Citizens are increasingly calling for those contesting for their vote in February’s elections to ditch cheap tactics and talk about how they intend to approach the issues facing the Nation.

Support for this progression in Nigerian politics has been echoed at various levels within national politics. The Special Adviser to the President on Niger Delta Affairs, Hon Kingsley Kuku said debates should be organised for candidates participating in the election.

“It is time for Nigerians to ask questions, questions on economy, questions on politics, questions on many issues, they must ask, so there must be a debate, let Nigerians ask questions. The line must be opened to Nigerians to call”, he said.

Increasing Citizen Participation

Enough is Enough (EiE) Nigeria, Google, Channels TV, Facebook, GEMSTONE, GenVoices, and MTV Base all plan to work on election debates in 2015. SDN is working with the Rivers Entrepreneurs and Investors Forum and NigeriaInfo (with support from EiE Nigeria and Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP)) to hold a debate in Port Harcourt on the 12th February, and broadcast live on 92.3 NigeriaInfo. We are planning for the attendance of all party candidates at what will be a great chance for them to engage in debate just two days prior to the Presidential poll.

The aim is to position voters at the centre of the democratic process by reinforcing the narrative that elections and governance are about the people. It also aims at providing voters with the information required to select credible candidates and hold them accountable once in office.

Actively Engaging Citizens

Citizens will be able to participate via various online platforms – online, SMS, TV, radio – to show their support for a debate by voting on what topics they would like to be discussed. Economy, security and Open Governance are the topics highlighted for the debate as citizen priorities.

This builds on the work of SDN on the Citizen Manifesto series that strengthens the relationship between politicians and citizens, reinforcing downward facing accountability. In a similar format, live radio broadcasts of debates between aspirants have allowed citizens and representatives of civil society groups to quiz political hopefuls on their strategies.
INEC Chairman, Professor Attahiru Jega, said last week that attaining credible, free and fair elections in next month’s elections will depend on a change of attitude and disposition of politicians. He attacked the integrity of politicians, stating that “the general tendency is disturbing as they want to win by hook or by crook.”

Speaking at a conference in Abuja, he went on to say, “Good elections are not the business of the election managers alone. Politicians want to win by hook or by crook; they induce and entice INEC officials and if they fail, they threaten them because it is an investment that they want to win at all costs.”

Prevalent amongst campaigns is the tactic of exploiting ethnic and religious divides in order to split the vote in their favour. It is now mandatory that a candidate explicitly display their commitment to their religion in order to justify their credibility, despite the fact that Nigeria remains a secular state.

A vivid illustration of how this phenomenon is exploited is the recent mudslinging versus governorship candidate of the PDP in Kwara State, Senator Simeon Sule Ajibola. Campaign posters that had been doctored to show him wearing a turban on his head appeared pasted around town in strategic locations within the Ilorin metropolis.

While Ajibola was born into a Muslim background, he has long since been a Christian. Moreover, the turban is a symbol in the Sikh religion – not Islam – which gives an indication of the lack of thought the perpetrators of these tactics are capable of.

The posters were made by people aiming to discredit his campaign by exploiting the long-standing tensions between Christians and Muslims in the middle belt state.

A similar campaign advert was sponsored by the Ekiti State Governor, Ayo Fayose, and published in some national dailies. In the ad the pictures of past military rulers and a democratically elected...
president— all Muslims who died while in office— were placed aside the APC Presidential candidate, Mohammadu Buhari.

The ad sponsor who is a Christian quoted a Bible verse to warn Nigerians not to vote for the APC candidate because he might die while in office like the other Muslims before him. The ad received condemnation from many quarters as it was seen as a likely trigger for Muslim-Christian confrontation.

**Overcoming the Problem**

Some politicians have denounced this behaviour. The Governor of Kaduna state for example, Ramalan Yero, represented by his deputy, Nuhu Bajoga, appealed to fellow politicians to engage in the political process with decorum, focusing on issue-based politics as against maligning each other.

Yet when addressing the public, even he slipped into using religion to justify his position. “After all, power belongs to God and he gives it to whom he pleases at the time he pleases,” he said.

With events like this emerging daily, politics in Nigeria often feels like a game show, like the popular TV program ‘Big Brother’. Contestants will do whatever it takes to get the popularity necessary to win the prize up for grabs in the contest. This narrow focus to win the short-term prize comes at the expense of the long-term goals.

