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BEFORE THE BALLOT: **POLICY BRIEF**



SEPTEMBER 2026

From Nominations to Electoral Confidence

Nigeria's 2026 party primaries: findings and priorities before the 2027 elections and during 2027–2031

Executive Summary

On 12 September 2026, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) published the final lists of candidates for the presidential and National Assembly elections in January 2027. They include Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Kashim Shettima for the All Progressives Congress (APC), Atiku Abubakar and Rotimi Amaechi for the African Democratic Congress (ADC), and Peter Obi and Rabiu Kwankwaso for the Nigeria Democratic Congress (NDC), alongside 15 other presidential tickets. All 469 National Assembly seats have more than one candidate on the published lists; none is currently unopposed. Earlier concerns that Atiku or Obi would be excluded have not materialised. NDC's registration proceedings and other legal nomination disputes remain unresolved and could still require changes to the lists and jeopardise the competitive nature of the elections.

The 2026 reforms changed nomination procedures while party leaders and influential patrons retained effective control over candidate selection. Direct primaries gave ordinary members a formal vote, but in cases examined, leadership still controlled access to forms, screening, consensus arrangements and the submission of candidates to INEC. Internal appeals and national review could also overturn outcomes announced after voting and lead to controversial replacements. Gatekeeping shifted from delegate conventions to less visible decisions before and after the vote, while inaccessible party records and monitoring findings restricted members' ability to scrutinise or challenge those decisions.

Parties were required to notify INEC, publish primary procedures and document nominations. In the exercises observed and according to collated media information, aspirants and members sometimes lacked even the venue information needed to participate. Observers could not obtain the party rules, registers and results needed to check compliance, and INEC's presence did not establish that its monitors had verified accreditation or the full process. High nomination costs and reported disruptions further restricted participation.

APC's nominations incorporated incoming governors and established federal officeholders while leaving disputes over legislative tickets unresolved, some of which went to court. Despite various efforts during the last 18 months, opposition leaders failed to agree on a common presidential candidate, and realignments dispersed officeholders and local networks across different parties, with ADC and NDC becoming the main vehicles to challenge President Tinubu and his ruling APC.

The Court of Appeal's 16 July judgment in *Zenith Party v INEC* undid a membership-based safeguard incorporated into the Electoral Act 2026 after prolonged reform dialogue and negotiation. By removing the link between eligibility and membership registers submitted before the primaries, the ruling reopened precisely the route to alternative nominations that the reform had sought to restrict: unsuccessful aspirants could again negotiate another party's ticket after the main primaries had concluded. Access to these tickets continued to depend on financial resources and relationships with those controlling selection, while members often lacked the records needed to scrutinise subsequent changes. Candidates still had to belong to the receiving party and comply with the remaining nomination and replacement rules and deadlines. On 16 September, the Supreme Court heard INEC's appeal against the ruling and reserved judgment. While this opens the opportunity to realign the Electoral Act with the reform path on this specific issue, it also extends the ambiguity and uncertainty of the legal rules governing the nomination process into the campaign period.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY • CONTINUED

Action before polling and during the next cycle

The cumulative burden of procedural shortcomings, unresolved disputes and weakened public confidence could still be partly mitigated before polling.

Disputes carried forward from the primaries

The immediate recommendations address disputes carried forward from the primaries and subsequent nominations. Party leaderships should explain disputed selections, internal appeal decisions and candidate replacements, and give affected aspirants access to the primary results, appeal records and withdrawal documents needed to examine those decisions. INEC should release the relevant primary-monitoring findings, explain how it handled disputed submissions and give reasons for changes to its published candidate lists, while protecting sensitive personal information. Courts should prioritise pending cases affecting party participation and candidate nominations, delivering reasoned and consistent judgments early enough for INEC to implement them before polling.

Towards the 2027 elections: Campaign conduct and election preparations

During the campaign, parties should translate their Peace Accord commitments into instructions to officials and supporters against intimidation, violence and inducement. Security agencies should protect candidates, voters, election workers, observers and journalists impartially, investigate reported abuses promptly and make their responses public. INEC should make candidate information and election procedures accessible and explain its administrative and technological preparations, including test results, deficiencies and corrective measures. These actions would address the conditions under which candidates campaign and voters participate, alongside the continuing work to resolve nomination grievances.

Reform during 2027–2031

Political parties should give members an effective say in candidate selection, publish nomination rules and results, and provide a usable process for checking membership records and challenging exclusions. Reduce nomination fees to affordable levels and establish internal appeal panels independent of those responsible for the contested decisions, with clear deadlines and reasoned rulings. Adopt enforceable inclusion measures for women, young people and persons with disabilities, covering candidacies, campaign resources and participation in party decision-making. The National Assembly should review nomination and litigation timelines together, in consultation with INEC and the judiciary, so that effective remedies can be delivered before ballot production and other critical election preparations.

