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Nigeria's 2015 Election in Perspective

Nkwachukwu Orji

Abstract: As Nigeria moves closer to its 2015 elections, there are concerns that the elections, like the previous ones, will be marred by violence. This article examines why elections are usually volatile in Nigeria, the main sources of apprehensions regarding the 2015 elections, the key issues that might define the elections, factors that might mitigate the outbreak of violence, and the national and regional fallout that can be expected.

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In February 2015, Nigeria will hold its fifth general elections since the country returned to democratic rule in 1999. Previous elections in Nigeria have been marked by allegations of fraud and disputes over results. The 2007 general elections, in particular, were widely adjudged as generally flawed (Suberu 2007; Ibrahim and Ibeanu 2009; Onapajo 2014). This forced the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the government, civil society groups and Nigeria's development partners to initiate and implement electoral reforms. These reforms contributed largely to the success of the 2011 elections, yet the risk of flaws affecting Nigerian elections still remains (Akhaine 2011; Lewis 2011a).¹

Besides the risk of irregularities, elections in Nigeria are imperiled by threats of violence. The 2011 general elections witnessed a scale of violence unprecedented in the country's history, with more than 800 people killed and 65,000 displaced (Human Rights Watch 2011). As the 2015 general elections approach, there are concerns that these elections, like the previous ones, will be marred by violence (Okolo 2014; Rękawek 2014; ICG 2014). Why are elections usually volatile in Nigeria? What are the sources of apprehensions regarding the 2015 elections? What key issues will end up defining the elections? Are there factors that could mitigate the outbreak of violence? What national and regional fallout should be expected from the elections? These are the key questions that I will address below.

Why Nigerian Elections Are Often Volatile

To appreciate the causes and dynamics of election irregularities and violence in Nigeria, it is vital to reflect on the wider socio-political and economic context of the country. Four issues, all of which are connected to the worsening social, political and economic conditions in Nigeria, provide the general context for difficulties with elections.

First, the nature of Nigerian politics is the most crucial reason for failed elections in the country. As is now well known,

Nigerian politics revolve around the distribution of oil money, whether officially (in the form of debates over oil-revenue allocation) or unofficially (as military and civilian politicians seek favour

1 This was demonstrated by the complaints following the Anambra State gubernatorial election in November 2013. The INEC did, however, receive improved ratings for the Ekiti and Osun States' gubernatorial elections conducted in June and August 2014, respectively.

with those in a position to reward them with opportunities to “chop”). (Human Rights Watch 1999: 27)

Nigerian politics is largely a struggle for the privatization of the state to the benefit of personal and sectional interests (Ake 1985; Ekekwe 1986; Ibeanu 1999). Since election outcomes in Nigeria greatly determine access to power and to the enormous resources controlled by the state, electoral contests often extend beyond the electoral space and are conducted in ways that undermine the rule of law. In this way, elections are inevitably akin to war, and therefore, prone to manipulation and violence.

Second, there is a distinctive link between the existing communal tensions in Nigeria and the rising incidence of electoral violence in the country. In the first decade of Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999, at least 18,000 people were killed in more than 600 violent incidents (Lewis 2011b: 9). Since 2009, the Boko Haram insurgency alone has claimed more than 5,000 lives (Giroux and Gilpin 2014: 2). Some of these violent incidents were manifestations of spillover from communal conflicts which began even before Nigeria's independence in 1960 or represented outbursts of tensions suppressed during the military rule (Plotnicov 1971; Nnoli 1978; Albert 1995). In the context of existing inter-group animosities, communal tensions not related to elections sometimes nevertheless degenerate into bloodshed during elections (Best 2007).

Third, the presence of a huge number of willing protesters in Nigeria also provides a basis for electoral violence in the country. Although Nigeria is richly endowed with human and natural resources, a substantial part of its population remains uneducated, unemployed and poor. Figures put the proportion of Nigerians living in absolute poverty in 2010 at 60.9 per cent (National Bureau of Statistics 2012). Unemployment rose from 11.9 per cent in 2005 to 23.9 per cent in 2011 (National Bureau of Statistics 2011). The socio-economic conditions help to produce individuals that are easily influenced to engage in violence (Sambanis 2004), and Nigerian politicians have a known proclivity towards the exploitation of these willing protesters (Ibrahim 1991; Human Rights Watch 2007).

Fourth, the inability of the Nigerian state to provide adequate security and law enforcement serves as a basis for electoral violence in the country. Decades of corruption and bad governance have weakened the capacity of the Nigerian government to prevent or punish mass violence. The weakness of security and law enforcement in Nigeria is reflected in the country's inability to regulate the flow of small arms, curtail banditry and check the activities of illicit armed groups (Human Rights Watch 2005; Hazen and Horner 2007). This weakness is also reflected in the emergence of private security outfits and vigilante groups (Fourchard

2008). These non-state security crews have failed to deter violence; in one case, they were even used to perpetrate electoral violence (Hoffmann 2010).

