

Welcome Remarks by Ngozi Iwere, Executive Director, Community Life Project (CLP) delivered at the High-level Religious Leaders' Forum on the Responsibility of Religious Leaders and Faith Communities in the forthcoming 2019 Elections

Traditional Rulers here present, Religious Leaders here present, our distinguished speakers, representatives of donor and development agencies, INEC, Civil Society and ReclaimNaija partners, on behalf of Community Life Project, I welcome you all to this forum for Religious Leaders on the 2019 Elections. The reason for this forum is to hear from the moral voices in society – to provide guidance on how we as religious people and faith communities should conduct ourselves during this election.

This forum is taking place at a time when there is deep yearning in the country for peaceful, free and fair elections. At the same time, the country is witnessing ethno-religious divisions and different forms of violence. There is a lot of misinformation, especially on social media and cynicism. A significant number of our citizens are questioning whether there is any point in going out to vote. There is lack of faith in some quarters that vote will count and many anticipate election rigging.

Nigerians are noted as one of the most religious peoples on the face of the earth. This should naturally result in the construction of a peaceful, just and prosperous society where citizens have confidence in the systems, appreciate their diversity and are proud to contribute to nation building. The irony, however, is that we have not experienced the fruits of that religiosity in our civic life.

CLP is a leading non-partisan civil society organisation working to promote inclusion and participation of grassroots citizens in electoral integrity and democratic governance. In the wake of the 2011 elections, CLP created the non-partisan ReclaimNaija social movement for grassroots citizens to come together across religious and ethnic divides to express their voice on governance. ReclaimNaija brings together grassroots networks, community associations, artisan groups, women and youth associations, faith-based groups (Christian and Muslim), professional groups and government agencies.

Notable among our Faith-based partners are the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN), the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) and several other Christian and Muslim youth organisations and networks.

ReclaimNaija Grassroots partners have networks and a presence in all the States of the Federation and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) and we have had activities in 234 Local Governments. On Electoral integrity, we partner with INEC in areas of grassroots citizens inclusion and participation in the electoral process such as voter education, registration, PVC collection and election incident reporting.

Post-election, we work on social accountability, especially on participatory budgeting; training grassroots community leaders and the government officials - budget and finance officers, community development officers - on participatory budgeting; organising Town Hall meetings where we bring together grassroots leaders and relevant government officials on how to identify and include community needs into the Local Government budget.

In Kaduna State, a Christian and Muslim ReclaimNaija team has been working with the Universal Basic Education Board to promote transparency and accountability in the use of UBE funds. For the past one year, they have been monitoring UBE-funded projects to ensure effective service delivery.

This is an opportunity for us to extend our appreciation to our funders who have been supporting our work over the years - the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation and OSIWA.

In keeping with the ReclaimNaija tradition, therefore, we have organised this interfaith forum to dialogue and reach a common understanding of what the role of religious leaders should be in the 2019 elections.

We believe strongly that the civic space should not be abandoned to politicians. And without pre-empting what our speakers will be saying to us today, members of the ReclaimNaija movement will like to pose the following questions to our Religious Leaders: If politicians are heating up the body polity, using divisive language; if rumours and half-truths are being churned out and circulated on social media, what should be the role of religious leaders?

If peaceful, free and fair elections are desirable, should the votes of citizens not count? If elections are rigged, the peoples' votes are sold and bought, does this stealing of votes and election rigging not rob the people of their God-given free will? If the people did not choose, if the votes did not count, if the mandate was stolen, can we say that the candidates that emerged were chosen by God, had God's blessings? Does God now endorse election rigging? How should religious leaders conduct themselves? What is their responsibility towards the country, the citizens, their faith communities and to God, as far as elections are concerned?

These are the questions the presentations and discussions at this Forum will help to answer.

We have invited you as faith leaders and communities to be who you are; to be the moral voices that you are, servants of God Almighty, answerable to God, to provide the needed guidance.

Speak. Your faith communities are listening; the country is listening; God Himself is listening.

After this forum, ReclaimNaija movement will be organising similar forums in all the 36 States and FCT targeting 200 Christian and Muslim leaders per State making 7,400 leaders. We expect the leaders to further step down the civic and voter education through all their various channels. We have prepared standardised modules and voter education materials that are non-partisan and that promote active participation in the elections in a manner that would promote free and fair elections. We often hear it say that the major political parties have structures all over the country. We, in ReclaimNaija, would like to remind our Religious Leaders that Faith communities have more structures on ground than any political parties anywhere in the world. We are calling on you to put those structures in use for the promotion of non-partisan, peaceful, free and fair elections.

I will like to use this opportunity to acknowledge and appreciate the presence of highly placed religious leaders. We have in our midst today, our speakers – Dr. Khalid Abubakar Aliyu (Secretary General of Jama’atu Nasril Islam); Fr. George Ehusani (former Secretary General of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria and Founder of Lux Terra Foundation); our discussants - Dr. Sale Momale (Representative of the Supreme Council for Shari’a, Nigeria), Prof. Anthony Akinwale, OP (Vice Chancellor, Dominican University), Very Rev. David Agada (Diocesan Synod Secretary, Methodist Church, Kaduna) and Prof. Ishaq Oloyede (Secretary General, Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs).

Representatives of leaders of Christian and Muslim networks from across the country. They include Islamic Youth League, Youth Wing of the Christian Council, Christian Council of Nigeria (CAN), the representative of the International Amirah of NASFAT, the Bishop of the Anglican Communion, Bauchi, representative of the Diocese of Lokoja, Anglican Communion, representative of WOWICAN, MURIC, Council of Imams, National Amirah, FOMWAN and others that time will not permit me to mention here.

Our prayer is that what we will share together in this inter-faith forum and what we shall do subsequently will help our country achieve peaceful, free and fair elections.

Once again, I thank you all for being here and for answering this call to service.

God bless you.