

Research Paper

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Countdown to February 2019

A Look Ahead at Nigeria's Elections



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Summary

- In February 2019 Nigerians will vote for their next president, deciding who will lead Africa's largest economy and most populous country into the next decade. They will also elect the governors of 29 of Nigeria's 36 states, and all federal and state legislators. The elections will pit the governing All Progressives Congress (APC) against the opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP) and many smaller parties.
- The presidency and the Senate are currently jockeying over the sequence of elections, which is proving to be very disruptive to the process. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) released its election timetable (providing for a two-stage election process) in January 2018, but a controversial bill to enable the reordering of the electoral sequence was subsequently approved by the National Assembly. Buhari refused to sign the bill into law, warning that it might undermine INEC's ability to organize, undertake and supervise elections.
- Security conditions during the pre- and post-election period will greatly impact INEC's ability to ensure credible and well-executed polls. A number of security crises have intensified across the country: these could be exploited by unscrupulous politicians and their supporters to disrupt pre-election logistics or the voting process itself.
- A few key factors will determine whether the APC will repeat its 2015 victory or risk defeat. The first is the degree to which the party either remains united behind Buhari's candidacy or sees additional high-level defections and a widening of existing factional divisions. The second is the president's performance in the last six months of his term, and his party's performance in off-cycle governorship elections.
- The opposition PDP currently controls 12 state governorships and the office of deputy president of the Senate, as well as – following large-scale defections from the APC in July 2018 – an apparent majority in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Looking ahead, the PDP's competitiveness will depend on two main factors: the political pedigree and popular appeal of the party's presidential nominee, and its ability to unify against a well-financed incumbent who retains a strong support base across much of the north.
- A number of political groupings are now emerging that are keen to exploit popular disillusionment with the APC and PDP. They are raising awareness of the power that citizens hold, and calling for an end to political impunity by encouraging the electorate to hold political leaders to account.
- Nigeria's international partners appear to be somewhat less engaged ahead of the 2019 elections than they were four years ago. US policy towards Nigeria, in particular, has been weakened by a shift in emphasis away from democracy and governance toward counterterrorism and trade. To make up for the lack of interest in Washington, the UK, the EU and their Nigerian civil society partners will need to redouble their efforts to support – but also closely and objectively scrutinize – INEC's performance in the run-up to and during the elections.

Introduction

In February 2019 Nigerians will vote for their next president, deciding who will lead Africa's largest economy and most populous country into the next decade. They will also elect many state governors, and all federal and state legislators. The elections will pit the governing All Progressives Congress (APC) against the opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP) and many smaller parties. In many ways, the process will serve as a referendum on President Muhammadu Buhari's first term at the head of a civilian government.

The 2019 elections are shaping up to be of the 'old school', with APC incumbents likely to leverage their access to state coffers, their control over patronage mechanisms and their influence over security agents in their efforts to fend off opposition challengers. Such tactics recall those used by the PDP to hold on to power for 16 years (1999–2015), and reflect the strong similarities between Nigeria's two main parties. Virtually indistinguishable in terms of their ideology, policies and conduct, both parties function as patronage-fuelled coalitions of fractious elite networks that share one objective: to achieve political power and the financial rewards that come with it.

Even so, there are signs that a generational shift in Nigeria's political landscape is under way. Political debates among younger Nigerians are increasingly focused on politicians' performance, government policies, and citizens' own expectations and aspirations. Unwilling to be 'carried along' by self-serving politicians in exchange for hollow promises or token sums, a new generation of voters – one that may take many years to coalesce and to change political norms – is beginning to take shape.

Like the 2015 elections, next year's polls will have a colossal impact on Nigeria's economic future and stability prospects. The outcome will determine the extent to which its government makes progress in fighting terrorism, reining in corruption, resolving communal conflicts and addressing the country's significant socio-economic challenges. The 2019 elections also represent an important milestone in Nigeria's democratic development: will they be as credible as the 2011 and 2015 polls, or deeply flawed like those in 2003 and 2007?

This paper examines the pre-election playing field in Nigeria, assesses the prospects of the two main parties, reviews the prospective presidential candidates, assesses the readiness of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and examines how social media and new social movements could influence the elections.

