**The Democratic Transition in Nigeria  
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Challenges of Democratization  
The election of Olusegun Obasanjo to the presidency of Nigeria in 1999 effectively brought an end to 16 years of military rule. Obasanjo became only the third head of government to be elected by the people (not counting the election of 1993, won by Chief Moshood Abiola but later annulled). Nigerians greeted the transition from military to civilian rule with widespread jubilation as they looked forward to a new era of stability, peace, and prosperity.   
  
Nigerians had good reason to be optimistic about the future. After all, Obasanjo assumed the presidency with an avowed commitment to combating many of the ills that plagued the country. His pronouncements before and after his election suggested that he intended to follow through on this platform, bridging the cleavages between ethnic and religious groups, and guiding the country through the process of democratization. The general public's expectation was that the country's return to democratic governance would lead to the restoration of freedoms lost under the previous regimes. Nearly seven years later, it is worth examining Obasanjo's efforts to establish a new order.   
  
A reflection of sorts took place when 40 Nigerians and other experts on the country attended a conference at the Kennedy School at Harvard in December 2002. They expressed their profound distress at the parlous state of Nigeria's democracy. Conference participants identified and suggested possible resolutions to Nigeria's nine critical governance problems: overcentralization, lack of transparency, lack of economic diversification, corruption, the sharia (imposition of Islamic law), lack of human security, human rights, a national conference to debate constitutional reform, and leadership. While recognizing the importance these problems, in this article I focus on only three of the most immediate and perennial pitfalls -- ethnonationalist cleavages (including the sharia controversy), human rights violations, and corruption. The discussion of these issues reveals the challenges and inherent contradictions of democratization for Nigeria and how the country's experiences might call into question the applicability of Western concepts of democracy in non-Western settings.  
  
Ethnonationalism and National Unity  
Perhaps nothing demonstrates the challenges of democratization in Nigeria better than the problem of ethnonationalism. The issue of ethnic cleavages, manifested in the high incidence of ethnonationalism, has loomed quite large in the affairs of successive Nigerian governments. A major problem arising from the ethnic and religious diversity of Nigeria is that it makes democratic compromise difficult. The different groups clamor for scarce resources and for control of the government. This leads to what Daniel Chirot refers to as "democratic paralysis" (1977, 224). Even in more advanced Western democracies, conflicts over what Dan Usher calls "assignment" (or resource allocation) can be especially troublesome. For a democratic political system to survive, citizens must have a prior agreement on a set of rules or consensus for allocation of resources (Usher 1981, viii). In such a society, it is necessary to have general agreement -- what Rousseau called "*la volonté générale*" (the general will) -- concerning certain substantive assumptions underlying the government. Where this is lacking, as in Nigeria, democracy -- once put into practice -- can be destabilizing.  
  
Before the colonial era, the geographical area now known as Nigeria consisted of a collection of small, independent states with different historical, political, and cultural backgrounds. The major cultural groups inhabiting the area at the onset of the colonial period were the Yoruba, Bini, and Igbo in the south and the Hausas, Fulani, and Kanuri in the north. In addition, several hundred subcultural groups exist. Unlike the United States, Nigeria is truly a multicultural country. It is true that people of different cultural backgrounds live in the United States, but there is also a dominant American culture. That is not the case in Nigeria, which has no dominant Nigerian culture to speak of. Traveling a few hundred miles in Nigeria can mean passing through as many as 10 different ethnic enclaves in which the natives speak entirely different languages and practice entirely different customs. The inevitable clash of cultures amongst these enclaves frames the country's political arrangements. Given the coincidence of regional boundaries with ethnic group boundaries, and the overlay of religion and ethnicity, establishing truly national political parties has proved impossible to achieve. From the very beginning, party politics in Nigeria was ethnically and regionally based. The major political parties tended to represent a specific region or cluster of ethnic groups. For example, the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), even though it began as a nationalist movement, essentially became an eastern and Igbo party mechanism, while the Action Group (AG) was of western and Yoruba orientation. The Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC), which began life as a cultural organization, became an ethnically-based party serving the interests of northern Hausa/Fulani elites.  
  
The leaders of these parties were not overly concerned with promoting national integration. For the ambitious Nigerian politician, ethnic affinity determined the constituency most readily accessible to support his claim to high office. Despite efforts to facilitate the emergence of national political parties, the parties of the Second Republic (1979-1983) essentially followed ethnic and regional boundaries.   
  
