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The 2015 Nigerian General Elections

Nkwachukwu Orji

Abstract: The high level of success of Nigeria's 2015 general elections was unexpected, considering the difficult political and security environment in which the elections were conducted. The major obstacles to the smooth conduct of the elections include the grave security threat posed by the Boko Haram insurgency, the competing claims to the presidency by northern and southern politicians, a keenly contested campaign smeared by inflammatory messages, and serious gaps in electoral preparations. Against the backdrop of these challenges, this article assesses Nigeria's 2015 general elections, looking closely at the key issues that affected the polls, the major electoral outcomes, and the critical post-election issues raised by the outcomes.

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Keywords: Nigeria, elections/voting, election campaigns, voting results, democratisation

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Despite widely held concerns about the likelihood of a destabilising outcome, Nigeria successfully conducted its general elections on 28 March and 11 April 2015. Muhammadu Buhari, candidate of the newly emerged national opposition party known as the All Progressives Congress (APC), defeated the incumbent president Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in the presidential election. His party also scored huge victories in the gubernatorial elections, as well as those in the National Assembly and the various state Houses of Assembly. A phone call by President Jonathan to his main rival conceding defeat a few hours before the official results of the elections were announced set the 2015 elections apart from previous elections, most of which were characterised by disputes over results. President Jonathan's early acceptance of defeat had a tremendous calming effect on the political atmosphere, which had been tense prior to the elections.

The peaceful and positive outcome of the 2015 elections came as a surprise to many, considering the difficult political and security environment in which the elections were conducted. The grave security threat posed by Boko Haram insurgency posed the greatest obstacle to the smooth conduct of the elections. Other issues, such as the competing claims to the presidency by northern and southern politicians, a keenly contested campaign smeared by inflammatory messages, allegations of politically motivated postponement of the elections, and gaps in electoral preparations, caused equally serious concerns (Orji 2014).

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and other election stakeholders, especially the security agencies, addressed many of the challenges that were anticipated; yet logistical lapses, electoral irregularities, and outbreaks of violence could not be entirely avoided. In a few states, such as Rivers and Akwa Ibom, losers of the gubernatorial elections contested the results based on allegations of irregularities. However, most election observers maintain that the spread and gravity of irregularities recorded were not sufficient to question the overall credibility of the elections (EU EOM 2015a; TMG 2015).

The 2015 elections can be viewed as a positive step towards democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The elections enabled the country to achieve inter-party alternation of the presidency for the first time in its electoral history. Democratic theorists see alternation of power as a crucial stride in the democratisation process (Przeworski et al. 2000; Huntington 1991). Although the Nigerian presidency did not change hands before the 2015 elections, there has been significant alternation at other levels of government (LeVan et al. 2004). The uniqueness of the 2015 alternation, however, is that it occurred at the highest level of authority.

Nigerian Elections: A Background

The evolution of electoral democracy in Nigeria has been protracted and difficult. Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, the country has organised nine general elections and numerous regional/state/local elections. Of these elections, the 1979, 1993, and 1999 polls were conducted by military regimes to allow for transition to civil rule, while the other elections¹ were conducted by incumbent civilian regimes to consolidate democratic rule. Elections organised by incumbent civilian regimes have been the most problematic (Agbaje and Adejumo 2006). With the exception of the 2011 and 2015 elections, these elections have been characterised by attempts by the ruling parties to contrive and monopolise the electoral space and deliberately steer the process in their favour. This pattern was reflected in the "simulated" landslide victories recorded by the ruling parties in the 1964, 1983, 2003, and 2007 elections (Ibeanu 2007).

The 1964 federal election was contested by the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA), which is a coalition of predominantly southern parties, and the Nigerian National Alliance (NNA), whose base of support is in northern Nigeria. The Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) and its allies in the NNA took advantage of their control of the federal government to contrive a controversial victory (Dudley 1973). The 1983 general elections were also manipulated by the incumbent National Party of Nigeria (NPN), which won the presidency and gubernatorial elections in seven out of the nineteen states in 1979, and thereafter attempted to extend its political power throughout the federation. The allegations of vote manipulation in the 1983 elections triggered violent protests in some parts of Nigeria (Hart 1993).

