

THE 2015 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA: THE ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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THE PRIORITY

The 2015 presidential election in Nigeria—the fifth since 1999 when the military handed over power to elected civilians—will be the first time that the opposition will have a realistic chance of wresting power from the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP). All things being equal, it will be a two-horse race between the ruling PDP and the main opposition party, the All Progressive Congress (APC)—the party formed in February 2013 from a merger of three ethnically and regionally based political parties. Before the emergence of the APC, opposition parties were mostly fragmented along regional and ethnic lines, making it impossible for them to mount a credible challenge to the ruling PDP.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The emergence of a viable opposition coincides with a period of great tension between north and south, arising from the decision of President Goodluck Jonathan to contest the 2011 elections, a decision that has made many northerners feel cheated of their turn in producing the president and that induced some violence. With President Jonathan, a southern Christian, contesting again and very likely facing a northern Muslim candidate, the elections will have implications not just for north-south

relations but also for the survival of the country’s democracy.

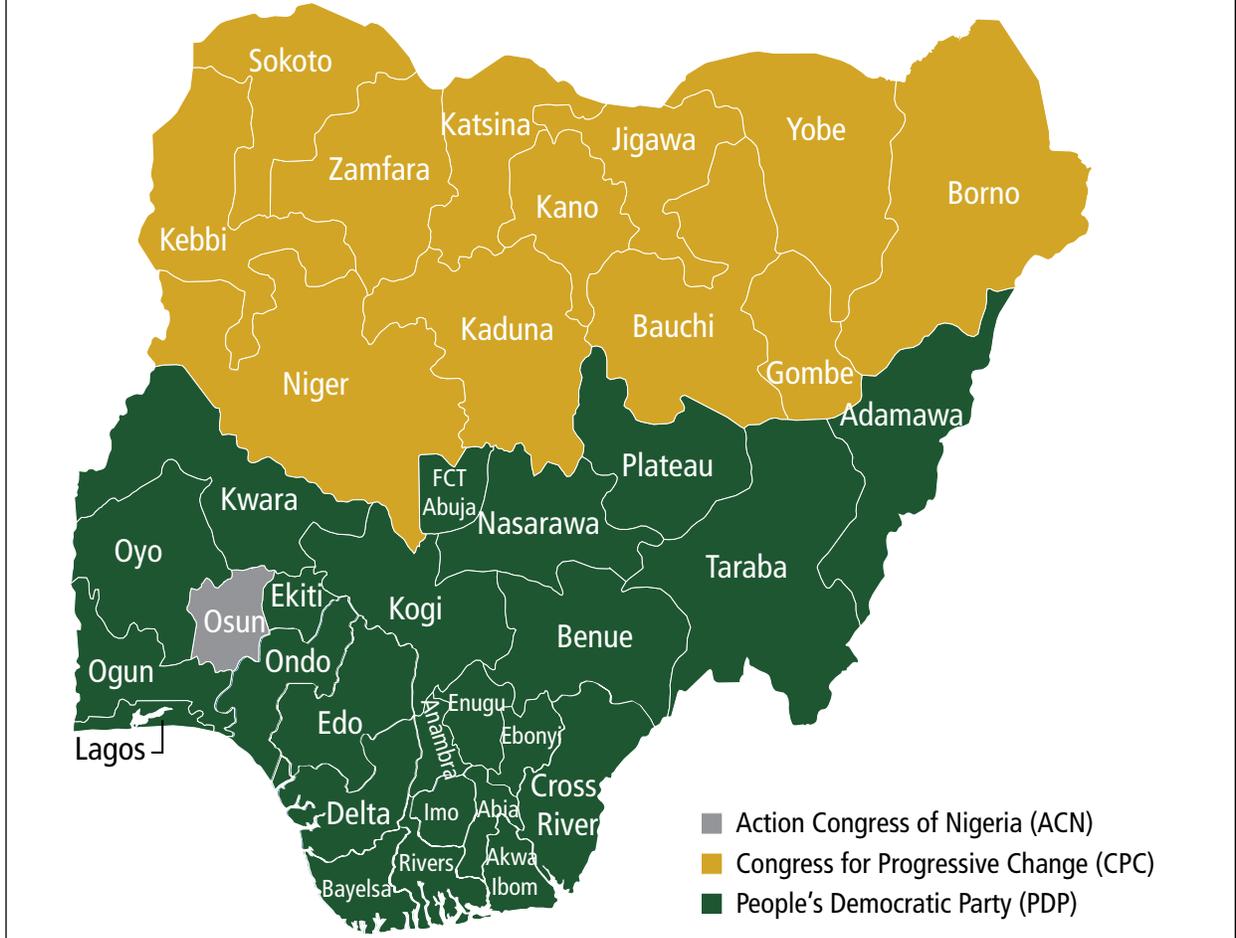
Nigeria is the continent’s biggest economy and most populous country, and so instability in Nigeria could have dire economic impacts for the region. Similarly, with the number of internally displaced people from the Boko Haram conflict estimated at about 650,000 as of August 2014 (*The Guardian* 2014), a mismanaged election could trigger post-election violence that will exacerbate the refugee crisis both internally and at the regional level. For instance, it has been estimated that the Boko Haram conflict has led to more than 100,000 Nigerians seeking refuge in Niger’s Diffa region since the beginning of 2014. It is also estimated that there are 44,000 Nigerian refugees in Cameroon and 2,700 in Chad (Baiyewu 2014). Ironically, the neighboring countries where Nigerians are seeking refuge from the Boko Haram conflict are already quite poor and have severe socioeconomic challenges of their own.