Elections 2015: The Danger Signs

A recent report by Nigerian-based non-governmental organization the CLEEN Foundation claims that 16 of the country's 36 states face a high risk of violence during the 2015 elections.² Apprehensions over security during the elections stem mainly from two sources: the hangover from the 2011 post-election violence and the rising insecurity in the country.

Hangover from the 2011 Post-Election Violence

The failure of the Nigerian government to make real progress in addressing the grievances that led to the 2011 post-election violence is a major source of concern ahead of the 2015 polls. The deep sense of marginalization and frustration in the North, which led to the violent rejection of the 2011 election results, is still present. The inability of northern politicians to control the Nigerian presidency for a single four-year term since 1999 has led to demands for a power shift to the North – similar sentiments having previously been associated, vice-versa, with southern politics and a corollary shift to the South (Ibrahim 1999). Following the death of President Umaru Yar'Adua in May 2010 and the elevation and subsequent election to the presidency of his vice-president, Goodluck Jonathan, the perception that the North has been systematically outmanoeuvred and disempowered has become widespread (Hoffmann 2014). The rise of President Jonathan, a southern Christian from the Niger Delta region, overturned the informal power-sharing arrangement established by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) at the onset of Nigeria's democratic transition in 1999. As Nigeria moves closer to the 2015 elections, the political questions of a power shift to the North and how the North might react should President Jonathan be re-elected have become more present.

One major response of the northern elite to the question of a power shift has been the withdrawal of several of its senior political figures from the ruling PDP. These PDP defectors established an alliance with some

2 The report also indicates that 14 other states and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, face reasonable levels of risk of violence during the elections; see CLEEN Foundation, *Security Threat Assessment: Towards 2015 Elections*, 23 September 2014, online: <<http://cleen.org/2015%20Election%20Security%20Threat%20Assessment%20September%202014.pdf>> (24 September 2014).

opponents of President Jonathan in the southwest region, leading to the formation of a national opposition party – the All Progressives Congress (APC). The emergence of the APC has essentially polarized Nigeria between opponents and supporters of President Jonathan. Analysts fear that the APC's challenge of the nearly two decades of PDP dominance will exacerbate regional and religious tensions. Much of this calculation, however, depends on how President Jonathan and the PDP respond to the APC's opposition. One possible response could be to attempt to weaken the party by fostering internal fracture, capitalizing on inevitable discontentment among its members. Another response could be to try to woo northern political figures with political “carrots”. Shifting loyalties can often be induced with the enormous financial and political resources of the Nigerian presidency. Successful co-optation of senior northern politicians by President Jonathan will temper threats from the APC.

Rising Insecurity

Nigeria is currently dealing with Islamist insurgency and other security challenges that have created deep tensions in many parts of the country. Terrorist activities, generally attributed to the Boko Haram insurgents, are on the increase, especially in the Northeast (Adesoji 2010). Other parts of the North are battling with persisting communal clashes and an upsurge in violent confrontation between farmers and herdsmen. In the South, activities of armed bandits continue unabated. One major consequence of the deteriorating security situation in Nigeria is the emergence of several militia and vigilante groups and the control of enormous amounts of arms by ordinary people. Politicians could exploit the poor security situation to stoke violence during the elections. The fact that the 2015 election would take place in the context of a grave national security crisis means that any minor dispute over the integrity and/or outcome of the elections can lead to bloodshed. The deep contentions that are associated with elections in Nigeria will further politicize and entrench the existing security challenge.

There is also the question of whether the security situation will permit the conduct of elections in the first place. The INEC initially expressed concerns that it may not be possible to hold elections in the Northeast, especially in Borno and Yobe States (Agbakwuru and Erunko 2013). Later, the commission changed its outlook, maintaining that elections will be held in the region. The reality, however, suggests that securing polling stations for credible elections will be an uphill task, especially if Boko Haram or any other militant group decides to escalate attacks to disrupt the process. Failure to conduct elections in the North-

east would badly dent the legitimacy of the polls and raise serious constitutional questions. In Nigeria, the entire federation constitutes a single constituency for the presidential election, and the successful candidate must win “not less than one-quarter of the votes cast at the election in each of at least two-thirds of all the States in the Federation and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja”.³ Not holding elections in some states could lead to fierce legal battles over the results; and in a worst-case scenario, it could create political chaos and a rejection of the final results. The leadership of the opposition APC, which largely controls Borno and Yobe States, has already expressed its suspicion that the ruling PDP and President Jonathan are trying to keep people from voting in the North-east (ICG 2014: 39).

