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One last victory for the old order?

Nigeria's new president will once again be provided by the ruling party. Yet, the Labour Party's remarkable results make it a serious opponent

It's a truly sensational event: Peter Obi, the presidential candidate of the small Labour Party (LP), which four years ago got just 5,000 votes in the whole of Nigeria, has won in Lagos. Against Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the former governor, the 'godfather' of Lagos, who was running on the presidential ticket for the ruling party, the All-Progressives Congress (APC). Technically, Tinubu has had a firm grip on Lagos since his time as governor in 1999, installing successors and sponsoring vice presidents. But this time, it's his turn. This could clearly be seen on election day: in many corners of the megacity, one heard that voters were being pressured to vote for APC, while elsewhere, polling stations were raided and election documents destroyed. And yet, in the end, there it is: Peter Obi has won in Lagos. By 584,454 to 572,606 votes. This truly is a sensational outcome – technically.

Of multiple crises and great hopes

In the past eight years, the APC government under President Buhari, who, in accordance with the constitution, did not stand for office, had gambled away virtually all of its political capital. Despite considerable success in the fight against Boko Haram, the security situation in Nigeria has steadily deteriorated and kidnappings are an everyday occurrence throughout the country, separatist movements in the north and south threaten national unity, and the farmer-herder conflict costs several thousand lives each year. The fight against corruption has also faltered, and the regular fuel shortages in conjunction with constant billions being spent on subsidies for imported petrol are causing despair for the common people in Africa's largest economy. Most recently, a failed currency reform caused unprecedented cash shortages and brought the largely informal economy to a standstill.

Nevertheless – or precisely because of this – many of the more than 93 million registered voters were pinning their hopes on the presidential and

parliamentary elections on 25 February 2023. Contrary to the trend in many neighbouring countries, the majority of Nigerians actually believe that changes are possible through democratic means. Over 11 million first-time voters were registered and over 39 per cent of registered voters are under 35 years old. Like four years ago, Tinubu was joined by the now 76-year-old Atiku Abubakar as candidate for the People's Democratic Party (PDP), which ruled from 1999 to 2015 – his sixth attempt to become president of the country. In the 2019 election, Atiku ran for office with Peter Obi as his running mate – and lost to Buhari. A year before this latest election, when it became apparent that the PDP would once again place its trust in Atiku, Obi decided to switch to the Labour Party.

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This party, which was once founded with the help of the Nigerian trade union movement, had been dormant for many years. Only a few committed trade unionists worked behind the scenes to rebuild it. In the 10 months between his switch to Labour and the elections, something happened that was unprecedented in Nigeria: Obi – who had been considered frugal and conscientious since his time as governor of Anambra from 2006 to 2014, and certainly by the time of his positive statements about the EndSARS protests in 2020 became a 'Hero of the Youth' – found that his supporters were mobilising nationwide, above all via social networks. Throughout the country, these 'Obidients' called for mass rallies. Large sections of civil society also backed his candidacy. In many ways, Obi's campaign became a projection screen for hope for a new Nigeria that would give voice to its youth and enable economic advancement. Despite his rather liberal economic views, he also managed to gain the support of the large trade union federations NLC and TUC. The NLC officially recommended him as a candidate for election to its more than four million members – the first time since 1992 that the union center had backed any candidate.

On Wednesday 1 March, 2023, the Nigerian elections authority INEC made it official. The (officially) 70-year-old Tinubu, former governor and 'godfather' of Lagos, clinched it after all: with just 36.6 per cent of the

votes cast, he is to become the new president of Nigeria. Thanks to a clause in the constitution whereby a simple majority on the first ballot is sufficient as long as the winner received at least 25 per cent of the votes in two thirds of the states, a runoff is unnecessary. Tinubu is considered by many to be a representative of the old elite. Although he likes to present himself as a self-made man from Lagos, he has hardly shown any appeal for the country's youth, as for many he represents everything that is going wrong in Nigeria: insecurity, corruption, intimidation and nepotism. Due to numerous glitches and deficiencies in the election process and ballot counting, the opposition has so far refused to recognise the result and is instead demanding that the election be held again. It remains to be seen whether – and if so how – the Election Tribunals set out in the new Electoral Act 2022 will deal with these objections.

A movement with substance or ethnic division?

Even if the numbers are still to be taken with a grain of salt, the results of the Labour Party under Peter Obi are tantamount to a political hurricane: a party that was able to win only 0.02 per cent of the votes in 2019 now received 25.4 per cent of the votes cast – over six million in total. In addition to the victory in Lagos, the LP received the most votes in 11 of Nigeria's 36 states, and in the capital Abuja it achieved a landslide victory with over 60 per cent of the votes. Overall, Obi came in third, behind Tinubu and Atiku, who brought in 29.1 per cent for the PDP.

Two opposing trends can already be identified: in Nigeria, which has been marked by multiple crises, the desire for change has become more than evident. Both Peter Obi and Rubia Kwankwasso, who ran in his home state of Kano for the small New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP) and garnered over one million votes in total, have challenged the bipartisan system and made significant gains. Especially in the cosmopolitan metropolises of Lagos and Abuja, Labour achieved outstanding successes, probably due primarily to the strong mobilisation of young people. It is also striking that the success was achieved in these cities, where content-related arguments weigh more than ethnicity. More than six million votes nationwide are a more than respectable achievement for the young alliance of youth, civil society and trade unions.

The 2023 elections have shown that an alliance of civil society and trade

On the other hand, the emerging election map can also be interpreted differently: Peter Obi, who is from the Igbo ethnic group and of

unions is capable of challenging conditions in Nigeria.

Catholic faith, received a significant portion of these votes in south-eastern Nigeria, the home of most members of his ethnic group. The other three candidates, all Muslims, also won their most decisive victories in those regions where their respective ethnic groups are in the majority. While Obi won his home state of Anambra with a whopping 95 per cent, he received less than one per cent of the vote in northern rural states like Katsina, Sokoto and Zamfara. Even in heavily populated cities like Ibadan or Kano, Labour did not come close to replicating the successes of Abuja or Lagos. Even though the two major parties APC and PDP achieved more balanced results, there is a great danger for the future that political actors could use the multiple experiences of social and economic marginalisation to further divide the country along ethnic or religious lines. In addition, for the first time since 1999, the still-pending results of the parliamentary elections might not produce a clear majority in the two chambers. And despite the hope and spirit of optimism before the elections, voter turnout will probably still end up lower than the 34.75 per cent of 2019.

Against this background, the decisive factor for the Labour Party over the next four years will be whether it is actually able to establish itself as a serious platform for the change that many are longing for – not only on the streets and on the Internet, but also in the parliaments, where the LP is likely to win many seats. It is not yet clear whether – and if so in which role – Obi will remain loyal to the party. The 2023 elections have already shown that an alliance of civil society and trade unions is capable of challenging conditions in Nigeria. It remains to be seen whether this impetus can be sustained beyond the personal popularity of individual candidates and the ethnic-religious fault lines. And last but not least, will the LP's own movement see the 25.6 per cent as a victory that serves as motivation for the future, or as a defeat brought about by the alleged election fraud and intimidation? In the end, how well the Labour Party performs in the upcoming 11 March elections for 28 of the 36 governorships and State Houses of Assembly will shed a first light on this issue.



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