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This news update marks the launch of SDN's coverage of the 2011 Federal and State elections which commence April 2nd and should conclude April 16th. The elections mark a crucial crossroads for Nigeria and the Niger Delta.

SDN's election centre can be [found here](#). In the weeks ahead of the election SDN has been working with others to increase awareness on how communities can peacefully defend their vote. We will be working closely with partners to observe and report on the elections. We encourage you to visit the online resources that will include more live data on Nigerian elections than has ever been seen before.

Improvements on the fraudulent elections of 2007 are crucial if increasing dissatisfaction with political elites and abusive governance is to be stemmed. In the Niger Delta the elections could provide a fresh start or have swift impacts on both regional stability and Nigeria's oil production.

Yours sincerely
Inemo Samiama

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State by State

In the Niger Delta the major elections will be on the third weekend - April 16th - when State Governorships are decided alongside the State Assemblies, the only body that can impeach a sitting governor.

The first weekend of elections for the National Assembly on April 2nd is primarily of interest for its sign-post value. Political parties will use it to stake out their territory and test their strength. In the past, this first weekend has been the most violent as gangs drive away potential voters who were an inconvenience to rigging elections. INEC will be testing its strength both in logistics and its ability to overcome systematic attempts to corrupt its officials and elections as a whole.

While the Presidential election will be of interest nationwide the consensus behind backing the first plausible candidate from the Niger Delta region is overwhelming. The main question will be one of turnout. With the possibility that every vote will be needed the Presidency should note that violence in the region in the first weekend will be the most likely thing to damage their prospects on April 9th. Violent rigging will send people back to their houses across the state and risk a disastrously low turnout that approaches the 10% or less levels observed in 2003 and 2007. Hiding such turnouts behind ludicrous rigged turnouts of up to 95% was the norm in the past, but it is highly unlikely to be acceptable in 2011.

Akwa Ibom

As mentioned above the normally quiet state has undergone several changes. Grassroots actors persistently report an attitude from the State Government that does not tolerate criticism and seeks to buy over or intimidate any focal points of opposition. The ACN seem to believe they can win the state Governorship race based around growing polarisation in the state and the unpopularity of the Governor's approach.

There are credible reports of armed gangs being imported from other states and both sides contain actors capable of sponsoring violence. The state is likely to be volatile with a high risk of

violence. The Federal Government and INEC need to assert themselves and demonstrate their commitment to free and fair implementation of the law.

Rivers State

With considerable infrastructure laid out over the past three years many had assumed that Governor Amaechi would cruise to victory. However, a combination of some unpopular choices by the PDP to contest other positions and the ethnic diversity in the state which politicians have exploited since 2003 means that the contest has warmed up considerably. There is a serious risk of violence in some areas and some signs of preparations for extensive election rigging.

Extensively rigged elections would create a perfect excuse for youths to resume militancy, while results seen as fair could lead to more diverse representation and a much strengthened state. Much will depend on the ability and political will of the Governor and key political actors to accept that Rivers cannot continue as a one party state if it is to have any credibility as a part of a functioning democracy.

Bayelsa

This remains a zone where the two main contenders for Governor are showing more signs of preparing for a conflict than an election. Bayelsa has a history of rigging elections where ballot papers seem never to leave the state headquarters of government. With regular reports of incidents of exploding bombs and sporadic shootings in the election rallies of opposition candidates, the spotlight is on the incumbent Governor. Some observers are pointing accusing fingers and questioning his ability to win a free and fair election without intimidating his opponents and their supporters. Incidents of widespread intimidation by Famou Tangbe (the state government vigilante group) are also increasing. With politicians in the state preparing for violence the Presidency should show leadership by calling all parties to order and ensuring that this state sends a positive message rather than a disastrous one.

It is still unclear if the Governorship election will hold in Bayelsa - it could be delayed up to a year by court action over tenure. However, the State Assembly elections on the same April 9th will undoubtedly be as hotly contested because of their power to unseat a sitting governor.

Delta

Delta state in some ways offers the most promise of progress in the Niger Delta, while facing risks that are common across the region. In January, Governor Uduaghan comfortably saw off a challenge from Great Ogboro of the DPP. However, he lost to Ogboro in 11 of 25 LGAs, a result that would produce a radical shift if it were replicated in broader state elections in April. The elections won deserved praise for their progress from the depths of overwhelming rigging, but there were still very serious questions about 'turnouts' in the creeks that saved the Governor from a much tighter race. SDN's observation report and lessons for April are here. The January poll also had exclusive call on security services and INEC and still faced significant challenges. INEC, observers and civil society should follow Delta state closely and seek at every opportunity to reinforce its potential to become a positive precedent for the Niger Delta.