In addition to not holding elections in the Northeast, there is talk of postponing the 2015 general elections in their entirety. This view received attention when Senate President David Mark declared on the floor of the Senate that “there is no question of election, it is not even on the table. We are in a state of war” (Hassan 2014). Opposition politicians immediately condemned that statement, arguing that Mark was suggesting a possible tenure extension for the Jonathan administration. Concerns about his comments are serious considering that the Nigerian Constitution allows for a six-month postponement of elections with the approval of the Senate when the country is at war or its territorial integrity violated.⁴ In view of the genial relations between President Jonathan and the leadership of the Senate, the postponement of the 2015 elections cannot be ruled out. However, much depends on the ability of the Senate leadership to secure the support of a majority of the senators. The idea might appeal to senators who expect to benefit from the tenure elongation. But, senators may be pressured by their constituents to oppose the idea, more or less in the same way that the Senate was pressured into rejecting the proposal to elongate President Obasanjo’s tenure in 2005 (Ibrahim 2006).

Other Defining Issues

Besides the hangover from the 2011 post-election violence and the rising insecurity in Nigeria, the 2015 elections will be defined by the integrity of the elections and the use of social media.

3 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, Section 134, Subsection 1(b).

4 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, Section 135, Subsection 3.

Integrity of the Elections

Political scientists have established a link between the integrity of elections and the outbreak of electoral disputes and violence (Norris 2014). Questions about the transparency and fairness of the electoral process, credibility, independence, neutrality or partisanship of the election authority, and the perception that an election is not free and fair are now known to be major sources of electoral disputes and violence. In Nigeria, it is not sufficient for an election to be free and fair – it must be seen as such by the citizens. A history of failed elections has eroded public confidence in the electoral process. However, improvements in the quality of the 2011 elections compared to previous elections raised public confidence. On the flip side of that coin, though, the success of the 2011 elections has heightened expectations from the INEC, placing the commission under stricter public scrutiny.

It appears that the INEC is aware of public expectations and is therefore making efforts to remove obstacles to success. Since 2011, the commission has embarked on reforms aimed at improving its structure, planning and policymaking capacities. To this end, the commission implemented a comprehensive restructuring of its bureaucracy, proposed a series of changes to the election legal framework, developed a comprehensive election project plan, designed a comprehensive business-process mapping, and adopted a new communications policy. Counting on the reforms initiated and preparations made, the chairman of the INEC assertively declared “we are convinced that the prospects of having good elections in 2015 are very bright” (Jega 2013: 9). It is reasonable to give the INEC the benefit of the doubt, yet we must note that the quality of an election is determined not just by the actions of the electoral authority, but by the aggregate actions of other actors including political parties, candidates, voters, security agencies and the judiciary. The actions of these actors not only shape the integrity of elections, but also create circumstances that could trigger or mitigate disputes. Being at the core of the electoral process, the INEC bears the responsibility of coordinating and directing other actors to achieve the ultimate goal of credible elections. In Nigeria, this is certainly not an easy task. In preparing for the 2015 elections, the INEC must understand that the outcome of the elections is a critical measure of whether the gains of the 2011 elections have been consolidated or reversed, and whether, in general, Nigeria is making democratic progress. The commission must also appreciate that a successful election provides a strong basis for anti-conflict advocacy that may help mitigate disputes.

The Use of Social Media

Since the 2007 general elections, social media has become an important tool of political communication in Nigeria (Ifukor 2010). Because of its ease of use, its speed and its reach, social media has revolutionized the efficiency of electioneering, election administration and citizens' oversight of the electoral process (Asuni and Farris 2011). The many benefits of social media make it an indispensable instrument during the 2015 elections. There are, however, many aspects of social media that diminish its value and call for caution in its use. Many questions have emerged about the reliability of the information collected and shared through social media. The crowd-sourcing technique used by many activists often relies on information provided by individuals in local communities, who are sometimes anonymous reporters. Bearing in mind that some of these "citizen journalists" might be people with partisan interests and biases, it is difficult to affirm the accuracy of the reports they provide without first subjecting them to a systematic verification process. Reliability may improve if independent verification checks are built into the system – for example, if a random sample of reports are vetted by a trusted and independent agency, or if reports from multiple sources are compared and found to contain similar information. Information shared through social media during the 2011 general elections was subjected to little or no vetting or verification, and this will likely be the case again in 2015. The absence of social media censorship, which in itself is a major appeal of this tool, may also be its main drawback. During the 2011 electioneering campaigns, social media was largely misused as a vehicle for spreading false information and inciting violence (Ekine 2010). Rumors and inflammatory messages spread through the tool were partly blamed for the 2011 post-election violence. Regrettably, neither the government nor the INEC has come up with a clear strategy on how to deal with the possible abuse of social media during the 2015 election campaigns. In the midst of this vacuum, one can only hope that social media is used positively during the 2015 contest.

