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**COVID-19 AND ELECTIONS:  
HOW SECURITY AGENCIES  
CAN ENSURE THE INTEGRITY  
OF THE ELECTORAL  
PROCESS**

ELECTORAL HUB TECHNICAL BRIEF 6/2020

**COVID-19 AND ELECTIONS:  
HOW SECURITY AGENCIES CAN ENSURE THE INTEGRITY AND  
CREDIBILITY OF THE ELECTORAL PROCESS IN NIGERIA**

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# Introduction

Electoral violence in Nigeria dates back to the colonial period, when the first general elections were conducted in 1959. Since then, every single election in Nigeria has seen violence in one form or another. This long history of electoral violence in Nigeria has led to political instability, sometimes paving the way for military coups as in 1966, 1983, and 1993. All these show that without peace and security, the essential function of elections to uphold representative democracy cannot be met.

As Ambassador Lasiende notes, “election security cannot be isolated from the general security environment and socio-economic milieu within which elections are conducted”.<sup>1</sup> When there is general insecurity, election security will be harder to maintain. In Nigeria, general security challenges have been rampant, from farmer-herder conflicts in the Northcentral, to the Boko Haram crisis and bombings in the Northeast; from conflicts regarding oil production in the South-south, to armed robbery, kidnaps and killings elsewhere. Elections, with their tendency to cause political tension as well as division among supporters of opposing candidates and parties, only exacerbate these problems further.

Some of the ways in which inadequate security might undermine elections include the following: voters might be beaten or intimidated into voting for a particular candidate; election officials might be beaten or intimidated into skewing the election results in favour of a particular candidate; ballot boxes might be snatched from election officials and stuffed with fake votes; and election observers might be beaten or intimidated into giving inaccurate reports of the election. Indeed, if voters are uncertain about the security situation at polling centres, they might be unwilling to come out and vote, and a low voter turnout will affect the legitimacy of an election. Clearly, it is impossible to have free and fair elections without adequate security. Security agencies are therefore highly crucial in ensuring the integrity and credibility of elections in Nigeria.

It is interesting to examine how COVID-19 will affect elections, as well as the capacity of security agencies to handle them. It goes without saying that elections cannot be conducted as normal in these circumstances. INEC has already issued a policy on guidelines for the conduct of elections during COVID-19, which includes arrangements for social distancing, and the provision of sanitisers, thermometers, and protective equipment.<sup>2</sup> Security agencies will therefore have to carry out their functions in unprecedented circumstances, including enforcing these health guidelines while also observing them.

The consequences of COVID-19, including the economic hardship it has brought around the country, may also affect security agencies in terms of less funding, fewer

personnel, and higher incidence of crimes during elections. It is paramount to address these problems and think of ways to solve them, to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the integrity of Nigeria's elections. In this light, this paper gives an overview of the role of security agencies in elections in Nigeria, explores the implications of COVID-19 on their role, and provides recommendations on how security agencies can ensure the integrity and credibility of elections even in the context of COVID-19.

# The Role of Security Agencies in Elections

The security agency primarily concerned with elections in Nigeria is the Nigeria Police Force. However, different aspects of elections might also involve other security agencies, including the State Security Service (also known as Department of State Services), National Intelligence Agency, National Drug Law Enforcement Agency, Nigeria Customs Service, Nigeria Immigration Service, Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, and Nigerian Prisons Service.

The main roles of these security agencies in elections are to ensure the safety of all stakeholders involved (including voters, candidates, election officials, election observers, the media, civil society organisations, and non-governmental organisations), and to ensure that the integrity of the elections is not compromised.

INEC, in its official Manual for Election Officials, elaborates on these roles further. According to the Manual, the roles of security agents on election day include:<sup>3</sup>

- a) provide security at polling stations to ensure that counting of ballots, collation, and declaration of results are conducted without disturbance;
- b) take necessary measures to prevent violence;
- c) ensure the safety and security of all election materials by escorting and guarding them;
- d) protect election officials at polling stations, especially in the course of their movement from one point to the other;
- e) arrest any person causing disturbance or preventing the smooth conduct of proceedings at polling stations;
- f) accompany the Presiding Officer to deliver the election result, ballot boxes, and other election materials safely to the ward collation centre; and
- g) accompany the Collation Officers to deliver election results to the Returning Officer.

