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## Why Nigeria Must Have Credible Elections

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This week, Nigeria will hold what will be its sixth General Elections since 1999. The Presidential and National Assembly elections are scheduled Saturday, 16th February and the Governorship, State Houses of Assembly and Area Council Elections in FCT, will hold on Saturday, 2nd March 2019.

It is no exaggeration to say this singular electoral event has generated plenty of interest, and the country is under a global microscope. This is not surprising. Nigeria is Africa's largest democracy and economy; and it's also the most populous, with an estimated 200million people. Within the sub-region of West Africa, Nigeria's voice and economy loom large too. So there are tangible reasons for the international interest in the country's affairs. Thus it's in Nigeria's best interest and that of its citizenry, to ensure that these elections are credible.

But what does a credible election entail? On the list of democratic tenets and principles, the credibility of an election holds a significant place. During any discourse on democratic governance, it maintains a front row and forms a central theme in the various declarations and protocols of universal agencies, such as the United Nations (UN), and regional ones, such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS).

Each body outlines descriptions of the importance of free, fair and credible democratic elections; hinging electoral processes on the free will of people to decide their leaders. For instance, Article 21 of the UN Declaration of human rights highlights the "right to freely choose representatives." And the "will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government..."

The African Union's Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance Article 17 in Chapter 7 calls for "state parties to re-affirm their commitment to regularly holding transparent, free and fair elections, in accordance with the AU's Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa; while Section 11, Article 6 of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, highlights "preparation and conduct of elections and the announcement of results shall be done in a transparent manner."

On the domestic level, the 1999 Nigerian Constitution (as amended) and Electoral laws, also demand that an electoral system embraces inclusiveness, participation, transparency and accountability.

As part of the comity of nations, Nigeria is a signatory to these international frameworks and is equally obliged to adhere to set values in her domestic laws and regulations in the administration and conduct of elections.

The four broad areas usually defined as pre-requisites for a credible election and which must

be operational in an electoral process are: inclusiveness, transparency, accountability and competitiveness. Under these areas, a long list of determinants serve as indicators for evaluating whether an electoral process is credible or not. These include but are not limited to the following: political actors and their parties must be allowed to compete in a process that is peaceful and unrestricted; every adult franchise must have equal voting rights be allowed to freely exercise this democratic right; the sorting, counting process should be transparent and open to the polling agents, media and election observers to access and evaluate the entire process. Others are the impartiality of a national election management body and objectivity and fairness of election administration.

The linkage between a credible election and political stability cannot be overemphasized. This is because there are far-reaching consequences for a country, where political actors feel that the electoral process is tainted, riddled with exclusion, or unfair. The violence, bloodshed, loss of lives and destruction of property witnessed in several countries attests to this fact. Kenya and Zimbabwe for example still bear the scars of this; while the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Venezuela are currently in the throes of turmoil, as a consequence of disputed elections.

Thus it is clear, peaceful and violence-free elections is highly essential. It reinforces credibility of the system and confers legitimacy on a government. This in turn promotes democracy and good governance which are indicators for development and underscore economic growth strategies towards a better society. It is important to note that Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)16 which says: “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels,” is another clear pointer in this direction. Goal 16 unambiguously states what is already known: Business, development and economic growth can only thrive in a peaceful and stable environment.

The key pillars highlighted above are essential for a credible election, and are part of what Nigeria’s election management body known as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), must institutionalise. Nigeria’s electoral system must be as a matter of course, be “effective, transparent and accountable.”

In recent months, INEC has demonstrated its willingness to conduct an inclusive, participatory and fair electoral process. Its guidelines and regulations which were released in January, say as much. The journey has however not been without some nudging from Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) who have proactively kept the election management body on its toes, by reminding

it of its obligations towards the citizenry and nation, at large. For example, INEC has said the use of the Smart Card Reader for the accreditation and voting procedure, is mandatory. This is a step to eliminate any attempts at fraudulent practices at the point of voting. The Commission has also introduced two reforms as frameworks to enable marginalized groups exercise their democratic rights, unhindered. These legal instruments are targeted at Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Persons With Disabilities (PWDs). While this is commendable, it remains to be seen how it will work in practice, especially with regards to the former group. From the prism of logistics and insecurity for IDP voting, huge difficulties still remain.

Parts of the North of Nigeria are still fraught with security challenges due to the decade-long insurgency. As recent as December 2018 and January, fresh spates of attacks from Boko Haram and banditry in Borno, Zamfara, Sokoto states saw thousands forcibly moved from their homes. Capturing a population in flight for a voting and accreditation procedure remains at best uncertain.

Nonetheless, INEC has publicly pledged its commitment to ensuring that no IDP is disenfranchised, and towards this end has outlined voting locations, election categories amongst other components of the process. Similarly, it has assured Nigeria’s estimated 25 million PWDs, that their right to vote is guaranteed by

the new framework and assistive tools it will make available on Election Day.

Suffice to say, Nigerians are expecting an open and fair process; and a peaceful one too, which is felt will go some way in building trust and confidence in the process, and strengthen democratic governance. Still, these public expectations are helped in no small way by efforts of CSOs such as Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, the coordinating platform for civil society engagement on governance and democracy. Its sustained push for impartial electoral frameworks and credible electoral administration will continue, because it believes that these are some of the principles which need to be institutionalised, in order to entrench political stability and economic growth.

The recent launch of a Threshold Document which comprises minimum expectations and best practices from stakeholders before, during and after the general elections, is just one of several actions taken, to promote openness and accountability in Nigeria’s electoral system. INEC’s conduct of the elections will be measured against yardsticks contained in the Threshold document.

The 2019 General Elections present an opportunity to harness and enshrine all the obligatory democratic principles, values and themes towards holding credible elections.

## **NIGERIA CIVIL SOCIETY SITUATION ROOM**

Secretariat: c/o Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC),  
Plot 451 Gambo Jimeta Crescent, off Nasir El-Rufai Crescent, via Gilmor Junction,  
Guzape District, Abuja, Nigeria.

Tel: 09032999919, 09095050505; Email: [situationroom@placng.org](mailto:situationroom@placng.org)

Website: <http://situationroom.placng.org>