Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests – welcome to the YIAGA AFRICA Watching The Vote (WTV)’s Preliminary Press Conference on observation plans for the governorship and state assembly elections on March 9, 2019 and the pre-election environment leading up to the elections. This briefing is the first in a series of three planned press conferences to be hosted by YIAGA AFRICA. We equally invite you to join us at the same location on Saturday 9 March 2019 when YIAGA AFRICA will share its Mid-day Situational Statement on the opening of polls and on Sunday 10 March 2019 at 11:00 am when YIAGA AFRICA will share its preliminary statement on the conduct of the elections.

YIAGA AFRICA and Watching The Vote Observation of the 2019 Governorship and State Assembly Elections

On Saturday, 9 March 2019, Nigerians will once again go to the polls to elect their State Governors in 29 States across Nigeria excluding; Kogi, Bayelsa, Edo, Ondo, Anambra, Ekiti and Osun States. The Election will also include the election of the State Houses of Assembly members representing the 991 State constituencies and the Abuja Area Council elections. For these elections a total of 1066 Governorship Candidates contesting in the 29 States and 14, 580 candidates contesting for the State House of Assemblies.

YIAGA AFRICA is a strictly nonpartisan and independent civil society organization without affiliation to any political party, candidate or state agency. YIAGA AFRICA’s Watching The Vote effort includes volunteers representing Nigeria’s diversity: women and men, youth and the elderly, persons with disability, Muslims and Christians from the six geographical zones. YIAGA AFRICA’s observers have all been carefully selected and extensively trained in accordance with strict criteria to ensure their independence and neutrality, are properly accredited with INEC and have signed a project Code of Conduct to uphold standards of impartiality,
objectivity and professionalism. YIAGA AFRICA observes on behalf of all Nigerian people and speaks in their name on the basis of verified data.

For the March 9 Governorship elections, YIAGA AFRICA Watching The Vote will not be deploying the Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT) methodology. As such YIAGA AFRICA will not be verifying the election day result but will be assessing the election day process at the polling units and collation centres. YIAGA AFRICA will deploy a total of 682 observers to observe the elections in 29 states. This comprises 642 stationary observers and 48 roving observers. YIAGA AFRICA will also deploy observers to 642 LGA results collation centers and 29 state collation centers. Our observers will observe the entire election day process including setup of the polling units, accreditation, voting, announcement and posting of the official results and will send in periodic reports to the Watching the Vote National Data Centre located at Floor 01, Benue/Plateau Hall, Transcorp Hilton in Abuja where they will be processed and analysed. This deployment will enable YIAGA AFRICA to provide the most timely and accurate information on the governorship and state assembly elections in 29 states.

Matters Arising and recommendations

As noted in our statement on the February 23, Presidential and National Assembly elections, the elections were characterized by similar shortcomings that marred previous national elections in Nigeria. As in past elections, logistical challenges faced by INEC that resulted in widespread late opening of polling units and malfeasance by political parties compromised the ability of citizens to vote and undermined public confidence in the process. We maintained that Nigeria lost an opportunity to improve the quality of its elections as compared to the 2015 national elections. The elections were not the elections Nigerians expected neither is it the elections Nigerians deserved. The March 9 elections presents INEC and other stakeholders with an opportunity to address all the gaps and shortcomings observed in the February 23 elections. Nigerians deserve an election that inspires confidence and restore hope in electoral democracy. To this end, YIAGA AFRICA notes the following;

1. **Deployment of Election Materials**: YIAGA AFRICA notes the deployment of election materials across the States with at least 27 States confirming the deployment of sensitive and non-sensitive materials in the Local Government Areas of the State. While this is a positive sign, YIAGA AFRICA calls on the Independent National
Electoral Commission (INEC) to ensure a proper coordination and communication with the transport companies/unions providing logistics support to ensure early deployment of materials and personnel to polling units to break the trend of late commencement of polls.

2. **Clarity of Election Day Process:** YIAGA AFRICA notes from its observation of the Presidential Elections the need for INEC to ensure proper communication on the election process to ensure uniformity and strict compliance to the electoral guidelines. This includes the need for all Presiding officers/Assistant Presiding Officers at the Polling units/Voting points to ensure that the smart card readers are shown to be zero at the commencement of accreditation and announce the number of accredited voters at the close of polls before sorting and counting of ballots. There is need for **clarity on who reserves the authority to cancel ballots** and the levels where cancellation will take place.

3. **Electronic Accreditation of voters:** YIAGA AFRICA notes that during the February 23 elections the Smart Card Readers were not used throughout the process of accreditation of voters in 7% of polling units. In another 2% of polling units persons were permitted to vote without a Permanent Voter Card (PVC). This infractions pose a threat to the integrity of the electoral process if not curtailed. INEC should ensure strict compliance with use of the card readers for voter accreditation. Polling officials who disregard the INEC guidelines and regulations should be sanctioned.

4. **Destruction and Attack on INEC Officials, Materials and Structures:** YIAGA AFRICA notes the increasing reports of attacks on INEC officials, materials and structures and calls on the security agencies to effectively deploy security protection to properly secure INEC officials and election materials especially on election day. YIAGA AFRICA condemns the vandalization and destruction of INEC office in Ibesikpo, Akwa Ibom State.

5. **Transparency of the results collation process:** YIAGA AFRICA is concerned with the non-compliance with result collation guidelines by INEC officials especially Presiding Officers, Ward Collations officers and returning officers. INEC should ensure collation centres are accessible to accredited observers. The form EC 40 G should be revised to include details for cancellation for every polling unit canceled. The current form only captures the
name of the polling unit and the total number of registered voters affected without reasons for cancellation. To increase transparency of the collation process, INEC is encouraged to share Form EC40G series with party agents present during the different stages of the collation process.

6. **Posting of Form EC 60 E:** YIAGA AFRICA urges the Commission to fully comply to the Electoral Guideline for the conduct of the general election by posting Forms EC.60E series in all collation centers. This recommendation is made based on WTV presidential election observation findings of results not posted in 19% of the observed sampled polling units.

7. **Strict Compliance on Guideline for Cancellation of Ballots:** YIAGA AFRICA in its presidential election observation reports noted the high percentage of cancelled ballots and calls on INEC to ensure that the guidelines on cancelled ballots are strictly adhered to reduce discretion on the part of INEC officials. This includes ensuring that where the scenario in the INEC guidelines on cancelled ballots provides for the election to be conducted the following day, that such elections are conducted as so required to reduce the threat of disenfranchising voters for no fault of theirs.

8. **Election Security:** YIAGA AFRICA calls on the security agencies to ensure proper coordination especially between the military and police. It is important to note that the Police has the coordinating responsibility of election security and not the soldiers, as such proper lines of communication and rules of engagement should be adhered to. In addition, security agencies must at all cost remain non-partisan and professional in their conduct and operation.

YIAGA AFRICA calls on all political parties contesting in this election to ensure they encourage their supporters to come out and vote within the ambit of the law and to refrain from electoral bribery. YIAGA AFRICA also calls on all Political parties to refrain from deploying thugs or promoting any action that would lead to violence which will disrupt the electoral process.

**Voters:** YIAGA AFRICA calls on Nigerian citizens who are the biggest stakeholder in this election to turn out in their numbers and cast their votes by properly thumbprinting to reduce the number of rejected/invalid votes.
YIAGA AFRICA undertook the Watching The Vote project to provide Nigerian voters, governorship candidates, political parties, civil society and INEC with independent information on the conduct of the elections. The Watching The Vote project is “Driven by Data – For All Nigerians – Beholden to None!”

Thank you and God Bless the people of Nigeria!

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