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# SPECIAL REPORT

1200 17th Street NW • Washington, DC 20036 • 202.457.1700 • fax 202.429.6063

## ABOUT THE REPORT

With Nigeria's 2011 election cycle well within view, the country's political elites remain locked in a tense succession negotiation after the midterm death of President Umaru Yar'Adua. In this already-troubled election season, Nigeria's history of electoral violence raises significant additional concerns about the possibility of hostilities. Commissioned by the Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention at the United States Institute of Peace, this report offers a brief overview of electoral violence in Nigeria, examines Nigeria's prospects for a nonviolent political transition in 2011, and concludes with recommendations for a safer, more secure polling season.

Ebere Onwudiwe, a senior faculty member in the department of behavioral sciences at Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio, is currently a Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) in Abuja, Nigeria. Chloe Berwind-Dart, a conflict resolution consultant to CDD for the production of this report, has lived and worked in Nigeria since 2009.

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*Ebere Onwudiwe and Chloe Berwind-Dart*

## Breaking the Cycle of Electoral Violence in Nigeria

### Summary

- Nigeria's 2011 polls will mark the fourth multiparty election in Nigeria and, if a power transfer occurs, only the second handover of civilian administrations since the country's return to democracy in 1999.
- Past election cycles have featured political assassinations, voter intimidation, intra- and interparty clashes, and communal unrest. Party primary season, the days immediately surrounding elections, and the announcement of results have been among the most violent periods in previous cycles.
- Although the most recent elections in 2007 derived some benefit from local conflict management capacity, they were roundly criticized for being neither free nor fair.
- The 2011 elections could mark a turning point in the consolidation of Nigeria's democracy, but they could also provoke worsening ethnosectarian clashes and contribute to the continuing scourge of zero-sum politics.
- President Umaru Yar'Adua, who died in May 2010, kept his 2007 inauguration promise to create an Electoral Reform Committee (ERC) but failed to adopt key recommendations that the committee made.
- His successor, President Goodluck Jonathan, appointed a widely respected professor, Attahiru Jega, to head the Independent National Electoral Commission, inspiring hope that electoral processes will improve in 2011.
- The issue of "zoning," the political elite's power-sharing agreement, has taken center stage in the current election cycle and will drive significant conflict if the debate around it devolves into outright hostilities.

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- In this unusual election cycle, local and international organizations and Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) must redouble their efforts both to prevent and resolve conflicts and to promote conflict sensitivity.
- The near term requires an increasingly important role for the judiciary in combating electoral fraud, and the longer term requires the creation of the ERC–recommended Electoral Offenses Commission, which would specialize in the investigation and prosecution of crimes.
- Local agencies and respected community leaders must remain proactive and creative in violence-prevention programming, irrespective of international funding. Established local organizations with preexisting networks are best situated to perform early-warning and conflict management functions.
- High voter turnout and citizen monitoring are vital for ensuring that the 2011 elections in Nigeria are credible and civil.

## Introduction

While Africa's largest democracy prepares for the polls, serious questions remain about Nigeria's capacity and political will to conduct free, fair, and peaceful elections. Since independence in 1960, violence and myriad irregularities have persistently marred the process of electing the country's leaders. Nigerian politicians have become habituated to fraud, corruption, intimidation, and violence, as if they consider these the necessary weapons of political winners. Nigerian voters have been denied the chance to count and be counted and, disturbingly, the trend has worsened. National and international monitors observing the 2007 polls referred to them as an undemocratic charade, while Freedom House declared them the worst in Nigeria since the end of military rule in 1999.<sup>1</sup>

Will 2011 be a transformational year of relatively peaceful transition, or a reprise of violent electoral disenfranchisement? As Nigeria navigates the 2011 election season, few are hopeful that this ugly political history will not be repeated. Fierce ambition among Nigerian politicians is certainly part of the problem. So too is the scarcity of transparency, accountability, and law enforcement oversight in the funding and running of campaigns, leaving ambitions unchecked and enabling the "do-or-die" approach so famously touted by outgoing president Olusegun Obasanjo in 2007.

Nigerian elections have not been about the issues, nor about addressing the many challenges faced by Nigeria's largely struggling citizenry. The Nigeria Labour Congress has recently threatened a general strike if the government raised the price of fuel. Yet the question of petrol subsidies is largely absent from party platforms. Pensioners of the federal government recently underwent an onerous identity and eligibility verification process, yet politicians are not discussing what policies they can offer this important class of voters. There is debate over the "privatization" of the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN), but this issue too is rarely featured in aspirants' speeches. Many politicians make passing references to improving electricity output and publicly agree that corruption is one of Nigeria's greatest problems, but most citizens see such comments as half-hearted attempts to paper over political gambits for power.

