

Report of Pre-Election Assessment of the 2023 Bayelsa State Governorship Election



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of the
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study interrogates the socio-political context of the 2023 Governorship elections in Bayelsa State. The analysis notes several factors that could impact the election such as the difficult geographical terrain of the state and the challenges it poses to the conduct of elections. The swampy and riverine environment constrains the work of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and security operatives. Boats, the only means of transportation are in short supply due to inadequate numbers to meet the huge number of travelers during elections, and sabotage by politicians who hire them to create shortages and force INEC to depend on them for transportation logistics. Such a shortage could hamper the quick and effective distribution of staff and electoral materials; and make the deployment of security personnel and access to communities difficult. The long travel hours on water and insecurity in the waterways on account of sea piracy exacerbates the security concerns pertaining to the conduct of elections. This partly explains the high rate of electoral malpractices as indicated by the very high figures turned out in past elections as votes cast in areas where these malpractices occur.

In addition to violence, the study highlights political campaigns and the associated hate speeches and intemperate utterances, a high rate of cultism and drug abuse, community conflicts, and the continuing relevance of ex-militant leaders and supporters as the dossiers of potential conflict that require attention.

Other factors identified as potential challenges to the election include poor political education; possible failure of Bi-Modal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) machines; possible attacks on BVAS machines, the commoditisation of the electoral process and associated compromise of electoral officials and manipulation of election outcomes; difficulty in transporting election materials and staff; and the unprofessional conduct of security personnel on election duty.

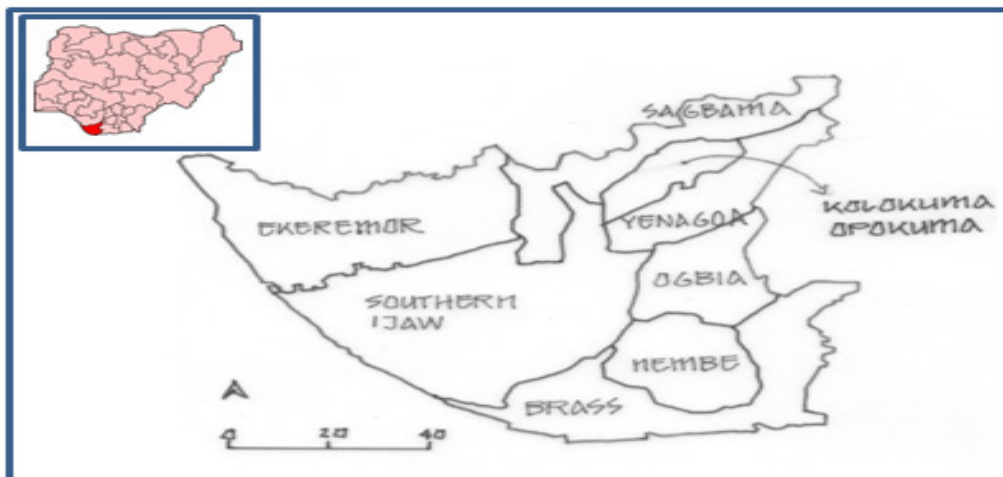
Possible flashpoints for violence are also identified for attention. Based on findings from this study, recommendations include improved political education, the use of government security personnel to transport election staff and materials, monitoring of the electoral process by non-partisan community volunteers (religious leaders, etc), and ensuring adherence to the provisions of the Electoral Act on transmission of results and collation, among others.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Election studies have become important due to the key role elections play in democratic governance. Essentially, such studies seek to examine elections and voting behavior, with a view to gaining better understanding of the political system in the context of democratic practice. This study is located in this context, and seeks to understand the socio-political context of electoral process in Bayelsa State.

Bayelsa State is made up of eight local government council areas (Brass, Ekeremor, Yenagoa, Sagbama, Southern-Ijaw, Kolokuma/Opokuma, Ogbia, and Nembe) and over 400 communities. It is made of twenty clans, namely; Apoi, Basan, Olodiana, Oporoma, Ogboin, Tungbo, Kolokuma, Opokuma, Gbarain, Zarama, Okordia, Biseni, Ekpetiama, Tarakiri, Boma, Akassa, Nembe, Epie, Atissa, and Oruma. Although the people speak the Ijaw language, there are dialectical differences and these have become a basis for identity politics and competition.

Figure 1: Map of Bayelsa State showing the eight LGAs



Source: *Brisibe and Pepple, 2018, 173*

Bayelsa State was created on October 1, 1996, out of the old Rivers State and was governed by Military Administrators until May 29, 1999. The State has witnessed Governorship elections in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2015 and 2019. Each of these election cycles, some of which held alongside elections for legislators at the state and national parliaments, and presidential elections have been characterized

by divisions, violence, fraud, etc. The State is scheduled for another governorship election on November 11, 2023, which like the 2011, 2015, and 2019 elections is an off-cycle election; instigated by litigations on propriety of tenure elongation in 2011.

A former Governor of the State, Timipre Sylva who was elected in 2007 had his elections annulled, and a fresh one conducted in 2008. Counting from the date he was sworn in 2008, he had expected his tenure to end in 2012. However, litigations by opponents within and outside his then political party, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) led to a recent landmark judgment by the Supreme Court of Nigeria, which counted his tenure from the date of the first oath he took in 2007. This disrupted the normal governorship election cycle and also resulted in new political alignments in the State. Being unable to secure the PDP ticket for the 2011 Governorship election, Sylva later pitched his tent with the All-Progressives Congress (APC); denting the dominance of the PDP in the state, and returning the political contestations to the pattern in 1999 to mid-2003 where the All-Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP) contested power with the PDP.

The 2023 Governorship election will be holding 8 months after the 2023 general elections which came with twists and turns in the fortunes of the APC in Bayelsa State, which lost all seats in the National Assembly. This along with the candidacy of former Governor Timipre Sylva has raised the stakes for the elections. This study interrogates the socio-political context of upcoming governorship elections with the following specific objectives:

1. Identify the flash points and areas of high-security risk and history of election violence;
2. Analyse topographical landscapes of the State including flooding;
3. Develop a well-articulated assessment of the context before the election and possible areas of concern during and after the election;
4. Assess INEC's preparations
5. Identify issues arising from the 2019 Governorship election, as well as the 2023 General elections conducted in the State, and how this can impact the November 11, 2023 Governorship election

The overall objective is to provide information to stakeholders with a view to improving the conduct of the election.