The 2003 and 2007 general elections were also allegedly manipulated (Lewis 2003; Suberu 2007). The 2007 elections, in particular, severely dented Nigeria's democratic credentials due to the national and international condemnation they elicited. However, on a positive note, the elections led to a great deal of soul-searching among the Nigerian leadership. The president at the time, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, publically acknowledged that the election that brought him to office was fundamentally flawed. He therefore set up the Electoral Reform Committee (ERC) to suggest measures that could improve the conduct of elections, restore electoral integrity, and strengthen democracy in Nigeria. Some of the ERC's recommendations were reviewed and adopted as amendments to the Constitution and Electoral Act. The government also tried to restore

1 Held in 1964, 1983, 2003, 2007, 2011, and 2015.

the integrity of elections in the country by appointing credible leadership to the INEC. For its part, the INEC adopted series of internal measures aimed at restoring public confidence in the electoral process (Kuris 2012). All of these measures contributed to the relative successes of the 2011 and 2015 general elections.

Polling Preparations

Preparations for the 2015 elections began soon after the 2011 polls. In August 2011, the INEC inaugurated a committee – the Registration and Election Review Committee (RERC) – to evaluate the 2011 voter registration and general elections in order to recommend ways of strengthening the commission’s operations. The RERC’s recommendations created a framework for preparations for the 2015 elections and broader electoral reforms (INEC 2012). A major outcome of the RERC report was the INEC strategic plan (2012–2016), which sought to reorganise and reposition the commission. Based on the plan, the INEC implemented wide-ranging reforms, including a comprehensive restructuring of its bureaucracy, the development of a comprehensive election project plan, the formulation of a business-process map, and the adoption of new communications and gender policies (Bolaji 2014; INEC 2014).

The extent to which the implementation of these reforms improved election management during the 2015 polls has not been determined; the myriad of challenges faced by the INEC in conducting the 2015 elections raises doubts about the impact of the reforms. Challenges relating to voter registration and to the reorganisation of both the constituency and polling arrangements were the most prominent. Although the Nigerian Constitution requires the INEC to review electoral boundaries at least once every ten years,² the last review took place in 1996. Given the huge population expansion and the migration of citizens across the country since 1996, there was a consensus that a new constituency-delimitation exercise was necessary before the 2015 general elections (INEC 2014). On 16 November 2011, the INEC convened the Technical Committee on the Review of Electoral Districts and Constituencies (TCRED&C) to review past constituency-delimitation efforts and suggest measures that would improve future demarcation undertakings. Based on the committee’s report, the INEC formulated a four-phase work plan for constituency delimitation. But the commission could not proceed beyond the first stage of the plan due to poor coordination and failure to secure the consensus required to

2 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, Section 73.

implement the exercise. In September 2014, the INEC suspended its constituency delimitation plan and introduced a scheme to create 30,000 new polling units to relieve pressure on the approximately 120,000 units in existence (Jega 2014). The INEC's polling-unit reorganisation plan was similarly abandoned after it was severely criticised for allegedly favouring northern constituencies (Ndiribe et al. 2014; Olokor 2014). The inability of the INEC to manage its constituency and polling-unit reorganisation programme called into question the commission's planning and technical capacity.

The INEC's professional capacity was further questioned by the manner in which it managed the distribution of permanent voter cards (PVCs). Following the compilation of the biometric voter registry in 2011, the INEC proposed issuing PVCs to duly registered voters before the 2015 elections. The PVCs replaced the temporary voter cards (TVCs) handed out to registrants immediately after their enrolment. Unlike the TVCs, PVCs have a microchip containing machine-readable biometric data of each voter. The INEC planned to deploy card-reading machines to authenticate the cards they issued and verify the identity of the voters through their fingerprints. This is expected to help prevent multiple voting, reduce incidents of card theft, and control vote-buying. From November 2014 when the PVC distribution exercise began, the Nigerian press buzzed with stories of tardy INEC officials, protesting registrants, insufficient PVCs, stolen cards, and other irregularities (Mordi 2015; Haruna and Ismail 2015). By 14 February 2015, the date originally scheduled for elections, only 76 per cent of registered voters had received their PVCs. The postponement of elections allowed more time for registrants to obtain their PVCs, resulting in approximately 82 per cent of PVCs having been collected by 21 March (EU EOM 2015a: 6).