The failure to address the pressing issues facing ordinary Nigerians is a bleak and irksome reminder that politics in Nigeria is not yet by, about, or even for average citizens. Elections have been about power: controlling it, undermining it, distributing it. Among both political elites and civilians, alliances form along expedient lines of convenience, ethnicity, and religion. These political alliances can be fluid, particularly among the elites, and all too frequently they encourage allegiance to factional rather than national interests. In this context, conflict can be triggered at any stage of the electoral process, particularly in this

very unusual election season, which follows the midterm death of President Umaru Yar'Adua and the succession of a vice president, Goodluck Jonathan, whose unexpected leadership is a matter of some controversy. Unfortunately, community unrest and murders that appear to be politically motivated have already taken place.

Still, election strife is preventable, but a 2011 election season less violent than its predecessors will occur only through the efforts of all stakeholders. Where hostilities have not or will not be prevented, opportunities remain to manage conflicts better and to build upon the good work of community leaders, citizens, and civil society groups dedicated to Nigeria's peaceful democratic development.

## **Electoral Violence in Nigeria**

Since the rebirth of Nigeria's democracy in 1999, violence of varying levels has been an unfortunate staple of Nigerian elections. Local peacemaking efforts in conflict-prone states such as Kaduna have led to meaningful security improvements, and more recent efforts are under way in restive Plateau state, but the risk of election violence nationwide is unacceptably high.<sup>2</sup> Many drivers of election violence remain unaddressed and will be exacerbated if tensions around the 2011 polls escalate further.

Whether sponsored or spontaneous, election-related conflicts are distinctive, signifying discontent around tightly interwoven social and economic concerns. In Nigeria, these concerns include dissatisfaction with government performance, competition for resources, inter- and intragroup distrust, joblessness, and anger at an abundance of unscrupulous politicians with little respect for due process or rule of law. During election periods, underlying social and economic concerns collide with hopes and fears of change, raising tensions and the likelihood of violent competition. This is particularly true in countries like Nigeria where chronic instability, poor governance, communal disputes, gang-related fighting, and violence sponsored by power brokers fosters long-standing grievances. Economic incentives, preexisting anger, and opportunistic desires for revenge can be potent incentives for violence. Fresh anger at election injustices under the aegis of a government still perceived as promising only modest accountability for electoral crimes is a worrisome factor.

1999: Election-related violence occurred this year, though not as extensively as some had feared. The Carter Center and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, which jointly observed the 1999 elections, concluded that "the transition from military to civilian rule was generally conducted without violence," reserving their sharper criticism for the "electoral irregularities" and "outright fraud" that their monitors reported.<sup>3</sup>

2003: Violence during the 2003 election cycle was more blatant and widespread. Intra-party clashes, political assassinations, and community unrest in already volatile areas such as Nigeria's oil-producing Niger Delta, characterized these elections. This cycle also marked the unchecked proliferation of another worrisome development: the hiring and arming of militias to serve narrow political ends. One concerned nongovernmental organization (NGO) monitoring the elections characterized them as "a low intensity armed struggle."<sup>4</sup> Politicians and party bosses found a ready supply of unemployed men, frequently youths, willing to perpetrate violence in exchange for pay and firepower.<sup>5</sup> As a result, these young men comprised a significant percentage of the lives lost leading up to the 2003 polls.<sup>6</sup>

2007: These elections saw the same patterns of violence and intimidation from earlier elections. Merely declaring oneself a candidate was enough to put one's life at risk. In fact, by 2007, electoral violence had become such a credible risk despite Nigeria's return to democracy that the mere threat of it was enough to keep large swaths of voters away from the polls, as in Rivers state, where absent ballot materials and violent threats contributed to low voter turnout. When statewide tallies nevertheless boasted vote casting in the millions,

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violence surged in the postelection period. Weapons and firearms still circulating from the 2003 election cycle not only increased the likelihood of violence but also afforded militias new leverage through which to influence the very powers that had armed them in the first place.<sup>7</sup> In light of the violence unleashed during the 2007 and other past elections, Action-Aid Nigeria released a report in 2010 that classified Nigerian electoral violence squarely within the category of protracted social conflict, "characterized by civil strife, heightened social and political tension, [and the] sporadic use of violence, but in which armed conflict is not formally declared."<sup>8</sup>

2011: With the 2011 polls fast approaching, politically motivated violence seems to have already taken place in several states. In Edo state, for example, a political contender was gunned down in August after declaring his intention to contest for a seat in the House of Representatives.<sup>9</sup> A security aide to the current Bauchi state governor was shot in what may have been an attempted attack on the governor himself, an incident that followed several other attacks involving Bauchi politicians or their affiliates.<sup>10</sup> Well-known Niger Delta militant Saboma George, accused of past election rigging, was killed in Rivers state, while the supporters of two gubernatorial candidates recently clashed in Kano, leading to one reported death and numerous injuries.<sup>11</sup> In Anambra and other eastern states, high-level political kidnappings are already on the rise. Meanwhile, in October 2010, Nigerian security officials intercepted thirteen shipping containers of smuggled weaponry at the Lagos port in what many analysts consider an ominous portent for this year's election season.<sup>12</sup>

