



The Nigerian 2007 Election: A Guide for Journalists and Commentators

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Key Points:

- Nigerians will vote in April for a president to replace Olusegun Obasanjo. The election is shaping up to be highly controversial.
- Corruption remains a major concern, with allegations reaching as high as the Vice-Presidency.
- Whoever wins will face the mounting challenges of the oil-rich but poor and increasingly violent Niger Delta region.

Introduction

Nigeria's President, Olusegun Obasanjo, is bucking the trend set by some of his peers across the continent – he is stepping aside after two terms. As the leader of one of Africa's largest economies, a leading producer and exporter of oil, he must have been greatly tempted to serve another term or two. In fact, he sought to alter the constitution to allow the reigning president to stay beyond two terms but the bid was thrown out by Senate.

So who is likely to win favour with Nigeria's 140 million-strong population? Before their bitter and public falling out last year, Obasanjo's Vice-President Atiku Abubakar was viewed as his natural successor. Now, with the pair barely on speaking terms and accusing each other of corruption, Abubakar has been forced to campaign under the ticket of another party.

Other candidates include the former military heavyweights Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida – the mention of whose name strikes fear into the hearts of many Nigerians – and Muhamadu Buhari.

By complete contrast, Obasanjo's chosen successor is the reclusive and softly spoken Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, the Governor of Katsina state. Yar'Adua has pledged to continue Obasanjo's reform policies, but his unassuming profile has led the President's critics to accuse him of appointing a stooge.

Nigeria needs a strong and credible leader, someone who can clamp down on corruption and open up the country's markets to foreign investors. The new president will also have to work hard to unify a country still suffering in the aftermath of decades of military rule. Public services and infrastructure (non-existent in places) need to be restored and improved. Social issues such as religious violence, crippling poverty and abysmal healthcare have to be tackled. But the biggest challenge the country faces is the conflict in the Niger Delta.

Against this background, the April 2007 elections are likely to be an exciting, if bitter, contest.

Political history

Nigeria was a British colony until independence in 1960. Politics in Nigeria post-independence is dominated by religious and ethnic issues. The most extreme example of this was in 1967 when a region in the southeast declared independence. This declaration resulted in Nigeria's civil war, also known as the Biafran War, which killed more than one million people. Horrific images of starving children were broadcast around the world when the government of Nigeria destroyed farmland and prevented food and medicine from reaching Biafrans. The country was reunified after the surrender of Biafran forces in 1970.

Since independence, Nigeria has been governed almost exclusively by the military – with the exception of the 'second republic' period of 1979–83 when General Olusegun Obasanjo oversaw the handover of power to a civilian, Shehu Shagari.

Shagari's term as president was marred by rampant corruption and allegations of electoral fraud. It was also during this time that Nigeria's oil-dependent economy

suffered the effects of a downturn in oil prices. In December 1983, Shagari was overthrown in a *coup d'état* by General Muhamadu Buhari.

From 1983 to 1999, Nigeria saw a succession of coups and counter-coups by military strongmen – the most notorious being General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (1985–93) and General Sani Abacha (1993–98).

In 1993, Nigeria almost returned to civilian rule when Chief Moshood Abiola won elections that were widely regarded to be fair. However, General Babangida declared the result null and void. Another coup followed and Sani Abacha appointed himself president.

The Abacha years were, according to some, one of the darkest periods in Nigeria's history. A brutal dictator, Abacha was feared for his uncompromising stance on dissidents and critics of his regime. During his rule opponents (including Olusegun Obasanjo) were imprisoned. It was also during his rule that the writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa was convicted of treason for protesting against environmental damage caused by oil companies in his Ogoni homeland. Saro-Wiwa's execution led to Nigeria's expulsion from the Commonwealth and to European Union sanctions.

Sani Abacha died in 1998 and General Abdulsalami Abubakar oversaw the successful handover to civilian rule when Olusegun Obasanjo won presidential elections in the following year.

