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‘The absent Lion King’

Nigeria’s president Muhammadu Buhari has spent much of this year at a London clinic. His days at the top may be numbered

Not many people knew Nigeria’s Minister for Women’s Affairs, Aisha Alhassan, until she made the headlines last month. She was quoted in a news report as saying if President Muhammadu Buhari, in whose current government she’s serving, were to seek re-election in the country’s 2019 elections, she would support former Nigerian Vice President Atiku Abubakar’s bid for the office. With that bold declaration, Alhassan signalled the beginning of jostling for the next presidential elections which according to the timetable of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) will be conducted on 16 February 2019.

It has thrown open discussions about the contest in the ruling party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), on whether or not President Buhari would be offering himself for re-election, and on potential replacements should he choose to step down. Besides Abubakar, other possible candidates from the APC whose names have been touted are incumbent Vice President Yemi Osinbajo; former governor of southwestern Lagos state, Bola Tinubu; and former governor of northern Kano state, Rabiu Kwakwanso. Add to the mix current Senate President Bukola Saraki and the serving governor of northwestern Sokoto state, Aminu Tambuwal. Only Ayodele Fayose, the outgoing chief executive of southwestern Ekiti state, has so far openly declared his intention to run in the opposition People’s Democratic Party (PDP).

Buhari, who defeated PDP’s candidate and former President Goodluck Jonathan in 2015, holds the key to what will happen in the ruling party. Having been away from the country for a total of five months this year as a result of ill health (a senator described him as the ‘absent Lion King’), there are doubts he will be willing to go through the gruelling campaigns again. At 74 years of age, his silence on the subject may be a sign that he hasn’t the appetite to seek a second term in office.

The initial beneficiary of this development is Abubakar who has never hidden his ambition to be Nigeria’s President someday. With well-

established political machinery and a sophisticated media team, he is usually first with his viewpoints on national issues.

And just like two years ago, the 2019 elections will be pivotal not only for Nigeria but for the continent and beyond. In 2015, there were fears that the country might not survive if the outcome was unacceptable to some parties. Despite an explosive campaigned marked by verbal and, sometimes, actual warfare, the elections went relatively smoothly.

Credit for the calm after the storm, however, must be given to President Jonathan who, seeing that he had lost, phoned Buhari to congratulate him on his historic victory. It was the first time an opposition party managed to wrest power from a ruling party in the country. And it calmed nerves, saving the country from political turmoil and an avoidable loss of lives.

Nigeria's existential crisis

Nigeria has a reputation for serious naval gazing following disputed presidential ballots. In 2011, when Buhari lost to Jonathan, hundreds of people were killed as a result of riots in the North where Buhari has his support base. Buhari first contested and lost to President Olusegun Obasanjo of the PDP in 2003. He was also defeated in 2007 by the PDP's Umaru Yar'Adua. The ballot was condemned by observers as running badly even by Nigerian standards. Among other things, the elections were marred by vote rigging, violence, theft of ballot boxes and intimidation. Citing "poor election organisation, lack of transparency, significant evidence of fraud, voter disenfranchisement, violence and bias," Chief European Union observer Max van den Berg said it had "fallen far short" of basic international standards, and that "the process cannot be considered to be credible."

Also in 1993, the military rulers cancelled what was described as the best voting exercise in the country at the time when it was clear that Moshood Abiola, the candidate from the southwest, had an unassailable lead over Bashir Tofa, the contestant from the north. The annulment and its aftermath plunged the country into one of its darkest periods since independence 57 years ago.

The country cannot afford this kind of dangerous gamble anymore. And if civil democratic rule is to be firmly rooted in Africa, clearly what happens in Nigeria is a pointer for the rest of the continent. While a few other African countries may possess better democratic credentials, they don't have Nigeria's international clout.

Africa's elder brother

Africa catches cold when Nigeria sneezes. With more than 180 million people, the country is Africa's most populous. It is also the continent's largest economy and biggest oil exporter. Between the 1970's and about a decade ago when oil prices exceeded the current price of around $50 a barrel, Nigeria's oil wealth gave it the leverage to successfully help the southern African countries of Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and South Africa gain independence from their colonial masters and white minority rulers.

Nigeria also likes to see itself as big brother to poorer African countries in distress. Starting from 1990 the country put men and vast amounts of resources into restoring peace in Liberia and Sierra Leone at the head of a West Africa intervention initiative known as ECOMOG. Following its own independence in 1960, it became a major contributor of troops to peace-keeping missions on the continent and further afield.

So it's in Africa's best interest that Nigeria should be conducting more credible and acceptable elections going forward. Failure to do this may likely destabilise the country with far more serious repercussions for the continent. For one, Nigerians fleeing any likely trouble in their homeland will not only overrun West Africa by their sheer numbers; countries to the east, north and south won't be spared. One can only imagine the resultant humanitarian disaster.

Also, millions more of its citizens may take the dangerous Sahara Desert route in order to cross the Mediterranean Sea into Europe. The European Union will have an uphill task coping with this influx that could make the current disaster a child's play. To prevent this, Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission must up its game. It has a duty to be better than its 2015 performance. Not only must it overcome its logistical challenges, it has also to evolve a system to shield its members from the corrupting influences of politicians and vested interests keen to subvert the wishes of the voters. A number of officials of the body accused of taking bribes in 2015 are still facing prosecution in court to date. The slow pace of justice delivery in the country may yet allow compromised electoral officials to still play a part in the forthcoming contest.

If the electoral body succeeds in cleaning up its image, that could go a long way to reduce agitations from ethnic groups in the country that are seeking relevance – from militants in the oil-rich Niger Delta, pro-Biafra groups in the south east, to the Boko Haram Muslim terrorists in the north east.

Other African countries may well take their cue from Nigeria. We saw this earlier in the year when Gambia's Yahya Jammeh threatened to frustrate a smooth transition of power after losing last December's presidential ballot. Buhari, on a moral high ground, together with other West African leaders, promptly intervened, easing Jammeh out. The world hailed the action as a perfect example of proffering an African solution to an African problem.



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