## **Formation of the 2007 Electoral Reform Committee**

The electoral process itself had been so heavily compromised by 2007 that domestic and international monitoring bodies pronounced it irreparably flawed. Condemnation of the 2007 elections was so total that it appeared for a time to jeopardize Nigeria's leadership role in Africa. International observers wondered how a country whose leaders were so undemocratically selected could enjoy prominent roles in the Economic Community of West African States and the African Peer Review Mechanism.<sup>13</sup> Coming on the heels of President Obasanjo's unconstitutional attempt to remain in office for a third term,<sup>14</sup> the elections continued to drive Nigeria's already-beleaguered governance credentials downhill.

Incoming president Umaru Yar'Adua, with a reputation for honesty and probity, needed to act quickly to legitimize his presidency and to repair the country's tattered image. Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka had called on him to abdicate by declaring himself "not a receiver of stolen goods,"<sup>15</sup> but Yar'Adua proposed a different solution. Pledging electoral reform in his May 2007 inauguration speech, he promised citizens some hope that Nigeria's historically impenetrable electoral process would finally open the political system to citizen participation.

In August 2007, President Yar'Adua formed an Electoral Reform Committee composed of nearly two dozen respected citizens. Chaired by Honorable Justice (ret.) Muhammadu Lawal Uwais, the ERC set about assessing the country's many electoral dilemmas and developed a set of recommendations, such as granting true independence for Electoral Management Bodies, ensuring the sensible distribution of election management duties, attaining international electoral standards, resolving election disputes, and mitigating postelection tensions.<sup>16</sup> By December 2008, the committee had submitted its sizable report and detailed recommendations to President Yar'Adua, including three bills the committee drafted for expedited submission to the legislature.

The Yar'Adua administration's response to the ERC recommendations was tepid. The ERC had called for the Independent National Election Commission (INEC) to be sovereign, at both the federal and state levels, to ensure much-needed political and fiscal autonomy. It also

recommended the establishment of three new management bodies, including an Electoral Offences Commission and a Political Parties Registration and Regulatory Commission. Both were intended to relieve INEC of an unwieldy set of responsibilities. The administration rejected crucial reforms outright, rebuffing the committee's call to end the presidential appointment of the INEC chair. This rejection alone was considered an enormous blow to true reform. Nigeria's civil society sector and most of its political parties—a notable exception being the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP)—protested, asserting that an independently chosen INEC chair was necessary for INEC's independence and credibility.

Ultimately, the administration drafted and sent seven of its own suggested reform bills to the National Assembly, but the bill relating to the regulation of political parties was immediately refused. The remainder of the bills languished after the legislature tabled further decisions, proclaiming that the remaining bills should be considered within a broader constitutional review process, despite Yar'Adua's request that the bills be considered separately from other questions of constitutional reform.<sup>17</sup> Yar'Adua's subsequent illness and untimely death brought the reform agenda to a standstill. While his administration ultimately accepted a high percentage of the ERC's recommendations, its rejection of key provisions had a dispiriting effect on citizenry and civil society organizations.

An independently elected INEC chairman would have improved public morale as well as INEC credibility by providing potentially violence-preventing evenhandedness in election oversight and implementation. Even so, newly appointed INEC chair professor Attahiru Jega is widely seen as the best chairperson for whom citizens could have hoped. Well respected and credible, his selection by President Jonathan comes none too soon.

More broadly, the electoral reform process represents a missed opportunity for a national conversation regarding large-scale violence prevention. The ERC made a pointed call for violence reduction through, for example, increased electoral inclusiveness and widespread mentality shifts. The Yar'Adua or the Jonathan administrations could have taken up the well-established problem of electoral violence directly. Neither did. In the short time remaining before elections, much needs to be done by all stakeholders to navigate Nigeria's veritable minefield of electoral flashpoints.

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## **Patterns of Electoral Violence in Nigeria**

Before turning to specific drivers of conflict during the 2011 election season, it is worth noting that election-related violence across Nigeria manifests in foreseeable patterns. Election conflicts typically fall into four related categories: intraparty feuding, interparty clashes, electoral-events violence, and communal unrest.

### ***Intraparty Feuding***

Violence among party factions happens most frequently prior to the party primaries, and its intensity correlates positively with the party's political influence. As one respected analyst put it, "Where a party holds power, the level of strife within that party tends to be greater."<sup>18</sup> At the national level and in many of Nigeria's thirty-six states, the PDP is the ruling political party. A place on the PDP ticket has assured victory at the polls in many parts of the country. From the State Houses of Assembly to the governorships, competition for PDP nominations is frequently associated with violent struggle.<sup>19</sup> This type of violence rarely involves ordinary voters directly. More typically, it is fought by elite-sponsored militias or directed at the elites themselves, as in July 2006, when the PDP gubernatorial aspirant for Lagos, Chief Funsho Williams, was murdered in his home by hired assassins.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Interparty Clashes***

While this type of violence can happen at any point in the election cycle, it most frequently takes place after party primaries and during the postelection period when party supporters who believe the election was rigged against their candidate clash with the opposition. A good example of this was the recent postelection violence that took place in Rivers state. Voting there had been minimal. Missing ballot materials or closed polling booths were a serious part of the problem, but so too was voter intimidation. Yet statewide vote tallies were in the millions, causing significant outrage. In this case, election violence increased rather than decreased following the elections. As Human Rights Watch observed, the Rivers state violence “was no random explosion” and, in fact, was arguably not simply a response to local events but a “widely predicted aftershock of Nigeria’s rigged and violent April 2007 nationwide elections.”<sup>21</sup>

### ***Electoral Events Violence***

Patterns of election violence follow a largely predictable sequence around key electoral events. Party primaries and election days (and specifically the announcement of results) are critical periods of concern, but even the initial selection of party delegates can be a contentious affair.<sup>22</sup> This, coupled with the headline-grabbing pressure that the new INEC chair is under to adequately manage voter registration and the eleventh-hour uncertainty around the final dates for the 2011 polls, has created a general atmosphere of anxiety. Past elections have shown that violence becomes increasingly likely as the polls draw nearer, and the entire month of elections is a high-risk period, as previous elections have demonstrated. April 2007 saw an almost 42 percent uptick in recorded incidents of violence over March 2007.<sup>23</sup> Actual election days have also historically been spoiled by violence and intimidation tactics targeted at journalists and political aspirants and their families, as well as at ordinary voters, as Human Rights Watch observers noted during the 2007 polls in Ekiti, Rivers, and Anambra states. Meanwhile, the announcement of election results known to be fraudulent can provoke heated reactions, as reported in the case of opposition voters who set government buildings ablaze in Katsina at the unlikely seeming news that “PDP had swept the state’s gubernatorial polls.”<sup>24</sup>

### ***Communal Unrest***

Election tensions tend to exacerbate preexisting community conflicts, which in Nigeria may involve regional resource fighting, rebellious unrest in response to corrupt and degenerative leadership, and/or ethnoreligious hostility. Two regions of particular concern are Plateau state in the lower North-Central area of the country and the Niger Delta in Nigeria’s south, but other regions of concern include the notoriously insecure east, including states such as Anambra, and increasingly restive parts of the north, such as Borno.

Anambra has what one representative newspaper terms an “ugly past” of electoral violence and fraud.<sup>25</sup> Long a good example of very bad politics, previous polls in Anambra have featured armed political militias, the dominance of extralegal political backers (commonly referred to in Nigeria as “godfathers”), ballot-box stuffing, ballot-box stealing, and the nearly routine threat of kidnappings and other security breaches. Yet, the 2007 gubernatorial race, which was rerun in February 2010 and is widely seen as a “test case” for the 2011 general elections, offers indications that better managed elections can be more peaceful. Conducted amid an extensive intervention program by the Department for International Development-sponsored ActionAid Nigeria, election preparations engaged local stakeholders from the police and citizenry to politicians and INEC officials. ActionAid

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Nigeria employed a holistic approach to violence prevention and largely succeeded in stemming it. Voter education components of the program also appear successful: a number of reports note instances of nonviolent civil insistence that votes be properly accounted for.<sup>26</sup> Anambra state's 2011 polls will not include a gubernatorial election, but concerns remain high for Anambra and other eastern states with a history of electoral unrest.

Jos, the capital of Plateau, where ethnic and religious differences are compounded by the perception that some groups are indigenous to the state (“indigenes”) while others are migrants (“settlers”), has been rocked by intracommunal fighting for years. The Jos crises are colored by the fact that some groups view Plateau as an ethnic homeland, but the crises also represent a battle for control of land and other resources that are often administered along ethnoreligious lines.<sup>27</sup> Plateau's miseries are exacerbated during periods of open political competition, an issue addressed in greater detail later in this report.