Nigeria under Obasanjo

From the start of his presidency, Obasanjo had his work cut out. As a leader, he has been praised by the international community for his efforts to tackle corruption, but domestically he has been criticized for using this as a weapon to attack his adversaries. This has not deterred him from continuing his programme of economic and social reforms. Although he has successfully crafted an image of a leading African figure on the international political stage, at home his popularity is questionable. Many Nigerians are fed up with him and now call him a dictator.

Since Obasanjo's election in 1999 Nigerian society has become notably divided by issues of religion and ethnicity. Much of the violence is centred on disputes between Muslims and Christians in northern towns. The introduction of Sharia law in Nigeria's

northern states has only served to fuel tensions. Although Sharia is meant to apply only to Muslims, those practising other religions have been affected by the law, which advocates harsh punishments such as the death penalty for adultery. The man who pioneered the implementation of Sharia into state politics is Ahmed Sani Yerima, the Governor of Zamfara state.

Although nobody has been executed since Sharia was adopted, some high-profile cases of defendants having their convictions overturned have captured the world's interest.

Despite occasional outbreaks of violence, Nigeria's Christians and Muslims have historically coexisted peacefully. Intermarriage between the two faiths is common. Having Sharia in half of the country has effectively politicized the differences between Islam and other religions.

It is no coincidence that Sharia was introduced while Nigeria was undergoing a political transition. Previous dictatorial military regimes would have used force to quash any alternative to their rule. The majority of Muslims see Sharia as God's law – and who would argue with that? Sharia, the law of the Koran, is seen as the only alternative to the corrupt laws and action of government. It also appeals to a people who feel marginalized and neglected by the federal government.

Major reported incidents of religious violence during Obasanjo's presidency

1999

- More than 100 people are killed in clashes in Lagos between Yorubas and migrant Hausas from the north.

2000

- Thousands are killed across the north as non-Muslims protest against the implementation of Sharia.

2001

- More than 915 people are killed in riots between Christians and Muslims in Jos, Plateau state.

- More than 200 people die in Kano when Muslims and Christians fight each other after protests against the US bombing of Afghanistan.

2002

- In Lagos, 100 people die and 430 are wounded as a result of fighting between Muslims and Christians.
- Shortly before Abuja is due to host the Miss World contest, more than 215 people die in rioting in the northern city of Kaduna after a newspaper suggested the Prophet Muhammad would have married one of the contestants. The contest is moved to India.

2003

- More than 600 people are killed in Plateau state after fighting between Muslims and Christian militia. The government declares a state of emergency in the state.
- Following the crisis in Plateau, Christians and Muslims take to the streets and fight each other in Kano.

2006

- The global outcry over a Danish newspaper's publication of a derogatory cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad spread to Nigeria. More than 100 people die in riots and protests across the north.

Oil and violence in the Niger Delta

Nigeria produces the type of oil that does not require much refining. This makes it appealing to many oil-reliant Western economies – in particular the United States. Nigeria is America's fifth largest oil supplier.

Violence in the Niger Delta, which results in a drop in production, affects the overall price of oil. Nigeria is the 12th largest producer of petroleum in the world and the 8th largest exporter. Recently, production has dropped owing to ongoing violence in the main oil producing Niger Delta area. The Delta area is comprised of nine states – Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers. This region is home to arguably the poorest and most oppressed people in Nigeria. Many

areas in the region lack clean water and electricity and there are signs of environmental pollution.

The people of the Delta accuse multinationals of destroying their land and livelihoods in the search for oil and would like to see a fairer distribution of the country's oil wealth. At the more extreme end there are armed groups fighting for an independent state. The struggle for Biafra – the cause of Nigeria's last civil war – isn't dead.

The Niger Delta region is full of militant groups. The various militant groups regularly kidnap and take hostage (mostly foreign) oil workers. They then issue a list of requests, normally involving large sums of cash and other luxuries, while throwing in a demand for the immediate release of Diepreye Alamieyeseigha and the most famous oil militant of all, Mujahid Dokubo Asari.