Issues That Will Drive the Election

North-South, Christian-Muslim Divide

The fault lines of region, ethnicity and religion run deep in Nigeria. Virtually every part of the country has an institutionalized memory of in-

2011 Nigerian Presidential Election Results by State



Note: To win the vote, a presidential candidate must obtain an absolute majority or at least 25 percent of the ballots in two-thirds of the country's 36 states.

jury or feelings of injustice, which they often feel will be best addressed if one of their own wields power at the center, preferably as the president. Similarly, there is a pervasive fear that the president of the country will abuse the powers of his office to privilege his region, ethnicity or religion—if not to punish or deliberately disadvantage others.

To allay fears of domination, most Nigerian political parties have written or unwritten zoning and power rotation arrangements in which the parties agree that key offices and candidates should be

produced by designated sections of the country for a certain number of years. For instance, under the PDP's arrangements, former President Olusegun Obasanjo, a Yoruba from the southwest, served for two terms of four years before power was "returned" to the north. The north's "turn" was, however, interrupted after Obasanjo's successor, Umaru Yaradua, a Muslim from Katsina state, died in office in 2010 and was succeeded by then-Vice President Jonathan.

This result shortened the north's "turn" in power and extended the south's—frustrating

Current Nigerian Governorships by Party by State, 2014



Note: Since 2011, several parties, including the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) and the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), joined to form the All Progressive Congress (APC).

many northerners. In 2011, influential people in the north argued that Jonathan should serve out only Yaradua’s remaining first term in office and not contest those presidential elections. However, Jonathan did run and won—triggering post-election violence in the north in which an estimated 800 people lost their lives (Human Rights Watch 2011).

Jonathan’s supporters have a contrary argument. For them, in the 39 years between the time the country gained independence in 1960 and the inauguration of the Fourth

Republic in 1999, the north ruled the country for about 35 of them and should therefore be patient for that “historical injustice” to be redressed first.

North-South Regional Inequalities

Nigeria is sometimes described as a country that runs on two unequal wheels. In 2013, the Russian investment bank Renaissance Capital produced a report titled, “Nigeria Unveiled,” which painted the picture of Nigeria’s economy as moving on two wheels—a thriving south

with rising income, lower unemployment and better educated citizens, and a much poorer, less educated and struggling north (Atuanya 2013). Based on this economic imbalance, the north's dominance of power before 1999 was justified as a lever to balance the south's economic advantage. Thus, for some, since the south has held the presidency for 12 of the 15 years of civilian rule since 1999 means that the north has lost its leverage in the north-south equation.

Muhammadu Buhari—a Muslim and former military head of state with cult following in the north—was chosen as APC's presidential candidate. The election is therefore likely to witness an intense politicization of the Muslim-Christian divide and the north-south dichotomy in the country, which will add to the already existing tension in the country.

Vice Presidential Running Mate

APC strategists are banking on a combination of votes from the populous northwest (18 million votes), northeast (11 million votes) and southwest (13.5 million votes) for victory. Based on this calculation, the APC, after choosing Buhari from the northwest as its presidential candidate, also chose Professor Yemi Osinbajo, a Christian from from the southwest, as its vice presidential candidate. What remains to be seen, however, is whether Bola Tinubu—a former governor of Lagos State who played a pivotal role in the formation of the APC and is considered to be the party's strongest mobilizer in the southwest—will be very enthusiastic in delivering the battleground southwest to the APC during the elections. Tinubu indicated his interest in being the party's vice presidential candidate but being a Muslim like Buhari, the party's strategists felt that a Muslim-Muslim ticket might offend Christians and cement the PDP's labeling of the APC as an Islamic party.

Money and the Power of Incumbency

The greatest strength of the ruling PDP is its "power of incumbency," and all the institutional support that goes with it. Not only does it have federal resources to use as patronage, it also controls key institutions like the police, the army and the anti-corruption agencies like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, which could be used to harass political enemies. Furthermore, of the 36 states in the country, the PDP has 21 governors while APC has 14. The PDP also holds comfortable majorities in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Similarly, money plays a very important role in Nigerian politics—in campaigning, media reach and vote buying (which is a common practice in Nigerian elections). Where the voters are sufficiently animated by a certain cause, the role of money in influencing the outcome of an election will be muted. However, in places where the election is close, the role of money, especially in vote buying and other material inducements such as distribution of bags of rice, wrappers or motorcycles, will become quite important.

