

IS INEC AN IMPARTIAL UMPIRE?

Election Outcomes Have Deepened Division, Disunity, Distrust and Insecurity in Nigeria

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Electoral legitimacy is the constitutional oxygen of democracy. Where the ballot is compromised, the mandate becomes questionable; where the umpire is distrusted, the entire democratic process is placed on trial. The central question confronting Nigeria is therefore not merely whether elections are conducted, but whether the sovereign will of the electorate is faithfully translated into an authentic electoral mandate. Nigeria's electoral history has been punctuated by disputed outcomes, allegations of manipulation, judicial battles, protests and, at various points, bloodshed. The problem predates the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The electoral bodies have changed names over the decades, from ECN and FEC to FEDECO, NEC, NECON and eventually, INEC- but the recurring crisis of institutional independence has remained. INEC itself acknowledges that FEDECO conducted the elections that ushered in the Second Republic in 1979 and the 1983 elections. The 1979 presidential election produced one of Nigeria's earliest major post-independence electoral litigations. Chief Obafemi Awolowo challenged the declaration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari before the Supreme Court. The case, *Awolowo v. Shagari*, became a landmark constitutional dispute over the interpretation of the electoral threshold for presidential victory. The Supreme Court ultimately upheld Shagari's election.

The 1983 elections generated further controversy and were followed by a military coup. But the greatest rupture in Nigeria's electoral history came in 1993. The June 12 presidential election, conducted by the then National Electoral Commission (NEC), was widely regarded as exceptionally credible. Chief M.K.O. Abiola emerged as the apparent winner, but the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida annulled the election. INEC's own historical account records that NEC conducted the election and that the military administration subsequently annulled it. June 12 therefore became more than an election. It became a national symbol of a denied mandate, a painful reminder that an election can be conducted and yet its political consequence can be extinguished by executive power. The return to civil rule in 1999 did not immediately eliminate the credibility crisis. The election that produced Olusegun Obasanjo was challenged by Chief Olu Falae, while international observers reported irregularities that clouded the process. Scholarly analysis has consequently raised longstanding concerns about the autonomy of Nigeria's electoral management institutions and their susceptibility to governmental influence. Then came the deeply controversial 2007 elections. The process that produced Umaru Musa Yar'Adua was severely criticized by domestic and international observers for fraud, violence, organizational failures and lack of transparency. The United States government reported that the elections were "seriously flawed" and identified problems including politicization, inadequate independence and poor logistical arrangements.

Significantly, Yar'Adua himself did not pretend that the electoral process was perfect. He publicly acknowledged shortcomings and established an Electoral Reform Panel to address the weaknesses. His own admission was remarkable because he was the principal beneficiary of the disputed process. The 2011 election under Professor Attahiru Jega

represented a significant improvement, although the result produced violent post-election reactions, particularly in parts of northern Nigeria. Goodluck Jonathan won the presidential election, and subsequent reforms helped demonstrate that an electoral commission can improve its performance when institutional leadership, technology and political conditions align. The 2015 election provided another important lesson. Jonathan's decision to concede defeat to Muhammadu Buhari helped prevent an explosive post-election confrontation. It demonstrated that democratic maturity does not rest exclusively on the electoral commission; candidates themselves must possess the statesmanship to accept lawful outcomes. Yet the controversy did not disappear. The 2023 presidential election again exposed serious questions about electoral technology, result transmission, logistics and public confidence. INEC subsequently acknowledged technical difficulties surrounding the uploading of presidential results to its IReV portal, one of the most contentious features of the election. INEC's own post-election report also acknowledged technical glitches, delays, violence and intimidation in some areas.

This brings us to 2027. The coming election is already enveloped in suspicion because Nigerians have seen too many disputed electoral processes. INEC must therefore understand that credibility is not obtained by declaration; it is earned by transparent conduct. It is constitutionally charged with organizing, undertaking and supervising elections. Its responsibility is consequently quasi-judicial in public perception: it must act as an impartial referee, not as an interested participant.

