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Programme Paper

Key Issues in Nigeria's 2011 Elections

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Introduction

In April, Nigeria will hold presidential, gubernatorial and legislative elections. Elections in recent years have been anything but credible, peaceful and fair, so will these be any different? Despite the heavy investment in fraud-proof voting technology, reports of political killings and the ruthless treatment of civilians during political rallies in some states indicate that elections are still perceived as a 'do or die' affair in Nigeria.

Conducting fair and credible elections is undoubtedly a big challenge. The much-maligned Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has undergone an internal overhaul under its well-respected new leader Professor Attahiru Jega. INEC claims that a great deal of time and money has been invested in technology, for a high-tech registration process, and in staffing to ensure the elections are clean. The reality so far has been mixed. Before and during voter registration, there were reports of theft of equipment, malfunctioning equipment, ill-prepared staff and lengthy queues. Some people claim to have been turned away and told to return because of faulty machinery.

With rhetoric coming thick and fast from the main political parties, the electorate is being wooed by promises of change and a more prosperous Nigeria. Whoever emerges victorious in April will have to confront a number of issues that have crippled Nigeria's growth and development in recent times.

Political instability

2010 was a turbulent year for Nigeria and this looks set to continue. In the run-up to the elections there has not only been a resurgence of violence in the most volatile parts of the country (the oil-producing Niger Delta in the south, Jos in the middle belt and Borno in the far north), but a spate of bomb attacks has threatened security in the capital, Abuja.

The party primaries are over and presidential candidates have been declared. The ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) has fought its most bitterly contested battle so far. Incumbent president Goodluck Jonathan beat his main rival, Atiku Abubakar, by a wide margin but the process was overshadowed by internal grievances which threatened to tear the party apart. Winning the PDP primaries signifies a vote of confidence in Jonathan, but his credibility as a leader is under scrutiny, and a cable recently disclosed

by Wikileaks in which Jonathan himself is alleged to have questioned the merits of his elevation to senior government will do little to pacify his critics.[1]

While other parties had a smoother journey in declaring their candidates the PDP spent much of the latter part of 2010 embroiled in a debate over the origin of its candidate. An agreement within the party dictates that the presidency should rotate between Nigeria's north and south – a system commonly known as 'zoning'. It appears in the party's constitution but without detail of its implementation, which casts doubt on whether it is legally enforceable.[2] On the basis of this, many people, particularly in the north, consider it to be the north's turn to hold the presidency as Nigeria's last president, northerner Umaru Yar'Adua, died before completing his first term in office, and his predecessor in office, Obasanjo, was a southerner. Yet Goodluck Jonathan, who as vice-president took over the presidency upon Yar'Adua's death, is himself also a southerner. A powerful coalition of northern interests combined to try to prevent Jonathan's assumption of the interim presidency, and subsequently his nomination to PDP candidate for these upcoming elections, precisely because they foresaw the north missing out on 'its turn'.

In this they appear to have been correct. Upon being sworn in as Head of State, Jonathan immediately began drawing up ambitious plans to reform Nigeria, politically, socially and economically. His plans have generally been well received, although there has been scepticism surrounding what he could actually achieve given the imminence of the elections.

The PDP has dominated Nigerian politics since 1999, and whoever the party nominates to contest the presidential elections has, so far, ended up leading the country. The PDP's preoccupation with zoning may be damaging to itself but – if capitalised on by opposition parties – could actually benefit politics in Nigeria. In the event of a party split or fragmentation a smaller, less powerful PDP could level the playing field for other political parties, and give the electorate more choice. This is already being seen at state level where opposition parties are chipping away at PDP dominance. The party currently has control of roughly two-thirds of the country's 36 states and is expected to concede more to the opposition in the upcoming state elections. Signs of a weakening PDP are being seen in the recent defections by at least fifty of its members to other parties, in particular to ACN and Labour.

That Jonathan is standing in the 2011 elections does not mean the issue of zoning is dead. It is more likely that he managed to get resistant party members on board by agreeing to only serve a single full term, should he win

the presidential elections. With this in mind, the north will almost certainly expect to field a candidate in 2015, but this may not be a straightforward matter, as some in the south and south east argue that the election should produce a president from their region.

