



Mitigating Risks of Violence in Nigeria's 2023 Elections

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Principal Findings

What's new? Nigeria is preparing for general elections on 25 February and 11 March 2023. The elections will be different from previous polls in several ways, posing new challenges. Amid widespread insecurity, there has been an uptick in election violence, which could escalate further during and after the polls.

Why is it happening? Intense acrimony, especially among the three major parties, has raised tensions across the country. The ethnic, religious and regional identities of the candidates, and bombast from the front runners, have polarised the electorate. Failure to prosecute perpetrators of election violence is emboldening them to commit more such acts.

Why does it matter? A peaceful election is crucial to the country's cohesion and to its credibility in discouraging unconstitutional seizures of power elsewhere in Africa. A violent or disputed vote could aggravate Nigeria's governance challenges and diminish its stature as a democratic leader on the continent.

What should be done? The security forces should step up operations against armed groups and to protect electoral commission offices countrywide, while the judicial system should speedily punish those behind election violence. Parties should tone down inflammatory rhetoric. Foreign partners should sustain support, including by sanctioning those who incite attacks.

Executive Summary

Nigeria's democracy faces another crucial test. Presidential, parliamentary and state gubernatorial and assembly elections are scheduled for 25 February and 11 March 2023. These elections differ from the six previous polls since Nigeria's transition from military to civilian rule in 1999. Notably, they will involve the country's largest-ever, most youthful electorate and new technologies. Moreover, the presidential vote will largely be a three-way contest, meaning it is not completely out of the question that it goes to a run-off, which would be Nigeria's first. A peaceful election is critical for the eventual winner's ability to govern and the country's stability. It would also boost Nigeria's credibility in opposing coups in Africa. Yet electoral violence is already on the rise and could escalate further. Nigeria's federal and state governments, security agencies, the election management agency, political parties and international partners should work to mitigate violence by sanctioning perpetrators, firming up election security, defusing inter-party tensions and ensuring the polls are credible.

Nigerian electoral authorities have taken steps to protect the integrity of what could be a particularly complex vote. More than 90 million Nigerians, in a population estimated at over 210 million, are eligible to vote in 2023. That number is considerably larger than the 84 million who could cast ballots in 2019 and bigger than the electorates of West Africa's fourteen other countries combined. To ward off fraud, and thus burnish the vote's legitimacy, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is rolling out technological innovations. It has boosted voter confidence in the credibility of elections. Its current chairman, like his predecessor, is regarded as impartial. President Muhammadu Buhari has also shown greater respect for the INEC's independence than some presidents did in the past. These factors augur what could be a record-high turnout.

Yet several factors heighten the danger of violence. First are persistent security challenges across large swathes of the country. These include Islamist insurgents – Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province – in the North East, bandits as well as herders and farmers at loggerheads in the North West and North Central zones, Biafra separatists in the South East and criminal gangs in the Niger Delta. These challenges are affecting election preparations and could disrupt the vote in many places, thus raising the risk of post-election protests that could degenerate into street clashes or worse.

A second factor is the bitter quarrelling among the major parties. Unlike previous elections that were mostly two-horse races, the 2023 presidential contest features three front runners: Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress, Atiku Abubakar of the Peoples Democratic Party and Peter Obi of the Labour Party. The first two parties in particular are guilty of incitement and hate speech in their messaging, and partisans of all three candidates have spread the same on social media. With each front runner drawing support – strongly but not exclusively – from his ethnic, religious and regional bases, the campaigns are stirring up communal tensions that could turn ugly.

Still other concerns drive up risks. In particular, the failure to punish perpetrators of violence in past elections has sustained a climate of impunity that is continuing in 2023. Some state governors are using their powers to weaken opposition parties, which is fuelling tensions in several states.

There have already been incidents of election-related violence, with more than 50 reported in the first month after campaigning kicked off on 28 September 2022, including more attacks on INEC offices than in the countdowns to past elections. More cases have emerged since. The post-election outlook is grimmer still. There is a chance, albeit perhaps a small one, that no presidential candidate wins the 25 per cent of votes in two thirds of Nigeria's states required to avoid a run-off, and a second-round vote could bring additional perils. All the three main parties have proclaimed that they expect to win in a landslide. All have strong motives to prevail, perhaps even more so than usual, raising concern that the losing parties – either in the first round or the run-off – may not readily accept defeat.

Two further problems for the elections are the shortages of motor vehicle fuel in most parts of the country since late 2022 and the scarcity of cash following the federal government's introduction of redesigned banknotes in December. If unresolved before the polls, fuel shortages could hamper INEC logistics and disenfranchise the many voters who need to travel to polling stations. The paucity of currency has already created significant hardship, which could make a greater number of voters vulnerable to vote buying and ratchet up election tensions even further.

The Nigerian government, political parties and civil society groups need to take steps to improve election security, defuse tensions and mitigate the risks of violence. A first priority is to push back armed groups, especially in the North West and the South East. Security forces should also provide better protection for INEC offices and election materials. Candidates and their spokespeople should stop spreading inflammatory rhetoric and refocus their campaigns on substantive issues. Having signed a pledge in September 2022 to campaign peacefully, they should enter another accord, brokered by the National Peace Committee, agreeing to either accept the outcome or challenge any results they feel are not credible in the courts rather than in the streets. INEC and the security agencies must strive to ensure the credibility of the elections, especially by minimising technical flaws and curbing vote buying. The federal government should act fast to resolve the fuel and currency crises.

Foreign partners should support these efforts. The policy of imposing diplomatic sanctions on any Nigerian politician who incites violence or otherwise compromises the vote seemed to help promote peaceful polls in 2015 and 2019. It should continue. Also as in previous elections, international observer missions could help in evaluating the elections' credibility, which is crucial to managing post-election tensions. Donors should also give more financial, technical and training support to Nigerian civil society organisations that are working to curb electoral violence, notably the National Peace Committee.

Abuja/Nairobi/London/Brussels, 10 February 2023

Mitigating Risks of Violence in Nigeria's 2023 Elections

I. Introduction

Nigeria is preparing for general elections, the seventh since the end of military rule in 1999.¹ The presidential vote and federal parliamentary polls will take place countrywide on 25 February, while contests for governor and state legislatures will follow in 28 of the 36 states on 11 March. (The other eight states have different cycles due to litigation that cancelled elections or ousted people wrongfully sworn in to office.²) Eighteen parties are participating, after the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) deregistered 74 others in 2020 because they did not meet constitutionally established criteria.

The elections will be unlike any of Nigeria's previous polls. First, while past presidential elections have been dominated by two parties, the 2023 vote is poised to be largely a three-way race among the governing All Progressives Congress (APC), its long-time rival the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), which held the presidency from 1999 to 2015, and the Labour Party, which until recently was not a major player. President Muhammadu Buhari cannot run, having served the two terms the constitution allows. The three front runners are the APC's Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a former Lagos state governor (1999-2007), the PDP's Atiku Abubakar, a former vice president (1999-2007), and Labour's Peter Obi, a former Anambra state governor (2006-2014). A fourth entrant, former Kano state Governor Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso of the New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP), is also in the running, but seems not to pose a significant challenge nationwide.³ The three-man contest raises a small possibility that none wins the 25 per cent of votes in two thirds of states that outright victory requires, leading to the country's first-ever run-off.

Secondly, as per provisions in the new election law, the Electoral Act of 2022, the polls will feature innovations. These include the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System, which combines fingerprint and face biometrics to verify voters' identity, and the electronic transmission of results from polling units directly to the INEC Result Viewing

¹ For past Crisis Group reporting on this subject, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°268, *Nigeria's 2019 Elections: Six States to Watch*, 21 December 2018. See also Nnamdi Obasi, "Managing Nigeria's Election Tensions", Crisis Group Commentary, 24 March 2015; Nnamdi Obasi, "Nigeria's Unexpected Election Success", Crisis Group Commentary, 2 April 2015; Crisis Group Commentary, "Averting Violence around Nigeria's 2019 Elections", 25 October 2018; Nnamdi Obasi, "Winning Back Trust in Nigeria's Rescheduled Elections", Crisis Group Commentary, 19 February 2019; and Crisis Group Commentary, "Countdown Begins to Nigeria's Crucial 2023 Elections", 23 December 2022.

² These eight states are Anambra, Bayelsa, Edo, Ekiti, Imo, Kogi, Ondo and Osun.

³ Kwankwaso has served twice as Kano state governor (1999-2003 and 2011-2015), as Nigeria's defence minister (2003-2007) and as senator (2015-2019). Given his party's limited national reach, northern leaders have urged him to drop his bid and endorse the PDP's Abubakar. But he says he will not step down for anyone. Crisis Group interview, member of NNPP executive committee, Abuja, 13 November 2022.

Portal. In principle, these tools should help prevent unregistered voters from casting ballots and stop anyone from altering figures being sent to state collation centres and INEC headquarters in Abuja, which accounted for much of the vote rigging in previous elections.⁴ INEC Chair Mahmood Yakubu promises that the 2023 polls will be the country's "best ever".⁵

The polls will see the largest electorate in Nigerian history. Over a year of registration drives that ended on 31 July 2022, INEC signed up 12.29 million new voters. After an internal audit, followed by a public verification process, the commission identified 2.8 million of the registrants as ineligible (including some who were underage and others who had registered twice or more) and weeded them out of the list. In early January, the commission published its final register with 93.4 million voters, up from 84 million in the 2019 election. The larger numbers may add new logistical challenges to the 2023 vote.⁶

This election is likely to involve greater participation of young voters, including many who will be casting ballots for the first time. According to INEC, 7.28 million or 76 per cent of the new registrants are aged eighteen to 34 years, up from 51 per cent in 2019. This surge of young voters is due to several factors. Many youths became politically active protesting police brutality in October 2020, giving them a sense of their power to push for improvements to governance.⁷ Labour's Obi, who is promising precisely that, has galvanised many young people (especially in southern states) who hope to vote out the two main parties, which they see as largely responsible for the country's woes.⁸

Turnout could also be higher than in the past. Participation in Nigerian elections had declined over the years, from 52.26 per cent and 69.08 per cent of registered voters in 1999 and 2003, respectively, to 43.65 per cent in 2015 and 34.75 per cent in 2019 – but several factors could lead more people to the polls in 2023. INEC's innovations, which curtailed rigging in recent gubernatorial elections in Anambra, Ekiti and Osun states, have boosted public confidence in the credibility of elections; many more voters now trust that their votes will count.⁹ The country's economic slump, seen in record unemployment, double-digit inflation and unprecedented emigration,

⁴ Crisis Group interview, INEC official, Abuja, 13 November 2022.

