

WOBBLY AND FRAUGHT WITH UNCERTAINTIES; NIGERIA'S ELECTIONS DRAW CLOSER

By Awah Leonide Azah

Key points

- ❖ *The Nigerian General Elections of 28th March 2015 promise to be the most keenly contested elections in recent history and preventing any sort of electoral violence is vital.*
- ❖ *It is absolutely essential that the incumbent and his ruling party PDP refrain from the politics of calumny that has characterized the campaign, and focus on articulating why Nigerians should entrust them with another term in power. The president he needs to address the nation, to assure Nigerians of his commitment to: open, free and fair elections*
- ❖ *The Independent National Electoral commission (INEC) of Nigeria should ensure that the electoral process is credible and conducted in accordance with Nigerian law and international*

Introduction

In a few days Nigeria, Africa's biggest economy will be holding its 5th presidential elections since the return of civilian rule in 1990. President Goodluck Jonathan who is seeking a second four year term is facing a tough challenge from opposition candidate, retired military General, Muhammadu Buhari. This is arguably the first election in a long while whose outcome is not a foregone conclusion in favor of the incumbent.

The Boko Haram insurgency, competing claims to the presidency between the Muslim north and majority Christian south, inadequate electoral arrangements and apparent bias by security agencies all point toward a very perilous contest. Fraught with tension and uncertainties, reason why all hands are on deck to ensure a peaceful election.

Given Nigeria's prominence in West Africa, the outcome of these elections stands to serve as a bellwether for other West African countries holding elections this year. This policy brief focuses on the context of these elections and considers a number of possible related trajectories and offers modest recommendations to all stakeholders in the elections.

On 28th March 2015, Nigerians would hit the polls in a bid to elect the leader and government that will lead their nation for the next four years. Political analysts at home and abroad have opined that the elections will be the most keenly contested in Nigeria's recent history. Given this prognosis, and the fact that Africa cannot afford a descent into widespread violence in its most populous nation, national stakeholders and members of the international community are focusing on ensuring an open, fair, and above all, violence-free elections on March 28th.

A Tale of two parties

As Nigerians head to the polls on Saturday, they will have an abundance of candidates and parties to choose from, though it is evident that the main contest will be between the incumbent, President Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), and retired Major General and former military ruler, Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC). President Jonathan and his ruling party the PDP are very much aware that there is deep and widespread disaffection with their leadership and governance of the country. Despite having Africa's largest, and one of its fastest growing economies, wealth continues to be disproportionately distributed, poverty remains widespread, and basic services still elude millions of Nigerians. The Boko Haram insurgency in the North East has escalated over the past four years. It has led to a significant loss of lives, extensive destruction of communities, and mass kidnapping of Nigerians, including the schoolgirls from Chibok. Consequently, President Jonathan's government has lost credibility and has become very unpopular to millions of Nigerians.ⁱ

Support for the opposition has risen considerably thus tightening the electoral race. The incumbent government has fought the opposition's rising support, by resorting to questionable political strategies. The postponement of the elections, which were initially scheduled from 14th of February to the 28th of March, has been interpreted by many Nigerians and external observers, as a blatant attempt by President Jonathan and the PDP to cling onto power by buying time to enable him campaign more aggressively and regain some trust.

The last few weeks following the postponement of elections have seen vigorous campaigning by the ruling party to gain some momentum. The country's landscape continues to be heavily dominated by electioneering and murky politicking; candidates have defected to join opposing parties, churches and entertainers have abandoned all pretense of neutrality and hitched on to different political bandwagons, while owners of electronic and print media have engaged in broadcasting hateful messages, all in contravention of section 90 of the Electoral Act of the Republic of Nigeria.

Despite the renewed efforts by the government to demonstrate that it deserves a renewed mandate, the opposition APC led by General Buhari, have continued to anchor their campaign on the persistent insecurity, massive corruption and visible economic decline in the country. The opposition has blamed President Jonathan's government for massive corruption, failure to guarantee employment and economic prosperity for the masses as well as inability to secure the lives and property of Nigerians in the North East.ⁱⁱ

However, one would note with a lot of worry that instead of engaging in serious and robust debates about the economy, national security, and general welfare of Nigerians, both campaigns have been characterized by calumny, character assassination, intimidation, and hate speeches. This has not inspired much hope that the electoral process will produce the matured, visionary, and transformative leadership that Nigeria so desperately needs.

The distribution of cash and other material inducements – rather than compelling political visions, ideas and programs - in exchange for the votes of Nigerians seems to be the modus operandi of major political parties. Political rallies are less vehicles of transmitting party platforms and engaging voters, and more of popular theatre with the dance, chants and flamboyant attires all a testament to this.