2.0 ELECTORAL MAP AND POLITIMETRICS OF BAYELSA STATE

(A) THE GEOGRAPHY AND TOPOGRAPHY

Bayelsa State is in the heart of the Niger Delta and is located within latitudes 4° 15' North and 5° 23' South and longitudes 5° 22' West and 6° 45' East. The State is criss-crossed by several lakes, rivers, and creeks, such as Santa Babara, St. Batholomew, Nun River, and Epie Creek. The water bodies and swamps constitute about 75 percent of its land mass of 11,109 square metres. The state lies below sea level, and occupies 203 kilometers of the longest coastline in Nigeria; making it the longest. Rainfall is also very heavy and it is characterised by annual seasonal floods. The topography has a number of implications for development and elections:

- The topography makes development expensive and partly explains the lack of road and communications infrastructure.
- Poor infrastructure associated with the topography makes transportation difficult and this impacts negatively on the effective deployment of electoral materials, election staff and security personnel.
- The topography makes it prone to flood as evidenced by the 2022 flood where nearly all areas of the State were taken over by flood waters.
- Poor and ineffective communication makes rural, and particularly swamp/riverine communities prone to or vulnerable to electoral fraud due to poor access by election observers and security operatives. This partly explains the huge votes that purportedly come in from those areas until the 2023 elections where the BVAS reduced the numbers. Significantly, these areas constitute about 75 percent of voting areas.
- The difficult terrain also adds to the logistics challenges faced by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Boats for marine transportation are usually not enough due to the high volume of persons who usually travel to their communities to vote. As part of mobilization, politicians hire several boats for registered voters, leaving a limited number of boats for INEC. To win elections, politicians deliberately create transportation difficulty by paying off boat drivers and owners to take their boats out of circulation. This is one reason for the late

deployment and arrival of INEC staff on election day.

(B) POLITICAL CONSTITUENCIES

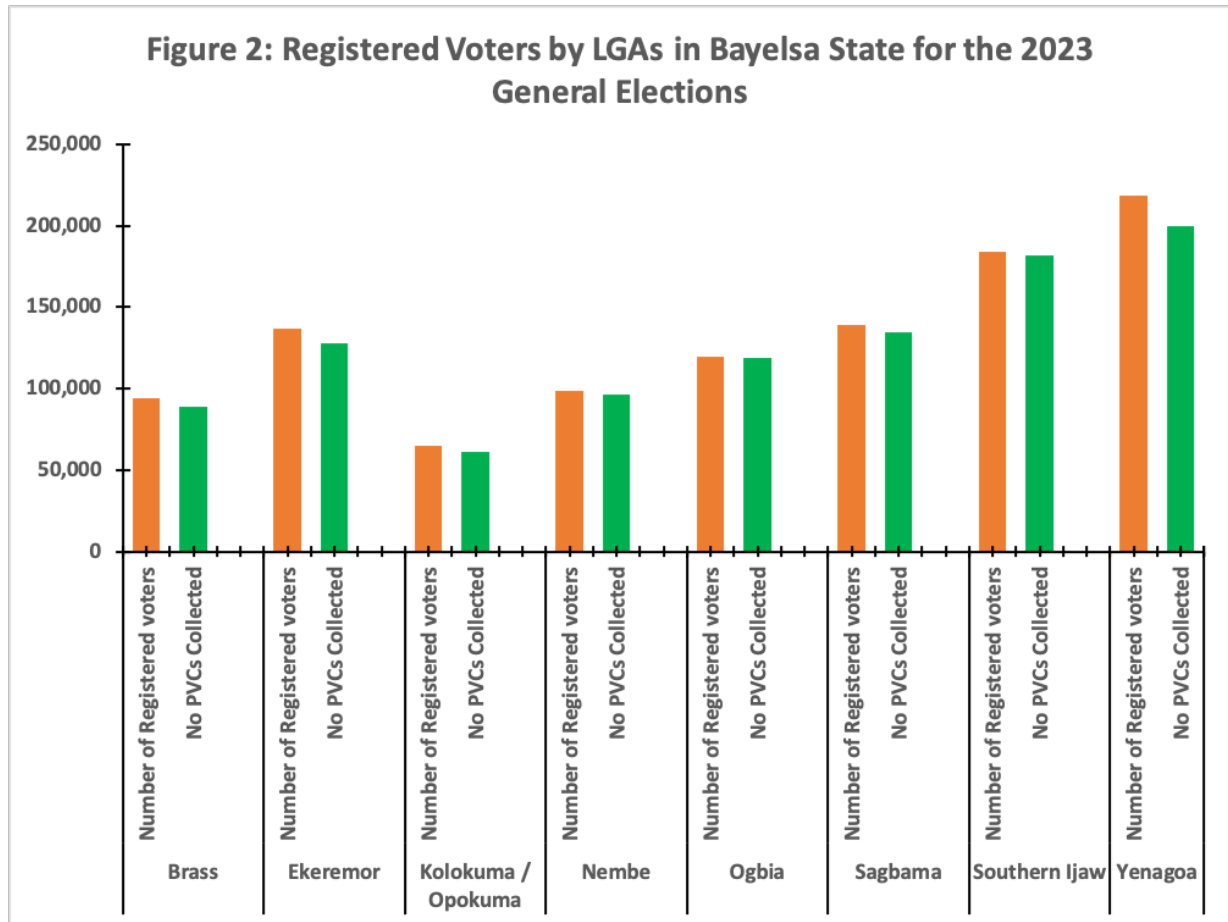
The State is divided into three senatorial districts, five federal constituencies, 24 State constituencies, and 105 electoral wards as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Political Constituencies

Senatorial Districts	Federal Constituencies	LGAs	Number of State Constituencies	Number of Electoral Wards
Bayelsa Central	Yenagoa	Kolokuma/ Opokuma	2	11
		Yenagoa	3	15
	Southern Ijaw	Southern Ijaw	4	17
Bayelsa East	Brass/ Nembe	Brass	3	10
		Nembe	3	13
	Ogbia	Ogbia	3	13
Bayelsa West	Sagbama/ Ekeremor	Sagbama	3	14
		Ekeremo	3	12
TOTAL			24	105

The number of electoral wards, registered voters and geographical terrain gives strength to each of the three senatorial districts; subsequently, political parties struggle for dominance in those areas. Bayelsa Central has a total of 43 wards, Bayelsa East, has 36 wards, while Bayelsa West has 26 wards. The Central and East senatorial zones, in addition to Ekeremor LGA in the West Senatorial zone, are usually the hotbed of vote chasing, and most often the flash points of violence.