Engaging young people

The political parties will also have to make greater efforts to engage the younger electorate. There is a gulf between Nigeria's leaders and the younger population. While still retaining the country's leaning towards social conservatism, young people are increasingly being influenced by other cultures. It could be argued that this is the nature of the power of information-sharing in the world today, but there is a danger in Nigeria of disengagement from mainstream politics in favour of extreme religious affiliations or material gains. Re-engaging young people with national political issues will take time, but could create an appetite in this generation not just to ask questions but actually to challenge the clique of a relatively few 'Big Men' who still dominate Nigerian political life.

According to the United Nations Population Division, the median age in Nigeria is almost 19. Nigeria's youth could therefore play a very important role in politics. This is being recognized by some presidential aspirants who have now made youth engagement a feature of their campaigns. Much has been written in Nigeria about the 'Facebook generation' and although this currently applies to only a small percentage of the population,^[3] the use of social media as a political tool is gaining momentum. Goodluck Jonathan's campaign has been noted for its use of Facebook to deliver his message to Nigeria's younger electorate and expatriate communities.

At a grassroots level, determined efforts are being made by critics of the current system to try to engage young people in politics. The outspoken Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka launched the Democratic Front for a People's Federation which he says will be at the 'forefront of the watchdogs of democracy' and a movement 'for frustrated youth and uncomfortable ideas'. The former anti-corruption chief and ACN presidential candidate Nuhu Ribadu has also campaigned heavily on youth engagement issues. The participation of younger people in politics should help to breathe life into a stagnant social and political system.

Presidential candidates

Goodluck Ebele Jonathan (PDP)

As the current president Goodluck Jonathan has the advantage of incumbency, which is taken very seriously in Nigeria. He has ambitious plans to reform Nigeria and is seen as a stabilizing presence outside Nigeria after the death of Umaru Yar'Adua.

Gen. Muhammadu Buhari (CPC)

A former military head of state, General Buhari has contested presidential elections in 2003 and 2007. He is seen as a stern anti-corruption advocate, though some see him as out of touch with modern Nigeria. Until recently, he was a member of the All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP) but internal disagreements resulted in his leaving the party to form the Congress for Progressive Change

Ibrahim Shekarau (All Nigeria Peoples Party)

The governor of Kano state, Ibrahim Shekarau is the candidate for the ANPP, which was led by Muhammadu Buhari and has much of its support in the north. Earlier in the campaign season there were rumours of a possible alliance with the Action Congress for Nigeria (ACN) which could have increased the ANPP's popularity. This has not happened.

Nuhu Ribadu (Action Congress of Nigeria)

A former head of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Nuhu Ribadu is one of the least politically experienced presidential candidates, but has an enthusiastic and youthful following. During his tenure at the EFCC, he made headlines for his ruthless pursuit of corrupt officials.

Professor Pat Utomi (Social Democratic Mega Party)

A former lecturer at the Lagos Business School, Pat Utomi stood in the 2007 elections as the African Democratic Congress (ADC) candidate. He is respected for being principled, but lacks the resources and perhaps the charisma of other candidates. He is now standing for the Social Democratic Mega Party.

Presidential Candidates (contd)

Dele Momodu (National Conscience Party)

Dele Momodu is perhaps best known as the publisher of Nigeria's glossy society publication *Ovation*. A former member of the Labour Party, he is now the candidate for the National Conscience Party.

Rev. Chris Okotie (Fresh Democratic Party)

Reverend Chris Okotie stood in the 2003 and 2007 presidential elections. He is the pastor at the Household of God Church Lagos. While he is not viewed as a serious threat to any of the main presidential aspirants, he has a very visible media presence and is a regular critic of the PDP.

Internal security and outside interference

There are three main ongoing problems relating to security, all (currently) relatively localized: Niger delta militant groups in the south, Islamist groups in the northeast, and the social and religious flare-ups in Jos and Nigeria's middle belt. In the past, the violence has tended to be contained within local communities, which gives the impression that it is relatively easy to deal with by enforcing martial law, conducting large-scale police operations and through cooperation between the police and intelligence services. However, the 50th Anniversary Independence Day bombs in Abuja, on 1 October 2010, which for the first time targeted a national celebration attended by high-level international dignitaries, indicate that the containment of violence may be becoming a thing of the past.

