



Election within Persisting Insecurity and Citizens Distrust; Imo State Governorship Election

**Yiaga Africa Watching the Vote First
Pre-Election Observation Report**

September 2023



Introduction

The political environment in Imo State is heating up ahead of the November 11, 2023, governorship election as political actors and parties intensify efforts to win the election. The election will be conducted on the heels of a pervasive level of disillusionment and distrust in both the electoral process and INEC as an institution amongst a reasonable number of citizens. These levels of distrust and worrying state of disillusionment have an adverse effect on the faith in democracy and the quality of participation in the elections. Accordingly, the pre-election environment is driven more by campaigns by the contesting political parties and less engagement of the citizens. Voter education and stakeholder engagement in the electoral process are abysmally low and almost absent across most of the Local government areas. In addition, the level of insecurity in the state limits major civic and voter engagement and other election-preparatory activities that ordinarily precede election. While the

governorship election is expected to be keenly contested, the question is more around the level of citizen participation and the impact of insecurity on voter participation as the pre-election observation projects a likelihood of low voter turnout.

The Imo governorship election like both the Kogi and Bayelsa state governorship elections will be conducted after the 2023 Presidential election whose outcome remains contested in court. This is in addition to an already existing controversy surrounding the 2019 Supreme Court decision that brought in the Imo incumbent Governor. Imo state joined the list of states conducting gubernatorial off-cycle elections in 2019 after the Supreme Court removed the then-sitting governor Emeka Ihedioha of the PDP and affirmed the APC candidate Senator Hope Uzodinma as the Governor. This court decision has remained a defining factor influencing both citizens' perception of the electoral process and

stakeholder engagement in the state. Post the 2019 and 2023 presidential elections, the political dynamics remain almost the same except for the variance in the actors. Unlike the 2019 Imo Governorship election, the three major political parties headlining the governorship election are the; All Progressive Congress (APC), People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the Labour Party (LP). The APC is fielding the incumbent governor, Hope Uzodinma as its candidate in the election. The People's Democratic Party, (PDP) which is a major contender in 2019 is fielding Sen. Sam Anyanwu a former Federal Lawmaker and party man. Although Sen. Sam Anywanwu did not contest in 2019 he is currently riding on the party's popularity from the 2019 election. A third contender Achonu Nneji, of the Labour Party is said to be the dark horse in the election. The Labour Party emerged as a major contender after the political shift in party realignments from the Presidential election in 2023 and is currently riding on the party's popularity and gains in the 2023 general election. The state map of political party stronghold post the last round of off-cycle elections and the 2023 general elections also indicates some major shifts in party dominance across the state. Currently, the APC is the ruling party in 20 of the 36 states, while the PDP is the ruling party in 13 states. The LP and New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP) emerged as the ruling Party in 1 state each; Abia and Kano states respectively and the All Progressive Grand Alliance APGA still retained Anambra.

Beyond the Political context, is the level of insecurity in the state which is likely to affect the upcoming off-cycle elections. This is a major concern especially with respect to its effect on voter education in the state and the impact on INECs ability to conclude all election preparatory activities and to conduct elections in a secured environment across all polling units and LGA's in the state. Imo State has experienced several security crises, with militia groups posing a significant threat to the socio-economic well-being of the State

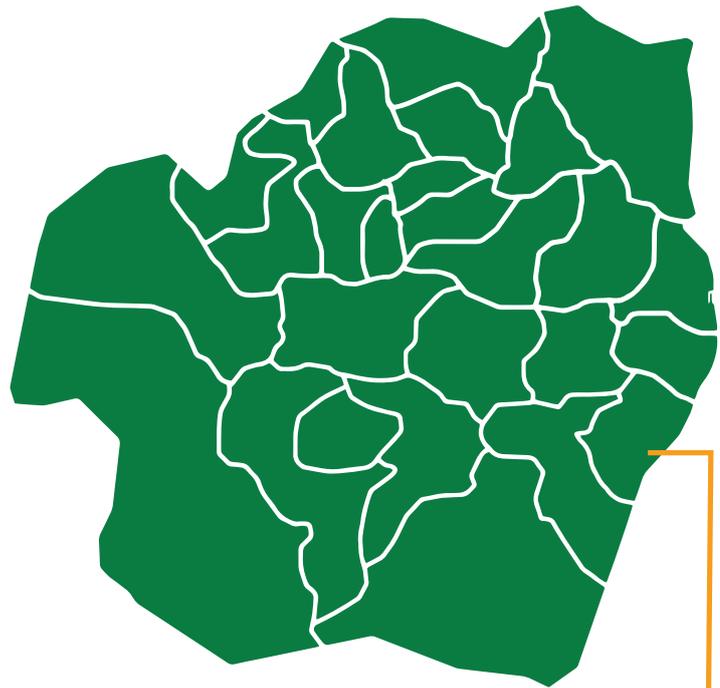
and the arbitrary enforcement of the Monday sit-at-home by The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). In addition, is the continued terror by unknown gunmen. These multi-layered insecurity have continued to hamper both economic activities and the civic life of the people of Imo state. Yiaga Africa's pre-election observation revealed LGAs like: Ehime/Mbano, Okigwe, Oru West, Oru East, Orsu and Orlu LGAs in the State are likely hotspots for violence ahead of the governorship elections. Orsu LGA in particular seems most affected by the violence as more of its communities are becoming abandoned. Pre-election observation also revealed that the staff of INEC in Orsu LGA were reported to be operating from the INEC state office as the LGA was unsafe for them. The activities and terror by the secessionist group have heightened the vulnerability of the state to armed violence, causing deaths and property damage, including attacks on State facilities, such as the Independent National Electoral Commission assets.

Another issue that could pose great danger to the election is the verdict of the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal, this has increased the level of distrust in the electoral process and in INEC. Concerns have been raised about the uneven playing field for other political parties, with the state government allegedly using the state apparatus to hamper the campaigns of the other political parties. For instance, the state owned media are not allowed to air campaign jingles of other parties. In addition, the supposed regulation of campaign posters and billboards in the state capital with observation indicating that only the posters and billboards of the ruling party adorn the street of Owerri.

This report contains key findings of the first observation period (between September 17, 2023, and September 30, 2023) and it is based on reports received from 27 LGAs in Imo State.

Key Findings

Election Preparatory Activities by INEC



Number of Polling units
4,758



Number of registered voters
2,423,788



Number of Candidates **18**

Number of Polling Units where INEC will conduct elections is **4,720**

Elections will not be conducted in 38 polling units as no voter was assigned to those polling units.

The Yiaga Africa LTOs observed ongoing election preparatory activities by INEC, in line with the election timetable. These activities include; the recruitment and training of INEC personnel to manage the election, deployment of election materials, collection of permanent voter cards by registered voters, meeting with election stakeholders etc. In September, election preparatory activities were observed in 23 LGAs in Imo as reported by Yiaga Africa WTV LTOs. The commission had also commenced the training of its Adhoc personnel. INEC activities were however not observed in 4 LGAs especially Orsu LGA, due to the growing insecurity. INEC staff for the Orsu INEC LGA office temporarily relocated to the INEC office in the state capital; Owerri. Voters from Orsu LGA are also collecting their PVCs from the INEC Orsu staff now stationed in the INEC office in Owerri.





50%

WTV observers witnessed or heard of voter information campaigns by INEC in 13 LGAs.



38%

WTV observers witnessed or heard of voter information campaigns by NOA in 10 LGAs



69%

WTV observers witnessed or heard of voter information campaigns by CSOs in 18 LGAs

Voter Education/Information

The long term observers (LTOs) tracked and reported voter education activities conducted by key election stakeholders such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), National Orientation Agency (NOA), and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) across some LGAs in Imo. This includes voter education messaging targeted at mobilising and sensitising citizens, especially the marginalised groups such as Youth, Women and Persons Living with disabilities (PWD) to participate in the electoral process. Yiaga Africa defined voter information campaigns as sensitization or awareness programmes on radio or television; distribution of materials such as handbills; road shows conducted by INEC, NOA or CSOs; or town hall meetings about the elections. The LTOs reported general voter information dissemination activities conducted in 22 LGAs. Specifically, Yiaga Africa LTOs reported voter education campaigns undertaken by INEC in 13 (50%) LGAs, by NOA in 10 (38%) LGAs and by CSOs in 18 (69%) LGAs. As part of the efforts to encourage participation, INEC in Imo also sent out bulk SMS urging citizens to go collect their PVCs.

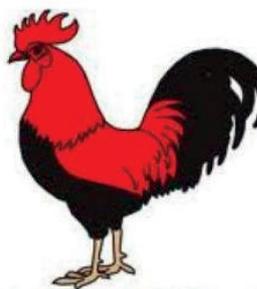
Voter information/education campaigns were however not observed in Owerri Municipal, Owerri West, Isu, Orlu and Oru East LGAs.

Campaign Activities by Political Party



The LTOs witnessed and/or heard of political party campaigns conducted by the All Progressive Congress (APC) in 23 LGAs

In September, political parties in Imo took the spotlight as they intensified campaigns across the state. Yiaga Africa observers monitored political party campaigns throughout the state and also reported party rallies in each LGA and the presence of party/candidates campaign posters across different LGA's. Overall, Yiaga Africa observed a visible level of party campaigning in at least 24 LGAs, suggesting that political parties are engaging voters to win their votes as the election approaches. The LTOs witnessed and/or heard of political party campaigns conducted by the All Progressive Congress (APC) in 23 LGAs. They also reported campaign activities conducted by the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) in 12 LGAs. The LTOs reported campaign activities undertaken by the Labour Party (LP) in 18 LGAs and campaign activities undertaken by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) were reported in 19 LGAs. Campaign activities by other political parties were noticeable in 11 LGAs.



They also reported campaign activities conducted by the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) in 12 LGAs.

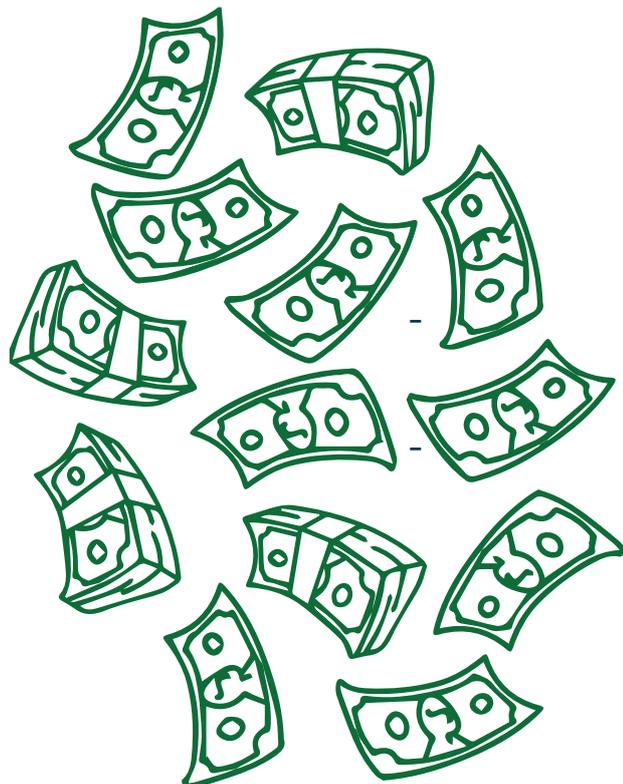


Campaign activities undertaken by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) were reported in 19 LGAs.



The LTOs reported campaign activities undertaken by the Labour Party (LP) in 18 LGAs

Cases of Voter Inducement/Buying of PVCs



Yiaga Africa LTOs observed the collection of voter's identification numbers (VIN) from voters' permanent voters cards in Ahiazu Mbaise, Ehime Mbanano and Owerri West LGAs. These voters were handed out N10,000 each in exchange for the information.

Yiaga Africa's LTOs also witnessed or heard of the distribution of money and gift items to woo voters. This was observed in Ahiazu Mbaise, Ehime Mbanano, Ideato North and Isu LGA.

WTV LTOs witnessed or heard of distribution of money or gift items by candidates or their supporters

■ Reported LGAs

■ No Activity



Early Warning Signs

Increase in the activities of armed assailants or secessionist groups:

Yiaga Africa received reports that gunmen killed some security operatives and burnt several vehicles belonging to the Joint Task Force (JTF) in Oriagu, in Ehime Mbano. The incident occurred on September 19, 2023 and has led to an increase of tension in the LGA.

LGAs with reports of Security Threats Limiting Access for the Conduct of the Election:

As the election day draws near, reports received from Ehime/Mbano, Okigwe, Oru West, Oru East, Orsu, Ihitte/Uboma, Njaba and Orlu LGAs indicates that there has been an increase in security tensions in these elections. The INEC office in Orsu LGA has been temporarily relocated to the state office in Owerri, as the LGA is not safe for its staff to operate.

Government policy that poses restrictions on political activities:

The LTOs reported that the N54 million campaign levy imposed by the government through the Imo State Advertisement and Signage Agency is affecting the participation of political parties in carrying out campaign activities. This levy has the likelihood to limit the political space in the state. Campaign posters of some political parties are rarely visible in about 7 LGAs in the state.

Key Recommendations

State Government

- Yiaga Africa calls on the state government to ensure a level playing field for free and fair political competition ahead of the governorship election.

INEC, NOA, CSOs

- Yiaga Africa calls on INEC, NOA and civil society organisations to increase their election preparations especially voter education to cover all LGAs, and capture special groups like women, youths and persons with disabilities

Security Agencies

- To prevent escalation or spillover to the electoral process, relevant security authorities should effectively address early warning indicators of electoral violence. This is to ensure the protection of lives and properties of citizens.
- The Police Force and other Security Agencies should pay particular attention to risks of violence in Ehime/Mbano, Okigwe, Oru West, Oru East, Orsu, Ihitte/Uboma, Njaba and Orlu LGAs

Political Parties

- Yiaga Africa encourages political parties to desist from vote buying and inducing voters with unsustainable gifts that do not contribute to the economic development of the citizens.
- Candidates contesting for the Gubernatorial election should denounce acts of violence – most especially acts of violence or destruction carried out by their own supporters and commit to campaigning on issue-based platforms. Furthermore, candidates should caution their supporters and party members against violence.

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

- Yiaga Africa calls on all Civil Society Organizations to continue the collaborative effort with INEC in sensitising the voters on the electoral process and peaceful participation.

Methodology

Yiaga Africa Watching the Vote recruited, trained, and deployed 28 long-term citizen observers (LTOs) and deployed them across the 27 LGAs of Imo State to systematically observe the pre-election environment in their various local governments. The observation also includes monitoring early warning signs of electoral violence that may influence the election outcome in the State. The observers are equipped with a checklist to record the relevant information and provide verifiable findings of the pre-election happening in their various LGAs. The LTOs send reports of their observation every month on a standard set of questions guiding their observation at the local government level and the state capital. All the 28 LTOs were recruited from their LGAs of residence, where they are expected to monitor all the electoral activities: voter education and information, political campaign activities, activities of marginalised groups (youth, women, and PWDs), election-related violence, and critical incidents all around the clock. Additionally, they track the activities of electoral stakeholders like; INEC, political parties, NOA, CSOs, as well as women, youths, and PWDs.

All findings from the LTOs are transmitted to the WTV data centre via coded SMS and are thereafter analysed and reported periodically. Yiaga Africa PREO findings are obtained from the entire LGAs within the state and not from a representative of the whole state, thus indicating emerging trends during the pre-election period. Unlike the WTV election-day observation methodology that relies on sample-based observation, Yiaga Africa's WTV PREO uses a more traditional approach that investigates the activities in LGAs of Imo State.



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