

ELECTION UPDATE

Vol. 1 No. 2

Nigeria's Poll Shift: Implications and Concerns

The postponement of Nigeria's 2015 elections from the initial date of 14 and 28 February to 28 March and 11 April signals a major dent on the credibility of the elections and provides pointers that the elections would not proceed smoothly.

Although the Constitution and the Electoral Act allows the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to postpone elections, and to hold elections within a time frame of "not later than thirty days before the expiration of the term of office of the last holder of that office" (which in the present case is 28 April 2015), the shift may have shaken confidence in the electoral process and throws up political, economic and diplomatic consequences.

The postponement of the elections questions the independence of INEC. It clearly demonstrates that INEC's capacity to manage the electoral process could be impinged by the actions of actors outside the electoral system.

The Chairman of INEC, Prof. Attahiru Jega, indicated that the decision to postpone the February elections is predicated on the advisory the Commission received from the office of the National Security Adviser stating "security could not be guaranteed during the proposed period in February for the general elections, and that "the Security Services needed at least six weeks within which to conclude a major military operation against the insurgency in the Northeast".

The advisory further stated "the military will be concentrating its attention in the theatre of operations such that they may not be able



to provide the traditional support they render to the Police and other agencies during elections".

Nigerians are concerned that the military decided to commence such major operations at the specific period INEC had proposed to hold the 2015 elections. They are particularly worried that the military was aware of the election several months before it made its decision. For many, the fact that the President who is a candidate in the election is also the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces raises suspicion of manipulation of the political process and interference in the work of INEC.

As the body statutorily responsible for the conduct of elections, it is the duty of INEC to coordinate and direct other actors. There are fears that the government and its security services are using insecurity as an excuse to postpone the elections even when INEC had indicated its preparedness to conduct the elections.

The failure to guarantee the security of the elections raises questions about the commitment of the government to support INEC to enable the Commission conduct free, fair and democratic elections. It is critical that the government does

not use security concerns as a pretext for impeding the democratic process, especially noting that the military had earlier indicated their readiness to provide security during the elections, only to change its position a few days to the election.

In addition to denting the credibility of the 2015 polls and eroding public confidence in the electoral process, the postponement of the February polls could provide a strong basis for a challenge of the election outcomes. The opposition had said that the poll shift is an act of political interference in the electoral process and described the action as “ a major setback to Nigeria’s democracy”. In an environment where the outcome of elections has historically been marked by disputes, and where the dominant perception of the voters and candidates is that the electoral process is open to manipulation, the postponement of polls could be a call for disputes and violence. Fur-



thermore, the postponement of the February polls brings along adverse economic consequences. By deepening the political uncertainty in Nigeria, the poll shift has affected the economic plans and decisions of citizens, politicians and investors, putting further strain on an already struggling economy.

Reports indicate that the Naira slid to a record low after the polls delay. At the Nigerian Stock Exchange (NSE), investors reacted negatively to the election postponement as market value dropped significantly. Analysts expect the decline in the equities market to continue, at least, in the pre-election period, as a result of the strong correlation between the performance of the Nigerian equities market and investors’ perception of domestic risks.

At the diplomatic level, the election postponement has affected the relations between the

Nigerian government and its Western partners, particularly the United States (US), the UK and members of the European Union (EU). The US expressed deep disappointment at the decision to postpone the elections, while the EU expressed serious concerns at the poll shift, stating that security must not be politicized. In its criticism of the poll shift, the UK stated that the shift of the elections was a cause for concern. Considering the several adverse consequences that have followed the postponement of the February elections, there is an urgent need for remedial measures. Three key measures are critical.

Firstly, INEC must ensure that there are no further postponements of the elections. Further postponement of the 2015 polls could push the limits beyond the constitutionally allowed period and knock Nigeria into an unchartered territory and raise questions about the commitment of the country to democracy.

Secondly, the government and the military have a duty to unequivocally and publicly declare support to the INEC to enable the Commission conduct the 2015 elections on the dates set. This public declaration of support is essential in mitigating tensions and restoring public confidence in the electoral process.

As part of that commitment, the government should provide INEC with all the resources it needs to effectively carry out and complete the preparations for the elections. In addition, the military and other security services should demonstrate a commitment to subject themselves to civilian authority and control, and to honour legitimate requests made by INEC to enable the Commission conduct the 2015 elections

Finally, the postponement of the 2015 polls has given rise to all sorts of rumours and conspiracy theories, which may fuel tensions and further divide the country. INEC and other stakeholders, including the government and political parties, must provide effective communication to counter negative and false information in the public domain. The Commission in particular should provide regular updates on its preparations for the elections to reassure the public that the electoral process is indeed on course.

NIGERIA CIVIL SOCIETY SITUATION ROOM: *Secretariat:*
c/o Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre,
Plot 1059 Guzape District, off Edwin Clark Way via Gilmor
Junction, Guzape, Abuja, Nigeria. Tel: 0903299919,
09095050505

Printed with support from

