



Africa Programme Briefing Note

Nigeria After the Elections: 100 Days of President Yar'Adua

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Key Points:

- The Nigerian elections took place in April 2007. In no way were they free and fair.
- Umaru Yar'Adua sees his 100th day as president this month. His main challenges on coming to power were preventing an uprising by opposition supporters and showing independence from the former President Obasanjo.
- President Yar'Adua made efforts at reconciliation by forming a government of national unity. He also promised to continue to tackle corruption.
- In his first hundred days, the President has declared his assets, released Dokubo Asari from prison, and sought to instigate energy sector reform and social and economic reform. The president's time to show he can improve people's standards of living is limited.

Introduction

In April 2007, Nigeria hosted landmark elections – the successful transition from one civilian government to another. That the elections actually took place was considered a small miracle by many as the whole process was mired by controversy months before any voting took place. The allegations of vote rigging, eyewitness accounts of violence and the all round incompetence of the electoral board, INEC combined to create a recipe for disaster.

Despite all the negativity, a winner eventually emerged in the shape of Umaru Yar'Adua. Before the elections, little was known or written about him. His selection as PDP candidate by the outgoing president, Olusegun Obasanjo,

thrust him into the limelight. Overnight, he went from reclusive state Governor to the president of one of the worlds most populous nations.

This month has seen his 100th day in office. Early days in any job, but for a man who has so much to prove every decision he makes will be subject to the most intense scrutiny.

The Elections

In April 2007 the world's media descended upon Nigeria in a scramble to cover what was undoubtedly one of Africa's biggest news stories of the year. Seasoned journalists expecting to fill their columns with the usual tales of ballot box stuffing, voter intimidation and polling station closures were not disappointed. For months commentators had been observing the erratic behaviour of the outgoing president with dismay. At its peak it seemed as if a bitter and ugly row between Obasanjo and his deputy, Atiku Abubakar, would prevent the elections from taking place as scheduled. As both men grew more vocal in their criticism of each other, Obasanjo intensified his efforts to prevent Atiku from running for president and the formation of an interim government looked like a very real prospect.

Despite all the obstacles the elections took place. In no way were they free and fair, as many Nigerians had hoped, but they took place - albeit in a climate of intense hostility by all parties concerned. The state elections preceded the presidentials and set the pace for what was to follow. There were widespread reports of violence and boycotts in parts of the country - most of which was blamed on the ruling People's Democratic Party's (PDP) refusal to allow the elections to proceed in an orderly and civil fashion.

The PDP, however, wasn't the only party accused of foul play. In Lagos state, one of the main opposition parties apparently erected their own polling booths in areas.

I arrived in Lagos a few days before the presidential elections and the airwaves were full of analysis and commentaries about the previous poll. Aggrieved politicians were venting their anger at what they thought was blatant robbery on the part of the ruling PDP.

The mood in Lagos in the days before the presidential vote was apathetic. People were divided into two clear camps – those who thought voting would be a waste of time because the result had been pre-determined and those who thought voting was a waste of time because they considered the gubernatorials to be the more important elections. The problem in Lagos wasn't a lack of polling stations or that they weren't open, it was that not many people bothered to visit them. Even though a public holiday had been declared, I did not meet a single person who had the will to walk a few minutes down the road to cast their vote at one of the many roadside polling booths. Many of the people I met at the larger polling stations were very vocal in their support for the Action Congress. A few people expressed their desire to "teach Obasanjo a lesson". Their mood was almost festive as they filled in their slips of paper and dropped them into large clear Perspex boxes under the presence of armed guards. The air of intimidation and the blatant lack of privacy wasn't an issue here.

Accounts of how bad the events of polling day were vary greatly from state to state. In the South, the former Senate President, Ken Nnamani (at the time, the third most senior politician in Nigeria) was scathing about what happened in his state where he claims no voting took place due to the incompetence of INEC officials. This story was echoed across other parts of the country where INEC was again blamed for not distributing voting papers, opening polling stations late – or worse, not opening them at all. Another senior politician, the Vice presidential candidate for the Action Congress, Ben Obi was also on television raging about his inability to participate because no voting took place in his ward. In Bayelsa state the office of Governor Goodluck Jonathan (Umaru Yar'Adua's running mate) was burnt down in what was believed to be an assassination attempt.

In Kaduna state, there were reports of INEC officials physically preventing people from casting votes. One BBC commentator documented his experience of an officer grabbing his thumb, pressing it into ink and forcing him to vote PDP. Perhaps one of the most disturbing reports from the North was that of underage voters. Young children – some as young as 10 - were turning up at polling stations and voting because they were instructed to by unscrupulous adults. Again, this was blamed on INEC.