Diepreye Alamieyeseigha is the former governor of Bayelsa state who was wanted in the UK on suspicion of money-laundering. He famously fled Britain for Nigeria last year, allegedly dressed as a woman. On his return to Nigeria, he was impeached and is currently in prison.

Mujahid Dokubo Asari is a devout Muslim and reported friend of Osama Bin Laden. He is the leader of the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) (<http://www.akumafiete.org/>) – Nigeria's largest armed militia group. He was arrested and imprisoned in September 2005, accused of treason. He faces the death penalty if found guilty.

The aim of the NDPVF is to gain more control of the region's oil resources (and profits). The group has a strong *Ijaw* (ethnic group) bias and has often fought with the other ethnic groups in the region over who should be considered the true indigenous people of the Delta. The group was, for a long time, at war with a rival group, the Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV). Asari has been called an oil thief because he and members of his group have seized large quantities of oil and sold them on for profit. The group specialized in sabotaging oil pipelines, driving up the price of oil. It is also said that the NDPVF is supported by unscrupulous politicians – including state governors. Asari has, in the past, been dismissed by the government as a publicity-hungry fantasist. Some people thought he grossly overestimated the number of his supporters.

For a while, the government was keen to appear to be reaching out to the Delta people. President Obasanjo talked about hosting meetings and having dialogue with the NDV and the NDPVF. He appointed an envoy, Father Matthew Kukah (a member of the OPUTA Panel set up to investigate human rights abuses committed during Nigeria's years of military rule) to engage in reconciliatory talks with the Ogoni people. There was talk of the government turning a blind eye to much of his criminal activity so long as Asari kept the Delta youth in check and continued to be accessible.

In 2005 relations between the government and the Delta militants took a turn for the worse. Talks between the NDPVF, President Obasanjo and the NDV failed and Asari accused President Obasanjo of supporting the NDV. He refused to disarm his group and stepped up the NDPVF campaign for independence for the Niger Delta. Soon after, he was charged with treason and imprisoned. In prison, he has claimed to have been starved and tortured. The government denies this and say he is being kept in comfortable surroundings.

The actions of the Niger Delta militants since Asari's imprisonment are something of a political nightmare for President Obasanjo. Several offshoots of the NDPVF have formed, all claiming to serve the interests of the people of the Niger Delta, but their activity is more violent and their demands greater.

The group most closely linked to the NDPVF is the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). MEND is the most well known of the new groups. Its members are heavily armed with second-hand guns, mostly from Eastern Europe, and carry out kidnappings and bombings in the Niger Delta. Few people know who their leader is – he keeps a low profile and, unlike the NDPVF, MEND has no flashy website or PR. It communicates with the media via email and issues inflammatory statements at its leisure.

'Leave our land while you can or die in it. ... Our aim is to totally destroy the capacity of the Nigerian government to export oil.' – MEND statement, January 2006

While the government and multinationals do not admit to giving the militants money, they are shy of discussing their methods of negotiation, leading to speculation that the militants are paid off. The problem with this approach is that it has turned

hostage-taking into a lucrative source of income for unscrupulous chancers who exploit the plight of the people of the Niger Delta.

The constant stream of kidnappings and hostage-takings has been very bad for Nigeria's oil industry. Oil production has dropped by 25% because of the violence and President Obasanjo has had enough. At a time when he wants to leave a legacy of reform and integration, any major uprising or violence will not look good. The President is also reacting to fears that his political opponents could engage the services of the militants to destabilize the elections (and embarrass him in the process).

In October 2006 more than 160 suspected militants were arrested by the army in a bid to 'sanitize the state'. The armed forces also burnt down small settlements that they said were sheltering militants.

On 9 January 2007 the Finance Minister, Nenadi Usman, told reporters that oil production had dropped by as much as 600,000 barrels per day in the previous year, resulting in a \$4.4 billion loss in oil revenue.