Election Campaigns

Campaigns for the 2015 elections commenced in mid-November 2014 with large-scale rallies in different states of the federation. There were also lively campaigns in the media, especially social media. The 2015 election campaigns played out more as low politics than high-minded electoral appeals based on policy proposals. The two main parties adopted mainly negative campaign tactics involving fierce personal attacks on the candidates and prominent party members. The PDP's main line of attack on Buhari was to question his democratic credentials. The party has contrasted his past as a former military leader with President Jonathan's ex-

perience as a “tested and trusted democrat” who emerged in the aftermath of the country’s return to civilian rule in 1999 (Amodu 2014).

From November 2014 when electioneering commenced, reports of violent attacks by rival political groups began to increase (NHRC 2015). In late November 2014, the APC accused the PDP of organising state-sponsored violence after the State Security Service raided the APC’s office in Lagos as part of an investigation into claims that the party was illegally duplicating voter cards.³ In early January 2015, the APC accused the PDP of having links with gunmen that shot at its supporters travelling to an election rally in Bori in Rivers State (Ezigbo 2015). A few days later, the PDP alleged that APC supporters set fire to one of President Jonathan’s campaign vehicles in Jos (Okocha and Ezigbo 2015). There were also reports of verbal attacks in the form of politicians using young “internet warriors” to attack rivals online, often deliberately peddling misinformation and employing inflammatory language (Nwaubani 2014).

The APC was clearly more coordinated and coherent in its campaign. The party anchored its campaign on the message of change with which it consistently challenged the PDP’s nearly two-decade-long hegemony of Nigerian politics. Hinged on the failure of the PDP government to lead Nigeria out of its governance and security predicaments, the APC’s message of change reverberated throughout society, especially among the youth and the middle and lower classes. The APC posed corruption as the fundamental challenge to the PDP’s moral fibre and the capacity of its government to produce results. Along this vein, the APC waged sustained attacks on the PDP’s credibility as a party and the effectiveness of its government. In contrast to the PDP’s rather elitist orientation, the APC presented itself as a mass party ready to ensure the government’s accountability and its staying in touch with popular needs such as education, employment, and security.

Voting and Results

The voting process in Nigeria reflects the myriad of challenges that have affected election administration in the country. The scale of the tasks facing the INEC was immense given an extremely challenging environment marked by inadequate infrastructure, poorly educated masses, fierce contestation of power, and grave security challenges. On 7 February, the INEC postponed the 2015 elections scheduled for 14 and 28

3 *BBC News*, Nigerian Opposition APC Condemns Lagos Office Raid, 24 November 2014, online: <www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-30175988> (23 April 2015).

February by six weeks following an advisory from the National Security Adviser stating that security could not be guaranteed for the proposed election days. The general elections were therefore shifted to 28 March for the presidential and National Assembly elections and 11 April for the gubernatorial and state Houses of Assembly elections.

On 28 March, logistical lapses led to the late arrival of officials and materials and delays in the opening of polls. Reports by the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) indicate that only 43 per cent of election officials arrived on time in 90 per cent of the polling stations the TMG monitored (TMG 2015: 2). The late opening of polls imposed severe hardship on the voters who waited in long queues for several hours before the commencement of accreditation, particularly those who travelled far distances to arrive at the polling units before their official opening time.⁴

For the 2015 elections, the INEC introduced a two-step voter-accreditation process involving the use of card-reading machines to verify INEC-issued voter cards and authenticate the voters through their fingerprints. To ensure the optimal performance of the card readers on the day of the election, the INEC conducted a pilot two weeks before the elections. The outcome of the pilot showed that 100 per cent of the cards were verified while only 59 per cent of the voters were authenticated through their fingerprints (Chibuzo 2015). Mirroring the experiences of the pilot, the process of voter authentication posed serious challenges during the presidential and National Assembly elections. The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) reported that card readers malfunctioned in 18 per cent of the polling units monitored, while in 91 per cent of the polling units the cards were not able to consistently verify fingerprints (EU EOM 2015a: 12). The gravity of this problem forced the INEC to change the guidelines midway in the election, allowing officials to manually accredit voters. In so doing, the INEC expedited accreditation, but removed the safeguard of electronically checking for authentic PVCs allocated to particular polling units (*ibid.*).