The 1999 election of Obasanjo, a Yoruba who drew most of his electoral support from non-Yorubas, represented a departure from past experience. Obasanjo is one of the few Nigerian politicians whose loyalties are not determined by his tribal origins. Since his election, he has been trying to develop strategies to combat some of the more divisive problems in the country. He has, for example, divided federal funds more equitably among the states while reducing incentives for further division. Obasanjo has achieved this, in part, by the strategic allocation of medical, educational, administrative, and other kinds of facilities and resources. Through this distribution, he has encouraged a willingness to share while reducing calls for creating new states. He has called upon the armed forces to quell ethnic disturbances. His swollen cabinet contains at least one member from each of the 36 states. However, as the increasing incidence of civil strife demonstrates, it is impossible to satisfy everyone.  
  
Rising Civil Strife  
A strong case for the adoption of democracy is that it provides for a free and open society. In Nigeria, as in other democracies, the new arrangements provided for freedoms of expression, religion, association, and so forth. Ironically, some Nigerians have used these new democratic freedoms as a justification for advancing separatist sentiments, including religious fundamentalism and other potentially antidemocratic, destabilizing ideologies. The rise of Islam as a political force in Nigeria has been long in the making. It was nonetheless a little surprising when, in late 1999, the small northern state of Zamfara introduced Islamic law or sharia. To the dismay of Christians and other non-Muslim peoples in the north, other northern states soon followed Zamfara's example. This politicization of Islam has undermined the government's national integration efforts and proven to be quite detrimental to the process of democratization and political development in the country. It is estimated that in the years following the inauguration of the Obasanjo administration, Nigeria has endured more than 50 ethnoreligious conflicts in Nigeria, claiming more than 25,000 lives and destroying property worth billions. The more deadly and destructive of these conflicts since 2000 were in Kaduna (ethno-religious in nature), Jos (ethnic and ethno-religious), the Tiv-Jukun (ethnic), Lagos, (ethnic), and Kano (religious).   
  
It is noteworthy that religion and ethnonationalism are not the only forces behind the increasing incidence civil strife in Nigeria. Economic considerations are at work in a few cases. In the volatile delta region, violence from militants seeking more local control over oil wealth has also contributed to the loss of confidence in the ability of the Obasanjo administration to secure the safety of Nigerians. The violence in the delta has provoked a state of fear and contributed to a significant decline in oil production -- the lifeblood of the Nigerian economy. The militants, from the delta's dominant Ijaw ethnic group, have attacked pipelines and captured foreign and domestic oil workers, demanding various concessions from the government and foreign oil companies. The government's response, alternating between the use of negotiation and force, has failed to produce the desired outcome or restore the confidence of the people. In fact, the use of the police and the armed forces has had the effect of undermining the process of democratization and further aggravating the situation.  
  
Human Rights  
With the argument for the superiority of democracy over other forms of governmental arrangements often comes the claim that democracy advances and protects the rights of the citizen. Several developments in Nigeria since the inauguration of the new democracy call into question the government's commitment to protecting human rights. A case in point is Odi, a town in the delta region. After a number of incidents and the killing of policemen there, the government sent Nigerian Army soldiers to restore calm. According to press reports, the residents offered no resistance, yet the army shot at defenseless citizens and looted and burned their houses. A civil liberties group noted that at the conclusion of the military operation, no livestock remained and approximately 60,000 inhabitants either were killed, were arrested, or fled into the forest. The death toll was estimated to be more than 1,000. Further, many who fled into the bush died, and many who returned found that they had no source of livelihood. The invasion displaced at least 90 percent of the Odi population. This and other incidents of human rights violations were cause for anxiety, given Obasanjo's professed commitment to creating a more tolerant and free society.   
  
Two weeks after his inauguration on May 29, 1999, Obasanjo announced the formation of the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission (HRVIC), which is also known as the "Oputa panel." The HRVIC was similar in scope and mandate to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Obasanjo charged the HRVIC with investigating human rights abuses dating back to the military coup of January 15, 1966. Commission members were to establish whether human rights abuses resulted from deliberate state policies or actions. The commission was also to investigate the mysterious deaths of several public figures, including Kudirat Abiola, the wife of Chief Moshood Abiola, the presumed winner of Nigeria's annulled election of June 1993. Further, Obasanjo ordered that the commission make recommendations about how to redress past injustices and prevent future abuses.   
  
The national media carried the HRVIC hearings live. The coverage afforded Nigerians the opportunity to share and vent their frustrations over several years of oppressive and unaccountable governance. The hearings facilitated a highly charged national debate over democracy and government accountability. The commission summoned citizens from all segments of the society to appear, including President Obasanjo, three former military heads of state, and other current and past government and army officials. Obasanjo testified twice in person, but the three generals -- Abdulsalami Abubakar, Ibrahim Babangida, and Muhammadu Buhari **--** refused to appear. The Nigerian courts supported them, ruling that the commission lacked the authority to summon past leaders of the military. The HRVIC received several thousand petitions of alleged human rights abuses, such as the atrocities committed during the Nigerian civil war and the murder of Dele Giwa, founding editor-in-chief of *Newswatch* magazine.  
  