⁵ Yakubu cites the gubernatorial elections in Ekiti state (18 June) and Osun state (16 July), in which INEC used the above-mentioned tools, as the basis for his optimism. See "INEC will deliver best elections ever to Nigerians in 2023, says Yakubu", *The Guardian* (Nigeria), 20 July 2022.

⁶ Nigeria's 84 million-person electorate in 2019 was already eleven million people larger than those in the other fourteen West African countries combined (73 million). See "Nigeria now has 84 million voters, more than other West African countries put together – Electoral body, INEC, tells international observers", *Sahara Reporters*, 27 June 2022.

⁷ For background on the movement, see Crisis Group Statement, "Nigeria's #EndSARS Protest: De-escalate Tensions, Start Deep Police Reform", 26 October 2020. See also "#EndSARS – A Turning Point in Nigeria's Politics?", Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2020.

⁸ Obi, a former governor of Anambra state, was the PDP's vice-presidential candidate (Abubakar's running mate) in 2019. Labour, until recently, was very weak: in the 2019 presidential election, its candidate got just 5,000 votes. But Obi's reputation for being conscientious and prudent has won him support, especially from younger Nigerians, who see him as a welcome departure from the political class they revile as corrupt, ostentatious and aloof.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, civil society representatives who work on elections, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2022.

coupled with widespread insecurity, is pushing more people – especially the young – to campaign for better governance.¹⁰

The election will take place amid more widespread risks of violence than in the past. During the 2015 and 2019 votes, there was only one major threat, from Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the North East. But now numerous other armed groups have popped up. Notably, deadly criminal gangs (locally referred to as “bandits”) and jihadists are active in areas of the North West, while Biafra separatist agitators (and criminals who sometimes impersonate them) operate in the South East. Insecurity could make it more difficult to organise elections in parts of these two zones.

Acrimony among the three main political parties is also worrying. Bitter altercations between politicians have already sparked fighting, as has polarisation along ethnic, religious and regional lines. On 11 November 2022, the national security adviser to the president, Major General (retired) Babagana Monguno, said police had recorded 52 incidents of election-related violence in 22 states since the presidential campaign officially commenced on 28 September.¹¹ The leaders of all three major parties are already projecting “landslide” victories in the presidential election, with each pointing to opinion polls that predict such a result. In this atmosphere, a losing candidate might reject the outcome, especially if the race is close, and the ensuing disputes could escalate into conflict.¹²

This report seeks to increase awareness of these security threats and encourage efforts to mitigate the risks of violence before, during and after the 2023 polls. It analyses the tensions generated by inter-party rancour. It also provides early warnings for states that appear to be particular flashpoints. Finally, it recommends steps that the Nigerian government and other local actors, along with international partners, can take to enhance voter safety, defuse tensions among parties and curb unrest. Research took place from September 2022 to January 2023. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, in person or via telephone, with 31 purposely selected respondents in the federal capital, Abuja, and six states – Lagos, Rivers, Kaduna, Kano, Imo and Ebonyi. Respondents included INEC officials, senior officers of the Nigeria Police Force (serving and retired), officials of the four major parties mentioned above and members of civil society organisations, including the National Peace Committee, women’s associations and youth groups. The primary research is supplemented with reporting in credible media outlets.

¹⁰ The National Bureau of Statistics reports that 133 million Nigerians, or 63 per cent of the population, are experiencing multidimensional poverty. “133 million Nigerians poor – NBS”, *Vanguard*, 18 November 2022.

¹¹ “With 52 violence cases in one month, NSA Monguno says rogues planning to disrupt the elections”, *This Day*, 12 November 2022.

¹² “2023: Tinubu will record landslide victory – APC chieftain”, *The Punch*, 28 November 2022; “Atiku will win with landslide, says PDP chieftain Imansuagbon”, *The Sun*, 23 January 2023; “Bloomberg predicts landslide victory for Peter Obi, says 72% of Nigerian voters ready to elect Labour in 2023”, *Peoples Gazette*, 28 September 2022.

II. Widespread Insecurity

Election preparations are proceeding amid growing concern about public safety due to the activities of armed groups in swathes of the country. Insecurity is widespread, with significant death tolls in many states. From January to mid-December 2022, armed groups killed more than 10,000 people and abducted more than 5,000 in about 3,000 incidents that occurred in at least 550 of the country's 774 local government areas.¹³

In the North East, two jihadist groups – Boko Haram and ISWAP, which threatened elections in 2015 and 2019 – remain active.¹⁴ The government's counter-insurgency operations and internal rivalries have weakened both groups significantly, and more than 83,000 members and their families surrendered to the army between mid-2021 and late 2022.¹⁵ But the groups continue to pose a threat, especially in the eastern parts of Borno state – around Lake Chad and the Sambisa forest. Other parts of the North East, especially in Adamawa and Taraba states, are also unsafe due to communal conflict between predominantly Fulani herders and other ethnic groups.¹⁶

In the North West and parts of the North Central zone, various armed groups have rendered many areas insecure.¹⁷ Bandits in particular have grown stronger in recent years, kidnapping thousands of people in villages and on highways for ransom, and attacking government security personnel and assets in Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Niger, Sokoto and Zamfara states.¹⁸ ISWAP and another jihadist group, Ansaru, a Boko Haram faction associated with al-Qaeda, have also established cells in these two zones, claiming responsibility for attacks in Kaduna, Niger, Kogi and Nasarawa states, as well as the federal capital territory, Abuja.¹⁹ Furthermore, herder-

¹³ Crisis Group's tally, based on reports in the Nigerian media and statements from the police and army. This accounting is corroborated by reputable Nigeria-based organisations, notably Beacon Consulting and the Centre for Democracy and Development. See also "Borno, Kaduna, Zamfara most unsafe states as terrorists, others kill 7,222, kidnap 3,823 in Nigeria within 7 months –Report", *Sahara Reporters*, 2 August 2022.

¹⁴ See Crisis Group Africa Briefings N°180, *After Shekau: Confronting Jihadists in Nigeria's North East*, 29 March 2022; and N°184, *Rethinking Resettlement and Return in Nigeria's North East*, 16 January 2023.

¹⁵ In November 2022, the Borno state government said security forces had killed 90 per cent of the key Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgents. See "90 percent of die-hard Boko Haram fighters dead, govt declares", *This Day*, 30 November 2022; and "83,000 Boko Haram fighters surrender", *Daily Post*, 15 December 2022.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, retired senior police officer who served in Adamawa and Taraba states, Abuja, 22 November 2022. In Taraba state, local government areas including Bali, Takum and Ussa are prone to such violence.

¹⁷ For more on these groups, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°288, *Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem*, 18 May 2018. See also A. M. Rufa'i, *I am a Bandit: A Decade of Research in Zamfara's Bandits' Den* (Sokoto, 2021); "Terrorism and Banditry in Nigeria: The Nexus – Kaduna, Katsina, Niger and Zamfara States Context", Goodluck Jonathan Foundation, 21 September 2021; and "North West Nigeria's Bandit Problem: Explaining the Conflict Drivers", Centre for Democracy and Development, February 2022.

¹⁸ Nnamdi Obasi, "Halting Repeated School Kidnappings in Nigeria", Crisis Group Commentary, 5 March 2021.

¹⁹ In 2022, ISWAP claimed responsibility for two attacks in Abuja and four in neighbouring Kogi state. It also said it had abducted 66 passengers on the Abuja-Kaduna rail line on 28 March and

farmer conflict continues in parts of Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa and Plateau states, aggravated by long-running ethnic and religious feuds.²⁰

In the South East, a zone that was generally safe in 2015 and 2019, security has deteriorated significantly, particularly in Anambra and Imo states. Starting in early 2021, armed groups have killed dozens of security personnel and razed many police stations, court buildings and jailhouses, as well as INEC offices.²¹ Government and security officials, as well as some locals, blame the attacks on the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) separatist group and its armed wing, the Eastern Security Network.²² This claim, though repeatedly denied by IPOB, is plausible, considering that the attacks escalated following the armed wing's formation in December 2020 and that some of the gunmen killed in clashes with security forces were wearing IPOB insignia.²³ It is clear, however, that criminals impersonating the separatists, including occult gangs who use human body parts for rituals, carried out at least some of the attacks.²⁴

The federal government's overly militarised approach to the Biafra mobilisation is aggravating the situation, as are the security forces' human rights violations.²⁵ State governments' efforts to stem violent crime have largely faltered, due to lack of political will and poor provisioning for the zone's joint vigilante network, Ebubeagu.²⁶

Parts of the South South zone are also insecure. The region is somewhat more stable since the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta insurgency ended in 2009 and the Niger Delta Avengers likewise stopped attacking petroleum industry facilities in 2016. Yet many areas still experience violence due to the activities of various armed gangs and cults (criminal confraternities) that have proliferated over the past decade. Between January 2019 and September 2022, cult and gang-related violence in Rivers state killed at least 424 people.²⁷

raided the prison in Kuje, Abuja, on 5 July, allowing 879 of the 994 inmates to escape. (The Boko Haram faction previously led by Abubakar Shekau also claimed these two operations.) In October, the government warned of possible attacks by jihadist groups in Abuja and Kano.