It is worth mentioning that security agents are not election officials and as such it is unlawful for them to interfere with the collation and counting of ballots. In this line, the INEC manual states that security agents are not allowed to “interfere with polling procedures, counting of the ballots, or the collation and declaration of results”.<sup>4</sup> They are also not allowed to “handle any election material or in any way, interfere in the conduct of the polls or counting of ballots”.<sup>5</sup>

From the above, security agents are responsible for a wide range of tasks. The ACE Electoral Knowledge Network helpfully divides these roles into three main categories:

“static (e.g. protection of warehouses, polling stations and offices), mobile (e.g. protection of voter registration teams or campaign rally sites) and reserve (e.g. contingency forces to support either static or mobile forces as required)”.<sup>6</sup>

As Arowolo aptly recognises, the roles of security agents are not just limited to election day activities. Rather, they have roles to perform during three stages of the electoral process: the pre-election period, the election stage, and the post-election period.<sup>7</sup> In the pre-election period, security agencies should provide “security to candidates and their supporters during campaigns and political meetings”.<sup>8</sup> During elections, security agencies should “protect sensitive election materials, ensure the safe movement of people and materials, guarantee the safety of the voters, monitor voting stations and collation centres, and help maintain the overall integrity of the process”.<sup>9</sup> In the post-election period, security agencies should maintain “peace and security by preventing a breakdown of law as a result of violence or subversive activities”.<sup>10</sup>

Arowolo’s reference to the post-election period is particularly important because in countries like Nigeria with developing democracies, post-election violence is common, particularly with the supporters of defeated candidates. When an election leads to violence and instability, then the entire purpose of upholding democracy through elections is defeated. In this light, security agencies must not restrict their actions to the pre-election and election stages. Rather, they must also ensure that the post-election period is equally peaceful.

Ultimately, to have free, fair, and credible elections, there must be peace and security. Without these, incidents of intimidation, threats, and violence against election stakeholders will prevail. This will compromise the integrity of the elections. It is therefore paramount for security agencies to provide protection for all stakeholders involved, protect sensitive election material, and generally ensure a safe and secure atmosphere throughout the pre-election, election, and post-election periods.

# Implications of COVID-19 on the Role of Security Agencies in Elections

COVID-19 might impact the role of security agencies in elections in many ways, including increased burden, lack of preparedness, shortage of personnel, inadequate funding, and unfavourable public opinion.

## **a) Increased burden**

In some respects, COVID-19 has the potential to make the role of security agencies easier, as the number of physical campaigns will have to be reduced in favour of virtual campaigns. Social distancing measures also mean no large crowds and therefore lower likelihood of crime during campaigns.

However, the reality is that election violence is still occurring in Nigeria even with the pandemic. In fact, the economic hardship that COVID-19 has brought means that more people are likely to be induced to violently disrupt the election process in exchange for monetary benefits. The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) observes that during the election campaign in Edo state, speeches by opposing candidates seem to suggest that their supporters will be rewarded monetarily for disrupting the election process.<sup>11</sup> Given the realities of COVID-19, these and other more direct promises might induce violence and political thuggery from citizens. The divisive language of candidates has already been noted as a trigger cause for the clash between APC and PDP supporters in King Square in Edo State on 25 July.<sup>12</sup> Security agencies might therefore be faced with a higher incidence of electoral crimes that they have to curtail.

Another way in which the burden on security agencies might increase is through a drop in voter turnout. Uge Timipanipre has noted that fear of infection might make voters reluctant to come out and vote.<sup>13</sup> This might give greater room for the manipulation of results, stuffing of ballot boxes with fake votes, and intimidation or violence against election officials. This means that security agencies will have a larger task at hand in terms of maintaining security and preventing these electoral malpractices from occurring.

