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OPINION AND ANALYSIS

A marriage of inconvenience: some issues underlying Nigeria's 2015 presidential election

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FEBRUARY 2015, according to the Chinese Zodiac, ushers in the year of the goat. Under this mythology, the year of the goat promises stability and peace. After a year characterised by insurgency and declining fortunes, Nigerians would be happy for this to be true. However, current indicators are pointing to a year that would be full of strife.

On Valentine's Day, citizens of Africa's largest oil producer are set to go to the polls to choose a president. The two main contenders are the current incumbent, Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), and former head of state, Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressive Congress (APC). The truth of the matter is, no matter who wins, it would be difficult to make a call on the credibility of the elections. The environment in which the elections are to be held is not conducive to a free and fair election; with wide spread insecurity and questions surrounding the voter's roll. The real issue is whether or not there is a candidate that can cure the malaise that plagues the country.

Nigerian politics is a complicated weave of regional and religious tensions that was birthed in the creation of the state by British colonialists. The North and South were developed as separate protectorates and slammed together to form what is now known as Nigeria. A flawed power-sharing deal that has seen leadership alternate between the North and the South, has prevented the largely Christian (and resource rich) South being plunged into a bloody war with the largely Muslim North. Under late president Yar'Adua, the North was supposed to have their time in the sun from 2007 till the 2015 elections. However, he died in office in 2010 and, his Southern deputy, Goodluck Jonathan, became the president. This has left many Northerners feeling cheated and marginalized in the Nigerian deal.

In 2015, the North may just have another chance at having their candidate in the top job. In Africa, incumbents rarely lose elections. Yet the result of this election is really hard to predict. Under Jonathan's watch Nigeria has seen its fortunes decline, even more so since the drop in the price of oil. He has failed to oversee the stronger diversification of the country's economy, which in turn has

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made it vulnerable to the instability in the price of oil. More than half of the country lives in poverty and that is set to increase under current conditions. Even more worryingly, Jonathan is apparently incapable of controlling threats to State security vis-à-vis Boko Haram; neither does he seem to be have control of the military.

Retired Major General Buhari is not necessarily a better option. It cannot be forgotten that he ruled Nigeria from December 1983 till August 1985. He got there via coup d'état – and was ousted by a coup d'état. Since his ousting he has unsuccessfully contested elections in 2003, 2007 and 2011. Furthermore, his history as the minister Petroleum and Natural resources was not noteworthy. His choice of running mate for the 2015 election, however, is quite interesting. His chosen deputy is a relatively new player on the political scene, a southerner who is an accomplished jurist as well as a pastor within one of Nigeria's mega church franchises. With the choice of Oluyemi Osinbajo, Buhari allays fears that he intends to pursue a hard-line Islamist agenda that includes turning the entire country into an Islamic state.

Two things that may sway this election- assuming fairness- are Boko Haram and erstwhile president and PDP leader Olusegun Obasanjo. A former military dictator turned democratically elected president, Obasanjo, has been purportedly a 'kingmaker' since 1979. Even though his influence has waned, he still holds considerable sway. He has all but endorsed Buhari with his incessant criticisms of Jonathan. Boko Haram is another major factor, since their bombing of the UN building in Nigeria in 2011 as well as the carnage they have wrought in Northern Nigeria and parts of Cameroon and Chad; it is clear that Jonathan is struggling to deal with this threat convincingly.

Even though on the surface it appears that religion would be a deciding factor in the upcoming elections, the true issue is the unsound power sharing arrangement. Focus on whether the president is a Northerner or Southerner, will detract from real issues like security and the economy making them side considerations in assessing the suitability of each candidate. It is unlikely that the election would be postponed. Yet, a credible election is vital not only for Nigeria, but the rest of Africa, owing to its status as a leading economy and a regional power. Hopefully the year of the goat would usher in a calmer period but it is unlikely. Two important takeaways for all African countries from the Nigerian quagmire is that: first, historical imbalances always have to be addressed or else they become a thorn in the flesh; second, power sharing deals are forced marriages that inevitably end in an ugly divorce.

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