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BEFORE THE BALLOT: SAFEGUARDING ELECTORAL CREDIBILITY IN NIGERIA'S 2027 ELECTIONS

What the 2026 party primaries revealed, and the actions
needed to strengthen democratic competition



OVERVIEW

Nigeria's 2027 general elections will be among the most consequential democratic exercises on the African continent. The credibility of those elections will depend not only on the conduct of polling day, but also on the integrity of the political processes that determine who appears on the ballot.

The 2026 political party primaries constituted the first nationwide test of Nigeria's revised electoral framework. They provided an early indication of the strengths and vulnerabilities that may shape public confidence in the electoral process and highlighted the reforms that remain necessary before Nigerians return to the polls in early 2027.

This publication brings together the principal findings of the assessment of the 2026 political party primaries and identifies the measures that can still strengthen electoral credibility in the short term, while outlining priorities for deeper institutional reform beyond the current electoral cycle.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The credibility of Nigeria's 2027 elections will be determined long before polling day. The 2026 political party primaries offered the first nationwide test of the institutions, rules and political incentives that will shape electoral competition in Africa's largest democracy.

The primaries marked the point at which electoral competition narrowed from aspirants to candidates and provided an early indication of the strengths and vulnerabilities that may influence public confidence in the electoral process. While the reforms introduced under the Electoral Act 2026 brought important procedural changes, they did not eliminate longstanding challenges relating to transparency, internal party governance, dispute resolution and political inclusion.

Five broad conclusions emerge from the assessment.

First, electoral credibility begins before polling day. Candidate selection determines who appears on the ballot and shapes the choices available to citizens. Weaknesses at this stage can undermine confidence in the electoral process long before votes are cast.

Second, institutional reforms changed procedures but did not fundamentally alter political incentives. The abolition of indirect primaries reduced opportunities for delegate capture, yet influence increasingly shifted to membership registers, aspirant screening, nomination procedures and candidate substitution.

Third, transparency remains limited. Party constitutions, nomination guidelines, membership registers and monitoring findings remained largely inaccessible to party members, aspirants and observers, restricting independent scrutiny.

Fourth, women, young people and persons with disabilities continue to face significant financial, political and institutional barriers throughout the nomination process.

Finally, the window for action before 2027 is narrowing. Greater transparency, legal certainty and stronger public engagement can still reinforce confidence in the electoral process.

As Africa's largest democracy and one of its leading economies, Nigeria's electoral trajectory carries implications that extend beyond its borders, influencing regional stability, public trust and democratic governance across West Africa. The credibility of the 2027 elections will depend not only on the integrity of the vote itself, but also on public confidence in the institutions, rules and political processes that shape democratic choice.

HIGHLIGHTS

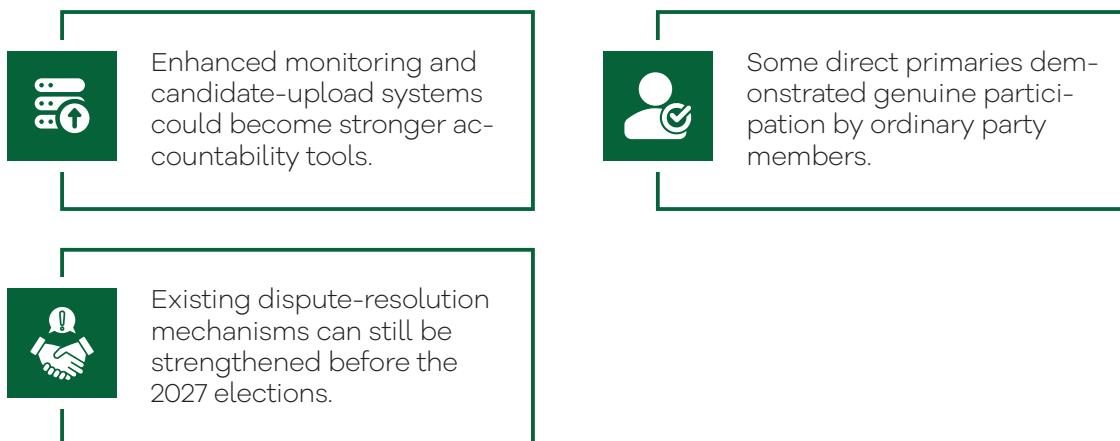
Building blocks for stronger elections



The abolition of indirect primaries removed one of the most visible forms of delegate capture and vote-buying.



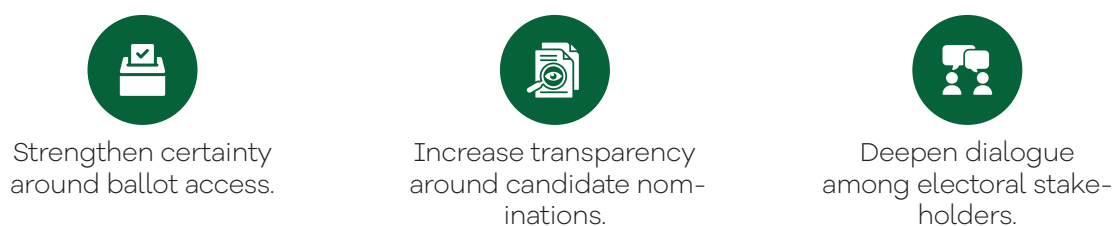
Digital party registers offer an opportunity to improve transparency and member participation.



