

PRESS STATEMENT

Osun Election: INEC Has Questions to Answer — Election Outcome Must Not Be Used as a Substitute for Electoral Credibility.

... CSO, SOAI Score Process Poorly, Calls for Accountability, and Institutional Reflection Amidst Public Applause

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Speak Out Africa Initiative (SOAI), a civil society organisation committed to strengthening democratic governance, electoral integrity, citizen participation, and accountable institutions in Nigeria, congratulates the people of Osun State for their resilience and peaceful participation in the recently concluded governorship election.

However, while the outcome of any election is important, SOAI strongly emphasize that **the credibility of an election is not determined solely by who emerges victorious, but by the integrity of the process that produces the outcome.**

A democracy cannot be measured only by the announcement of a winner. The real test of democratic maturity lies in whether citizens can trust the journey that leads to that announcement. A credible election must guarantee a level playing field, transparency, accountability, fairness, and confidence among all stakeholders.

Unfortunately, the growing tendency to judge elections exclusively by their outcomes rather than the quality of their processes represents a dangerous weakening of democratic accountability. A situation where citizens celebrate an electoral outcome while ignoring serious process deficiencies risks normalizing practices that undermine democracy in the long term. For SOAI, **the process is the democracy. The outcome is only the consequence of that process.**

The Osun State governorship election provides not only an opportunity for Nigeria's election management ecosystem to reflect critically on areas of progress, but also on unresolved concerns that require urgent attention from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and relevant stakeholders. Thus, our assessment of the election was guided by six (6) key indicators:

1. Pre-Election and Election Day Violence: A Major Threat to Democratic Participation

The prevalence of intimidation, threats, and acts capable of discouraging free participation remains a major concern. SOAI observed incidents and reports of political actors making inflammatory statements capable of threatening opposition supporters and creating an atmosphere of fear before and during the election.

Of particular concern were reports of political figures issuing threats against perceived opponents, including statements suggesting violence against individuals who refused to support particular political interests. Such actions undermine the principle of free choice and weaken citizens' confidence in participating without fear. Democracy cannot thrive where citizens must

calculate personal safety before exercising their constitutional right to vote. It is unacceptable that individuals accused of making threatening statements during an electoral process can continue participating openly without visible accountability measures from relevant authorities.

SOAI therefore calls on security agencies and prosecutorial authorities to investigate all reported cases of electoral intimidation, threats, and violence. The absence of consequences encourages repetition and gradually normalizes electoral impunity.

2. Vote Buying and Electoral Trading: A Persistent Attack on Voter Freedom

SOAI expresses serious concern over the reported scale of vote buying and voter inducement witnessed during the election. Vote buying remains one of the most damaging forms of electoral manipulation because it transforms citizens from active democratic participants into transactional participants. Democracy is weakened when voters are compelled by economic hardship to exchange their long-term interests for immediate financial incentives.

During the Osun election, political actors were seen openly distributing money around polling environments despite the presence of security personnel. Such practices raise serious questions about enforcement effectiveness and the commitment of institutions responsible for protecting electoral integrity.

SOAI calls on relevant agency, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) to investigate reported cases of vote buying and ensure that electoral offences are prosecuted.

An election where votes can be purchased openly is not a free choice; it is a negotiated transaction.

3. INEC Transparency and Accountability: Questions Around IReV Downtime Must Be Addressed

SOAI acknowledges INEC's efforts in improving election technology and transparency mechanisms. However, concerns surrounding the temporary disruption of the uploading of results on the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) require clear explanation.

During the election process, the public observed over two hours stoppage where result uploads appeared to slow down or stop before later resuming. At the time of this statement, there has been no satisfactory public explanation from INEC regarding the cause, duration, and technical details of the disruption - this concern cannot be dismissed.

The experience is particularly sensitive because Nigerians still remember the controversy surrounding the technical challenges experienced during the 2023 General Elections, when disruptions to the electronic results transmission process significantly affected public confidence.

The lesson from 2023 is clear: **Nigerians do not want a repetition come 2027.** INEC must therefore provide a detailed public explanation regarding:

- the cause of the IReV interruption;
- the duration of the downtime;
- whether any results were affected;
- the measures taken to prevent reoccurrence.

Transparency is not an optional requirement for an election management body; it is the foundation of public confidence.

4. Election Logistics: Acknowledging Areas of Improvement

SOAI recognises that INEC demonstrated improvement in election-day logistics compared to previous off-cycle elections, particularly the 2022 Osun governorship election. Reports from several locations indicated improved deployment of election materials and earlier commencement of voting processes in many polling units - this represents progress and should be acknowledged.

However, election administration must continue to improve towards ensuring that every polling unit opens at the stipulated time according to INEC guidelines. Timely opening of polling units is critical because delays disproportionately affect vulnerable voters, including elderly persons, persons with disabilities, pregnant women, and citizens travelling long distances to vote.

While improvements were recorded, INEC must continue strengthening logistics planning to achieve consistent compliance nationwide.

5. BVAS Functionality and Voter Access: Technology Must Not Become a Barrier

SOAI remains concerned about reports of malfunctioning Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) devices in some polling units. Technology was introduced into Nigeria's electoral process to strengthen transparency and prevent manipulation. However, when election technology fails without timely alternatives, it risks becoming a new form of voter disenfranchisement.

Reports emerged from some polling locations of delayed accreditation due to BVAS malfunction, slow response, and inadequate backup arrangements. Concerns were also raised regarding situations where polling units with large numbers of registered voters reportedly had only one functional BVAS device, despite previous expectations that adequate backup arrangements would be available. Long delays resulted in some voters leaving polling locations before completing the voting process. Every eligible citizen who arrives to vote deserves a fair opportunity to exercise that constitutional right.

INEC must review BVAS deployment strategies and ensure adequate contingency measures are available during future elections.

6. Voter Participation: Encouraging Signs Amid Democratic Challenges

SOAI acknowledges the encouraging improvement in voter participation compared to previous elections. The increased willingness of citizens to participate demonstrates that Nigerians still believe in democratic processes and remain interested in shaping political leadership through elections.

This renewed participation must be protected by ensuring that citizens' confidence is not weakened through avoidable institutional failures, electoral malpractice, or lack of accountability. Higher participation must be matched with higher electoral integrity.

Conclusion and Call for Action

The Osun election presents both **achievements** and **important lessons**.

SOAI commends areas where improvements were recorded, particularly voter participation and aspects of election logistics. However, these improvements must not overshadow unresolved concerns relating to violence, vote buying, technology reliability, and institutional transparency.

INEC must therefore rise beyond defending outcomes and strengthen accountability around processes.

SOAI calls on:

1. **INEC** to provide explanations regarding the IReV disruption and strengthen electoral technology accountability.
2. **Security agencies** to investigate and prosecute cases of electoral violence, intimidation, and vote buying.
3. **Political parties and actors** to respect democratic principles and end practices that undermine free choice.
4. **Civil society organizations and citizens** to continue demanding accountability beyond election day.

Nigeria cannot build a credible democracy through acceptable outcomes produced by questionable processes. **The credibility of democracy is not measured by whether a winner is declared; it is measured by whether citizens believe the process was fair, transparent, and trustworthy.**

Signed:

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