Violence and Conflict

MEND Statement

- MEND issues fresh threats of attacks
- Political violence increases

On 14th of March MEND issued a statement threatening to bomb locations in Abuja and Lagos and also renew attacks on oil installations. In a follow up statement it withdrew any assurance of 30 minute warnings because of the dismissive response from government. We are concerned by the callous attitude to civilian lives and the possible devastation such attacks might cause in this election period. Since the warning, there

has been an isolated pipeline attack and an undertaking by the Federal government that it will engage MEND.

The statement by MEND once again underlines two issues. There is no question that armed groups remain capable of mobilizing swiftly in the Niger Delta. Equally it is still true that the swiftest route to attention from government is the threat of violence. It is therefore vital that the new Amnesty leadership and incoming Federal and State Governments demonstrate that the road for peaceful advocacy is more effective and open to all.

Political Violence

Last week saw the outbreak of dramatic violence in Akwa Ibom state, once the quiet backwater of oil producing states. Akwa Ibom is now a contender both for leading in oil production and political violence that is reminiscent of Rivers State in its darkest days. Last week at least nine supporters of ACN Governorship contender, John Udoedeghe, died in clashes while reportedly several more have died as soldiers and police sought to restore order. The clashes which had a 'tit for tat' element started with attacks on an ACN entourage and finished with youths venting their anger on state vehicles, campaign offices and various structures across the capital.

Local activists have been reporting for weeks on an atmosphere of political intimidation and intolerance in Akwa Ibom state that goes far beyond the realms of civilised political discourse. The charging and detention of Udoedeghe with treason seems to be the leading national example of incumbent administrations using excessive state powers against their opponents. An atmosphere that has rapidly polarised large segments of voters, Akwa Ibom deserves strong focus through the election period and close monitoring of its respect for human rights and governance after its conclusion.

Governance

Freedom of Information Bill finally passed by senate

- Freedom of Information Bill finally passed by senates

In its last sittings before the elections the Senate finally passed the Freedom of Information Bill that civil society groups have been campaigning for since 2002. The National Assembly has spent almost a decade talking about transparency and finding one excuse after another to avoid action. Even this latest step still apparently requires finalization by both houses and the signature of the President before May 29th. In the dying days of his administration President Obasanjo shamefully refused to sign a previously passed version citing the most tenuous of national security excuses.

The FoI Bill is no magical panacea for the abuses of government, but it is one which civil society, youths, community leaders, and the international community must unite. If the bill does not become law in the dying days of this administration neither the new National Assembly or Presidency should be considered credible on issues of good governance until this bill is passed.

Elections - Some overview points

The elections in the Niger Delta have been largely overshadowed by the drama of Presidential politics, which sees the first serious open contest since the start of civilian rule. Civil society groups and the international community have rightly identified a sense of justice and progress associated with these elections as vital to Nigeria's stability.

The elections themselves mark a significant step forward - two years ago few would have imagined a reformist leadership of the electoral commission (INEC) trying to engineer better elections using a mix of cajoling, new technology, and engagement of civil society.

The changes are more dramatic than immediately apparent - interested readers should [check our report on the January re-run of the Delta State Governorship elections](#) for the impact of requiring

voters to accredit and then vote en-masse in polling units of around 500 persons. The new approach offers potentially unprecedented transparency, but also will require voters to show patience for many hours (willingly given in much of Delta) and adept logistical management.

INEC is not just playing for the short term. With under a year to prepare for the elections they will be hoping for elections that are 'good enough' to mandate continuing reform. Top of the list will be avoiding spending hundreds of millions of dollars every four years on a new voters register. The current registration exercise has faced its controversies and systematic attempts at inflation. If a marker for some credibility and political nerve of both INEC and the Presidency was required it was the trimming by over 25% of the population of the President's home state. [SDN has done a basic comparison of voter's registration that can be found here](#) (the 2003 register is referenced because it seems the lesser of two evils of previous distorted exercises). A key test of post election INEC will be its ability to further clean up the existing register and use it as a foundation for a continuous registration process that would bring it into line with basic democratic norms.

The Niger Delta states enter the 2011 elections in a context where democracy was crushed in the violent rigging of elections of 2003. In most oil producing states there is only a token member or two from the opposition at each level of government from local government councillor upwards. These are often the result of some intra party rift in the ruling PDP. In essence the region functions more like a one party state with internal conflicts rather than a representative democracy. A critical marker of a turnaround in democratisation is whether some communities will be allowed to choose more diverse and credible representation.

Presently the Niger Delta stands at a crossroads that could lead to vital first steps in democratization or back to a crisis that evolved swiftly in 2003 and beyond. Already there are many signs of politicians repeating the tactics of mobilizing and arming youth groups alongside worrying attempts to rig the elections in advance. It is quite possible that different states will follow divergent paths so distant observers should not view incidents in the region as necessarily reflective of the whole.

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