



Conducting Elections in the Era of COVID-19 in Nigeria, A Study of Edo & Ondo States

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 a public health crisis, has impacted elections around the world differently; which include but not limited to election postponement, low voter turnout, spike in infection rate post- electoral activities, uncertainty of succession crisis, among several others. COVID-19 has claimed over half a million lives worldwide; poses a serious threat to health and wellbeing, therefore, voters' fears are not unfounded. At the same time, elections enable the voters' voices and choices paramount. This study utilized secondary data and discourse analysis to interrogate the impact of conducting elections in the amidst COVID-19 in Africa, using Edo and Ondo state gubernatorial election as case studies. This study revealed that with increase in political activities in Edo and Ondo, spikes in confirmed COVID-19 cases trail political activities like rallies, party primaries and other activities which heat up the polity. This study found and concluded that understanding voters' – and poll workers' – fears of going to the polls amid COVID-19 is crucial for the election management body to address issues, which goes beyond adjusting electoral procedures but also communicate better with the public. If voters cannot participate, the legitimacy of election outcome can be compromised. It is thus a crucial responsibility of the Election Management Boards such as the Independent National Electoral Commission to create a safe/enabling environment.

Keywords: Coronavirus, Election, Nigerian States of Edo & Ondo, Independent National Electoral Commission, Election & Pandemic

1.1. INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the novel Corona Virus was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, brought about new normal. Curtailing the spread through social/physical distancing, resulted in significant surge in virtual processes globally. This has equally affected electoral processes which provide democratic transition globally. The spread of COVID-19 has brought the world into a standstill, affected more than 15 million people in nearly 240 countries, with no signs slowing down. KDI (2020, p.1) captured the pandemic in the following words; *the COVID-19*

pandemic is not only a health and economic emergency; it is also a crisis for democracy, human rights, and governance that could undermine or collapse fragile democracies". A look into the corridor of global democracy through electoral management bodies and news media shows that many elections have been postponed due to the outbreak of COVID-19. Not only has it led to far-reaching disruptions in the political and electoral system, it has also specifically led to the postponement of elections and created uncertainties about scheduled ones. Between February 21st and July 15th, at least 67 countries and territories across the globe have postponed national and subnational elections due to COVID-19. On the other hand, at least 48 countries and territories have and will hold national and subnational elections irrespective of the global pandemic. 2020 election span countries across the following continents; Africa, Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania (Asplund, Bicu and Masso 2020). The year 2020 is supposed to be a significant year for Africa given that 20 countries within the continent were scheduled to hold elections at various level (National, sub-national and state level), however, the nature in which COVID-19 spreads across Africa might disrupt electoral schedules (Schultes 2020). Globally and particularly in Africa, COVID-19 poses a litmus test of democracy particularly for countries with low testing rates and poor amenities to combat the spread of the deadly virus. Election process remains one of the pivotal principles for preserving democracy and therefore key to curbing succession crisis globally, particularly in Africa with weak institutions and strong men. The electoral process in Africa has been chequered with violence, rigging, low voter turnout, etc. In Nigeria, gubernatorial election will hold in Edo and Ondo state amid COVID-19 pandemic in pursuant to section 178(2) which states that "the office of the Governor shall be conducted not earlier than 150 days and not lesser than 30 days to the expiration of the tenure of the last holder of the office", which implies that since the incumbent Edo state Governor was sworn in on the 11th of November, election must hold on or before October 13th 2020 (Asadu 2020)

Out of 11 African countries due for election in 2020, 5 countries (Benin, Burundi, Malawi, Mali, and Guinea) have conducted their election irrespective of the pandemic, 4 countries (Ethiopia, Nigeria, Liberia, and Tunisia) scheduled electoral process to hold later in 2020, while 1 (Uganda) postponed her election to early 2021. Nigeria is one of the 48 countries and territories globally and one of the 5 countries in Africa scheduled to hold elections later in 2020; with no end in view to the spread of the deadly virus, will Nigeria risk the health and wellbeing of her citizens or adopt virtual voting without compromising the legitimacy and credibility of the electoral process in the upcoming gubernatorial elections in Edo and Ondo state, as well as, Bye elections scheduled to hold before the end of 2020? There is a crux between two extremes; public safety and upholding the tenets of democracy. Prof Mahmood Yakubu -the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) chairman in a webinar organized by Center for Strategy and International Studies (CSIS), - pointed out that 10 million registered and eligible voters are to participate in upcoming gubernatorial (Edo and Ondo) and bye-elections scheduled to hold before the end of the year.

INEC being cognizant of the profound impact of the pandemic on the electoral process, extensively deliberated on most effective ways to respond to the impact of the pandemic on election administration.