Similarly by making promises to satisfy public demands without laying out policies that can be tested and challenged, politicians are engaging in a superficial battle for power rather than an intellectual contest based on ideas and capability.

This is detrimental to democracy, and is symptomatic of the root of the toxic political character keeping Nigerian politics from progressing that candidates and voters must rise above. Instead of exploiting the fear of the people with the power of nightmares, politicians should unite behind ideas and aspire to the power of dreams.

It is disturbing that media agencies accept such negative campaigns but more disturbing is the failure of the regulatory bodies to call politicians and the media to order. Many wonder how inappropriate campaign ads are released for public consumption without interception by the regulators.
The pump price of petroleum has been brought down from 97 naira to 87 naira per litre (47 US cents). The measure was taken with the approval and directive of President Goodluck Jonathan, a candidate in the February 14 polls, taking into account the recent volatility in the oil market. In late 2011, Jonathan removed the subsidies altogether. This caused a general strike and mass protests across the country. Public pressure forced the government to reintroduce the subsidy as quickly as it removed it in January 2012 but to a lesser degree, increasing the pump price from N65 to N97 per litre against the planned increase to N140 per litre.

The fuel subsidy has long been the subject of scrutiny. It is viewed as an unproductive use of public funds, and full of systemic leakages that allow billions of naira to go missing or misappropriated every year.

International financial auditors JP Morgan were commissioned to evaluate the sector and identified shortfalls in the volume of refined products imported when compared to the amount of money paid to importers. These allegations have been backed by the thorough financial investigations of the Nigeria Extractives Industry Transparency Initiative (NEITI), and echoed by officials within the state, such as in 2013 when the now ex-governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria in 2013.

Who really benefits?

While the regulating agency is having a hard time forcing petrol station operators to revert to the new pump price as some still sell at N97 per litre, citizens across the Delta are arguing that the price should now be dropped to N50, or even N40 per litre as the global crude oil price has dropped to a third of what it was in early 2014. Instead of the benefits being passed on to consumers, by maintaining a high pump price the Federal Government has effectively reduced the fuel subsidy.

Without the subsidy however the financial incentive for importers of refined products is significantly reduced, which may threaten supplies and lead to mass fuel shortages and panic.

It is unclear what the extra revenue received is being used for, but suspicions are mounting as election campaigns demand more funds. It also raises the issue why Nigeria continues to rely on importing refined petroleum products, a pertinent question for aspirants to address.

This is a welcomed progression, but to make sure it is effective citizens must stay to check the results then take photos to document the exact figures. This way the room for manipulation will be significantly reduced.

**ELECTION RESULTS TO BE PUBLISHED AT UNIT LEVEL, INEC**

Chairman Jega disclosed that the results of the elections would be announced at the polling unit-level to prevent irregularities, stressing that the results would be announced even where an agent of a political party decided not to sign the result sheet.
Soldiers have barricaded the Adokiye Amiesimaka Stadium in Port Harcourt, three days after the incumbent state Governor Amaechi said that the facility could not be used for Goodluck Jonathan’s presidential campaign rally on Wednesday January 28.

Amaechi declared Rivers State did not grant the PDP permission to use the facility because of ongoing construction work, even though the APC have recently used the same facility twice for their own rallies. PDP responded with threats to forcible use the facility.

The events follow an attack last week by unidentified assailants on an event being prepared for an APC government rally in Okrika. This followed an earlier suspected dynamite attack at the APC office in Okrika.

In the early hours of the morning, gunmen stormed the venue in Okrika, attacking those setting up and using dynamite to destroy the podium, sound equipment and canopies. The assailants then returned later that morning and burnt and destroyed cars.

The attack follows a spate of attacks on the opposition party, forcing the APC to cancel its gubernatorial campaign in Okrika. On January 6, some APC members travelling to participate in the presidential rally at the Adokiye Amiesimaka Stadium were attacked by unknown gunmen who hailed bullets on their bus.

WEBSITE OF THE WEEK:

Niger Delta Watch is a website that plots all reports of offenses by election observers, alongside news and citizen journalist stories, on an interactive map. Set up by SDN for the previous 2011 general election, it will provide a unique insight into the geography of electoral conflict in the Niger Delta.

stakeholderdemocracy.org/nigerdeltawatch/
While nuclear weapons may be a big threat in Europe, the Middle East or other parts of the world, in Africa the threat is clear, the danger known; the weapon of mass destruction that continues to fuel conflicts, wars, violence and wanton bloodletting with severe losses in lives and wasted economic opportunities is small arms and light weapons.