²⁰ For more, see Crisis Group Africa Reports N°252, *Herders Against Farmers: Nigeria's Expanding Deadly Conflict*, 19 September 2017; N°262, *Stopping Nigeria's Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence*, 26 July 2018; and N°302, *Ending Nigeria's Herder-Famer Crisis: The Livestock Reform Plan*, 4 May 2021.

²¹ In a notable attack on 5 April 2021, a group armed with rocket-propelled grenades, machine guns and rifles stormed the prison in the Imo state capital, Owerri, and sprung 1,844 inmates. "1,844 inmates roam free after Imo prison break", *The Guardian*, 6 April 2021.

²² IPOB is the most prominent of several groups calling for the creation of an independent country, Biafra, which would include the South East and parts of the South South. The police have arrested its leader, Nnamdi Kanu, and he is now on trial on terrorism charges.

²³ IPOB insists that its armed wing's operations are limited to removing Fulani herders and criminals from forests, and enforcing a stay-at-home order that it issued for every Monday, in solidarity with its detained leader, Kanu. The armed wing rescinded the order, but some units are still enforcing it.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, community leader in Anambra state, Abuja, 12 October 2022. See also "Unknown gunmen now known; they're Igbo who kill for human organs – Soludo", *Vanguard*, 13 August 2022.

²⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, civil society leader based in Owerri, Imo state, 16 December 2022.

²⁶ For more, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°308, *Managing Vigilantism in Nigeria: A Near-term Necessity*, 21 April 2022.

²⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, researcher, Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta based in Port Harcourt, Rivers state, 20 November 2022.

Typically, in the lead-up to elections, violence among cult groups escalates as they battle for territorial control. Such control gives them the power to supply election-related services to politicians and parties – intimidating rivals, coercing voters or rigging ballots. The spread of these groups poses a significant threat to elections in the Niger Delta.

In the South West, though to a lesser degree, cults similarly imperil the polls. Armed groups, such as these cult groups – along with ex-militants – in the Niger Delta and Lagos, may intimidate voters or otherwise disrupt the proceedings. In Nigeria's former capital and most populous city, Lagos, violent cults are ready recruits for politicians seeking to orchestrate violence around the elections.²⁸

Persistent violence and insecurity in many parts of the country could mar the polls in several ways:

Disrupting preparations. Insecurity is limiting INEC's access to many volatile areas. For instance, the commission could not register new voters in some local government areas in the North East, North West and North Central zones, and it was unable to issue voter cards to many of the more than three million internally displaced people there. From 2019 to December 2022, criminals attacked INEC offices 50 times in fifteen of Nigeria's 36 states.²⁹ Some of the early attacks, such as during the police abuse protests in October 2020, were apparently not election-related, but lately many have been.³⁰ Attackers have torn down many offices housing materials for the vote.³¹ INEC officials say they are apprehensive about conducting the polls in many places.³² In Niger state, where fourteen of the 25 local government areas have suffered repeated attacks by armed groups, INEC has warned that it may be unable to hold elections in 270 polling units.³³ In Katsina state, INEC said it could not administer the vote in 242 polling units home to 142,261 voters spread across ten of 34 local government areas.³⁴

Limiting campaigns. Fears are growing in many areas that armed groups may kill politicians and attack rallies. There are several cases already. In Katsina state, on 6 February, the APC cancelled its presidential road show after an armed group attacked villages in Bakori local government area, killing more than 100 people.³⁵ In the South East, where armed groups have killed several politicians since 2021, many

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, retired senior police officer, Lagos, 20 October 2022. See also "Cult members are now lords of our communities, Lagos residents cry out", *Nigerian Tribune*, 5 December 2022.

²⁹ These figures include attacks on INEC offices by hired hoodlums. Thirty of these attacks took place in the South East zone alone. Crisis Group interview, INEC official, Abuja, 31 January 2023.

³⁰ On 19 December 2022, at a workshop entitled "Electoral Violence and Election Security in Nigeria", INEC Chair Yakubu said: "Since the 2019 general elections, up until 2022, we have recorded 50 attacks in fifteen states of the federation, but the ones we recorded in 2022 are the ones we consider as systematic and coordinated and these are the ones that are targeted at derailing the preparations of the commission from conducting free, fair, transparent and credible elections". See "INEC: If attacks on our offices persist, polls may be jeopardized", *This Day*, 20 December 2022.

³¹ See, for instance, "Again, Imo INEC office attacked, fourth in three weeks", *Vanguard*, 21 December 2022.

³² Crisis Group interview, INEC official, Abuja, 13 November 2022.

³³ "Insecurity: Elections may not hold in 270 polling units in Niger – INEC", *Vanguard*, 15 March 2022.

³⁴ "Insecurity: Elections may not hold in 10 Katsina LGAs – INEC", *Daily Trust*, 10 November 2022.

³⁵ "Katsina terrorists' attack: APC cancels road show", *New Telegraph*, 7 February 2023.

parties and politicians are unable to hold rallies, especially on Mondays, the sit-at-home day decreed by an IPOB faction.³⁶ Some Biafra separatists say the election is irrelevant to their cause and demand an independence referendum instead.³⁷ Others vow to block campaigning until the federal government frees IPOB leader Kanu.³⁸ The deepening cracks in IPOB, with factions now fighting for dominance, could heighten pre-election tensions or disrupt voting in the zone.³⁹ Elsewhere, jihadists banned election activities, such as in the Birnin Gwari area of Kaduna state in mid-2022.⁴⁰ In rural areas and on exposed inter-city highways, candidates are highly cautious in their movements; in remote spots in Adamawa state, for instance, bandits' threats have dampened campaigning.⁴¹

Disenfranchising the displaced. Displacement caused by armed groups could hinder many registered voters from casting their ballots. For instance, in Kaduna state, where more than 200,000 have been displaced by attacks on 148 towns and villages over the past six years, many of the uprooted may be unable to vote.⁴² In Benue state, many of about 1.8 million people displaced since 2018 may also be disenfranchised.⁴³ Where large-scale displacement and disenfranchisement put some candidates at a disadvantage, they could contest the results, heightening the risk of violence. The opposition PDP's national chairman, Iyorchia Ayu, warned that his party will not accept results based on votes "harvested" from inaccessible areas. He was alluding to something that allegedly transpired in 2019, when the APC benefited from what seemed like artificially inflated turnout in states with serious security challenges.⁴⁴

³⁶ In some of the deadliest incidents, thugs killed a prominent politician from Adamawa state, Ahmed Gulak, in Imo state on 30 May 2021; kidnapped and beheaded two former state legislators (Okechukwu Okoye and Nelson Achukwu) in Anambra state in May and June 2022; attacked the convoy of federal Senator Ifeanyi Uba, also in Anambra state, on 11 September 2022, killing six of his aides and police escorts; attacked the convoy of former Imo state Governor Ikedi Ohakim on 2 January 2023, killing four of his police escorts; and kidnapped and beheaded a local government administrator, Christopher Ohizu, on 22 January 2023.

³⁷ "Nigeria: Biafra independence more important than Peter Obi as president of a failed system – IPOB", *The Africa Report*, 2 January 2023.

³⁸ IPOB officials also claim that the police may carry out such attacks themselves and then blame the separatists. "IPOB alleges police plot to attack political campaigns", *Vanguard*, 27 September 2022.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, official of the pan-Igbo group Ohanaeze Ndigbo, Abuja, 9 December 2022.

⁴⁰ "Ansaru terrorists ban political activities in Birnin Gwari emirate in Kaduna", *Vanguard*, 27 June 2022.

⁴¹ For instance, in Taraba state, bandits living in the forest reportedly warned politicians they would be kidnapped and held for ransom if they campaigned. "Fear grips Taraba politicians as bandits threaten to launch attacks during election campaigns", *Daily Post*, 9 June 2022.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, Southern Kaduna Peoples' Union official, Abuja, 21 October 2022.

⁴³ On 31 March 2022, the executive secretary of the State Emergency Management Agency, Emmanuel Shior, said the number of IDPs had risen to nearly two million, scattered in eight official and 20 unofficial camps in the state. This increase, he said, was a result of armed group attacks.

⁴⁴ "2023: PDP won't accept questionable votes", *Daily Trust*, 19 November 2022. For instance, in the North East, where the Boko Haram/ISWAP insurgency was active and attacks occurred on election day, the reported turnout (just under 42 per cent) was inexplicably higher than the national average (34.75 per cent). See "#NigeriaDecides2023 could be decided in places where no voting can occur", *Premium Times*, 25 September 2022.

Depressing turnout. Volatility could also allow for intimidation of voters, election officials and observers. Armed groups may prevent elections from taking place entirely or at least push down participation rates in some areas. In November 2021, IPOB threatened to block the gubernatorial election in Anambra state; though it eventually relented, following pressure from Igbo ethnic and religious leaders, turnout was just 10.2 per cent. It remains unclear what the group will do in 2023.⁴⁵ In areas with underlying ethnic, religious, herder-farmer or other communal tensions, attacks could scare voters away from casting their ballots on election day. In such places, disputes over results could also escalate to violence.

⁴⁵ The federal government has shown it does not want to release Kanu or explore a political solution to the Biafra agitation. In October, the government rejected an appeals court ruling that threw out all the charges against the IPOB leader, citing his illegal extradition from Kenya. It filed new terrorism charges against Kanu in November.

III. Inter-party Tensions

A. *Inter-party Tensions*

A second major threat to the elections is violence arising from inter-party tensions. Some of the factors underlying the frictions are not new. Since Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999, many people have made huge amounts of money by winning elected office. Unsuccessful candidates sometimes take large financial losses.⁴⁶ With the stakes extremely high, many rally supporters with the mindset of winning by all means.

Several other factors are particularly troubling. First – perhaps more than in the past – all three main parties are bent on victory, albeit each for its own reasons. The sense of desperation pervading the camps of all three front runners is a source of rising tension among them and concern about how the losing parties' candidates and supporters may react to defeat.⁴⁷

For the two big parties, the determination not to lose is particularly acute. The governing APC, a coalition that wrested power from the PDP in 2015, wants to retain the presidency for several reasons, including the fear that if it loses control of the top office, the party could disintegrate.⁴⁸ The PDP, out in the cold for the past eight years, sees the end of President Buhari's faltering administration as its best opportunity to recapture the centre. Losing a third presidential election in a row could also have deleterious effects on its future.⁴⁹ Moreover, for both parties' presidential candidates – Tinubu and Abubakar – this election may be the last chance to run for the presidency on account of age; both are at least in their seventies, and while there is no constitutional age limit for presidential candidates, they may be increasingly unattractive to a predominantly youthful electorate.⁵⁰

Labour is similarly motivated. Many of Obi's youthful supporters (who call themselves "Obidients") consider the election their best opportunity to improve the quality of governance in the country – and maybe their last to do so through electoral means.⁵¹ As a Lagos-based youth leader told Crisis Group: "Nigerian youths are running for president through Peter Obi. What is at stake is not just the presidency but our future. If we lose this election, we are finally doomed".⁵² Many Obidients vehemently reject any suggestion that their champion might lose.⁵³ Only time will tell if their fervour

⁴⁶ For instance, to contest the presidential primaries in May and June 2022, both the APC and PDP required candidates to pay 100 million naira (officially about \$223,000) just to collect a nomination form. Some candidates spent a lot more on buying the votes of hundreds of delegates during the primaries (in some cases up to \$5,000 per delegate), and are spending vastly more on their campaigns. See "2023: Ongoing primary election, complete mess, failed process – Goodluck Jonathan", *Daily Post*, 26 May 2022; "Save naira from obscene dollar-monetized presidential primaries – Okechukwu begs Buhari", *Daily Post*, 29 May 2022; and "PDP primaries: Sharing of money disgraces Nigeria – Adegboruwa", *Daily Post*, 3 June 2022.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, election monitoring group official, Abuja, 21 October 2022.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, member of the APC's national executive committee, Abuja, 2 October 2022.

⁴⁹ "PDP may die if we don't win 2023 presidency, Atiku tells BoT members", *The Cable*, 16 March 2022.

⁵⁰ Abubakar, born on 25 November 1946, is now 76 years old; Tinubu is officially 70, but some claim he may be considerably older. They would be 80 and 74, respectively, at the time of the 2027 election.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, #EndSARS activist, Lagos, 3 October 2022.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, youth organisation leader, Lagos, 2 October 2022.

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, Labour youth mobiliser, Abuja, 2 November 2022.

leads them to exaggerate his appeal. But they do appear to think that if he loses, the outcome would ipso facto be illegitimate, indicating rigging, which might prompt them to take to the streets.

Secondly, tension around the election is deepening religious and regional polarisation. As Buhari is a Muslim Fulani from the north, many Christians, based on the informal principle, which Nigerian elites have mostly followed in recent decades, that the presidency should alternate between Nigeria's two largest religious groups, feel strongly that the next president should be a Christian. They oppose Tinubu and Abubakar, both of whom are Muslim, on those grounds. Christian organisations protested as well when Tinubu chose a fellow Muslim, former Borno state Governor Kashim Shettima, as his running mate, departing from an unwritten convention by which parties field both a Christian and a Muslim on every ticket.⁵⁴ Tinubu insists that he selected Shettima for competence, not religious affiliation, and he has pledged, if elected, to govern without religious bias.⁵⁵ Many Christians are unconvinced, however, and religious sensitivities around the election are getting deeper.⁵⁶ In the mostly Muslim far north, many voters are wary of Obi, as he is a Christian.⁵⁷ Opposition to Abubakar is particularly strong among southerners.

The contest stokes ethnic divisions, too. Many Igbo in the South East strongly support Obi, who hails from that zone, particularly as an Igbo has not led the country since 1966.⁵⁸ In Lagos, particularly, friction is growing between the large, pro-Obi Igbo population and many Yorubas who back their ethnic kinsman Tinubu for the presidency. Tinubu says it is "Yorubas' turn" to hold the top office.⁵⁹

Hate speech and fake news are aggravating partisan acrimony. APC and PDP spokespeople and supporters are disseminating such harmful messages via both social media and the mainstream press.⁶⁰ Obi's Labour has not engaged in this practice, but many of its constituents have. Social media platforms have grown increasingly toxic. Influencers on these platforms, including some who work as journalists, and some who are on party payrolls, have traded in distorted narratives and inflammatory rhetoric.

Unfair treatment of the opposition, especially by state governors, is also generating heat. A few governors are seeking to cripple opposition candidates by denying them

⁵⁴ Abubakar, Obi and Kwankwaso all named running mates who practise religions other than their own.

⁵⁵ "I'm for secular govt, Tinubu assures CAN", *Vanguard*, 17 November 2022; "Tinubu meets CAN, defends choice of Shettima as running mate", *Daily Sun*, 17 November 2022.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, official of Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, Abuja, 11 November 2022. "We've not shifted ground on same-faith ticket – CAN", *Vanguard*, 23 November 2022; "PFN disowns northern bishops fraternizing with Tinubu", *Leadership*, 26 September 2022.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, retired police officer based in Kano, 22 October 2022. Crisis Group interview, Kaduna-based women's group leader, Abuja, 3 November 2022.

⁵⁸ The last Igbo who headed the country, Major General Johnson Thomas Umuunnakwe Aguiyi-Ironsi, was killed by northern officers on 29 July 1966 in a "revenge coup" following the country's first coup that 15 January, in which predominantly Igbo officers killed leading politicians and senior military officers from the North, South West and South South.

⁵⁹ "It is my turn, it is Yoruba's turn – Tinubu", *Nigerian Tribune*, 3 June 2022. See also "Avoiding Igbo-Yoruba crisis (I)", *Vanguard*, 21 September 2022.

⁶⁰ "National Peace Committee describes Fani-Kayode, Reno Omokri as purveyors of fake news, hate speech, accuses Labour Party supporters of cyber bullying, malicious utterances", *Sahara Reporters*, 20 January 2023.

use of public space for campaigns, sending thugs to tear down their posters or keeping their messages off billboards by charging exorbitant fees.⁶¹ In Gombe state, the APC-run government demolished part of the PDP's campaign office, alleging it had been built illegally, while the case was still in court.⁶²

Some incumbents are abusing their power in other ways. A few state governments have employed vigilantes to intimidate opponents.⁶³ In Ebonyi state, members of the South East Security Network, Ebubeagu, are widely accused of involvement in such activity.⁶⁴ Several candidates have said the governor, David Umahi, is the mastermind.⁶⁵ Umahi says the group is simply helping the police fight crime and maintain order. If any member has committed an offence, he continues, that person should face justice.⁶⁶ Some candidates have also engaged trade unionists, unemployed youths and, in the Niger Delta, former militants – to scare away rivals from campaigning. These attempts to constrict democratic space in several states could escalate to violence during and after the polls.

B. *Risks of Post-election Tensions*

Beyond the tensions that may flare before or during the polls, a further – arguably even graver – threat could arise from disputes over the results. Nigeria's gravest election violence in the past, notably in 2011, has been triggered by such disputes.⁶⁷

Questions already swirl around the elections' integrity, with some doubting the credibility of the voters' register and others alleging plots by parties or candidates to buy massive numbers of votes. After INEC unveiled the preliminary register on its website, critics pointed to apparent duplicate registrations and other irregularities.⁶⁸ On 17 November, Labour supporters marched in Abuja, protesting numerous dis-

⁶¹ "Political parties reject state charges for campaign signage, billboards", *Leadership*, 26 September 2022. On 8 November, the Abia state government banned what it called "misguided parties" and "sadistic elements with malicious interests disguised as politicians" from using athletic fields, stadiums and other public places for rallies. "Abia bans rallies in public facilities", *New Telegraph*, 9 November 2022; "Campaigns: Police to arrest, prosecute billboard, poster vandals", *The Punch*, 19 November 2022.

⁶² "2023: War of words as Gombe govt demolishes PDP governorship candidate's campaign office", *Premium Times*, 14 September 2022.

⁶³ "2023: Governors responsible for political violence – IGP", *Premium Times*, 17 November 2022.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, civil society leader based in Abakaliki, Ebonyi state, 13 November 2022.

⁶⁵ "Ebonyi group bemoans use of Ebubeagu against opposition candidates", *Vanguard*, 19 October 2022. On 23 October 2022, the Labour, PDP, Action Alliance, All Progressives Grand Alliance and Young Progressives Party candidates for governor issued a joint statement protesting alleged Ebubeagu attacks on opposition politicians in Ebonyi state. "Ebonyi guber candidates decry activities of Ebubeagu", *The Guardian*, 24 October 2022; "Ebonyi 2023: Curb attacks on opposition – NNPP guber candidate, Adol-Awam to Umahi, Ebubeagu", *Daily Post*, 25 October 2022.