The situation is made worse by the global economic impact of the pandemic and its knock-on effect on the Nigerian economy, which has seen a decline in funding for government activities. Expectedly, this trend will also affect the work of the Commission. An election in Nigeria is dominated by biometric card

¹Africa (Botswana, Chad, Ethiopia, Gabon, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, South Africa, Tunisia, Uganda, Zimbabwe), Americas (Angullia, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, French Guiana, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Falkland Island, Uruguay, Puerto Rico and USA), Asia (Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Iran, Maldives, Kyrgyzstan, Oman, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Stria), Europe (Armenia, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Isle of Man, Guernsey, Cyprus, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland, England and Gibraltar) and Oceania (Australia, New Caledonia, Autonomous Bougainville, Kiribati, Solomon Island and Guam).

readers, which require voting by thumbprinting, thereby providing an avenue for contact and transmission. The electoral process in Nigeria has been synonymous with pre- and post-electoral violence, low voter turnout, a cluster of voters during accreditation and voting exercise, among several others. With the fear of contracting the virus, senior citizens and individuals with ailing health conditions with higher chances of contracting COVID-19 maybe disenfranchised; and should basic hygiene measures not be in place in a certain polling booth, will the electorates go home without voting or will they take chances with COVID-19? The Commission is committed to conducting all elections that are due within the extant legal framework, however, in so doing it will put a premium on public safety and mitigation of health risks from COVID-19. With INEC approval of All Progressive Congress (APC) primaries on the 22nd June 2020 in Edo and 20th of July 2020 in Ondo; and Peoples Democratic Party Primaries (PDP) on the 23rd to 24th of June 2020 in Edo and 22nd to 23rd of July 2020 in Ondo raises serious concerns. Considering the nature of the corona virus and its mode of transmission, would approving party primaries, actual campaigns and election not bring INEC and the two major political parties in direct violation of a Citizens right to life guaranteed under Section 33 of the Constitution? Which is more paramount, the Right to Life or the exercise of a civic duty? One would have to be first alive and healthy before engaging in any political exercise.

Electoral activities are argued to enable the spread of COVID-19 cases, for instance, The American President- Donald Trump's rally in Tulsa is argued to have resulted in high COVID-19 numbers in Oklahoma (Carlisle 2020), while Israel and South Korea adopted safety measures and curbed the spread of the virus post-election (Ahidjo-Iya and Hounkpe 2020). Some African countries like; Burundi, Malawi, Tanzania, Mali, Niger, and Guinea held national and sub-national elections amidst the COVID-19 while other countries in Africa will hold their election before the end of 2020 (IFES 2020). With mixed feelings about the post-election spread of COVID-19 and peculiarities of an election in 2020, it becomes imperative to analyze trends ahead of Nigeria's election scheduled to hold September and October in Edo and Ondo respectively interrogating if there exists a relationship between electoral activities and spread of Corona Virus.

The broad objective of this paper is, therefore, to prepare the parties and election management body to respond to the effects on the electoral process of the twin challenges of COVID-19 pandemic and the role political parties and political activities are playing in the rising cases of the pandemic. The rest of the paper is structured in the following way. Section 2 discusses the thematic review of literature. Section 3 shows the methodology. Section 4 shows the results. Section 5 empirically analyses case studies and section 6 concludes.

1.2. Literature Review: Contending views on Elections under a Pandemic

Elections are major events in the life of a polity. They are accompanied by greatly increased discussion and interest on the part of the population as a whole, by intense political activity and by massive coverage in the mass media. According to Momoh and Adejumobi (1999:142), elections occupy a central place in the democratic process through the animating force they provide for representative government. On the one hand, they serve as an instrument of legitimization for the state and those who manage the reins of state power, while on the other; they ensure political accountability to the people. According to Anifowose (2003:21), election refers to the process of elite selection by the mass of the population in any given political system. Although controversy rages among political thinkers about the nature of representation, there is one point of universal agreement – the representation process is intrinsically linked to election and voting. Agbaje and Adejumobi (2006:26) supported Anifowose's view as the best view but adding to it shows an appreciation of the people's participation and consent in choosing their representatives. For them election is a viable mechanism for consummating representative government and leadership recruitment.

Apart from the above, it promotes political accountability, citizens' participation and gives voice and power to the people. This means that, elections are an expression of the people's sovereign will. An election may be defined as the process of choice agreed upon by a group of people. It enables them to

select one or a few people out of many to occupy one or a number of authority positions. This process of choice usually involves rules and regulations designed to ensure a certain degree of fairness and justice to all concerned. This process in most cases is threatened by a pandemic witnessed in Nigeria with COVID-19 health crisis. It is also the duty of the election management body to properly respond to this kind of challenge and allow the electorates to exercise their franchise.

