



Threats, Fears and Securitised Ballots The Concluded Governorship Election in Anambra State

Policy Recommendations

1 The conflict resolution capacity of the elders in the South-East should be explored in seeking a solution to the larger issue of secession and violence.

2 Governments in the South East need to explore within their capacities ways of addressing the points of agitation raised by IPOB.

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The governorship election for Anambra State took place on the 6th and 8th of November 2021. The ballot has come and gone and produced a winner and losers with the declaration of Prof Chukwuma Soludo of the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) as the winner. The election arguably generated the highest level of anxiety and fear in Nigeria's recent electoral history. The background to fears about the election is the fears and anxieties from the warning issued by a secessionist movement, the Independent People of Biafra (IPOB), that no election must hold in any part of the South-East. On the contrary, the Federal Government announced a determination to hold the governorship election. These counter declarations from two parties, both with the potentials to pursue their intentions with force, set the stage for brinkmanship between the State and the Biafran agitators.

In a determined move to ensure that the election was held, the Federal government made a massive security deployment to create safety guarantees. However, the deployment became a source of greater anxiety as people feared potential clashes between IPOB and the government's security personnel. In this edition of the Nextier SPD Policy Weekly, we reflect on the spin-offs of the fears of violent conflicts on the Anambra State 2021 governorship election.

Contextualising the Struggle for Biafra and 2021 Governorship Elections

About three decades after the Biafra war, a new form of Igbo nationalism emerged with creating a neo-Biafran movement called the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). They want an independent state from Nigeria based on the claim that the official Nigerian State is subjugating the Igbo. Developments in the neo-Biafran struggles led to the rise of several more neo-Biafran agitators, including IPOB, which is now the most vocal and radically militant among them.

Like [\(MASSOB\) resisted census activity in](#)

[2006](#) in South-East Nigeria, IPOB campaigns for the South Easterners to reject elections in their region. They urged a boycott of the Anambra State gubernatorial elections in [2017](#) and demanded a plebiscite. Similarly, in furtherance to its demand for a referendum, IPOB also called for a [boycott of Enugu State Local Government elections in 2017](#). Again in 2018, they declared a plan to [boycott the 2019 general elections](#) in 11 states of the South East and South-South, including Biafran clans carved into Kogi, Benue and Edo States. Preparatory to the gubernatorial elections in Anambra State in 2021, IPOB stated that the [election would not hold without the release of Mr Kanu](#), their detained leader. He was recently abducted from Kenya by Nigeria.

Before the planned boycott of the elections, Monday of each week beginning from 9th August 2021 had been declared a compulsory sit at home day across the South East pending the release of Mr Kanu. The threat of violent enforcement created fears and compliance from a large number of people. Even when the organisation decided to call off the sit at home strike and limit it only to days that Mr Kanu's court hearing takes place, hoodlums were still frightening people to remain indoors. This strategy of 'ghost town' strategy, which had achieved massive compliance, emboldened IPOB to declare a six-day sit-at-home protest that would have spanned 5th to 10th November 2021. Had this happened, the implication is that people would not go out to vote. Determined to hold the Anambra election and assert its sovereign power, the Federal Government deployed more than [54,000](#) security personnel comprising the police and the Civil Defence Corps. Also, there were soldiers and personnel of the Department of State Security (DSS) to keep the peace in that election.

In a sudden twist on the eve of the election, [IPOB withdrew their sit-at-home protest and encouraged people to go out and vote](#). According to them, they succumbed to the counsel of the elders in the South East.

Exploring the Spin-offs of Threats and Tensions on the Elections

Three important spin-offs from the tensions generated before the election include fear, pervasive securitisation, and voter turnout effects. Firstly, people were afraid that the election would be hard-fought, not much on the ballot but with bullets, as a series of [armed attacks](#) killed both prominent and ordinary citizens. For example, [Dr Chike Akunyili](#), a physician and widower of the late Prof Dora Akunyili that fought fake drugs racket, was brutally shot and murdered in Anambra State as the election was approaching. Also, there was an armed attack on [Ajali police station Anambra State](#) in which five officers were killed by unknown gunmen who also set the police station ablaze. Another attack in which three policemen were shot in [Prof. Soludo's](#) hometown, where he was meeting with the youths. In contrast, these developments were sources of fear as the election was approaching, IPOB's plan for a six-day sit-at-home protest to prevent voting in the election, side by side Federal Government's security deployment to ensure that election held, left the people with no doubt that the day of the ballot would be bloody. The other fear about the election was that the votes might not count, considering that court verdicts had applied facile technicalities in some recent experiences to decide electoral victory.