Stunned journalists expressed their dismay at the blatant and open fraud displayed on voting day. Many reports and opinion pieces appeared in the international media documenting the ways in which the Nigerian people had been denied a fair poll.

International observers slammed the elections saying there was no way the outcome could be viewed as credible and furious opposition parties vowed to challenge the result in court.

Amidst all the outrage and lawsuits, many ordinary Nigerians believed that the best candidate won and that a similar result would have been achieved without having to resort to such fraudulent tactics. Umaru Yar'Adua was considered a more favourable candidate by many precisely because he lacked the baggage that his two main opponents – Atiku Abubakar and former military ruler Muhammadu Buhari - were saddled with. His seemingly unblemished record as Governor of Katsina state gave him a serious advantage over Atiku who was fighting allegations of corruption and misconduct throughout his campaign. Yar'Adua also escaped being dubbed a Muslim fundamentalist – a label which cost Muhammadu Buhari many votes among Nigeria's moderate Muslim and non Muslim population.

The other challengers were considered too weak or unknown to take a chance on by the masses. Of course Emeka Ojukwu retained his cult status in some of the South's more volatile states, but his separatist rhetoric has never translated well outside his Igbo stronghold.

For others like the visionary Pat Utomi, it was an attempt at making a jaded and skeptical public aware that there was an alternative to the rich and powerful military heavyweights who have made a career out of refusing to step out of the political spotlight.

Emerging from the Shadow of Obasanjo

There were several challenges facing Umaru Yar'Adua in the immediate aftermath of his victory. His main priority would be to prevent an uprising by supporters of his political rivals. He also had to somehow show his critics that he wasn't being manipulated remotely by Obasanjo.

One of the first promises he made was to consider the formation of an inclusive multi party government. This was a clever and calculating proposal which not only helped to pacify some opposition politicians but would also expose some as seriously lacking in principles. After all, how could any credible politician with such strong opposition to

Yar’Adua’s presidency then accept a post in the same government? Atiku Abubakar’s running mate, Ben Obi was very vocal in denouncing any such offer of a post in the new government. He described the rumours as “ludicrous, totally untrue” and “insulting” to his person. Not all opposition politicians were so open in their condemnation.

On the issue of corruption – Nigeria’s political Achilles heel – President Yar’Adua has vowed to continue the reform programme set by his predecessor. While he was applauded for this, questions are being asked about how far he is prepared to go. Now that the members of the previous administration who are no longer serving have lost their immunity the pressure is on for them to be brought to account. At the same time, there are calls for Obasanjo and his inner circle to be investigated. If he stops short of going to the top of the previous government he will be open to accusations of being selective in the fight against corruption.

There are many arguments for tackling allegations of corruption and mismanagement amongst Nigeria’s political and military elite. The most powerful argument is that for the country to move forward and grow, all the negative elements need to be removed. It is pointless going after mid level crooks if the majority of theft is happening at the highest levels. However, the prospect of serious change occurring is weakened when one realizes the extent to which a few rotten apples control and manipulate an entire orchard. This is discussed openly at all levels of Nigerian society. It is a fantasy of many Nigerians to see the greedy, powerful elite and their cronies brought down in disgrace. It is also a fantasy that many people accept simply won’t happen, so in the meantime any attempt to expose a thieving state Governor or senior civil servant is widely applauded. The logic behind this is that any attempt at rooting out corruption is sending out the message that efforts are at least being made to do something about it. What President Yar’Adua needs to be mindful of is how long the public will continue to accept half hearted attempts to bring bent politicians to account, while the country’s infrastructure and social services continue to decline.

The President will also have to consider the full implications of reducing the powers of the anti corruption agency, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). The agency, which had been accused of only targeting Obasanjo’s foes has had its prosecuting powers curbed by the new president. Now, any prosecutions will be

decided by the office of the Attorney General. This will almost certainly lead to delays, more bureaucracy and, ultimately, fewer prosecutions.

In the meantime, with a handful of former state Governors under investigation and accusations of financial mismanagement being made against the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Patricia Etteh, the president has plenty to occupy himself with.

Achievements

This month has seen Umaru Yar'Adua's hundredth day as Nigeria's president. In most other countries this would go unmarked. After all this is a mere fraction of a four year term, but for many who remember the intense speculation over his health, the fact that he is still in Nigeria (and not undergoing treatment in a foreign hospital) is something of a small miracle.

The controversy surrounding his election has left him open to an even greater degree of scrutiny than normal. In a pre-emptive strike against his critics and political gossips the president has forged ahead with some eyebrow raising changes.