Peculiar challenges await West African countries scheduled to hold their election in 2020 amid COVID-19 which presents the dilemma of postponing or going ahead with the election, this explains why some countries will defy the public health crisis and conduct slated election (Ahidjo-Iya and Hounkpe 2020). For countries which have held or scheduled their election before the end of 2020, International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) identified the following teething issues; logistics and preparatory efforts to organize timely elections, engagement of international observers and acceptance of results, and increased costs of elections for African countries with shifted election timetable (IFES 2020). In agreement with IFES (Schultes 2020) argued that should an election be delayed, COVID-19 may impact preparation and administration processes. Burundi tested positive to IFES projections on international observers and the acceptance of the result; Burundi under the guise of 14-day quarantine did not give room for international observers, while journalists within the state were not granted access without a virtual private network, with records of violence, less importance was given to COVID-19 as WHO officials were kicked out of the country; the above taint the credibility of the election (Vanguard 2020). Considering the above in light of upcoming election in Nigeria, Edo state government (in which the incumbent is an aspirant in the upcoming election) under COVID-19 quarantine regulations, urge party and electoral body to apply for a waiver before organizing election in the state (Kabir 2020).

International IDEA (2020) is of the view that campaign rallies, door to door canvassing, and town hall meetings which are an important part of vibrant and inclusive democracy; peculiarities with COVID-19 necessitated internet and social media campaigns. However, in Burundi, political campaigns were conducted without adequate attention given to precautionary measures towards containing the spread of COVID-19 (Soi 2020). Malawi presidential campaign was characterized by door-to-door visits, partisan fight, and electoral frenzy with little attention to COVID-19, of which one of the contestants alluded that coronavirus had not reached Malawi given low death rate (Africa News 2020). Mali election campaign was conflict-ridden, opposition aspirant was kidnapped (TRTWorld 2020). In Nigeria's upcoming election, Edo and Ondo state rejected indirect party primary for direct primary which requires contacts which may lead to the spread of the virus – Edo state held direct primary while Ondo had an indirect party primary- (Kabir 2020)(Premium Times 2020), rallies and campaign are currently ongoing in the two-state. The one-on-one campaign is geared towards winning votes; however, voter turnout might be influenced by citizens' fear about their health and wellbeing, that of their family members and those with an underlying health condition which predisposes them to COVID-19, are less likely to vote (International IDEA, 2020). Examining voter turnout in African countries which have conducted their election in 2020, Burundi recorded 87.8% voter turn-out in both presidential and parliamentary election (IDEA, Burundi 2020), Malawi recorded 64% turnout of registered voters (Gondwe 2020) and in the case of Mali, only 35.58% of registered voters turned-out, low voter turnout could be explained by the threat of violence and COVID-19 pandemic (IDEA, MALI 2020). With the upcoming election in Nigeria, Akindele (2020) cited a study in which 48.1% indigenes of Edo and Ondo state are of the view that there will be low voter turnout, however, 82% of the sample size are willing to vote if preventive measures are in place (social distancing, hand sanitizer, personal protective equipment, etc).

Election during a global public health pandemic is expected to be fraught with challenges. (International IDEA, Managing Elections during the COVID-19 Pandemic; Considerations for Decision-makers 2020)and (IFES 2020) pointed out a challenge relating to logistics of voting material which must have been touched by several persons, overcrowded spaces where social distancing will be a challenge, thereby posing a serious threat to individuals and public health in general. It is necessary to review COVID-19 cases before and after the election in African countries, draw from the conducted elections, advise policymakers and forecast upcoming elections. Before the election, Mali on the 25th of March announced