But Nigerians must also resist the temptation to convert electoral disappointment into anarchy. Politicians frequently exploit ethnic, religious and regional sentiments to manufacture outrage. When emotions replace evidence, democracy becomes the casualty. The defeat of a sitting president is difficult in many political systems; incumbency confers enormous institutional and political advantages. Yet difficulty is not impossibility. The ballot must remain the lawful instrument of succession. If an election is disputed, the constitutional remedy is petition, evidence and adjudication, not violence, destruction or vengeance. INEC must therefore protect the sanctity of the ballot. Politicians must respect the electorate. Security agencies must remain neutral. And Nigerians must vote, protect their votes lawfully and pursue grievances through the courts. The future of Nigeria's democracy cannot be entrusted to ethnic arithmetic, political godfathers or institutional manipulation. The ballot must speak, and the umpire must have the courage to let it speak.

Huriwa Tasks Presidential Candidates To Abandon Hate Speech, Present Clear Development Blueprints

The Human Rights Writers Association of Nigeria (HURIWA) has charged all presidential candidates participating in the 2027 general elections to use the 150-day campaign period to engage Nigerians on ideas, policies, development strategies and practical solutions to the country's longstanding challenges, rather than resorting to hate speech, ethnic mobilization, religious sentiments and divisive rhetoric. HURIWA said the commencement of the presidential campaign should mark the beginning of a serious national conversation about the future of Nigeria and not another season of empty promises, political name-calling, character assassination and the exploitation of the country's ethnic and religious fault lines for electoral advantage.

The rights group, therefore, urged all presidential candidates and their supporters to conduct their campaigns with restraint, civility and respect for the constitutional rights of other citizens and political opponents. In a statement signed by its National Coordinator, Comrade Emmanuel Nnadozie Onwubiko, HURIWA said Nigerians deserve to know, in clear and measurable terms, what each presidential candidate intends to do differently if elected and, more importantly, how such programmes will be funded and implemented. According to the organization, candidates should go beyond presenting attractive manifestos and campaign slogans and explain the specific strategies, timelines, institutions and resources that would be deployed to achieve their promises. HURIWA said the central issues in the 2027 presidential campaign must include national unity, poverty reduction, employment creation, economic stability, industrialization, human rights, constitutionalism, security and the rule of law. The organization maintained that Nigeria cannot continue to conduct elections primarily around ethnic calculations, religious sentiments or regional interests while millions of citizens struggle with poverty, unemployment, insecurity and declining purchasing power.

ECONOMY AND INDUSTRIALISATION; HURIWA challenged the presidential candidates to present convincing economic blueprints capable of moving Nigeria from an import-dependent and consumption-driven economy to one anchored on production, manufacturing, agriculture, technology and value addition. The group said candidates must explain how they intend to reduce inflation, expand employment opportunities, support small and medium-scale businesses, attract investment and create an environment in which industries can thrive across the country. It particularly called for concrete plans for the industrialization of all 36 states of the federation, stressing that economic development must not remain concentrated in a handful of major cities.

According to HURIWA, each state possesses unique economic resources and comparative advantages which, if properly harnessed, could generate employment, increase internally generated revenue and reduce dependence on federal allocations. The organization also challenged candidates to explain how their administrations would attract genuine Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), protect investors without compromising national interests and use Nigeria's foreign policy to advance economic development.

SECURITY AND COUNTER-TERRORISM; On security, HURIWA urged presidential candidates to provide detailed strategies for ending the persistent insecurity that has affected communities across different parts of the country.

The group said the next administration must have a clearly defined strategy for achieving decisive victory in the war against terrorism, banditry, kidnapping and other violent crimes.

It also called for stronger institutional cooperation among the military, police, intelligence agencies and other security institutions. HURIWA urged the presidential candidates to support the ongoing counter-narcotics efforts of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), stressing that the



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fight against illicit drugs is directly connected to national security, youth development and the battle against organized crime.

POLICE REFORM AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE; The rights group also demanded that candidates state their positions on the establishment and development of functional policing institutions at both federal and state levels. It argued that policing must be professional, accountable, adequately funded and insulated from partisan political control. HURIWA specifically cautioned law enforcement agencies, particularly the police, against allowing themselves to become political instruments or “attack dogs” for politicians, especially those in power. The organization warned that the use of security agencies to intimidate, harass or suppress political opponents would undermine public confidence in the electoral process and weaken Nigeria's democracy. It called for zero tolerance for armed political thuggery, electoral violence, intimidation and the deployment of criminal elements during campaigns and elections.