⁶⁶ "Umahi speaks on Ebubeagu's alleged involvement in killings", *Premium Times*, 25 January 2022.

⁶⁷ Following the April 2011 presidential poll, protests over the results escalated to three days of violence in twelve northern states with more than 1,000 people killed and about 65,000 displaced. The protesters were supporters of Buhari, who was then the main opposition candidate. The incumbent, Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the Niger Delta and PDP candidate, had won re-election. See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°81, *Lessons from Nigeria's 2011 Elections*, 15 September 2011.

⁶⁸ The apparent duplication produced an outcry on social media, especially Twitter, where users posted screenshots of listings that appeared multiple times.

crepancies, such as registered voters who appeared to be underage.⁶⁹ In response, the commissioner for information and voter education, Festus Okoye, said INEC had released the preliminary register precisely so that people could identify errors and anomalies.⁷⁰ In January 2023, INEC published a final register, having weeded out about 2.9 million ineligible registrants. Yet some parties continue to doubt the register's accuracy.⁷¹

Vote buying, the practice whereby parties or candidates distribute money or food, demanding that recipients vote for them in return, is also a concern. As INEC has rolled out new technology to prevent rigging, such as the system for reporting tallies directly to its central online portal, many politicians are resorting to other means of putting their thumbs on the scales.⁷²

In the countdown to the elections, various sources have sent out alerts warning of vote buying on an unprecedented scale. On 21 November 2022, a multiparty network, the Coalition of United Political Parties, claimed that the APC has plans to transfer cash to voters via pirated bank accounts, in a scheme code-named Operation Wire Wire.⁷³ The Coalition said more than twenty APC-run state governments had worked together to harvest ten million accounts in which they intend to deposit payments to voters on election day. It named the digital platforms it said were created to carry out the plan. It remains unclear if the allegation was genuine or merely a ploy preparing the ground for disputing unfavourable results. The APC's presidential campaign council dismissed it as "mere rumour concocted ... to malign our candidate".⁷⁴ The risk of post-election violence will rise if vote buying does in fact occur on such a large scale, leading losing parties to perceive that the results are compromised.

Two other developments, without precedent in Nigeria's electoral history, could also escalate tensions around the polls and create grounds for post-election disputes that could turn violent. The first is that motor vehicle fuel began getting scarce in the last quarter of 2022. The cause of the shortage remains unclear: petroleum ministry officials have repeatedly claimed to have enough petroleum products in stock; the Nigerian National Petroleum Company continually trades blame with petrol marketers. On 6 February 2023, angered by the shortages, a coalition of six groups of transporters threatened to hold out its workers whom INEC had contracted to take election

⁶⁹ "Obi supporters protest, allege underage registration, vote-buying plot", *The Punch*, 18 November 2022.

⁷⁰ He also disclosed that INEC had identified 2,780,756 ineligible people who were registered.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, Labour Party official, Abuja, 21 January 2023; election monitoring group official, 29 January 2023. On 27 January, a coalition of ten Nigerian civil society organisations issued a report saying 22 states are at high risk of election manipulation. "22 States at high risk of election manipulation – Report", *Premium Times*, 28 January 2023.

⁷² In October 2022, in the wake of major floods, the three presidential front runners (and associated groups) donated millions of naira to people in the hardest-hit states. At Christmas, Tinubu distributed huge amounts of food to his "female supporters" in appreciation of their commitment to the party over the previous year. See "APC distributes a million bags of rice to women supporters", *The Nation*, 21 December 2022. Some such donations, coming so close to the elections, appear to be driven by political calculation. Crisis Group interview, official of Transition Monitoring Group, an election-monitoring civil society organisation, Abuja, 2 November 2022.

⁷³ "2023: APC, opposition parties bicker over digital vote-buying allegations", *Vanguard*, 22 November 2022.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

materials to polling sites.⁷⁵ Along with protests by transport workers, the dearth of fuel could hamper INEC's plans to power the 100,000 trucks and 4,000 boats it has engaged for election logistics and disrupt timely delivery of staff and materials on election days.

The second challenge is the acute scarcity of cash, following the Central Bank of Nigeria's introduction of a redesigned version of the national currency, the naira, in December 2022. Even as the apex bank's second deadline for phasing out the old currency passed on 10 February – following an initial 31 January deadline – the new notes remain largely unavailable. The APC's candidate, Tinubu, alleges that the currency shortage is a plot to undermine his campaign, masterminded by persons in the government who oppose his candidacy.⁷⁶ It is thus conceivable that, should it lose at the polls, his party could strongly protest on that count.⁷⁷ The currency scarcity could also render many voters more vulnerable to vote buying and disenfranchise others who may be hindered from travelling to their polling stations due to lack of cash. Widespread hardship resulting from the currency and fuel crises could cause further frictions around the elections, heightening risks of violence.

⁷⁵ "Fuel scarcity: Transporters, traders groan, issue 3-day warning strike", *New Telegraph*, 7 February 2023.

⁷⁶ "Tinubu: Petrol scarcity, naira redesign ploy to sabotage my victory in the election", *This Day*, 26 January 2023; "Presidential Villa insiders working against Tinubu – El-Rufai", *The Guardian*, 1 February 2023; "Emefiele introduced naira swap policy in vengeance – Ganduje", *Daily Trust*, 7 February 2023.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, PDP official, Abuja, 27 January 2023.

IV. Flashpoints

The widespread tensions suggest that election violence could break out in many parts of the country, but the danger looms larger in some states than in others. These are states with the following characteristics: where the stakes are high, where long-running ethnic or religious feuds persist, where outgoing governors are seeking to instal handpicked successors and where unpopular incumbents are running to be re-elected for a second term. Based partly on these criteria, but also on other factors, the risk is likely greatest in six states – Lagos, Rivers, Kano, Kaduna, Ebonyi and Imo.

A. Lagos State

Lagos state is important because it has the highest number of registered voters of all the 36 states – 7,060,195 on INEC's final register. From the return to democratic rule in 1999 to the APC's formation in 2014, Lagos voted strongly for Alliance for Democracy, later the Action Congress of Nigeria, one of the APC's major constituent parties. Since 2015, the APC has governed Lagos. The state is APC presidential candidate Tinubu's home base and he himself was governor from 1999 to 2007.

The 2023 election in Lagos state is a three-way contest between the APC, the PDP and Labour. Tinubu has strong political influence, especially in choosing who will fill the top office. Recent elections in Lagos have largely pitted the APC against the PDP – in 2019, the APC won 53 per cent of the vote, while the PDP got 41 per cent.⁷⁸ The state also has a large Igbo population. Obi's emergence as the Labour candidate has galvanised many of them.

Competition between Tinubu and Obi is particularly fierce, turning Lagos into a battleground between their respective supporters. On 9 June 2022, after traders' union leaders at Alaba International Market in the Ojoo area directed the predominantly Igbo members to shutter their shops in order to register for voter cards, thugs reportedly disrupted the exercise.⁷⁹ It was reminiscent of incidents in 2019, in which pro-APC thugs attacked polling stations to chase away voters in PDP strongholds with large Igbo populations, such as Ijeshu and Okota. Notably as well, a mob beat up a Labour supporter in the state's Oshodi area on 2 October.

Such attacks could recur in 2023 to suppress turnout. The road transport workers' union in the state, whose members are known for a tendency to use violence, has pledged to work for a Tinubu victory.⁸⁰ APC supporters have also threatened dire consequences for residents originally from the South East and South South zones, along with their businesses, accusing them of "treachery" that could cost Tinubu the

⁷⁸ "2019 Presidential Election: Declaration of Results", Independent National Electoral Commission, 23 February 2019.

⁷⁹ "Alaba market melee: We'll resist intimidation, Lagos PDP guber candidate warns APC", *The Cable*, 10 June 2023. Police played down the fracas as resulting from tensions over registration delays and crowd control, saying it had little to do with party thugs or ethnicity. See "Fight disrupts voter registration exercise in Lagos community", *The Cable*, 10 June 2022.

⁸⁰ "MC Oluomo levies N500 bumper sticker fee on Lagos transporters to support Tinubu campaign", *People's Gazette*, 20 September 2022.

presidential contest.⁸¹ The risk of unrest is high, both during the elections and afterward, especially if Tinubu loses.

B. Rivers State

Rivers state has considerable political and economic weight. It has the largest electorate of any state in the Niger Delta and South South zone – 3,537,190, according to INEC's final register. An oil-producing state, it receives considerable subventions from the federal government, via Nigeria's system for allocating federal revenues. Governors have long siphoned some of this money into party coffers. Rivers state is sharply contested between the two major parties, though the PDP has consistently won its elections since 1999.

The state has been notorious for electoral violence since 2011. In 2015, a report by a state government-appointed commission of inquiry said an average of nineteen election-related killings occurred in the state each month between November 2014 and the general election in April 2015.

In the countdown to the 2023 elections, tensions are highest in two contests. The first is the presidential race, where quarrels have erupted within the governing PDP. Governor Nyesom Wike – along with four other state governors in a group called the G5 – is at loggerheads with presidential candidate Abubakar. The bad blood stems partly from the party's May 2022 presidential primary – which Wike lost – and also his opposition to the party having both its presidential candidate, Abubakar, and national chairman, Iyorchia Ayu, from the north. Afterward, Wike vowed not to support Abubakar. He went so far as to offer two other parties' candidates – Labour's Obi and NNPP's Kwankwaso – logistical support, apparently to spite his PDP rival.⁸² The Rivers state government, through a court order, shut Abubakar's campaign office in the state capital, Port Harcourt, on 23 December 2022. It cited its Executive Orders 21 and 22, which stipulate the closure of all party offices hosting noisy political activities in residential areas without approval from the state government.⁸³

Wike has sought to intimidate PDP leaders in the state who remain aligned with Abubakar. On 6 November, a mob attacked three Abubakar supporters with machetes while they were hanging posters at Eberi-Omuma in Omuma local government area. On 14 December, gunmen shot the director of youth mobilisation for the state's Abubakar campaign team, Rhino Owthorkire, in Aluu, Ikwerre local government area.⁸⁴ More such attacks could take place as the election draws near.