the first positive COVID-19 case, post-election Mali as at 22nd of July Mali recorded 2477 confirmed cases, 122 deaths, with 129 confirmed new cases within 14 days (2476 spike in 4 months), while President of the election management body (EMB) in Mali, died in April 2020 with the assumption that COVID-19 was the cause of death (Tasamba 2020)(ECDC 2020)(NDI 2020). During the voting, COVID-19 awareness posters were visible at pooling centers, provision was made for hand washing kits and hand sanitizers, participants wore face mask (Tasamba 2020), however, if precautionary measures were put in place and there is an exponential increase in confirmed cases, it raises concern. Before the election, Burundi had 42 confirmed cases of COVID-19(Vanguard 2020) and post-election, on 22nd of July Burundi has 328 confirmed cases (286 spikes), 1 death and 137 new cases in 14 days (ECDC 2020). The election in Malawi didn't observe social distancing, few persons wore face masks, political parties had campaigned with large public rallies; before the election, the country had 803 cases of coronavirus and 11 deaths (Kondowe 2020) and post-election, as at 22nd July Malawi has 3149 confirmed cases (2346 spike in cases), 71 deaths and 1272 new cases within 14 days. Guinea and Benin had 2 and 338 confirmed cases of COVID-19 before the election (International IDEA 2020), while post-election confirmed cases of the virus in Guinea and Benin as at 22nd July was 6652 and 1602 respectively (6650 and 1264 spike respectively), while growth rate within 14 days for Guinea and Benin stood at 955 and 403(ECDC 2020). Political activities and spike in COVID-19 confirmed cases was equally tested in Oyo state Nigeria which held political party (PDP) mega rally on the 18th of March amid the pandemic. Between February 27th and April 19th Oyo state recorded a total of 16 cases of the corona virus (WANEP, 2020), while NCDC daily report showed that as at 29th of April, the state recorded a total of 21 cases while maintaining 10th position across the states in Nigeria. As at 24th of July 2020, the state recorded a total of 2,497 confirmed cases and climbed from the 10th position to the 3rd position among states with highest COVID-19 burden in Nigeria.

Drawing from the above review, there exist a similar response among African countries in line with IFES's prediction on the credibility of elections held under COVID-19. Reviewed literatures observed spikes in new confirmed COVID-19 cases trailing electoral activities in African countries that conducted election amid public health pandemic. It becomes imperative to examine the spread of the virus in Nigeria before and after the party's primary election in Edo and Ondo state.

1.3. Contending views on Elections under a Pandemic: The Nigerian Perspective

The Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) has announced the date for the State Elections for Edo and Ondo States as 19th of September 2020 and 10th of October 2020 respectively. What would make INEC take this rare step considering the current global pandemic that has not eluded Nigeria? Two perspectives have emerged to offer an explanation. These are the Civic right- Constitutional and Right to Life thesis.

1.3.1. Civic right- Constitutional

This thesis hinges on the understanding to avoid constitutional crisis. Election to the office of the Governor of any State in Nigeria must be held on any date not earlier than 150 days and not later than 120 days before the expiration of the term of office of the sitting Governor as contained in Section 178 (2) of 1999 CFRFN (as amended). The right to vote is not a fundamental right under Chapter IV of the 1999 Constitution. There are qualifications or conditions to voting under the Constitution. With the history of suffrage movement across the continent for the right of colonies, indigenes and the black race to vote in their respective countries or homes one would ordinarily expect that either the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria or the African Charter for Human and Peoples' Rights will make the right to vote a fundamental right. Though election is a fundamental right, and it is crucial to facilitating peaceful and democratic transfers of power, deadlines for holding these elections are often baked into a country's legal or constitutional framework identified above, no other time that the constitutional and other electoral laws should be carefully navigated other than this time of global pandemics. Most countries during the constitution drafting period, state actors envisage rare happenings such as natural disasters, war, and health challenges such as the COVID-19 to make provision for continuity of governance or government beyond the

constitutional ratified term. However, in many other cases, it is silent. Countries that have provisions that allow for the postponement of elections due to emergencies like a global pandemic in their Constitutions or electoral legal

Although, Section 26 of the Electoral Act 2019 gave INEC the power to postpone an election where there is an emergency which must be interpreted in line with Section 178(1) of the Nigerian Constitution that gave INEC power to determine the date of election to the office of a governor of a state, adding that Sub-Section 2 stipulated that such postponement could only be on a date not earlier than 159 days and not later than 30 days before the expiration of the term of office of the last holder of that office. This thesis made the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to state that shifting the two elections would be an open invitation to a constitutional crisis. Rather, the Commission said it would ensure strict observation of the COVID-19 guidelines and protocols as there would be no voting without face masks. Although, the legal basis for succession and continuity of government beyond the constitutionally ratified term in case of an emergency like war and global pandemic has generated puzzles to unravel. The question of who takes over government becomes imperative; would the tenure of the incumbent be extended, or an interim government chosen? Before this option of tenure extension would suffice, much consideration needs to go into the timing of the Constitutional amendment process. If both electoral deadlines and emergency powers are provided for in the 1999 Constitution without any specific guidance on how they interact, new Constitutional interpretation will likely be needed by the courts or whichever body has the authority to determine constitutional questions if it emerges in Nigeria. This perspective has cost of governance perspective. That is, postponing elections equally comes with economic implications, when there is no early declaration of postponement decision. In the face of COVID-19 pandemic, Nations across the world that have elections months ahead have ample time to re-strategize on ways to ensure election integrity and administration without the further spread of the virus. However, nations across the world that have their elections closer before the novel coronavirus was declared as a global pandemic, their Electoral Management Bodies would have made a logistical arrangement, trained election officials, produced ballot papers, voting booths, seals, and other supplies needed during the process. If any of these countries fall into the development nation like, where manual voting processes and procedures are still dominant. Sensitive and printed election materials and voter Education materials with designated date become a commercial waste. The cost to the political parties and election observers can better be imagined. Some of the political parties may not have the resources to foot the extra bill, given that their agents had already been mobilized. Most civil society organizations would have invested heavily in an observation mission. Postponing could widen the fiscal deficit if necessary care is not taken (KDI, 2020, Eme & Onuigbo, 2019).