(C) REGISTERED VOTERS AND STRONGHOLD OF POLITICAL PARTIES



Source: Adapted from INEC, 2023

The total number of registered voters for the 2023 general elections stood at 1,056,862, out of which 1,009,895, representing 95.6 percent who have collected their PVCs. Yenagoa Local Government recorded the highest number of registered voters and also the highest number of registrants who collected their PVCs. The details for the registered number of voters by ranking is Yenagoa Local Government Area (218,394); Southern Ijaw Local Government Area (184,401); Sabgama Local Government (138,832); Ekeremor Local Government Area (137,225); Ogbia Local Government Area (119,571); Nembe Local Government Area (99,035); Brass Local Government Area (99,035); and Kolokuma/Opokuma Local Government Area (65,364). The collection of PVCs follows the same ranking with Yenagoa as the highest and Kolokuma/Opokuma with the least. The distribution of registered voters across the local government areas raises some fine notes.

- Yenagoa Local Government Area has the highest number of voters, but also has a high number of non-indigenes who only show passing interests in local elections; except there is voter inducement or inducement and/or patronage of leadership of ethnic associations.
- The two leading governorship candidates are from the LGAs with the least number numbers of registered voters. The incumbent Governor (Senator Douye Diri) and candidate of the PDP hails from the Kolokuma/Opokuma LGA and has 65,364 registered voters; while the candidate of the APC, Chief Timipre Sylva hails from Brass LGA with 94,040 registered voters. This suggests that two candidates have to scramble for votes outside their LGAs which going by the culture of Nigerian politics should be their stronghold. However, the PDP candidate has the advantage of incumbency, in addition to having the PDP representing the federal constituency covering the LGA of the APC candidate. Similarly, the Speaker of the State House of Assembly is also from the Brass LGA. There is a strong push by the PDP to win the Brass LGA, a move the APC is strategizing to counter. This suggests that the electoral environment would be tense, and thus calls for adequate attention by stakeholders

Figure 3 provides a graphic representation of the battlegrounds for voter mobilisation and vote capturing based on PVC collection, while Figure four highlights the LGAs with the highest number of polling points that would be attractive to the politics of winning votes.