## **b) Lack of preparedness**

Security agencies might be prepared to safeguard elections as they have gotten used to doing in the past; however, conducting elections during a pandemic is a different situation. Security agencies will have to enforce social distancing and wearing of masks within crowds, while also observing these preventative measures themselves. This might make it increasingly difficult for them to perform their job while observing the health guidelines, to the extent that one of them might have to be sacrificed for the other.

They will have to receive training and familiarise themselves with operating in the new circumstances, so that they will be able to strike a healthy balance between performing their tasks and following the health guidelines.

### **c) Shortage of personnel**

The Nigeria Police Force has a personnel strength of about 370,000,<sup>14</sup> with plans to recruit more this year.<sup>15</sup> With a population of almost 200 million, Nigeria fails to meet the United Nations recommendation of 1 police officer per 450 people. Furthermore, there are almost 120,000 polling units across the country, and there are talks about creating more.<sup>16</sup> This translates to just about three police officers per polling unit, a ratio that has been described as “grossly inadequate”.<sup>17</sup>

Given the fact that security agencies are already occupied with pandemic-related activities such as enforcing lockdown orders/curfews and ensuring that people and businesses are following public health guidelines, this reduces the number of available personnel even further. The occurrence of COVID-19 has already shifted some focus away from the rampant security challenges facing Nigeria and is likely to further reduce the already insufficient number of personnel available for election-related activities. In fact, it has been reported that the pandemic has already made it more difficult for security agencies to deal with the Boko Haram crisis in the Northeast.<sup>18</sup> If they are unable to cope with maintaining general security due to COVID-19, then it will be even more difficult for them to cope with maintaining election security.

### **d) Inadequate funding**

The issue of inadequate funding was already a problem for security agencies before the pandemic. Although the Nigeria Police Trust Fund (Establishment) Act was signed in 2019 to address this problem, it is likely to worsen as the economy declines due to COVID-19. This is because the money for the trust fund was supposed to come from a 0.005% levy on businesses, but as businesses decline with the current state of the economy, this affects the amount that will go into the trust fund. State funding is also likely to be directed to health and relief measures as a priority. Moreover, election costs will be higher, with the need to create more polling centres to allow for social distancing, provide thermometers and sanitisers, and provide protective equipment for election officials. All of these affect the amount of funding available for security agencies to carry out their operations effectively.

In turn, when security agencies have less funds to carry out their operations, this means not only less effectiveness but also more susceptibility to accepting bribes from politicians. In interviews conducted with a representative sample of election staff, civil society, security agencies, and NGOs, it was agreed that elections in Kebbi State, Nigeria usually see the government in power conniving with security agencies to act as informants for them, overlook instances of violence and electoral malpractices, or take

other steps to skew the election in their favour.<sup>19</sup> This is a reflection of the larger bribery and corruption problem faced in Nigeria (for instance, Nigeria ranks very poorly, at 146 out of 180, on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index<sup>20</sup>). This problem is likely to worsen with COVID-19 as inadequate funds of the security agencies and the economic hardship faced by the security agents makes it easier for them to be induced by bribes.

**e) Unfavourable public opinion**

During the lockdown period in Nigeria, there were many reports of brutality and abuses of power by the security agents meant to enforce the lockdown order. The BBC reports that while enforcing the lockdown, security agents killed eighteen people, more than the total number of people who had died from the virus at that time.<sup>21</sup> This is reflective of the police brutality problem in Nigeria, where security agents sometimes abuse the power given to them and use unnecessary force on people.

Given this context of police brutality during the COVID-19 period, there is a risk that the presence of security agents will create a hostile atmosphere during elections. This may mean that voters and election officials are intimidated by the presence of the security agents. Such a hostile atmosphere is not conducive for the operation of free and fair elections. Indeed, it is antithetical to the role of security agents, who are meant to provide a safe and secure, rather than hostile, atmosphere during elections. Having an unfavourable public opinion thus affects the ability of security agents to do their job in protecting voters.

# Recommendations

The recommendations set out below should help to mitigate some of the effects of COVID-19 on security agencies' role in election, and well as address some of the problems that have faced security agencies even before the onset of the pandemic.

## Provide adequate funding

Security agencies should not be neglected when it comes to the provision of funds, as they are an integral part of the electoral process. They should be provided with sufficient funds to carry out their operations effectively and independently. Surely, with COVID-19 the level of funding available may be reduced, but this does not mean that it should be diminished completely. Prioritisation should occur and security agencies should be placed at a suitable position in terms of how much funding they should receive.

Moreover, it is not enough to just provide the funds to the agencies; steps must also be taken to ensure that staff are being paid adequately and promptly. Security agents have long complained of inadequate remuneration and, just as recently as April 2020, non-payment of salaries.<sup>22</sup> With the coronavirus-induced economic decline this problem is likely to be even more disastrous. When security agents are not adequately paid, a lot of issues arise. They will lack the motivation to do their work properly, they might channel their frustration on to the voters and election officials, and the temptation for them to take bribes from politicians will be higher. Therefore, adequate remuneration should be passed on to them just as adequate funds should be provided to the security agencies.

## Deploy adequate personnel

As Olurode and Hammanga pointed out, there are objective and subjective factors regarding the deployment of security officials for elections.<sup>23</sup> Objective factors include the volatility of the area, number of polling units, the proximity of the security agents to the units, and the size of the voting population. Subjective factors include the political interest of politicians, pecuniary benefits attached to some locations, and the risk level of a polling unit. Objective, rather than subjective, factors should be used to determine deployment. Agents should not be sent to locations where they can receive benefits or do the bidding of their preferred party. Rather, they should be sent to areas that are the most appropriate for them based on need, proximity, and size.

Admittedly, the shortage in personnel in the Nigeria Police Force raises issues that cannot be readily solved before elections take place. However, the Police Force is not the only security agency involved with elections. If necessary, staff from other security agencies like Immigration and Customs can be temporarily deployed to make up for the

shortfall (provided that adequate training is provided). This will ensure that there are enough staff to perform pandemic-related activities as well as election-related activities.

### Strengthen inter-agency collaboration

To prevent rivalry among different security agencies, it is crucial to have inter-agency collaboration. In this light, the Inter Agency Consultative Committee on Election Security (ICCES) instituted by INEC in the run-up to the 2011 elections, is a laudable achievement. It created a Code of Conduct that has helped to reduce rivalry and promote synergy across different security agencies.

The ministries, departments, and agencies that are part of the ICCES are:<sup>24</sup>

- a) The Office of the National Security Adviser;
- b) Ministry of Police Affairs;
- c) Nigeria Police Force;
- d) Police Service Commission;
- e) Ministry of Interior;
- f) Nigeria Immigration Service;
- g) Nigeria Prisons Service;
- h) Nigeria Army;
- i) Nigerian Navy;
- j) Nigeria Air force;
- k) State Security Service;
- l) National Intelligence Agency;
- m) National Drug Law Enforcement Agency;
- n) Nigeria Customs Service;
- o) Federal Road Safety Corps;
- p) Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps;
- q) Federal Fire Service; and
- r) National Youth Service Corps.

It is also important that these agencies develop their strategies well before the elections. Rather than merely reacting to incidents of violence, they should be “anticipating and pre-empting security risks, mitigating their impact or probability of occurrence”.<sup>25</sup> Of course, this does not mean that the strategies will not be subject to change. Circumstances can change quickly during the election period, and security agencies will need to be able to respond to them. The important thing is to have pre-planned strategies in place that can be used as guides, which can then be adapted to suit the circumstances on ground. In order to facilitate even further inter-agency collaboration including the adoption of strategies across agencies, the ICCES should be strengthened.