In its conclusions, the HRVIC held numerous former top government officials responsible for violating the rights of many Nigerians. Notable among the commission's findings were that Babangida and his two security chiefs (Brigadier-General Halilu Akilu and Colonel A. K. Togun) were accountable for the death of Dele Giwa; Buhari was liable for the attempted abduction of Umaru Dikko, former transport minister, and the execution of three drug pushers; and Abubakar was responsible for the death in detention of Chief Abiola. The commission called for the creation of a ministry of human rights to promote human rights, recommended that the military get pruned to a smaller number, and that the subject of human rights become part of the curricula at Nigerian military institutions.   
  
The commission's report represented a direct assault on the culture of impunity, which has pervaded Nigerian society since independence. While Nigerians were pleased with the commission's report, there was widespread concern that the Obasanjo administration would not have the political will to implement the recommendations of the report. Perhaps even more important than the indictment of former heads of government was President Obasanjo's appearance before the commission. The nation saw his appearance and that of other top officials -- notwithstanding the heavy-handedness of the armed forces in quelling domestic insurrections -- as representing the dawn of a new culture of openness and respect for human rights.   
  
Corruption  
No discussion of Nigeria can be complete without, at least, a brief mention of the problem of corruption. While the formation of the HRVIC was a necessary and proper first step by the Obasanjo administration, it was widely recognized that the new democratic arrangement would not succeed unless the government made meaningful efforts to combat corruption. Consequently, around the same time that he established the HRVIC, Obasanjo introduced an anticorruption bill to parliament. Corruption permeates every sector of Nigerian society, "from millions of sham e-mail messages sent each year by people claiming to be Nigerian officials seeking help with transferring large sums of money out of the country, to the police officers who routinely set up roadblocks, sometimes every few hundred yards, to extract bribes of 20 naira, about 15 cents, from drivers" (Polgreen 2005, A1). However, the most disturbing and damaging form of corruption is made manifest in the succession of kleptocratic governments, which has produced extremely wealthy generals and political leaders. The prevalence of prebendalism (client patronage) in Nigerian societies has undermined the process of democratic transition in the country.   
  
Cognizant of the damaging effects of corruption on Nigeria, the administration of President Obasanjo, upon assuming power in 1999, established the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offenses Commission (ICPC is its official acronym) and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). The administration charged these commissions with investigating and prosecuting various criminal activities and officials involved in corrupt practices. Initially these commissions prosecuted a few low-level officials, leading to near universal condemnation of their efforts. In the recent past, however, the ICPC and EFCC have scored some notable successes. The EFCC has facilitated the arrest and prosecution of many fraudsters. It has also prosecuted officials involved in corrupt enrichment, including a former inspector general of police. Further, the president of the Senate was forced from office under the pressure of accusations that he took bribes from the education minister to pass an inflated budget. The government has also formed a partnership with Microsoft to crack down on the notorious email fraud (Polgreen 2005, A1). In spite of these efforts, Transparency International, an independent global watch on corruption, continues to rank Nigeria among the five most corrupt nations in the world.   
  
The record of the Obasanjo administration in its efforts to restore confidence in the government, advance human rights, eradicate corruption, and reduce ethnic and religious conflicts is a matter of unsettled debate. There is, however, little argument over the administration's creditable performance in managing the transition from military to democratic civilian governance. The successful civilian-to-civilian transition in 2003 represents a positive step toward the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. Nonetheless, as the foregoing discussion reveals, the challenges for democracy in Nigeria are quite real.   
  
Concluding Observations  
Looking at Nigeria's experiences, one has good reason to wonder whether the Nigerian condition is amenable to Western-style consensual political arrangements. Although the temptation to borrow well-established and tested models of governance is strong, Nigeria must devise a system more appropriate to the country's ethnic circumstances if it is to endure. The answer may lie in the establishment of a consociational system in which traditional leaders play the central role of consensus building. Nigerian traditional rulers -- emirs, sultans, obas, obis, and so forth -- have continued to enjoy widespread support within their respective domains. In many parts of the country, they have more legitimacy than the modern leadership structure. Because the substantial majority of Nigerians live in small towns and villages where the authority of traditional rulers holds sway, it would seem expedient for the government to use the legitimacy these leaders enjoy to secure the support of Nigerians for integrative, consensual politics. 

