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Nigeria's make or break elections

Nigeria has seen a massive surge in registered voters. But does the security situation allow for fair and free elections?

Campaigning has reached a peak ahead of Nigeria's presidential elections on 16 February, which observers perceive as crucial for consolidating democracy in Africa's largest economy and most populous country. The contest is a straight fight between the incumbent, President Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC) and former Vice President Atiku Abubakar of the main opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP).

Buhari may be re-elected primarily because of the power of incumbency, although that didn't work for former president Goodluck Jonathan, the man Buhari upset in 2015. Buhari's promise to combat corruption, revamp the economy and fix insecurity appealed to voters tired of Jonathan's inept performance. But while Nigerians may not be as enthusiastic about Buhari today as they were four years ago, his defeat would still be a major upset: his image as an 'honest man' gives him a bit of an edge over Abubakar, who's viewed with suspicion and perceived as a man tainted by corruption.

The elections are important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it would be the fifth straight voting in the country since constitutional rule was restored in 1999. For a country with an unenviable record of political instability characterised by post-election disputes, coups and counter-coups, that is an encouraging development that needs to be sustained. This holds even more true, as what happens in Nigeria affects the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Secondly, fair and credible elections would be the second consecutive satisfactory ballot in the country after 2015. Anything short of an acceptable outcome could spark violent reactions whose outcome is hard to predict. The polls also come amid 'growing tensions along ethno-religious and regional lines,' said Chris Kwaja, a Senior Advisor at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP).

A surge in registered voters

This year has witnessed an unprecedented degree of voter interest. The failure of past governments to meet people's yearnings has built up public awareness of the need to register and vote for capable officials. Many jobless and impoverished young people who blame poor governments for their plight now want to have a say in determining their destiny. This has led to a surge in registered voters: 84 million this year compared to around 70 million four years ago, according to the election umpire Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC).

However, the challenge facing INEC is how to effectively deploy men and materials across a vast country measuring 923,763 square kilometers, or three times the size of Germany. If poorly managed, this logistical nightmare could cause turmoil before, during and after voting.

To prevent trouble, INEC must prevent vote rigging, financial inducements, under-aged voting, ballot stuffing and other malpractices.

More worrisome is the pervasive insecurity across the country. The Islamist Boko Haram terrorists in the northeast appear to be the most serious threat facing the elections. They have increased their attacks against government troops and civilians in a determined effort to disrupt the elections. In recent months alone, hundreds have been killed and more than 59,000 refugees have been sent to camps for internally displaced persons.

In northwestern Nigeria, armed bandits are also going on a rampage. They indulge in cattle raiding, kidnapping for ransom and other criminal activities. The security situation is 'turning from alarming to tragic – and could yet get worse,' according to Nnamdi Obasi, Senior Advisor at International Crisis Group.

How to ensure fair elections

The fighting between pastoralist Fulani cattle herders and farmers in the north central zone could also contribute to disrupting the elections. While the primary reason for the conflict may be the reduction in the land available for grazing and farming, there are also Christian-Muslim, north-south and ethnic conflict lines – which have been prevalent in Nigeria's politics. The fake news conundrum could spark a fire leading to violent conflagration. There's also been an increase in fatal inter- and intra-party violence. As if that wasn't enough, the security authorities warn of the existence of arms stockpiles in parts of the country which troublemakers are planning to use during and after the polls. And the

separatist Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) call on the people of the southeast to boycott the presidential election.

To prevent trouble, INEC must prevent vote rigging, financial inducements, under-aged voting, ballot stuffing and other malpractices. Security should be tight all around the country to create an atmosphere that's conducive for voters to come out. Also, the military and police must display a high degree of professionalism and impartiality.

Lastly, influential members of Nigerian society, including the clergy, business, and former heads of state and traditional rulers have a role to play in ensuring a peaceful exercise. Just as they did in 2015 when they encouraged President Jonathan to congratulate the eventual winner – a historic gesture that has further strengthened Nigeria's democratic development – they should be prepared to intervene again if necessary.



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