According to HURIWA, security agencies must provide equal protection to all candidates, political parties and citizens irrespective of political affiliation.

HUMAN RIGHTS, RULE OF LAW AND LEGISLATIVE INDEPENDENCE

HURIWA also challenged the presidential candidates to make clear commitments to protecting fundamental human rights and strengthening the rule of law. The group said respect for constitutional rights must not depend on whether a citizen supports the government of the day.

It also demanded clear commitments to the independence of the legislature, stressing that a functional democracy requires effective checks and balances among the arms of government.

HURIWA said the National Assembly must be allowed to exercise its constitutional responsibilities without undue interference from the executive, while legislators must equally remain accountable to the Nigerian people.

GENDER EQUALITY; The organization further urged presidential candidates to explain how their administrations would promote equality and equity for all genders in employment, politics, commerce, education and other areas of national development. HURIWA said women and other historically underrepresented groups must not be treated merely as electoral audiences during campaigns and forgotten after elections. It urged political parties and candidates to demonstrate their commitment to inclusive governance through specific policies and measurable targets.

BILLBOARDS, CAMPAIGN REGULATION AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

HURIWA also condemned what it described as attempts by some state governments to impose excessive fees on political billboards in ways that could restrict legitimate political communication. While acknowledging the authority of state governments to regulate outdoor advertising and protect public

spaces, the organization said such regulations must not be converted into instruments for suppressing political expression or denying opposition parties a fair opportunity to communicate with voters. It therefore called for reasonable, transparent and non-discriminatory charges for campaign materials.

HURIWA equally urged candidates, political parties and their supporters to respect environmental regulations throughout the campaign. Political mobilization, it said, must not become an excuse for indiscriminate dumping of campaign materials, destruction of public infrastructure, obstruction of roads or other activities capable of degrading the environment.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND NATURAL DISASTERS; HURIWA said climate change and disaster preparedness must also become major issues in the 2027 presidential debate. The organization urged candidates to explain how they intend to address flooding, erosion, drought, extreme weather events and other climate-related challenges increasingly threatening communities and livelihoods across Nigeria. It called for policies covering early-warning systems, flood control, urban planning, environmental protection, emergency response and climate-resilient infrastructure. HURIWA said the devastating consequences of natural disasters can no longer be treated merely as seasonal emergencies requiring temporary government intervention.

FOREIGN POLICY AND INVESTMENT; The rights group also challenged presidential candidates to articulate foreign policy positions capable of restoring Nigeria's influence on the African continent and strengthening its relationships with global economic partners. Candidates, it said, should explain how Nigeria would deploy diplomacy to attract Foreign Direct Investment, expand export opportunities, promote Nigerian businesses abroad and protect the interests of Nigerians living and working outside the country. HURIWA stressed that foreign policy should be connected to Nigeria's economic and development objectives rather than being treated solely as a matter of diplomatic protocol.

A CAMPAIGN OF IDEAS, NOT DIVISION

The organization said the coming campaign period provides an opportunity for Nigeria to elevate its political discourse. HURIWA therefore appealed to candidates, political parties, campaign organizations and their supporters to resist the temptation to exploit religious, ethnic and regional differences. “The Nigerian people deserve a campaign of ideas, not a campaign of hatred; a campaign of development, not a campaign of division; and a campaign of accountability, not a campaign of propaganda,” HURIWA said. The organization maintained that candidates should be prepared to subject their records and policy proposals to public scrutiny and should tell Nigerians not only what they intend to do, but how, when and with what resources they intend to do it.

HURIWA further called on the media, civil society organizations, professional bodies, religious institutions and the electorate to demand issue-based debates and hold candidates accountable for their promises. The organization said the 2027 election must ultimately be about the Nigerian people and their right to live in a secure, prosperous, democratic and rights-respecting country.

As campaigns commence, HURIWA urged Nigerians not to be carried away by political theatrics, lavish rallies or inflammatory speeches, but to carefully examine the records, competence, character and policy proposals of every candidate.