The story so far

2015 saw a historic victory for the APC. Formed in 2013 as an amalgamation of three large, mostly regional, parties and rebels from the then governing PDP,¹ the APC overturned 16 years of PDP dominance. The success of the party was largely attributable to its national spread and a number of

¹ Five political groupings united to form the APC: the southwest-oriented Action Congress of Nigeria; the northeast-focused All Nigeria People's Party; the northern-based Congress for Progressive Change; numerous PDP defectors (including five governors, hundreds of legislators and a former vice-president); and a faction of the southeast-oriented All Progressives Grand Alliance.

high-profile defections from the PDP. The 2015 elections marked a turning point in Nigeria's political journey since the return to civilian rule in 1999. This was the first time an opposition party had won both the presidential election and a majority in the legislative and gubernatorial polls. It was also the first time that an incumbent president had been defeated.

The APC, led by former general Muhammadu Buhari, who had previously headed a military government in 1983–85, entered office with an ambitious list of pledges to the electorate. These centred on fighting corruption, combating insecurity, improving public services and creating social welfare programmes. With the exception of large swathes of the South South and South East,² the APC could boast widespread support across the country. But it was not long before public frustration with Buhari's new government began to mount. The new president took several months to name his cabinet, and he left many other key government positions unfilled. The economy entered recession, largely as a result of low world oil prices, reduced oil production, and the government's slow policy response and illiberal economic policies. The naira plummeted as the Central Bank of Nigeria imposed foreign exchange controls to avoid devaluation, and food prices shot up as the effects of protectionist trade policies hit consumers.

Security also deteriorated, with the Centre for Democracy and Development's 'Buharimeter' monitoring project reporting that more than 800 people died as a result of insurgency-fuelled violence in the northeast during Buhari's first 100 days in office.³ Although the president would later claim some victories over the weakening Boko Haram insurgency, a potentially more deadly expansion in land- and resource-based clashes between farmers and pastoralists was devastating parts of the Middle Belt region of central Nigeria. In the southern half of the country, Niger Delta militants threatened a fresh wave of violent attacks against oil infrastructure, and there was a revival of Biafra separatist movements. In addition to the challenge of multiple conflicts, a series of overseas visits by the president to address an undisclosed health issue helped create a fertile environment in which an internal party conflict then festered.

Despite the speculation over his health and criticism of his presidential style, Buhari remains very popular in some parts of the country and within factions of his party, and he has declared his interest in running for a second consecutive term in 2019. If he wins and then serves another full term, he will be in his early 80s by the end of his tenure, and it is likely that his time in office will again be disrupted by further medical treatment overseas and internal party disputes.

The PDP is not faring much better as regards party unity. Instead of focusing on repairing its image, which has been tarnished by decades of corruption, the party prefers to criticize the APC's failings without offering alternative policy approaches. Despite this, the PDP gained significant mass in July 2018 after numerous senators and federal representatives defected to it from the APC. The PDP is certainly not short of prominent figures hoping to win the party's presidential nomination: several sitting and former governors and a former vice-president have joined the crowded primary field.

² Nigeria's 36 states and Federal Capital Territory of Abuja are divided into six 'geo-political zones': South South, South East, South West, North Central, North East, North West. The South South zone consists of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers states.

³ Buharimeter (2015), *Delivering On Campaign Promises: The First 100 Days Report*, Centre for Democracy and Development, p. 6, <http://www.buharimeter.ng/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/4.pdf> (accessed 9 July 2018).

In all, 29 states will also hold governorship elections in February 2019; seven others remain 'off-cycle' for different reasons. Of these contests, 20 involve sitting governors (12 of whom are members of the APC, the other eight being from the PDP). Incumbent governors running for a second term have significant advantages over their opponents because they are able to dominate state party structures, leverage powerful patronage networks, and use state funds to bolster their campaign. The other nine state governorships that will be contested next year (Borno, Gombe, Imo, Kwara, Nasarawa, Ogun, Oyo, Yobe and Zamfara) have term-limited incumbents who cannot run again, setting the scene for more competitive party primaries and governorship elections in those states.