Possible Fallout: National and Regional

The 2015 elections will have significant national and regional consequences. At the national level, the elections will, among other things, determine the direction of Nigeria's counter-insurgency campaign and shape the security of the country's energy infrastructure. One analyst has suggested five possible directions for Boko Haram: The group could

burn out as a result of internal division and battle strain; be crushed by the state; successfully establish a ministate; engage in an interminable insurgency; or wither away following a peace deal with the government (Walker 2012: 12).⁵ The Nigerian government would likely try to crush Boko Haram if President Jonathan is re-elected. Following the failure of past efforts to negotiate with Boko Haram, the Jonathan administration appears to have ruled out further dialogue, embracing a militarist solution. With plans for more investment in military operations, there is no realistic prospect for a change in policy by the administration in the post-election period.⁶ Should the Nigerian military fail to overwhelm Boko Haram, then the insurgency will simmer indefinitely. The prospects of a negotiated end to the Boko Haram insurgency would, however, be brighter if President Jonathan fails to secure re-election. The new government, in a bid to widen its legitimacy, would have an incentive to engage groups opposed to Jonathan, including Boko Haram.

The 2015 elections will also have significant implications for the security of Nigeria's energy infrastructure, located mostly in the Niger Delta region. The region was the theatre of a conflict that reached its peak in the late 1990s before the amnesty programme introduced by the government in June 2009 led to a relaxation of restiveness. The relative peace that now exists in the Niger Delta is a product of three main factors: 1) the huge contracts awarded to specific ex-militant leaders to "protect" oil installations, 2) the perception in the region that the present government is well placed to address the neglect of the oil-producing communities, and 3) the expectation in the region that the amnesty programme will provide adequate re-integration opportunities for ex-militants (Ibeanu 2012: 21-22). A change in government after the 2015 elections would likely upset the existing arrangement, and the failure of the new government to win the confidence of the ex-militants and leaders of oil-producing communities may lead to renewed attacks on energy installations. The Jonathan administration has failed to contain the huge oil theft going on in the Niger Delta, which involves even community mem-

5 The most unrealistic of all these possibilities is the establishment of a ministate by Boko Haram, considering the group's lean resources. With a force of no more than 9,000 fighters, it is hard to see how Boko Haram can take permanent control of a part of Nigeria's territory. For a recent assessment of Boko Haram, see Perouse de Montclos 2014.

6 On 25 September 2014, the Nigerian Senate approved a one billion dollar loan requested by President Jonathan to tackle insecurity and terrorism in the country; see *Punch*, 26 September 2014, online: <www.punchng.com/news/uproar-as-senate-approves-jonathans-1bn-loan-request/> (27 September 2014).

bers and costs Nigeria an estimated 35 million USD a day in revenues (Okeowo 2014; Eboh 2014). Any attempt by a new government to stem the theft may meet serious resistance that could lead to a resurgence of restiveness. The Niger Delta may also relapse to violence if ex-militants accept the propaganda that northern politicians are behind the Boko Haram insurgency, using it to apply pressure on President Jonathan to cede power to the North or offer an amnesty programme to northern insurgents (Perouse de Montclos 2014: 24). In one scenario, the Niger Delta could become more restive and pressure the government to do more for the region; in another, the Boko Haram insurgency could lead to more solidarity for President Jonathan, including armed resistance of his electoral defeat.

Finally, at the regional level, a successful election in Nigeria might provide a basis for development partners to widen democracy promotion activities in West Africa. The success achieved in the 2011 elections led, for example, to the replication of the Nigeria Civil Society Election Situation Room in Liberia and Senegal as an innovative model for civil society engagement with elections (Ilo, Manby and Odinkalu 2012). Because of the huge international attention that Nigerian elections normally attract, any positive lessons or innovative approaches that emerge from the 2015 elections are likely to be widely disseminated and possibly replicated in other countries in the region. Overall, the success of the 2015 elections will underscore the possibility of conducting credible elections in difficult electoral environments.

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Ausblick auf die Wahlen in Nigeria 2015

Zusammenfassung: Während die nationalen Wahlen in Nigeria immer näher rücken, werden Befürchtungen laut, die Wahlen von 2015 könnten wie die vorherigen gewaltsam verlaufen. Der Autor untersucht, warum Wahlen in Nigeria generell unberechenbar sind. Er benennt die konkreten Besorgnisse im Zusammenhang mit den Wahlen 2015, die Kernthemen dieser Wahlen, Faktoren, die einem Ausbruch von Gewalt entgegenwirken könnten, und die zu erwartenden nationalen und regionalen Folgen.

Schlagwörter: Nigeria, Nationale Wahlen, Wahlkampf, Innenpolitischer Konflikt