



IMO STATE: Election Security Threat Assessment

Key Risk Factors:

- The riverine communities in Imo state also present a unique security challenge that would require keen monitoring throughout the election period.
- Orlu LGA, the hometown of the incumbent Hope Uzodinma is another area to watch as candidates would be keen to claim victory there.
- Secessionist agitation: IPOB has vowed that there will be no election in the State. The Nov 2023 Government Election is adjudged to be highly vulnerable in Imo State due to the activities of separatist agitators.

Key Mitigating Factors:

- To restore voters' confidence in their ability to cast ballots in an election, the government should negotiate a cease-fire agreement with the secessionist movement.
- Various campaigns should be launched to educate candidates and supporters about the value of peaceful elections.
- Increased inter agency collaboration and support security outfits in the state and the region would likely be enough to forestall breakdown of law and order during the election.

Brief History of Imo State:

Imo State was created on 3 February 1976 out of the old East Central State by the then regime of General Murtala Mohammed. Abia State was carved out of Imo State in the state creation exercise of 1991. Situated in the South East zone, Imo State covers an area of 5,530 square kilometers. Imo State shares boundaries with Enugu and Ebonyi States to the north, Anambra State to the west, Rivers State to the south and in the North and Rivers State to the South, Cross River and Akwa Ibom States to the east. Imo State derives its name from the Imo River, which takes its course from the Okigwe/Awka upland. It has Owerri as its capital and largest city. The state is divided into twenty-seven (27) local governments areas (LGAs).



POLITICS AND POLITICAL PARTIES

Like in most parts of the country, politics is big business in Imo State. The position of government as the main source of economic opportunities has created disincentives for opposition politics. This political economy sets the ground for the evolution of a one-dominant party system in the state. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) has produced all governors in the state since the return to civil rule. The ascendancy of the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) at the state level is evidenced by the gradual disappearance of opposition parties in the state House of Assembly. Presently, out of 27 Houses of Assembly members in Imo state, 25 are members of the ruling party. Apart from PDP, which became an opposition party after a supreme court judgement in 2019, the emergence of the Labour Party (LP) during the 2023 general elections has brought a shocking wave in the political environment of the south-east region. Although the governorship election in the state is contested by

candidates of 17 political parties, the candidates of the APC, PDP, and LP are thought to be frontrunners in the contest.¹

The Nov 11 elections will be keenly contested by the following political parties and their candidates; APC Candidate: Hope Odidika Uzodimma, Labour Party Candidate: Senator Athanasius Achonu, PDP Candidate: Samuel Nnaemeka Anyanwu, AA Candidate: Ogunewe Lincoln Keonyemere Jack

SECURITY PREPAREDNESS FOR THE ELECTION

According to the Nigerian Police Force, security has been strengthened in the state towards ensuring a hitch-free governorship election in the state. This came just as the Acting Inspector-General of Police, Mr Kayode Egbetokun spoke at a meeting with strategic police managers and media briefing to highlight policies, breakthroughs, and achievements of the Nigeria Police Force in the last five weeks. The Nigerian Police Force Public Relations Officer has announced robust security measures, including the deployment of drones, in anticipation of the forthcoming governorship elections scheduled for November 11 in the states of Kogi, Imo, and Bayelsa.² Meanwhile, no fewer than 2,300 soldiers will be deployed for the November 11, 2023, governorship election in Imo State. This was affirmed by the Imo Resident Electoral Commissioner, REC, Professor Sylvia Agu, during a media round table, organized in Owerri for journalists, by the International Press Centre, IPC, in collaboration with the European Union, EU.³

SYNTHESIS OF SECURITY THREAT

- **Secessionist agitation:** IPOB has vowed that there will be no election in the State. The Nov 2023 Government Election is adjudged to be highly vulnerable in Imo State due to the activities of separatist agitators. The state has experienced attacks on security personnel, destruction of police stations, stealing of arms, burning of INEC facilities, in-stealing fear into the minds of citizens, political kidnapping, murder, destruction of property and disruption of political gatherings, attacks on registration centres, and polling units, destruction of electoral materials and billboards, kidnapping and killing of politicians and their families. Local government areas likely to be affected- Orsu, Orlu, Oru-East, Ohaji-Egbema, Ngor-Okpala, Ejihime-Mbano, Isiala Mbano, Okigwe, Njaba, Mbaitolu, Oguta, Onuimo, etc. Those who are mostly vulnerable include: INEC personnel, security agents, observer groups, media, and the electorates.
- **Political racketeering/kidnapping:** Abduction of political opponents to deter them from achieving their ambition; Burning of their houses and properties; Attacks on their families and loved ones. Politicians often use thugs/criminals to kidnap opponents and disorganise the process before or during the election. Political racketeering/kidnapping is not frequent in the state. However, the possibility is very high and may not be ruled out in an insecure environment.
- **Political Thuggery:** Thuggery is very frequent and widely spread in Imo State, vulnerable youths are accessible by politicians for thuggery and other criminal activities. Thuggery impedes the emergence of credible candidates, electoral integrity, and outcomes. Areas likely to be affected: Ngor-Okpala, Isiala Mbano, Ehime Mbano, Abo-Mbaise, Ahiazu-Mbaise, Ideato North, Orlu, Obowo, Ihitte-Uboma. Disruption of the electoral process; Snatching of Ballot Box; Abduction and Killing of political opponents; Violent activities; Burning of electoral materials; Vote trading- Buying and Selling **Targets:** Election materials, results, ballot boxes, burning of collation centres and INEC offices and materials, etc. The election may be prone to violence because of the activities of party thugs. INEC staff, materials, and security agents are highly vulnerable. The probability is very high and impacts significantly if it happens.
- **Desperate Politicians:** Politicians who are not sure of winning the election may resort to violence. Recruitment of electoral thugs; Vote trading (Buying and Selling); intimidation of INEC staff and electorates, persuasion of electorates to vote their candidates; forgery of electoral materials; comprise of the process through monetary inducement, fake civil society and community-based groups, desperate individuals working for their paymaster. The occurrence is frequent and widely spread. Areas likely to be affected are Obowo, Ihite-Uboma, Isiala-Mbano, Ehime-Mbano, Ideato South, Nkwere, Ohaji/Egbema, Okigwe, Ikeduru, Mbaitolu, Abo-Mbaise, Ahiazu-Mbaise. Their activities will impact heavily on the peaceful conduct of the process (before, during and after). Their targets are: Security agents; INEC staff

¹ <https://inecnigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/List-of-Candidates-Imo-State.pdf>

² <https://businessday.ng/politics/article/police-to-deploy-drones-in-bayelsa-kogi-imo-elections/>

³ <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/08/2300-soldiers-for-poll-imo-rec/>

and materials; Opposition parties; Electorates; Government assets and Politicians etc. The change in this happening is very high and will impact significantly to the process and outcome.

- **Delay in arrival of election materials:** Late arrival of electoral materials at the various polling units and locations may lead to suspicion leading to youth unrest, voter apathy, and loss of confidence in the process. This is not so frequent in the state, but it is likely to occur in slum communities, those ravaged by insecurity, and climate change, and others in far way local communities that are not easily accessible to riverine locations. Areas likely to be affected: Eninihitte Mbaise, Ideato North and South, Oguta, Ohaji/Egbema, Ngor-Okpala, Okigwe, Obowo, Ihitte Uboma, Orsu, Orlu, Oru. The election will be vulnerable due to delays in the delivery of electoral materials by INEC and late arrival of the personnel. INEC staff and security personnel are highly vulnerable.
- **Fake news, Disinformation/Misinformation:** The election will be highly vulnerable, and fake news will be the order of the day. All would be affected. CDD and other organizations working on fact-checking are expected to live up to expectations and prevent all attempts to misinform the people and stakeholders before, during, and after the election. Propaganda/Spreading of fake news and rumours to discourage voters from coming out, particularly in areas they won't win. Their target is to disrupt the entire process. Perpetrators are thugs, politicians, agitators, and their supporters.
- **Partisan Conduct of Actors** - These impacts negatively on the integrity of the process; Unprofessional conduct. This is very frequent, widely spread, and likely to occur before, during, and after the elections. Perpetrators are bad eggs within INEC, security institutions, fake CSOs/CBOs and media etc. The targets include electorates, Observer Groups, INEC staff, Media, CSOs, CBOs, Party thugs and loyalists, etc. Areas likely to be affected are all the LGAs except the Owerri zone.