**As Goes NIgeria, So Goes Africa**  
**BLOOMBERG VIEW EDITORIAL BOARD  
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Boko Haram's [pledge of allegiance](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-03-07/boko-haram-pledges-allegiance-to-islamic-state-on-twitter) to Islamic State has raised fears of terrorism spreading across middle Africa. Yet such anxieties threaten to overshadow a larger and [less hypothetical](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-03-12/nigeria-vote-may-spawn-violence-whoever-wins-control-risks-says) threat: that Nigeria's upcoming [elections](http://www.cfr.org/nigeria/nigerias-2015-presidential-election/p36087) will spark widespread unrest in Africa's leading power.

The presidential vote, set for March 28, is a bitter rematch of the 2011 election between Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the south, and Muhammadu Buhari, a former military leader from the Muslim north. Jonathan prevailed last time in a contest marred by fraud and riots.

Low public confidence in the electoral process, particularly in the north, took another blow when the government, citing security concerns caused by Boko Haram's attacks, postponed the vote just one week before it was supposed to take place in February. (Never mind that [plans](http://www.inecnigeria.org/?page_id=28) for a new and complex computerized voting card system were behind schedule.)

Meanwhile, incendiary rhetoric has also fanned hatred, with Nigeria's first lady [saying that](http://blogs.cfr.org/campbell/2015/03/10/nigerian-first-lady-on-the-campaign-trail/) Buhari is "brain-dead" and that his supporters should be "stoned." No wonder that, in one pre-election [poll](http://www.ifes.org/Content/Publications/News-in-Brief/2015/~/media/Files/Publications/White%20PaperReport/2015/Nigeria%20Pre%20Election%20Survey.pdf), 73 percent of Nigerians were dissatisfied with how democracy works in their country.

None of this is to say that Nigeria's response to Boko Haram has been effective; after first [downplaying](http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-01-13/boko-haram-can-be-stopped-by-a-nigeria-united-against-it) the group's attacks, the government has trumpeted gains that have been achieved mostly by Nigeria's neighbors and [mercenaries](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-03-13/nigeria-says-south-africans-are-giving-arms-training-to-soldiers). It is to say, however, that Boko Haram [is not](http://www.cna.org/sites/default/files/research/DRM-2014-U-009462-Final.pdf) an existential threat to the Nigerian government. And its recent pledge of fealty to Islamic State has fed Jonathan's narrative that Nigeria is helping to fight a global war on terror, rather than flailing before a decentralized insurgency that draws on local grievances.

Instead of promising military discipline, stoking sectarian passions or ridiculing opponents, Nigeria's presidential candidates should be putting forward a convincing vision for progress. They need to address the [disparities](http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2014/07/23/000470435_20140723133415/Rendered/PDF/896300WP0Niger0Box0385289B00PUBLIC0.pdf) that have left the north home to more than 60 percent of Nigeria's poor, with relatively dismal education and public health. They need to combat rising inequality, even as Nigeria's economy enjoys robust growth, and reduce its [dependence](http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2015/pr1591.htm) on oil for government revenue and foreign exchange.

Above all, Nigeria's leaders need to address their country's [pervasive corruption](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/nigeria0811WebPostR.pdf). Last February, for instance, Jonathan [fired](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-02-20/nigerian-central-bank-governor-sanusi-suspended-by-president) the head of Nigeria's central bank for daring to point out that $20 billion in Nigeria's oil revenue had gone missing.

In this kind of toxic climate, any hopes for clean, violence-free elections may be misplaced. Both candidates' camps have said the only credible outcome would be their respective victory, with Buhari's followers vowing to set up a parallel government and Jonathan's [threatening attacks](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-2932817/Nigeria-oil-rebels-warn-unrest-unless-Jonathan-elected.html) on the country's oil infrastructure in the event of a loss.

Nigeria's neighbors and friends need to help them come to their senses. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry visited in January to encourage both candidates and their followers to accept election results. One worrying sign would be the removal of the head of Nigeria's independent election commission, which has been [rumored](http://blogs.cfr.org/campbell/2015/03/06/anxiety-grows-over-election-rigging-in-nigeria/).

It's hard to exaggerate how important it is for the continent's biggest economic power and most populous nation to make its first successful transition of power between parties since gaining independence more than half a century ago. The significance of Nigeria's election is its potential impact not on the fight against terrorism there, but on the progress of democracy in Africa.

# Opinion: Democracy is taking root in Nigeria

**March 23, 2015  
Uchenna Ekwo, Ph.D.      
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Nigeria will hold its rescheduled presidential election on March 28. The poll was postponed last month amid growing instability in Nigeria’s northeastern region. Tension remains high ahead of the vote. As Nigerian army and African Union forces intensify the offensive against Boko Haram, the drumbeat for war is loud and clear. Vitriolic exchanges between the two major political parties in the Nigerian media suggest that the country is imploding.