These were the sentiments expressed by the Chairman of the Presidential Committee on Small Arms and Light Weapons (PRESCOM), Emmanuel Imoho, at the launch of the ‘Ballot without Bullets’ forum in Kaduna last week.

The forum aims to contribute to reducing electoral violence in Nigeria in 2015 and beyond by sensitizing Nigerians on the necessity for “ballot without bullets,” and create awareness on the negative socio-economic impact of illicit small arms and light weapons proliferation in Nigeria.

Speaking at the event, INEC Chairman Jega had the following to say on the topic: “In elections, arms are used to steal the people’s collective mandate thus subverting the whole process. We know the effects of stolen mandate are much more profound and far-reaching as it impacts not only on individuals but the society in general as a result of the lack of legitimacy, insecurity and instability associated with this.”

Nigerian Police Not Capable of Securing Elections

He went on to state that the number of police officers nationwide was not enough to man the 130,000 polling units across the country. He said that other security agencies would be employed to complement the police and achieve the desired results. It is not clear whether these are official, formal organisations or hired muscle.

Corps Deputy Commandant-General in charge of operations of Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), Evans Ewurum, responded by saying the NSCDC will deploy 60,000 officers and men to ensure the security of Nigerians and government installations before, during and after the 2015 elections. INEC has also taken the precaution to call all Nigeria Youth Service Corpers to attend trainings to allow them to be deployed as ad hoc polling unit staff on election day.

We heard reports last week that unprecedented amounts of illicit weapons are entering the Niger Delta to arm actors across the coming period. There are also indications that the State military and police are importing mass shipments of weaponry, in part to tackle the spreading insurgency in the North. One thing is for sure, filling personnel gaps with weaponry and fighting firepower with firepower is bound to lead to bloodshed.
The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has said the number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) that would vote are enough to meet the legal requirement and consequently return candidates as elected.

The INEC chairman said it is unrealistic for the commission to cater for all the displaced around the country and other neighbouring countries. He said of an estimated 981,000 to 1,000,000 IDPs across the three northern states currently classified as emergency status.

A report by the International Organisation for Migration released recently unveiled the fate faced by IDPs in Nigeria. The research conducted in December 2014 found that 92% of people forced from their homes live in host communities, while only 8% in official camps.

Children dominate the groups of those displaced. 54% are children, and more than 50% of the total displaced are under the age of five.

Amongst the causes are natural disasters such as drought and floods, and community disputes. But by far the biggest factor causing displacement is the ongoing insurgency in the north – accounting for more than 77%.

North-Eastern States Cannot Vote

Despite pledging that provisions will be made to ensure all citizens can vote, and promising that all eligible voters will have their PVCs by the end of January, INEC has now announced that they will not hold in areas under the control of Boko Haram, except if the local security agencies say otherwise. “The commission can only do elections in areas that are safe,” Jega said.

But if reports by the Washington-based Global Post are true, that ‘Boko Haram now controls some 20 percent of Nigerian territory, or 20,000 square miles’, then the INEC statement means more than 20% of the country will be unable to vote.

One state particularly devastated by the crisis is Borno State. Senator Maina Maaji Lawan, representing Borno North at the Senate, last week claimed that Boko Haram controlled 70 per cent of Borno State.
Across the 2015 elections cycle you can report incidents you observe in your area to SDN.

The SDN network is spread across every LGA across Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers State, and will aim to respond to verified reports of incidents within the shortest possible time. This initial response will be followed by a number of positive steps for resolution where appropriate.

SDN has experience working with communities on tackling election related violence. Our aim is to help communities voice their experiences with the election process, whether good or bad.

For a live report you can tweet to our twitter handle @SDNNigerDelta

For a more in-depth report of an incident, or a personal account of your experience, you can write an email and send it to: election2015@stakeholderdemocracy.org

We will be circulating regular updates on elections and educational materials. You can see these by visiting

www.stakeholderdemocracy.org

by liking our page on facebook

and Following us on Twitter @SDNNigerDelta

Written by Stakeholder Democracy Network: