



# **Pre-election Press Statement on the 2023 Off-Cycle Governorship Elections in Bayelsa, Imo and Kogi States**

Friday, November 10, 2023

Delivered at the Treasure Suite Hotel, Abuja

## **Introduction**

On November 11, 2023, 5,169,962 registered voters with Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) will vote to elect governors across Bayelsa, Imo, and Kogi States. These are the first elections after Nigeria's contentious and controversial 2023 general elections. The commitment of key democratic institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission, security agencies and the executive to restore public confidence in the electoral process will be tested in Saturday's polls. As the pre-election climate in these states suggests, they are high-stakes elections with the potential for violence. Nigerians in the three states desire a safe environment to cast their ballot without violence, suppression or intimidation. As these voters proceed to the polls, they expect timely deployment of election materials, early commencement of accreditation and voting and transparent counting and collation of results to ensure the outcome reflects the people's will.

Yiaga Africa notes INEC's level of preparedness for the election. The commission undertook several preparatory activities in the three states, including training its personnel and deploying non-sensitive and sensitive materials. In October, the commission conducted a successful mock accreditation in the three states to test the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Results Viewing Portal (IReV); however, the turnout for the exercise was abysmally poor, as noted in Yiaga Africa's observation report on the mock accreditation. In some instances, voters requested cash incentives as a condition for participating in the exercise. Yiaga Africa urges INEC to meticulously configure BVAS and ensure only trained officials manage the devices on election day. Equally important is the need to ensure strict compliance with the upload of authentic result sheets from the polling units on IReV to enhance transparency of the results management process.

Yiaga Africa expresses concern with the unassailable level of insecurity and the spate of violence across the states especially in Imo and Kogi states. Also concerning is the obnoxious abuse of incumbency powers manifesting through restrictions of campaigns, imposition of fines and levies on campaign posters and attacks on political opponents. The lack of accountability for the fatalities and attacks recorded in the pre-election period deepens the culture of impunity pervading the electoral process. Yiaga Africa states emphatically, that the successful administration of a peaceful and transparent election is dependent on the effective collaboration and coordination with respective institutions like the INEC, the Nigerian Police and other security agencies. For instance, INEC requires adequate security protection to deploy materials to some highly volatile Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Imo state that are prone to violence e.g. Oguta, Orsu, Orlu LGAs amongst others.

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Improved security deployment in volatile areas will enable voters, election observers and media practitioners in particular to participate in the election across the three states.

Yiaga Africa commends the peacebuilding initiative in the three states led by the National Peace Committee. Yiaga Africa urges all political parties and candidates to adhere to their commitment to the Peace Accord.

## **Summary of Key Issues and Observations**

The issues highlighted below are summary observations from Yiaga Africa Pre-Election Observation;

1. **Low Voter Turnout Projections:** According to INEC, the number of Permanent Voters Cards (PVC) collected in Bayelsa is 1,017,613, Imo, 2,318,919 and 1,833,160 in Kogi state. Despite these high collection rates, Yiaga Africa projects low voter turnout in the respective states owing to the spate of pre-election violence, a deep sense of citizens' distrust, apparent fear of intimidation, voter fatigue and loss of faith in elections as a means to achieving democratic leadership. Yiaga Africa advocates for eleventh-hour confidence-building voter education to improve voter turnout.
2. **Deployment of Election Materials:** Yiaga Africa notes INEC's deployment of sensitive and non-sensitive election materials to the Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the three states. While this projects a positive outlook, Yiaga Africa calls on INEC to ensure proper coordination and communication with the transport companies/unions providing logistics support to ensure early deployment of materials and personnel to polling units on election day. The commission should resist attempts to sabotage its logistics preparations by collaborating with security agencies to arrest and prosecute any defaulting transport companies. This will address the recurring late commencement of polls.
3. **Security Climate:** Yiaga Africa notes an increasingly volatile pre-election environment with the spates of attacks in the following LGAs in Imo state, Oguta, Orlu, Orsu, Oru East, Oru West, Okigwe, and Ehime/Mbano and the prevalence of election motivated violence during campaigns in Kogi and Bayelsa states. Undoubtedly, the insecurity will gravely impact the quality of the election in those affected areas if not checked. Yiaga Africa is concerned this volatility could potentially limit voter participation, and the situation could be exploited to intimidate and attack political opponents.
4. **Unequal Playing Field:** Yiaga Africa notes with grave concern the unequal playing field for political parties and candidates to compete. The exploitation of incumbency powers against candidates undermined the opportunity for fair competition. Incumbents in the three states introduced repressive policies to stifle political opponents and other stakeholders. In Imo state, the government, through the Imo Signage and Advertisement Agency, imposed a N54



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million fee for billboards, posters and other campaigns. The Imo and Kogi State governments, through a circular, booked all the rooms in all the hotels in the state, which tactically restricts hotels from providing accommodation to other stakeholders like media, election observers etc.