The second tense competition is that for governor, in which fourteen parties are running. At first, this contest looked like a two-horse race between Wike's PDP candidate Siminialayi Fubara and APC candidate Tonye Cole, who is backed by a Wike

⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, APC official in Etiosa local government area, Lagos state, 2 October 2022.

⁸² "2023: Wike promises Peter Obi 'logistics support'", *Premium Times*, 17 November 2022; "Wike pledges logistics support for Kwankwaso", *Vanguard*, 22 November 2022.

⁸³ "2023: Why I shut down Atiku's campaign office in Port Harcourt – Wike", International Centre for Investigative Reporting, 24 December 2022.

⁸⁴ "Gunmen shoot Rivers PDP PCC youth mobiliser", *The Punch*, 15 December 2022. Earlier in November, thugs abducted Owthorkire. He was later seen online in a video recorded at a cave-like location, in which he renounced his support for Abubakar, evidently under duress as he looked frightened, surrounded by armed people who appeared to be dictating his utterances.

foe, former Rivers Governor Rotimi Amaechi.⁸⁵ On 25 October, however, a federal high court in Port Harcourt nullified the APC's primary, due to illegal exclusion of delegates, ruling that the APC therefore has no candidate for any state office in 2023. The APC appealed. On 15 December, the appellate court reversed the high court's judgment, thereby restoring the APC to the ballot.⁸⁶ In another ruling on 5 January 2023, an appeals court in Port Harcourt set aside an earlier federal decision that had annulled the candidacies of the APC's sixteen House of Assembly aspirants in the state.⁸⁷ These judgments have made Rivers state into a key APC-PDP battleground once more.

Besides this central rivalry, there is a considerable risk of violence between the PDP and other parties. Wike has clamped down on all opposition, threatening to "finish off" anyone who defects from his camp and to demolish hotels or other buildings that host parties "planning to cause trouble".⁸⁸ On 4 November 2022, Wike began recruiting 200,000 "political aides", naming them special assistants on political unit affairs, who are to work for him until May.⁸⁹ Opposition parties strongly criticised this action, saying Wike is buying votes and enlisting foot soldiers to ensure the victory of his favoured candidate.⁹⁰ These and the governor's other anti-opposition actions are raising tensions around the elections.

There have been other violent incidents in Rivers state. On 5 July 2022, gunmen killed a police officer in an attempt to assassinate the APC's candidate for deputy governor, Innocent Barikor, in Port Harcourt.⁹¹ Barikor was unhurt. In December, an NGO, the Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta, reported that INEC offices in Port Harcourt had suffered thirteen attacks in the three years from January 2019 to October 2022. On 21 November, the Social Democratic Party's gubernatorial candidate, Magnus Abe, reported gunshots fired at his convoy in Degema.⁹² On 26 December, suspected thugs attacked Abe's party's secretariat in Nonwa, Tai local government area. They pulled down the rostrum, smashed chairs and tore up Abe's billboards.⁹³ On 6 February 2023, thugs stormed the venue of an APC rally in Omuma local government area and destroyed the equipment set up for the program.⁹⁴

⁸⁵ In May, Wike picked his former accountant-general, Fubara, to run for governor. Wike accuses Amaechi – who was governor from 2008 to 2015 – and Cole, a businessman, of looting the state treasury. He vowed to stop them from regaining power in the state.

⁸⁶ "A Court sets aside judgement nullifying Rivers APC candidates", *The Punch*, 15 December 2022.

⁸⁷ "Appeal Court clears all APC House of Assembly candidates in Rivers for 2023 election", *Daily Post*, 5 January 2023.

⁸⁸ "I'll leave our enemies, finish you first, Wike tells Rivers PDP 'rebels'", *Vanguard*, 21 August 2022.

⁸⁹ "Wike appoints 200,000 political aides", *Saturday Vanguard*, 5 November 2022. The cost of these aides is estimated at 42.1 billion naira (\$95.2 million).

⁹⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, Social Democratic Party member based in Port Harcourt, Rivers state, 12 November 2022.

⁹¹ "Election: Orderly dies as Rivers APC deputy gov candidate escapes assassination", *The Nation*, 6 July 2022.

⁹² "Rivers: Attacks won't deter us from participating in 2023 elections – Abe", *Leadership*, 22 November 2023.

⁹³ "Wike warns Atiku campaign team as thugs vandalize SDP office in Rivers", International Centre for Investigative Reporting, 27 December 2022.

⁹⁴ "Armed thugs invade Rivers APC campaign venue, destroy property", *Vanguard*, 7 February 2023.

C. *Kano State*

Kano state in the north has the second-largest electorate among Nigerian states, numbering 5,921,370, according to INEC's final register. It has been a reliable source of votes for the APC, but competition will be tougher in 2023.

In Kano, the 2023 presidential race is a three-way contest among Tinubu, Kwankwaso and Abubakar. Kwankwaso was governor from 1999 to 2003, and again from 2011 to 2015, serving as a senator representing Kano Central from 2015 to 2019. The present governor, Abdullahi Ganduje, strongly backs Tinubu. Another former two-term governor, Ibrahim Shekarau, is supporting Abubakar.⁹⁵

With these three heavyweights in the ring, the election fight will be fierce. On 23 November 2022, the APC's state chairman said the party would win in Kano "by hook or crook".⁹⁶ The two other parties have expressed similar resolve, though less explicitly. All three parties could instigate violence to depress turnout for their main rivals as well as for fourth alternatives. Voting could be disrupted in areas like Sabon Gari, which has a large population originating elsewhere in the country, particularly pro-Obi Igbos from the south, to keep down the Labour tally.⁹⁷

D. *Kaduna State*

Kaduna state has a large electorate of 4,335,208, according to INEC's final count. For decades, it has been deeply divided between north and south. The former is predominantly Muslim, Hausa and Fulani, while the latter is predominantly Christian and has more than twenty small ethnic groups. In recent years, inter-faith and inter-ethnic relations have deteriorated badly.

Prior to 2019, parties put forward dual-faith tickets for governor and deputy governor, similar to what they did for presidential races on the federal level. In that year, however, Governor Nasir El-Rufai fielded a Muslim-Muslim ticket, arguing that religion should play no role in composing a slate of candidates. That action, which many Christians in southern Kaduna saw as rendering them politically irrelevant, has heightened religious sensitivities around elections.

In the 2023 elections, voters are sharply polarised along religious lines. For president, many in the north of the state are likely to choose Tinubu or Abubakar. Voters in the south support Obi.

The gubernatorial contest poses perhaps even greater risks. The race is between the APC's Uba Sani – who is running with the incumbent deputy governor, Hadiza Balarabe, a fellow Muslim – and Labour's John Asake, who hails from southern Kaduna.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Shekarau, a former Ganduje ally, was governor from 2003 to 2011. He ran for president in 2011, losing, and was federal minister of education from 2014 to 2015. He is a senator representing Kano Central senatorial district. In May 2022, he left the APC to join Kwankwaso in the NNPP. But he fell out with Kwankwaso in August, citing "betrayal" of an agreement to accommodate his supporters in NNPP elected positions, and moved to the PDP. See "Why I dumped NNPP, by Shekarau", *The Nation*, 23 August 2022.

⁹⁶ "We'll win Kano by hook or crook – APC chairman", *The Punch*, 24 November 2022.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, Kano-based civil society leader, 3 December 2022.

⁹⁸ Sani is a senator representing Kaduna Central senatorial district. Asake is former president of the Southern Kaduna Peoples Union.

The 2023 election may further strain inter-religious relations in the state, and campaign frictions could degenerate into violence, especially after the polls.

Already, there have been many violent incidents in the state. Notably, on 28 November 2022, gunmen killed Victoria Chintex, a Labour women's leader, in Kaura local government area.⁹⁹

E. *Ebonyi State*

Ebonyi state in the South East, with 1,597,646 voters on INEC's final register, is set for a fierce contest. The PDP has long controlled the Ebonyi government, starting in 1999; but in November 2020, Governor David Umahi, citing "injustice" done to the South East by the party, defected along with other elected officials to the APC. In October 2022, Umahi declared that the PDP was no longer a strong force in the state.¹⁰⁰ He is rallying the public to vote for Tinubu for president, though Obi seems to have a lot of support in the state.¹⁰¹ To succeed him as governor, Umahi is backing Francis Nwifuru, whom he handpicked as a candidate, and he himself is running for senate.

Violence has already transpired, consisting mostly but not exclusively of attacks on opposition candidates and their supporters, and it could well get worse during and after the elections.¹⁰² Opponents accuse Umahi of using the state-sponsored vigilante organisation Ebubeagu to intimidate the opposition (see above).¹⁰³

F. *Imo State*

Imo State, in the South East, with 2,419,922 voters on INEC's final register, has been the theatre of sharp partisan rivalry in several past elections. Candidates have been assassinated, apparently by their adversaries' supporters, and deadly clashes have sometimes erupted between groups of party loyalists.

In 2023, there are three main sets of tensions that could fuel strife.¹⁰⁴ First, the campaign has rekindled a bitter feud between supporters of the incumbent governor, Hope Uzodimma, and those of his predecessor, Rochas Okorocha. Secondly, the APC state government has thrown its weight behind Tinubu, while the Igbo electorate (which makes up the majority) is strongly pro-Obi. Thirdly, IPOB separatists – or armed groups pretending to be them (the attacks have gone unclaimed) – have been making violent attempts to disrupt election preparations.