Kidnapping of oil workers and acts of sabotage in the Niger Delta in 2006/07

January 2006

- Four oil workers are kidnapped at gunpoint by militants at a Shell oilfield. They are freed three weeks later.
- Militants blow up a crude oil pipeline, reducing supplies by 115,000 bpd.

February

- Nine workers are abducted by militants in speedboats. The hostages are released in March.
- Militants blow up a Shell oil pipeline and a state-owned gas pipeline.

March

- A pipeline operated by the Italian company Agip is blown up, resulting in a loss of 75,000 bpd.

May

- An American oil executive is killed in Port Harcourt.
- Three workers are kidnapped. They are freed the following day.

June

- Eight foreign oil workers are abducted from a Norwegian-owned oil rig. They are released two days later.
- Five South Korean contractors are kidnapped when militants attack a Shell natural gas facility. They are released the next day.
- Two Filipino oil workers are kidnapped near Port Harcourt. They are freed five days later.

July

- A Dutch national is captured by gunmen in Bayelsa. He is released four days later.

August

- A German national is kidnapped in Port Harcourt.
- Three Filipino oil workers are abducted from a bus near Port Harcourt.
- Two Norwegians and two Ukrainian oil workers are kidnapped.
- Two contractors, a Belgian and a Moroccan, are kidnapped in Port Harcourt.
- Five foreign oil workers are kidnapped from a nightclub in Port Harcourt
- A Lebanese man is abducted on the Bayelsa/Rivers border.

All the captives were released in the same month.

October

- More than 25 Nigerian staff are abducted near a Shell facility in Rivers state.

November

- A British oil worker is killed during an attempt to free hostages seized by militants. An Italian worker is also wounded.
- Two oil workers – a Briton and an American – are kidnapped from a ship off the coast of Nigeria.

December

- Four foreign workers are kidnapped by masked gunmen in speedboats.

- Militants attack a pumping station. Three security guards die in the attack.

January 2007

- Nine South Korean oil workers are taken hostage by gunmen in southern Nigeria, officials say.
- Five Chinese telecommunications workers are kidnapped.
- A Nigerian and a Dutch national are killed in an attack
- Six Filipino workers are kidnapped.

(Sources: Reuters, BBC News, AFP.)

The humanitarian cost of oil scarcity

The government is striving to boost the economy, which experienced an oil boom in the 1970s but suffered badly when prices dropped in the 1980s. Recently, the economy has benefited again from high oil prices, but corruption and mismanagement are hindering development. Few Nigerians have seen any direct benefit from the country's oil profits. In fact, fuel shortages are a frustratingly regular occurrence. Ironically, most of the oil used by Nigerian consumers is imported at a high price because there are not enough resources to refine oil at home.

Fuel scarcity has created a highly lucrative black market and oil theft is common. Professional gangs tap pipelines and siphon large quantities of oil which they then sell on for profit. The market in illegal oil is said to be worth billions of pounds. This practice, called oil bunkering, can lead to catastrophic disasters when carried out by amateurs. When the professionals have left the scene, members of the public often tap the pipe themselves and take their own share of oil. This is a very dangerous practice and explosions are common. In two separate incidents in Lagos last year more than 400 people were killed in explosions near vandalized pipelines.

- December 2006: At least 280 killed in Lagos.
- May 2006: At least 150 killed in Lagos.
- Dec 2004: At least 20 killed in Lagos.

- Sept 2004: At least 60 killed in Lagos.
- June 2003: At least 105 killed in Abia state.
- July 2000: At least 300 killed in Warri.
- Mar 2000: At least 50 killed in Abia state.
- Oct 1998: At least 1,000 killed in Jesse.

(Source: BBC News.)

Oil, corruption and the economy

The government has traditionally subsidized the price of oil – one of the very few benefits available to Nigerians. However, in 2004, the country ground to a halt during a series of strikes organized by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) in response to government plans to cut the subsidy. The cuts meant a 30% rise in fuel prices which, the unions argued, would dramatically affect Nigerian workers at all levels. The government countered that a cut was necessary to free up funds for improvements in infrastructure and poverty eradication, but nobody believed it. Cynics suggested that the cut was a step towards opening up Nigeria's oil industry to foreign companies which are put off by the heavy subsidies.

