

Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room

Rivers State December Suspended Elections Observations Summary

Issued: Monday, 19th December 2016

Introduction

These notes provide highlights of issues observed in the Saturday, December 10th 2016 poll. The Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room and Stakeholder Democracy Network had a limited number of observers deployed for the poll, so coverage of local governments across the state was prioritized and limited in some areas. Research was conducted before and after the poll.

The widespread disruption and interference has been acknowledged by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), with partisan allegations from the major political parties reinforcing the consensus around a badly damaged poll. For this reason we are summarizing observations and research around key themes:

Security Services Interference in the Election:

The direct intervention by security forces to truncate voting and unit level collation was unprecedented and widely reported within the Rivers South East Senatorial district.

Combined teams of police and military personnel were reported intervening to collect election materials and electoral officials from locations where either voting or unit level collation were ongoing. In some cases incidents appear to have been staged to justify their intervention.

Incidents where detailed accounts were gathered included Bodo Ward 3 (St Pius School) where one voter was shot and killed, B Dere Ward 4, and Bomu Ward 7 all in Gokana Local Government.

Each of these incidents detailed combined teams of police and military personnel operating independently of the security already put in place at these polling units. In Bodo Ward 3 detailed allegations were made that the ward was violently disrupted by SARS personnel who shot in the air to disperse voters, observers, reporters and party agents.

Aside the incidents directly observed allegations were made to our observers on the day of this conduct across Gokana Local Government, in parts of Eleme, and in Andoni Ward 9. Allegations after the poll suggest an even wider pattern of intervention. The consistent similarity of incidents suggests that this behavior was systematic and pre-planned.

Delays Due to Disruption:

The deployment of the poll was disrupted further by objections and blockages to the distribution of materials which occurred at both the state and local government level. This intermingled with operational choices made by INEC that made the election more vulnerable to such delay.

Before the poll, observers noted disputes that delayed distribution of materials for much of Thursday December 8th which had knock on effects for deployment across the state. In Gokana, Khana , and Eleme Electoral officers confronted by these delays made choices to retain materials at local government level with supervising officers who would then go to their wards (RACs) early on Saturday 10th.

INEC has reported that further disputes with party agents were a key driver to delays in the distribution of materials and the start of the election. In Khana Local Government this led to further confusion that seems likely to have been exploited. Interviews with voters from several wards reporting in post election had claims that no election took place at all and INEC consistently claims that the reason that multiple closed wards were due to obstructive delays.

Yet the announced results for Khana Local Government in the Senatorial elections put voter turnout across the local government at 46% (by far the highest in the state outside the discredited Tai LGA March results)

Manipulation of Results:

The collation of results has been a difficult area for the Situation Room to comment on. After security personnel began shutting down, unit level collation observers were withdrawn from Gokana and other local governments on safety grounds.

The results released to date by INEC have been incomplete and without breakdowns. This has made it almost impossible to make more than general comments on the quality of results in a poll that was already beset by serious disruption.

Post election interviews have raised very serious allegations about the conduct of the collation process in Gokana Local Government. Interviews with ad-hoc staff detail some of them being taken to the house of a key political candidate in the zone, that some were assaulted for not 'delivering', and that a systematic process of re-writing results began at this location.

It is also alleged that the same candidate intervened directly at the INEC Local Government Office and at the same time ejected party agents from the office at this point. INEC has again reported violence and intimidation of its officers across the state in relation to the completion of results. Post election interviews and incidents observed on the day suggest that both of the major political parties used all available means to gain control of electoral officials and results sheets and used a combination of bribery, intimidation and violence to secure desired outcomes.

Political Sponsorship of Disruption, Manipulation & Violence:

In all of the reports of violence and disruption there was hardly any incident that was reported, arising from spontaneous local disputes.

Pre and post election interviews described systematic interventions where activity was sponsored, pre-meditated and paid for in advance.

Pre election interviews found party supporters of the ruling party describing assurances that they had received that in this poll security services would be “with them” and provide all necessary support.

Pre and post election interviews described both political parties attempting to bribe and intimidate INEC officials into allocating “ad hoc” positions in their direction. Post election interviews suggested that both parties had succeeded in placing their own supporters as officials across much of the state.

Interviews also described a situation where intimidation was so systematic that electoral officials felt they faced serious violence unless they accepted payments - made more credible by the reports of assaults and abductions that have emerged from interviews and from INEC.

Violence Against Electoral Officials, Voters, and Security Services:

The poll recorded at least 3 deaths, which have been widely reported:

- Police DSP Alkali and his colleague in an ambush Omok (five missing colleagues have reportedly been recovered.)
- Mbeari John Meebari shot and killed when SARS police intervened at St Pius School Bodo.

Investigation into these incidents needs to lead follow up on violence that occurred in multiple locations, some with reported direct links to the major political parties, while the role of security services in instigating violence must also be independently reviewed.

Post election interviews made it clear that ad hoc staff faced intolerable pressures and actual violence if they did not comply with demands from political actors. INEC has reported both assaults and abduction of staff. This threatens the viability of elections at its most basic level - if officials are unable to proceed with some confidence over their safety, elections will quickly cease to be functional.

Key Responses:

The Situation Room has already made calls for specific responses to the December 10th elections. These have been updated as follows:

- Investigation into violence, intimidation and bribery in relation to control of results from the Rivers polls noting that serious and credible allegations have been made against both major political parties in the country
- INEC should immediately release a breakdown of results for all areas in the state (to unit level) for both the March and December polls. This should be made available to political parties, observers, and the media along with reports of all incidents affecting the credibility of the poll.
- An investigation into the directly observed reports of security services interfering in polls and urgent remedial steps to prevent any future abuse by political office holders.
- An investigation of the circumstance leading to the killing of Police DSP Alkali and bringing to account all persons responsible for his killing and for all other deaths that occurred during December 10, 2016 legislative re-rerun elections in Rivers State.

We note that INEC has already indicated that there are over 70 incidents affecting the polls and staff and that the Inspector General of Police has publicly committed to a high level investigation.

As the incidents reported in Rivers state involve security personnel we also call for additional steps to ensure independent review of their conduct.

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