5. **Voter Inducement:** As citizen mobilisation efforts intensified ahead of the elections, Yiaga Africa received reports of voter inducement through the distribution of gift items and wire (money) transfers by the political actors. Specifically, Yiaga Africa received reports of money and food items distribution by party supporters Ezinihitte and Onuimo LGAs in Imo State.

### Recommendations

1. INEC should ensure the operational shortcomings in previous elections are properly addressed ahead of the elections, especially the early deployment of election materials to all polling units.
2. Collation and Returning Officers deployed in the election should be individuals of proven integrity and impeccable character. INEC should ensure effective oversight to enforce compliance with the provisions of the Electoral Act 2022 and guidelines on results collation.
3. INEC should ensure proper and timely communication with stakeholders on the election day process, challenges experienced and immediate plans to address those challenges to inspire citizens' confidence in the process.
4. Yiaga Africa calls on the Inter-Agency Consultative Committee on Elections Security ICCES to ensure that security personnel deployed for the election comply with the code of conduct on election security. This includes professionalism in their conduct, arrest of electoral offenders and respect for the rights of citizens, media, and observers, including the right to freedom of movement on election day for duly accredited observers and media practitioners.
5. Yiaga Africa calls on Political parties, candidates and their supporters to commit to peaceful campaigns ahead of the election and on election day and refrain from vote-buying and compromising the secrecy of the ballot.
6. Yiaga Africa urges voters to resist efforts to purchase their votes, turn out in their numbers, and vote according to their preferences on Saturday, November 11.

### Yiaga Africa Watching The Vote Observation of the 2023 Off-Cycle Governorship Elections

For the November 11 Governorship election, Yiaga Africa is deploying a comprehensive and systematic observation of the elections, which involves deploying the Process and Results Verification for Transparency (PRVT) methodology to observe the governorship elections in Imo and

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Kogi States. Yiaga Africa will also be deploying stationary and roving observers to observe and report the election day process in Bayelsa State. Further, at the end of polls, Yiaga Africa will deploy observers to all the Local Government Areas (LGA) and State Results Collation Centers in all the states to observe and report on the Governorship results collation process.

Yiaga Africa will deploy a total of 659 duly trained and accredited stationary and roving observers to observe the conduct of the Governorship election in 3 states. This will involve deploying 600 stationary observers to a representative randomly selected sample of 300 polling units for each of these 2 states. In addition to the PRVT methodology, Yiaga Africa will deploy 9 observers in Bayelsa State to observe the process and LGA results collation.

At the end of polls, Yiaga Africa observers will deploy to all LGAs and State's results collation centres to observe and report the results collation process. This deployment will enable Yiaga Africa to provide the most timely and accurate information on the governorship elections in the states. Using the PRVT, Yiaga Africa will also provide an independent projection of voter turnout in Imo and Kogi States and will be able to project the vote shares that each party should receive within a narrow-estimated range. If the official results fall within Yiaga Africa's estimated ranges, then the public, political parties and candidates should have confidence in the ballots cast at the polling units.

Only INEC has the legal mandate to announce the election results. As soon as INEC announces the official results, Yiaga Africa will follow up with a result verification press conference to share its statement on the accuracy of the election results. Utilising information communications technology and statistical principles, PRVT is the gold standard for citizen election observation and has been utilised throughout Africa and the world. Yiaga Africa has also deployed this methodology in the 2019 & 2023 Presidential elections and in 14 State Governorship Elections.

Yiaga Africa restates its commitment to objective, non-partisan and credible election observation. The Watching The Vote is **“Driven by Data – For All Nigerians – Beholden to None!”**

Thank you and God Bless the people of Nigeria!

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