## Provide intensive training

Training of security agents involved in elections spans across different areas. Firstly, security agents should be trained specifically on promoting security at elections. Maintaining electoral security is not exactly the same as maintaining general security. One of the recommendations of the Justice Uwais Election Reform Committee in 2008 was that the training of security agents involved in elections should include political education.<sup>26</sup> They should be aware of Nigeria's electoral laws, INEC's policy on the role of security agents during elections, what to expect on election day, who to report to and take instructions from (usually the presiding officer), and so on. They should also be trained on the required qualities for maintaining electoral security, including approachability, neutrality, and impartiality. The aim of security agents during elections is to protect the people and election materials. They must be approachable in order for them to be able to respond to complaints of violence or threats. They must also be neutral and impartial for them to provide a secure environment without accusation of partisanship.

Secondly, security agents should be trained on the level of appropriate force to use, in line with the United Nations guidelines on the use of force and firearms.<sup>27</sup> The kind of brutality that was used to enforce the lockdown is unwarranted. Even when enforcing social distancing and wearing of masks at polling centres, security agents should make sure that force is not used unless there is a risk of danger involved.

Finally, security agents should be given specific COVID-19 training. They should be taught how to do their jobs effectively during the pandemic without breaking public health guidelines and endangering themselves or others. This will require not just security or election experts, but also health experts. When these forms of training are adopted, the quality of security agents will be higher, which is likely to translate to higher efficiency and thus safer elections.

## Promote a culture of transparency and accountability

It is crucial that the security agencies in a country have public trust and confidence. Unfortunately, in Nigeria this is rarely the case as security agencies are seen as corrupt and partisan, only there to favour their preferred politicians or party. To change this narrative, the public must be informed of the strategies and actions of security agencies regarding elections. Saviour Akpan recommends adopting democratic policing, which "relies upon active partnership between the citizens (community) and the Police", and ensures that "the Security Agencies view their primary role as the provision of quality service to the community".<sup>28</sup> The people should not see security agents as hostile agents meant to induce fear and intimidation; rather they should see them as protectors and providers of security. Instead of being hostile and unfriendly, security agents should be approachable and accessible, ready to provide assistance in whatever way necessary.

Force should be used only if necessary, and even then, the amount of force used should be proportional to the issue at hand.

Similarly, offenders should be held accountable for their actions. As Igini argues, “the greatest challenge of security during elections has been paucity of enforcement”.<sup>29</sup> Despite the well-known incidents of violence and malpractices in elections, the conviction rate is low. This makes candidates and their supporters feel that they can disrupt elections with impunity. In order to prevent these events from recurring, these agencies must be proactive in sanctioning thugs and offenders.

Accountability is not only limited to parties and candidates; even the security agents must be held to account. Ironically, security agents are sometimes the perpetrators of electoral violence in Nigeria. For instance, Human Rights Watch reported that the post-election violence in 2019 was partly caused by soldiers and police officers.<sup>30</sup> Security agents were involved in acts such as indiscriminate shootings, intimidation and unlawful arrest of both voters and election officials, and blatant lack of response to incidents of violence by political thugs.<sup>31</sup> Over 600 people were killed during the 2019 election cycle (including the pre-election, election, and post-election periods), according to SBM Intelligence.<sup>32</sup>

All these actions should not be allowed to occur without consequences. When members of the public make complaints, investigations should be made by the relevant bodies, such as the Police Service Commission, Public Complaints Commission, the Code of Conduct Bureau, and SERVICOM. If any officer is found wanting, they should be punished. Only then can we have security agents who are accountable to the public and trusted by them.

### Promote independence, autonomy, and non-partisanship

Security agencies must be independent, autonomous, and non-partisan. They should treat all parties, voters, and candidates equally. According to Ambassador Laseinde, one of the reasons for electoral violence in Nigeria is the “perception by the public of efforts by security agencies to favour one group of politicians against the other”.<sup>33</sup> Both the reality and the perception of partisanship must be changed in order for security agencies to be able to perform their roles effectively.

Security agencies must also have operational autonomy and independence. Politicians or parties should not be able to influence their internal operations, such as the deployment of security agents to specific polling stations. Only when security agencies are independent, autonomous, and non-partisan will they be able to provide the security that is much needed in Nigerian elections.

