

In April 2003, voters throughout Nigeria will go to the polls to elect new leaders at the state and national levels of government. This is the second in a series of reports on the electoral environment in Nigeria as the country approaches these critical elections, the first civil transfer of power since 1983.

INEC Sets New Deadline for Candidate Lists, Begins Screening Candidates

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) pushed back the deadline for the submission of lists of political party candidates to February 17 from February 10. Though INEC did not give a reason for shifting the date, one Nigerian newspaper speculated the cause to be the intense negotiating and changing of candidates between parties and between national and state party offices. For the April 19 presidential election, fifteen names had been submitted by the original deadline.

INEC invited party chairmen to meet on February 28 to discuss candidate screening. Since the submission deadline, INEC has begun examining candidate's credentials and verifying that the information in their nomination papers is accurate. Screening of presidential candidates is taking place in Abuja while screening of candidates for other offices is carried out at the state level.

Initially, political parties believed that INEC would allow parties to replace the names of disqualified candidates, though INEC Chairman Abel Guobadia stated that changes would not be accepted after March 10. INEC's timetable calls for the release of the final list of nominated candidates by March 18. The ruling People's Democratic

Party, among others, is reported to be looking for replacement gubernatorial candidates.

Candidate Carousel Begins

Though most parties held primaries and conventions to choose presidential and gubernatorial candidates, party executive committees have the authority to replace candidates with little approval from the rank and file members. With many presidential candidates, there is much room for dealmaking and changes. For example, it is unlikely that seven Igbo candidates will remain in the field.

In one case, the National Reform Party shifted its allegiance to the incumbent, President Olusegun Obasanjo of the PDP, with the blessing of party founder Chief Enahoro.

Hoping to come to a consensus on a candidate with a civilian background as a credible alternative to Obasanjo and All Nigeria People Party's candidate Muhammadu Buhari, representatives from fourteen small parties have formed the Conference of Nigerian Political Parties (CNPP). Following meetings on February 15 and February 20, the CNPP vowed to run a progressive campaign based on issues. They set February 27 as a target date for choosing a candidate. Chief Gani Fawehinmi of the National Conscience Party seems to be the favorite

Yet not all activity favors consolidation and the larger parties. The former PDP national chairman recently joined the United Nigeria People's Party (UNPP). Similarly, the Alliance for Democracy (AD) national

executive committee appears deadlocked between those who back Obasanjo and others who prefer a separate candidate. The latter took advantage of the extended deadline to submit for INEC's approval the name of Alfred Aisedionlen. On February 27, the pro-Obasanjo faction won an injunction to prevent INEC from accepting the list. AD was one of three parties to contest the 1999 national elections.

Despite criticism from those close to Buhari, the Movement for Democracy and Justice candidate Alhaji Muhammadu Yusufu vowed to remain in the presidential race. ANPP supporters fear that Yusufu, who hails from Katsina, the same state as Buhari, could siphon away votes from their candidate.

INEC releases Voter Register; Suspends Electoral Officers for Irregularities

Originally promised in December, INEC released the voter register for public scrutiny, according to an INEC spokesman. The release was delayed by slower-than-expected processing of the estimated 70 million voter cards.

The voter roll will be open from March 1-8 and voters may lodge complaints and objections on March 11 and 12 at the ward level of the 774 local government areas. However, there is potential for confusion due to a concurrent national identity card campaign, which has been extended until March 18, and the lack of a voter awareness campaign.

INEC has suspended approximately 250 electoral officers who, during the voter registration exercise, "colluded with politicians to either sell forms or engaged in actions which sought to compromise the integrity of the commission," said an INEC spokesman. At least 13 Resident Electoral Commissioners have been reassigned to other regions. Political parties and civic groups greatly criticized INEC for widespread irregularities in the original

September 2002 voter registration. In response, INEC conducted a smaller registration exercise in January.

In related news, INEC released a code of conduct for the 30 political parties. INEC chairman Guobadia stated that the code is intended to ensure a level playing field.

Violence Continues in Warri

Communal violence sparked by a PDP primary in Warri, Delta State, raged anew with the army becoming involved. The dispute started over the number and allocation of wards that divide the city.

Political leaders of the Urhobo and Itsekiri ethnic groups received conflicting court injunctions requiring INEC to implement either a 10 ward or 12 ward system for the primary. In the deadlock, members of the ethnic groups sought reprisals against each other, burning houses and lynching opponents.

The army was called in to calm tensions, but has been accused of profiting from the chaotic environment, looting and burning stores. The Urhobo Progress Union called for the removal of two military officers for complicity in destroying Urhobo property. The army had denied the allegations.

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