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**AN ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL  
STRATEGY, ELECTORAL  
BEHAVIOUR, AND GOVERNANCE  
IMPERATIVES IN PRE-ELECTION  
NIGERIA**

by



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February 2026 | The Abuja School

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With Nigeria's 2027 General Elections scheduled for January 2027 and formal campaigns commencing in August 2026, the country is already in the throes of intense political activity. This policy brief interrogates the central tension in Nigerian democratic politics: whether the pre-election period of 2026 will be defined by substantive governance delivery or by strategic electoral manoeuvring. It examines the behaviour of the incumbent All Progressives Congress (APC) administration of President Bola Tinubu, the fragmented opposition coalescing around the African Democratic Congress (ADC), and the structural conditions — economic, institutional, and security-related — that will shape voter decisions. The brief concludes that while the Tinubu administration's policy reforms provide a governance narrative, the dominant mode of 2026 politics is likely to be competitive politicking, driven by mass defections, coalition scrambles, party fragmentation, and patronage distribution. It argues that genuine democratic accountability demands more, and offers recommendations for both governing and opposition actors.

## INTRODUCTION

In Nigerian political discourse, the phrase 'it is not yet campaigning season' has long been rendered meaningless by practice. Barely weeks after President Bola Ahmed Tinubu was sworn into office on 29 May 2023, political actors — including those within his own cabinet — began positioning themselves for the next electoral cycle. As the country enters 2026, with the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) having officially released the timetable for the 2027 General Elections in January 2026, Nigeria formally enters a period of structured pre-election activity. Presidential and National Assembly campaigns are scheduled to begin 16 January 2027, while governorship and state assembly campaigns commence 6 February 2027.

This policy brief poses a question of democratic significance: in the twelve months preceding the official campaign window, will Nigeria's political class be preoccupied with governance — delivering on promises, enacting policy, and demonstrating administrative competence — or with politicking — engaging in strategic positioning, inducing defections, building transactional coalitions, and mobilising state resources for electoral advantage?

The answer has profound implications for democratic development. If governance takes precedence, citizens stand to benefit materially from policy implementation, and elections can become genuine accountability exercises. If politicking prevails, public resources risk diversion toward electoral ends, policy coherence suffers, and democratic norms erode. The evidence reviewed in this brief suggests a complex, hybrid reality — one in which governance performance and political strategy are not mutually exclusive but are frequently intertwined in ways that complicate accountability.

## 2. THE ELECTORAL LANDSCAPE ENTERING 2026

### 2.1 INEC's Timetable and the Formal Campaign Framework

On 13 February 2026, newly appointed INEC Chairman Professor Joash Ojo Amupitan formally released the Notice of Election and Timetable for the 2027 General Elections, marking what he described as 'a significant milestone in our democratic journey.' The timetable stipulates that presidential and National Assembly elections will hold on Saturday, 16 January 2027, while governorship and state assembly elections follow on 6 February 2027. Continuous Voter Registration (CVR) is scheduled nationwide from April 2026 to January 2027, creating an extended civic engagement window.

Governorship contests will not be held in eight states — Anambra, Bayelsa, Edo, Ekiti, Imo, Kogi, Ondo, and Osun — due to their off-cycle electoral schedules. Critically, 2026 also features strategically significant precursor elections: the Federal Capital Territory Area Council elections and governorship contests in Ekiti and Osun States, which both analysts and political actors have described as dress rehearsals for 2027.

## 2.2 The FCT Elections as a Strategic Barometer

The 2026 FCT Area Council elections have assumed an outsized political significance precisely because they fall exactly one year before the national polls. The APC inaugurated a dedicated national campaign council for the FCT contest, with its national chairperson explicitly framing the local vote as 'more than a local election — a strategic political exercise to prepare for 2027.' FCT Minister Nyesom Wike further politicised the contest by openly declaring he would only support candidates aligned with President Tinubu's re-election agenda, effectively converting a local governance contest into a test of loyalty to the centre. The opposition bloc — particularly the People's Democratic Party, the Labour Party and the newly formed ADC coalition — has sought to use the FCT elections to demonstrate remaining structural depth in the nation's capital. These contests reveal a recurring tension in Nigerian democracy: the instrumentalisation of electoral sub-contests as rehearsals for higher-stakes national battles, diverting attention from the immediate governance concerns of local constituents.