Nigerians have good reason to be nervous about the outcome. The volatile political environment is reminiscent of the postelection violence that followed the annulment of the 1993 presidential election. Since its independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria fought a bloody civil war, endured bouts of dictatorship for 38 years, survived the collapse of its economy and only recently managed to restore democratic rule.

Yet, as troubled as the upcoming election has been, there are signs that Nigeria’s democracy is maturing. Information flow is at breakneck speed. The plurality of voices in the Nigerian media is emblematic of a country that enjoys freedom of expression — a rare commodity in many African countries. Though Nigeria’s democracy faces serious challenges, it also shows signs of resilience.

## **Electoral politics**

Some of the public anxiety arises from the choices that Nigerians face: Re-electing President Goodluck Jonathan, who is widely perceived as weak, or handing power to Gen. Muhammad Buhari, a former military dictator who ousted a democratically elected government in 1983. Neither choice is good for Nigeria, but the nine other candidates in this election are invisible and unelectable; the Nigerian media does not even bother to cover them. By ignoring the dark horses who don’t have the resources to buy airtime, the media is not helping Nigerians make informed decisions. But the lack of equal publicity and coverage among the presidential candidates is hardly surprising. Journalists often follow front-runners, money and influence.

Both Jonathan and Buharienjoy a level playing field to address their supporters. But instead of addressing the myriad of issues at stake, the two candidates prefer to spout platitudes and personal attacks. For example, the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) appears fixated on Buhari’s allegedly forged high school diploma. Nigeria’s Constitution stipulates that presidential candidates must at least have a high school diploma or its equivalent. The demand for Buhari’s credential is legitimate. He can simply lay the allegation to rest by releasing his certificate.

For its part, Buhari’s All Progressives Congress (APC) continually downplays Jonathan’s achievements during his six-year tenure and emphasizes his weakness as commander-in-chief. That such open debates about a candidate’s health, competence and educational credentials are taking place in Nigeria is a sign of improved democratic ethos in a country still grappling with democratic norms.

For the first time in Nigeria’s history, the incumbent is crying foul over treatment from the opposition. It is unusual for the incumbent to complain about election fraud. In the past, the ruling party colluded with the electoral commission to win elections. For example, in the 1983 election, President Shehu Shagari’s now defunct National Party of Nigeria won the election by cheating at the polls. Similarly, former President Olusegun Obasanjo’s PDP manipulated the electoral system to extend his grip on power in the face of sustained opposition.

The PDP is now accusing the opposition of manipulating that very system. That Jonathan’s campaign is alleging members of the Independent National Election Commission (INEC), appointed by the incumbent administration, colluded with the opposition to manipulate the outcome in its favor signals that the commission is not beholden to the ruling party. Cheating in elections remains a scar in the democratic experiment of most African countries. But an incumbent crying foul about the opposition having an upper hand in influencing the electoral body is evidence that democracy is taking roots in Nigeria.

“Jega may have decided to aid the APC to rig the forthcoming elections through the manipulation of the production, distribution and collection of permanent voter’s cards,” Jonathan’s representative Femi Fani-Kayode [said recently singling out INEC Chairman](http://allafrica.com/stories/201502120231.html) Attahiru Jega. “Emerging trends have consistently shown calculated attempts to deprive parts of the country that would traditionally vote for President Jonathan of their PVCs.”

Moreover, the PDP has also accused Jega of holding secret meetings with APC officials in Dubai. There is certainly cause for concern: Voters in regions under a state of emergency because of Boko Haram have received more voter’s cards than the relatively peaceful parts of the country. INEC’s independence is key to ensure fair and credible poll. Regardless of the veracity of these allegations, the reports risk tainting the credibility of the entire electoral system. INEC must now provide sufficient explanation as to how states where citizens have been displaced by Boko Haram’s insurgency appear more prepared to vote than those in the south or southeast of the country.

## **Obasanjo’s frustration**

In yet another twist in the growth of Nigeria’s democracy, on Feb.15, Obasanjo abandoned the PDP at the 11th hour, publicly tearing up his membership card, to the consternation of his longtime supporters. The former president is not new to such display of eccentricity. In 1986 he snatched a microphone from then–Nigerian Television Authority reporter Segun Aderiye and broke it to protest a question. In 2009 he lost composure during an [interview with the BBC’s “Hard Talk.”](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/hardtalk/8340532.stm)

Obasanjo’s latest dramatic act may appear indelicate, bizarre and ungrateful to a party that offered him the opportunity to lead the country twice. But his behavior demonstrates the growing frustration within the PDP rank and file over its resistance to democracy. Since its founding in 1998, the PDP has gradually drifted toward institutionalizing a civilian dictatorship in the name of democracy.

