

# POLICY BRIEF

The 2011 elections in northern Nigeria post-electoral violence: origins and response

[www.nsrp-nigeria.org](http://www.nsrp-nigeria.org)



.....

**The April 2011 elections were considered to be one of Nigeria's fairest polls; they were also among the bloodiest in the country's history.**

Most of the violence occurred after the election, as the results of the presidential poll began to become clear and almost all of it occurred in ten northern states. An estimated 938 people were killed and 735 were injured in three days of rioting and targeted ethnic-religious killing. In response to the violence, the government called in the army, and subsequently appointed a non-judicial Panel of Investigation.

The brief recommends a number of measures to reduce violence around future elections, including addressing the underlying cause of violence – particularly through employment generation, educational reform, better preparedness and co-ordination by security agencies, improved internal democracy of political parties, electoral reform, civic education and the promotion of restraint and balance by the media.

## BACKGROUND

### Elections in Nigeria have frequently been characterised by malpractice and violence, and the two elections that preceded the 2011 elections, in 2003 and 2007, were particularly flawed.

In an attempt to reduce the likelihood of further deterioration, and the threat to national stability that could result, a number of reforms were introduced in advance of the 2011 elections and a new chair was appointed to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC).

However, the financial autonomy and administrative independence of INEC as assured by the 1999 Constitution (as amended) and appointment of its chairman and commissioners is still the responsibility of the president. The 2010 Electoral Act and other reforms also introduced changes to the procedure for appealing election results, effectively making the process of appeal more difficult.

The general elections of April 2011 consisted of three rounds: Senate and House of Representatives held on 9 April (postponed from 2 April, then 4 April); presidential on 16 April (postponed from 9 April); and state governors and state House of Assembly members on 26 April (originally scheduled for 16 April). Governorship elections were only held in 24 of the 36 states as a result of electoral tribunals having overturned the results of earlier elections.

The political tensions that surrounded the presidential election in the north in 2011, which were to lead to violence when its results were announced, were rooted in the longstanding tensions between the north and south of the country. More immediately, however, they were due to the practice of ‘zoning’ key posts – including the presidency – between different regions by the People’s Democratic Party (PDP).

The political tensions that surrounded the presidential election in the north in 2011, which were to lead to violence when its results were announced, were rooted in the longstanding tensions between the north and south of the country.

Though of dubious constitutionality, zoning is an unwritten agreement for the rotation of the presidency between the north and south of Nigeria. When the PDP was formed in 1998, Olusegun Obasanjo, a former army general from the south-west of the country, won the party primaries and was nominated as the presidential candidate in 1999. He went on to be elected with a running mate from the north, Atiku Abubakar, and to serve two terms. Obasanjo made a bid for a third term, which was widely considered unconstitutional, but was frustrated. With Obasanjo’s support, Umaru Yar’Adua, a northerner, emerged as the PDP candidate for the 2007 election, with Goodluck Jonathan, Governor of Bayelsa State in the south-south region, as his running mate. They went on to win an election tainted by extensive malpractice. However, Umaru Yar’Adua was not to complete his first term; after a struggle with illness, he died in 2010, and his vice president, Jonathan, was sworn-in in his place. Soon after this, as the presidential term approached its end, there was contestation in the PDP over Jonathan’s right to contest the presidency in 2011. One faction argued for Jonathan’s right as former vice president and incumbent president to stand; the other held that, under the party’s rotation agreement, the north should be allowed the chance to regain the presidency lost with Yar’Adua’s premature death. Jonathan’s faction prevailed.



Jonathan's main opponent was Muhammadu Buhari, a candidate for the opposition Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), which had been founded in 2009. Buhari had been military head of state from 1983–85 and unsuccessfully contested the presidency in 2003 and 2007. He commanded considerable loyalty among northerners and Muslims, including PDP followers who felt betrayed by both southern interests and the northern party elite who had gone along with Jonathan's candidature. While he was a military ruler, Buhari had been the author of the controversial 'War Against Indiscipline' initiative and was admired by his supporters for his stand against corruption. However, Buhari had little following in the south, where he was perceived to be authoritarian, and even a bigot. There were also allegations of undemocratic practices and corruption within his party. Thus, as the 2011 election approached, longstanding political, regional and religious lines of conflict, shaped by the peculiar circumstances of Yar'Adua's early demise and the outcome of the zoning arrangement, both reinforced north-south tensions and led to the emergence of a serious rift in the politics of the north itself.

## THE ELECTION

The process of registration for the elections, undertaken in January and February 2011, passed relatively smoothly and credibly. For the election itself, the INEC adopted a modified open ballot system, which comprised a two-stage electoral procedure: voters were accredited between 8.30 a.m. and noon, after which sensitive voting materials were delivered; voting by those accredited then followed in the afternoon. On 2 April, the date scheduled for the House of Assembly elections, registration had already begun when it was discovered that some sensitive voting materials had not yet arrived in the country. As a result, all of the elections were postponed by a week. However, once underway, the elections were considered to have been the most credible in Nigeria's history. There were incidents of pre-election violence, including bomb attacks that killed dozens of people in Niger State, however, and some instances of irregular voting. The collation process was the weakest link in the election management process and this led to suspiciously high turnout figures in some states. Despite this, the overall turnout was 53 per cent of registered voters; turnout was highest for the presidential poll. While there was initially strong enthusiasm for voting, this seems to have been tempered by the week-long delay and the cumbersome two-stage electoral procedures.

## THE ELECTION RESULTS

The ruling PDP swept the board, winning the presidency, control of both chambers of the National Assembly, 17 of the 24 contested state governorships and more seats than any other party in all the state assemblies. In the presidential elections, Jonathan won over 22 million votes, carrying 24 of the 36 states, while Buhari gained over 12 million and the third candidate; Nuhu Ribadu of the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) trailed with two million votes. The PDP also won over 60 per cent of the seats in the House of Representatives and Senate. It even captured Kano, a key northern state which had been dominated by the ANPP since 2003. However, the PDP lost two states in the south-west (Ogun and Oyo) to the ACN, a development that allowed the opposition party to consolidate its grip on the region, winning five of its six states. The CPC emerged as the biggest loser, missing the presidency, and winning only one gubernatorial election, in Nassarawa State.

## THE VIOLENCE

While judged by national and international observers to be among the fairest elections in Nigeria's history, the April 2011 elections were to be the bloodiest. As the results of the presidential elections trickled in on 17 April and it became clear that Buhari had lost, his supporters took to the streets in northern towns and cities to protest what they alleged to be the rigging of the results.<sup>1</sup> Three days of rioting and sectarian killings followed in 12 states: Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Sokoto and Zamfara states in the north-west zone; Bauchi, Adamawa, Gombe, Borno, Jigawa and Yobe in the north-east; and Niger State in the north-central zone. The targets were Christians and members of southern ethnic groups believed to have supported Jonathan; their churches, shops and homes were burned. Police stations, offices of the ruling party and electoral commission officers were also targeted, along with the property of members of the northern elite who were considered to have supported the ruling party. Rumours that traditional rulers had been heavily bribed to support Jonathan's candidacy fed attacks on the Emirs of Kano and Zaria. In southern Kaduna, where most of the violence and 80 per cent of the casualties were concentrated, Christians retaliated by attacking Muslim communities. It was estimated that more than 65,000 people were displaced and 350 churches burned. The violence was generally perpetrated with crude weapons such as axes, machetes, sticks and knives, suggesting a degree of spontaneity. The police were initially unable to control the violence and the army had to be called in. These security forces were later accused of excessive use of force, including unlawful killings.

1. Human Rights Watch (2011) 'Nigeria: Post election violence killed 800. 11 May 2011. [www.hrw.org/news/2011/05/16/nigeria-post-election-violence-killed-800](http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/05/16/nigeria-post-election-violence-killed-800).

The Panel on Investigation of Post-Election Violence, chaired by retired Grand Qadi Sheikh Dr Ahmed Lemu, was established on 11 May 2011. Its 22 members were charged with investigating the post-election violence. The Lemu Panel gave the number killed during the violence as 943, with most of the killings occurring in northern Nigeria (Table 1).<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1: Number of persons killed and injured in 2011 post-election violence in northern Nigeria**

State	Killed	Injured
Kaduna	827	71
Bauchi	36	200
Adamawa	26	158
Gombe	20	147
Niger	9	27
Kano	8	22
Katsina	7	59
Borno	3	10
Jigawa	1	38
Yobe	1	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>938</b>	<b>735</b>

Source: Lemu Panel Report

## GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

As the Lemu Panel appointed by the federal government was not established as a Judicial Commission of Enquiry, it did not have the authority or jurisdiction to identify or indict any individual or group of individuals. Its report was released on 10 October 2011 and it found that the root causes of the violence included a widespread desire for change following failed promises to fix infrastructure, corruption, zoning policies that turned the election into an ethno-religious contest, rumour-mongering and negative campaigning, and the individual actions of some candidates.

