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Nigeria's 2023 elections: a turning point for the country?

Amidst media meddling and widespread corruption, Nigeria is electing a new government. The stakes are high for the most populous country in Africa

The upcoming National Assembly and presidential elections in Nigeria, taking place on 25 February, are crucial as they offer the opportunity to strengthen the country's democracy and to address a multitude of prevalent issues which have been worsening for years. The role of the media as well as widespread corruption are decisive factors that challenge this democratic process in the most populous country in Africa. But there is also the possibility of a 'dark horse'; the Labour Party's candidate Peter Obi, who has been able to mobilise a great number of followers, especially from the younger generations, has a good chance to win the presidential election.

Nigeria has successfully conducted six presidential elections every four years since 1999, and the 2023 elections should be no exception. Having suffered bouts of military incursions, the success of the February 2023 elections will further help to solidify and improve Nigeria's democracy.

Nigerian elections are winner-takes-it-all elections. Hence, candidates mobilise all their resources: money, religion, tribe and other affiliations to ensure they win. Elections are like warfare in Nigeria; party candidates and supporters very often become targets of hired assassins and other forms of attacks. Hoodlums, armed with dangerous weapons, also sometimes attack the campaign trains of political opponents.

Media ownership and election coverage

Nigeria has been wracked by serious insecurity, lack of reliable power (electricity and petroleum products), overwhelmed health and education sectors, an economy that perpetually reels in recession with galloping inflation and a deteriorating value of the Naira against major and minor currencies.
It is expected that the electorate will choose their next set of

representatives based on whom they believe will address the myriad of problems listed above, which the media have highlighted in their reportages continuously. Of course, ownership of a media outlet determines the direction of its reportage: media outlets owned by politicians are like the PR arm of the party. In the same vein, state and federal government-owned media outlets tend to give more coverage to party events that their Chief Executive belongs to. Reports about opposition parties and figures are tucked at the end of news broadcasts or some far corner of the newspapers – if they are reported at all. At times, broadcast stations are even prohibited from carrying the adverts of the opposition in spite of their readiness to pay for the advert space.

The party in power determines how much airtime is allocated to other political parties.

The federal government controls the Nigerian Television Authority and its nationwide network as well as the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria and its subsidiary FM stations located in virtually all the states of the federation. News, current affairs and discussion programmes that are aired on these stations are usually slanted in favour of the federal government and the party in power and other political parties do not enjoy equal airtime on these stations.

As the federal government controls the Nigerian Television Authority and the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, so do the state governments control radio and television stations owned by their states, and the party in power determines how much airtime is allocated to other political parties.

Some media owners are also bigwigs in one political party or the other and they use their mediums to run down a party or candidate either directly or indirectly; some news items that should be investigated aren't but instead, they are aired or published without any follow-up and without giving a voice to the other side.

Corruption is an issue that no government has been able to tackle, essentially because Nigeria does not have strong and independent systems and institutions to check on possible abuses of power. Corruption reigns with impunity in Nigeria. There is hardly any aspect that it has not affected, including health, education, security, law enforcement, private institutions, religious institutions – you name it. It is therefore no surprise that the media is also enmeshed in the corruption that plagues the nation. And so, some journalists and media houses will pander to the whims of the highest bidder in their reportage.

Possibility of a 'dark horse'

The main opposition party, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), ruled for 16 years straight while the All Progressives Congress (APC), which is currently in power, has ruled for eight years. Hence, Nigerians have had a taste of both major parties, enabling them to weigh if they still want one of them to continue to rule. Since the people were not satisfied with the rule of the PDP, in 2015, the party was defeated in the polls and President Buhari (APC) took over with the promise of change. However, the issues that the APC promised to solve have not only remained unaddressed but have actually worsened.

The Labour Party, although not in power in any of the 36 states of the federation, may just be the beautiful bride that Nigerians choose instead. The party was originally founded with the support of the trade unions, and for this year's elections the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), an umbrella organisation for trade unions in Nigeria, has endorsed a Labour Party candidate for election for the first time since 1992.

Virtually all the exit polls that have been carried out to determine the likely winner of the presidential election have predicted that Peter Obi is the most popular candidate.

So, there is the possibility of a dark horse; the Labour Party's Peter Obi might win the presidential election as he has been able to mobilise a huge following from among the younger population. Even though some people claim that he has no structures on the ground to help him win the election, he has, however, been pulling crowds wherever he goes to campaign. An alliance of trade unions, the youth movement and the women's movement could therefore possibly bring Obi into office.

Virtually all the exit polls that have been carried out to determine the likely winner of the presidential election have predicted that Obi is the most popular candidate and most likely to win. In his manifesto, he has offered to deliver seven priorities among which are to secure Nigeria; run a production-centred economy; entrench the rule of law and aggressively fight corruption; enhance the human capital of Nigerian youth for productivity and global competitiveness; and conduct an afro-centric diplomacy that protects the rights of Nigerian citizens abroad. These promises resonate with Nigerians, especially the youth who have become disenchanted with successive governments and are emigrating daily to other countries as a result of the challenges which Obi has promised to address.

But Nigeria is a nation of many paradoxes and most of its people make decisions based on primordial sentiments of their connections to candidates – especially ethnic and religious connections. Ethnicity and religion are two weapons politicians have successfully deployed to win elections and cause havoc.

The National Assembly and presidential elections are Nigerians' opportunities to choose the kind of Nigeria they want.

Nigeria is witnessing violence and carnage today – the type only witnessed in a country experiencing civil war – even though Nigeria is not at war. The country is one boiling cauldron of internal violent conflicts that the government seems unable to contain. In spite of the huge amount invested in fighting these violent crimes, the nation's security and law enforcement agencies seem simply overwhelmed.

Nigerians want a government that can guarantee them peace, affordable electricity and petroleum products and employment for the teaming youths. They will most likely vote for a candidate who promises to deliver this to them. At the end of the day, Nigerians hold their destinies in their hands to choose whoever they think can make life better for them; the National Assembly and presidential elections are their opportunities to choose the kind of Nigeria they want.



Ayode Longe

Ayode Longe is an advocate for freedom of expression, access to information, and digital rights and freedom. He is committed to raising awareness about these issues and promoting policies and practices that protect these fundamental rights through his work with the non-profit organisation Media Rights Agenda.