PDP membership used to be an automatic route to public office. Success in the party primaries was once a near guarantee for victory in general elections. But the days of PDP membership as a gateway to wealth and influence appear numbered. Besides Obasanjo, other PDP leaders, including the Speaker of the House Aminu Waziri Tambuwal, have abandoned the party and are now determined to make sure it loses in the coming polls. The exodus of prominent party members signals the PDP’s eventual demise. But Obasanjo’s exit may open the door for the much-needed reform in the PDP. Other parties may also learn from the PDP’s mistakes.

Taken together, these tea leaves indicate a democracy that is challenged but growing stronger. There is now less appetite for military coups and the rule by Big Men. Democracy might be messy, but Nigerians appear resolute that it is the best form of government for the multiethnic and multireligious nation. What happens after the elections will likely test the limits of Nigeria’s electoral democracy. It may be difficult to predict how the 2015 elections will affect Nigeria. But a free, fair and peaceful poll and transition would earn Nigeria a deserved seat in the community of nations and further guarantee the country a strong voice among leading powers in the world.

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# Nigeria’s Democratic Revolution

**Cheta Nwanze**

#### The Nation

#### APRIL 2, 2015

In a move that is likely to surprise a lot of people in the West, Nigeria has elected for the presidency a man who truncated a democratic government three decades ago.

Former General Muhammadu Buhari won on Tuesday a keenly contested election, by a very slim margin, to become the first man in my country’s fifty-five years as a postcolonial state to unseat an incumbent government via the ballot box. This is a change.

Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999, after thirty-three years of primarily military rule. For four years, between 1979 and 1983, democracy surfaced briefly, until Buhari led a military coup to end it. He proceeded to run one of the most brutal regimes that Nigeria has ever seen. His Decrees 2 and 4 were aimed directly at press freedom and the right to free assembly, and a lot of people were imprisoned and killed under those laws.

But Buhari says he is a “changed” man. Since 1999, the People’s Democratic Party has governed the country. Buhari has competed against PDP opponents in three previous elections, and lost each time. His first two losses, in 2003 and 2007, were marred with controversy because of irregularities, vote rigging, ballot box snatching and voter intimidation. Following the fiasco of the 2007 elections, reforms forced greater transparency. And the 2015 vote has to many Nigerians been a welcome indicator that we do know how to organize elections. Buhari says his role in that development—as the three-time losing candidate who continued to marshal votes rather than guns—is proof of his commitment to democracy.

Still, why did Nigerians opt for a former dictator, with such a brutal past?

One reason is security. Just before he became dictator, in 1983, Buhari put down the Maisatsine insurgency. Maisatsine was the forbear of today’s Boko Haram movement and many Nigerians long for that kind of decisive action now.

But another reason is impatience with the “transformation” that was the mantra of outgoing President Goodluck Jonathan’s government. In the last half a decade, Nigerians really have witnessed a transformation of the country. But the truth is that for the vast majority of my people, this transformation has not been for the better. Our lives have gotten a lot worse.

Yes, there was growth. In 2014, Nigeria became Africa’s largest economy. But that growth, which made our economy larger than South Africa’s, was in reality a statistical change that did nothing to improve the quality of life of the Nigerian.

There is an example that I use to illustrate the difference. My son turned 1 year old last month, and I like to tell people that he’s been growing since he was born. My wife and I have tried to provide for him as best as we can, so he can grow. However, if in the past year we had fed him on just bread and water, he would still have grown—but he would not have developed.

This is Nigeria’s story over the past odd decade of Jonathan’s leadership. Nigeria has grown, there is no doubt about it. But what the statistics never say is this: Our growth has come because every other African country with similar indices has grown as well. In 2001, it took fifteen African banks to put together a deal worth $50 million. Now, to get a deal worth $1 billion, you do not need more than four banks on this continent.

Development, on the other hand, should be an effect of growth, if managed properly. The Jonathan government did not manage our growth into development that benefits all Nigerians, and nowhere is this more evident than in the power sector.

Nigeria’s power grid is notoriously inefficient, and has become worse in the last decade, despite billions of dollars spent in nominally fixing the problem. Almost all Nigerian families have a power generating set. Some have more than one, and the more affluent Nigerians have power inverters, a battery bank which stores power and is less noisy. The need for all of these generators and inventers pushes up the cost of living, and the cost of doing business in Nigeria.