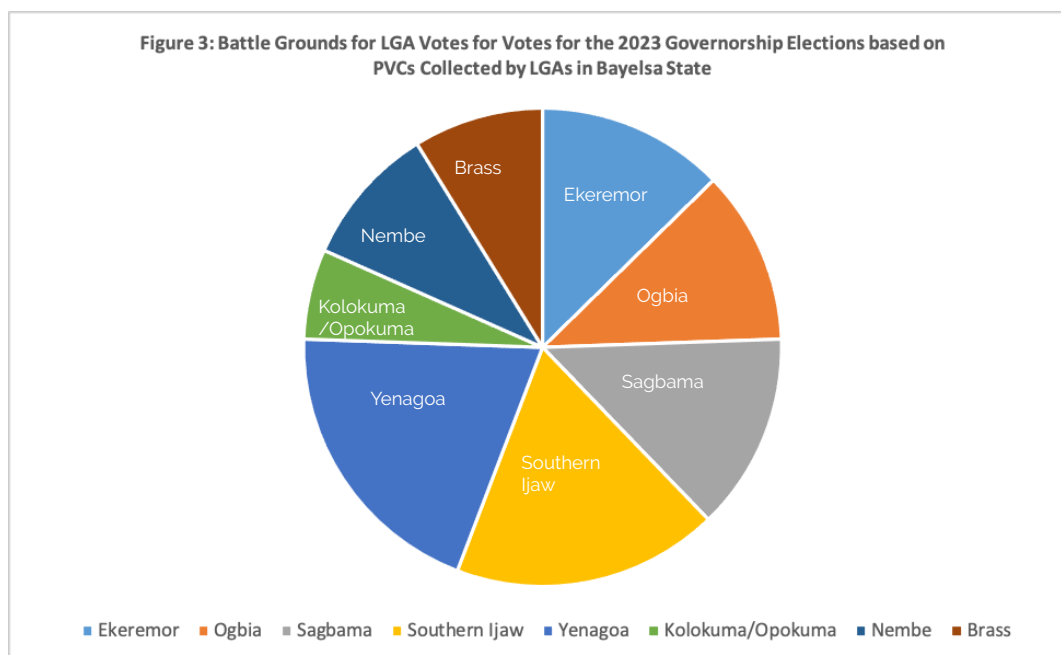


Figure 4: Distribution of Polling Units by LGAs

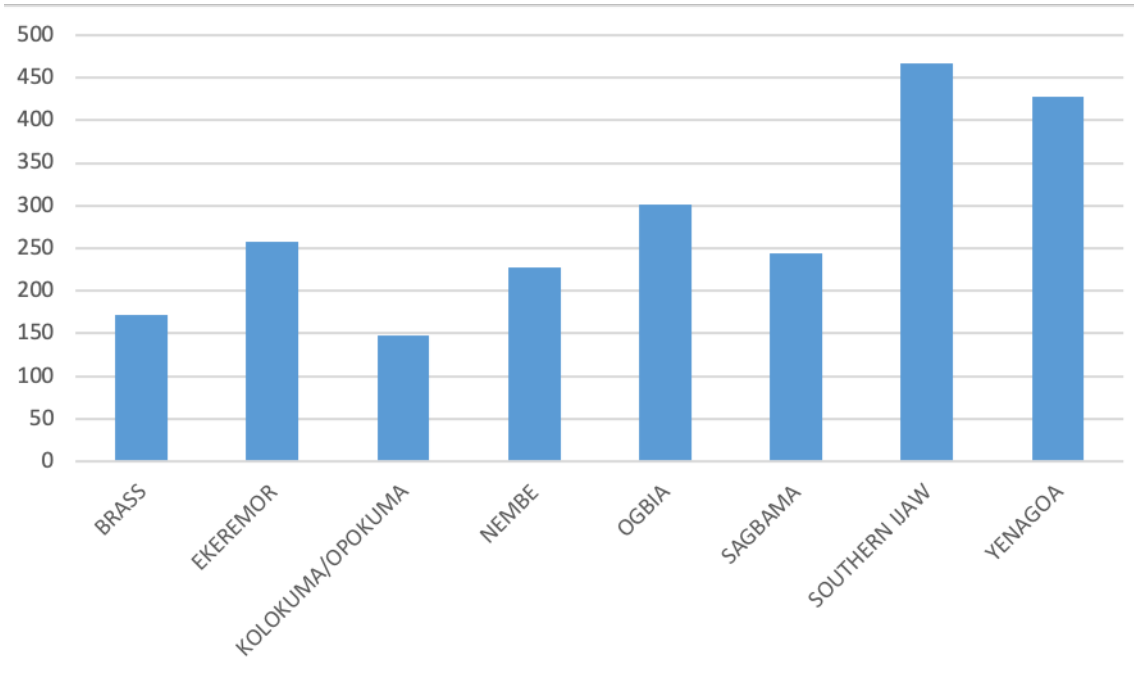
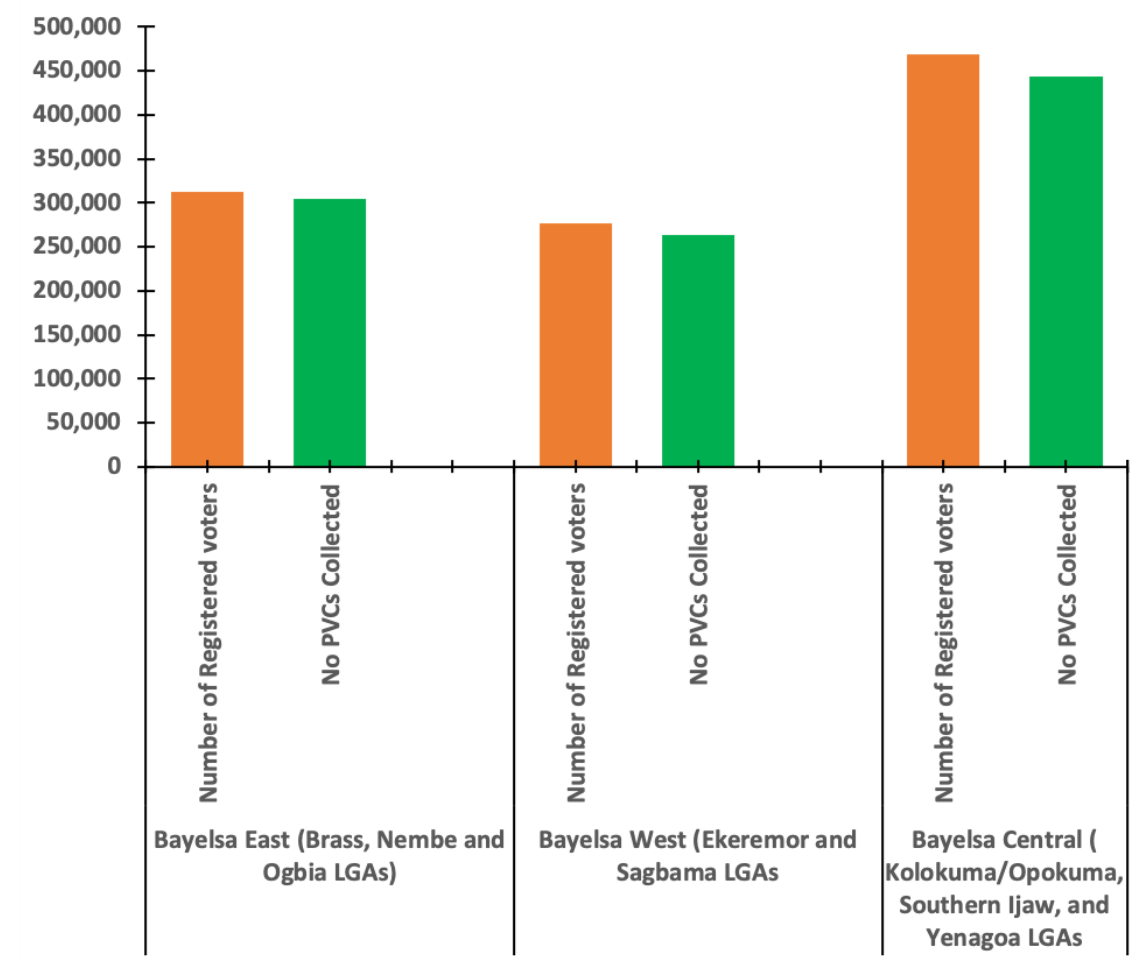
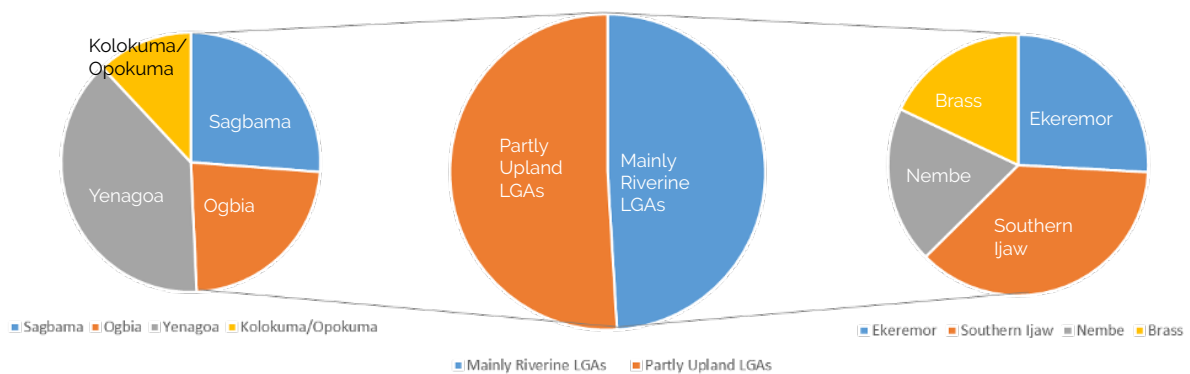


Figure 5: Registered Voters by Senatorial Districts in Bayelsa State for the 2023 General Elections



The distribution of registered voters by senatorial districts shows that Bayelsa Central Senatorial District has the highest number of votes with 468,159, while the East Senatorial District has a total of 312,646 registered voters. The least is Bayelsa West Senatorial District which has a total of 262,850 registered voters. The PDP candidate is from the Central Senatorial District, while that of the APC is from the East Senatorial District. Again, this suggests the trend of voter mobilisation, to gain the advantage of the highest number of votes and the spread of votes. In addition to factors such as ethnicity; sentiments of zoning and tenure; commoditisation of violence, votes and support by political elites, the swampy and riverine terrain is also a crucial determinant of election victory. For this reason, an understanding of the distribution of votes across the riverine LGAs is important. See Figure 5.