Apart from being oil-dependent, Nigeria's economy also suffers from political corruption. All levels of government are rife with allegations of corruption. In Nigerian politics the quickest and easiest way to discredit a political opponent is to hint that they are somehow involved in corrupt practices.

The image of Nigeria as a hotbed for fraudsters and bent politicians was cultivated in the late 1970s and 1980s when high-profile Nigerians would travel to the West, siphon large sums of money into offshore accounts and purchase obscenely expensive property in exclusive postcode areas – with cash! Since the 1980s, Nigeria has been synonymous with fraud and corruption. Association with money-laundering, bribery, identity fraud, drug-smuggling, people-trafficking and internet-based advanced fee fraud ('419s') has had a very negative impact on the economy.

This image, along with the mind-boggling bureaucracy, has made foreign investors from the non-energy sectors view Nigeria as an unsavoury place to do business. President Obasanjo realized that for the economy to grow, his country needed to be more receptive to foreign investment, and he embarked on a programme of political and social reform.

One of President Obasanjo's boldest anti-corruption measures was the creation of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Nigeria's anti-corruption watchdog and law enforcement agency. It is run by Nuhu Ribadu, who has been rewarded for assuming such an important role with death threats. He claims the EFCC has secured 50 convictions, had 200 customs officers sacked, arrested 2,000 suspected fraudsters and returned more than \$5bn to victims of financial crime – including the Nigerian government. Mr Ribadu has said that his job is more dangerous than being in Baghdad and that rooting out corruption is 'worth dying for'.

Mr Ribadu is regarded as a member of President Obasanjo's Economic Team (a collective of bright youngish technocrats without the baggage of the more established political heavyweights). The EFCC likes to go after people who were previously viewed as untouchable, but in doing so, it has been accused of political manipulation.

The EFCC receives some financial and technical help from the UK, the European Union, the US Treasury and the FBI. Mr Ribadu has been singled out for praise by World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz, who described him as 'a remarkable young man' who has 'literally put his life on the line in the fight to rid Nigeria of corruption'.

According to Ribadu, the assets and monies recovered recently by the EFCC from two high-profile Nigerians could have built numerous schools and hospitals.

***'Megalithic kleptocracy is perhaps the greatest human tragedy that has affected our people and society since slavery and colonialism, yet this act of shameless and unbridled state plunder continues to date.'* – Nuhu Ribadu**

Recent high-level corruption cases

Ayo Fayose (the former governor of Ekiti state) – Accused by the EFCC of diverting \$100,000 to a personal account in the US. He was also accused of taking bribes on a poultry project in his state. He was impeached in October 2006 and fled the

country to escape trial. He has since said that his impeachment was a coup attempt and he left because he was in fear of his life.

Joshua Dariye (the former governor of Plateau state) – Accused of money-laundering by British authorities. His attempted impeachment led to riots in which two people were killed by the police. He was sacked and fled the country shortly afterwards.

Diepreye Alamieyeseigha (the former governor of Bayelsa state) – Accused of money-laundering when Metropolitan Police officers found almost £1 million in one of his many London residences. He fled the UK (allegedly dressed as a woman) and is now facing charges in Nigeria.

Peter Obi (Governor of Anambra state) – Accused of depositing state funds to the Fidelity Bank Plc (in which he allegedly has an interest).

Tafa Balogun (former Chief of Police) – Pleaded guilty to eight charges of corruption and was jailed for six months in 2005.