I spend, on average, 2,000 naira—or, roughly $10—each day buying gas to power my generating set. That’s $300 per month, in a country where the national minimum wage is about $90 per month.

With realities like these, people have simply stopped believing in the president’s “transformation” agenda. Heck, the fact that our national budget includes millions of naira for servicing the generators at our Presidential Villa tells us that no development is taking place in the power sector, despite the touted claims to the contrary.

Most Nigerians believe the money that was to be spent on infrastructure projects to fix the power problem was simply pocketed by friends of the government—and what is worse, that nothing happened to those people who were caught stealing. In 2013, the governor of the central bank, also a man with a reputation for doing things right, blew the whistle on [$20 billion](http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/06/us-nigeria-election-banker-specialreport-idUSKBN0LA0X820150206) of missing government funds. He got fired. His successor, who is a friend of a friend of the government, has presided over the collapse of Nigeria’s currency, and a higher rate of inflation.

I recently found out that a police inspector earns N52,000 ($260) a month as his basic salary, and this is a person charged with our security. How would such a person cope in Nigeria? Has there been “growth” in the salaries of public workers? Yes, but has there been development?

Thoughts such as these drove the thinking of so many Nigerians as we went to the ballot box last Saturday.

It is true that the outgoing president got a lot of votes from his region of origin. But, and this is important, the voter turnout in those regions was very poor as compared to the rest of the country. As a friend who lives in Awka, the capital of the southeastern Anambra state, told me, “We can’t vote for Buhari because we do not like Northerners, but Jonathan has not performed, so we will rather stay away from the elections.”

Nigeria’s southeastern region has a historical animosity with the North, where the president-elect comes from, because of our civil war, in which Buhari participated five decades ago. The hatred has not dissipated. Despite that, a fair number of people from the Southeast are willing to give the aged statesman a shot. This is simply because the decisions of the outgoing government hit them where it hurts the most: in their pockets.

**Miracle in Abuja: A largely democratic and peaceful handover of power  
From the Economist’s 2015 Survey of Nigeria**



“THEY RIGGED AND rigged right until the very last moment,” says one Western diplomat of Nigeria’s March election. A variety of techniques were employed. First, the police and the army insisted on the election being postponed by six weeks, arguing that they needed extra time to ensure security. But most people believed that the delay was instigated by the ruling party, which feared it was at risk of losing and hoped that this would give it more time to buy votes. More blatantly, states around the Niger Delta saw ballot-box stuffing and submission of false counts, and across the country bags of cash were being handed out to prospective supporters. As a result the local currency, the naira, weakened as politicians converted it into dollars. These came in high denominations, taking up less space in the suitcases used to cart them about on the campaign trail.

To be fair, both sides were guilty of malpractices. Observers in the north say that supporters of the governing PDP were threatened, and many stayed at home. Some also reported seeing large numbers of children voting for the winning APC. All the same, the outcome broadly reflected the will of the electorate in what most observers said was the fairest election in decades—even though some informed sources reckon that a more accurate count of the vote would have delivered about 60% of the total to Mr Buhari, rather than the 54% he was officially credited with. So how did democracy triumph against the odds?

Much of the credit goes to Attahiru Jega, a soft-spoken academic who was put in charge of the independent electoral commission in 2010. His appointment came too late to influence the 2011 election, but he has spent the past five years cleaning up the voters’ roll and introducing electronic ID verification that makes it much more difficult to stuff ballot boxes. He has also proved to be stubbornly non-partisan, to the chagrin of many in the PDP.

A second factor was the PDP’s sheer incompetence. With little leadership or direction emerging from Aso Villa, the presidential compound, the party had become so weak in government that it seemed incapable of defending its position. “They were too incompetent even to rig the election properly,” says one insider.

Third, many voters had become deeply frustrated with Mr Jonathan’s government and were desperate for change. Tempted by the ruling party’s bribes, they may have worked out their own moral compromise. As one observer put it, “people took the money and then voted their conscience.”

Last, across the country independent monitors kept an eye on the polling stations. Many took photos of the results recorded at each station and posted them on social media, making it difficult for officials subsequently to fiddle with the numbers. Others submitted results to a parallel vote count run by the Transition Monitoring Group, a non-government organisation. This flagged up instances of ballot-box stuffing by the PDP in the Niger Delta and helped limit its extent. It also encouraged the police and army to stay largely neutral, even as senior figures within the PDP tried to get them to take sides. Pressure from abroad, mainly America and Britain, played a part too.