Secondly, by deploying security men from virtually all armed services, the election was constituted as an issue of urgent and exceptional security interest. To be sure, an election is a securitised phenomenon in Nigeria. But that of 2021 governorship in Anambra State stood out because the State and an aggrieved armed actor were in contention about whether or not it should hold. So, the stage was set for suspense and fear, while the victim was the right to free choice. The point is that pervasive securitisation could be counter-productive for free elections because, under such a circumstance, people vote in an atmosphere of fear or even opt-out for fear of death.

The third important spin-off is how the fear and securitisation of the election played out on the voter turnout in the election. In the 2021 governorship election in Anambra State, there were 2,466,638 registered voters. The number of accredited voters was 253,388; 8,108 votes were rejected, leaving a total valid vote of 245,280. Thus, we have 9.93 per cent of registered voters deciding the fate of a population of around 6 million. This figure further reduces to a paltry 4.08 per cent of the six million population. This outcome is neither good for the election nor democracy generally. While analysis connects the dismal turnout in the election to an established history of low voter turnout, there are dissenting views. Those who argue that the poor voter [turnout is only a continuation of a trend of voter apathy](#) that did not start with the last Anambra governorship election note that out of the 2.2 million that registered to vote in Anambra elections in 1999, 46.4 per cent voted. In 2004, 47.22 per cent of the registered voters went to the polls. In 2010, only 16 per cent of the voters exercised their franchise out of 1.84 million that registered. In 2013 only 25 per cent of the 1.77 million registered voters exercised their voting rights. 2017 election recorded a drop to 21 per cent in participation in the ballots as only 448,711 voted out of 2,016,134 registered voters. 2021 is therefore seen as only a reflection of an established pattern of the State's voting behaviour. A lawyer Mr Ike (pseudonym), who responded to an oral interview on the election, suggested that it is still the same people who vote that continue to go to the polls. While some are citizens who wish to express their choices freely, others have vested interests such as balloting for rewards or voting as party members.

While the above idea appears persuasive, there are reasons to see that the sharpest drop in election turnout took place in the 2021 election in Anambra. A [pre-election survey of the SBM](#) showed that 60 per cent of the registered voters would not participate due to fear and lack of trust in the electoral system. A major source of this fear was the possibility of an attack from the IPOB.

In the end, the election was essentially free from violence as another respondent, Mr Oko (pseudonym), a civil society activist, volunteered. He suggested that the security meetings before the elections were targeted at ensuring civil conduct for the security personnel deployed for the election. However, the election could not be said to be free from fear.

Looking Forward

What stands out in the election and its preparation is that some conflict management strategies that the government and major political actors have continued to ignore became the most potent instruments for ensuring that the election took place. At the core, the elders of the South-East whose advice made the IPOB members withdraw their threat to the election are by that incident shown to be an important agency in brokering peace in the South-East not just for elections for other range of issues that occasion conflicts. Thus It is recommended that:

1. The conflict resolution capacity of the elders in the South-East should be explored in seeking a solution to the larger issue of secession and violence. Working with Igbo Apex socio-cultural group, the Ohaneze, in setting up town meetings and discussing with the many disgruntled youths in the region will help reduce the tension in the region.
2. Governments in the South East need to explore within their capacities ways of addressing the points of agitation raised by IPOB. Primarily, they should use good governance to develop infrastructure in their states, create employment and develop local capacities. This is a trust-building measure that would connect citizens at lower levels with the government. It would be a prelude for articulating demand points for dialoguing with the Federal Government on areas that the South East complain of inequity.
3. Since the South East has a culture of low voter turnout and political apathy, there is a major gap to be filled through conscious political education (not sloganeering). Such education should emphasise the power of voting in changing poor governance outcomes. If the South-East successfully mobilises up to 80 per cent of her 9.8 million registered voters, they can determine the outcome of both local and presidential elections. Besides, they should be educated to develop the power of voice from below in engaging governance and ensuring accountability.

Conclusion

The 2021 gubernatorial election in Anambra State has ended without major incidents. It could be said to be a peaceful election but ridden with tensions and fears. The fears were occasioned by the brinkmanship between the government and IPOB about holding the election. Ultimately, the existing culture of poor voter turnout became reinforced based on fears of uncertainty that made some of the usual voters abandon their civic duty. The core lesson from successful intervention to allow the ballot is the need for local solutions to the crises in the South East since elders could dissuade the Biafran agitators from stopping the elections. Besides, there is a major gap to be filled with political education to teach the people the power of voting and participation as the less costly routes to achieving change in a democracy.

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