



Nigeria's elections: more democracy, less security?

by Cristina Barrios and José Luengo-Cabrera

In the midst of rising communal tensions and the chaos caused by terrorist group Boko Haram, Nigeria's citizens are set to vote in presidential and parliamentary elections on 14 February. Earlier on in the campaign, the violent Islamists were portrayed as a fleeting problem for a minority in the country's remote northeast. But the sinister reality of the sect's territorial expansion and its ever more daring and brutal attacks have transformed Boko Haram into an electoral spoiler.

President Goodluck Jonathan and his ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) can no longer dismiss the threat. The Nigerian government has quietly accepted the African Union's (AU) plans to deploy a 7,500-strong military force in the affected areas, and tolerated the increasing involvement of Chad, Cameroon and Niger in what it has long been perceived to be a domestic matter. The international community has also voiced concern, and has offered assistance despite its reservations *vis-à-vis* supporting the Nigerian army.

Consolidating democracy

Still, Nigeria's upcoming elections convey some good news about the country's path towards democratisation. In contrast to the country's long history of *coups d'état*, a full electoral cycle is now nearly complete, reaffirming the Nigerian people's commitment to the idea that free elections are the legitimate conduit to political power. Indeed, previous attempts

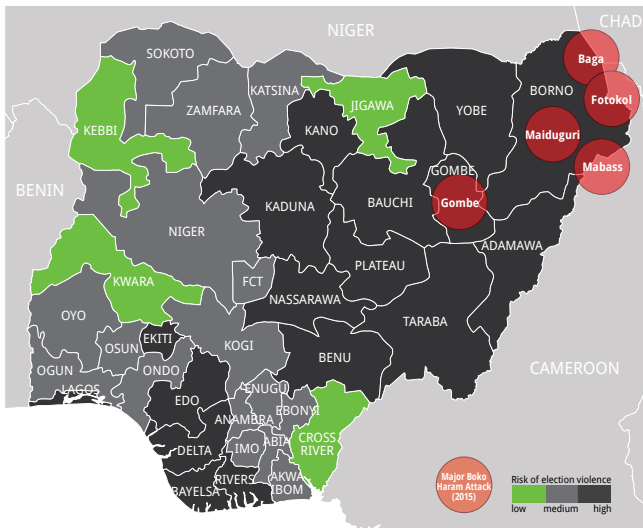
to undermine democratic rule have been met with popular opposition. For example, attempts by then President Olusegun Obasanjo to change the constitution in order to extend his mandate prompted demonstrations and led to the election of Umaru Yar'Adua in 2007.

Moreover, for the first time in Nigeria's history, these elections are truly competitive, and the outcome remains uncertain, according to opinion polls. There is a real possibility that the incumbent PDP will have to cede power to the All Progressive Congress (APC), an umbrella coalition which unites the four main opposition parties (and includes PDP defectors). Ever since Goodluck Jonathan assumed the presidency in 2010, a debate has intensified over an unwritten 'zoning agreement' whereby presidential power should rotate between representatives from the country's northern and southern regions. The APC's presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, is a Muslim general from the north who is running on a joint ticket with a popular Christian southerner for vice-president. This strategy has raised the electoral prospects of the APC and, for the first time since the restoration of civilian rule in 1999, increased the likelihood of a democratic alternation of power.

Trouble ahead?

However, with the vote looming, the acrimonious political environment has deepened pre-existing regional divides, with party leaders exploiting

Risk of electoral violence and Boko Haram attacks



Data sources: ACLED, CLEEN, The Economist.

ethnic and religious identities to shore up support. This has led to fierce electioneering, inflammatory rhetoric and, unsurprisingly, politically motivated attacks on party activists in the states of Kano, Nasarawa and Plateau. Worryingly, an influx of smuggled firearms from neighbouring countries has fuelled allegations that political parties are in the process of arming associated militia groups. Meanwhile, Nigeria's security forces seem unable to prevent the spread of electoral violence.

If Jonathan is re-elected, a wave of disgruntlement will sweep across the country's northeastern states, where a large majority will vote for Buhari. In addition, many people there will not be able to vote at all, as procedural deficiencies have led to the disenfranchisement of internally displaced people and the failure to distribute millions of voting cards. Many will dismiss Goodluck Jonathan as a southern Christian who cares little for the north, a feeling accentuated by the belief that he has not honoured the informal power-sharing agreement. Buhari's party members, affiliated militias and organised thugs may contest the results if he loses, and cause havoc. This could, in turn, push the government to deploy national security forces, fuelling confrontations with opposition supporters.

If Buhari wins, however, the militia groups affiliated with the PDP and its allies could also trigger violence in some states and cities of the country's middle belt and southwest. In the short term, until trust in a new government is established, paramilitary groups may appear in the south, claiming to protect Nigeria's economic assets – most notably oil fields and pipelines. For example, the residual members of MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta), the armed group

closely connected to the political-economic chain of oil exploitation, will likely try to preserve the status quo. PDP leaders would then need to behave responsibly despite having, thus far, contributed to the poisonous discourse of the campaign. The danger is that they may be willing to defend their personal fiefdoms through corruption and, if necessary, force.

And the winner is...

Post-electoral violence, however serious, would further undermine Nigeria's already fragile security environment, and allow Boko Haram to thrive. In any case, the group will, for now, maintain its grip on the area it has already seized and continue – and possibly intensify – its territorial expansion by capitalising on local grievances.

The president's track record in the northeast is indeed poor. From his questionable public management of the crisis over the kidnapping of the schoolgirls from Chibok, to his purely military response to the insurgency and his lukewarm reaction to international concerns and regional initiatives, he has categorically failed to defuse the dangerous situation. The recent suicide bomb attack in Gombe and the killing of an estimated 2,000 people in Baga are grim reminders of this failure. It is still unclear how Jonathan would engage more proactively (and successfully), or whether he would listen to northern Nigerians' calls for greater protection and an increased redistribution of the country's oil revenue – already dented, meanwhile, by the sharp decline in international crude prices.

Although Buhari has also promised to defeat Boko Haram during his campaign, it is still unclear how he would do so beyond deploying more soldiers: a strategy which has proved inefficient and inadequate so far.

Regardless of the electoral outcome, however, the terrorist group will continue to pursue its violent mission to establish a cross-border 'caliphate', as proven by its recent incursions into the Cameroonian towns of Fotokol and Mabass. The spread of the Islamist threat to surrounding countries has now made the deployment of AU troops to contain Boko Haram all the more urgent.

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