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Like a cat with nine lives

Nigerian history had its ups and downs. But celebrating 58 years of independence now, its democracy is here to stay

On 1 October 2018, Nigeria celebrated its 58th anniversary as an independent country. Earlier, on 29 May, it marked 19 years of unbroken civil democratic rule. Given its history of political instability, Nigerians commemorate these milestones with pomp and speeches recounting the strides made ever since. Between 1960 and 1999, the country only knew 10 years of constitutional rule. The annual chest beating could therefore take place for good reasons. Firstly, elections have been held without exception every four in the past 19 years either to reaffirm confidence in office holders or to reject them. This has enhanced stability and the country has continued to defy pessimists who think it cannot remain one united entity.

But Nigeria's journey to democracy has at times been so bumpy as to threaten its very existence. In 2000, the initial threat was the decision by predominantly Muslim regional states in the North to introduce the Islamic legal code – to the chagrin of the rest of the country, particularly the Christians. This leads to violent clashes in some northern cities claiming hundreds of lives and nearly plunging the country into a sectarian conflict.

More recently, the country's resilience has been tested by some Fulani herdsmen, the largest pastoral nomadic group in the world, who, in their quest for fodder and water for their livestock have been widely accused of killing farmers and destroying their farmlands. A report by the International Crisis Group estimates that 1,300 people were killed during such attacks in the first six months of this year alone.

Beyond possible economic causes of the violence, many Christians believe the Fulanis'motive to be more sinister. 'We are aware there is a game plan to Islamise Nigeria, and they are using the Fulani herdsmen to actualise it,' said Samuel Uche, the leader of the country's Methodist Church, according to another report by the International Crisis Group. Though Muslims, including the Sultan of Sokoto who is the head of the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs, have repeatedly denied this claim, the

suspicion has persisted. All of this has further widenedthe gulf between the followers of the two major faiths in Nigeria.

A political, not a religious conflict

However, the conflict is not predominantly a religious one but rather created by politicians working in concert with vested interests including security forces and cattle owners. Some analysts believe opposition politicians want to use the killings as an excuse for voters to reject the current President Muhammadu Buhari, an ethnic Fulani cattle owner himself, and snap victory from his ruling All Progressives Congress party (APC) in next year's general elections.

As voting practices have been improving, ballot snatching, ballot stuffing, electoral violence, under-aged voting, vote buying and other fraudulent activities have become more sophisticated. Elections are still seen as 'a do or die affair,' forcing the elites to flee abroad before voting takes place while others move back to their states of origin. This could be due to fear of retribution from the hands of those who may perceive them to belong to a rival group. This tragic scenario has been re-enacted again and again with a huge number of human casualties.

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For instance, violent riots broke out in many northern states in 2011 after former president Goodluck Jonathan defeated Buhari –who was then candidate of the leading opposition party. As most of the riots' victims were Southerners, reprisals aimed at Northerners ensued in the South. Hundreds of lives were lost.

On top of all these threats to Nigerian democracy, militant groups in the oil-producing Niger Delta region are demanding more resources to develop their region, while separatists in the Igbo-speaking south eastern region are putting increasing pressure on the state. Add the nine-year-old Islamist insurgency in the northeast to the mix, and the picture is very grim. But like a cat with nine lives, Nigeria continues to surmount these challenges.

The need for constitutional reform

For some analysts, Nigeria will only emerge stronger and more cohesive from the next elections if calls for reforms are heeded. A recent editorial opinion piece in The Punch, a leading national newspaper, called for 'a fundamental rearrangement' of Nigeria'scomponent parts into a

competitive, just and federal system as the way forward to preserve the country's existence and make its democracy more meaningful. Civil society organizations, many political associations, and professional groups want to see the constitution amended so that the central government would lose some of its powers while the federating states would be allowed to take up more responsibilities. The goal is to ensure that each state maximises its own areas of strength, thereby fostering a healthy rivalry among their peers that might lead to even development across the land.

Also, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which is responsible for conducting fair elections, must raise its game and ensure a transparent and credible system becomes the norm rather than the exception. This will further engender confidence in the process and gradually erode the corrupting influence of money and attempts to rig elections. However, until INEC starts to bring offenders to justice, violating its rules are likely to persist.

Finally, the military establishment, a pivotal player in the country's destiny, should be encouraged to become apolitical, restricting itself to its constitutional duty of defending the country against external attacks and internal insurgencies. Fortunately, the current cadre of officers, which was not activelyinvolved during the period of military rule, must realise that it is no longer acceptable for soldiers to forcefully seize political power. Instead, their goal should be to develop the institution to a level where it could help to defend democracy against subversive forces.



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