
Nigeria's 2019 elections: so many choices, so difficult to choose

Ojobo Ode Atuluku | Head, Africa 2 Region, Federation Development Cluster, ActionAid (Burundi, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somaliland, The Gambia and Zambia) | @ojoboa 

Theme

This paper looks at the two most visible candidates in the Nigerian presidential elections, highlighting issues regarding conflicts, political parties, the electoral commission and the changes in institutions like the Police.

Summary

The 2019 Nigerian elections comes at a time of great challenges for the nation, in economic, security and other terms. With 73 candidates competing, only two seem to be serious contenders for the role. However, both seem to lack aspects of leadership that Nigeria needs at this time in its history. This paper looks at the two leading candidates and the situation in Nigeria, describing the context in which the elections are being held among ongoing controversies.

Analysis

Nigeria is a strategic partner to many countries and a recognised global actor. With South Africa, it is among the largest economies in Africa. The country is its fourth Republic, having gained independence from the UK on 1 October 1960. The first Republic was proclaimed in 1963 with the adoption of a republican constitution, but came to an end in 1966 following a military coup. Six months later a counter coup led to a bitter civil war between 6 July 1967 and 15 January 1970 to prevent the secession of the country's south-eastern portion, known as Biafra. Tension in Nigeria had been caused by a complex mix of political, religious, ethnic and economic factors affecting its 200 million peoples and over 300 ethnic groups. A second Republic was inaugurated in 1979 by the then military head of state General Olusegun Obasanjo, who in 1999 became the first elected civilian President of the later fourth Republic. Meanwhile, however, the second Republic was cut short by another coup d'état that installed the current President, Muhammadu Buhari, as military head of state, who justified his overthrow of the regime by alleging the need to fight corruption. His third Republic was short-lived, starting in 1992 and ending with the annulment of the 1993 presidential elections. The military stayed in power until the birth of the fourth and current Republic in 1999. The 1999 Constitution prescribes a presidential system with three arms of government and a National Assembly comprising a 109-seat Senate and a 360-seat House of Representatives. The electoral system is a first-past-the-post system and, under the Constitution, a candidate wins the presidential election when he gains both the highest numbers of votes cast and receives at least a quarter of the votes cast in each of

Nigeria's 36 states and its Federal Capital territory. Failing that, a second election between the two candidates with the highest number of votes is held within seven days of the results being announced.

The Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) won the elections in 1999 and remained in power until 2015. The All Progressive Congress was an alliance of the two major opposition parties.

Nigeria goes to the presidential polls on Saturday 23 February 2019 after a week's postponement from 16 February. For many it will be a practical challenge managing a ballot paper with 91 political parties and 73 presidential candidates without invalidating their vote.¹ All, however, will be in fear of the challenges to security that may arise in their constituencies, be it Boko Haram, herdsmen-farmers or outright political thuggery.

The Nigerian electoral system is overseen by an Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), with a Chair and Federal Commissioners, and a State Independent Electoral Commission (SIEC), with State Commissioners.

The candidates

Saturday 23 February 2019 is the date finally set for the election of the eighth President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. There are four types of candidate in the running: the incumbent, Muhammadu Buhari; a former Vice-President, Atiku Abubakar; a handful of popular social-media names new to the game of partisan politics, a new crop of youthful and energetic would-be leaders; and what one could describe as the 'the invisibles'. There is no division between right and left in Nigeria's presidential election since ideologies are neither on offer or expected, except by a handful of intellectuals who in all likelihood might not have registered to vote. It is a crowded racetrack of 73 presidential candidates, each with a running mate. The hopefuls range from a young 33-year-old male to an ailing 75-year-old, with many under the age of 40, beneficiaries of the 'not too young to run' movement whose advocacy saw the approval of a law that reduced the eligible age for contesting presidential elections from 40 to 30. So there are newly-minted politicians and experienced warlords of old political battles, both male and female. One wished to withdraw but was told by the electoral umpire it was too late to do so, while another party has a blank on its ballot as the court declared the candidate but the party itself claimed not to have decided and is het to forward to the court its own nominee.

Up to 22,643 candidates will be contesting 1,504 seats in the 2019 general elections, to be held on the same day as the presidential elections. Sub-national elections will be held on 2 March 2019. There are 73 candidates for the presidential elections: five are women, four with male vice-presidential running mates, while 23 presidential candidates have women as running mates. One candidate announced her withdrawal from the elections in response to a coalition that was being discussed but the INEC declared it was too late to withdraw as the ballots had already been printed.

¹ <https://youtu.be/Ka4eSxMMIJI> shows the Commission Chairman demonstrating how to use the ballot paper.