Rebuilding confidence before polling

Campaign conduct and administrative preparations must reinforce these corrective measures through fair treatment and visible correction of deficiencies. Improved election-day administration and verifiable results collation can contribute to rebuilding confidence when the preceding stages visibly address the failures exposed during nominations.

Basis: Before the Ballot, updated assessment supplied on 17 September 2026. This brief draws principally on its Executive Summary, chapter Main Findings and Chapter IX recommendations. Candidate data refer to the 12 September lists; litigation status follows the dates stated in the report.

MAIN FINDINGS

1. Party control and access to nomination records

Aspirants and observers lacked the records needed for scrutiny

Current party constitutions, primary guidelines, membership registers, accreditation figures, result forms, appeal decisions and INEC monitoring findings remained largely inaccessible. Aspirants lacked evidence needed to challenge disputed decisions, and members and observers could not verify claims of compliance. INEC's aggregate assurances that parties had submitted documents did not show whether each submission met the relevant deadlines. INEC monitors primaries; parties conduct them. The law and regulations did not provide a sufficiently clear procedure for INEC to turn evidence of non-compliance into a timely, reasoned response and sanction before parties submitted candidates' lists. Late regulations and the compressed timetable compounded these difficulties.

Party leaders retained control before and after voting

Party leadership controlled access to forms and screening, determining who could reach a vote or participate in consensus negotiations. Internal appeals, national certification and candidate submission could then alter the outcome. Members' influence over the final nomination remained limited where they could not scrutinise these decisions or obtain the supporting records. Inter-Party Advisory Council (IPAC) chairman Yusuf Dantalle acknowledged pressure on some aspirants to withdraw, restricted availability of forms and late schedules, attributing these partly to the demands of direct primaries.

Observed in Abuja and Ibadan North

At the selected Abuja primary, the team did not observe accreditation against the relevant membership register. Members could choose only among aspirants whose agents were present. In Ibadan North, a late venue change sent some members to the wrong location. These are observations from selected exercises, not a nationwide count of irregularities.

High costs restricted entry and increased dependence on sponsors

Presidential form costs reached ₦100 million; APC charged ₦20 million for Senate forms and ₦10 million for House forms. Screening, appeals, mobilisation, security and litigation added to the published fees. Aspirants seeking access to established party organisations and resources therefore faced substantial hurdles before members could test their support. These costs restricted access and increased structural dependencies on sponsors, while income from form sales gave parties an incentive to maintain high charges. Discounts for women, youth and persons with disabilities left much of this wider cost burden intact without increasing their nomination numbers.

Violence threatened participants and the evidence of results

The media cases include a fatal confrontation at an APC primary in Plateau and the abduction of an INEC official and removal of ballot boxes during an ADC primary in Cross River. Responsibility requires case-by-case examination. The reported incidents put both participants and the records needed to verify results at risk. Impartial security and investigation of alleged abuses are therefore integral to participation and accountability.

MAIN FINDINGS

2. Candidate lists and the effects on parties

The federal lists contain 18 presidential tickets, 1,303 Senate candidates and 3,560 House candidates. The legislative field is 15.2 per cent larger than in the corresponding 2023 publication. APC has candidates for every seat. ADC's and NDC's gaps do not overlap, so at least one has a candidate in each legislative contest.

Party	Senate candidates 109 seats	House candidates 360 seats
ADC	108	346
APC	109	360
APM	104	312
NDC	99	330
PDP	101	316

APC: incoming networks secured tickets; legislative disputes continued

Incoming governors secured nominations alongside established federal officeholders, increasing claims on a fixed number of tickets. In Benue and Ondo, the National Working Committee reversed some governors preferred legislative selections. Across nine states, APC revised 26 nominations in July, attributing the changes to appeals. Established networks could recover tickets through national review; some displaced aspirants continued litigation or obtained other parties' tickets. Support for Tinubu

could coexist with opposition to an APC legislative candidate. Whether these disputes and internal factional politics weaken the presidential re-election campaign machinery remains to be assessed during the campaign; this goes also for the APC Legislative prospects.

Opposition parties: divided leaderships and regrouping on other platforms

Atiku's settlement with Amaechi resolved his primary dispute within the ADC. Obi and Kwankwaso, after leaving ADC, brought their movements, together with other regional networks, to NDC while constituency nominations remained contested. Labour retained its Abia governing base after losing national figures. The New Nigeria Peoples Party's (NNPP) former Kano state governing coalition split across APC and NDC.

