**Nigeria's primaries**

**A northern bid:** **In primaries the ruling party looks set to pit north against south**

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ELECTIONS next April are already casting long shadows in Nigeria. The ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) is set to hold a presidential primary next month with a victor to be announced by January 15th. A powerful challenger to Goodluck Jonathan, the incumbent, has emerged. A bout of frantic politicking is certain.

Atiku Abubakar, a former vice-president, last month became the consensus candidate of northern Nigeria. His main selling point is that he upholds the PDP’s so-called zoning pact, whereby the presidency rotates between the country’s mostly Muslim north and largely Christian south every two terms. The candidacy of Mr Jonathan, who hails from Nigeria’s oil-rich southern delta, has ruffled feathers by breaking that unwritten rule.

So Mr Abubakar should be able to count on the votes of northern party delegates next month, despite the region’s internal rivalries. A nine-man panel of elite northerners selected him from a shortlist of four hopefuls, mindful that to have more than one challenger to Mr Jonathan would split the area’s votes. “If all four from the north had stood in the primaries, that would have been a serious setback,” says Udenta Udenta, a senior member of Mr Abubakar’s campaign team.

The challenger is an adroit dealmaker with strong networks in north and south, aided by four wives from different parts of the country. Confident and broad-shouldered, he is said to have amassed a fortune through investments in oil-service companies and printing presses. He presents himself as pro-business, saying he would reduce the state’s role in the energy industry.

The former vice-president has been in national politics for two decades and was a founding member of the PDP, which has kept a tight grip on power since the end of army rule in 1999. His rivals on the shortlist offered stiff competition: a former military ruler, a sitting state governor and a former national security adviser. His next task is to woo the PDP’s influential state governors, the deciding factors in previous primaries.

By contrast, Mr Jonathan is often seen as an accidental leader. Also a former vice-president, he came to power unexpectedly in May after the then president, Umaru Yar’Adua, died. He has since vowed to fix three of Nigeria’s biggest problems: woefully unreliable electricity; flawed elections; and an insurgency in his native Delta region. An 18-month-old amnesty for Delta gangs is looking ever shakier, with fresh attacks on oil pipelines and abductions of oil-company staff in recent weeks.

If Mr Jonathan is hoping for an easy ride in southern Nigeria, he could be in for an nasty surprise. His party is losing sway there. A series of court verdicts since October have annulled the victories of three southern PDP governors in the latest polls in 2007. More states may fall to opposition parties in April’s elections, especially in the south-west, where the Action Congress of Nigeria is gathering strength. It already controls Lagos, the country’s vibrant business capital.

Yet the presidential race is still Mr Jonathan’s to lose. Nigeria’s system favours the incumbent, who can steer a vast patronage network serviced by the energy revenues of Africa’s largest oil and gas producer.

Many voters are unkeen on all the PDP contenders, preferring candidates such as Muhammadu Buhari, a former military ruler, or Nuhu Ribadu, a former head of the anti-corruption agency. But even after the recent court verdicts, the PDP behemoth still controls 27 of Nigeria’s 36 states—and is likely again to provide its next president.