In the general elections there will be 1,904 senatorial hopefuls and 4,680 candidates for the House of Representatives, a total of 6,657 individuals contesting the 470 seats of the National Assembly. Female candidates account for 12.3% in the Senate and 11.6% in the House of Representatives, while young people account for 13.5% in the former and 27.4% in the latter (the 9.6% and 3.5% increase could be attributable to the recently approved 'Not-too-young to run' law).

The electorate

There are 84 million registered electors, 14.2 million more than in the previous elections in 2015. Female voters comprise 47.14%, young people (aged 18 to 35) 51.1% and those aged between 36 and 50 29.97%.

Figure 1. Registered voters for the 2019 election (INEC data)

Category	Percentage	Number
Students	26.57	22,320,990
Farming and fishing	16.23	13,630,216
Housewives	14.10	11,844,079
Business sector	12.87	10,810,006
Traders	9.01	7,558,012
Uncategorised	7.17	6,021,741
Civil servants	6.00	5,038,671
Artisans	5.33	4,478,202
Public servants	2.73	2,292,167

Source: the author.

Poor voter turnout may, however, mean that many registered voters will not turn up as has been the case in all past elections in the fourth Republic. Voter turnout was at 43.65% in 2015, 54% in 2011, 57% in 2007, 68% in 2003 and 52% in 1999.

Collecting permanent voters' cards (PVCs) has remained a challenge, with around 8 million yet to be claimed by their holders as at January 2019. Despite an extension of the deadline for collecting PVCs, hundreds of thousands of them remain in the custody of INEC offices. Without a PVC there can be no voting. The reasons given range from difficulties in getting the cards back after repeated efforts, changes of locality of residence, death or inability to locate the appropriate issuing office.

Electoral malpractice and irregularities

The history of elections in Nigeria is fraught with malpractice, fraud, rigging, ballot snatching, violence and intimidation of opponents and electors.

In the 2015 presidential elections, 13.5 million out of 31.7 million voted manually without biometric accreditation. President Buhari, the then APC candidate, won in nine of the 10 of the most affected states, which were predominantly in the north-west and middle belt areas. Manual voting could be a likely irregularity in this election if, as in 2015, the card readers fail to work or other electricity-related challenges are faced.

The leading candidates

With 72 presidential hopefuls, the contest seems to be between the two dominant parties, the All Progressive Congress Party (APC) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and between the incumbent president and a past Vice-president. Amongst the others, perhaps the most highly qualified in terms of education is the former Central Bank Deputy Governor. The manifestos show little differences in the ideologies motivating either parties or leaders.

Muhammadu Buhari

Muhammadu Buhari, aged 76, is Muslim from the north-eastern geo-political zone of the country. He is the incumbent President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria. A retired-General of the Nigerian Army, he was military head of state from 1983 to 1984, when he was overthrown by another military coup. Buhari is the front runner, being the incumbent and having access to State-facilitated resources to attempt to retain his post. His ruling APC selected him without holding primaries.

Atiku Abubakar

Atiku Abubakar, aged 71, hails from the north-west and was formerly Vice-president, from 1999 to 2007. He won a keenly contested primary to emerge as the PDP's standard bearer. Having ruled Nigeria for 16 years, the PDP became the main opposition party in 2015 in a historic loss in the general elections. Atiku is an entrepreneur who built his career as a customs official. He had accused his detractors of using the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission against him but the court cleared him of corruption allegations. In a CNN interview he was asked why his name consistently came up associated with corruption and claimed he was not corrupt and challenged anyone with evidence to produce it. It was alleged that Atiku could not visit the US due to a presumed case of money laundering but in a bid to quell the rumour he received his first visa in 13 years and paid a visit to the US despite lobbying by government officials for the US consulate not to grant it so that they did not appear to endorse his candidacy.

Atiku, who owns a private university in his home Adamawa state, a Boko Haram enclave, has identified unemployment and national unity as his key priorities. In a country where economic theories do not follow normal patterns and privatisation has yielded no positive results except for a few business elites, Atiku's market-based economic preferences do not appear attractive to the masses, as Nigeria has more people in absolute poverty than India. The fear of a corporate capture of the State under an Atiku-led government is high.

The political parties

The APC was formed by the alliance of three political parties in 2013 in order to present a stronger challenge to the then ruling PDP. Most of the party's stalwarts have previously been prominent PDP members at one time or another. President Buhari himself, prior to contesting under the APC banner in 2015, had woefully failed in presidential bids in 2003, 2007 and 2011 under two different parties. The APC considers itself a centre-left party with a preference for controlled market policies and a strong regulatory environment.