- Declaration of assets:**

One of the first things he did was to publicly declare his assets, stating that he is worth around \$5 million. It is no secret that he hails from a wealthy family of northern aristocrats, and by going public with the details of his personal fortune, he has opened up the floor for others in his cabinet to follow suit. His Vice President, Goodluck Jonathan, was reluctant to declare his wealth. This isn't surprising when you consider the scandal that surrounded him in his previous posts as Deputy - and eventually - Governor of Bayelsa state. His former boss, Diepreye Alamieyeseigha was famously wanted by Scotland Yard after being caught with nearly £1 million in cash in one of his London properties. Jonathan eventually made public his assets of more than \$2 million but, as predicted, questions were asked as to how one could amass so much money as a state Governor.

- **Releasing Asari:**

On June 14th, the imprisoned oil militant, Mujahid Dokubo Asari was released on bail on the grounds of ill health. A few weeks before this, there was speculation that the President would order his release in an attempt to bring an end to the lawlessness in the Niger Delta region. The Niger Delta is arguably the most volatile part of the country. It is where most foreigners are kidnapped and is prone to sporadic acts of violence. Dokubo Asari was held in detention in September 2005 on a treason charge. During his detention, militant groups in the Delta stepped up their campaign of disruption and unrest and made his release a condition of any negotiations with the government. Since his release there has been a short lived truce, the militants have resumed their activity and Asari has vowed to continue the struggle in the Delta.

- **Reform of the Energy Sector:**

Like his predecessor, President Yar'Adua has vowed to reform the chaotic power sector. Nigeria is one of the worlds largest exporters of petroleum but fuel shortages are a huge problem domestically. Power cuts are a daily occurrence and many businesses (and homes) are forced to rely on diesel guzzling generators. He has his work cut out. Less than one quarter of Nigeria's power stations function properly and there are few working oil refineries. The country operates on less than half the electricity it needs to function properly. In complete contrast, South Africa – which has around one third of Nigeria's population – has an energy supply that is ten times more.

In an attempt to overhaul the energy sector, the president has adopted the role of Energy Minister – sending the message that he means business. One of the first moves he made in this area was to reverse the sale of two oil refineries - a decision made towards the end of Obasanjo's tenure. The controversial deal involved a conglomerate of powerful businessmen who were close to the former president. An attempt by the government to repair or rebuild these refineries will

give the impression that the government is working to put a curb on the fuel shortages which often cripple the country.

- **Economic and Social Reform:**

The president is keen to continue Obasanjo's programme of economic and social reform. His appointment of Shamsuddeen Usman - a former Deputy Governor of the Central Bank- as Finance Minister is a sign of his commitment to at least appear to be pursuing an economic overhaul. Mr Usman has been vocal in his support for the efforts of the previous administration. Much of the groundwork has been done by his predecessors – in particular, the famous foreign debt cancellation negotiated by Ngozi Okonjo Iweala – but some would argue that the really hard work is in tackling problems at home.

Throughout his presidency, Obasanjo vowed to strengthen the non-energy sectors in order to make the economy less oil reliant but there has been little sign of major change. By default, Umaru Yar'Adua has inherited many of his predecessor's failings but this is one area that he can make a real difference. If he commits to more action in the areas of health, education and the economy he will be free to dedicate more time to the political eggshells that threaten the unity of the country.

The public's reaction to the new president so far has been fairly positive. Despite the horrible events of April, there has been little public appetite for legal challenges and even less for an electoral re-run. It is ironic that many people think Umaru Yar'Adua should be treated with fairness considering the manner in which he was elected. The fact that he is succeeding a civilian means he won't have to live up to the same expectations that people had when Obasanjo was sworn in back in 1999 after the end of military rule. The lowered expectations are, however, a part of something bigger in Nigeria. Years of neglect from the state have led to decaying public services and institutions. This has led to a more pro active attitude among the masses. People are tired of waiting for a sluggish government to grade roads, supply clean water and educate their children.

Nigerians have been equally revered and admired for their can-do attitude in education and commerce. This approach has entered the social fabric of the country. When

people feel the state cannot be relied upon to provide basic facilities, they take matters into their own hands. In this case, by acting independently of the state to ensure they have an adequate supply of water and electricity. Obviously, there has to be a certain level of affluence with which to achieve this, but some of this thinking can penetrate all sections of society. The downside to this *uber-capitalist* way of functioning is that, left unchecked, it can breed feelings of extreme negativity towards the state. If the state is considered redundant the risk of an uprising is multiplied.

President Yar'Adua has two choices here. He can try and fulfill his promise to reform the country's rusty public services and improve the quality of life for all Nigerians. Alternatively, he can allow the current two tier system to continue - creating a chasm in the social fabric of the country. The rich will stay rich and the middle classes will extend themselves in order to maintain a fairly comfortable way of life. The poor will grow poorer, more resentful, feel increasingly marginalized and the natural goodwill of the Nigerian people will start to run out.

If the president opts for the latter he should expect a very turbulent time in office.

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