The Niger Delta is another long-standing concern. President Yar'Adua made peace in the oil-rich region a priority. In 2009, his administration offered Delta fighters an amnesty package that included education and jobs training in exchange for laying down and, in some cases, for handing over their weapons.<sup>28</sup> Some Niger Delta watchers lament that a peace that is “bought and paid for” rather than negotiated leaves the root causes of militancy unaddressed,<sup>29</sup> and even supporters of the program remain concerned that lingering questions of resource allocation have not been answered.<sup>30</sup> Tragically, ongoing concerns appeared all too prescient when car bombs detonated on October 1, 2010, during Independence Day celebrations in Abuja. A faction of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta claimed credit for this unprecedented attack in the country's capital, which left more than a dozen dead and many more injured. Later that month, a militant attack on an oil facility in Bayelsa state reportedly cut production there by 60,000 barrels per day.<sup>31</sup> It is not yet clear how the historically volatile Delta—long a source of violence and insecurity during elections and beyond—will weather the remainder of the 2011 election cycle.

Of more recent alarm has been a surge in religious extremist violence in parts of northern Nigeria, including Borno state. World media was briefly captivated in late 2009 when reports of a group popularly known as Boko Haram—a moniker roughly meaning that Western education is prohibited—clashed with local authorities in what became a vicious cycle of attack and counterattack. By the end of the fighting, security personnel and dozens of Boko Haram's members and associates had been killed, including its leader, Muhammad Yusuf, who was captured alive and largely uninjured but did not survive police custody. In October 2010, the reconstituted group struck again. Suspected Boko Haram militants gunned down a prominent Muslim scholar—known as both a critic of Boko Haram and an associate of Borno's governor—and later attacked a police station near Maiduguri, Borno's capital. These groups attract membership by defining themselves against the corruption and profligacy of religious elites and politicians. It is not entirely clear how they will respond to elections per se. These remarkably bold attacks do not bode well, especially in a region now rife with small arms and other weaponry.

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## **Key Drivers of Conflict in the 2011 Elections**

A relatively smooth electoral transition could be conducted in an atmosphere in which voters feel confident that their votes are secure and that criminals will be held accountable, in which political parties resolve leadership disputes through dialogue and negotiation, and in which politicians do not exploit social, economic, and religious grievances in their bids to secure a victory. However, if current officeholders abuse incumbency powers to force victory at the polls—a widespread practice in previous elections that is accomplished by significant violence—then the transition is bound to be characterized by conflicts and threats to national

stability. The incumbency factor is a particular concern during the 2011 polls, because they feature a significant number of first-term executives, up to and including the president, seeking reelection. The “zoning” debate is also of special concern, and the need for an amicable solution to the zoning question remains high. Finally, though INEC has received an inevitable boost in the form of its new chair, it remains an agency burdened by a cumbersome set of duties. With regard to violence prevention, creation of the ERC-recommended Electoral Offenses Commission could have been of particular advantage in reassuring the public that election-season criminality will be investigated and punished. As it stands, Nigeria’s courts will remain challenged by inevitable postelection appeals to justice.

### **Zoning**

“Zoning” is essentially a power-sharing agreement among members of Nigerian political parties, most notably the country’s principal political party, the PDP. It is an arrangement designed to promote inclusiveness and therefore political stability among Nigeria’s main ethnic groups from the north and south. Fears of ethnic domination are long-standing, and in fact the country’s postindependence choice of federalism as a governing principle was itself largely motivated by this concern. The constitutionally mandated “federal character” principle maintained by the government<sup>32</sup> and the creation of successively more states under the Nigerian federation were both attempts to avert ethnocentric tendencies and even violence by offering each group equal access to national leadership and to break the otherwise dominating blocs formed by Nigeria’s largest ethnic groups.

Under zoning, six geographical areas (South-South, South-East, South-West, North-Central, North-East, and North-West) become unofficial “geopolitical zones” from which candidates rotationally vie for the presidency and other top leadership positions. As the current debate over who should take the presidency in 2011 demonstrates, however, zoning is largely seen as an agreement between the political north and the political south. Hence, northern leaders who have sought a “consensus candidate” to replace the late president Yar’Adua—who was recently announced as Atiku Abubakar, former vice president from 1999 to 2007—did not limit their consideration to northern politicians from Yar’Adua’s own zone, the North-West. Zoning has been a key element in maintaining a relative peace, which in turn divests the military of an excuse to leave the barracks. Following eight years of rule by President Olusegun Obasanjo, a southerner, the north was slated to take its eight-year turn at the top of the party. But Yar’Adua died shy of the halfway mark, and Vice President Goodluck Jonathan, a southern Niger Deltan, ascended to power. Many northerners contend that Jonathan should not contest for president because the presidency is still zoned to the north, while Jonathan’s supporters argue that he is completing a joint mandate with Yar’Adua for an eight-year term.