PDP's official list emerged without a leadership settlement. INEC gave portal access to the recognised Abdulrahman Mohammed-led, Wike-backed leadership, withholding it from Kabiru Tanimu Turaki's group. The latter's submission of Goodluck Jonathan's papers manually was rejected by INEC, and the former President, long rumoured as that faction's possible candidate, was absent from the list. Makinde's Oyo former PDP network secured APM candidacies.

At least 79 sitting senators and 258 House members are candidates again for their respective chambers, showing individual continuity across party realignment. These are minimum working counts, not an official INEC incumbency total.

At least six candidates appeared on INEC's 12 September final lists for other parties after unsuccessful APC nomination bids or exclusion at screening. These alternative nominations covered both chambers of the National Assembly. The routes included obtaining another party's ticket for the same office, securing a nomination elsewhere after exclusion at screening, and moving from an unsuccessful governorship bid to a Senate candidacy. Their inclusion on the final lists did not, by itself, establish compliance with the applicable membership, nomination and replacement rules.

MAIN FINDINGS

3. Continuing disputes and barriers to participation

Campaigns opened before the final candidate lists

Federal campaigning opened on 19 August, before the final lists on 12 September; state campaigning opened on 9 September, ahead of lists scheduled for 10 October. NDC's registration proceedings could affect its entire candidate list. Other cases concern nomination authority or individual tickets. Late judgments can still require INEC to amend the authoritative lists and, depending on the order, election materials.

The July judgment reopened routes to another party's ticket

The Court of Appeal's 16 July judgment in *Zenith Labour Party v INEC* undid a membership-based safeguard incorporated into the Electoral Act 2026 after prolonged reform dialogue. The judgment also struck down section 84(2), which had restricted parties to direct primaries or consensus as nomination methods. By removing the link between nomination eligibility and membership registers submitted before primaries, it reopened precisely the route to alternative nominations that the reform had sought to restrict: unsuccessful aspirants could again negotiate another party's ticket after the main primaries, with access still dependent on those controlling selection. Some of the six documented transfers preceded the judgment, which changed the legal basis for assessing those nominations as well as the options for later entrants.

Those Candidates still had to be members of the receiving party, and replacing an already submitted candidate required valid withdrawal or death and a fresh primary under the applicable rules and deadlines. INEC appealed the judgment to the Supreme Court. On 16 September 2026, a seven-member panel heard the appeal (SC/CR/495/2026) and reserved judgment, with the date for delivery to be communicated to the parties. The final legal position therefore remains unresolved and extends the uncertainties and ambiguities of the legal nomination rules into the campaign period. Separately, the Court of Appeal set aside the *Youth Party* timetable judgment; no outcome had been reported for the separate Social Democratic Party (SDP) appeal at the assessment's cut-off.

Aspirants had little time to obtain evidence and challenge decisions

Eligible claimants generally have 14 days from the disputed act or decision to challenge a nomination. Publication of the final list does not restart an expired deadline for challenging a primary or replacement. Aspirants therefore needed party and INEC records before time ran out. Courts cannot halt primaries or elections while these suits are pending. Revised procedures address delay and examination of disputed evidence. Beyond individual cases, inconsistent decisions, delayed finality and disputes over compliance with appellate orders also place pressure on public confidence in electoral justice

Women faced barriers throughout candidate selection

Women comprise a meagre 346 of 3,560 House candidates (9.7 per cent), compared with 9.2 per cent in the 2023 publication; 160 constituencies have no woman candidate. Fees, screening, consensus bargaining and limited access to finance and decision-making restricted participation before the lists appeared. The special-seats proposal, requiring Constitutional Change, despite some late progress, remained unenacted. Assistance to women already nominated is needed alongside work on structural inclusion measures.

Youth and disability figures do not show the full extent of participation

The assessment has no verified national age profile. Seven House candidates have a disability recorded in the published list; this counts disclosures, not all candidates with disabilities. Information on who entered, passed screening and secured a nomination is needed to identify

barriers. Identifiable health information requires protection, while practical support should address accessible information, venues and safety.

RECOMMENDATIONS • GENERAL / THEMATIC

4. Until the 2027 elections

The first measures address disputed selections and replacements carried forward from the primaries: obtaining party and INEC records, resolving claims and implementing court decisions. Campaign measures address a separate, concurrent task: safe participation, impartial security and transparent electoral preparations.