On 11 April, the day of the gubernatorial and House of Assembly elections, there was marked improvement in election management, especially in terms of timely opening of polls and functionality of the card readers. Observers note that 90 per cent of the polling units monitored opened on time, and that accreditation proceeded smoothly with the

4 In Nigeria, curfews are usually imposed during the election period – normally from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., and voters residing far away must reach the polling units before the official time of poll opening.

card readers functioning with minimal hitches.⁵ But this positive outlook was marred by reports of critical incidents, including refusal to allow eligible observers into polling units, intimidation of poll officials, snatching of ballot boxes, and interference with the result-collation process. The security situation clearly deteriorated during the gubernatorial and House of Assembly elections, with at least 30 people killed in 28 incidents (EU EOM 2015b: 10). This figure surpassed the 19 deaths in 20 violent incidents reported during the presidential and National Assembly elections (EU EOM 2015a: 11).

The results announced by the INEC indicate that the APC won the presidency, increased their proportion of gubernatorial positions, and won a majority of the seats in state and federal legislatures.⁶ However, the national scope of support of the two leading parties – the APC and the PDP – challenged the identity-politics argument of many analysts of Nigerian politics, and suggests that the relevance of ethnicity and religion in understanding the complexity of Nigerian politics might indeed be overstated. The democratisation literature emphasises the importance of multi-ethnic support in plural societies (Lijphart 1977; Horowitz 1985). Although the PDP swept the votes in the South South and South East while the APC enjoyed vast support in the North West and North East, the two parties still maintained a national presence. In the presidential election, the APC won in 21 states and received at least 25 per cent of the votes in 26 states, while the PDP won in 15 states and gained 25 per cent of the votes in 25 states. The overall votes won by the two parties (the APC's 15.4 million to the PDP's 12.8 million) also reflect their relative strength and national range.

The 2015 elections were a major success for the APC and its presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, who triumphed for the first time after standing in four successive presidential elections. Buhari unlocked “the battleground states” of the South West and North Central. The voting pattern in these regions refuted the simplistic story of North/South, Christian/Muslim splits. Historically, the two regions have op-

5 Nigeria Civil Society Election Situation Room, *Final Statement on the Gubernatorial and State Houses of Assembly Elections*, 13 April 2015, online: <www.placng.org/situation_room/sr/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Final-Statement-on-the-State-level-elections.pdf> (15 April 2015).

6 The APC won 20 out of the 29 governorship positions contested, leaving 9 to the PDP. The party also won 64 out of 109 senatorial seats – the PDP got the remaining 45. Of the 360 House of Representatives seats, the APC won 225, the PDP got 125, while three other parties – the Labour Party (LP), All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), and Accord Party (AP) – shared the balance of 10 seats.

posed the Muslim North, with the North Central, in particular, framing its political identity in terms of opposition to the Muslim North. In the 2015 elections, voters in the South West gave Buhari 57.1 per cent of their votes compared to the paltry 6.9 per cent he received from the region in 2011. The North Central voters also increased their support for Buhari from 31.3 per cent of their votes in 2011 to 55.7 per cent in 2015. Even in the South East and South South, where opposition to Buhari and the APC is strongest, the electoral fortune of the opposition candidate changed significantly. Support for Buhari in the two regions increased from 0.6 per cent of the votes in 2011 to 7.9 per cent in 2015.

The success recorded by Buhari and the APC in the 2015 polls can be attributed to three factors. The first is the poor performance of the Jonathan administration and the desire of many Nigerians for a change. The APC confronted an extremely discredited and unpopular PDP government, and successfully used its message of change to sway the voters. Concerns about economic and security failures of the government forced many voters to defy traditional allegiances to stand behind Buhari and the APC. Second, Buhari and the APC benefitted from an internal crisis that significantly weakened the PDP. President Jonathan's candidacy was extremely controversial within his party, leading to the withdrawal of several prominent politicians from the party and the weakening of the party's support base in the North. The APC capitalised on the breakdown of the PDP's organisation to make inroads into the party's traditional strongholds. Finally, improvements in election administration offered all parties a more level playing ground and increased the prospects of genuine elections being carried out. In this way, the PDP's opportunities to frustrate the opposition or co-opt their mandate were greatly reduced.