## 3. THE INCUMBENT'S DILEMMA: GOVERNANCE PERFORMANCE AS ELECTORAL STRATEGY

### 3.1 The 'Renewed Hope Agenda' as a Re-election Platform

President Tinubu's central political challenge in 2026 is to transform governance performance into electoral appeal. His administration's 'Renewed Hope Agenda,' first articulated as a 2023 campaign manifesto, is now being recalibrated as a governance assessment framework and re-election platform simultaneously. This dual function — policy blueprint and political tool — is not unique to Nigeria, but it creates particular analytical challenges in evaluating whether reform is being pursued for public benefit or electoral advantage.

The macroeconomic record offers mixed signals. On the positive side, the administration can point to consistent quarterly GDP growth in 2025, with annualised growth expected to exceed four percent; inflation declining to below 15 percent, meeting the government's stated target; foreign reserves reaching \$45.4 billion as of December 2025; the Nigerian Stock Exchange posting a 48.12 percent gain in 2025; and Foreign Direct Investment rising to \$720 million in the third quarter of 2025, up from \$90 million the preceding quarter.

The government has also secured sovereign credit rating upgrades from Fitch and Moody's, signalling improved international investor confidence.

These are not insignificant achievements. The subsidy removal and exchange rate unification — two of the most politically painful reforms of the post-1999 democratic era — have begun to show macroeconomic results. Four major Tax Reform Acts signed in June 2025 are designed to raise Nigeria's tax-to-GDP ratio and reduce oil dependency. The Renewed Hope Ward Development Programme, targeting at least 10 million Nigerians across all 8,809 wards, represents an ambitious social investment initiative.

### **3.2 The Governance-Reality Gap**

Yet the lived experience of ordinary Nigerians remains markedly different from these macroeconomic indicators. Household purchasing power has been severely eroded by the exchange rate devaluation and subsidy removal that preceded the macroeconomic stabilisation. Food prices, though declining, remain elevated relative to 2022 levels, and the food security emergency declared by the government in April 2025 underscored the depth of agrarian and supply chain disruptions. The GDP growth rate of 4.23 percent, while noteworthy, falls short of the 7 percent annual growth target Tinubu announced in August 2025 as a goal by 2027.

This gap between macroeconomic improvement and household-level hardship creates a political paradox: the administration can credibly claim reform achievements while simultaneously facing legitimate public grievances about cost of living. For 2026, the administration's strategic imperative is to narrow this gap — through the Renewed Hope Ward Development Programme, agricultural interventions, and infrastructure delivery — sufficiently before the election to convert economic narrative into voter sentiment.

## KEY FINDINGS

The Tinubu administration faces a 'credibility gap' between measurable macroeconomic gains (GDP growth, FDI, reserves) and the lived economic experience of ordinary Nigerian households. Closing this gap is both a governance imperative and the administration's central re-election challenge.

### 3.3 Incumbency Advantages and Their Limits

The structural advantages of incumbency are formidable. When President Tinubu assumed office in May 2023, the APC controlled 20 states. By early 2026, that figure had risen to approximately 29, driven by a steady wave of gubernatorial defections from opposition parties. This expansion of state-level control provides the APC with administrative reach, patronage networks, and party mobilisation structures that the opposition cannot easily replicate.

However, incumbency also creates vulnerabilities. The scale of defections to the ruling party, while reflecting APC's structural dominance, also generates perceptions of democratic erosion. Analysts and civil society organisations have noted that many of these defections are driven not by ideological alignment but by the calculus of political survival and access to federal patronage — a dynamic that IDEA described as the 'systematic erosion of political competition through induced defections,' which risks disincentivising public participation in 2027.

## 4 . THE OPPOSITION: COALITION BUILDING OR POLITICAL MEANDERING?

### 4.1 The ADC Coalition and Its Formation

The most significant development in Nigeria's opposition politics in the lead-up to 2027 has been the emergence of the African Democratic Congress (ADC) as a vehicle for a grand opposition coalition. In July 2025, prominent figures including former Vice President Atiku Abubakar, former Labour Party presidential candidate Peter Obi, former Kaduna State Governor Nasir El-Rufai, former Senate President David Mark, and former minister Rauf Aregbesola formally adopted the ADC as their coalition platform. Peter Obi subsequently joined the ADC on 31 December 2025 in Enugu, ending months of political ambiguity.

The coalition's intellectual framing has been explicitly governance-oriented in its rhetoric. In its founding communiqué, the ADC leadership accused the Tinubu administration of being 'more concerned with the next election rather than the survival of ordinary Nigerians' and of 'being so totally consumed with politicking that governance is abandoned.' Ironically, this accusation came from a grouping whose internal deliberations over presidential tickets, power-sharing arrangements, and party control have themselves been extensively politicised.