These elections matter because state governors collectively exercise more influence over the country's overall stability, economic prosperity and social welfare than do federal-level officials. They sit at the top of the political food chain in their respective states, each of which has a population, an economic profile and a budget on a par with some small or medium-sized countries. The result of the contest to replace the term-limited governor of Borno State, Kashim Shettima, will be especially important, given the enormous conflict-related and socio-economic challenges facing that state. Will Borno voters be given the opportunity to elect someone with the skills and vision to confront these problems, or will Shettima be tempted to designate a less capable – but more politically pliable – 'godson' as his successor?

The Independent National Electoral Commission: ready for 2019?

Many of the troubles of previous elections can be traced to the conduct of INEC, a body that has seen many changes of leadership and is in a constant state of internal reform. It has shouldered the blame for many pre-election mishaps (such as the non-delivery of voting papers and equipment malfunctions), but with every election the Commission seems to get better at scrutinizing its staff and trying to improve its processes. The 2015 elections, conducted under the leadership of Attahiru Jega, are considered the most efficiently run and the most transparent of Nigeria's recent elections. But obstacles are already apparent as regards preparation for 2019.

The presidency and the Senate are currently jockeying over the sequence of elections, which is proving to be very disruptive to the process. Traditionally, the presidential election and national assembly elections are first to be conducted, followed a fortnight later by the state governorship and state assembly polls. The Senate has supported a legislative proposal to alter the order and hold elections over three days, with national assembly elections first, followed by state governorship and state house of assembly elections, and with presidential elections coming last in the sequence. INEC released its election timetable (providing for a two-stage election process) in January 2018, but the bill to enable the reordering of the electoral sequence was, controversially, passed by the National Assembly a month later. President Buhari refused to sign the bill into law, warning that it might undermine INEC's ability to organize, undertake and supervise elections. Critics of the bill condemn the actions of its supporters as unconstitutional, and are concerned that, with a sufficient majority in the House of Representatives, the president's veto can be overturned.

The argument for reordering is that the outcome of the presidential poll influences the way in which people vote in the elections that follow. By holding the presidential elections last, the intention is that electorate will exercise greater consideration in electing their federal and state legislators,

rather than voting for the party of an already declared winner. This dispute has drawn attention to the discord between the executive and legislative branches of government. If the National Assembly overturns the veto, this will embolden the legislature and set a trend for more confrontations with the presidency.

INEC has been carrying out continuous voter registration since 2016, but this has not been without difficulties, and some parts of the country have experienced the problem of citizens being unable to register because of inadequate staffing levels and a shortage of registration machines. INEC personnel, for their part, have complained about voters registering but then failing to collect their permanent voter cards. The increasing number of parties being registered also poses complications. There are currently 68, and the number is likely to rise even higher.

Another issue dogging Nigerian elections – and one that resurfaces with every election – is that of underage voters. An INEC official has claimed that underage voters have been registered in certain parts of the country after some members of those communities intimidated INEC staff. But despite such challenges, INEC claims that it will be ready for 2019 and its incumbent chairman, Mahmood Yakubu, insists he will not be intimidated by partisan pressure.

Security remains a serious problem in the northeast of the country, with Boko Haram and other militant groups still very active in the region. The 2015 polls were delayed to allow for a military offensive to secure the area. If the military is called into action again for 2019, this will further weaken the government's often-repeated claim that the insurgency has been eliminated.

Security conditions during the pre- and post-election period will greatly impact INEC's ability to conduct credible and well-executed polls. Since Buhari's victory the government has claimed success in reducing the impact of insurgents in the northeast, but other security crises have intensified across the country: these could be exploited by unscrupulous politicians and their supporters to disrupt pre-election logistics or the voting process itself. In some states, the threat of intercommunal clashes – such as the farmer–herder conflicts that roil the country's Middle Belt states – could suppress voter turnout, or even put poll workers at risk.

2019: Buhari's last hurrah

President Buhari and his party will attempt to assemble the same geopolitical coalition that propelled them to victory in 2015. Then, the APC relied on a powerful electoral alliance between the country's southwest economic heartland, the vote-rich northwest – President Buhari's home region – and parts of Nigeria's northeast and north-central regions. Buhari's key campaign promises – to rein in corruption, defeat Boko Haram and revive the ailing economy – resonated with a plurality of Nigerians in the wake of 16 years of increasingly corrupt and ineffective PDP leadership.

Since that time, public opinion polls show that President Buhari's popularity has waned considerably.⁴ For the first half of his term, he was suffering an undisclosed but clearly serious illness. Although he appears to have since recovered, he remains an aloof and disengaged leader, 'walled off' from his own government and party, and from Nigerians themselves. Halfway through his first term, Buhari and his government had fulfilled just seven out of his 222 campaign promises, and had made no progress at all on a further 96, according to analysis by the Buharimeter project.⁵

President Buhari's critics claim he has done little to tackle unemployment, boost the country's anaemic power supply, or address the worsening violence between pastoralists and farmers in the volatile Middle Belt. Even the results of his signature policy issue – fighting corruption – are mixed. During his tenure, Nigeria's anti-corruption agencies have assiduously investigated former government officials, while at the same time sparing sitting officials and ruling party 'bigwigs' from close scrutiny.

Unlike his predecessors, Buhari disdains partisan political issues and rarely intervenes in intra-party disputes. As a result, the APC lacks cohesion, as well as any deep affinity with the president himself. Almost five years since its establishment, the party is still an uneasy alliance of autonomous elite networks bound together by little more than incumbency and a collective desire to stay in power through 2023 and beyond.

Since taking power nationally and in two-thirds of Nigeria's 36 states, the APC's political strength has grown in some ways and ebbed in others. It has wrested three state governorships (Kogi, Ondo and, most recently, Ekiti) from the PDP during off-cycle elections. Similarly, the APC is exploiting missteps by the PDP governors of Cross River and Akwa Ibom states to make inroads there. At the same time, however, intra-party squabbles and divisive leadership have weakened its position in hitherto APC strongholds like Kano and President Buhari's home state of Katsina. These state-level disputes factored in the decision of some senators and representatives to defect from the party in late July 2018. The APC will also struggle to maintain its grip on swing states that it won in 2015, especially Kogi and Benue.

Over the coming months, a few key factors will determine whether the APC will repeat its sweeping 2015 victory or risk defeat. The first is the degree to which the party either remains united behind Buhari's candidacy or sees existing factional divisions widen. Recent party congresses – forums where the APC's local, state and national leaders were chosen by party members – have deepened intra-party rifts. Regardless, the congresses will have determined which APC power brokers will enjoy an advantage when they meet to select party candidates later this year.

Recent developments suggest that tensions and divisions within the party continue to escalate. Notably, in early July 2018 a group of prominent APC members held a press conference to announce the establishment of the Reformed APC (R-APC). This breakaway faction from the party core, led by Alhaji Buba Galadima, a former ally of Buhari, presaged the defection later the same

⁴ NOI Polls (2018), 'Monthly Buhari Job Approval', http://www.noi-polls.com/root/index.php?pid=16&ptid=10&cat_id=6&parentid=6&timeline_id=131 (accessed 18 May 2018).

⁵ Centre for Democracy and Development (2017), *Buharimeter Mid-Term Report*, Abuja: Centre for Democracy and Development, <http://www.buharimeter.ng/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Final-Buharimeter-2-years-Report-1.pdf> (accessed 9 July 2018).

month of dozens of federal legislators from the APC to the PDP.⁶ Additional 'cross-carpeting' may follow. As at previous elections, political parties and party membership will remain fluid at least until the primaries.

The second factor is the President Buhari's own record in the last six months of his current term, and his party's performance in off-cycle governorship elections in the states of Ekiti and Osun – in July and September 2018, respectively. Buhari's popularity may yet rebound if he is able to meet some of his manifesto promises – or it may slide further if he seeks re-election having failed to make tangible progress in addressing the country's socio-economic and security challenges. In either case, the APC's win in the July 2018 state governorship election, as announced by INEC, together with its performance in the forthcoming election in Osun state – both of which are located in the politically fickle southwest – will serve as a bellwether for the party's fortunes in the 2019 national polls.

2019 aspirants: many old hands – and some new faces

Although, as yet, only a handful of people have formally declared their intention to run for president in 2019, with a little over six months to go there is intense speculation over who will eventually contest the election, and for which party. Among the most widely discussed figures are:

President Muhammadu Buhari: A combination of astute PR and the ability to tap into popular anger at the conspicuous corruption associated with the administration of Goodluck Jonathan helped Buhari – a serial presidential aspirant – to victory in 2015 at his fourth attempt. His team worked hard to shed his stern authoritarian image from his time in the army and his short-lived military presidency in the 1980s. Buhari promised Nigerians a return to high economic growth, improved security and an end to corruption.

Atiku Abubakar: Nigeria's vice-president in 1999–2007, Abubakar has plenty of experience in campaigning for the presidency using several platforms. On this, his fourth attempt, he is hoping to win the nomination of the PDP, the party he served in government. Despite the fact that he is 71 years old, the early stage of his campaign is actively targeting Nigeria's youth.

Datti Baba-Ahmed: Kaduna native Datti Baba-Ahmed is a former senator who also served in the House of Representatives. His campaign focuses on institution building, job creation and fighting corruption. Like Abubakar, he is seeking to appeal to younger voters, and at 48 years of age he is young by Nigerian political standards. The founder and pro-chancellor of Baze University in Abuja, Baba-Ahmed also hopes to win the PDP nomination, claiming that a second term for Buhari 'will destroy Nigeria and unsettle the rest of Africa'.

Ibrahim Dankwambo: The governor of Gombe State and former federal accountant-general is also vying to represent the PDP. His background in finance is appealing to fans of technocrats. Although he does not have the political profile of some of the aforementioned, he has the backing of several political subgroups which highlight his relative youth – he is 55 years old – and firmly believe he is the best qualified candidate.

⁶ Malingha Doya, D., Wallace, P. and Ibukun, Y. (2018), 'Nigerian President Suffers Senate Blow as He Prepares for Vote', Bloomberg, 24 July 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-07-24/nigeria-s-ruling-apc-party-loses-senate-majority-on-defections> (accessed 25 July 2018). Although the APC immediately claimed that it nonetheless retained a majority in the House of Representatives, the scale of the defections from the governing party indicated that this was no longer the case.

Donald Duke: The former governor of Cross River State is one of a younger breed of politicians to emerge during the Olusegun Obasanjo presidency (1999–2007). A polished politician, Duke disappeared from the political scene after 2011 but has occasionally hinted at making a comeback.

Fela Durotoye: A motivational speaker with a large following, Durotoye is running as the candidate of the Alliance for New Nigeria (ANN), a new political party. He describes himself as a ‘technician’ – a hybrid of technocrat and politician – and says that his focus is not just on politics but on delivering good governance.

Ayodele Fayose: The outgoing PDP governor of Ekiti State, Fayose is a larger-than-life and divisive figure known for his attention-grabbing style of governance and his acid put-downs of opponents. He has on more than one occasion claimed that God revealed to him that he will be president.

Jaye Gaskia: Social activist Jaye Gaskia says that Nigeria has been crippled by ‘decades of incompetent, selfish, greedy and light-fingered leadership’, and he believes he is the man to address it. He leads ‘Take Back Nigeria’ – a movement demanding that politicians be held to account by the electorate. Gaskia says the 2019 elections will be about citizens taking back the country from the elites. Like many non-career politicians, he has not yet announced which party he intends to run for.

Rabiu Kwankwaso: A former governor of Kano State and incumbent senator, Kwankwaso outperformed Atiku Abubakar in the APC’s 2014 primaries, coming second to Buhari. He has since then been quietly strengthening his profile, but growing animosity between him and his successor as state governor, Abdullahi Ganduje, divided the APC in Kano and resulted in him rejoining the PDP in July 2018.

Sule Lamido: A former minister of foreign affairs and two-term governor of Jigawa State, Lamido does not have a national profile but is nevertheless a serious contender for the PDP nomination. He surprised many observers by not defecting to the APC, instead remaining in the PDP to rebuild the fractured party after its 2015 defeat. The reopening of a money-laundering case against him and his sons may hamper his ambitions, however.

Ahmed Makarfi: The former governor of Kaduna State, former senator and erstwhile PDP chairman, Makarfi reportedly enjoys a political alliance with Rivers State governor and party financier Nyesom Wike. Makarfi hails from the same geopolitical region as Buhari, which could help the PDP make inroads into that area – latterly an APC stronghold – in 2019.

Kingsley Moghalu: A former deputy governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, Moghalu is also a respected lawyer. His years at the UN have given him international exposure, while his role in overseeing change at the Central Bank has identified him as an economic reformer. Moghalu is campaigning as a competent technocrat with a vision to help Nigeria ‘Build, Innovate and Grow’.

Omoyele Sowore: An outspoken journalist and political newcomer, Sowore is the publisher of Sahara Reporters, a media platform that has become the bête noire of Nigeria’s political elite. He has thus far campaigned on improving Nigeria’s anaemic power supply, addressing insecurity and releasing the imprisoned Shia cleric Ibrahim Zakzaky. Sowore is attempting to use crowdfunding to raise \$2 million in campaign funds.

Opposition: ready to roll?

Although still reeling from its 2015 election defeat, the PDP remains Nigeria's largest and most formidable opposition party. At the time of publication, it controls 12 state governorships,⁷ as well as the office of deputy president of the Senate. In the National Assembly, moreover, the PDP now holds an apparent majority in both houses, and its legislators chair many key committees, including the Senate Downstream Petroleum Committee and the House Upstream Petroleum Committee. The party also enjoys the support of several 'godfathers' – former top officeholders with deep pockets and well-developed political networks.

The PDP appears to have emerged from a two-year long power struggle between rival internal factions: one led by the former governor of Kaduna State, Ahmed Makarfi, and the other by his former counterpart in Borno State, Ali Modu Sheriff. With the backing of Nyesom Wike, the governor of cash-flushed and vote-rich Rivers State, Makarfi's faction won a messy legal battle in 2016 for control of PDP party structures. Wike, now one of the party's most influential power brokers, installed his close ally Uche Secondus as national party chairman late last year.

Looking ahead, the PDP's competitiveness will depend on two main factors: the political pedigree and popular appeal of the party's presidential nominee, and its ability to unify against a well-financed incumbent who remains popular across much of the north. In an effort to blunt Buhari's 'home field' advantage, it is likely that the PDP will nominate a candidate from Nigeria's northwest – a political strategy known as 'zoning'. Contenders from this region include Makarfi, former senator Datti Baba-Ahmed and former Kano State governor Rabiu Kwankwaso, who recently decamped from the APC. Despite hailing from the northeast, wealthy former vice-president Atiku Abubakar has also announced he will once again run for the presidency.

It remains to be seen, however, whether the PDP's new leaders can reunite the opposition party and entice some sitting governors away from the ruling party. As with the APC, much will depend on how credibly and collegially the PDP conducts its party congresses and primaries. If it builds an inclusive coalition of dynamic candidates, it could recapture many legislative seats and some of the governorships that were lost in the 2015 APC landslide.

How new media and new movements will shape the 2019 elections

As already seen at the 2011 and 2015 elections, social media is playing an important role in disseminating information and creating new trends. While hashtags like #BringBackOurGirls have mobilized people to protest against a perceived failing of government on security matters, social media has largely been adopted by politicians as a convenient propaganda tool and a channel to discredit their opponents. All the same, a number of political groupings are now emerging that are keen to exploit the popular disillusionment with the APC and PDP.

⁷ The APC challenger for the governorship of Ekiti State defeated the PDP candidate in the July 2018 election, but the PDP incumbent, Ayodele Fayose, will remain in office until the end of his term in October. The governor of Benue State, Samuel Ortom, announced his defection from the APC to the PDP on 25 July 2018.

The Not Too Young To Run initiative, created by the Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth and Advancement, seeks to encourage youth inclusion in political processes. It promotes the removal of age barriers to running for office and aims to address inequalities in the political system, and has been adopted by the UN as a global campaign to encourage young people to run for public office. In Nigeria, the Not Too Young To Run bill, signed into law by President Buhari in May 2018, reduced the lower age limit for presidential hopefuls from 40 to 35, while the minimum age for candidates for election to the House of Representatives was reduced from 30 to 25.⁸

Another non-aligned citizen-led group is the Red Card Movement, led by the former federal minister of education and social affairs activist Oby Ezekwesili. The movement aims to end what it sees as poor leadership in politics and governance in Nigeria, and advocates citizens' participation in politics and elections; it also envisages serving as a sort of watchdog over government activities after elections. It emphasizes that it is not a political party, nor is it aligned to one.

