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Growing Election-Related Hate Speeches on Social Media: A Need for Legislative Oversight of the Implementation of the Cybercrimes Act

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Introduction

The increasing use of social media as a primary channel for political communication has created new opportunities for political participation, voter mobilisation and access to electoral information in Nigeria. At the same time, digital platforms have become important channels through which inflammatory political messages, threats, ethnic and religious stereotyping, personal attacks, misinformation and calls for retaliation can circulate rapidly during election periods.[1] The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), in its assessment of the 2023 General Election, specifically identified the combination of fake news and hate speech as having polluted the electoral environment and weakened public confidence in the electoral process. INEC had also previously expressed concern about the contribution of misinformation, disinformation and inflammatory communication to campaign violence, noting that it had engaged civil society organisations, media organisations, security agencies and social media platforms to address the problem.[2]

The concern is particularly important as Nigeria approaches another politically competitive electoral cycle in which social media is likely to play an increasingly significant role in campaigning, mobilisation and political debate. The problem is not simply that offensive political speech exists online, since freedom of expression remains constitutionally protected. Rather, the legislative concern arises when online communication moves from legitimate political criticism into conduct that may constitute threats, intimidation, incitement or the deliberate dissemination of false information in circumstances covered by existing law. The Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act, 2024, (as amended) provides a legal basis for addressing some forms of harmful online communication, while the Electoral Act 2022 separately prohibits abusive, intemperate, slanderous or provocative language in political campaigns. The central policy question, therefore, is whether these existing legal provisions are being consistently implemented and whether relevant law enforcement and regulatory institutions have adequate mechanisms for detecting, investigating and prosecuting election-related cyber offences without unnecessarily restricting lawful political expression.

Nature and Emerging Pattern of Election-Related Online Hate Speech

Election-related online hate speech is increasingly assuming a more organised, identity-based and politically consequential character**,** particularly on X. Recent monitoring has documented the continued use of ethnic slurs and dehumanising language directed at Igbo and Yoruba communities, with some posts invoking the 2023 electoral experience, the Nigerian Civil War and anticipated retaliation during the 2027 elections. For example, a recent investigation by *The Cable* found that several ethnic slurs used during the

[1] Giwa, A. (2026). Social media and conflict management in Taraba State, Nigeria: An assessment of its role in conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding. *Jalingo Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Innovations, 2*(4)

[2] Independent National Electoral Commission. (n.d.). *2023 general elections updates.* https://inecnigeria.org/elections/general-2023

2023 elections remain accessible on X, while new posts continue to portray particular ethnic groups as enemies and threaten retaliation in 2027. The report also identified concerns about weak moderation, engagement-driven amplification and the difficulty of detecting Nigerian language-specific slurs, suggesting that the persistence of such content is not merely a product of individual expression but is reinforced by the architecture of digital platforms.[3]

A second emerging pattern is the migration of inflammatory political rhetoric from physical rallies and meetings into highly shareable digital content. Political actors and public officials increasingly record statements on video, upload them to X and other platforms, and reproduce them far beyond the original audience. The controversy involving Senator Francis Fadahunsi illustrates this pattern: a video of remarks interpreted as calling for the killing of Accord Party members circulated widely online, prompting police action and a National Human Rights Commission response, although Fadahunsi subsequently argued that his words had been edited or were intended metaphorically to mean defeating the party electorally.[4] Similarly, Buba Galadima's call for voters to go to polling units with "bottles and jerrycans of kerosene" during the 2027 elections was widely reported and circulated online, showing how political rhetoric that can be interpreted as encouraging confrontation can quickly reach a much larger audience through social media.[5]

A third pattern is the increasing religious framing of electoral competition. The reported remarks of Sheikh Sani Yahaya Jingir, in which he referred to non-Muslims as "infidels" while urging Muslims to obtain voter cards to "show their limit," prompted the National Human Rights Commission to characterise the remarks as hate speech and incitement to religious hatred and call for investigation and prosecution.[6] This is significant because religiously framed electoral rhetoric can transform political competition into an identity-based contest between religious communities rather than a contest over policies, candidates and programmes. When such statements are converted into short videos and repeatedly circulated online, their potential audience and lifespan extend well beyond the original political gathering. The concern for election security therefore lies not simply in the offensive character of individual statements, but in their capacity to reinforce identity based mobilisation at a time when political tensions are already elevated.

