

# Nigeria's Dangerous 2015 Elections: Limiting the Violence

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Nigeria's presidential, parliamentary and state gubernatorial and assembly elections, scheduled for February 2015, will be more contentious than usual. Tensions within and between the two major political parties, competing claims to the presidency between northern and Niger Delta politicians and along religious lines, the grim radical Islamist Boko Haram insurgency and increasing communal violence in several northern states, along with inadequate preparations by the electoral commission and apparent bias by security agencies, suggest the country is heading toward a very volatile and vicious electoral contest. If this violent trend continues, and particularly if the vote is close, marred or followed by widespread violence, it would deepen Nigeria's already grave security and governance crises. The government, its agencies and all other national figures must work urgently to ensure that the vote is not conducted in an explosive situation as this could further destabilise the country.

Nigerian elections are traditionally fiercely contested, but in 2015, risks of violence are particularly high. This will be the first nationwide contest essentially between two parties – the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the opposition All Progressives Congress (APC) – since the return to civilian rule in 1999. While a genuine contest is a welcome sign of progress for Nigeria's democracy (thanks to the emergence last year of the APC, a merger of the four largest opposition parties), increasingly acrimonious relations between the two parties could engender even fiercer clashes among their supporters once campaigning formally starts in December.

Factional feuds within both parties could degenerate into violence during their national and state primaries. Competing claims to the presidency, between northern leaders and their Niger Delta counterparts, could also result in violence in either or both regions, particularly after the polls. As in 2011, clashes could erupt in some northern states if the APC, whose frontrunners are all northerners, loses the polls; there is similarly a high risk of violence if the PDP loses the presidency, particularly in the Niger Delta, home region of the party's candidate, President Goodluck Jonathan.

The Boko Haram insurgency and the state of emergency in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe could prevent voting in parts of those north-eastern states. If this occurs, the opposition APC, which has large following in those (and other northern) states, could lose a significant number of votes, reject the presidential polls' outcome and question the elected government's legitimacy. An election not held in all states may also fall short of the constitutional requirements for electing a president, namely that the winner score 25 per cent of the votes in two-thirds of the 36 states, thereby raising serious legal disputes. Equally worrying are the increasing availability of firearms, the rise in communal violence across several northern states since 2013 and deepening criminality in the Niger Delta.

Deficiencies in electoral preparations are also compounding the risks of violence. Proposed amendments to the 2010 Electoral Act, including provisions for establishment of an election offences tribunal, which were intended to prevent or punish electoral offences including violence, remain stuck

in the National Assembly (federal parliament). There is no certainty they will be passed in time to have meaningful impact on the polls.

Repeated assurances by the chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Professor Attahiru Jega, that the polls will be an improvement on the past, are not entirely supported by realities on ground. There are growing fears that INEC may not be able to produce an updated and credible voter register before the polls. The commission's decision to create 30,000 new polling units, mostly in northern states, was widely rejected by southern leaders and groups who feared Jega, a northerner, was handing his home region an electoral advantage. INEC's decision to put the new polling units on hold has not entirely dispelled southern misgivings. Amid such lack of confidence, an election conducted with an incomplete voter register will certainly be disputed.

Actions by the police and other security services, all controlled by the federal government, could also aggravate tensions around the polls and undermine the credibility of their outcomes. The conduct of some senior police officers, notably in Rivers state, has raised fears that the agency could be manipulated to serve the PDP's interests. Similarly, some actions and pronouncements by the Department of State Security (DSS) – Nigeria's main domestic intelligence agency – have raised concerns about institutional bias. If these agencies act or are perceived to act in a partisan manner, they could undermine free and fair polls and heighten the risks of violence, particularly after the vote.

With only three months before elections, the government cannot engage in long-term structural efforts to improve the quality of the vote, but it can and must be encouraged to urgently take several steps to limit the risk of widespread violence. These include increasing efforts to contain the Boko Haram insurgency, paying special attention to the police to improve the security environment, reinforcing the capacities of the INEC to restore confidence in the electoral process, and along with all politicians, avoid playing the religious card and reducing tensions within and between the parties. The government – President Goodluck Jonathan, the federal legislature, INEC and security agencies – must bear the greatest responsibility for implementing these measures, but other national and political figures, including civil society, as well as international partners must also rally to stop the slide.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **To the government of President Goodluck Jonathan:**

1. Step up efforts to contain the conflict in the north east and ensure elections are held in all states, particularly by strengthening security services, improving coordination with state governments and implementing regional security arrangements in concert with neighbouring countries.
2. Direct publicly the heads of the Nigeria Police Force and other security agencies to act lawfully and impartially with all parties and individuals participating in the elections.

### **To the president, major political parties and their candidates:**

3. Avoid inflammatory rhetoric, publicly denounce violence, pledge to respect rules, in particular the Code of Conduct for Political Parties, and pursue grievances through lawful channels.
4. Respect party constitutions and particularly allow democratic candidate selections.

**To leaders of regional, ethnic and religious groups:**

5. Organise national, regional, ethnic and inter-faith public forums to jointly and publicly commit to non-violence, and establish channels of communication and contingency plans to respond to large-scale communal violence.

**To the National Assembly:**

6. Ensure speedy passage of the amended Electoral Act.

7. Approve urgently supplementary funds for INEC to meet its logistical requirements.

**To the Independent National Electoral Commission:**

8. Intensify efforts to build relations with all parties, particularly opposition parties, including holding constant consultations to discuss and explain major decisions, sparing no effort in trying to increase confidence and ensuring transparent relations with all parties, individuals and civil society.

**To the Nigeria Police Force and other security agencies:**

9. Improve security arrangements for the elections by training more personnel for election duties and strengthening capacity to gather information, monitor developments and analyse threats; strengthen ongoing efforts to curb the influx and availability of illegal arms particularly in violence-prone areas; and ensure the newly established Elections Security Planning and Monitoring Unit is well resourced, firmly led and instructed on international best practices.

10. Direct publicly all officers to ensure neutrality in relations with all parties and apply exemplary sanctions against any officer who fails to comply.

**To civil society organisations and mass media:**

11. Engage more actively with youth leaders especially in poor urban and rural areas, strengthen participatory early warning and early response systems, and raise timely alerts of possible violence.

12. Ensure factual and balanced reporting of all election-related developments, and avoid publishing hateful, divisive and inflammatory statements.

**To the UN, EU and other international partners:**

13. Sustain ongoing capacity building programs for major institutions involved in the elections, particularly INEC and the police, and increase technical and financial support to relevant civil society organisations.

14. Deploy observer missions for longer periods before and after the votes to monitor the process more comprehensively.

15. Create a common donor forum for collectively messaging and pressuring President Jonathan, political parties and their candidates, security agencies and all other stakeholders to act lawfully and prevent or mitigate violence.

**Dakar/Abuja/Brussels, 21 November 2014**