Atiku Abubakar (Vice-President) – The EFCC accused him of using £64 million of public funds for his personal business interests – an allegation which he denies. He has so far escaped trial because his position affords him immunity. However, his very public falling out with President Obasanjo last year resulted in his resigning from the party and being sacked as Vice-President. He contested the sacking on the grounds that it was unconstitutional, and was reinstated in his post. The case is still ongoing; if he loses, he will lose his immunity and face arrest. Vice-President Atiku claims that he has evidence to prove that Obasanjo is the dishonest one and is using false allegations of corruption to destroy the credibility of his opponents.

It is worth noting that none of the politicians involved in these allegations are Obasanjo's supporters.

Elections 2007 – the main players

Umaru Musa Yar'Adua

Obasanjo's chosen candidate. He won an overwhelming majority of the votes in his party's selection. His support from Obasanjo and his lack of international presence have led to his being described as a puppet and to complaints that he has an unfair advantage.

The positive view of his selection is that he is one of a small handful of state governors who have been given the green light by the EFCC. His record is untainted. He suffers from a kidney condition, and speculation about his state of health led him to challenge his opponents to a game of squash in January 2007.

<http://www.yaradua2007.com>

Olusegun Obasanjo

Given that he was so late in publicly backing a successor, all the signs are pointing towards Olusegun Obasanjo's maintaining some control of the country beyond April 2007.

He has three options here:

- Some journalists in Abuja think an interim government is looking the most likely option. Not for a lack of presidential candidates – more because 'Baba' is not quite ready to jack in his day job. An interim government would allow him a few more months or a year to complete his programme of reform and groom a suitable successor.
- He can promote a stooge – a younger, more malleable politician who would effectively be controlled by Mr Obasanjo.
- Of course the third, more democratic, option is to exit the political ring with his dignity intact.

<http://www.olusegun-obasanjo.net/>

Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida

A highly emotive figure for many Nigerians. A former military ruler (1986–93) who still has very strong ties to the army, he is loathed and feared by many, but also has a very loyal following in the north and among Nigeria's rich and powerful elite.

The self-proclaimed 'Evil Genius' is widely acknowledged to have masterminded and financed Obasanjo's first term in office. It is thought that the two men had a sort of gentleman's agreement for a handover of power after Obasanjo's second term, but they fell out and Mr Babangida (IBB) publicly declared his interest in the presidency.

On 17 August 2006 (Mr Babangida's 65th birthday) a group calling themselves 'Citizens for Nigeria' took out a full-page advertisement in Nigeria's Guardian newspaper claiming that 'the bedrock for today's economic and financial problems in Nigeria was laid by this man' [*sic*]. They also blamed him for Nigeria's 'institutionalization of the culture of corruption'.

<http://www.mribbforpresident.com/>

Atiku Abubakar

Formerly one of Obasanjo's closest allies, Vice-President Atiku will now be running for the presidency as part of a coalition (the Action Congress party). His support is mostly in the Muslim north. Though not quite as divisive a figure as Babangida, Atiku is still viewed with suspicion by many Nigerians. He was suspended from the PDP after allegations of corruption and mismanagement, which he has furiously denied. Since his suspension he has tried vigorously to clear his name and has accused Obasanjo's supporters of running a smear campaign to prevent him from becoming president.

<http://www.atikupresidentialcampaign.com>

Muhamadu Buhari

Another former dictator, he lost to Obasanjo in the 2003 elections. He is considered to be one of Nigeria's political strongmen, but his support base is quite marginal. Many Nigerians are turned off by his disciplinarian method of rule and have not forgotten some of his more eccentric laws while he was president, such as the 'War

Against Indiscipline' he launched in 1984. Some of the stranger elements of this war included the right for soldiers to beat civilians who did not queue at bus stops in an orderly fashion, and forcing civil servants who were late for work to do 'frog jumps'.

<http://www.votebuhari.com/>

Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu

Ran in the 2003 elections and lost miserably. He was responsible for the secession of the state of Biafra which plunged Nigeria into three years of civil war. It is not known what he hopes to achieve by running for the presidency again – he will be 74 this year. He is seen as a cult figure amongst many Igbos but his general support base is very small.

Sola Tayo is a producer on the BBC's Hardtalk programme.

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