Figure 4: Battle Grounds for Rural/Riverine LGA Votes for the 2023 Governorship Elections based on PVCs Collected



The mainly riverine LGAs of Ekeremor, Southern Ijaw, Nembe, and Brass have a combined voter register strength of 495,354, or 49.1 percent of total registered voters. The others, partly upland, have a total of 514,540 or 50.1 percent of the total registered votes. This gives an indication of the LGAs to watch out for logistics challenges in INEC deployment of staff and materials, hijacking of election materials and probably staff, and other acts of impropriety such as destruction of election materials (in particular the BVAS) into the waters, as part of attempts to destroy evidence for electoral litigation and threats of drowning to electoral officials and political party agents.

3.0 THE 2019 GOVERNORSHIP ELECTION

(A) REFLECTIONS

The 2019 Governorship election in the State was a significant break from the past. The PDP had dominated the political space in the State since 1999, until the 2019 general elections, and the governorship election later that year. The 1999 Governorship election contest was between the PDP represented by D.S.P Alamiyeseigha and the All People's Party (APP) which had Francis Doukpolagha as its flag bearer. While the PDP won the keenly contested Governorship election, it shared the seats in the 24-member State House of Assembly with the other parties. However, by the 2003 elections, the PDP became the only Party with members in the House as members from the other political parties defected to the PDP. In 2003, the governorship election was again contested by D.S.P Alamiyeseigha of the PDP and Francis Doukpolagha of the APP. Again, the PDP candidate won, but unlike in 1999, the margin was very wide. This time, the APP won no legislative seat into the State House of Assembly. By 2007, the APP had fizzled out and its candidate for the previous elections, Francis Doukpolagha, had decamped to the PDP. The 2007 Gubernatorial election had the PDP candidate Timipre Sylva and Ebitimi Amgbare of the Action Congress (AC), now the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) as the major contenders. The PDP won the elections, but a re-run election was ordered by the Appeal Court in May 2008 following a judgment in favour of the AC candidate who had challenged the 2007 elections on grounds of electoral fraud. In the 2007 elections into the State House of Assembly, the PDP won all the 24 seats, but later lost one following the nullification of the victory of the PDP candidate representing Ekeremor State Constituency III.

The 2003 governorship election created two deep political divisions – the camp led by the then Governor, D.S.P Alamiyeseigha and the Timi Alaibe camp. Both drew their strength from armed thugs and party leaders of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in Abuja. Intrigues, blackmail, and threats were the instruments of political contest. At the end, the Alamiyeseigha camp won. A “no peace, no war” situation emerged, as attempts at reconciliation were not deep rooted.

For the 2011 general elections, a Governorship election was not held in the State on grounds that the tenure of the incumbent who won re-election in the 2008 court

ordered re-run election has not ended. Thus, elections were only conducted for the three senatorial seats, five federal constituencies and 24 state constituencies. A total of 10 political parties and 20 candidates contested the senatorial elections, while 14 political parties and 32 candidates contested for the House of Representative elections. Out of this number of candidates, only one woman contested the senatorial elections under the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), while three women, each representing All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP), ACN, and one other party, contested the federal constituency elections. A Governorship election was later held in the State after the Supreme Court ruled that it was wrong to extend the tenure of former Governor Timipre Sylva on ground that the first oath of office supersedes the one he took after the re-run election. The PDP won the election and Seriake Dickson governed the State till 2020.

In December 2015, elections were held to the office of Governor. The elections which held on December 5 and 15, 2015, and later January 9, 2016, brought to the fore, the deep-seated political rivalries in the State. It vindicated claims that ex-militants were not fully demobilised. The violence which ravaged the State during the election reactivated dormant community conflicts in Brass, Nembe, Ekeremor, and Southern Ijaw Local Government Areas

(B) THE CHANGING SCENARIO AND THE 2019 GOVERNORSHIP ELECTION

Since 2015, the APC had become an alternate party in the State. Based on existential realities- harsh economic and civil service reform policies of the then PDP government headed by now Senator Seriake Dickson, political and personality rivalry among the political class which resulted in massive defections from the PDP into the APC, the APC became very prominent. Subsequently, it won one Senatorial seat and two House of Representatives seats. In the end the APC won the 2019 Governorship election, but this was later overturned on account of disqualification of the running mate to the Governorship candidate, Biobarakuma Degi-Eremienyo.

The 2019 Governorship elections had all the characteristics of Bayelsa elections such as late arrival of materials, violence, late arrival of INEC staff, collusion between the electorate and party officials to manipulate the process, voter inducement, security breaches, breach of INEC Guidelines and Regulations, falsification of results,

compromised civil society organisations (CSOs) who had interventions inconsistent with best electoral practices, interventions by ex-militants that undermined best electoral practices, among others. The integrity of the process was undermined, but paradoxically, this was overlooked by the majority of citizens because the outcome was generally accepted by people who wanted the PDP out of government. The APC won the election but this was later overturned as the Supreme Court disqualified the APC Deputy governorship candidate on grounds of name-related discrepancies in his credentials and other documents.