These bomb attacks were claimed by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), a militant group based in the oil-producing south. MEND and other groups in the region are notorious for their acts of violence. These are mostly targeted at oil companies which they blame for polluting their environment and destroying their livelihoods while depriving local people of a fair share of oil revenues. Militant activity in the Niger Delta usually consists of attacks on oil pipelines and the kidnapping for ransom of employees of oil companies (foreign and local) and the families of local government officials. MEND has threatened in the past to take its attacks outside the Niger Delta, to Abuja and Lagos. The Independence Day bombs were a powerful reminder that once localized disputes can and will spread beyond their previous confines.

Security has been prioritized since the October bombings, but violent attacks have continued in the run-up to the elections. Worryingly, the use of bombs, previously unusual in Nigeria, has continued, and expanded to other disputes. In December 2010 at least 80 people were killed in a series of church bombings in Jos. Four people were killed in a similar attack in Abuja a week later. MEND had claimed responsibility for the October bombs, but Boko Haram, a northern-based militant Islamist group with an increasingly violent track record, has claimed responsibility for the Jos attacks. The human rights organization Amnesty International, in a recent report (*Loss of Life, Insecurity and Impunity in the Run up to Nigeria's Elections*) has warned of an escalation in pre-election violence.

Concerns about internal security are common during electoral periods, but the possible action of outsiders is also causing concern within the government. In November 2010 a shipment of arms was intercepted in Lagos. The intended destination of the shipment was unclear, although it is claimed it was to be re-exported to The Gambia. However the trafficked rockets and explosives, which came from Iran, were the responsibility of a Nigerian and two Iranians who have been charged with the importation of prohibited firearms. The incident caused a diplomatic storm which resulted in Nigeria reporting Iran to the UN Security Council for a possible arms violation. Although Nigeria has not severed diplomatic ties with Iran, the relationship (on the Nigerian side at least) is tense.

Whatever the intended destination of that shipment, the Nigerian government is understandably wary of arms shipments entering the country and ending up in the possession of militant groups. It is equally suspicious of direct interference by outsiders. In March 2010 the Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi, suggested that Nigeria be split in two to end the violence between Muslims and Christians. His comments provoked a strong reaction from the Nigerian government, with Abuja recalling the Ambassador in Tripoli and accusing Libya of trying to destabilize the country. The issue of partitioning the country into a Muslim north and Christian south is a deeply sensitive subject in Nigeria.

Another example of the government's actions against the perceived threat of outsiders was the expulsion of 700 migrants in northern Nigeria to Niger, Cameroon and Chad in November 2010.^[4] The government was so concerned that the Islamist sect Boko Haram was importing members from outside Nigeria that a crackdown was launched and the migrants were deported. The Nigerian government often blames the actions of outsiders for fuelling internal tensions, although a substantial link has yet to be established

between foreigners and militant activity in the country. Any perceived outside interference flies in the face of what Nigerian politicians pride themselves on: that only Nigerians are capable of finding a solution to their own problems.

Longer term challenges

As one of the world's biggest producers and exporters of petroleum, Nigeria's economy is heavily reliant on oil. Yet in recent years growth has not just been confined to the oil sector, upon which Nigeria relies for 80% of government revenue; the non-oil industries such as banking are also making substantial gains.

Despite this, Nigeria has a serious problem with development. UNDP data from 2010 revealed a poor ranking in terms of prosperity – 142nd out of 169 countries in the world. Life expectancy, at under 50 years, is below that of many lower-income sub-Saharan African countries. The problem of corruption in Nigeria is well documented and does not seem to be showing any significant signs of improvement. Apart from a few years in the middle of the last decade, Nigeria has languished near the bottom of Transparency International's annual corruption perceptions index. Years of neglect and lack of investment have had a devastating effect on state education. Infrastructure is poor in many parts of the country and remains an acute obstacle to growth. The World Bank predicts that Nigeria is at risk of not meeting many of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

Electricity generation of around 4,000 megawatts is so sporadic and unpredictable (and in parts of the country practically non-existent) that many people rely on noisy and expensive diesel-powered generators. The government has put ambitious reform plans on the table to improve supply. Prior to the election period, Goodluck Jonathan indicated he would tackle this problem by privatizing the power sector, a move that has garnered interest from many overseas bidders. He has also appointed a presidential adviser on power. Professor Barth Nnaji is tasked with helping to realize the president's plans to increase output to more than 14,000 megawatts by 2013. But it remains to be seen if the president will manage to achieve what previous governments have pledged and failed to do.