#### **4.2 Structural Weaknesses of the ADC Coalition**

The ADC coalition faces significant structural challenges that political analysts have identified across multiple dimensions. First, the coalition lacks sitting governors. Unlike the APC formation in 2013, which was anchored by fifteen serving governors who could deploy state resources, the ADC coalition is composed largely of former office holders whose control over their home states is contested or absent. Former Anambra Governor Peter Obi's home state governor, Charles Soludo, has aligned with President Tinubu. Former Kaduna Governor El-Rufai has been marginalised in Kaduna by his successor. Aregbesola does not control Osun. Atiku's influence in Adamawa was symbolically diminished when Governor Umar Fintiri stripped him of a traditional title.

Second, the coalition faces the 'credibility contradiction' — it brings together former political adversaries whose past conflicts are well-documented and whose ideological differences remain substantive. El-Rufai's record of divisive governance, Atiku's repeated unsuccessful presidential bids (this would be his seventh attempt), and the tension between the Obidient Movement's aspirations for transformational change and the transactional pragmatism of establishment politicians all create internal fault lines.

Third, the combined mathematical potential of the coalition is real but not automatically realisable. Atiku and Obi together received over 12 million votes in 2023, compared to Tinubu's 8 million. However, as analysts from the London School of Economics have cautioned, political math does not automatically translate into electoral victory, particularly in Nigeria's system, where geographic distribution requirements (the constitutional 25% threshold across 24 of 36 states) demand national breadth rather than merely aggregate vote totals.

### **4.3 The PDP's Fragmented Position**

The PDP — once Nigeria's dominant party — presents a case study in institutional fragmentation. The party's official position is that it is not part of any coalition arrangement, yet some of its most prominent leaders, including Atiku himself, are the architects of the ADC coalition. High-profile gubernatorial defections have further eroded PDP's structural base: the defection of Enugu Governor Peter Mbah collapsed the PDP's last South-East stronghold, while Delta State Governor Sheriff Oborevwori's move to the APC, accompanied by former governor Ifeanyi Okowa (who was Atiku's 2023 running mate), further narrowed the party's territorial footprint. Senate defections from Kebbi, Kano, and Osun have reduced the opposition caucus in the National Assembly.

## **5. POLITICKING AS THE DOMINANT MODE: PATTERNS AND DRIVERS**

### **5.1 The Pre-Campaign Campaign**

Despite INEC's reminder that political campaigns must strictly adhere to approved timelines — with presidential campaigns beginning only on 18 November 2026 — political campaigning in effect began immediately after the 2023 elections. This creates a structural violation of the spirit of electoral law that INEC lacks practical tools to enforce. The pattern reflects what governance analysts at the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) have characterised as 'weak accountability mechanisms that perpetuate a culture of impunity.'

Across the country, the political activities of 2026 are already heavily tilted toward electoral positioning. The APC's deployment of a national campaign council for the FCT Area Council elections, the framing of every by-election as a referendum on the Tinubuagenda, and the extensive media management around macroeconomic indicators all reflect a governing party in permanent campaign mode. This is not unusual in democratic systems, but in Nigeria's context, where state resources and policy levers are routinely deployed for partisan advantage, the convergence of governing and campaigning carries particular risks.

### **5.2 Patronage, Defections, and the Logic of Access**

The mass defection of politicians to the ruling APC is one of the most analytically significant developments in Nigeria's pre-2027 political landscape. These defections follow a well-established Nigerian pattern: access to federal power and resources incentivises alignment with the centre, regardless of policy or ideological positions.

Many defecting governors have explicitly framed their moves as necessary to 'unlock development opportunities' for their states — an acknowledgment that Nigeria's federalism, in practice, delivers more to those aligned with the presidency. This dynamic undermines the very premise of issue-based politicking. It suggests that electoral competition in Nigeria is less about presenting competing visions of governance and more about demonstrating proximity to the sources of state patronage. The result is a diminishing of the democratic dividend — where electoral competition is supposed to create incentives for candidates to offer better governance in order to attract votes.

### **5.3 Security, Voter Engagement, and Electoral Legitimacy**

Nigeria's multi-dimensional security crisis presents another layer of complexity for both governance and electoral politics. Insurgency in the North-East, banditry in the North-West, communal conflicts, separatist agitations, and organised criminal violence constitute what IDEA has called an 'expanded geography of insecurity' that threatens both voter safety and turnout. Survey data from IDEA's National Voting Intentions Round 1 indicates that insecurity may drive low voter turnout in 2027 despite high nominal voting interest among respondents.