The PDP was the ruling party until 2015, when an alliance of the strongest opposition parties saw it losing the presidential elections and a historic handover of power from one political party to another. It considers itself to be at the centre-right. Atiku was the Vice-president during two terms although he was relatively out of favour with his President, Olusegun Obasanjo, in his second term in office. This saw him lose out in his presidential ambitions. The party supposedly supports free-market policies and limits to government regulation. The government under PDP saw the de-regulation and privatisation of Nigerian investments, much to the chagrin of civil society. The presidential candidate in 2015, the then President Goodluck Jonathan, lost by 2.6 million votes to Buhari.

Crackdown on the judiciary

Concern is rife over the actions of the executive power in the period leading up to the elections. The President's bitter experience and lack of success with the judiciary in claiming what he believed to be his mandate in 2007 and 2011 elections has pitted him as an adversary. Judges under his administration have been under investigation and attacked by the security forces and prosecutors in a fight against corruption, which is alleged to be heavily biased against his opponents. The latest assault has been a charge of falsely declaring assets brought against the Chief Justice of Nigeria, Walter Onnoghen, at the Code of Conduct Bureau. The allegations of it being an electoral strategy seem to have a basis in the timing of the charge, the usurpation of the powers of the National Judicial Council, which has disciplinary powers over judicial officers, the call for the Chief Justice to resign and the presidential suspension of the Chief Justice of Nigeria on the eve of the appointment of electoral tribunal judges and members across the country.

The President then appointed the next senior Justice of the Supreme Court, Ibrahim Tanko Muhammad, as Acting Chief Justice of Nigeria. The social media could not fail but notice that the Acting Chief Justice hails from northern Nigeria, like the President and unlike the Chief Justice. The President claims he was acting in compliance with the order of the Code of Conduct Tribunal. The Constitution provides that the President can only remove a Chief Justice with the support of at least a two-thirds majority of the Senate. The matter had not been considered in the Senate at all. The day after his controversial and purportedly unconstitutional appointment, the acting Chief Justice of Nigeria swore in 250 members of the electoral tribunals to handle election-related disputes. In a swift move, the PDP rejected to no avail the electoral tribunal appointees of the new Acting Chief Justice. A petition immediately surfaced against the acting Chief Justice Tanko before the National Judicial Council. The latter had to step in through the appointment of one of its members to be the interim Chair of the National Judicial Council while both Justices were asked to answer the petitions against them. There is, however, a list of

persons involved in high-level corruption cases who are yet to be charged. His fight against corruption as a military ruler was hinged on the basis of being guilty until proved innocent. His current strategy is, however, unknown and has yet to show clear results.

President Buhari hinged his 2015 campaign promises on improving security, fighting corruption and improving the economy. In a 2018 poll,² 40% of Nigerians approved his administration, while 67% rated him poorly in his management of the economy, which hit a recession in recent times. At the same time, 57% rated him poorly in the fight against corruption and 55% also rated him poorly in security. Other areas of a weak performance were electricity, education, housing, oil and gas, transport and health. His highest rating was in agriculture.

The regime's National Social Investment Programme has seen positive results and is receiving positive reviews. Around 297,973 households were receiving cash transfers of NGN5,000 (€12) in 20 states with over 455,857 poor and vulnerable households included in the national social register. The categories of people normally excluded from credit facilities by traditional banks are targeted to give them access to credit free of collateral as part of the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme. The home-grown school feeding programme has also seen 9 million children benefitting and 95,422 cooks employed with over 100,000 smallholding farmers supplying the ingredients. Up to 500,000 unemployed graduates are said to be on the government payroll, earning NGN30,000/month (€73) in health, agriculture and education.

Security

Security is on red alert due to the elections and the increase in crimes, terrorism and civil unrest. Attacks continue in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States allegedly by Boko Haram despite the Army's claim to have regained control. Both ISIS West Africa (ISIS-WA) and Boko Haram have stated they plan to disrupt the elections with the threat of attacks on security officials, infrastructure and public places such as places of worship, malls and markets.

On 9 February nine vehicles of the ruling APC campaign convoy were burnt with petrol bombs on the outskirts of Abuja. On 13 February, in its stronghold of Borno state, Boko Haram is alleged to have attacked the convoy of the State Governor on his way to a campaign rally. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has assured the public that it has made adequate security arrangements for the elections.

The government's response to the activities of supporters of the separatist Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has also brought to light issues of human-rights abuses. The social media have shown people alleged to be soldiers complaining of a lack of weapons to combat Boko Haram despite the investments made in order to fight against terrorism. The herdsmen-farmer conflict has seen many deaths and Amnesty International has called on the government to consider the cost of its response. Nigerians generally do not feel safe and are not safe and Shiites have been subject to judicial killings.