Hope For A Peaceful election

Though many Nigerians believe that the main opposition party hardly represents a distinctive alternative to the incumbent government, the electoral situation is not all doom and gloom as many Nigerians still see the elections as an opportunity to write the next chapter of Nigeria's progress. A recent survey by the Centre for Law Enforcement Education (CLEEN Foundation) and Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) reported about 89 percent of voters were willing to vote.ⁱⁱⁱ Nigerians are ready to participate massively in determining the future of their country. It is an indicator of the high level of engagement and investment that Nigerians have in their country and its future. Open, free and fair elections will re-energize Nigeria, and rekindle their commitment to keeping the

country together regardless of which side they had supported at the ballot boxes.

Many critics believe that the county will sail through the tension that has characterized the run up to the elections, but for this to happen, all critical actors, in this case; The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) responsible for the overall conduct of the elections; the political parties that have fielded candidates for various offices; and ordinary Nigerians, whose choice it is to decide those returning to elected public offices have to act as responsible statesmen who have the interest of the country at heart. All the parties should especially refrain from fanning the flames of ethnicity, and regionalism, and assiduously focus on bridging the historic North –South divide in Nigerian politics. Whoever is elected president on Saturday is, and should be accepted as president of entire Nigeria and not only a particular region of the country.

Nigeria occupies a significant position in West African, African and global politics. The choices that its citizens and leaders make have far-reaching implications beyond their nation's borders. The success or failure of democracy, rule of law, and ethnic and religious reconciliation in Nigeria will serve as a bellwether for African countries organizing elections this year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the government of President Goodluck Jonathan:

- ❖ Refrain from the politics of calumny that has characterized the campaign, and focus on articulating why Nigerians should entrust President Good luck with another term in power. In the next few days, President Good luck needs to address the nation, to assure Nigerians of his commitment to: open, free and fair elections
- ❖ Caution members of the ruling party and supporters of the government to eschew violence and intimidation, and to respect the rights of their fellow Nigerians who are supporters or members of opposition parties
- ❖ Cooperate with local electoral authorities, party and media representatives, citizen election monitors, other candidates and international elections observers to conduct the polls in accordance with Nigerian law and international standards for election monitoring set forth in the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation.

The major opposition candidate General Mohammadu Buhari

- ❖ Resist provocation, and rein in followers and supporters who may be inclined to use intimidation and violence.
- ❖ Uphold the Rule of Law, and as in the aftermath of the first three contests, use the judiciary to seek redress for any electoral violation, malpractice or injustice.
- ❖ Discourage the perception that the contest for the presidency is a North-South leadership contest rather than a process for producing a leadership for all Nigerians.

To Leaders of Youth, Ethnic and Religious groups

- ❖ Organise national, regional, ethnic and inter-faith public forums to convey your commitment, individually and collectively, to non-violence and peaceful conduct of the elections
- ❖ Establish channels of communication, coordinating mechanisms, and contingency plans to respond quickly to potential as well as evident acts of violence before, during, and after the elections.

To the Independent National Electoral Commission:

- ❖ After the unpopular postponement of the elections, (INEC) needs to regain the trust and confidence of Nigerians by explaining major electoral processes and decisions to all political parties and Nigerian voters, leaving no stone unturned in building confidence with all parties, individuals and the society at large.
- ❖ Conduct the elections efficiently, and with as little hitch as possible, making sure that voting stations are well staffed, accessible, secured, and monitored; ballots boxes and

ballot papers are thoroughly safeguarded and available to voters; and vote tallying is transparent and expeditious.

- ❖ Avoid partisanship and treat Nigerians as Nigerians and not as PDP or APC members.

To civil society organisations and mass media:

- ❖ Engage more actively with youth leaders especially in poor urban areas as well as with women and faith based groups.
- ❖ Strengthen participatory early warning and early response systems, and raise timely alerts of possible violence.
- ❖ Ensure neutral, fair, balanced reporting of all election-related developments, and avoid publishing hateful, divisive and inflammatory statements or unverified election results.

To the Nigeria Police Force and other security agencies:

- ❖ Improve security arrangements for the elections by deploying adequate numbers of personnel to election duties and strengthening their capacity to gather information, monitor developments and analyse threats.
- ❖ Educate the security forces on human rights and respectful treatment of civilians.
- ❖ Step up efforts to curb the influx and availability of illegal arms to militia groups on either side of the political divide and ensure that the newly established Elections Security Planning and Monitoring Unit is well resourced, firmly led and instructed on international best practices.

To ECOWAS AU/UN and other international stakeholders

- ❖ Harmonise initiatives and work together, to create a common forum for collectively pressuring political parties and their candidates, security agencies and all other stakeholders to act lawfully to prevent electoral violence

About the Author

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ⁱ *Sunday Trust* "2015 Presidential elections; Jonathan's unviable rigging options" 22 March 2015 Abuja;Nigeria.

ⁱⁱ *Premium Times* "Buhari Accuses Jonathan of Failing Nigerians" 25th March 2015; Abuja Nigeria

ⁱⁱⁱ *Afro Barometer* "Let the people have their say" Dispatch No 11 of 27th January 2015 www.afrobarometer.org