives in the first six months of 2018, has ebbed over the past few months. But tensions in parts of the north central and north eastern zones (particularly Benue, Plateau, Taraba and Adamawa states) continue. As of January 2018, the north central zone accounted for about 15 per cent of registered voters nationwide. Politicians are already exploiting herder-farmer frictions to mobilise support and divide communities. Similarly, while recent military operations have curbed rural banditry in Zamfara state in the north west, the area remains unstable.

General insecurity across the country (especially kidnapping for ransom) poses another challenge. With youth unemployment rate rising to an unprecedented 33 per cent in the third quarter of 2017, according to the National Bureau of Statistics, a higher number of youth are now vulnerable to recruitment into militias. As in previous elections, politicians can mobilise and arm youths – many already organised in criminal gangs and so-called “cults”, whose members are bonded by blood oaths and other rituals – to attack and intimidate opponents. This, coupled with the continuing influx of illegal arms (two major seizures were recorded in May and July) and the circulation of weapons from some of the country's conflict zones, has created a more perilous environment ahead of next year's polls.