Furthermore, INEC, while laying a foundation for the conduct of the elections released a document titled “*Policy on Conducting Elections in The Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic*” (INEC, 2020), a 17 page document made pursuant to Section 160 (1) CFRN 1999 and Section 153 of the Electoral Act 2010 (as amended). INEC claims the policy shall apply to all elections and electoral activities of the Commission during the Covid-19 Pandemic but on the other hand it is expressly inscribed on the document that the party responsible for complying with the policy is INEC and its Staff. This document highlights serious constitutional questions. Are political parties excluded from complying with the COVID 19 Guidelines? The guideline made no provisions whether political parties are allowed to organize rallies and congresses or convention. How primaries will be conducted. No sanctions for violation of the guideline. The policy guidelines issued by INEC did not address these issues. Section 15 (c) and (f) of item F, Part I, Third Schedule of the 1999 Constitution empowers INEC to oversee the affairs of political parties and make the necessary regulations with respect to their conduct and activities. Therefore, the “Policy on Conducting Elections in The Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic” issued by INEC falls below the obligation imposed on them by law.

1.3.2. **Civic Right- perspective**

In contrast, what ought to take priority according to this perspective is citizen’s right to life (safe guarding the lives of citizens against coronavirus pandemic) or citizen’s civic exercise to vote? The term civic

exercise to vote was deliberately used because there is no express “right to vote” under the constitution. INEC, laying a foundation for the conduct of the elections released a document titled “*Policy on Conducting Elections in The Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic*” a 17 page document made pursuant to Section 160 (1) CFRN 1999 and Section 153 of the Electoral Act 2010 (as amended). INEC claims the policy shall apply to all elections and electoral activities of the commission during the Covid-19 Pandemic but on the other hand it expressly inscribed on the document that the party responsible for complying with the policy is INEC and its Staff. According to the chairman of the Commission, Prof. Mahmood Yakubu, the Edo governorship election would hold on September 19, while that of Ondo State would hold on October 10. The INEC chairman said the declaration was in pursuance of the provisions of Section 178(2) of the 1999 Constitution that states that INEC cannot hold elections earlier than 150 days and not later than 30 days before the expiration of the term of office of an incumbent governor. According to him, the tenures of the governors of Edo and Ondo states would end on November 12 and February 24, 2021 respectively. By interpretation, INEC must conduct the governorship election in Edo State on or before October 13, 2020, while that of Ondo State must be conducted on or before January 25, 2021. However, given the fact that the elections may not be concluded on the first ballot as had happened in several elections in the past, the electoral management body decided to hold the elections before the last legally permissible date. Truth be told, INEC had earlier postponed Bayelsa Central, Bayelsa West, Imo North, and Plateau South Senatorial bye-elections following the outbreak of the disease. However, as the World Health Organization had rightly observed, as highlighted in *The WHO’s special envoy for COVID-19, David Nabarro, on “Hardtalk” on British Broadcasting Corporation on April 21, 2020 when he posited that, “We have all got to learn to live with this virus, to do our business with this virus in our presence, to have social relations with this virus in our presence and not to be continuously having to be in a lockdown because of the widespread infections that can occur”*(Ojo, 2020). Ojo(2020) further explained that the world may have to learn to live with COVID-19 as no one knows when a cure will be found for the raging pandemic. Thus, it is appropriate for INEC to make the necessary contingency plans to ensure that all outstanding elections are held without any further delay. However, in doing so, public safety must not be compromised neither the credibility of the polls. In case we do not know, on April 15, 2020, South Korea held its national elections in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and it was hitch-free. In a report by Catherine Kim of VOX, published online on April 17, 2020.