The report specifically identified the public statements of the Buhari CPC presidential candidate as contributing to the violence. One comment credited to the former military leader shortly before the election that voters should 'guard their vote' was '... misconstrued by many voters to imply

recourse to violence'. Buhari had also said publicly that he was losing confidence in the judiciary. However, as Lemu put it in his report to the president: 'The first and probably the most important major cause [was] the failure on the part of the previous successive regimes since the military handover of power in 1999 to implement the recommendations of various committees, commissions and panels that had taken place in our nation. That failure facilitated the widespread sense of impunity in the culprits and perpetrators of crimes and violence in the Nigerian society'.<sup>3</sup> The report went on to recommend that the security agencies be ordered to prosecute culprits and, mentioning seven reports specifically, that the recommendations of earlier bodies be revisited. The report also recommended stringent action against bribery and corruption, the improvement of general security and changes to the school curriculum to inculcate moral values.

One comment credited to the former military leader shortly before the election that voters should 'guard their vote' was '... misconstrued by many voters to imply recourse to violence'.

## CONCLUSIONS

The efforts made to revamp INEC and election procedures before the elections were fairly successful, although some of the reforms may have reduced the ability of unsuccessful candidates to overturn electoral decisions through the courts. However, the level of violence **after** the elections appeared to have taken security agencies by surprise. The Lemu Panel took a comprehensive view of the root causes of the violence after the elections and advanced wide-ranging, if general, recommendations. Unfortunately, aside from the establishment of a special electoral offences tribunal, it is not clear whether these recommendations are being implemented with any determination, or that those responsible for the violence are being prosecuted.

However, the level of violence **after** the elections appeared to have taken security agencies by surprise.

2. Federal Government of Nigeria (2011) Report of the Federal Government Investigation Panel on 2011 Election Violence and Civil Disturbances, Abuja, September 2011.

3. 'Post-election Violence: Lemu Committee Submit Reports; blames Buhari, by Lanquart' Nairaland. 11 October 2011: [www.nairaland.com/779226/post-election-violence-lemu-committee-submit](http://www.nairaland.com/779226/post-election-violence-lemu-committee-submit).



# LESSONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

## The implementation of the following recommendations would reduce the likelihood and scale of violence around future elections.

### 1. The government should address the root causes of violent conflict in Nigeria

The difficult social conditions in Nigeria create a context in which people readily resort to violence. This brief therefore recommends that:

- The government should take steps to improve governance and intensify the war against corruption so that more resources can be devoted to social provisioning and, in particular, job creation and skills acquisition for the youth.
- The principle of education for all, which is embedded in the Universal Basic Education Act of 2004, should be implemented, especially in the north of Nigeria, to reduce the number of uneducated youth on the streets and prepare them for employment.
- The *Almajiri* reform programme, which aims to integrate the over ten million *Almajiri* into formal education, should be implemented. This will require considerable confidence-building measures, including the engagement of community leaders and monitoring, so that parents can be assured that their children are receiving the religious education they would like for them.

The government should take steps to improve governance and intensify the war against corruption so that more resources can be devoted to social provisioning and, in particular, job creation and skills acquisition for the youth.

### 2. Security agencies should be better trained, and better prepared to anticipate and prevent violence

Specific recommendations would be:

- The security agencies should improve their capacity for proactive planning and improve collaboration between different agencies.
- Security agency staff should undergo improved training on human rights.

- The country's security services should improve their capacities for gathering, analysing and interpreting intelligence.
- The Police Act should be reformed so as to remove the powers of the president to issue instructions to the police to deal with political opponents.

### 3. Political parties should improve their internal democracy

Specific recommendations would be:

- Political parties should discontinue their undemocratic practices, including the failure to follow their own rules; they should stop exacerbating the culture of political violence.
- INEC should be empowered by law to monitor the operations of political parties.

### 4. Electoral reform should be pursued to create more confidence in the electoral system

Specific recommendations would be:

- The government should commence implementation of the recommendations of the Election Reform Committee aimed at improving the impartiality and independence of INEC.

### 5. Government should prioritise civil education

Specific recommendations are:

- Relevant government agencies such as the National Orientation Agency; Ministry of Information; Ministry of Culture, Tourism and National Orientation; and INEC should introduce and implement a comprehensive civic education programme.

### 6. The media should be encouraged to play a more constructive role during elections

Specifically:

- Sanctions are introduced for false and inflammatory reporting.
- The media is monitored and provisions made to ensure equitable access for all candidates.

Supported by



## FIND OUT MORE

20 Mississippi Street, Maitama, Abuja, Nigeria  
[nsrp.comms@ng.britishcouncil.org](mailto:nsrp.comms@ng.britishcouncil.org)  
[www.nsrp-nigeria.org](http://www.nsrp-nigeria.org)

This Policy Brief is based on a paper prepared for NSRP by Jibrin Ibrahim, PhD, Executive Director, Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD). Ibrahim was a member of the Election Reform Committee (ERC).

NSRP is managed by the British Council, International Alert and Social Development Direct (SDD) and funded by the UK department for international development (DFID). Views expressed are those of the authors.

Photography © Jide Adeniyi

© **British Council 2014/E189**

The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities.