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Nigeria's 2011 Elections: Best Run, but Most Violent

Summary

- Nigeria's 2011 general election received high praise for being well-managed. But post-election violence claimed 800 lives over three days in northern Nigeria and displaced 65,000 people, making the elections the most violent in Nigeria's history.
- The violence was triggered by a belief that challenger Muhammadu Buhari, a northerner, should have won the election.
- Two special commissions established to examine the factors leading to the violence will have limited effect in breaking the cycle of violence unless their reports lead to ending impunity for political violence. In addition, local peacemaking initiatives and local democratic institutions must be strengthened.

The Well-Managed 2011 Elections

Nigeria's 2011 general elections—in particular the presidential election—were seen widely as being well-run. This was especially important given the universally decried elections of 2007.¹ A number of factors contributed to ensuring that Nigeria's 2011 elections were successfully administered. They include the fact that the voters' register was the most accurate, and there was also adequate training and fielding of election observers. The chair of the Independent Nigerian Electoral Commission (INEC), Attahiru Jega, was well regarded and judged independent from the government. And, the parallel vote tabulation used by domestic observers allowed poll monitors to concurrently record the results of the election along with INEC as a means to provide a check on the official results. Additionally, ordinary citizens were encouraged to report, via calls or texts, any incidents of fraud or violence that they witnessed or experienced. INEC declared incumbent Goodluck Jonathan the winner of the presidential poll with 59 percent against Muhammadu Buhari's 32 percent.

But despite a more transparent election, 800 people—mainly in Kaduna—were killed in three days and 65,000 people were displaced.² Muslims burned churches and attacked Christians and southerners in their homes, businesses, schools, and on the streets. Christians soon retaliated. Once violence erupted, only soldiers succeeded in stopping it.³

Two commissions were established in May, following the elections, to examine the factors leading to the violence. Governor Patrick Ibrahim Yakowa established a 12-person commission in Kaduna, and nationally, President Jonathan established a 22-person commission. The commissions'

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work is ongoing, and findings from either or both have the potential to identify the root causes of violence in Nigeria, and even identify the perpetrators for possible punishment.⁴ But the track records of past commissions suggest that neither effort will make any headway.⁵

The Context of 2011 Electoral Violence in Nigeria

The irony of the violence in Nigeria is that whereas in 2007 former President Olusegun Obasanjo famously declared that the election was a “do or die affair,”—a comment largely seen to urge his supporters to use violence to obtain victory— in 2011 the politicians emphasized the need for peace. However, there were disturbing signs before the election that the type of violence in Nigeria had changed, when seven bomb blasts occurred in several parts of the country.⁶ This constituted almost a third of all bomb blasts in Nigeria since 1995.⁷ Moreover, previous elections had not been preceded by bomb blasts. There were other ominous signs of potential violence. Buhari’s warning of an “Egypt-style” revolt if the elections were not free and fair was one.⁸ Buhari’s admonition that his supporters defend their votes was another. And his declaration that going to court to contest the elections would be a waste of his time provided his supporters with the unspoken alternative: take their protests to the streets.⁹ Indeed, the day of the presidential elections, Buhari claimed that the ruling party had rigged the election¹⁰ and violence started soon after INEC declared Jonathan the winner. Buhari did not immediately condemn the violence, fueling speculation of his role in inciting it.

Over the course of the next few days, Muslims and Christians in northern Nigeria clashed violently. And with 800 fatalities in three days, the 2011 elections were the most violent in Nigeria’s history (about 100 people died in 2003, and 300 died in 2007). The violence this year was also notable because 700 of the fatalities came from Kaduna, Buhari’s home state, which has not experienced this level of violence since 2002.

The Muslim-Christian violence reflects Nigeria’s regional and religious divisions and long-standing expectation of sharing power. Many in the north believed that President Jonathan, a Christian and southerner, should have conceded the presidential bid to a northerner and Muslim in honor of the unwritten rotation of power between the north and south. President Olusegun Obasanjo, a southerner and Christian, had been replaced by Umaru Yar’Adua, a northerner and Muslim. Yar’Adua’s untimely death in 2010, midway through his term, catapulted then-Vice President Jonathan to the presidency. The proponents of the power rotation argued that Jonathan should not have contested the presidency because the north had not finished its “turn.”¹¹ Indeed, the need for power-sharing and political pacts indicate the presence of weak institutions and the inability of government to manage political conflict. Going forward, programs and policies should address coalition building across groups,¹² in addition to building the capacity to manage elections.

Ending the Cycle of Electoral Violence

Commissions to investigate violence in Nigeria have been organized in the past, but their recommendations and findings have either remained unimplemented or essentially kept secret, resulting in a culture of impunity.¹³ Thus, residents have little faith that the two commissions currently investigating the roots of the violence in northern Nigeria will have any effect. Should these beliefs materialize, the two commissions will not succeed in helping to break the cycle of electoral violence in Nigeria. Instead, the commissions must not only identify the perpetrators of violence, but they must be brought to book and compensation must be obtained for the victims. Only such a significant break from the past can help Nigeria move toward realizing the fruits of a well-organized and administered electoral campaign. Failing this, electoral violence will persist in Nigeria.

The violence in Kaduna reflected local grievances and demonstrated the limited reach of the state's reformed electoral institutions. Subsiding only with the interventions of the soldiers, it also showed a paucity of local peacemaking institutions. Indeed, many had criticized the government's plan to rely heavily on the military to keep the peace.¹⁴ Civil society's initiatives in Jos, the site of repeated intense sectarian violence in Nigeria, offer some lessons. Specifically, civil society organizations in Jos came together to prevent violence by targeting youth in Jos, who were responsible for much of the violence, as well as faith-based groups, given the city's sectarian violence. These initiatives in Jos included the following:

- The Youngstars Foundation was sending its database of 5,000 youth regular messages to conduct themselves peacefully;
- The Center for Peace Advancement in Nigeria had reached out to the Achaba Riders, a motorcycle gang many hold responsible for the violence in Jos.
- Women Initiative for Sustainable Community Development (WISCOD) developed peace sensitization programs to faith-based groups; and
- Country Women Association of Nigeria (COWAN) aired a radio program targeted at faith based youth groups before the elections.

USIP helped to reinforce these initiatives by organizing a consultation in Abuja that encouraged these groups to share information, position their messages to focus on preventing electoral violence, and spurred the organization of the "Coalition for Nonviolent Elections in Jos" (CONEJ)—a coalition that remains active and growing beyond the elections. Unlike past elections, Jos did not experience violence. That highlights the importance of local peacebuilding networks that target potential perpetrators of violence and identify programming gaps. Such coalitions can be important in new democracies where the state has limited reach and local institutions assume a greater importance.

Local Electoral Violence and National Institutions

Still, while local initiatives to prevent violence are necessary, they are insufficient. High-level judicial and electoral reforms must occur. Civil society's initiatives in Jos emerged from a history of intense sectarian violence, the latest of which took 200 lives in January 2011 and again in March. History shows that failing to enact credible reforms, punishment for inciting violence and urging political supporters to conduct themselves peacefully only brings temporary relief. In Zanzibar, for example, following the postelection violence in 2001, wide ranging electoral reforms were mandated to prevent violence in subsequent elections. But the reforms were poorly enacted. While concerted efforts by the major political parties to cooperate and hold peaceful elections in the 2003 by-elections were successful, the more competitive 2005 general elections were marred by violence facilitated by the presence of weak and biased institutions.

Nigeria is not alone with the conundrum of an improved electoral management body and increased violence. In Ghana, for example, observers hailed the 2008 elections as a successful transition, but the atmosphere in which they took place raised many concerns. Violence occurred in northern Ghana over disputed chieftaincies, as it does during every election. But, in an alarming change, migrant communities in the capital, Accra, had episodes of violence mirroring the home communities in northern Ghana. Additionally, some media politicized ethnicity and some political supporters descended upon the electoral commission's headquarters with machetes to protest the results. Notably, in Ghana, tensions were at times reduced through the interventions of national peacemaking institutions that formed partnerships with local groups or leaders.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Nigeria's 2011 elections were the most violent yet—claiming 800 lives in three days. Breaking the cycle of violence includes ending impunity for political violence, cultivating local peacebuilding initiatives and strengthening local democratic institutions. Dorina Bekoe, the author, is a program officer in the Center for Conflict Management at the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP). USIP supports work on the prevention of religious, economic, and political violence in Nigeria.



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Conclusions

Perhaps the violence may have been more intense in either Ghana or Nigeria had the national institutions and reforms not existed. However, national institutional reforms are limited in their ability to curb electoral violence at the local or state level. Rather, national-level reforms must be accompanied with strong local peacemaking institutions that form critical partnerships with national initiatives meant to prevent or reduce violence. Secondly, impunity for inciting violence must end. And finally, improvements in the capacity to manage elections must be accompanied by programs to strengthen the pillars of democracy at the local level, away from an emphasis on regional, religious, and ethnic mobilization and toward a focus on common issues across groups.

Endnotes

1. Elections were held on April 9 (national assembly elections); April 16 (presidential elections); May 6 (gubernatorial and state assembly elections). On the presidential elections, see: European Union Election Observation Mission in Nigeria, "Final Report: General Elections, April 2011," p. 3.
2. Human Rights Watch, "Nigeria: Post-election Violence Killed 800," May 16, 2011.
3. Ibid.
4. Amnesty International, "Loss of Life, Insecurity and the Impunity in the Run-up to Nigeria's Elections," March 2011.
5. Ibid.
6. April 8, 2010 at the INEC offices in Suleija, Niger; May 9, 2010 at the Shadawanka barracks in Bauchi state; October 1, 2010 in Abuja at the independence day celebration; two blasts in December 29, 2010 at the rally of Beimo Rufus-Spiff, a candidate for the governorship of Bauchi State; two blasts on December 31, 2010 in Abuja.
7. Emeka Umejei, "Nigeria: Chronicle of Bomb Blasts in the Country," *AllAfrica.com*, June 16, 2011 (<http://allafrica.com/stories/201106170593.html>).
8. "Egypt, Buhari, and Revolution," *The Punch*, February 24, 2011 (<http://m.punching.com/Article.aspx?theartic=Art201102240241378>).
9. Tajudeen Suleiman, "Rage of Buhari's 'Army'," *Tell*, April 27, 2011 (http://www.telling.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id+item212:rage-of-buhari%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%98army%E2%80%99).
10. Olamilekan Lartey, "Buhari alleges rigging of election," *The Punch*, April 17, 2011 (<http://www.punchng.com/Articl.aspx?theartic=Art2011041752362>).
11. A *USIP Special Report* predicted that violence could erupt from political divisions if the power-sharing arrangement unraveled. (Ebere Onwudiwe and Chloe Berwind-Dart, "Breaking the Cycle of Electoral Violence in Nigeria," *USIP Special Report*, December 2010, p. 8.)
12. Evidence from India shows that this helps to reduce sectarian violence (Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002)).
13. Amnesty International.
14. Onwudiwe and Berwind-Dart, pp. 10 – 11.