## Collaborate with the media

As noted above, there is a widespread perception that security agencies are biased towards certain parties. Even when the security agencies are trying to do their jobs impartially, if the public do not trust them, their efforts will be diminished. Furthermore, elections might see disinformation campaigns being used to destroy the credibility of security agencies. Therefore, it is important to collaborate with the media to promote an information campaign that will increase voters' trust and confidence in the electoral process. This is particularly important as police brutality during lockdown enforcement has further turned public opinion away from security agencies. People need to understand why security agents are present at elections – it is not to act as thugs for certain candidates; rather it is to impartially ensure the security of all voters, candidates, election officials, and election materials. If people do not understand the reason for the presence of security agents at elections, it might induce fear and thus prevent them from coming out to vote. This will affect voter turnout and, in turn, the legitimacy of the elected government.

In addition, the information campaign should also include awareness raising on the disadvantages of electoral violence and how to prevent it. The messages should “reinforce positive democratic practices” and curb “deviant democratic behaviours”.<sup>34</sup> People should be made to understand the importance of having peaceful and credible elections. If security agencies collaborate with the media to sensitise the public in such a way, then it is likely to reduce the incidence of electoral crimes.

# Conclusion

Given the rampant security challenges in Nigeria, security agencies face a huge task in maintaining election security. COVID-19 further complicates this by increasing the burden on these agencies and affecting the level of funding and personnel available for election-related activities. In order to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and promote the integrity of elections, it is recommended that adequate funding should be provided to security agencies; adequate personnel should be deployed for election activities; inter-agency collaboration should be promoted; security agents should be trained effectively; a culture of transparency and accountability should be promoted; the independence, autonomy and non-partisanship of security agencies should be promoted; and security agencies should collaborate with the media to promote a positive information campaign. These steps should make it easier for security agencies to adequately perform their roles in safeguarding voters, candidates, election officials, election observers, and the entire electoral process. In turn, they will be better equipped to ensure the integrity and security of elections in Nigeria, even with the pandemic.

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<sup>2</sup> Policy on Conducting Elections in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic 01/2020, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), 21 May 2020 <<https://www.inecnigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/INEC-POLICY-ON-CONDUCTING-ELECTIONS-IN-COVID19.pdf>>

<sup>3</sup> *Manual for Election Officials 2020* (COVID 19 Edition), INEC, pages 9-10. Kas Arts Service Ltd: Abuja

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, page 10

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Focus on Elections and Security, ACE Electoral Knowledge Network <<http://aceproject.org/ace-en/focus/elections-and-security/onePage>>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

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<sup>11</sup> *New Allegiances, Familiar Faces: A Preview of Edo’s 2020 Gubernatorial Election*, Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) Pre-Election Briefing Paper (August 2020) pages 15-16

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<sup>13</sup> Uge Timipanipre, “Electoral Assessment of COVID-19 in Nigeria”, Kimpact Development Initiative (11 May 2019) <<https://www.kdi.org.ng/electoral-assessment-of-covid-19-in-nigeria/>>

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**INITIATIVE FOR RESEARCH,  
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### **About the Electoral Hub**

The Electoral Hub (E-Hub), an organ of the Initiative for Research, Innovation and Advocacy in Development (**IRIAD**), is a multidisciplinary strategic think-tank which seeks to provide solutions to improve the credibility and integrity of the electoral process. It is conceptualized to complement the roles and activities of the different institutions, stakeholders and drivers of the electoral process and governance. The Electoral Hub's aim is to strengthen electoral governance and accountability in Nigeria through the provision of data and critical analysis supporting the credibility and integrity of the electoral process. We believe that the integrity of the electoral process is crucial in improving the electoral governance architecture and democracy in Nigeria. We also believe in contextual analysis for solutions rooted in the principles of justice and equity

Our core values are knowledge-exchange, inclusion, justice, equity, transparency and accountability.

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