Warning signs

- 01** Party constitutions, primary guidelines and membership registers remained largely
- 02** INEC monitors primaries but has limited powers to enforce compliance.
- 03** Candidate screening and consensus arrangements continue to concentrate influence within party leadership structures.
- 04** Pre-election disputes increasingly shape electoral competition.
- 05** INEC monitors primaries but has limited powers to enforce compliance.

Immediate priorities before 2027



Longer-term priorities beyond 2027



LESSONS FROM THE PRIMARIES

Reform changed procedures, but not the underlying pressures



The Electoral Act 2026 abolished indirect primaries, requiring political parties to select candidates either through direct participation by party members or through consensus arrangements. This represented an important institutional shift and addressed one of the most visible sources of manipulation in previous nomination processes.

Political influence nevertheless adapted to the new framework. Control increasingly centred on the management of membership registers, the screening and clearance of aspirants, access to nomination forms, candidate substitutions and the authority to submit names to the electoral commission.

In practice, the formal conduct of a primary did not always determine who ultimately secured a place on the ballot.

Transparency remains the principal challenge



The primary season generated extensive documentation, including party constitutions, nomination guidelines, membership registers and compliance records. Much of this information remained inaccessible to citizens and independent observers.

The absence of public access limited the ability of party members, aspirants and voters to determine whether established procedures had been followed and reduced confidence in the integrity of the process.

INEC's role remains essential but constrained



INEC monitored the primaries and collected information relating to candidate nominations and party compliance. Nevertheless, the legal framework does not clearly define how findings of non-compliance translate into immediate consequences.

The Commission can document irregularities, but its authority to intervene remains limited. More systematic publication of non-sensitive information would strengthen both transparency and institutional credibility.

Litigation increasingly shapes electoral competition



Questions concerning party leadership, candidate eligibility, substitutions and nomination procedures now routinely extend beyond party structures and into the courts.

Judicial intervention remains indispensable, but prolonged legal uncertainty can affect electoral administration and public confidence, particularly where disputes concern ballot access and candidate recognition.

Inclusion remains uneven



Women, young people and persons with disabilities continue to face significant financial, political and institutional barriers throughout the nomination process.

High nomination fees, informal power structures, screening procedures and limited access to competitive constituencies continue to restrict participation, despite formal commitments to inclusion.

IMMEDIATE PRIORITIES BEFORE THE 2027 ELECTIONS

Strengthen certainty around ballot access

Outstanding disputes concerning party registration, leadership and candidate-submission authority should be resolved well in advance of final nomination deadlines.

Particular attention should be given to disputes capable of affecting the participation of major political platforms in the electoral process. Legal certainty and timely clarification will be essential to maintaining confidence that electoral competition remains open, competitive and governed by due process.

In practice, the formal conduct of a primary did not always determine who ultimately secured a place on the ballot.

Increase transparency around candidate nominations

Accessible public information concerning candidate status, substitutions, withdrawals and compliance procedures would reduce uncertainty and strengthen public understanding of the nomination process.

Deepen dialogue among electoral stakeholders

Regular engagement among electoral authorities, political parties, civil society organisations, the media and inclusion groups can help address concerns before they evolve into litigation, misinformation or political tension.

Improve dispute resolution and litigation management

Pre-election litigation will remain an important feature of Nigeria's electoral landscape. Greater public understanding of legal processes and dispute-resolution mechanisms can help distinguish legal uncertainty from political speculation.

Make inclusion measurable

Progress in political inclusion should be assessed across the entire nomination process, from the purchase of nomination forms to the publication of final candidate lists.

Expand public information and issue-based debate

Voters require clear and accessible information on candidates, party programmes, electoral procedures and the status of on-going disputes.

Beyond 2027: Strengthening Democratic Institutions

The lessons of the 2026 primaries extend beyond the current electoral cycle. The reforms required beyond the 2027 elections extend beyond electoral administration. They include stronger safeguards for party transparency, improved oversight of political finance, more credible membership systems and institutional mechanisms capable of reinforcing internal party democracy throughout the electoral cycle.

More transparent political parties

Party constitutions, nomination guidelines, membership registers and internal procedures should become more accessible, while stronger safeguards should protect the integrity of political data and records.

Stronger internal democracy

Political parties require more robust systems for member participation, policy development and internal accountability. Candidate selection should be governed by transparent and predictable rules rather than informal arrangements and patronage networks.

More inclusive political participation

Future reforms should address barriers affecting women, young people and persons with disabilities at every stage of the nomination process, from expressions of interest to final candidate selection.

CONCLUSION

Credible elections do not begin when polling stations open. They begin when citizens can trust how candidates reach the ballot.

The assessment of Nigeria's 2026 party primaries demonstrates that confidence in elections depends on more than the administration of polling day. It rests equally on the transparency, fairness and legitimacy of the processes through which candidates emerge and political competition is organised.

The period before the 2027 elections offers an opportunity to strengthen public trust through clearer information, timely dispute resolution, more transparent nomination procedures and stronger safeguards for participation.

The reforms required beyond 2027 are broader. They concern the development of political parties that are more open, accountable and representative, and electoral institutions that command public confidence throughout the democratic cycle.

The credibility of the 2027 elections will depend not only on the integrity of the vote, but also on public confidence in the institutions, rules and political processes that shape democratic choice. Strengthening that confidence before the country goes to the polls remains one of the most important democratic tasks of the coming months.

Beyond 2027, the challenge is broader: to consolidate democratic institutions that are transparent, inclusive and accountable, and to reinforce the partnerships required to sustain public trust in the electoral process. The lessons emerging from the 2026 primaries provide an opportunity not only to strengthen the next election, but also to support the long-term resilience of democratic governance in Nigeria.



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