For the Tinubu administration, security performance is both a governance obligation and an electoral liability. The president has pledged to deepen cooperation between security agencies, explore decentralised policing mechanisms, and regulate forest guards as counterinsurgency tools. The credibility of these commitments will be tested by observable security conditions in the months preceding the election. For the opposition, security failure presents an obvious campaign theme, but credibility in this domain requires alternative proposals that go beyond rhetorical critique.

## **6. INSTITUTIONAL RISKS: INEC LEADERSHIP TRANSITION AND ELECTORAL INTEGRITY**

A factor that has received insufficient public attention is the unprecedented leadership transition within INEC immediately preceding the 2027 elections. Former Chairman Professor Mahmood Yakubu completed his two-term tenure in late 2025, and the new INEC Chairman, Professor Joash Ojo Amupitan, now leads the commission through what will be its most consequential operational cycle. Five national commissioners are due to exit in 2026, with five more departing on the eve of 2027, meaning the 2027 elections could be managed almost entirely by newly constituted leadership.

This creates institutional vulnerability. IDEA has documented a troubling pattern of highly politicised appointments to INEC since 2015, including instances where partisan individuals or individuals with limited electoral experience have been nominated. The integrity of the commissioner appointment process in 2026 will be a critical indicator of whether the political class is committed to fair electoral governance or is seeking institutional capture.

The new INEC chairman has publicly committed to ensuring that 'the 2027 General Election must be free and fair and be a watershed moment in Nigeria's history.' Proposed amendments to the Electoral Act 2026 — including mandated electronic transmission of results — could strengthen institutional integrity. However, the National Assembly's deliberations on these amendments are themselves subject to political pressures, with some legislators even proposing shifting elections to November 2026 rather than February 2027 — a move that, if adopted, could significantly disrupt the electoral calendar without clear public benefit.

## 7. WHAT THE VOTING CLASS WANTS: READING THE ELECTORATE

Any serious analysis of the 2027 electoral landscape must engage with the preferences and dispositions of Nigeria's voting population, which is among Africa's most youthful. The 'Obidient Movement' that emerged around Peter Obi's 2023 candidacy represented a generationally significant mobilisation of educated, digitally active, urban young Nigerians who expressed demand for policy-driven, accountability-oriented governance over ethnic or patronage-based politics. The fact that this movement has now encountered the practical constraints of Nigerian party politics — with Obi joining the transactional ADC coalition — reflects a broader tension between civic aspirations and structural realities.

Several voter-facing dynamics will shape the 2026-2027 electoral period. First, economic performance will be central: the government's ability to translate macroeconomic stability into household-level improvements in purchasing power, food prices, and employment will determine whether reform rhetoric resonates. Second, security conditions will significantly affect voter turnout, particularly in the North, where both the APC and opposition draw substantial support. Third, institutional trust — in INEC's neutrality, in the courts' electoral integrity, and in the counting and transmission of results — remains fragile following contested 2023 outcomes.

Importantly, the Continuous Voter Registration window from April 2026 to January 2027 creates a significant opportunity to expand the electorate. Youth-driven registration drives — a feature of the 2023 cycle — are likely to resume, potentially introducing a new cohort of voters whose preferences may not map onto existing party structures. Political actors who invest in credible policy communication to this emerging electorate, rather than relying solely on ethnic and regional solidarity, may gain electoral advantages that are difficult to predict from current polling.

## **8. PROJECTED SCENARIOS FOR THE 2026 POLITICAL YEAR**

On the basis of the evidence reviewed, this brief advances three analytical scenarios for the political dynamics of 2026:

### **Scenario A: Governance-Led Campaign (Low Probability)**

In this scenario, both the ruling APC and opposition parties compete primarily on the basis of policy platforms, governance records, and programmatic proposals. The Tinubu administration's economic reforms deliver tangible household-level benefits by mid-2026, while the ADC coalition produces a credible governance manifesto. Electoral competition becomes a genuine accountability exercise. INEC conducts the 2026 precursor elections without significant controversy, building institutional confidence. This scenario would represent the ideal democratic outcome but is assessed as low probability given the structural incentives of Nigeria's political economy.

### **Scenario B: Hybrid Governance-Politicking (Moderate Probability)**

In this more likely scenario, governance delivery and political positioning occur simultaneously, with each party deploying governance initiatives as electoral tools. The Tinubu administration accelerates visible infrastructure and social investment programmes, frames economic data favourably, and uses state resources strategically. The ADC coalition produces rhetoric about governance failures while internally consuming energy in coalition management, ticket negotiations, and party administration. Electoral outcomes in the FCT, Ekiti, and Osun contests influence relative narratives heading into the formal campaign season.