Post-Election Issues

The outcome of Nigeria's 2015 elections has raised three main issues in the post-election period. First, the severe operational and logistical problems encountered by the INEC before and during the elections indicate a critical need to scale up the commission's professional capacity through sustained reforms. The current leadership of the INEC appears committed to continuing the reforms it started upon its appointment in 2010. However, the tenure of the commission's chairman, Attahiru Jega, and some other members ends in June 2015. Jega has publicly stated that he will not accept a reappointment, raising the question of whether the next leaders of the INEC will be willing and able to sustain and extend the reforms (Anwar 2015). The Nigerian Constitution grants the president the power

to appoint the chairperson and members of the INEC.⁷ In the past, this prerogative has been abused following the appointment of individuals who were clearly unprofessional. Attahiru Jega has been widely adjudged to have led a relatively independent and transparent commission. The end of his tenure raises fears that this outlook of the electoral commission may be reversed.

The second key post-election issue is the role of the PDP as opposition. The 2015 elections have reduced the PDP to a regional organisation with solid backing in the South East and South South, as it trails behind the APC in other parts of the country. Noting the historical tendency of Nigerian politicians to converge under one broad political organisation, there are indications that the PDP may implode, as various factions of the party seek political accommodation in the ruling APC. Just after the 2015 elections, there was a major wave of defections from the PDP to the APC (Olaniyi and Anwar 2015). The survival of the party was further threatened by the leadership crisis that ensued in the aftermath of the 2015 elections (Alechenu et al. 2015). The collapse of the PDP will return Nigeria to one-party dominance and reverse the democratic progress represented by the emergence of the APC as an alternative political platform. As is recognised in the democratisation literature, inter-party contestation is a crucial element of true democracy (Przeworski et al. 2000). But such contestation can only thrive where two or more relatively strong parties exist.

Finally, the outcome of the 2015 elections has revived underlying ethno-regional tensions in Nigeria. In the build-up to the elections, there were campaigns by local PDP activists urging voters in the South East not to support the APC, describing the party as a reincarnation of the Northern–Yoruba alliance that defeated Biafra in the civil war of 1967–1970.⁸ Following the APC's victory, there was a growing perception that the APC government would alienate the South East and South South, the same way the two regions were marginalised in the 1970s and 1980s in the aftermath of the civil war. This view highlights the need for the new government to embark on national reconciliation. Part of this effort will focus on appraising the country's institutional arrangements. Among election losers, there is an underlying lack of confidence in the capacity of the institutions to protect the minorities, and strong fear that they might not be able to regain power in future elections. This fear could be addressed by creating additional institutional guarantees of minority inclusion in the government. Furthermore, sustained improvements in

7 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, Section 154.

8 *Africa Confidential*, Nigeria: No Condition Is Permanent, 56, 8, 17 April 2015.

the electoral process will reassure losers of the possibility of victory in future elections, and in this way, will transform politics into a game – which it is supposed to be.

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Die allgemeinen Wahlen in Nigeria 2015

Zusammenfassung: Angesichts des schwierigen politischen Umfelds und der akuten Sicherheitsprobleme waren die allgemeinen Wahlen in Nigeria 2015 ein unerwarteter Erfolg. Ihr reibungsloser Ablauf war insbesondere durch Angriffe von Boko-Haram-Kämpfern gefährdet, aber auch durch konkurrierende Ansprüche auf die Präsidentschaft von Politikern aus dem Norden und dem Süden, heftige Auseinandersetzungen im Wahlkampf, die durch Hetze im Internet noch angeheizt wurden, und erhebliche Unzulänglichkeiten bei der Vorbereitung der Wahlen. Vor dem Hintergrund dieser Herausforderungen beleuchtet der Autor die wesentlichen politischen Streitfragen und das Abstimmungsverhalten und zieht Schlussfolgerungen aus dem Wahlergebnis.

Schlagwörter: Nigeria, Wahl/Abstimmung, Wahlkampf, Wahlergebnis/ Abstimmungsergebnis, Demokratisierung