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**Nigeria's 2015 Presidential Election:  
Deciphering a High-risk Operation**

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## ***Introduction***

Nigeria is entering a new electoral cycle, holding its sixth general elections since the restoration of civilian rule in 1999. The elections were initially scheduled for February 14 (presidential elections) and 28 (governorship elections), 2015. The first round has now been postponed until March 28. The issue of the threat posed to Nigeria by Boko Haram is not, as one might expect, at the heart of the debate surrounding the presidential campaign in the country. Nevertheless, the peculiar security context in which the forthcoming elections will take place, as well as the changes under way in Nigeria's political landscape, make this vote unique. It is therefore essential to analyze the various issues at stake in the country's sixth general elections.

## ***A united opposition for the first time***

The fact that Nigeria's opposition is united behind a single candidate<sup>1</sup> should, for once, make for a certain level of suspense surrounding the presidential election of March-April 2015. The four main opposition parties have come a long way since they merged less than two years ago. On December 11, 2014, the All Progressives Congress (APC) movement, founded in February 2013, named its candidate for the presidential election of March 2015. Thus Muhammadu Buhari, a native of the northern state of Katsina, will stand against the incumbent, Goodluck Jonathan, who has been in office since 2010 and hails from the oil-rich Niger delta region. This is the first time that the opposition, traditionally torn between the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) and the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), will present a united front, under a single banner, against the 'machine' of the People's Democratic Party (PDP).

Founded by Olusegun Obasanjo (president from 1999 to 2007) in 1999, the PDP won the presidential elections of 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011, every single presidential ballot held since the country's military dictatorship came to an end in 1998 with the death of president Sani Abacha. The PDP also controls 20 of the 36 states of the Federation of Nigeria and holds a majority in the House of Representatives (with 181 of 360 seats) and in the Senate (62 of 109 seats), despite the defection of several members – including the

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<sup>1</sup> There are 14 candidates in total for the election on March 28, 2015. The other 12, whom we will not discuss, carry little weight.

current speaker of the lower house, Aminu Waziri Tambuwal - who have left to join the ranks of the APC.<sup>2</sup> While each defection probably has its own specific reasons, it is likely that the impossibility of attaining certain positions (particularly local roles, such as governorships) has been a decisive factor inducing some PDP cadres to join the APC. Mr. Tambuwal, for example, will stand as a candidate to become governor of Sokoto for the APC on April 11, whereas he probably would not have been able to secure the PDP's nomination for the candidacy.

Despite internal wrangles between the leaders of the APC, which largely manifested themselves during the party's internal campaign, the APC's primary in December 2014 was a success. This was a necessary first step towards maintaining the unity of this varied opposition coalition. A great many APC cadres are PDP defectors, such as the governor of the northern state of Kano, Rabi'u Kwankwaso, who came second in the vote on December 11, and a former vice-president, Atiku Abubakar. Watched by dozens of cameras and journalists, the approximately 7,200 individuals registered to participate in the primary election cast their vote in a relatively peaceful climate at the Teslim Balogun Stadium in Surulere, a residential area of Lagos. The results were revealed in real time within the stadium and elsewhere, thanks to several information websites. The successful organization of this convention was due partly to the role of one of the founders of the APC and a former governor of Lagos, Bola Tinubu. He used his influence as much as possible to ensure that Muhammadu Buhari obtained a large number of votes in this key state in terms of primary votes. The situation will be the same for the presidential elections.<sup>3</sup> The extremely transparent and democratic nomination method chosen by the APC is new for Nigeria. Bola Tinubu conceived the system together with senior members of the opposition coalition in order to make the old machine of the PDP, which did not invite its activists to vote to select the party's candidate for the 2015 elections, look out of touch. Goodluck Jonathan was appointed exclusively by party cadres. However, the electoral battle is far from won for the opposition.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be pointed out that several important figures within the APC have also left to join the PDP, including Mallam Nuhu Ribadu, the former executive chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and an anti-corruption champion, and the former governor of the state of Borno, Ali Modu Sheriff, who has been very close to late president Sani Abacha.

