

# Policyweekly

## Violence in Advance

Nigeria's 2023 Presidential Election



### Policy Recommendations

- 1** The voter registration exercise should be extended with more manpower and logistics to register voters.
- 2** INEC should recruit and train ad-hoc staff for voter registration purposes.
- 3** Security agencies should ensure adequate security around registration centres to protect INEC staff and citizens.
- 4** The necessity to educate INEC staff on the value of neutrality as a fundamental tenet of public service.
- 5** The importance of prosecuting suspects involved in attacks on registration centres.
- 6** Abuse and engagement on social media should be closely watched.

As the 2023 presidential election draws close, there is an unusual upswing of interest among several Nigerians, especially the youth, in the electoral process. In this connection, the [continuous voter registration is experiencing a surge](#) that had never been the case since the restoration of elective rule in 1999. [Between June 2021 and June 2022, 6.8 million voters were registered.](#) The youth constitutes 69.7 percent of this number. Besides, there is a major rise in online campaigns to stimulate voter registration, obtain a permanent voter's card (PVC), and participate in the 2023 ballots. This new drive to obtain voter's cards may be accounted for by one or some combination of the following reasons a) massive disenchantment with the quality of political rule and the character of the dominant political platforms for electing leaders; b) disenchantment with the track records of some candidates and excitement about

some promising new contestants; c) the potential of the new electoral law to support transparent elections because it allows direct online transmission of votes to the central portal of the election management body. Electronic transmission of results is believed to be a major innovation toward electoral integrity because it would be an important check against concocted results outside the polling units. Therefore, people who feared their votes would not count now see a promise of reduced election rigging.

Nonetheless, a certain form of electoral violence is evolving to undermine the rising enthusiasm of potential voters interested in registering and participating in the forthcoming ballots. Hoodlums gather in some instances to disperse interested registrants with violence. In some cases, they also inflict mortal harm on the registrants. In subsequent paragraphs, examples from Imo and Lagos States and FCT Abuja are illustrated. Besides this direct violence, there are cases of online attacks and the use of social media to threaten would-be registrants.

The evolving violence around elections sometimes targets persons who secessionist groups see to undermine the objectives of the secessionists by performing citizenship duties of registering to vote in elections. On the other hand, violence is also targeted at potential strongholds of either an opposition party or an ethnic group which is believed to be capable of voting against the interest of some politically influential persons, especially in the political enclaves of such powerful politicians. Whichever is the case, forcefully preventing potential voters from registering is like a mustard seed of violence that would grow as other aspects of the electoral process draw nearer. In this edition of Nextier SPD Policy Weekly, we reflect on the use of violence to mitigate voter registration as an early stage electoral malpractice which may compromise the overall electoral process.

### **Gradual Growth of the Monster of Violence**

On April 14 2022, gunmen purported to be the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) invaded a registration centre of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) [Ihitte Uboma](#) Imo State, shot an INEC official and inflicted injuries on persons who had gathered to register as voters. They issued warnings that there should be no further registration in the South East of Nigeria as they struggle to actualise the

state of Biafra. Furthermore, the attackers categorically warned against elections in South-Eastern Nigeria. Similarly, on June 23, 2022, [Alaba International Market traders](#) in Lagos state, who had shut down the entire market to go and register for the Permanent Voters Cards, were physically attacked at their registration points. In addition, a case of disruptions of voter registration was reported in Lugbe, a suburb in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. The attack aimed to disperse and prevent the intending registrants from participating in the forthcoming elections. What appears more disturbing is that the incident has acquired an ethnic colouration.

In Lagos, the traders who closed shops were mostly Igbo. They believe they were attacked because they are Igbo, and their political interest is distinct from their attackers. One tweet reported in the Premium Times newspaper indicted the INEC and read verbatim that: *“the INEC officials refused to register Igbo people, they insisted the centre will only Register Yoruba people, one of the INEC officials (an Igbo) was told he will be dealt with if he ever registers his people.”* The report also indicates that there was only one registration point for the mammoth crowd that gathered at Ojo Local Government Area for the enrolment.

Another trader in Okota, Lagos, who responded to an oral interview, noted that there was no physical attack in his area. Yet, he suspects a deliberate ploy to frustrate their intention to register for the ballot. According to him, he had closed his shop on three different occasions to register. But, those responsible for the registration would report very late to the office or announce after a few registrations that their machines have become dysfunctional (Personal conversation, 2022). Although INEC has responded to the inadequacy of logistics by deploying an [additional 209 registration machines](#) in the South East, Lagos and Kano state, the extent to which this intervention could meet the intensity of the surge in voter registration remains a source of anxiety.