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The spread of Corona virus in March compelled the President to issue regulation pursuant to Section 3 of the Quarantine Act, after setting up a Presidential Task Force on Covid-19. This regulation temporarily outlawed movements of goods, services, operation of financial, commercial, educational and corporate institution. It restricted inter and intra- State travels in various states in a bid to curb the spread of corona virus. Subsequently, the regulation was modified to allow individuals and corporate bodies who offer what the government termed “Essential services” to operate. Which simply meant, service that are imperative and crucial in ameliorating the spread of the virus and the socio-economic effects of the

policies implemented as a result of the corona virus. The 9 page document termed “*Implementation Guidance for Lockdown Policy*” listed services and corporate bodies allowed to remain operational, however, the Independent National Electoral Commission was excluded. This means that the government does not yet consider elections activities or institutions or parties engaged in electioneering as essential service providers.

With the determination of INEC to approve All Progressive Congress (APC) primaries on the 22nd June 2020 in Edo and 20th of July 2020 in Ondo; and Peoples Democratic Party Primaries (PDP) on the 23rd to 24th of June 2020 in Edo and 22nd to 23rd of July 2020 in Ondo raises serious concerns. Considering the nature of the corona virus and its mode of transmission, would approving Party primaries not bring INEC and the two major political parties in direct violation of a Citizens right to life guaranteed under Section 33 of the Constitution? Which is more paramount the Right to Life or the exercise of a civic duty? One would have to be first alive and healthy before engaging in any political exercise.

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1.4. Study Area

Edo and Ondo state are located in South-South and South-West Nigeria respectively, with registered voter population of 2,210,534 and 1,822,346 in Edo and Ondo state respectively, with a total of over 4 million registered and eligible voters. The two states have a total of 2,627 polling units in Edo state and 3,009 polling in Ondo state. The two states are neighbours, irrespective of being situated in different geo-political zones.

1.5. METHODOLOGY

This study uses discourse analysis to analyse the impact of conducting elections in the era of COVID-19 in Edo and Ondo states of Nigeria. The analysis in this study was conducted using information obtained from several reputable sources such as the World Health Organization (WHO), NCDC, UNESCO, KDI, INEC and information obtained from the media and other public sources. The period of analysis is from April 30th to July, 31st 2020. Focusing on this narrow period (from April July) allows us to capture the events occurring at this time and to identify the significant effect of COVID-19 in Nigeria at a time when many African countries were imposing strict lockdown rules due to the rapidly spreading coronavirus in African countries.

1.6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1.6.1. Socio-political characteristics

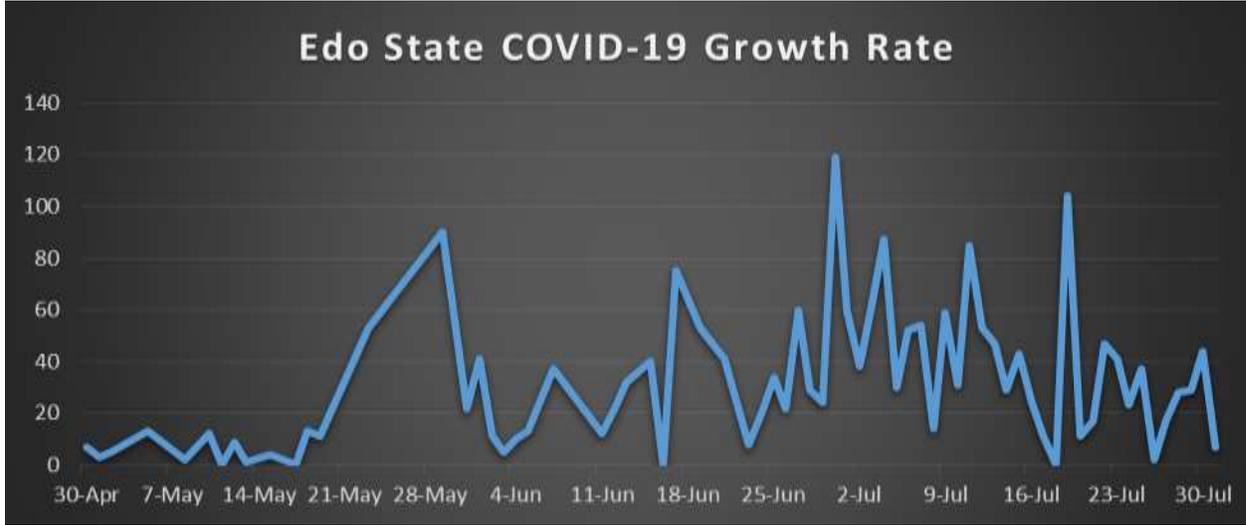
Edo and Ondo state both have seating governors contesting for a second term in office. While Edo state incumbent governor witnessed internal party issue which resulted in contesting for the upcoming election under a different political platform which brought him to power, Ondo state incumbent governor on the other hand witness internal crisis in his cabinet, as the incumbent deputy governor was interested contesting in the upcoming gubernatorial election, though, the deputy governor lost the PDP primary election. There are similar characteristics in the two states, of which internal crisis within the states resulted in consultation meeting, visit to the presidency and official resignation as well as, party primary. If precautionary steps were not put in place in the various activities above, it could have propelled the spread of COVID-19 virus or accelerated government keen attention to combating the spread of the deadly virus in the two states.