<sup>3</sup> The state of Lagos represents 5.8 million voters registered for the presidential election by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). This makes it the country's largest state by voter population, followed by Kano, with 4.9 million voters. *This Day*, January 16, 2015, available at: <[www.thisdaylive.com/articles/with-5-8m-registered-persons-lagos-tops-states-with-eligible-voters/199345/](http://www.thisdaylive.com/articles/with-5-8m-registered-persons-lagos-tops-states-with-eligible-voters/199345/)>.

## ***The motivations behind political competition in Nigeria: an analysis of party politics***

Political competition in Nigeria is not much influenced by comparisons of the programs or track records of the different candidates. The election of Ayo Fayose as governor of Ekiti in June 2014 is a recent example of this. Mr. Fayose was sacked in 2006 by Olusegun Obasanjo for corruption. However, since the elections of October 2014, which he won under the banner of the PDP, he has been the state governor once more. Elections are still largely influenced by a party's capacity to mobilize its political clientele and funding circuits.

While the APC has considerable funds thanks to the businessmen who run it (such as Atiku Abubakar, who is one of the shareholders of the extremely profitable oil logistics firm), these sums are modest in comparison to the amounts at the disposal of the PDP, which controls almost all of the states of the Niger delta region, which are rich in oil and gas. President Goodluck Jonathan, the former governor of Bayelsa state – and his minister for petroleum resources, Diezani Alison-Madueke, a native of Rivers state – can count on the support of a good many influential men in this region (civil servants at local government area level, traditional leaders, etc.), as well as a broad network of 20,000 'activists', who benefited from the generous amnesty granted by Mr. Jonathan in 2009, when he was vice-president, in exchange for putting a stop to acts of vandalism to oil infrastructure. Mr. Jonathan will also have the backing of certain wealthy local businessmen, who became rich thanks to the allocation of oil blocs or through oil theft. His campaign will also be supported by the region's PDP governors. The PDP therefore has a sizable advantage in shoring up the support of its clientele.

The manipulation of religious and regional affiliation plays a fundamental role in Nigerian elections. Since 1999, an informal arrangement has applied within the PDP, whereby the presidency of the republic alternates between the North and the South under a so-called zoning system. This form of informal power sharing based on regional criteria is perceived by many, both within and outside of the party, as a sharing of power between a Muslim-majority North and a largely Christian South. The religion factor continues to dictate the structure of political competition in terms of voter perception. According to the Pew Research Center, 87% of Nigeria's population considers religion to be "very important in their life" and 31% say they could support only leaders from their own religious group.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the populations of the Niger delta region (known as the South South by the authorities when breaking down the country into geopolitical zones) should traditionally vote largely for Mr. Jonathan.

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<sup>4</sup> "Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa", Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Washington, April 2010.

For example, in 2011, out of 8.9 million voters, 6.1 million chose Mr. Jonathan, with just 49,000 opting for Mr. Buhari.<sup>5</sup> Mr. Buhari instead mobilizes votes in the country's North.<sup>6</sup> The parties therefore have an incentive to play this card by using divisive rhetoric in a bid to secure the loyalty of their respective electorates. An example of this is the PDP's recent declaration that the APC, whose two main leaders, Muhammadu Buhari and Bola Tinubu, are Muslim, was the equivalent of the "Muslim Brotherhood of Nigeria"<sup>7</sup>. The party also accused the APC of supporting Boko Haram.<sup>8</sup>

## ***Buhari: a man of the past?***

While Muhammadu Buhari is presented by his supporters as the embodiment of the rotation between the two different religions, the PDP's leaders like to depict him as a man of the past. Major General Buhari has already been president of Nigeria once before, between 1983 and 1985, following a military coup. During the two years of his rule, Mr. Buhari was heavily criticized for his dictatorial tendencies, his brutality, and his regime's poor human rights record.<sup>9</sup> Another argument used against Mr. Buhari is his age (72), which contrasts with the relatively youthful Mr. Jonathan, who is 57. The fact that Mr. Buhari has already lost at the ballot box on three occasions (in 2003, 2007 and 2011) is also used by the ruling party as proof that Nigerians have already made their opinion known and did not choose him. One of the main personal attacks against him concerned the validity of his academic qualifications, about which certain voices from the PDP have officially expressed doubts. Mr. Buhari therefore had to publicly justify himself by providing details of his academic history and mentioning the names of his fellow students, including that of Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, the elder brother of former president Umaru Yar'Adua (2007-2010).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For reference, in 2011, Mr. Buhari received 12.2 million votes, compared with 22.5 million for Mr. Jonathan (58.9% of votes cast).