VIOLENCE HOT-SPOTS

The wave of violence by unknown gunmen against Imo citizens has escalated a few days to the general elections. Despite efforts of security agencies, killings by unknown gunmen have surged in many parts of the State. Imo residents live in fear of being attacked in their homes or on the streets, especially in Ideato North, Arondizuogu, Okigwe, among other places. Most of the attacks frequently target innocent people, politicians, security services, government officials, and facilities.

- In Orsu LGA, thousands of terrified natives have abandoned their communities, leaving behind their cosy homes and productive farmlands.
- The riverine communities in Imo state also present a unique security challenge that would require keen monitoring throughout the election period.
- Orlu LGA, the hometown of the incumbent Hope Uzodinma is another area to watch as candidates would be keen to claim victory there. Uzodinma's administration saw the outbreak of the Orlu Crisis and a military invasion by the Nigerian Army to uproot Biafran separatists.
- Owerri LGA, which houses the seat of power is an important area to watch security-wise. With its population and ease of access, all candidates would seek to win in the town where they intend to govern from.
- Ehime Mbano Local Government Area of the state, where hapless security operatives were recently burnt alive inside their operational vehicles by gun men operating in the state.

MITIGATING FACTORS

In spite of foregoing ominous scenario, the likelihood of large-scale violence in the forthcoming election range between low to medium. This is because of a number of mitigating factors.

First, the 17 political parties involved in the election had signed a Peace Accord which observers say is holding in spite of occasional fracas between supporters of the APC and opposition parties. On the other hand, different initiatives have been held to sensitize candidates and supporters on the importance of peaceful elections.

Second, Imo is a small state with only a total of about 2.4 million registered voters. The efforts of the police led by Acting IGP Kayode Egbetokun along with the support of other security outfits in the state and the region would likely be enough to forestall breakdown of law and order during the election. Should there be violence, it could be localised and rapidly quelled to avoid it spreading to other areas.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- As Imo participate in the first staggered elections to be organised under the President Bola Ahmed Tinubu led administration and under the current leadership of INEC, there are important lessons for Imolites and Nigerians to take away from the process.
- The government agencies, especially the judiciary should be sensitive to the impact of their work on elections. Judgements on on-going criminal prosecution coming on the eve of the elections as well as the adjournment of hearing on eligibility suit of a candidate well ahead of the election date risk being interpreted as politically motivated and calculated to determine the outcome of the election.
- Ahead of the elections, INEC should make adequate arrangements for early and secure transportation of election materials and personnel. While logistics management has traditionally been a challenge in the election cycle, it is particularly crucial in Imo State. Timely distribution of electoral materials is pertinent in the Imo State governorship election to reduce agitation by electorate at the polling unit that could degenerate to fracas and a breach of the peace.
- Strategic deployment of security agencies should be made to hotspots identified in the report. However, to order avoid clashes between security agencies and secessionist and unknown gun men, government and opinion leaders and traditional rulers should reach out to leaders of the secessionist movement volunteers to desist from interfering with the electoral process.
- Welfare of security agents on election duty should be considered and taken care of before the election on November 11 not to make them more vulnerable.
- Civil society, the media and political parties should not relent in strategic non-violence sensitization programmes especially targeting youths. Furthermore, politicians should publicly declare to uphold the outcome of the election or pursue redress peacefully and in the courts.
- Civil society organisations observing the elections should work with networks and groups for enhanced security. Furthermore, the help-lines made available by security agencies, INEC and civil society groups such as the Situation Room should be made public and well utilised for incidence reporting.
- The social media is expected to trend with the Imo election, however, there is need for restrained and responsible usage to avoid inciting comments and hate speech.