### **Scenario C: Politicking-Dominant Environment (High Probability)**

In the most likely scenario, the dominant political mode of 2026 is electoral positioning, with governance instrumentalised primarily as campaign material. Mass defections continue, narrowing the competitive space.

Party internal conflicts consume opposition energy. State resources are deployed for electoral preparation under the cover of governance programmes. INEC's leadership transition introduces institutional uncertainty. Voter disenchantment, already elevated by contested 2023 outcomes and economic hardship, further suppresses civic engagement. The election in February 2027 is competitive but contested, with turnout and legitimacy concerns recurring as democratic challenges.

## 9. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### FOR THE TINUBU ADMINISTRATION

- Separate governance delivery timelines from electoral timelines — policy programmes must be implemented on merit and need, not calibrated to electoral benefit.
- Ensure that the Renewed Hope Ward Development Programme is monitored by independent civil society organisations to prevent partisan capture of social investments.
- Accelerate security architectural reforms, particularly decentralised policing proposals, which have genuine governance value beyond electoral messaging.
- Pursue transparent INEC appointments, resisting the temptation of institutional capture that would undermine long-term democratic stability.
- Communicate economic reform trade-offs to citizens honestly, acknowledging household hardships while explaining structural rationale — this builds more durable trust than selective data presentation.

### FOR OPPOSITION AND THE ADC COALITION

- Develop and publicly release a comprehensive policy manifesto that goes beyond governance critique to offer detailed, costed alternative programmes — this is the most credible basis for democratic competition.
- Resolve internal coalition management issues, particularly presidential ticket negotiations, through transparent internal democratic processes rather than elite back-room deals.
- Build genuine grassroots organisational capacity at ward level to compensate for the absence of serving gubernatorial allies — this requires investment, not merely social media mobilisation.
- Engage the Obidient Movement and youth-oriented civil society groups in genuine policy consultation, not merely as mobilisation vehicles.
- Resist the temptation to replicate the incumbent's transactional politics: the coalition's strongest electoral argument is the promise of genuine democratic accountability.

## FOR INEC

Prioritise the credibility and independence of the INEC appointment process for incoming commissioners — this is the foundational prerequisite for electoral trust.

- Accelerate the implementation of proposed Electoral Act 2026 amendments, particularly mandatory electronic result transmission, which significantly reduces room for post-election manipulation.
- Use the 2026 precursor elections (FCT, Ekiti, Osun) as institutional credibility tests, with maximum transparency in the results management process.
- Enforce campaign timeline regulations firmly, including against the ruling party, to establish institutional independence and deter premature campaign activities that drain governance capacity.
- Engage civil society and the media in proactive voter education ahead of the CVR period to maximise registration and electoral participation.

## FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE MEDIA

Establish independent governance scorecards tracking the administration's specific policy commitments against verifiable delivery indicators throughout 2026.

- Monitor and publicly report on the use of state resources for electoral purposes, contributing to accountability norms that reduce the governance cost of perpetual campaigning.
- Support youth voter registration drives to ensure the 2027 electorate reflects Nigeria's demographic reality.
- Provide balanced coverage of opposition coalition-building that holds the ADC to the same governance accountability standards applied to the ruling party.

## 10. CONCLUSION

The central argument of this policy brief is that the Nigerian polity entering 2026 is structurally biased toward politicking over governance, and that this bias, while not inevitable, is driven by deep features of the country's political economy: patronage-based federalism, weak accountability institutions, party incoherence, and a political culture in which electoral cycles continuously disrupt administrative cycles. The 2027 elections arrive amid genuine policy reforms but also amid deepening opposition fragmentation, unprecedented political defections, and real institutional vulnerabilities at INEC.

Yet the brief does not counsel fatalism. Nigeria's democratic development has demonstrated remarkable resilience: the 2015 peaceful transfer of power between parties, the 2023 electoral innovations with BVAS, and the enduring civic energy of movements like the Obidients all point to a political society with significant democratic aspiration. The extent to which 2026 becomes a year of substantive governance delivery or hollow political posturing will depend on choices made by the administration, the opposition, electoral institutions, civil society, and ultimately, by Nigerian voters themselves.

Democratic elections are, at their best, structured incentives for good governance. If both incumbents and challengers in 2027 conclude that voters will reward tangible delivery over political theatre, the quality of governance in 2026 will improve. This shift in incentive requires a shift in voter behavior, demanding accountability, refusing to be mobilised purely on ethnic or patronage grounds, and holding candidates to programmatic commitments. The 2027 elections thus represent more than a political event but a referendum on the quality of Nigerian democracy itself.

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