On the ethnic colouration of the electoral process, the [Police authority in Lagos](#) has dismissed the claim by noting that the skirmishes at the registration centres were not about Igbos. The Police further maintained that it was one of the registrants that made trouble but was challenged by those around. However, those who went to register for their PVCs on that day hold a different opinion. An interviewee insisted that it was targeted violence and related it

to episodes of targeted violence during the 2019 presidential election, in which suspected thugs of the All Progressives Congress (APC) party disrupted elections in Okota, Isolo, Oshodi, Alaba and Ajegunle areas of Lagos State. These places have a predominance of non-indigenous populations, especially the ethnic Igbo.

Moreover, in one of the locations, the thugs were reported to have openly threatened any voting against the APC, which is the national and Lagos State ruling party. (Personal Communication, 2022; also see Okon-Ekong, Obioha & Maduekwe, 2019). Thus, there is a certain feeling that violent hitches to voter registration are a reinvention of the 2019 style of election crisis. Similarly, the case in the Abuja suburb had a religious-North/South divide colouration, as the men accused of disrupting the registration were Moslem Northern men.

Based on the narrative above, a few things stand out. First, there is inadequate security at INEC registration points. This encourages seamless attack of both INEC officials and innocent citizens, as well as the introduction of fracas by hooligans at the registration points. Second, there tends to be inadequate logistics for carrying out the registration and biometric capture of interested citizens for PVC. Third, many qualified Nigerians willing to vote are yet to be captured in the voter's register. Fourth, the allegation of ethnic bias in registration invites a need for the briefing of INEC staff on the need to maintain neutrality as a major defining character of public service.

### **Recommendations.**

Some issues for consideration at the level of policy in the light of the preceding include the following:

1. The election management body INEC should reckon with the increasing demand for voter registration and the imminence of expiration of voter registration and deploy more manpower and logistics to

register as many qualified voters as are interested in enrolling into the voters' register. Besides, another slight extension of the voter registration exercise appears compelling.

2. To deploy human resources, INEC may consider hiring and quickly training some ad-hoc staff for voter registration.
3. Given the security challenges across the country, INEC should consider organising a level of security around their registration centres to protect their staff and citizens who have come to enrol for their PVCs.
4. INEC should advise its staff and other human resources that it engages in the ethics of neutrality as a core principle of public service. This principle requires public servants to treat all citizens equally and eschew nepotism and tribalism in their conduct. In this context, we refer to voter registration and other aspects of the electoral process.
5. The security agencies should investigate alleged attacks at the registration centres and, if possible, arrest and prosecute suspects involved in the attack as a deterrence for future occurrences.
6. There should be efforts by the state, INEC, political parties and all concerned organisations to monitor social media abuses and engagements as we move towards the elections. For example, social media posts promoting ethnic and religious hate on the 2023 elections are seen daily. Allowing social media hate to continue could lead to election and post-election violence in some states.

### **Conclusion**

The approach to the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria is a mixed bag. Political developments in the country stimulate public interest in the electoral process to an unknown extent. In addition, the electoral laws that promise the integrity of votes and

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experiences with poor governance tend to be the core push factors for public interest in participating in the elections. The outcome is a surge in enrolment in the voters' register. But this upsurge in participatory interest is being hindered by what seems like targeted violence, logistic gaps and other bureaucratic hiccups from the election management body. Addressing this problem warrants looking at its security dimension to secure human lives at the voter registration centres. For the election management dimension, INEC should consider extending their voter registration deadline further, even if it warrants tweaking the election calendar very slightly. The other aspect that bears attention is the dimension of public service ethic, which INEC should do well to address to end the complaints of nepotism against their personnel.

## References

Okon-Ekong, N., Obioha, V. and Maduekwe, O., 2019. Marred by Glitches and Violence. [online] Thisdaylive.com. Available at: <<https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2019/02/25/marred-by-glitches-and-violence/>> [Accessed June 27 2022].

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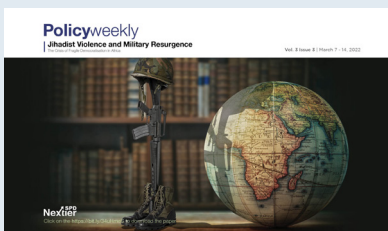
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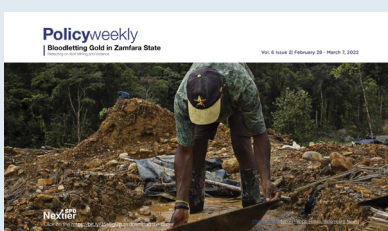
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