<sup>6</sup> The breakdown of the results of the 2011 presidential elections is available at: [www.nigerianmuse.com/20110419040622zg/sections/general-articles/details-of-2011-presidential-election-results-in-nigeria/](http://www.nigerianmuse.com/20110419040622zg/sections/general-articles/details-of-2011-presidential-election-results-in-nigeria/).

<sup>7</sup> "PDP Condemns Dominance of APC Executive by Muslims", *All Africa*, January 2014, available at: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201401080532.html>.

<sup>8</sup> "Fani-Kayode's Revelation: We Have Been Vindicated – PDP", *All Africa*, June 2014, available at: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201406040360.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Read the text on this topic by Nigerian Nobel literature laureate Wole Soyinka, available at: <http://saharareporters.com/2007/01/14/crimes-buhari-wole-soyinka>.

<sup>10</sup> "Buhari: My Certificates with the Army Secretary", *This Day*, January 21, 2015.

## **Goodluck Jonathan and his record on security and the economy**

The deterioration of the security situation in the country's North works against the incumbent president. On the one hand, the states of the North-East (Borno, Adamawa and Yobe), which have been under a state of emergency for more than a year and a half, have seen a resurgence of massive killings claimed by or attributed to the Islamist movement Boko Haram.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, since 2014, the Islamist group's activities have been covering a wider geographic area, with suicide attacks perpetrated in some cities in other states, as in Kano in December 2014. The movement is also spreading beyond Nigeria's borders, particularly to Cameroon, where the Chadian army deployed several thousand men in mid-January<sup>12</sup>, and now Niger, in the Diffa region. However, the states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe are run by opposition governors who are members of the APC. The votes of this underdeveloped region, situated far from the economic and political centers of Lagos and Abuja, traditionally go mainly to the opposition (except in Adamawa, where Goodluck Jonathan came first in 2011). The fact that its inhabitants may be prevented from voting due to the climate of insecurity linked to Boko Haram is therefore not a real reason for concern for the PDP camp, even if it justified postponing the election due to the impossibility of distributing voting cards in this region, which represents some 15 million registered voters (22% of the electorate). One could even say that if a large number of inhabitants of the three states worst affected by Boko Haram, which are also reservoirs of votes for Mr. Buhari, were prevented from voting, it would be a decisive electoral advantage for Mr. Jonathan.

Moreover, the president's management of his native Niger delta region, the economic heart of Nigeria, which is home to almost all of the country's oil activity and represents more than 90% of its exports, accounting for 15.8% of gross domestic product<sup>13</sup> and around 75% of the federal budget, could work against him. The considerable drop in company investments in the Niger delta due to legal uncertainty<sup>14</sup> and the unprecedented volumes of oil being stolen<sup>15</sup> is

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<sup>11</sup> For 2014, Amnesty International recorded 4,000 civilian deaths linked to the actions of Boko Haram, available at: <[www.amnesty.fr/CP-Nigeria-Des-images-satellite-montrent-ampleur-terrifiante-de-attaque-de-Boko-Haram-contre-Baga-13883](http://www.amnesty.fr/CP-Nigeria-Des-images-satellite-montrent-ampleur-terrifiante-de-attaque-de-Boko-Haram-contre-Baga-13883)>. According to Amnesty International, the most recent massacre, which took place between January 2 and 7 in the town of Baga, on the shores of Lake Chad, resulted in around 2,000 deaths.