The PDP has not yet declared its candidate for 2011, but President Jonathan holds the incumbent’s advantage of funds and administrative control, no small benefit in Nigeria’s system of executive supremacy. The PDP’s candidate has won every presidential election since 1999—and not a single source consulted for this report expects the 2011 polls to upset that pattern—so a PDP nod for Jonathan likely upends the prevailing political paradigm. Many fear that outcome would lead to a discontented north and a rise in ethnoreligious violence incited, or at least condoned, by disgruntled elites. Finally, Jonathan’s ascension is an unexpected advantage to the South-South, home not only to the country’s significant oil supply but also to popular outrage over the environmental and human toll of an extractive industry that many Niger Deltans feel does not fairly compensate them. The presidency is a boon they will be loath to lose, and that factor adds an uncertain and troublesome element to a region that is already associated with recurrent as well as electoral unrest.<sup>33</sup>

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## ***Resource-Based Competition***

Nigeria is a relatively wealthy country. This fact stands uncomfortably juxtaposed with Nigeria's persistently bleak social indicators. Most citizens live on less than \$2 per day and more than two-thirds live on less than \$1 per day. Maternal mortality rates are remarkably high—some of the worst in the world, in fact—while adult literacy rates and the availability of jobs are unacceptably low. If a Nigerian man lives past forty-eight, he is beating the odds. These and other prosperity indicators are so dismal that the 2010 Global Peace Index report ranks Nigeria 137 out of 149 countries surveyed.<sup>34</sup> The same ordinary citizens burdened by these difficult truths also bear the brunt of Nigeria's underperforming electrical grid and its dilapidated roads, which together challenge even the most basic of daily activities.

It is little wonder that resource-based competition—for employment, for arable land, for oil profits, and for the financial advantage of political favor—underlies much of Nigeria's unrest. As political scientist Victor Adetula recently noted, "While electoral violence may occur before or after electoral competition, at their base are protests and agitations over socioeconomic issues."<sup>35</sup> With regard to election-related violence, these agitations play out on two levels. First, competition for political seats among elites can be incredibly fierce. Prospective politicians may be wealthier and better educated than most of their countrymen, but they too suffer from a dearth of alternative job prospects. Second, politicians and party bosses bent on mischief have a ready supply of recruits from an aggrieved, resource-deprived population. The lure of cash rewards for "security details" or outright troublemaking should not be underestimated in this context.

## ***Social Divisions***

Too often, leaders across Nigeria exploit and exacerbate the country's many social divisions to deadly effect as in communities like Jos, where Jonah Jang was elected governor in 2007 directly following years of leadership by the divisive Joshua Dariye. Despite a political mandate to equitably govern all of Plateau's inhabitants, Governor Jang has regularly and inflexibly promoted the notion that land ownership and other rights belong only to certain residents. A Christian of Berom extraction, Jang makes no apology for advancing the notion that members of his ethnic group are rightful "indigenes" who need not share the advantages of residency rights and who should resist religiopolitical domination by ethnic Jasawa (Hausa) Muslim "settlers."<sup>36</sup> Rather than play the part of a peacemaker or even strike a conciliatory tone, Jang governs by reinforcing divisions and emboldening intergroup discrimination. During his tenure, hundreds of residents have died in communal fighting, especially in the state's capital.

In a country still widely united by its deference to elders and authority, it is crucial that Plateau's leaders not only call for but set personal examples of peaceable coexistence, dialogue, and nonviolent conflict resolution if the bloodshed is to stop. Taken as a whole, Nigerians have much in common. Across ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic diversity, citizens share remarkable religiosity (Nigeria is one of the most faithful countries in the world), an emphasis on the importance of family and supportive social networks, a strong entrepreneurial spirit, and a resilient appetite for democratic governance. Together, Nigerians have navigated a difficult history since independence, persisting as a nation despite a civil war and a host of military dictatorships. Case studies from across the globe have shown that communities are more peaceful when members value the "connectors" that bind them over the "dividers" that separate them.<sup>37</sup> Up to and since the historic signing of the Kaduna Peace Declaration, a vital aspect of the Interfaith Mediation Centre's work in that state has been enjoining religious and community leaders to proudly, outspokenly emphasize the values and interests that unite residents despite their apparent differences.

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### ***Spoilers***

The generally tense zoning debate, coupled with resentment from some northern elites at losing the executive office, is raising concerns that troublemaking candidates will instigate violence as a means of presenting themselves as the most viable manager of the resulting insecurity. An alternative possibility—and one that is just as bleak—is that any large-scale eruption of violence might tempt President Jonathan to declare a state of emergency and put off elections entirely.

### ***Postelection Grievances***

Postelection violence similar to the Rivers example cited earlier continues to be a general concern. Some election watchers look forward to a continued role for appeals courts in managing election complaints and were gratified by the National Assembly's passage of an amendment requiring elections to be held earlier than usual to permit INEC and the judiciary enough time to adjudicate disputed results. INEC has more recently petitioned for elections to be pushed back toward April to better prepare for the voter registration process, and the National Assembly has approved the request. This is a welcome development for election organizers but a loss for judicial arbiters. Nevertheless, the judiciary can continue to play a crucial role in postelection tension reduction. In fact, with the October 2010 federal appeals court cancellation of Ekiti state's 2007 gubernatorial outcome, citizens received a timely reminder that nearly a dozen flawed elections from the previous cycle have been overturned by the courts. Reactions to the Ekiti decision have been mixed, ranging from jubilation at justice served to anger at justice delayed. The judicial system clearly needs support to process pleas and to do so much faster. Still, redress for fraudulent outcomes is clearly obtainable even without a newly minted Electoral Offenses Commission.

## **Violence Prevention**

Local agencies and international donors have worked for years to support democratic development in Nigeria. Violence prevention must remain an important part of these efforts, particularly now that the high-risk election season is under way. Nevertheless, during dozens of conversations and interviews conducted in support of this report in August–September 2010, the answer to questions regarding violence-prevention work already in progress was concerning. Most respondents stated that not enough was being done. Specific responses included: “I hear about plans only not action”; “Projects may be under way in some few communities, but work is not coming together at a higher level”; “From the federal and state governments, there is really nothing going on; they are just relying on security forces who need more training on bringing down conflicts without brutality.” With regard to the international community, one NGO representative said, “We were approached by a donor agency but don't know if they will fund our work,” while another reported that “from the international donors, I hear about credibility more than violence prevention.” Sounding a related note, a conflict management scholar and practitioner noted, “You can't talk about credibility without helping to stop the violence because violent elections are not credible elections.”<sup>38</sup>

In all likelihood, the months prior to elections will see a fresh crop of violence prevention programs, and this is an important step. Nevertheless, these reflections offered by civil society and community leaders working across Nigeria represent important feedback regarding the need for increased activity as well as the need for increased visibility both in the planning and implementation stages of violence-prevention work. The pervasive mood among those interviewed for this report was one of uncertainty about whether violence

prevention work will prove a serious programmatic or funding priority and how to make it a priority if funding proves limited. Nonetheless, local actors in conflict zones and high-risk regions must redouble their efforts to manage ongoing disputes and involve community stakeholders in publicly calling for peaceful elections. In this regard, civil society, religious bodies, and the media have important roles to play. Their efforts can be amplified by the support of external actors.

### ***Civil Society, Religious Bodies, and the Media***

Civil society is a diverse sector with strong and well-established organizations as well as a proliferation of new or underdeveloped agencies. As the civil society sector has gained in relevance and credibility, so too have the number of civil society groups overtly or covertly organized by government actors or political parties. Frequently called government nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) or political party nongovernmental organizations (PPONGOs), these partisan organizations may muddle information exchanges. For example, when leading nonpartisan NGOs condemn the elections as lacking credibility, PPONGOs counter those claims in an effort to cause doubt or confusion. Nevertheless, many credible civil society groups play a very positive “watchdog” role in civic education, election monitoring, and community dispute resolution purposes. These organizations are well positioned to take a leading role in violence prevention and credible information sharing during upcoming elections.

Religious bodies have generally played a positive and nonpartisan role in recent election cycles, and some have facilitated events such as candidate debates. Religious leaders who call for nonviolent conflict resolution and for youths to resist being used as political pawns have proven to be effective in persuading citizens against fighting. Archbishop John Onaiyekan and the Sultan of Sokoto, Mohammad Sa’ad Abubakar, who cochair the Nigeria Inter Religious Council, represent just one well-known example of faith leaders joining forces to set an example of interreligious cooperation, to speak out in favor of peaceful coexistence, and to deescalate tensions.

Readers know that a large number of the print media are owned by proprietors from southern geopolitical zones. One concern, therefore, would be that these media houses could overemphasize stories and opinions that are unfavorable to the ruling party’s zoning policy, a policy that “disqualifies” the incumbent president’s candidacy. Alternatively, media outlets perceived as having a northern slant could give greater space to reports and opinions that favor zoning or northern candidates. If such conflicts of interest arise and are not properly managed, they could call the impartiality of election reporting into question. Specifically with regards to news about electoral violence, it is vital that the public trusts media outlets and that the media remains fair and impartial in portraying conflicts so as to inform rather than inflame.

### ***External Actors***

In recent Nigerian elections, external actors have played consequential roles by supporting voter-education get-out-the-vote efforts and election-monitoring projects. These efforts are most meaningful when allied with local organizations and stakeholders. A promising example of this is the recently launched Project 2011 Swift Count, a partnership of the Federation of Muslim Women’s Associations in Nigeria, Justice Development and Peace/Caritas Nigeria, the Nigerian Bar Association, and the Transition Monitoring Group, supported by the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the UK Department for International Development. Together, these organizations will train thousands of vote tabulators to conduct a parallel count as votes are cast. Programs like

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***Nigeria must invest and reinvest in government-led initiatives for peace and conflict management at the federal and state levels.***

these can play important roles by independently verifying election results, providing real-time qualitative feedback, and assuring the Nigerian public that nonpartisan teams are on the ground to promote fairness and restore public faith in the entire process. Civil society's appetite for such activities is not donor driven, and prodemocracy or human rights NGOs are just two of many groups interested in such election-related activities. There are a number of labor groups and other professional or religious bodies that may organize activities with or without donor financing,<sup>39</sup> though external financing and expertise can improve quality, depth, and coverage.