(C) LESSONS LEARNED

The processes and outcome of the 2019 Governorship election throw up a number of lessons to guide future conduct. These are noted below

- Election outcomes will be accepted by citizens if it coincides with their interest irrespective of the integrity of the process. This suggests low political consciousness among the electorate and thus raises a need for action
- The commoditisation of violence in the State, wherein violence is a commodity that is bought and sold is a fundamental threat to elections in the State.
- There were several instances of voters rejecting inducements from PDP agents, having made up their minds to vote out the government; meaning that with adequate political education and by extension consciousness, vote buying can be reduced.
- Compromises by INEC officials and security personnel remain a sore point in our pursuit of electoral integrity.
- Efficient and effective deployment of electoral materials is a function of citizens with positive sum values (patriotic values). Given the terrain of Bayelsa State, structural and security arrangements can hardly work without the buy-in of the citizens
- Ex-militants or freedom fighters are now entrenched in the politics of the State, and therefore, they need to be mobilised to pursue electoral integrity
- Vote selling and buying is still highly prevalent in rural communities

The defeat of the incumbent PDP party by the APC candidate vindicates the point that with adequate mobilization of citizens, and with the right candidate, an incumbent party can be defeated. Chief David Lyon, the candidate of the APC for the 2019 election was widely known for his philanthropy, and this along with support from ex-militant leaders, high profile protest defections by top members of the PDP, and the objective realities of hardship and discontent created by the then PDP government, on account of public sector reform and taxation policies pitched the government against citizens who seriously desired its ouster. The APC cashed on this objective reality in its mobilisation, and subsequently got a victory that later became ill fated.

4.0 THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The 2023 general elections in the State were limited to elections for members of the State and federal legislative Houses, given that the governorship election is scheduled for a later date, November 11, 2023 as one of the off-cycle governorship elections in the country. The electoral process was faced with the usual challenges of violence, snatching of electoral materials, and voter inducement, among several others. However, the outcome of the 2023 general elections has significant high points that have implications for the upcoming November 11, 2023 governorship elections. The introduction and use of the BVAS significantly reduced the huge votes that are usually turned out in Bayelsa elections; particularly from the riverine communities. For example, in 2019, the APC won the Brass-Nembe constituency with 41,159 votes, while PDP, the closest rival scored 19,279. But for 2023, the PDP won the same constituency with 11,145 votes. The APC candidate scored 6,755 votes. Such outcomes were widespread in the State. The APC lost the one Senatorial seat and two House of Representatives seats it won in the 2019 elections; meaning that all Bayelsa State representatives in the National Assembly are of the PDP, while the APC has none.

The outcomes of the 2023 state and national legislative elections noted above have some implications for the 2023 governorship election.

- The outcomes deepen the PDP's entrenchment in the State, along with being the ruling party in the State, gives it advantage. This however means that the contest will be fierce and intense; thus, raising the stakes for violence and manipulations of the electoral process and security personnel.
- The low number of votes recorded on account of the use of BVAS will most likely make the BVAS machine an object of attack, violence, and manipulation.

Lessons Learned

- Effective use of BVAS and adherence to electoral guidelines will strengthen electoral integrity and thus ensure that the phenomenon of holding elections without voting or votes not counting, is addressed.
- Electoral fraud is a deep culture among politicians and thus needs to be addressed. This needs a change in attitude driven by strict enforcement of electoral offences laws and judicial interventions that would make individuals whose elections were overturned on account of fraud to refund all financial benefits received while in office.
- The geographical terrain which makes transportation and communication difficult is a fundamental issue that needs to be addressed. Significantly, this is a development issue that needs to be given top priority.

5.0 THE 2023 GOVERNORSHIP ELECTIONS

(A) THE BACKGROUND

i. Party Primaries

Party primaries for this year's Governorship elections were less rancorous in the State, compared to previous seasons. The PDP had the incumbent governor and candidate of the party, Senator Douye Diri as the sole candidate; and there were no contestations. For the APC, it had six aspirants, including the party's candidate for the 2019 Governorship elections. Chief Timpre Sylva won the primaries, which was disputed by the other contestants. The 2023 Governorship elections had three prominent candidates, namely; Governor Douye Diri of the PDP, Chief Timpre Sylva of the APC, and Engineer Udengbofa Eradiri of the LP. Whereas the LP candidate is considered to be the underdog, it is unlikely that he will cause some disruptions in voting patterns with his youth following and support. However, the candidate of APC who would have given PDP a tough challenge has been disqualified by a Federal High Court on account of a potential breach of Section 182 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) on the event that he wins the election. The candidate has however appealed the judgment.

ii. Campaigns

The campaigns have been relatively peaceful thus far. Cases of violence such as attacks on rival party members, destruction of bill boards and other campaign materials have not been reported. However, the perennial intra-communal conflicts in Nembe Basambiri have erupted once more, and the APC and PDP have accused each other of stoking the conflicts. Hate speeches, intemperate utterances, mudslinging, and name calling are common place. The campaigns are not issue based as they are characterised by singing and dancing, and issuance of "promissory notes" by candidates who simply roll out what they will do if they win. While the APC and Labour party candidates are campaigning with a vague six point and four-point agenda respectively, the PDP is campaigning on its prosperity agenda. However, none of their campaign programmes has passed the test of scrutiny by CSOs and

academics as they lack clearly defined strategies to achieve the intended goals.

The political environment is now characterised by defections and counter-defections. Presently, there are no high-profile public defections as the new approach appears to be the use of surrogate defectors. Although defections have occurred across party lines, from APC to PDP and vice versa, they are yet to shake the foundations of any of the parties. However, low level political appointees in the PDP government, such as Special Assistants, Senior Special Assistants and Technical Advisers have crossed over to the APC. Also, some close allies of the APC candidate, such as his former Deputy Governor, Chief Werinepre Seibarugu has defected to the PDP. Significantly, very high-profile politicians are remoured to be working with candidates of opposing parties. There is an emerging pattern of “pay me to support you while I remain where I am”. At the moment, the direction of defections is not clear, but the experience of other years suggests that significant defections may occur a week or just days before the election date. This happened in 2019, and it was a game-changer for the APC.