⁹⁹ "Labour Party's women leader assassinated in Kaduna", *Daily Post*, 29 November 2022.

¹⁰⁰ "2023: 'There's no PDP in my state' – Umahi boasts APC will win Ebonyi", *The Cable*, 3 October 2022.

¹⁰¹ "Thousands of Ebonyi youths march for Peter Obi after police tear-gassing", *Daily Post*, 17 September 2022.

¹⁰² Crisis Group telephone interview, human rights activist based in Abakaliki, Ebonyi state, 20 November 2022.

¹⁰³ "How I was caned, beaten with wood by Ebubeagu – PDP spokesman", *Vanguard*, 11 November 2022. On 16 October 2022, an APC youth leader, Celestine Egbuaba, was killed in a politically motivated attack in Ishielu. On 19 November, Ebubeagu operatives shot at the convoy of a PDP leader, Julius Oji, wounding two young people. "Ebubeagu operatives allegedly shoot two youths in Ebonyi", *Vanguard*, 23 November 2022.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, APC member and former Imo state government official, Abuja, 9 December 2022.

These groups have been staging attacks since early 2021, hitting security personnel and federal facilities, including courts, prisons and INEC offices. In April 2022, INEC was forced to suspend voter registration in three local government areas – Njaba, Orsu and Ihitte Uboma – due to such attacks. Police blame IPOB for the assaults – a charge the separatist group denies – pointing, as mentioned above, to the separatist insignia worn by the gunmen. State officials, including Governor Uzodimma, say opposition politicians are the masterminds, accusing them of hiring thugs who pretend to be IPOB members. Federal security forces and the state-sponsored vigilante group, Ebubeagu, have gone after the armed groups, but thus far with limited results.

In the countdown to the elections, the state has already seen several deadly incidents. On 16 December 2022, assassins shot a Labour candidate for the Imo state House of Assembly, Christopher Eleghu, setting his house and vehicles on fire.¹⁰⁵ On 2 January 2023, gunmen ambushed the convoy of a former Imo state governor, Ikedi Ohakim, and killed four police officers guarding him at Oriagu town in Ehime Mbano local government area.¹⁰⁶ On 22 January, an armed group kidnapped and later beheaded a local government administrator allied with Governor Uzodimma, warning of more such acts. Unless authorities take urgent steps to curb the insecurity, the state could suffer greater violence as the polls approach.

¹⁰⁵ “Gunmen murder Imo Labour Party House of Assembly candidate”, Channels TV, 16 December 2022.

¹⁰⁶ “Gunmen attack former Imo state governor, Ohakim’s convoy, kill four policemen”, *Sahara Reporters*, 3 January 2023.

V. What Should Be Done

Security is vital if President Buhari is to honour his pledge to ensure free and fair elections in 2023 as part of his legacy.¹⁰⁷ Monguno, his national security adviser, Usman Alkali Baba, the inspector general of police, and General Lucky Irabor, the chief of defence staff, have assured Nigerians that voting will take place safely.¹⁰⁸ Translating these promises into reality will require efforts to improve security and dial back tensions among the main contenders for office.

A. Improving the Security Landscape

The federal government, through its military and security agencies, should step up efforts to combat armed groups in theatres across the country. In recent months, they have made progress, such as with the army's Operation Forest Sanity in the North West, which has corralled many of the zone's bandits.¹⁰⁹ Security agencies should also intensify operations to rein in armed groups, whether IPOB agitators or criminals posing as separatists, in the South East. State governments should support the federal efforts with logistics. The governors of the five South East states, whose attempts at curbing insecurity many see as half-hearted, should ensure that state-sponsored vigilante organisations are properly funded, equipped and deployed, especially for the joint patrols they agreed to set up throughout the zone at a meeting on 31 October 2022.¹¹⁰

The federal and state governments should back the security responses with greater commitment to peace efforts. State governments and civil society organisations should lend urgent support to dialogues in areas suffering communal violence. Such efforts should aim, at the very least, to extract pledges from the belligerents to keep the peace before, during and after the elections. States like Kaduna and Plateau, which have state-sponsored peace commissions, should mobilise these mechanisms to prevent violence. In the South East, federal and state governments should reach out to moderates among the Biafra separatists. Such dialogue should involve local organisations and individuals with powers of persuasion, including the umbrella ethnic pressure group Ohanaeze Ndigbo, traditional leaders and religious officials, as well as women's and youth groups. In November 2021, in the run-up to the Anambra state gubernatorial election, such engagement helped convince IPOB to give the vote a chance. Federal and especially state governments should take similar initiatives across the zone as the 2023 elections approach.

¹⁰⁷ "Buhari assures world leaders of free, fair election in 2023", *The Guardian*, 11 December 2021; "2023: Buhari vows to ensure free, fair elections", *The Punch*, 1 October 2022.

¹⁰⁸ "2023: Police assure Nigerians of rancour-free elections", *Vanguard*, 7 October 2022; "2023 elections will hold in secured environment – CDS Irabor", *The Sun*, 10 May 2022; "We won't allow terrorists, criminals disrupt polls – Military", *Daily Sun*, 21 November 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior Nigerian army officer, Abuja, 12 November 2022. Crisis Group telephone interviews, civil society leaders in Kaduna, Kaduna state, 10 November 2022; Minna, Niger state, 11 November 2022.

¹¹⁰ "South-East governors plan joint patrol team in highways to curb insecurity", *The Guardian*, 31 October 2022.

The police and other agencies, under the Inter-Agency Consultative Committee on Election Security, have already undertaken efforts to improve security around the polls. Notably, since mid-2022, the police have been training senior officers in election security management.

In the final weeks before the elections, security agencies need to focus on three key areas. First, they need to expand training programs to ensure that all relevant police personnel are involved. These programs should emphasise officers' obligation to maintain strict neutrality amid the vote, so as to build trust in the electoral process.

Secondly, the police and other agencies should firm up operational arrangements around the elections. They should deploy security teams to INEC facilities nationwide and intensify intelligence gathering, including by dedicating staff to generating data, monitoring flashpoints and formulating plans to contain any violence that erupts.¹¹¹ They should also ready themselves to protect vulnerable groups – such as women, the physically challenged and minorities – especially in areas where violence around the elections seems particularly likely. A related priority should be to take decisive legal action against anyone purveying hate speech, inciting supporters to violence or mobilising thugs.

Thirdly, security agencies should collaborate more closely with civil society to establish observatories for, among other things, providing early warning of threats of electoral violence.¹¹² The community relations committees that police have established in many places should focus on detecting such threats. Security agencies should particularly monitor groups, like state-sponsored vigilantes and the National Union of Road Transport Workers, that could be enlisted to disrupt the vote.

B. *Defusing Inter-party Tensions*

As work to enhance security proceeds, various actors should also take steps to reduce tension around the elections.

1. Dial down the rhetoric

A first step in this regard is for parties, candidates and campaign spokespeople to dial down acrimonious rhetoric and focus on substantive issues, like security, the economy and challenges to national unity. Candidates should also rein in their more aggressive supporters by publicly urging civility, tolerance of opposing viewpoints and respect for individuals' choices.

Several government agencies have roles to play in curbing tensions. For instance, in June 2022, the National Orientation Agency launched its Peaceful Elections Campaign, urging everyone to play by the rules in order to ensure peaceful, free, fair and credible polls. Little has been heard of this campaign since, however. The agency should amplify its message, especially in areas that have been identified as hotspots. INEC, for its part, should go beyond warning of violence; it should set up a unit to ensure that candidates respect the law against hate speech, or at least to name and shame them if they violate it. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission and

¹¹¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Ebonyi state-based retired major general, 11 November 2022.

¹¹² Crisis Group interviews, civil society leader, Lagos, 3 October 2022; retired senior police officer, Abuja, 12 November 2022.

Independent Corrupt Practices Commission should step up efforts to deter vote buying, including by intensifying surveillance of money transfers by candidates, parties, banks and bureau de change operators.

Eminent citizens' groups, religious leaders as well as ethnic and regional pressure groups (such as the Northern Elders Forum, the Middle Belt Forum, Afenifere from the South West and Ohanaeze Ndigbo from the South East) can also contribute to soothing election-related frictions. A well-regarded NGO, the National Peace Committee, helped curb violence around the 2015 and 2019 polls. It is doing the same in 2023. On 29 September 2022, it organised a first peace accord ceremony in Abuja, at which chairmen and presidential candidates of all eighteen parties committed to peaceful campaigns.¹¹³ It has scheduled a second, shortly before the elections, at which parties and their candidates would commit to accepting the results as long as the polls are adjudged free, fair and credible.¹¹⁴ The committee should organise similar accords at the state level, focusing on states at high risk of violence. Other non-partisan organisations should also initiate inter-party peace deals at state and local levels, as some have already done.¹¹⁵ All parties and their candidates should honour their commitments under these accords.

2. Curb impunity and establish an election offences commission

An important step toward mitigating electoral violence is to curb the impunity that emboldens perpetrators. Several laws including the Public Order Act, Nigeria Police Act and the Electoral Act of 2022 include penal sanctions for such malfeasance, but the government rarely applies them. Even when arrests are made, prosecutions are often slow. As of August 2022, courts had handed down only 60 convictions in the 125 cases of alleged electoral violence filed since 2015.¹¹⁶ Following recent incidents, security agencies arrested many more alleged offenders.¹¹⁷

Ahead of the 2023 elections, security agencies and the courts should deal with these cases rapidly and also apprehend the politicians who recruited or sponsored the attackers.¹¹⁸ These examples should be widely publicised in order to communicate zero tolerance for similar offences.

