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Conflict
Trends

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Nigeria's Presidential Election 2015

Nigeria's general election was scheduled for 14 February 2015 and it has raised fears both at home and abroad that the country will be ravaged by election-related violence. The presidential candidates have signed a declaration of non-violence, however, the postponement of the election until 28 March will increase the risk of violence and allegations of fraud.

Brief Points

- Nigeria is at a watershed moment when the current opposition could win the presidential election for the first time
- The postponement of the election could increase the risk of violence
- In regions where there is a power balance between the candidates, violence could erupt more easily
- Accusations and perceptions of election rigging could lead to an outbreak of violence

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Will history repeat itself?

The two main contenders, incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan representing the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the main opposition candidate Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC) face each other for the second consecutive presidential election. In the closely fought 2011 elections, Buhari got a third of the votes and won the popular vote in 12 northern states. Violence erupted primarily in these states after what analysts have called 'Nigeria's best conducted, but most violent elections', reportedly resulting in about 800 deaths and the displacement of 65,000 people. Protesters alleged the elections were rigged in other parts of the country, especially in the South where Buhari performed poorly. Those targeted by the violence were primarily northern politicians and traditional rulers who allegedly connived with Jonathan's PDP to give him the victory, but also more generally southerners and Christians are perceived to have voted for him.

In 2011, Buhari was broadly considered to be the northern candidate at a time when the perception in much of the North was that the Jonathan presidency violated the existing power-sharing arrangement that the North and the South would alternate the presidency, and thus deprived the North of their turn to rule. Buhari was further perceived as a strong advocate of strict implementation of Sharia and as an incorruptible leader. As a former military head of state in the mid-1980s he prosecuted and jailed corrupt politicians, however the popular perception in the South was that Buhari, as head of state, jailed more southern politicians than their northern counterparts. Rather than dissolve, these longstanding perceptions have solidified as the elections approach, leading to fears that the same antipathies will play out in the 2015 elections.

The fear of election violence also arises from the deteriorating security situation in Nigeria's Northeast region, which has witnessed continued attacks by the Boko Haram. The insurgent group has stated that they will attempt to prevent elections from being held in its stronghold areas, explicitly seeking to overthrow Nigeria's democratic order and replace it with a theocratic sharia-based caliphate. Fears that Boko Haram might escalate

violence to stop elections are clearly not misplaced as the insurgent group has stepped up attacks since November 2014 when campaigns for elections began to gain momentum.

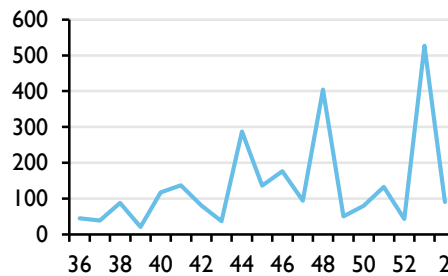


Figure 1: Number of civilian fatalities caused by Boko Haram between 1 September 2014 and 15 January 2015, broken down in weeks. (Source: Nigeria Watch)

Not only has Boko Haram intensified attacks in its stronghold in Borno state, including the recent attacks on the frontier town of Baga, it has also extended suicide bombings and attacks to neighboring Adamawa, Gombe, Yobe and Bauchi states. As a consequence the INEC has postponed the election for six weeks, however, skeptics are asking how the government will be able to calm the situation during this period when it hasn't been done in the last 6 years.

As both political authorities and the electoral commission insist on conducting elections in the worst affected states, there are fears that young female suicide bombers, who have so far successfully detonated bombs in crowded markets and bus stations in some northern towns and cities, will be used to undermine the elections. There are also concerns that the insecurity in the region may facilitate election rigging. Opposition politicians have already claimed that the failure of the government to address the insurgency is a strategy for disenfranchising the people of the region, based on the perception that the worst affected states are strongholds of the opposition party, APC. The opposition party has also claimed that the government has allowed the insurgency to linger on in order to create a rationale for postponing of elections it is reportedly afraid of losing. Observers note, therefore, that violence is likely to escalate in the Northeast region whether elections are carried out as planned, or not. This is because it will require massive mobilization of security to the trouble

states to stabilize the area for the voting exercise.

Is Nigeria ready for democratic alternation?

The repeated claims of the opposition APC that the ruling PDP is afraid of losing the elections stems from a strong and popular belief, particularly in the North, that the time for change has come. Thus, underneath the conspiracy theory of a ploy to postpone the elections is the stratagem of an overconfident opposition who want to ensure that the elections are held at a time when they believe they have the best chance of winning. Although there are no opinion polls to validate the opposition's optimism, the APC has undoubtedly emerged as a formidable opposition force, more united than in previous elections, and one that is ready to seize power.

Since its establishment in 2013, through the merger of the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), and the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), the APC has grown ever stronger. It has also successfully wooed some disaffected influential members of the ruling party. Its first gains occurred in late 2013, when five governors elected on the platform of the PDP decamped to the APC due to a crisis within the ruling party. Further, one governor elected under the platform of the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA), a minority party with popular appeal in the Southeast, joined the APC. As a result of these defections the APC has increased its state holding from 9 in 2011 to 14 in 2015.