1.6.2. COVID-19 in Edo and Ondo State

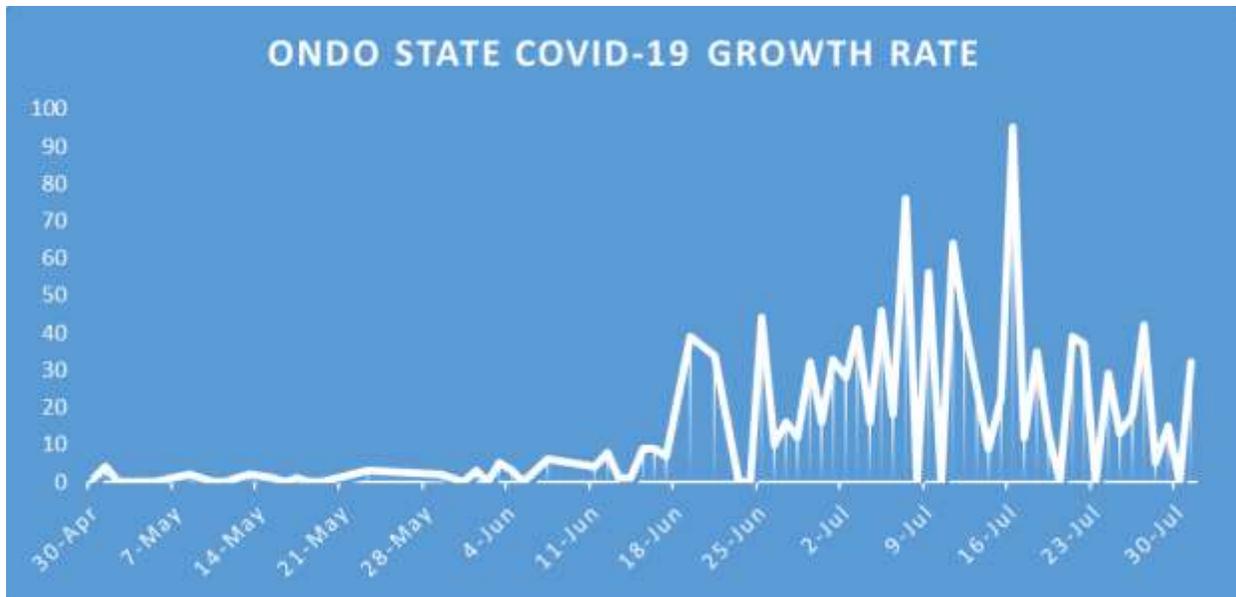
The first case of COVID-19 was reported in Nigeria on the 27th February 2020, between February 27th and April 19th Nigeria had a total of 436 confirmed cases, of which Edo and Ondo state recorded 15 and 3 cases respectively (WANEP, News Situation Tracking- Nigeria; Corona Virus andemic in Nigeria Vol. 8 2020). According to NCDC report, Edo and Ondo state as at 29th

April had 37 and 8 confirmed cases respectively, while maintaining 9th and 17th position across 36 states and FCT. Between 20th of April and 4th of May, additional 2,175 cases were recorded making a total of 2,802 cases in Nigeria, with Edo and Ondo state recording a total of 62 and 13 cases respectively (WANEP, 2020).

As at July, Nigeria has over 39,500 confirmed, this study at this juncture will proceed with a deep dive on the rate corona virus spreads across Edo and Ondo state and interrogate how the duo progressed from 9th and 17th position among states, to 4th and 10th position.



