



NRF CHAIR IN AFRICAN DIPLOMACY AND FOREIGN POLICY

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OPINION AND ANALYSIS

Nigeria's election: unsurprisingly surprising

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7 April 2015

NIGERIA HAS made history with its latest polls, reshaping its political history and more deeply entrenching its democracy. The opposition All Progressive Congress (APC) candidate Muhammadu Buhari has won, and his Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) predecessor Goodluck Jonathan has conceded defeat, the latter calling his opponent to congratulate him. The spirit of this outcome is one that many hoped for, but few expected with widespread violence being anticipated in the wake of the closest polls in Nigerian history. But Nigeria is a country of contradictions, with an outcome that is pleasantly surprising for those who have studied Nigeria.

It is no secret that the country has been plagued by a complex and often violent political history that has been punctuated by coups and civil war. Since the latest advent of democracy in the country, or the so-called Fourth Republic ushered in in 1999, the erstwhile ruling party and now opposition PDP have been in government. Indeed, no incumbent contesting polls had lost, until now, with Buhari, dictator turned democrat defeated in three elections previous. An outcome that had upset a portion of the electorate seeing post-electoral violence that killed more than 800 people in set of previous elections.

Of course it remains to be seen whether all stakeholders, along with Nigeria's 170 million-strong populace, will accept this outcome as gracefully as Jonathan. Indeed, it had been reported in at least one state that the PDP governor attempted to delay the announcement of results when it became patent that his party had lost power. Further, many Christians in the northeastern region of the country, currently plagued by Boko Haram, fled ahead of the elections in fear of reprisals in the event of an unfavourable outcome. Despite this, it is encouraging that the country experienced such a high voter turnout in the most hotly contested election in its history, at a time when support for the newly coalesced opposition is flourishing and as more and more Nigerians look to hold their government to account. What is sure is that Nigerians have decided.

Awe-inspiring and hopeful as this election may be it spells hard times ahead for Buhari and a new APC administration, which will inherit a veritable Pandora's Box of problems, many of which are not easily nor quickly solved. The country has for decades been plagued by grand-scale corruption and a lack of transparency around oil rents in particular, with many elites having considerable

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stakes in the business of oil, including Jonathan. The economy, much as it has grown impressively in previous years, is flagging due to oil price fluctuations and whilst sectors such as telecoms and retail are booming, diversification of the economy remains slow. What's more, the lack of infrastructure and the many challenges of doing business in the country have stymied prospects of further economic development and this must be addressed forthwith.

Another pressing challenge is rectifying the negative relationship the country has thus far experienced between economic growth and socio-economic development. Poverty and inequality remain rife, and a largely young population continues to battle high rates of unemployment, a low level of skills, and a sense of disenfranchisement, disillusionment, and isolation from economic processes.

Then, of course, there is the matter of security, particularly around Boko Haram, which needs a renewed and reinvigorated approach to its quelling, but other security challenges also persist. Trafficking, the preponderance of various scams, rampant and unchecked illegal oil bunkering, armed robbery at sea, and maritime piracy also need tackling.

This election certainly ushers in a new era for the country and, no doubt, will bring with it its own set of contradictions and surprises. The APC has, as any party does during election-time, made grand promises and will have to step up to the plate with a sense of dedication and sobriety in addressing them. A gander at Nigeria's history shows that many a junta and democratic dispensation have come forth on the waves of promised change, only to metamorphose into the predecessor, falling victim to the temptations of high office. Buhari is only too familiar with this reality, as he both overthrew and was overthrown in coups, but must now, as the changed man he claims to be, begin to break the cycle.

It will make for interesting observation to see how some of the higher stake issues of the transition are managed and play out, as I am sure there are many PDP politicians who may fear prosecution and may well be squirreling away what money they can into offshore accounts. Will this be exposed and tackled? Will the APC continue with its case against Mrs. Jonathan at the ICC? Buhari will have to tread carefully in keeping his promises, particularly around corruption, but will also have to be wary of making moves that are too sweeping as to unsettle the peace and threaten this strengthened yet still fragile democracy.

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