² Buharimetre of the Centre for Democracy and Development.

On 9 February 2019, two weeks prior to the elections, there was a fire at the Qua'an Pan Local Government Area (LGA) Electoral Commission offices in Plateau State, in the country's middle belt, a centre of religious strife between Muslims and Christians, herdsmen and farmers. Up to 360 voting cubicles, 755 ballot boxes, 14 generators, and election forms and official stamps were reported to have been lost in the fire. Earlier, on 2 February, a similar fate had befallen the Electoral Commission office in the Isiala Ngwa LGA in Abia State, in the country's south-east. As many as 4,695 card readers were destroyed in yet another INEC office in Anambra State in the south-east. The Electoral Commission has requested additional security measures around its offices and critical structures but has claimed the elections will go ahead regardless of arson attacks.

As campaigns heat up in the last days before the election, violence by campaign followers and attacks on politicians have flared up. The Vice-president suffered a helicopter crash on his campaign trail, although the lack of fatalities resulted in no investigation as to the cause. Convoy accidents and attacks resulting in multiple deaths are being reported. The presence of security personnel in major towns gives credence to social-media warnings about security risks and advice on how to take extra care for self-protection.

A new Acting Inspector-General of Police, Mohammed Adamu, was appointed by the President a month before the elections. This followed the statutory retirement of his predecessor, Ibrahim Idris. Adamu was an Assistant Inspector-General and junior to seven Deputy Inspector-Generals prior to his appointment. In line with the usual practice, all seven were prematurely retired. Police Commissioners were also appointed to the main state commands. The Coalition of United Political Parties has alleged that there is a plot to appoint police chiefs prior to the elections to favour the ruling APC. The police has denied that the posting of Police Commissioners has any bias linked to the elections, declaring itself non-partisan and neutral, while attributing the new postings to vacancies created by recent retirements. The Police has planned to deploy over 300,000 of its 350,000 strong force for security purposes in the presidential elections.

The peace accord

A peace accord has been signed by the presidential candidates fostered by the National Peace Committee led by the former military head of state, Abdulsalam Abubakar, who brought the fourth Republic into being. The elections are to count on the presence of international observers.

Disenfranchisement threats

Millions of university students who had returned home as a result of a three-month strike by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) have been recalled. The students could potentially have been disenfranchised because voters are required to register within their wards of residence, as movement is curtailed on election days. Most students attend tertiary institutions outside their home towns, to which they return when universities are not in session. However, given the threat, the ASUU suspended its three-month strike and signed a memorandum of understanding with the Federal Government. Nevertheless, the students themselves have mixed feelings, preferring to remain with their families until after the general elections. The Labour movement also threatened

strike action to force the government to the negotiating table in order to agree to an increase in the minimum wage to NGN30,000/month (€73).

Foreign interests

The question of foreign intervention has also been topical since a gubernatorial candidate of the ruling party and an incumbent threatened that anyone who sought to interfere in Nigeria's domestic affairs should expect to return home in a 'body bag'. The EU observer, in a quick response, justified his presence as being at the behest of the authorities, an invitation the EU has been receiving since 1999, and confirmed he would continue with his work. This prompted the opposition PDP to threaten to withdraw from the Peace Accord signed by the presidential candidates. The US, the UK and the EU had expressed concern over the suspension, calling for free, fair and credible elections. The ruling APC party instead accused the diplomats of 'making comments that are capable of undermining the integrity of the election'. In a related development, the President of Niger joined the incumbent presidential candidate of the ruling party on his campaign trail.

The social media, fake news and election campaigns

The social media have become a source of both news and fake news. The latter is making the rounds as much as genuine news with hardly any way of distinguishing between the two. Unverifiable information is being shared between people over a range of topics, including the elections and the issue of security during the election period.

The electoral body

As mentioned above, the INEC and the SIEC are the independent electoral management bodies for supervising elections in Nigeria. However, the former has struggled to gain public trust since it was reconstituted in 2017. Under the chairmanship of Professor Mahmood Yakubu it has attempted to build and maintain the trust and confidence of the public. The controversy generated by the appointment of National INEC Commissioner Amina Bala Zakari as head of its Collation Centre Committee has raged on despite denials that Zakari was a member of the President's family. The media have, however, linked the two.

Conclusions

For many Nigerians it is difficult to make a choice in presidential elections with so many candidates. Looking at the candidates' campaigns and their visibility, this analysis has focused on the two candidates considered to be the election's front runners. While the other 71 candidates may have value to bring to the country, the battle now seems to be between Buhari and Atiku, with all others far behind and none coming close to being a close challenger. Neither are an answer to Nigeria's problems but both are committed and consider themselves entitled.