In addition the APC is reaping the benefits of the bandwagon effects with more disaffected members of the PDP becoming emboldened to abandon the ruling party. Prominent among these are former President Olusegun Obasanjo and former military president General Ibrahim Babangida, who, while not formally leaving the PDP, have announced their support for the candidacy of Buhari. The litmus test of the APC's unity was the presidential primary held in December 2014. Analysts had expected the party to implode after the primaries with losers jumping ship. However, the party engineered a process where all aspirants covenanted to remain in the party to support whoever emerged victorious from the primary. This feat ensured that the party

retained its members to forge a common front against the PDP machine. Paradoxically, the APC has become the ‘umbrella’ party-symbol of the PDP - which is able to attract and accommodate diverse political interests.

On the other hand, the shrinking space for political competition in the PDP, evidenced by the decision to anoint Jonathan as consensus presidential candidate and the tight control that most of the PDP governors have over the state party structures, has adversely affected the image and fortunes of the party. The PDP leadership rationalized the decision to adopt the president as consensus candidate as being in line with the convention of the American presidential system – which Nigeria adopted in 1979 – and reckoned that it was the recipe for avoiding further divisions that had weakened the party. However, by imposing the consensus from the top rather than putting a proposal through the party congresses, the party alienated dissenting members. The last minute attempt to rally the party membership to vet the consensus candidacy of the president availed little as it smacked of the affirmative conventions of one-party democracies. The PDP clearly underestimated the clamor for a power shift and internal democracy within and outside the party. By avoiding competitive primaries, the PDP leadership lent credence to the estranged five governors who justified their defection on the grounds of an alleged agenda to impose Jonathan on the party.

This faux pas has robbed the Jonathan campaign of the legitimization that the widely acclaimed transparent APC presidential primary has infused the Buhari campaign. This is evidenced by the fact that while most APC members have rallied around Buhari, some key members of the PDP are lukewarm about the Jonathan reelection. For instance, notable northern PDP governors who have remained in the party are not investing their political capital in the reelection of Jonathan. Rather, their preoccupation is to use the party structure and platform to advance their interest of retaining control of their states. The politics of Jonathan’s consensus candidacy has impacted negatively on his reelection prospects. This is because the politics resulted in the privilege of capture of the party machinery rather than of building a consensus within the party.

It is not just politics that has weakened Jona-

than’s reelection prospects. The deteriorating security situation arising from the insurgency has called to question the capacity of the president to win Nigeria’s war on terror. While the president can rightly take credit for containing the insurgency to the Northeast, popular perceptions seem to point to the fact that the government was expected to do more to arrest the raging insurgency in the Northeast. The failure to rescue over 200 Chibok school girls; the botched peace deal with the insurgent group; rising incidents of court martialing of soldiers for disloyalty; sabotage and abandonment of posts are all indicative of the inefficacy of the government’s responses to the insurgency. It remains to be seen though how the management of the insurgency will affect the prospects of Jonathan’s reelection. It is not unlikely that his core supporters who see the insurgency as part of a grand plan to undermine the Jonathan presidency will still queue behind Jonathan.

The unfavorable economic indicators in the last three months following the oil glut and massive slump in oil prices have also not helped Jonathan’s reelection campaign. The Nigerian economy had grown under Jonathan’s watch to become Africa’s largest economy, which has become one of his selling points. The agricultural sector had been revitalized and there has been credible evidence of improvement in infrastructure, notably in the construction, power and transport sectors. The value of the naira has been stable, the foreign reserves improved and foreign direct investment (FDI) rose steadily. However, the Jonathan reelection campaign is haunted by

the virtual total dependence of the Nigerian political economy on oil. The slump in oil prices has resulted in a decline in value of the naira, devaluation of share prices, decline in foreign reserves and sundry fiscal challenges, notably delays in payment of salaries of workers in the public sector. Sluggish progress on poverty reduction and job creation amidst economic growth is also likely to hurt Jonathan’s reelection prospects.

Possible scenarios

However, these political, security and socio-economic developments will be contending for influence with the entrenched social structure, which has historically had an overwhelming influence on politics and voter behavior. It will not be surprising if ethno-regional and religious interests trump other factors. The parties are not oblivious of this possibility and have been very responsive to the social pressures. Thus, APC is banking on the support of the Southwest and Northwest - two geo-political zones that feel short-changed under the Jonathan presidency. Political interest groups in the Northwest want to produce the president to consummate the turn of the zone to produce the president which was truncated by the unfortunate death of then President Yar’Adua in 2010. Political interest groups in the Southwest are peeved by the fact that none of the major offices in government is occupied by a southwesterner under the Jonathan dispensation. Consequently, the APC has selected its presidential and vice presidential candidates respectively from the Northwest and Southwest. For good measure,