The spread of COVID-19 in Edo state was contained, however, with rise in party conflict and other political activities which necessitated more attention given to security of tenure in office, and consultation meetings, there has been spikes. Prior to June 10th APC screening in the state, political consultations and speculations were ongoing, after the screening, political activities increased with the Governor of Edo state's visit to the President and announcement of his formal defection to the People's Democratic Party (PDP). The spike around the 18th of June can be partly explained APC by activities surrounding APC party primary which held on the 22nd of June which was followed by PDP primary on the 25th of June, which both explain the highest spike recorded so far in Edo state; 119 new cases was recorded in the state on the 30th of June 2020. With increase in political rally, campaigns, consultations, there has been fluctuation on new confirmed case of COVID-19. Political rallies and other activities within Edo state following concluded party primaries contributed in another spike with 104 new confirmed COVID-19 cases on the 19th of July, after recording zero (0) new case on the 18th, which raises serious concern on what the situation will be post-election in Edo state. Ongoing political campaigns has been ridden with violence and vandalism as faction of PDP and APC clashed on the 25th of July. It is noteworthy to mention that Edo state which occupied the 9th position of state with the highest COVID-19 burden in Nigeria as at 30th of April, is currently the 4th positionsince the turbulence in the political arena, a total of 2,128 confirmed cases in 24th July as against 37 confirmed cases on the 29th of April.



New cases of COVID-19 in Ondo state prior to turbulence of the political arena has remained below 10, however, with the turbulence of the political arena there has been a spike from the 18th of June following accusation of Ondo state deputy Governor lobbying for NDDC MD job on the 19th of June, which was followed with the detention of the deputy Governor on the 21st of June, plot to impeach the deputy governor on the 28th of June explains the fluctuation in new cases which extended till the 2nd of July. Increase in new cases around 9th of July find expression on controversy over issuance of impeachment notice and the deputy governor approaching the court on the 7th and 11th respectively. Following the above political activities in the state and the move from PDP chieftain to disqualify the seating deputy governor from the party primary, Ondo state has recorded several spikes in new cases of COVID-19 on the 7th, 9th and 11th, it is noteworthy to mention that in between the spikes, on the 8th and 10th of July zero (0) new cases was recorded in between the spikes, which explains that certain activities explain high rise within 24hours. On the 10th of July, 11 out of 12 governorship aspirants under APC rejected indirect party primary on the same day, the APC chairman in Ese Odo local government in Ondo state resigned his position and defected to PDP (Gbalogunte 2020)(Alchenu and Dada 2020), activities which occurred on the 10th of July resulted in the state from recording zero new case on the said date to witnessing a spike the next day 11th July.

The highest spike of COVID-19 so far in Ondo State was on the 16th of July with 95 confirmed new cases within 24hours (15th and 16th). Ondo state occupied 17th position with 8 cases as at April, given the rise in political activities, the state currently occupy the 10th state with the highest burden of COVID-19 with a total of 1030 confirmed cases as at 24th July 2020

1.7.1. CONCLUSION

With election drawing near and political activities gaining momentum in Edo and Ondo state, there has been spikes in new cases of COVID-19 recorded in the states, which could be attributed to turbulence in the political arena. From all indications, the conduct of this year's governorship elections in Edo and Ondo states is being threatened by the coronavirus pandemic, which poses a choice between political stability and health and wellbeing of citizens. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) avoid crowd gathering during the elections, sterilize PVC machines after each vote cast, provide hand sanitizers and strictly adhere to all safety protocol towards containing the spread of the virus. The virus has discourage gathering of people in large numbers, given that the virus is airborne, some patients are asymptomatic and transmission are contact driven. INEC, aspirants and electorates would provide and

ensure effective use of face masks in polling booths and should any polling unit run out of sterilizers for PVC machines such polling booth official is advised not to risk the health and wellbeing of citizens over their vote. Rising transmission rate of the virus calls attention on the need to curb political rallies and campaign and adopt virtual campaign strategies without endangering the populace who are at the mercy of Nigeria poorly equipped healthcare facilities. The virtual campaign has become the fad, until a vaccine is found for COVID-19, political activities would need to adjust to the new mode of campaigning if only because other methods, like the huge rallies, now endanger the lives of those who attend them. Former President Goodluck Jonathan once declared that his political ambition was not worth the risk of people's lives. We study concludes that Edo and Ondo election is not worth the life of citizens, should necessary precaution not be in place, electorate are advised to cater for their health first.

1.7.2. RECOMMENDATION

Based on the above figures and analysis, this study recommends the following:

1. INEC should ensure adequate implementation of all safety procedures as contained in the policy document the commission released on 21st May 2020 on conducting elections in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Political parties and their candidates should engage their party members on how to ensure safety during elections and also on participating actively in the elections through effective social mobilization.
3. Political parties should also employ innovative means of reaching out to voters instead of the usual large campaign gatherings. Among such innovations include virtual campaigning, the use of the social media.
4. As far as it is practicable, CSOs, National Orientation Agency, political parties and INEC should carry out Voter Education and Sensitization of voters to reduce physical meetings and large gatherings.
5. There is need to amend the Electoral Act of 2019 to accommodate electronic voting.

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