International actors must focus significantly more attention on the matter of violence prevention specifically. Nigerian security forces require additional training toward managing and deescalating tension, but strong local partners with proven track records and community credibility are already situated to serve in early-warning and conflict prevention capacities at the community level. More broadly, external powers should not be quick to embrace Nigerian leaders brought to power by clearly fraudulent elections. Electoral rectification may be sought via INEC and the judiciary, as happened to an encouraging extent after the 2007 elections. Whatever the vehicle for redress, external powers must continue to encourage Nigerian leaders to settle for nothing short of a credible mandate.

## **Recommendations toward a Nonviolent Political Transition in 2011**

- President Jonathan must continue to support credible, nonviolent elections and government bodies must make every effort to speed up remaining decisions relevant to INEC's organization and management of elections.
- As a country with an established history of communal unrest, Nigeria must invest and reinvest in government-led initiatives for peace and conflict management at the federal and state levels. Where such government infrastructure exists—the Abuja-based Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, for example—adequate funding and capacity-building resources must be made available. Where it does not yet exist—agencies such as the Electoral Offenses Commission—it must be promptly constituted, if only in view of future elections. Such government initiatives must be fiscally and infrastructurally sacrosanct. Too frequently in Nigeria, turnover in government leadership spells the demise of the previous leadership's initiatives. Peace and conflict management programs must remain a consistent priority.
- Regional and international actors are needed as ongoing champions of electoral reform and as funders for well-established local actors with not only long-standing presence in the communities they serve but also violence prevention experience and preestablished networks to call upon. Partnering with established local actors is especially important given the short time remaining before elections.
- Communities currently lacking political, community, or religious leaders positioned to diffuse conflicts and deescalate tensions would be well served to identify and support credible actors who can play such roles.
- Civil society, religious leaders, and citizens should encourage high voter turnout. One recent survey reports that while only 35 percent of survey respondents felt confident that 2011 elections would be free and fair, 81 percent are willing to vote.<sup>40</sup> A remarkable opportunity exists to encourage this eagerness for credible democracy by encouraging citizens to cast their ballots. High voter turnout puts more citizen witnesses at the polling stations, discouraging mischief making and encouraging the proper usage of ballots, increasing chances that votes cast will be votes counted.

- Particular attention must be paid to preexisting conflict zones. Local and international actors should share or avail themselves of conflict-mapping reports that offer detailed assessments of high-risk regions around the country and that would assist them in prioritizing conflict prevention efforts. Conflict-mapping data should be distributed as widely as possible to maximize information sharing and encourage donor and actor coordination.<sup>41</sup>
- Local civil society groups must be proactive and take the initiative for violence-prevention planning and implementation. Contingency plans for outreach work that can be implemented even without external funding will be important.
- Lessons learned from programs such as ActionAid Nigeria's recent intervention in Anambra must be collated and shared widely for adaptation and adoption in other states and at the federal level.
- Social media offer exciting possibilities for early-warning systems as well as election-monitoring activities. Such systems should be approached with caution, however, as new media can just as easily be used to spread inflammatory rumors and false information. Trusted citizen monitors should be culled from experienced, preexisting early-warning networks originally developed at the community level for monitoring ongoing tensions.
- Conflict prevention programs must reach the right audience. Politicians and security agents, for example, can either serve as catalysts of conflict or play irreplaceable roles in conflict management and violence prevention. Direct and sustained engagement of these two important groups remains a neglected aspect of violence-prevention initiatives.
- Nigeria's judiciary is poised to play a critical role in resolving electoral disputes. Giving all necessary support to judges, including special training, must be a priority so that cases may be processed more efficiently. Community leaders should encourage citizens to recall the unprecedented number of judicially overturned election results from the 2007 polls. Faith that electoral redress is available may itself discourage citizens from taking justice into their own hands.
- International development partners and the Nigerian government must assist in diligently monitoring immediate triggers of electoral violence and in combating long-standing structural causes of unrest, such as the faltering economy, the poor provision of basic services, endemic corruption, and the allotment of benefits such as jobs and scholarships based on controversial, outdated notions of "indigeneship."
- INEC must be afforded every manner of support in its efforts to craft an independent and credible electoral management body and to handle the massive voter registration process. While the new chair's role will undoubtedly be significant, his reform efforts must be supported in order to meet with comprehensive success.

## Notes

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