Also, emerging is endorsements and counter-endorsements, that tend to be divisive. Divergent views have been expressed with respect to the States Elders Council and Founding Fathers Associations' endorsement of the PDP candidate. Similarly, the leadership of non-indigene associations are also engaged in conflicting endorsement of candidates. The widespread view is that these endorsements were bought, and although the sitting government and the PDP has denied this claim, there is evidence of commoditisation of support as shown by the multiple political appointments to both indigenes and non-indigenes and unusual financial support and donations to market groups, ethnic associations, artists, bereaved families, among others. The APC is also posturing itself as 'party of the centre' with support of the centre; this is causing ripples in the PDP.

iii. Litigations

The only post-primary election litigation experienced in the State was instituted against the APC candidate, Timipre Sylva by an individual whose name did not feature as an aspirant for the party's primary elections. Significantly, the petitioner, Demesuoyefa Kolomo who is a member of APC, asked the court to disqualify the candidate from the election, with the apparent objective of denying the party the

opportunity to compete in the election. The widespread view is that the APC sees it as a PDP-sponsored litigation. The grounds of the case are that the APC candidate has been sworn in twice, and therefore, he is not qualified to run for the election. The Federal High Court in Abuja upheld the petition and disqualified Chief Timipre Sylva; suggesting that he will spend more than eight years in office if he wins. APC members argue that a court only adjudicates on what has happened and is before it, and not what it contemplates or thinks will happen; deepening suspicion that the judiciary has again been compromised. The APC has appealed the judgment and admonished its members to be calm while the PDP is making gains out of it, telling voters that the APC has no candidate. INEC has gone ahead to comply with the order of the court to remove the name of the APC candidate from the list of candidates for the 2023 Bayelsa Governorship election.

The judgment has not impacted significantly on the APC campaigns; although the party postponed its campaign flag-off ceremony scheduled for October 14, 2023, citing the need for efficient preparations. It may not be unconnected with the judgment and the yet-to-be-secured stay of execution it has applied for. However, community and LGA-based campaigns are vigorously going on with party enthusiasts and sympathisers in high spirits. This may be for three reasons. First, it is common knowledge in Bayelsa State that the second oath Chief Timipre Sylva took was annulled by the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court annulled the first election in 2007, suggesting that the oath of office that accompanied it was also canceled. However, the same court in a judgment in another case upheld the first oath and sacked Chief Timipre Sylva from office in 2011; thus, ignoring the second oath he took in 2008.

Secondly, the APC has educated the public to the effect that because the petitioner was not a contestant in the primary elections that elected Chief Timipre Sylva as a candidate, he has no locus to institute the case as provided for in the 2022 Electoral Act. Thirdly, the APC has also made the point that the case was status barred as it was filed 30 days after INEC's publication of the list of candidates, as against 14 days prescribed by the Electoral Act. This explanation appears to have doused the concerns of party faithfuls who were initially apprehensive on account of the events of 2019, where the disqualification of the Deputy Governorship candidate eroded their electoral victory.

(B) THE INEC PREPARATIONS

INEC has since the end of the 2023 general elections, taken steps to prepare for the November 2023 Governorship elections. It monitored the primary elections of the political parties, published the final list of candidates, resumed the distribution of PVCs, and also embarked on political education and stakeholder engagements. Initially, the final list of candidates show that sixteen of the eighteen political parties presented candidates for the election. However, the candidates of the APC remains a subject of litigation as INEC has struck out the name of the party's candidate in its updated list.

Table 2: List of Governorship Candidates for the 2023 Elections in Bayelsa State (as at 10th of October 2023)

S/N	Name of Candidate	Political Party
1	Idikio Warmate Jones	Accord (A)
2	Bufumoh Akpoebi Alkex	Action Alliance (AA)
3	Kalango Stanley Davies	African Democratic Congress (ADC)
4	Oguara Nengimonyo	Action Democratic Party (ADP)
5	*Sylva Timupre Marlin	*All Progressives Congress (APC)
6	Subiri Waibodei Joseph	All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA)
7	Oshariken Saturday	Allied Peoples Movement (APM)
8	Ogege Kemelayefa Mercy	Action Peoples Party (APP)
9	Ben Victor Magbodo	Boot Party (BP)
10	Eradiri Udengmobofa	Labour Party (LP)
11	Azebi Bestman Ayabeke	New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP)
12	Micah Akeems	National Rescue Movement (NRM)
13	Diri Douye	Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)
14	Pzato Erepadei Erepadei	Peoples Redemption Party (PRP)
15	Osuluku Binalayefa	Social Democratic Party (SDP)
16	Simeon Imomotimi Karioru	Zenith Labour Party (ZLP)

Presently, INEC is working to prepare effectively for the election day. Voter education

by INEC and meetings with stakeholders is on the increase and collection of outstanding Permanent Voter's Cards (PVCs) took place between 11th September and 9th October 2023. It is expected that INEC will work out a more effective strategy to mobilise vehicles and boats for the exercise, given the high cost of and limited means of transportation, especially boats. It is also expected that INEC will outwit the antics of politicians who hire off vehicles and boats for their supporters and also create difficulties that will force INEC to depend on them for the transportation of staff and materials.

(C) ELECTION SECURITY

Preparations by security agencies also appear to be on course. Stakeholder meetings and voter education are taking place regularly. The Police High Command has disclosed its intention to deploy 27,000 officers and men for the elections. It is expected that other security agencies will deploy their men and officers as well. Interventions by the Airforce and Navy in the deployment of electoral materials and supervision of the electoral conduct of voters, politicians, INEC staff and their own personnel is also important here. Efficient inter-agency collaboration is needed to ensure smooth security operations.

Potential Risk to the Election

One of the significant risks to the 2023 governorship election is electoral violence, given the divisions among the ranks of ex-militants and other agents of violence such as cults, and the intense competition for votes that is ongoing. Since 1999, elections in Bayelsa State have almost always been violent, as politicians and political thugs engage each other in violent confrontations or attack INEC officials to hijack electoral materials or election results.

Flash Points to Watch Out for Violence

Given that electoral violence in the State is dynamic, especially because of the polarisation of ex-militants and other gang/cult groups, and the resultant divided support for candidates. It is often difficult to point to where violence could erupt, but

based on the history of electoral violence and emerging conflict dossiers such as the grouping of ex-militants for preferred candidates, community conflicts, and divided leadership that present themselves for patronage, chieftaincy disputes, the win your unit at all cost directive by some political leaders to their henchmen, existing and unresolved political antagonisms and bitterness, some areas can be identified as flash points.