<sup>12</sup> "Le Tchad mobilise ses troupes contre Boko Haram" [Chad mobilizes its troops against Boko Haram], *Le Monde*, January 21, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Based on the new accounting figures. See World Bank, *Nigeria Economic Report*, July 2014, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> A new Petroleum Industry Bill has been under discussion since 2007. This never-ending legislative process prevents oil companies from investing in

beginning to impact the public finances and the country's growth, which have been sheltered until recently thanks to the high price of oil. However, the president can no longer rely on high oil prices to support Nigeria's public finances. The price of oil has fallen by around 50% in six months, reaching \$45 in January 2015. Addressing the National Assembly to present the 2015 budget on December 17, 2014, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Nigeria's finance minister, stated that in 2014, recorded production fell by 180,000 barrels per day (bpd) compared with the forecast set out in the 2014 budget, before finally reaching an average of 2.2 millions of barrels per day (mbpd).<sup>16</sup> The 2015 federal budget had to take these changes into account, and was based on an average price of \$65 per barrel and a production rate of 2.28 mbpd.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

Goodluck Jonathan's record as the country's president, which is mixed to say the least, may not be enough to enable the opposition to win the election in April. The APC faces a bumpy road ahead: Muhammadu Buhari is an easy target due to his military past, and the PDP knows exactly how to use rhetoric to direct debate towards personalities, so as to avoid focusing on Mr. Jonathan's record.

There is a real risk of violence during and after the elections of March-April 2015. If Mr. Jonathan wins, some of his opponents will see his victory as calling the informal power sharing arrangement between North and South into question, something the president denies<sup>18</sup>. This difference of opinions, combined with heavy manipulation of religious identity, could give rise to deep tensions. If Mr. Buhari were to emerge victorious, however, Mr. Jonathan's supporters would consider it totally unfair that the first president from the Niger delta (the country's economic heartland) would not be enjoying a second term.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, despite the six-week

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certain areas, particularly in very deep water, where taxation is likely to change under the new code.

<sup>15</sup> The available figures show 400,000 b/d stolen, the equivalent of the combined oil production of the Republic of Congo and Chad, see at: <<http://allafrica.com/stories/201407100685.html>>.

<sup>16</sup> Details of the 2015 budget are available at: <[www.budgetoffice.gov.ng/pdfs/CME%20Budget%20Speech%202015.pdf](http://www.budgetoffice.gov.ng/pdfs/CME%20Budget%20Speech%202015.pdf)>.

<sup>17</sup> PWC, *Nigeria 2015's Budget. Fiscal and Macroeconomic Analyses*, 2014, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Goodluck Jonathan's opponents believe that if he won, he would be seeking a third term: he has been in power since the death in 2010 of Umaru Yar'Adua, under whom he served as vice-president, subsequently won the 2011 elections, and is standing in the 2015 poll.

<sup>19</sup> Ijaw leader Edwin Clark recently declared "we cannot continue to feed this country and we are not ruling the country". Cf. *International Crisis Group Africa Report*, no. 220, p. 3.



postponement, the security situation risks preventing a number of people from voting, which, as we have already mentioned, may result in a challenge to the election's outcome by supporters of Mr. Buhari, for whom the North is a reservoir of votes that could prove decisive. There is a particularly high risk of violence in the states of the North, as in Kaduna in 2011<sup>20</sup>, but also in the Niger delta region, which traditionally supports the PDP, since this time the governor of the powerful Rivers state, Rotimi Amaechi, is a member of the APC and will do everything in his power to mobilize his troops to obstruct his former party. Several violent incidents have already taken place in Port Harcourt, and the number of arms in circulation is causing concern for local authorities.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In 2011, some 1,000 people died during the electoral process, see at: <[www.nytimes.com/2011/04/25/world/africa/25nigeria.html?\\_r=2&scp=2&sq=nigeria%20&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/25/world/africa/25nigeria.html?_r=2&scp=2&sq=nigeria%20&st=cse)>.

<sup>21</sup> "2015: Amaechi Raises Alarm Over Arms Build-up", *Daily Independent*, January 2, 2014, available at: <<http://dailyindependentnig.com/2014/01/2015-amaechi-raises-alarm-over-arms-build-up/>>.