



PRELIMINARY REPORT:

ELECTION OBSERVATION AND REPORTING OF THE 25^H FEBRUARY 2023 GENERAL ELECTION IN THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF NIGERIA



INTRODUCTION

The African Women Leaders Forum (AWLF), in collaboration with The Ladies Empowerment and Support Initiative (LEGASI), conducted an observation and reporting exercise during the 2023 Nigerian elections. This initiative was brought together by the shared commitment to promote democracy, strengthen governance, and uphold human rights with a specific focus on protecting the rights of women and marginalized groups. The mission aimed to advance gender parity by facilitating the active involvement of women in both the electoral process and observation mission. This joint effort was significant for its comprehensive approach, bringing to bear the expertise of both organizations in achieving their shared objectives.

Nigeria has enacted the Electoral Act of 2022 with the aim of reforming the electoral system and making it more transparent. The focus of the reforms is to increase transparency in results collation and the timely organization of pre-electoral processes. The new reforms prescribe stiff penalties for electoral offenses, including vote buying, violence, and disruption of the voting process. However, responsibility for enforcing these provisions is not clear among the various stakeholders involved.

In addition, Nigeria ratified the African Charter on Elections, Democracy, and Governance on 24th June 2011, committing to holding free, fair, and transparent elections and ensuring the rule of law, the separation of powers, and the independence of the judiciary. The charter was adopted by the African Union in 2007 with the aim of promoting good governance, democracy, and respect for human rights on the African continent. Nigeria's ratification of the charter demonstrates its commitment to these principles and its efforts to promote democracy and good governance in the country and across Africa.

Despite Nigeria's commitment to holding democratic elections, previous elections have been marred by allegations of malpractice, violence, and vote-rigging. The country is currently facing challenges, such as currency and fuel shortages, that imposed excessive burdens on voters and election officials. Marginalized groups, especially women, continue to face barriers to seeking and obtaining political office. These challenges have contributed to the deterioration of the security situation in Nigeria, including incidents of violent extremism in the North East, armed banditry in the North West, intercommunal conflict in North Central, and threats of secession from the states in the South East. Despite these challenges, Nigeria remains one of Africa's largest democracies and is seen as a key player in the continent's politics and economy.

AWLF in collaboration with LEGASI observed the 2023 Nigerian elections with two key objectives. Firstly, to bring a gender-sensitive approach to election observation, examining issues such as violence against women in the context of elections and ensuring that women could participate fully and equally in the electoral process. Secondly, to assess the extent to which the election process adhered to legal provisions such as the ACDEG and the Constitution.

ELECTION DAY OBSERVATIONS

The voting process ran smoothly in most observed locations, although some voters who were assigned to new polling units encountered difficulty identifying the correct unit. Additionally, the layout of most polling units did not adequately protect the secrecy of the vote, and in more than half of these cases, voters did not mark their ballot in secret.

There were a few instances of malfunction with the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) in some observed polling stations. Observers reported that some key polling procedures were not consistently followed, such as the ticking of the voter register in some polling units and instances of underage voting in Sokoto and Kano.

Observers reported an equal representation of genders among the polling officials, party agents, and observers. The majority of the polling stations were accessible to all voters, including those who needed assistance such as the elderly, lactating mothers, pregnant women, and persons with disabilities who were given priority. Additionally, there were visible women security officials present at the polling stations that were visited.

Media reports and online sources indicated that there was a significant increase in instances of non-voting and disruptions during the elections due to security concerns and the delayed distribution of election materials. Even on February 26th, voting was still ongoing in some polling units across at least six states. However, INEC did not provide adequate information on the number of polling units affected by these issues or any concrete plan to guarantee the right to vote across the nation.

During the collation process, the Election Result Viewing Portal (IREV) did not have the presidential result forms from polling units, causing concerns about the delay in uploading these forms. Only 20% of the total number of forms were uploaded by noon on 26 February, and some of them were illegible which were later explained by INEC to be a result of “technical hitches”.

There was a lack of diversity among the candidates, with only one female candidate participating in the presidential election, minimal representation of young candidates, and a scarce presence of individuals with disabilities as candidates.

Despite these challenges, Nigerians exhibited their commitment to the democratic process. Voters demonstrated remarkable resilience and determination to have their voices heard through the ballot, even waiting for several hours due to logistical issues. Youth engagement was noteworthy, with a significant increase in youth registrants on the voter roll, and National Youth Service Corps members serving as poll workers across the country once again.



CONCLUSION

The AWLF-LEGASI observation mission was dispatched as a brief initiative to monitor the electoral process during the polling day. In the conclusive report, we aim to address various aspects that require enhancement, such as the negative impact on women's political rights resulting from the rejection of proposed laws for inclusion in 2022. Furthermore, the report will discuss the challenges women encounter, including financial and social constraints when they aspire to hold public office. Additionally, the report will comprise an exhaustive evaluation and suggestions for electoral reform.