Jonathan's Performance in Office

Jonathan's supporters argue that—despite Boko Haram—the country is thriving: The economy continues to grow and—with the rebasing of its GDP—became the largest economy in Africa and the 26th largest in the world. Jonathan's supporters also point to his success in containing the Ebola virus, which earned him commendations from countries and institutions around the world. For his critics however, his incompetence is reflected in the high unemployment rate, which worsened from 12 percent in 2006 to 24 percent in 2011 (*Premium Times* 2013), general insecurity in the country and the deepening suspicion among the different ethnic groups. Former President Olusegun

Obasanjo in fact accused Jonathan of being a polarizing figure who promotes clannishness, “For you to allow yourself to be ‘possessed,’ so to say, to the exclusion of most of the rest of Nigerians as an ‘Ijaw man’ is a mistake that should never have been allowed to happen,” an angry Obasanjo wrote in an 18-page letter to the president (Adoyi 2013).

Opinions on Jonathan’s approach to Boko Haram vary wildly as well: His critics cite terrorism as more evidence of his incompetence. On the other hand, his supporters claim that the terrorism is actually evidence of a siege laid on his administration by powerful politicians from the Muslim north aiming for it to fail.

The Electoral Umpire

There is a consensus that the performance of the electoral umpire, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), has improved in terms of the transparency and logistics of the electoral processes under its current chairman, the northerner Professor Attahiru Jega. However, the INEC continues to be viewed with a great deal of suspicion by all sides.

The APC has many times insinuated that INEC is being manipulated by the PDP-controlled federal government. In fact, the APC declared it had lost confidence in Jega to conduct credible elections shortly after the 2013 gubernatorial elections in Anambra State, which were marred by late or non-arrival of voting materials and which was won by a party allied with the PDP (Olatunji 2013). Jega has already been accused of planning to rig the 2015 election when he suggested creating more polling booths, most of which were to be put in the north (*Nigerian Tribune* 2014).

Perceptions of the neutrality of INEC will be crucial in the acceptance of the outcome. However, if the country’s electoral history is anything to go by, the outcome of the elections will be

contentious, irrespective of the opinion of the election observers.

PDP and APC: Strengths and Weaknesses

After suffering a wave of defections to the APC last year, including five of its governors, the PDP seems to have rebounded strongly. In the battleground southwest, for instance, the party won recent governorship elections in Ekiti state and got the governor of Ondo State to defect from the Labor party to the PDP.

The party is especially strong in the south-south (where Jonathan comes from), the southeast and among Christians in the north. Again, while the PDP remains weak in the Muslim north, it has gained new influential members who decamped from the APC including the former governors of Kano State and Borno State. And, of course, the PDP has the power of incumbency.

The APC gets much of its strength from tapping into anti-Jonathan sentiments in the Muslim north and grievances among the Yoruba who feel that the Jonathan administration has ignored them in key political appointments. Allegations of corruption against top PDP officials will be powerful ammunition in the hands of the APC, especially with the choice of Buhari, widely seen as not corrupt, as the party’s presidential candidate. The party is, however, a fragile one that seems united only in its quest to wrest the presidency from Jonathan or to have power “returned” to the north. Though the election is expected to be very competitive, the odds still favor President Jonathan.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE IN 2015

Avoiding a Meltdown

Given the centrality of political power in Nigeria, the election—just like almost all elections in Nigeria—will be highly contentious and the

losing side is likely to blame its fate on rigging. Post-election violence is therefore likely in the north if the APC loses while renewed militancy in the restive Niger Delta is likely if Jonathan does.

A main source of concern will be if the elections become stalemated for a prolonged period or if the scale of post-election violence gets beyond a certain threshold. In these scenarios, we may have to keep an eye on some military adventurists who may be tempted to use the opportunity to cause trouble—especially if the Boko Haram challenge remains intractable.

How can the country avoid the scenario of the 2015 elections leading to the implosion of the country, given how high the stakes are? Despite several more outlandish theories that Nigeria will disintegrate in 2015, chances are that the elections will come and go and the country will remain with its political problems largely unresolved (Adibe 2014). The country is a master at teetering on the precipice: It has survived major crises, including a civil war (1967-1970). Hanging on a cliff without falling over may indeed be the country's comfort zone.

To minimize the chances of the elections leading to chaos and violence, a number of pre- and

post-election arrangements are imperative. These include updating and double checking the electoral register at least one month before the polling day. The electoral commission should also develop robust early warning systems in areas where there are likely to be logistical problems and where pre- or post-election violence are likely to occur. Credible local and international observers must be allowed to monitor the elections to ensure that the entire electoral processes are transparent. Well-trained security personnel should be deployed in volatile areas to prevent or stop outbreaks of violence.

In the longer term, Nigeria should also devise more effective strategies for dealing with the crises in its nation-building processes, which have led to virtually every section of the country feeling marginalized or alienated from the Nigeria project. The country should also continue to explore more effective means of dealing with the Boko Haram terrorism just as it needs to find the necessary political will to embark on reforms that will make the electoral processes less contentious.

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