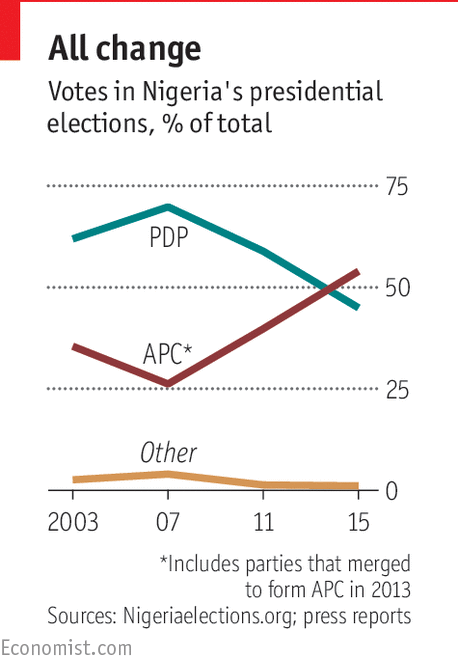
Though Mr Jonathan’s presidency was in most respects a failure, even his sternest critics give him credit for stepping down quickly once it became clear he had lost, even before the final tally was in. In doing so he pulled the rug from under senior PDP members who were said to be plotting to try to keep the party in power. One plan was to try to kidnap Mr Jega to disrupt the count, according to Reuters, a news agency.

The democratic outcome, however tenuously achieved, sets an important precedent. Having spent the past 16 years under the rule of a single party, and most of its history before that under military rule, Nigeria has matured into a multi-party democracy that is not ruled along ethnic or religious lines. The PDP, for all its failings, was a largely national party. When it came to power in 1999 under Olusegun Obasanjo, it managed to unite the country’s north behind a president from the south. Mr Obasanjo, a Yoruba-speaker from Ogun state in the south-west of the country who had ruled as military dictator in 1976-79 before handing over to a short-lived civilian government, managed to win the trust of northerners.

**North v south**

Nigeria’s population is about half Muslim and half Christian, and for some time it was widely argued that the PDP was the only party that could overcome the country’s religious and ethnic divisions, not least thanks to its policy of “zoning” whereby the presidential candidates it nominated would alternate between northerners and southerners. The opposition, by contrast, was seen as dominated by northerners and Muslims, who are concentrated in the north and west of the country, and was divided. That changed in 2013 when the three biggest opposition parties joined to form the APC, offering policies slightly to the left of the PDP’s.

Yet despite the apparent victory for democracy, concerns remain. In his previous terms as a military ruler, Mr Buhari was no democratic pin-up. He banned political meetings and free speech, executed people for crimes that were not capital offences when they were perpetrated and sent whip-wielding soldiers onto the streets in a “war against indiscipline”. Mr Buhari has since said that he is committed to democracy, but many Nigerians fret that he may try to rule by decree. Before his inauguration he threatened to expel critical journalists from press conferences, but his party did a swift about-turn on that.



Even if democracy has now taken root at the centre, it has yet to establish itself in state governments, most of which are little more than the fiefs of their governors. State governors often control the party apparatus in their states and thus dole out seats in the assemblies to loyal followers, and the state assemblies that should hold the executive to account are often vehicles for patronage. Many local governments are still more of a mess. There may be a need for constitutional reform to make all levels of government answerable to the citizens as well as to clarify how powers are to be divided among states and central government.

The election also highlighted the urgent need for political reform, not least in campaign finance. Contesting elections in Nigeria costs a fortune. Rigging them costs even more, leaving presidents and state governors in hock to various “Ogas”, the local slang for big-man or godfather. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, a long-standing PDP finance minister, recalled in her memoir, “Reforming the Unreformable”, that in the latter part of Olusegun Obasanjo’s second presidential term, in 2006, businessmen and party patrons asked her to waive a 50% tax on imports of rice. She reckoned such a waiver might be worth $1 billion to the importers and party funders, but would ruin many rice farmers who had been encouraged to plant by an import-substitution policy that included hefty tariffs. So she refused, and was kicked out of the finance ministry soon afterwards.

**Keeping the Ogas at bay**

The way Nigeria’s main political parties are run, too, needs to be made more democratic. Voters get to vote for one presidential candidate or another, but there is very little transparency over how each party selects its nominee. For the two main parties this is meant to be done at party congresses, yet there is talk of bidding wars as Ogas buy votes for their preferred presidential candidates. Once in office, politicians can dispense patronage to their supporters and influence legislation to benefit their Ogas. One solution might be to move to American-style open primaries in which voters elect their parties’ candidates directly. If overseen by an independent electoral commission, such primaries might make parties more responsive to voters and force them to come up with new ideas and policies. Nigeria’s recent election was fought mainly on perceptions of which candidate would be more effective and less corrupt, rather than on their policies or ideologies. But policies also matter, not least on how the government collects and spends money