

With less than a month until voters throughout Nigeria go to the polls to elect new leaders at the state and national levels of government, both political campaigns and election-related violence are heating up. This is the fourth in a series of reports on the electoral environment in Nigeria.

Twenty Candidates Cleared by INEC for Presidential Election

On March 13 a spokesman of the Independent National Electoral Commission confirmed that all 20 presidential candidates had passed the verification process and were deemed eligible for the April 19 election.

As the full list of candidates has yet to be released, it appears that INEC has missed the constitutional deadline that calls for the publishing of the candidate lists one month prior to the election. The first election, that of the National Assembly, is scheduled for April 12. However, INEC's deadline of March 12 for political parties to ratify the names of their candidates has remained firm.

The Vanguard reported on March 14 that INEC was still verifying the credentials of candidates for the governorships, National Assembly and State Assemblies.

No Consensus Candidate Found

After several meetings, the Conference of Nigerian Political Parties, an assembly formed by 28 of the 30 parties to field one candidate, announced the breakdown of talks. According to some observers, each party's candidate had designs on being the consensus nominee and refused to step aside for any other candidate.

Politicians, Civic Leaders Speak Out on Election-Related Violence

Sparked by the recent spate of politically motivated killings including that of ANPP Vice-Chairman Marshal Harry, various Nigerian leaders have spoken out on the importance of peaceful elections.

INEC Chairman Abel Guobadia expressed his concern at a news conference that 'mudslinging' by the candidates could engender further political violence. "It is disappointing that with barely a few weeks to the elections, campaigns are still centered around emotive and mundane issues which fuel passion and violent conduct rather than on issues which have bearing on the problems of the nation." He announced that INEC was intensifying efforts to encourage all parties to sign a political party code of conduct.

In an interview on BBC radio, former President Shehu Shagari called on politicians to adopt a peaceful approach, estimating that violence was worse in the prelude to these elections than when he was re-elected in 1983.

Building upon an election deal struck the previous week between the two parties, President Obasanjo presided over an accord between the PDP and Alliance for Democracy (AD) leadership in Oyo State for working towards violence-free polls. Gubernatorial candidates of both parties were present in Ibadan for the agreement. Ibadan experienced violence during the 1964 and 1983 elections.

In addition, a group of northern leaders and traditional chiefs gathered in Kaduna to

discuss the importance of transparent elections for avoiding violence. A similar ensemble of Yoruba leaders in Ibadan encouraged all candidates to play by the rules and eschew violence.

NOA Continuing Voter Education Efforts

Given the high level of illiteracy and large number of parties contesting the elections, INEC Chairman Guobadia stressed in a press conference the importance of voter education in training voters to correctly mark ballots and affix their thumbprint. Ballots will display only party symbols rather than the name of candidates.

In one example of its work, the National Orientation Agency, the government entity tasked with voter education, has embarked on “Operation Know Your Candidate” in Ekiti State. The campaign will promote voter identification of political party names and symbols. The exercise is taking place in the headquarters of the 16 Local Government Areas in the state.

At the press conference, Guobadia issued an appeal to educated Nigerians to act as elections officials. Approximately 500,000 officials will be needed to staff the 120,000 polling stations.

Presidential Debates Initiative begun

Presidential candidates discussed corruption, security and the economy in the debates organized by Broadcasting Organisations of Nigeria (BON), the Nigeria Press Council (NPC) and several civil society organizations on March 12. In each of four debates, two candidates responded to questions from a panel. Additional debates of a similar format are scheduled for the remaining candidates including the leading contenders on March 21.

Elections during Easter Weekend Denounced as Improper

The Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria declared that the April 19 date chosen for the presidential and gubernatorial

elections is unacceptable as it falls the day before Easter. Such a call follows a plea from All Nigeria Peoples Party candidate Muhammadu Buhari and a lawsuit by the National Democratic Party (NDP) to delay the polls. The NDP court hearing has been postponed until March 21.

Recent Reports of Violence

- While returning home from a campaign stop in Ondo State, Gani Fawehinmi, presidential candidate of the National Conscience Party (NCP), escaped attack by four machete-wielding assailants who wounded another member of his convoy.
- Unknown gunmen attacked the homes of the Deputy Governor and Secretary to the State Government of Imo State.
- As a measure to reduce violence, the Akwa Ibom State Police Command is requiring permits for all political campaigns and meetings.
- Police in Yola, Adamawa State, dispersed opposition political party supporters who blocked major streets and burned tires during a campaign visit by ANPP presidential candidate Buhari.
- ‘Thugs’ from Plateau State took over the PDP National Secretariat in Abuja for several hours on March 10. The PDP Governor of Plateau State was called before the party National Working Committee to explain his role in the intra-party altercation.

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is a nonprofit organization working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. Calling on a global network of volunteer experts, NDI provides practical assistance to civic and political leaders advancing democratic values, practices and institutions. In Central and West Africa, NDI conducts programs in Benin, Burundi, DRC, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. For more information on NDI’s Nigeria programs, please contact Program Officer Marla Zometsky at NDI’s Washington office at 202-728-5500.