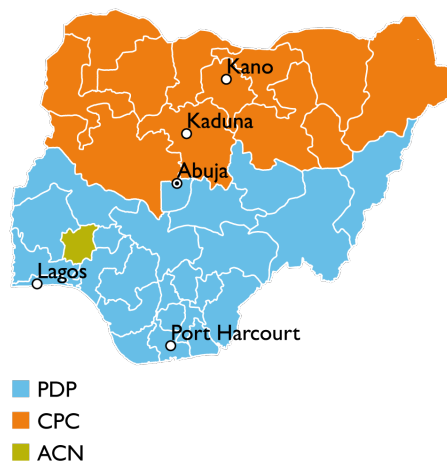


Figure 2: Majority votes in the 2011 election

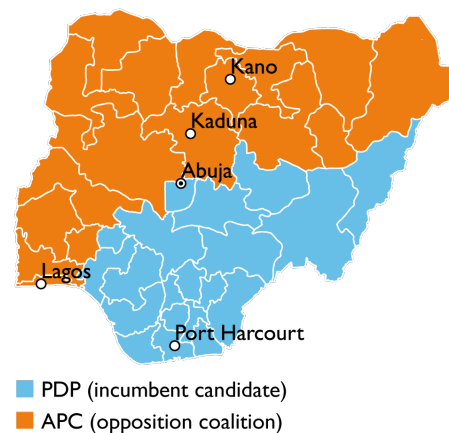


Figure 3: Likely majority votes in the 2015 election

the party chose a pastor as vice presidential candidate in response to social pressures against a Muslim-Muslim ticket. On the other hand, the PDP is banking on a Christian vote against the Buhari candidacy. The party projects that the alleged pro-Sharia stance of Buhari will scare away Christian voters who dominate the Southsouth and Southeast, as well as some of the North Central states. The party has also given key posts to influential figures in the Northwest to reduce the margin of victory of Buhari in his home base. This is significant because the Northwest has the largest proportion of registered voters.

The PDP is also banking on the influence of incumbency in elections. By pandering to the interests of most of the governors, the party has more governors who will deploy state patronage to mobilize votes. If the social pressures prevail, as expected, the most likely outcome will be one where Buhari wins the majority vote but falls short of meeting the constitutional requirement of winning up to 25 percent of votes cast in two thirds of states of the federation, which Jonathan is likely to get. This would force a re-run. Aware of this possibility, the APC is campaigning hard to ensure that Buhari gets some support in the Southeast and the Southsouth. The party is banking that its control of government in Rivers, Imo and Edo states will deliver the expected 25 percent for Buhari. The scenario of possible re-run is hinged on the assumption that INEC, the electoral commission, will remain unbiased as it was perceived to be in 2011 and build on its record of conducting free and fair elections. Opposition figures allege the government will erode the independence of the INEC and the impartiality of security agencies to ensure victory for the president.

Risk factors for violence

Electoral malpractice is consequently the major risk factor for violence: with perceptions that the INEC is compromised and election rigging will trigger violence. This is why there has been so much concern about improving the integrity and capacity of the election management body. The concern has arisen largely as a result of the challenges that the INEC has encountered in the protracted voter registration exercise. The inefficiency in voter registration has denuded public trust in the INEC. If not rectified before Election Day, mass disenfranchisement of sections of the voting population and particularly of voters in Northeast Nigeria will be a likely trigger for violence. The challenges of voter registration have led some commentators to conclude that INEC is not ready to conduct the elections. There are reports of INEC not having procured the necessary machines to conduct the election. This has consequently led to advocacy in some quarters for the postponement of the elections. Postponement of elections should not be ruled out, given the precedent in 2011 when the date for polls was shifted by a week, and it will increase the risk of violence if it is not well managed.

Another unlikely development, which will increase the risk of violence, is disqualification of the opposition candidate by the law courts. The PDP and concerned sections of the Nigerian public have alleged that the INEC erred by clearing Buhari, who reportedly did not produce evidence of the minimum educational qualification for the post of presidency - the school certificate. The uproar over the certificate of the opposition candidate took a dramatic turn when the Army, which employed the former general, reportedly said it does not have Buhari's school certificate on file. INEC has asked its critics to take the

matter to the court and has avoided being drawn into the controversy. However, INEC will be constrained by a court decision to withdraw the qualification to Buhari. Given the mass support base of Buhari such development will trigger violence. The other risk factor for the elections is the balance of power in the different states and localities. There is more likelihood of violence in states where the competing parties are evenly balanced. This is already evident in the high levels of violence in Rivers State where the incumbent governor is opposed to the reelection of the president.

Policy options

This is why the policy priority should be to support the INEC to conduct a fairly efficient, credible and fair election. INEC needs every support it can get to distribute the voter cards, get functional voter reader machines, and deploy personnel and materials to polling stations on a timely basis. There is also extant opportunity to organize a robust election observation system that builds synergy between local and international observers. This will enhance the prospects of observers covering more polling units and the process contributing to restraining the untoward behavior of actors that seek to compromise the integrity of the elections. Finally, there is still opportunity to use diplomatic channels to promote moderation among political actors and insulation of the INEC and security forces from political interference. ■

Notes

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THE PROJECT

The Conflict Trends project aims to answer questions related to the causes of, consequences of and trends in conflict. The project will contribute to new conflict analyses within areas of public interest, and works to produce thorough and quality-based analysis for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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