Table 3: Possible Flash Points for the 2023 Governorship Election

LGA	Likely Flash Point
Brass	All Communities
Ekeremor	Ekeremor main town Aleibiri Agoro Ezetu
Kolokuma/Opokuma	NIL
Nembe	Bassambiri Ogbolomabiri
Ogbia	NOT CERTAIN YET
Sagbama	Sagbama main town
Southern-Ijaw	All Communities
Yenagoa	Epie communities (Yenagoa urban)

Political education by CSOs, politicians, traditional rulers, and government functionaries on peaceful elections is ongoing, and this could help to avert violence in some communities. In addition to violence, there are other factors and practices that pose a threat to the elections. These are noted below.

- If there is a repeat of the 2022 floods in the State, it will impact severely on the elections as displaced persons will not be able to vote. In fact, INEC will find it nearly impossible to deploy men and materials as nearly 80 percent of the State would be flooded if it gets to the peak. If the floods get to the level witnessed in 2022, the only option available to INEC will be a postponement. Presently, the floods appear not to be a threat as the flood waters, unlike in previous years is

yet to reach frightening levels. However, the flood alert has conspicuously listed the State as a danger zone.

- Commoditisation of votes by electorate and politicians: Votes are now commodities offered for sale and purchased by the highest bidder. In the last 2023 general elections, voters in several locations (urban and rural) refused to vote until they were paid by agents of candidates or political parties. This is a threat to the voters' ability to make informed choices of who to vote in elections based on ability to deliver good governance.
- The claims and counter-claims of mobilisation of former militia leaders/ members and cults/gangs by rival political actors is a pointer to the possible use of violence.
- The purchase of political support and politicization of political appointments with a mandate to deliver polling units will most likely result in an intense struggle for votes and possible compromise or violence.
- Flooding and the associated displacements could impede efficient deployment of election staff and materials, or possibly lead to the postponement of voting in some areas. At the moment, flooding appears not to be a serious threat as only isolated communities are under water. Most likely, the flooding challenge may not be as huge as it was in 2020 or 2022.
- Diversion/kidnapping of electoral officers and materials (BVAS machines, ballot papers, and result sheets), forceful accreditation of voters, recording and declaration of results, etc.
- Conflicting reports by Election Observers
- Hate speeches/campaigns (insults on opponent's personality/integrity; 'I must win or else' blackmail, etc.), fake news including posting of incorrect results and the likely confusion and possible violence
- Late arrival of electoral materials; incomplete electoral materials, particularly result sheet; snatching of electoral materials, etc.)
- Deliberate breach of electoral duty guidelines by security personnel
- Poor/partisan electoral reportage by Journalists
- Unlawful movement of political stalwarts, candidates, and government functionaries on election day

- High/increasing use of hard drugs (Indian hemp, etc) by youths who support candidates
- Use of political thugs to cause violence or instigate disruptions designed to suppress votes
- Compromise of electoral officials to engage in acts that could create grounds for litigation
- Failure of BVAS machine and possible disenfranchisement; inefficient distribution of electoral materials, and poorly trained and subsequently inefficient INEC ad-hoc staff.
- Due to the difficult geographical terrain and the associated challenges with marine transportation, the transportation of men and materials may be hampered if proper arrangements are not made. Late arrival and hijacking of materials may disrupt elections in some areas if INEC depends on individuals to provide boats as was the case in previous elections.
- Security operatives on election duty are governed by a code of conduct and strict adherence to it helps to ensure that elections are transparent and free of violence. Where the code of ethics is breached, as was the case in the last 2023 general elections, it would be disruptive and subsequently undermine the integrity of the elections.
- Election Petition Tribunal judgments which suggest that the IREV is a viewing and not a collation portal have created the perception that transmission of results would be solely manual; creating apprehensions on whether the elections will be free and fair.

6.0 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above discourse, the reality in the State, and available time for preparing for the elections, the following are suggested for consideration as policy issues.

1. The promotion of adequate political education and socialisation by INEC political parties, CSOs, community-based organisations (CBOs), and faith-based organisations (FBOs) to enlighten electorates on the electoral law, procedures, and guidelines, and the implications of vote buying and selling.
2. Adequate security arrangements should be made to secure election staff and materials. In previous elections, security was largely focused on the waterways; thus, leaving the upland or urban-based communities with little or no security presence. Political thugs took advantage of this to perpetrate electoral fraud. To check this, the deployment of security operatives should adequately cover both the waterways and communities.
3. To avoid the hijacking and late arrival of electoral materials, INEC should deploy materials to electoral wards with adequate security. This means that materials would be deployed from 105 centers and thus avoid the concentration of materials in a particular area.
4. Ad-hoc staff should be drawn from a pool that satisfactorily passes a prescribed competence test based on job content and integrity. Also, security profiling of prospective ad-hoc staff should be made a policy
5. The hijack of electoral officers and materials mostly occurs in the riverine communities. Therefore, these areas, particularly in Southern-Ijaw, Brass, Ekeremor and Nembe LGAs should be given special security coverage. Yenagoa urban, particularly the Epie communities of Opolo, Yenizuegene, Biogbolo, and Amarata also needs special attention.
6. INEC should explore using boats owned by the marine division of the Nigerian Police and Nigerian Navy, and helicopters to convey election staff and materials to the swamp/riverine communities. Hiring private boats would not help as most of the owners have partisan political interests. Similarly, INEC should explore using vehicles owned by the Armed Forces and Police for the transportation of staff and materials.
7. To guarantee the integrity of electoral outcomes, the Electoral Act, and appropriate sections of the Nigerian Constitution should be reviewed to make electronic transmission and collation of results mandatory.

8. The use of non-partisan community volunteers (made of religious leaders and activists) who will monitor elections at the community level should be explored.

It is expected that implementing these policies would have challenges, given the short time left to the election, and the entrenched culture of cheating and violence that characterises elections in the State. Nonetheless, visible changes would be noticed if all the suggestions were actualised.

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ABOUT

PLAC hosts the secretariat of the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room and is a member of its steering committee. The Situation Room provides a co-ordinating platform for civil society engagement on governance issues. It is also a platform for information sharing among civil society groups working on elections and topical national issues. It intervenes in the electoral process by promoting collaboration, proactive advocacy and rapid response to crisis in the electoral process. The Situation Room provides a forum of advance planning, scenario building, evidence based analysis, constructive engagement with various stakeholders in the electoral process and observation of elections.

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