ADDRESSING THE FALLOUT FROM NOMINATIONS

1. Explain disputed selections, appeals and candidate replacements

Party leaderships should give affected aspirants the reasons for disputed selections and internal appeal decisions, together with primary results, appeal records and any withdrawal documents. INEC should release the relevant monitoring findings and explain how it handled disputed submissions, including new-party nominations. Later amendments to published lists should be dated, identify the decision authorising them and explain why the candidate changed. Public versions must protect sensitive personal information. Aspirants and members should be able to follow how the announced primary result became the candidate appearing on INEC's list.

2. Decide participation disputes in time to implement judgments

Courts should prioritise pending cases affecting party participation, nomination authority or individual candidates, while protecting fair hearing and applying filing rules consistently. Reasoned judgments should reach INEC early enough to be implemented before polling. Courts should identify related proceedings and share judgments to reduce conflicting orders. INEC needs reliable internal records of orders, appeals and granted stays, with named officers responsible for implementation. A public tracker should show each case's subject, latest order, next hearing and effect on the lists. Judicial support should address procedures and preparedness without influencing individual decisions.

3. Prepare for lawful changes to lists and election materials

INEC should identify which pending cases could require changes to candidate information, ballot approval, printing or distribution. Replacing a candidate within the same party may affect different materials from adding or excluding a party. In Osun, INEC reported late printing of ballot papers and result sheets to implement a judgment requiring SDP's inclusion. Contingency plans should reflect the possible effect of each case and the ballot design. When an order requires changes, INEC should explain what it is changing, why and which preparations are affected.

Milestone recorded in the assessment	Date
State withdrawal/replacement deadline	19 September 2026
Final state nomination documents	26 September 2026
Publication of final state candidate lists	10 October 2026
Presidential/National Assembly polling	16 January 2027
Governorship/State Assembly polling	6 February 2027

Dates cover governorship and State House of Assembly nominations where described as state-level. They are the timetable dates reproduced in the assessment, not substitutes for case-specific court deadlines. Announced intentions to appeal should be distinguished from confirmed filings and granted stays.

RECOMMENDATIONS • GENERAL / THEMATIC, CONTINUED

4. Until the 2027 elections

4. Use dialogue to obtain records and address unresolved grievances

INEC, IPAC and civic partners should meet parties and affected aspirants to obtain explanations of disputed nominations, clarify procedures and agree steps to reduce tensions. Each meeting should record who will respond and what action was agreed. INEC should explain which matters its alternative dispute-resolution mechanism can address and how to use it. Mediation may help with information gaps, procedural misunderstandings and emerging tensions; it does not suspend court deadlines or override nomination rules. Access should be available across parties.

CAMPAIGN CONDITIONS AND PREPARATIONS FOR POLLING

5. Publish accessible candidate, policy and election information

INEC should make candidate information searchable by office, party and constituency, explaining later changes. Parties should present their documented policy commitments in accessible, comparable form. Any voter-information tool needs public sources and methodology, equal treatment of parties and regular updates. INEC should also explain accreditation, electronic transmission and results collation, publish what technology tests found and what was corrected, and set out contingency arrangements. Explanations of reported digital incidents should state which systems were affected and what action followed.

6. Support participation by women, youth and persons with disabilities

Support should address barriers facing candidates already nominated: safe and accessible venues, information, media access and understanding of electoral procedures. Women candidates should have access across parties to non-partisan legal and procedural assistance, communications training and help responding to threats. INEC and civic organisations should publish reliable candidate data by sex and age and examine where aspirants were excluded during nomination. Disability organisations should help identify accessibility needs, with sensitive personal information protected. Practical assistance should continue alongside work on special seats and other inclusion measures.

7. Apply Peace Accord commitments throughout the campaign

Parties should instruct state, local-government and ward officials and supporters to comply with the Peace Accord, including those backing excluded aspirants. Security agencies should protect candidates, voters, election workers, observers and journalists impartially. Reports of intimidation, violence and inducement require prompt investigation and public explanations of official responses. Civic organisations and media should follow both the incident and the response, distinguishing allegations, confirmed facts and judicial findings. These measures should prevent nomination grievances from being pursued through coercion during the campaign.

8. Fund agreed activities and follow through on implementation

National civil society organisations should agree a manageable set of activities, assign responsibilities and provide adequate resources. Existing expertise can support publication of nomination records, INEC communication, inclusion assistance and dispute prevention. Follow-up should continue through the campaign and into the post-election review, keeping candidate information and litigation records current and checking whether agreed measures were implemented.

RECOMMENDATIONS • GENERAL / THEMATIC

5. Reform during 2027–2031

Realistically, preparatory work can begin after polling. Legislative revision, changes in party procedures and testing require sustained work during 2027–2031, ahead of the next primaries.