A cause of concern among investors and economists is the state of the country's excess crude accounts which have fallen in three years from \$20 billion to less than \$500 million. This removes an important protective cushion should government finances deteriorate further. Whatever the outcome of the election, there is a real danger that a further developmental slowdown

combined with a general spike in the cost of living for ordinary people will lead to intense criticism of the role of the government. This could in turn lead to more frequent outbreaks of unrest within the population, strikes and demonstrations with potentially destabilizing, and even violent, consequences.

Post election crisis?

The current government has repeatedly stressed how keen it is to avoid a repeat of the 2007 elections which were widely acknowledged to be the polls that caused the most damage to Nigeria's international reputation. However, a swing away from the PDP in the presidential election, towards opposition parties could result in a second round of voting. A failure to win outright in the first round of voting should result in a run off which would be a true test of the democratic process in Nigeria.

Nigeria is a country that is often described by commentators as a nation on the brink that somehow manages to avoid falling apart. In the event of a scenario where a result is so heavily disputed it leads to unrest amongst the masses, the response of other African states and the international community take will be important. The West African regional bloc, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), has its headquarters in Abuja and Nigeria provides the bulk of its military might. Nigeria is also a major monetary and military contributor to the African Union and its missions.

Should Nigeria descend into a post election crisis, the potential for its various militant groups to wreak havoc on the population could make the outcome deadly. If war were to erupt in Africa's biggest oil producer and exporter, the effects would be felt way beyond its borders. Global oil prices would most certainly see a rise if Nigeria's production were cut, as witnessed by events in North Africa. A refugee crisis of with the potential to outnumber other crises on the continent could occur. In that context it isn't just Nigeria that will benefit from fair and peaceful elections.

Conclusion

These elections, if allowed to be transparent and fair, should herald a change in Nigeria's post-military political journey. Perhaps for the first time, the electorate is willing to actively engage in the shaping of its country's future,

and politicians are willing to listen to the concerns of the people. As a result, and after two consecutive flawed elections, the country's leaders will seriously fail the people if the current opportunity is missed.

Nigeria is often spoken of as having unfulfilled potential. Analysts talk about it eclipsing South Africa to become the continent's largest economy,^[5] but such plaudits mean little if a country continues to suffer the effects of poor wealth distribution. Growth needs to be combined with developmental improvement if Nigeria is to be a continental leader. Meaningful efforts to address wealth inequality could be the key to tackling violence; this is blamed on religious differences when poverty is often a bigger factor. Improving the overall quality of life for all Nigerians should mean fewer people feeling disadvantaged or marginalized, and the concept of national unity might be embraced.

However, there is a risk that any sense of national pride and unity will continue to dissipate and people may react to situations according to their religious or regional grouping rather than acting in the national interest. Ordinary, disaffected people are vulnerable to being manipulated into serving the interests of the richer and more powerful, whether in the name of religion or ethnicity. Elements of this manipulation are already evident in conflicts across Nigeria, including over oil, religion and citizenship.

If the hopes of the people for fairness and prosperity continue to be held to ransom by the interests of a very powerful minority, Nigeria is at increasing risk of a downward spiral of disenchantment, with potentially disastrous consequences. The uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East show that disillusioned people will only take so much. This has been acknowledged by the Governor of Nigeria's Central Bank, Lamido Sanusi, who warned that events like those in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya could be experienced in Nigeria if developmental issues were not addressed.

Elections in Nigeria always create an air of tension and uncertainty, and the risks are many, but if the government, together with INEC, can achieve a credible electoral process, the rewards for the country could be considerable. Nigeria's most valuable asset remains not its oil but its resourceful, numerous and diverse people. Peaceful and transparent elections could be the first step to the responsible and transparent government that these Nigerians have long deserved.

[1] 'I was not chosen to be vice-president because I had good political experience. I did not. There were a lot more qualified people around to be vice-president, but that does not mean I am not my own man.'

2 Article 7.2(c) of the PDP constitution states that 'in pursuance of the principle of equity, justice and fairness, the party shall adhere to the policy of rotation and zoning of the party and public elective offices and it shall be enforced by the appropriate executive committee at all levels.'

[3] Facebook has an estimated 1.6 million users in Nigeria; the total population is 150 million.

[4] Reuters, 'Nigeria deports 700 immigrants in sect crackdown', 04.11.2010.

[5] Bloomberg News, 'Nigeria could be Africa's largest economy by 2023, Standard Chartered says', 08.06.2010.