One of the movements capturing headlines is the Coalition for Nigeria Movement (CNM), founded in early 2018 by former president Olusegun Obasanjo, which has claimed to be a grass-roots organization with 3 million members. The establishment of the CNM came shortly after Obasanjo published a statement launching a stinging critique of Buhari's performance as president.⁹ In May, the CNM merged with a small political party, the African Democratic Congress (ADC). Another group, the Nigeria Intervention Movement, co-chaired by civil society activist Olisa Agbakoba, has the stated aim of fostering new political leaders from a range of backgrounds to 'restructure Nigeria's foisted Constitution and corrupt political order'.¹⁰

What these movements have in common is a sense that Nigeria needs to be 'saved' from the current crop of political leaders and that the current system is not sustainable. They are also raising awareness of the power that citizens hold, and calling for an end to what they see as political impunity by encouraging the electorate to hold political leaders to account. Whether the current enthusiasm for these movements can be built on beyond the elections remains to be seen, but if the momentum is sustained the 2023 elections could see a younger and more engaged political class.

Outlook and implications

Nigeria has entered a volatile pre-election period in which politicians will be, as Nigerians would say, 'heating up the polity'. Across the country, politicians and officials build up personal or party 'war chests' – some of them using public funds. They will use these resources to build up their political machines, mobilize youth, and distribute patronage to influential individuals and voting constituencies. After party congresses and primaries conclude, some jilted politicians will decamp to other parties in the hope of reviving their campaigns elsewhere. Just prior to the election, governing party officials may well look to ensure that sympathetic officials are posted to top security

⁸ Omilana, T. (2018), 'Buhari signs Not Too Young to Run Bill into law', *The Guardian*, 31 May 2018, <https://guardian.ng/news/buhari-signs-not-too-young-to-run-bill-into-law/> (accessed 9 July 2018).

⁹ Ibekwe, N. (2018), 'Obasanjo attacks Buhari, asks president not to run in 2019', *Premium Times*, 23 January 2018, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/256426-obasanjo-attacks-buhari-asks-president-not-to-run-in-2019.html> (accessed 9 July 2018).

¹⁰ Nigeria Intervention Movement (NIM) (2018), 'About NIM', <http://nimng.org/about/> (accessed 23 July 2018).

and INEC postings in must-win states. In these respects, the 2019 elections will very much follow the pattern of other recent national polls.

Although the prospect of renewed military involvement in politics should never be totally discounted, on the surface at least it appears that Nigeria's democratic trajectory will continue without interruption. Now that the PDP monopoly has been broken, legitimate questions are being asked about the manner in which politics is conducted in Nigeria. Civil society organizations and youth-led pressure groups are mobilizing and using multiple platforms to question and hold government to account. Former political leaders are not just adding their voices to critiques of the governing party, but are creating and supporting new movements to offer an alternative to the two biggest parties. Civilian-led organizations are also shaping the debate on how to reform Nigeria's often nepotistic and crony-ridden political culture, which has traditionally excluded much of society.

Meanwhile, Nigeria's international partners appear to be somewhat less engaged ahead of the 2019 elections than they were four years ago. It can, however, be expected that their focus will sharpen as Nigeria's primary season heats up and the identities of the key presidential contenders become known. US policy towards Nigeria, in particular, has been weakened by a shift in emphasis away from democracy and governance towards counterterrorism and trade. To make up for the lack of interest in Washington, the UK, the EU and their Nigerian civil society partners will need to redouble their efforts to support – but also closely and objectively scrutinize – INEC's performance in the run-up to and during the elections. Just like Nigerians' all-important participation in the democratic process, international engagement will be critical to the success of Nigeria's elections.

About the authors

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Cover image: An official of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) registers the thumbprint of a voter with a biometric system at a polling station in the Apapa district of Lagos on 11 April 2015.

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