A related priority is to establish the proposed Electoral Offences Commission and Tribunal. INEC has stated, repeatedly, that it lacks the capacity to handle electoral

¹¹³ "2023: Party chairmen, presidential candidates sign peace accord", *New Telegraph*, 30 September 2022.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, official at the Kukah Centre, Abuja, 23 November 2022.

¹¹⁵ The northern pressure group Arewa Consultative Forum said it will facilitate the signing of a peace accord among all parties in Kano state. Crisis Group interview, Forum official, Abuja, 8 November 2022. See also "2023: ACF to facilitate peace accord among political parties in Kano", *Vanguard*, 7 November 2022; "2023: 18 parties sign peace agreement in Zamfara", *Blueprint*, 5 October 2022; and "Police engage political parties in Benue on peace", *Daily Trust*, 5 October 2022.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, INEC official, Abuja, 28 September, 2022.

¹¹⁷ See, for instance, "Anambra police arrest suspected INEC official's killers", *The Punch*, 19 November 2022; and "DSS arrests suspected attackers of INEC offices in Imo", *The Nation*, 21 December 2022.

¹¹⁸ Inspector General Alkali said police have made arrests after recent attacks on INEC offices, with several investigations still under way. See also "Nigerian police arrest 12 in Rivers state for attacking PDP candidate, Atiku's supporters", *Sahara Reporters*, 10 November 2022.

offences and that authorities should create a new agency with that mandate.¹¹⁹ The National Assembly is debating a bill to establish the commission and tribunal. On 27 September 2022, the chairman of the Senate Committee on INEC, Kabiru Gaya, promised that the bill will be ready for passage ahead of the 2023 elections.¹²⁰ That did not happen, as the National Assembly shut down from 26 January to 28 February, to enable lawmakers to participate in the last lap of the presidential campaign. Once back, they should pass the bill expeditiously, so that it can be signed into law as a matter of urgency and used to deal with cases of violence that will still be pending well after the elections are over.

3. Curb fake news and misinformation

A third important step in defusing tensions is to curb fake news about candidates. To counter such distorted narratives, some newspapers have set up fact-checking desks in partnership with NGOs. Others formed the Nigerian Fact-Checkers Coalition.¹²¹ Media organisations should battle misinformation through vigorous and speedy fact checking. Development partners should support these initiatives in order to help them pick up the pace, especially during and after the elections. Media houses should also ensure balanced and responsible reporting, and provide quality information that will help voters understand the parties' manifestoes and the candidates' track records. Civil society organisations should also step up their advocacy for a healthier information environment.

C. *Boosting Confidence in INEC*

If the election is seen as free and fair, parties – for the most part – are more likely to accept the results. INEC has already done much to build trust among most parties' candidates and voters. Its current leadership, building on its predecessor's achievements, has demonstrated remarkable commitment to improving the conduct and credibility of elections, aided by President Buhari's non-interference in the commission's affairs. It has been rightly praised for its management of the last three state governorship elections in Anambra, Ekiti and Osun states. That said, a countrywide election poses much greater challenges. The risk of violent post-election protests should be reduced if it sustains – and deepens – the trust it currently enjoys. The commission can take several steps to this end.

First, INEC should bolster its public communications. Among the public, doubts and misgivings about its activities are still widespread, and many voters still do not adequately understand the enormous amount of work it has already put in to ensure credible polls. In August 2022, at the request of the Abuja-based Centre for Democracy and Development, INEC inaugurated a special communications unit, the Election Crisis Communication Team, which is expected to raise awareness of what the commission has been doing. The team, along with the office of the INEC commissioner

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, INEC official, Abuja, 28 September 2022.

¹²⁰ "Electoral offences bill will be ready for 2023 polls – Senate", *Blueprint*, 28 September 2022.

¹²¹ The coalition comprises the International Centre for Investigative Reporting, Dubawa, Africa Check, FactMattersNG, the Insight, FactCheckHub, *The Cable* (an online news platform) and the influential Abuja-based daily newspaper, *Daily Trust*.

for information and voter education, should redouble efforts to communicate the steps INEC is taking to ensure the integrity of the elections, especially in the final weeks before the vote.

The commission should also ensure that the voters' register is scrupulously cleaned up, as it has promised, with particular attention to barring underage persons from voting. It should further firm up its logistics plans and ensure timely delivery of materials and deployment of staff, in order to avoid a late start to voting anywhere, for which it was accused of partisanship in past elections. For 2023, election monitoring groups and political parties have expressed concern about the reliability of the road transport workers' union, whose branches in some states have pledged support to particular candidates, but whose members will still be hired to deliver election materials to polling units.¹²² INEC should address these concerns, including by ensuring strong supervision of logistics arrangements and by giving the transporters no grounds for defaulting on their contractual obligations to provide services.

The commission should particularly watch out for any lapses – certainly, taking care to avoid significant ones – in its electronic transmission of results. Given the APC's worries about the viability of the new technologies – the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System and the electronic transmission of results from polling units to the INEC Result Viewing Portal – INEC must ensure that they work seamlessly, with special attention to areas without electricity and with poor telephone service.¹²³ INEC should also make certain that the 1.4 million ad hoc staff it is recruiting are properly trained to operate the 176,846 Bimodal Voter Accreditation Systems it plans to deploy.

Finally, the two anti-corruption agencies – the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission and Independent Corrupt Practices Commission – must redouble efforts to prevent vote buying that could seriously discredit the elections. They should liaise with banks and major bureau de change operators to track the illicit flow of funds, particularly in the weeks just before the elections, and apprehend vote buyers on polling days.

D. *Ending Scarcities of Fuel and Cash*

The federal government and relevant agencies should work to urgently end the scarcities of fuel and cash. On 24 January, the government constituted a fourteen-member committee, chaired by President Buhari, to (among other things) ensure transparent and efficient supply and distribution of petroleum products throughout the country. That committee should strive to fulfil its mandate ahead of the elections. On 1 February, the head of Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited, Mele Kyari, assured INEC that it will have adequate fuel supply for election day logistics. The company should speedily make good on that pledge, not on election day itself but well beforehand, to enable those voters who need to travel to their polling stations to do so.

The Central Bank should boost its supply of the new naira notes to commercial banks. Anti-corruption agencies should intensify their watch over banks to ensure

¹²² Crisis Group interview, Transition Monitoring Group member, Abuja, 27 October 2022; member of Labour Party's Lagos state executive, Lagos, 2 November 2022.

¹²³ "2023: APC kicks against deployment of BVAS, IReV", *Vanguard*, 24 November 2022.

that they distribute the new notes for public use, rather than hoard them for sale to political parties and candidates.

E. *Supporting from Outside*

Foreign partners are lending support for the elections.¹²⁴ They should particularly sustain their contributions toward curbing violence and ensuring the credibility of the polls.

Diplomatic sanctions, or the threat thereof, can help. The U.S. and other countries contributed to curbing violence around the 2015 and 2019 elections by threatening to impose penalties on politicians who compromised the vote.¹²⁵ In the countdown to the 2023 polls, the U.S. government has reaffirmed that it will levy sanctions, including visa restrictions, on anyone who instigates violence or otherwise interferes with the democratic process.¹²⁶ The British high commissioner to Nigeria, Catriona Lang, also warned of “the possibility of using our visas as sanction” against any individual who incites or perpetrates violence.¹²⁷ Other partners – including member countries of the European Union and leading democracies of the Commonwealth – should do the same.

International observation missions have been helpful in discouraging violence, fraud and other malfeasance. Reports on the credibility of the polls could help in managing post-election tensions and disputes. Development partners and donor organisations should also support the efforts of Nigeria-based NGOs that are working to minimise violence around the polls. In particular, they should support the efforts of the National Peace Committee, by giving it greater financial and technical assistance, including staff training, especially in the use of social media for countering fake news and hate speech.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ The European Union, for example, is aiding the elections under its EU Support to Democratic Governments in Nigeria (EU-SDG) Phase II.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Transition Monitoring Group member, Abuja, 27 October 2022; PDP official, Abuja, 2 November 2022.

¹²⁶ On 17 November, the political counselor at the U.S. embassy, Rolf Olson, said: “Individuals seeking to undermine the democratic process, including through violence, may be found ineligible for visas to the United States. We have imposed visa restrictions in the past against those responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the democratic process, and remain fully willing to do so again in the context of the upcoming elections”. See “US threatens visa ban on election riggers, backs adoption of BVAS”, *Vanguard*, 18 November 2022; and “US reaffirms visa ban on election riggers”, *Daily Sun*, 22 November 2022.

¹²⁷ “British envoy decries electoral violence”, *Daily Sun*, 24 November 2022.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Kukah Centre official, Abuja, 24 November 2022.

VI. Conclusion

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, with more than 200 million inhabitants. On 25 February and 11 March, its voters will head to polling stations to choose their political leaders for the next four years. The candidate who wins the presidential race, and who will be sworn in on 29 May, will be taking the reins of a country pulled in several different directions by security threats, a situation it has not seen since going through a civil war in 1970. Should electoral violence scar the country, deepening its divisions, it will be even more difficult to govern. Smooth and safe elections are thus of crucial importance, not only for advancing Nigerian democracy but for allowing the country to reassert itself as a leader in West African, continental and global affairs.

Abuja/Nairobi/London/Brussels, 10 February 2023

Appendix A: Map of Nigeria



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. The ideas, opinions and comments expressed by Crisis Group are entirely its own and do not represent or reflect the views of any donor. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Canadian Department of National Defence, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, United Arab Emirates (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy), United Nations Development Programme, United Nations World Food Programme, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the World Bank.

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