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**Text of Press Statement on the 2023 General Elections issued at the Interfaith Press Conference organised by Community Life Project (CLP)/ReclaimNaija in collaboration with Religious Leaders on Tuesday, January 10, 2023 at the Centenary Guest House, Wuse, Abuja.**

Ladies and gentlemen of the press.

It is with a keen sense of duty and patriotism that we, religious leaders from across the country, decided to call this press conference. We can never play down the role of the fourth estate of the realm. Indeed, it is not for nothing that our country's constitution emphasises the media as a veritable and important institution in the democratisation process in Nigeria. We are, therefore, glad about your presence here because you will help to magnify our voice at this critical and pivotal moment in the history of our country.

We cannot proceed without acknowledging the many encouraging efforts of the Community Life Project/ReclaimNaija whose collaboration with us made this event possible. We thank them for their partnership and collaboration.

That our country finds herself in a momentous period of her over sixty years of existence is not subject to debate. It is a period of fear, anxiety, and sometimes, despair about the direction our country is headed. But, paradoxically, it is also a period of great hope and optimism that it is not yet darkness for the country of over 200 million people. That our citizens are people of extraordinary talent, imagination, and vision is not a matter of debate. The stories of the wonderful successes and feats of our brothers and sisters outside the shores of Nigeria are celebrated abroad and at home. We still have so many of these same people burning with passion for their country among us. All that is needed is an enabling environment for them to thrive so that the country would reap bountiful harvests therefrom.

It is precisely in search of this environment, that we have called this press briefing. It is an environment that is built by having the right political culture under which all citizens are allowed to participate without constraint and inhibitions.

ReclaimNaija is a broad-based platform for citizen and grassroots participation in promoting electoral integrity and social accountability in Nigeria. The platform brings together a vast network of over 80 citizen and grassroots organisations spread across 234 Local Governments in the 36 States and Federal Capital Territory. Its membership comprises Trade-Based Associations and Informal Sector Artisan Groups, Civil Society, Faith-Based and Community-Based Organisations as well as Activists and Professional Groups.

**ReclaimNaija: Empowering Grassroots Citizens for Electoral Integrity & Democratic Governance**

As the 2023 General Elections come inexorably closer with each passing day, it has become imperative to point out the absolute necessity to get it right at the various stages and processes from pre-election to Election Day, as well as, post-election. In line with these, we make the following observations:

### **Distribution of the Permanent Voters Cards (PVCs)**

We note with some satisfaction that the distribution of voters' cards has continued across the country after some delays to the previous schedules by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). We observe that in the early stages of the collection process, it had not gone without hitches. However, we are happy that a smoother process has been instituted and is working better, but we must state that there are still stories of frustrations from many Nigerians over the slow process. There are still stories reflecting the old politics of PVC distribution where in some State and LG offices it is said that people are deliberately denied access to their PVCs based on ethnic or partisan considerations, which indicate manipulations to disenfranchise citizens. In some places, citizens have had to make several visits and/or wait for long hours before collecting their PVCs. Many new registrants or those who transferred to new polling units are being told to return in mid-January. We urge INEC to improve on observed lapses. If this is not done, then the fear will heighten that a large percentage of the over six million voters without PVCs will be disenfranchised.

INEC owes it a duty to ensure that no citizen is denied access to their PVCs due to administrative lapses, delays, or inefficiency in the distribution process. In view of the fact that all PVCs are yet to arrive at their State and Local Government offices, we call on the Commission to urgently consider extending the deadline for PVC collection at the ward level beyond the January 15 deadline.

We must be ever mindful of the fact that elections and their processes are about the people. And it is why we all speak with one voice as we call on all Nigerians of different persuasions and faiths to do all they can to avail themselves of the opportunities of PVC distribution at the ward level to go out in their numbers to collect their PVCs. It is disheartening that the turnout has been low in some places. We also say to them that the power they have over their elected representatives is in their PVC. We urge them to look closely at everyone seeking their votes and to eschew parochial sentiments of division and strife as they make their choices. Four years is too long (nor any period for that matter), to sacrifice good governance on the altar of mediocrity. Surely, we have had enough of bad governance.

The situation of people with disabilities is a matter of critical importance that demands increased attention by INEC to ensure that every aspect of the commission's policies and regulations of concern to Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) are fully observed and implemented going forward.

### **Insecurity**

Just like every patriotic and responsible citizen of Nigeria, we note with very grave concern, the heightened insecurity in the land. Violence and civil strife have continued unabatedly and seem to have spiked in the lead-up to the 2023 General Elections. The spread of these acts of violence to other parts of the country has added to the tension as regards the elections. To date, according to INEC, about 50 of the Commission's assets have been attacked in the last five years. It is most worrisome that between August and December 2022 alone, in just a span of 4 months 7 INEC offices were attacked. The implications of these unfortunate acts of violence are grave for our country. We call on all security agencies to be more alive to their responsibilities. We also call on governments, both state and federal, to increase their support to security agencies and put an end to the orgy of violence in the land.

We should bear in mind that insecurity is everyone's problem. Citizens should be more vigilant and report suspicious situations to authorities. The people behind these acts of violence, especially at this time, are trying to undermine our democracy. We must not let them.

Lastly, on the matter of insecurity, we call on the perpetrators of violence to sheath their swords. Violence does not solve problems. Electing responsible political leaders can lead to the process of healing our country of all her socio-economic malaise, including violence.

### **The Role of the Media**

We have already talked about the virtues and roles of the media in the lead-up to the 2023 elections. Their role is absolutely indispensable. In fact, the degree of freedom the media in any country enjoys is used as a barometer for determining the level of democratisation in such a place. Passing the right kind of information at this particular time in our nation's history is an important aspect of responsible journalism. The media must also be ready to educate, refute, and debunk, fake news. What we have seen by

way of Media activities and engagement with the electoral process during this special period in the life of our nation has been commendable. They can do more.

### **The Role of Influencers and Opinion Leaders**

By virtue of their standing in society, some Nigerians have attained certain levels of standing in the public space. This has subsequently given them a very large platform for engagement with the public. These groups of people are found in religious circles, mosques, churches, social media, and entertainment circles. They have a duty to use their amplified voices to push for issues that are of importance and relevance to the overall well-being of our country. This period affords them the opportunity to inform the people of the importance of responsibly exercising their civic duties. They must lend their voices to the cause of getting citizens to collect their PVCs and vote peacefully and participate in all aspects of our civic life with a true patriotic spirit.

### **Religious Leaders**

The importance of religious leaders cannot be over-emphasised. It is why we expect them to live above board at all times. We expect that they would use their enormous influence over their followers to encourage participation in the electoral process while admonishing them to shun all forms of violence. We must remind ourselves that we have a moral obligation to protect poor and vulnerable citizens, especially people at the grassroots and in our rural communities. We should not look the other way as the poverty and ignorance of our vulnerable population are being exploited by unscrupulous forces who are buying their PVCs and votes. The onus is on us to rigorously educate our faith communities on the adverse consequences of selling their PVCs and their votes. We should have the courage to call on all politicians and those vying for public office to act ethically and play by the rules.

We also expect that hateful and divisive rhetoric which sometimes finds its way to the pulpit will be a thing of the past. Our land needs healing and cleansing. Hateful speeches and fiery rhetoric are poisons that destabilise the nation. Much more is expected of the people of faith.

As we count down to a very important election on February 25, 2023, we praise Nigerians for their resilience, faith, and optimism that 2023 will mark a turning point in our nation.

God bless our country. God bless us all.