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Nigeria: Respect for human rights essential during and after elections

Amnesty International is urging all candidates in Nigeria's upcoming presidential, federal and state elections to commit themselves publicly to place the prevention of human rights abuses during elections at the heart of their electoral campaigns.

Amnesty International's plea comes in the aftermath of what seems yet another politically motivated killing during the electoral period in Nigeria, that of Harry Mashall, a leading member of the All Nigeria People's Party.

In two open letters to candidates for the federal executive and legislature and to candidates for state governorship and houses of assembly, Irene Khan, the Secretary General of Amnesty International stressed that protection and promotion of human rights should be central to their program for the post election period.

She pointed out that it is during electoral periods in the past that Nigeria has most suffered violence resulting, on many occasions, in the military seizing power.

"Respect for human rights during the electoral process is essential, even more so when political stability might depend on it, Amnesty International said.

However, the organization has received reports of numerous cases of political violence at the federal, state and local levels in the run-up to the elections, resulting in the death of some candidates and several supporters.

Allegations are rife across Nigeria of the use of groups of civilians armed by political leaders, including vigilante groups, to foment political violence at local and state levels.

"Unless immediate and sustained action is taken to prevent human rights violations by vigilante and other armed groups, further human rights abuses are inevitable," Irene Khan added.

"All candidates to the federal executive and legislature as well as candidates to state governorship and houses of assembly must do their utmost in preventing political violence whether it is generated by leaders or supporters of their own political parties in internal disputes or against other political party leaders or sympathizers," the organization urged.

Candidates must also avoid the instigation of ethnic or religious tensions among the electorate.

Post-election human rights agenda

In its open letter, Amnesty International urges candidates to both federal and state executive and legislature to give priority to human rights in their post-election agenda.

New state authorities should ensure that existing legislation in their various states complies with international human rights law and with the Nigerian Constitution. Several northern states have introduced new *Sharia Penal Legislation* which provides for mandatory use of the death penalty and other cruel, inhuman and degrading punishments despite Nigeria's ratification of many international human rights instruments

Furthermore, new authorities of those states that have tacitly or openly endorsed vigilante groups should ensure that these groups do not violate the fundamental human rights of any individual.

At the federal level, Amnesty International is calling on all candidates for the federal executive and legislature to commit themselves to making public the report of the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission (Oputa Panel), and to produce a plan to implement its recommendations.

In the past four years of civilian rule, the Nigerian Police and the armed forces have been responsible for large numbers of extrajudicial executions, deaths in custody, torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of alleged criminals in custody.

"Newly elected federal officials should give priority to the establishment of training programs for the federal police and the armed forces that include specific training on the use of force according to international standards," Amnesty International urged.

****(Amnesty International's researcher on Nigeria is currently in the country and can be reached at :Tel: + 234 9 314 8301)**

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