A fourth emerging pattern is political intimidation communicated through digital platforms, including statements by officials who appear to link access to local political or economic space with support for a particular party. In August 2026, Kuje Area Council Chairman Samuel Danjuma Shekwolo was reported to have told residents that they must support the APC or leave the area council, in remarks subsequently circulated on social media.[7] In September, Ohaukwu LGA Chairman Paul Ituma similarly warned opposition actors to stay away from the council area or

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[3] Soaga, O. (2026, August 16). *Three years on, ethnic slurs, hate speech thrive on X. TheCable.* https://www.thecable.ng/three-years-on-ethnic-slurs-hate-speech-thrive-on-x/?utm_source=chatgpt.com#google_vignette

[4] National Human Rights Commission. (2026, August 12). *Suspend and arrest Fadahunsi before he spills blood — NHRC tells authorities.* https://www.nhrc.gov.ng/nhrc-media/news-and-events/665-suspend-and-arrest-fadahunsi-before-he-spills-blood-nhrc-tells-authorities.html

[5] Folorunsho-Francis, A. (2026, May 2). *'Go to polls with bottles of kerosene, defend your votes,' Galadima tells voters. Punch Newspapers.* https://punchng.com/go-to-polls-with-bottles-of-kerosene-defend-your-votes-galadima-tells-voters/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[6] National Human Rights Commission. (2026, August 11). *NHRC demands arrest of Sheikh Jingir over hate speech.* https://www.nhrc.gov.ng/nhrc-media/news-and-events/664-nhrc-demands-arrest-of-sheikh-jingir-over-hate-speech.html

[7] Atanda, S. (2026, August 25). *Video: Chairman Danjuma Shekwolo threatens residents to 'vote APC or leave' FCT Area Council. FIJ.* https://fij.ng/article/video-chairman-danjuma-shekwolo-threatens-residents-to-vote-apc-or-leave-fct-area-council/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

risk being declared *persona non grata*.[8] In Edo State, Esan West LGA Chairman Blessing Ebhodaghe was reported to have directed commercial drivers at a motor park to wear APC branded materials or risk losing access to the park.[9] These cases are analytically important because they demonstrate how online political rhetoric can intersect with the exercise of public or institutional authority**,** potentially transforming social media statements into instruments of political pressure and intimidation.

Taken together, these developments reveal four interconnected characteristics of the emerging pattern**:** ethnic and religious targeting, increasingly violent or threatening political rhetoric, the rapid digital amplification of statements made by political actors, and the use of official or community authority to pressure political opponents and citizens. The principal concern is therefore not that every controversial political statement constitutes a cyber crime, but that some online communications may cross the threshold into threats, incitement, harassment, intimidation, impersonation or other conduct prohibited by law. This distinction is particularly important following the 2024 amendment of the Cybercrimes Act, which narrowed aspects of the earlier Section 24 framework and requires enforcement to be anchored in specific statutory offences rather than the mere offensiveness of political speech.[10] The emerging pattern consequently strengthens the case for effective implementation and parliamentary oversight of existing cybercrime and electoral laws**,** including systematic monitoring, preservation of digital evidence, inter agency referrals and transparent investigation of cases that meet the relevant legal threshold.

Key Implementation and Enforcement Challenges

A major challenge is the gap between legislation and the capacity to enforce it consistently. Election related online content can be produced anonymously, circulated through multiple accounts and hosted on platforms outside Nigeria, making identification and preservation of evidence more difficult than in conventional electoral offences. Investigators may need to establish the original source of a communication, authenticate screenshots or recordings, trace accounts and establish the relationship between a digital account and an individual. The rapid deletion or modification of online material further creates evidentiary challenges. These circumstances make specialised digital forensic capacity and timely cooperation between law enforcement agencies and technology platforms important components of effective enforcement.

A second challenge concerns institutional coordination. INEC has an electoral mandate, while cybercrime investigation involves law enforcement and specialised cyber security institutions, creating the need for clearly defined channels for referral and investigation. INEC already operates a Citizens Contact Centre through which members of the public can submit incident reports, complaints and queries relating to electoral processes. A more structured mechanism could connect election related digital complaints received by INEC with appropriate cybercrime investigators, particularly where the alleged conduct involves threats, coordinated harassment, impersonation, incitement or other offences under existing legislation.

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[8] Ugwu, C. (2026, September 4). *2027: Inspired by Gov Nwifuru, council chairman warns opposition to stay off. Premium Times.* https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/907398-2027-inspired-by-gov-nwifuru-council-chairman-warns-opposition-to-stay-off.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[9] Ibn News. (2026, September 18). *Edo council chairman orders motor park drivers to wear APC caps, links directive to 2027 Tinubu support***.** *IBN News***.** https://ibnnews.ng/edo-council-chairman-orders-motor-park-drivers-to-wear-apc-caps-links-directive-to-2027-tinubu-support/

[10] Soaga, O. (2026, August 16). *Three years on, ethnic slurs, hate speech thrive on X. TheCable.* https://www.thecable.ng/three-years-on-ethnic-slurs-hate-speech-thrive-on-x/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

A third concern is maintaining the distinction between unlawful digital conduct and legitimate political expression. Stronger enforcement should not aim to suppress criticism of candidates, political parties, electoral institutions, or government officials. The 2024 amendment itself reflected an effort to narrow some of the broader language previously contained in Section 24, and debates surrounding the provision continue to emphasise the importance of balancing cyber security with freedom of expression.[11] Parliamentary oversight is therefore necessary not only to demand stronger enforcement but also to ensure that enforcement agencies apply the law according to clearly defined statutory thresholds and due process.

Implications for Nigeria's Election Security

The uncontrolled circulation of election-related hate speeches can affect electoral participation, public confidence and community relations. When voters repeatedly encounter messages portraying political opponents or particular identity groups as enemies, threats or illegitimate participants in the political process, such communication can deepen social divisions and make constructive political engagement more difficult. UNDP's work on information integrity during electoral processes identifies the relationship between information pollution and election violence as an important area requiring preventive intervention.[12] The Nigerian experience documented by INEC likewise demonstrates that misinformation, fake news and hate speech have already been identified as concerns within the electoral environment.

The issue also has implications for the credibility of electoral institutions. False claims attributed to INEC, security agencies, candidates or other election stakeholders can create confusion about official decisions, election procedures and results. INEC's 2026 warning concerning fake accounts using the identity of its Chairman illustrates how impersonation can be used to manufacture apparently authoritative political communication. Where such content is not rapidly identified and corrected, citizens may struggle to distinguish official information from fabricated material, particularly during periods of heightened political tension.

The legislative concern should therefore extend beyond punishment after an incident has occurred. Effective enforcement oversight should include prevention, intelligence sharing, digital evidence preservation, public reporting, rapid verification and transparent prosecution of cases that meet the statutory threshold. Such a framework would allow Parliament to assess whether existing legislation is producing measurable enforcement outcomes rather than merely establishing offences on paper. It would also allow lawmakers to identify whether institutional weaknesses arise from inadequate funding, insufficient technical personnel, poor inter-agency coordination, limited digital forensic capacity or difficulties in obtaining evidence from technology companies.

Recommendations for Legislative Intervention

1. **Strengthen oversight on the implementation of the Cybercrimes Act**

The Senate Committee on ICT and Cyber Security and the corresponding House Committee responsible for ICT and cyber security matters may conduct periodic oversight hearings involving the Nigeria Police Force, relevant cybercrime investigation units, the National Information Technology Development Agency, INEC and other appropriate institutions. The Senate's standing orders expressly assign its ICT and Cyber Security Committee jurisdiction over cyber security and cybercrime control. Oversight hearings should require agencies to provide aggregated information on

[11] The 2015 Act criminalized messages considered "grossly offensive, pornographic, or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character". The 2024 amendment struck out the nebulous "grossly offensive" descriptor, narrowing the scope to messages that are pornographic or known to be false.

[12] United Nations Development Programme. (2023, July 25). *Information integrity to sustain peace during electoral processes*. https://www.undp.org/publications/information-integrity-sustain-peace-during-electoral-processes

complaints received, investigations initiated, prosecutions undertaken and cases concluded in relation to election related cyber offences, while protecting sensitive operational and personal information.

2. **Establish an election cyber incident reporting and referral mechanism**

The Senate Committee on Electoral Matters and its House counterpart may work with INEC and relevant security institutions to establish a formal referral protocol for election related online threats, impersonation, incitement and other suspected cyber offences. The mechanism should define what information INEC can refer, the responsible investigative institution, expected response times and procedures for preserving digital evidence. This could build on INEC's existing Citizens Contact Centre, which already receives electoral incident reports and complaints through several channels. Such a mechanism would help prevent complaints concerning serious online threats from remaining within general public communication channels without appropriate investigative follow up.

3. **Require periodic reporting on prosecution of election-related cyber offences**

The Senate Committee on Electoral Matters, ICT and Cyber Security, as well as their House counterparts may request periodic reports from law enforcement and prosecutorial authorities showing the number and general categories of election related cybercrime complaints, investigations, prosecutions and concluded cases. The reports should distinguish between complaints that were dismissed because no offence was established and cases that proceeded to prosecution. This distinction matters because an increase in complaints does not necessarily demonstrate an increase in criminal conduct, while a low number of prosecutions may reflect either low incidence, evidentiary difficulties or enforcement gaps. Parliamentary oversight should therefore focus on the entire enforcement chain rather than prosecution numbers alone.

4. **Develop digital evidence and forensic capacity for election security**

The Senate Committee on Electoral Matters and its House counterpart may work with INEC to examine the adequacy of funding, personnel and technological capacity available to agencies responsible for investigating cyber offences during elections. Particular attention should be given to digital forensics, preservation of social media evidence, account attribution, authentication of digital materials and lawful requests for information from technology companies. INEC's experience with fabricated social media accounts demonstrates the practical importance of cyber intelligence and investigative cooperation during politically sensitive periods. Legislative oversight can therefore require relevant agencies to demonstrate their operational readiness before major elections rather than waiting until politically inflammatory content has already generated offline consequences.

5. Strengthen cooperation with social media platforms while protecting lawful expression.

The Senate Committee on ICT and Cyber Security**,** together with relevant House committees, may encourage structured engagement between Nigerian authorities, INEC, civil society organisations and major social media platforms before and during election periods. Such cooperation could cover verified channels for reporting credible threats, impersonation and coordinated harmful activity, as well as procedures for preserving evidence where a suspected offence is under investigation. Any such framework should incorporate safeguards for freedom of expression, privacy and due process, since not every controversial political statement constitutes a cyber crime. The objective should be faster identification and lawful investigation of conduct that meets the statutory threshold rather than general political content moderation by government agencies.

6. **Strengthen monitoring of compliance with electoral campaign rules**

The Senate and House Committees on Electoral Matters may examine how Section 96 of the Electoral Act 2026 are being applied to contemporary digital campaigning by political parties. The legislation already prohibits campaign language that is abusive or likely to injure religious, ethnic, tribal or sectional feelings and prohibits language or insinuations designed or likely to provoke violent reactions or emotions. The legislative review should consider whether the existing framework adequately addresses contemporary social media campaigning or whether clearer regulations are required to define institutional responsibilities without duplicating the Cybercrimes Act.

Conclusion

The expansion of political communication through social media has made election-related hate speech and other forms of harmful digital communication an increasingly important component of Nigeria's electoral security environment. Existing legislation, particularly the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act as amended in 2024 and the Electoral Act 2026, already provide legal provisions that can apply to certain forms of threatening, harmful or provocative online conduct. The principal legislative challenge is therefore not necessarily the creation of additional offences, but ensuring that existing provisions are implemented consistently, investigated professionally and subjected to effective parliamentary oversight. The National Assembly may strengthen inter-agency coordination, digital forensic capacity, incident reporting, prosecution monitoring and engagement with technology platforms while maintaining safeguards for legitimate political expression and due process. Such an approach would enable Nigeria to respond to harmful election related online conduct in a manner that protects electoral security without treating legitimate political disagreement as criminal behaviour.

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