1. Strengthen members' participation and access to records

Parties should maintain reliable membership records, publish their rules and communicate regularly with members. Members need to check and correct their records and understand who makes nomination decisions. Admission rules should specify the participation rights of existing members and newcomers. Support should reach national and local structures across parties.

2. Make selection and internal appeals transparent

Parties should publish screening decisions, primary results and appeal outcomes, explaining candidate changes. Internal appeals need independence, clear procedures and access to records; national decisions also require scrutiny. Legislators, INEC, parties and courts should review nomination and litigation timetables together, allowing complaints to be heard and judgments implemented before ballot production. Revised guidance should precede the next primaries.

3. Reduce nomination costs and clarify financial accountability

Parties should publish affordable Expression of Interest and nomination fees and explain how the income is used. Disclosure should cover form sales and spending in internal contests. The report proposes explicit prohibition and sanctions for bribery and inducement throughout primaries. Legislative review should address gaps in coverage and enforcement, specifying who investigates, who imposes sanctions and what evidence and resources they need.

4. Make inclusion commitments enforceable

Parties and legislators should develop enforceable inclusion measures and nomination targets for women, young people and persons with disabilities, covering candidacies, resources and selection bodies. The women's special-seats proposal requires constitutional amendment and, if adopted, subsequent implementing legislation. Women's and disability organisations should assess whether reforms improve access at each selection stage, using data collected and published with privacy safeguards.

5. Improve digital records and test procedures before adoption

Electronic systems should record membership, who authorised each nomination and the reasons for later changes. Internal electronic-voting pilots need independent assessment of security, verification and protection against coercion, with alternatives for members unable to use them. Published procedures, technical capacity, maintenance and data protection are needed between elections.

6. Sustain reform work through the next primary cycle

Post-election review should connect nomination records, observer findings, court decisions and participants' experience with improvements in law, selection procedures, training of primary monitors and dispute resolution. Institutions and development partners should agree responsibilities, sustained funding and progress reviews early enough to test and correct procedures before the next primaries.

RECOMMENDATIONS • INSTITUTIONS / STAKEHOLDERS

6. Institutional responsibilities and follow-up

The table sets out responsibilities for addressing unresolved nominations and campaign conditions, and for improving procedures before the next primaries.

Institution/stakeholder	Before the 2027 elections	During 2027–2031
National Assembly	Examine the handling of disputed nominations, election preparations and participation barriers; hear parties, aspirants and observers.	Review the Act against court decisions and nomination problems; specify responsibility and resources for enforcement.
INEC	Release primary-monitoring findings, explain disputed submissions and list changes, and implement court orders promptly.	Publish guidance early, train monitors and maintain accessible membership and nomination records with privacy safeguards.
Political parties	Explain selections, appeals and replacements to affected aspirants; address local grievances and instruct supporters to campaign peacefully.	Publish rules and results, reduce fees, establish independent appeals and clarify the nomination rights of existing and incoming members.
Judiciary	Decide participation and nomination cases early enough for implementation; identify related cases and publish reasoned judgments.	Review access to evidence, case handling and implementation of judgments; improve procedures and readiness for the next cycle.
Civil society, media and development partners	Scrutinise nominations, campaign conduct and official responses; provide impartial information and inclusion assistance across parties.	Observe party governance between elections, publish methods and findings, and follow up on reform implementation.

Responsibilities for delivery

Civil society organisations should assign responsibility for maintaining candidate information and litigation trackers, recording agreed follow-up and sustaining inclusion assistance during the campaign. Nigerian institutions and expertise should lead this work, with resources extending into the post-election review.

Security agencies should protect participation and investigate reported intimidation, violence and inducement. Public explanations of their responses are necessary for parties, candidates and civic organisations to assess whether complaints are being handled impartially.

Questions for checking implementation

Can an affected aspirant obtain the reasons and records behind a disputed selection or replacement? Can voters find the current candidates and understand changes? Has INEC implemented the relevant court orders? Have reports of intimidation and violence been investigated and the responses made public?

Evidence and scope. This brief synthesises *Before the Ballot*, supplied on 17 September 2026, without a new factual or legal investigation. It draws on selected observations, Kukah Centre findings, media and institutional records, court analysis and candidate counts. Cases are illustrative; incumbent figures are minimum counts; disability figures record disclosure. Candidate data refer to 12 September; case status follows the report's stated dates. References use its printed pages.

ABOUT THE EU-SDGN PROGRAMME

The European Union Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria (EU-SDGN) is the EU's flagship democracy support programme in Nigeria. The programme is designed to complement the efforts of the Nigerian government to improve and strengthen democracy.



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