

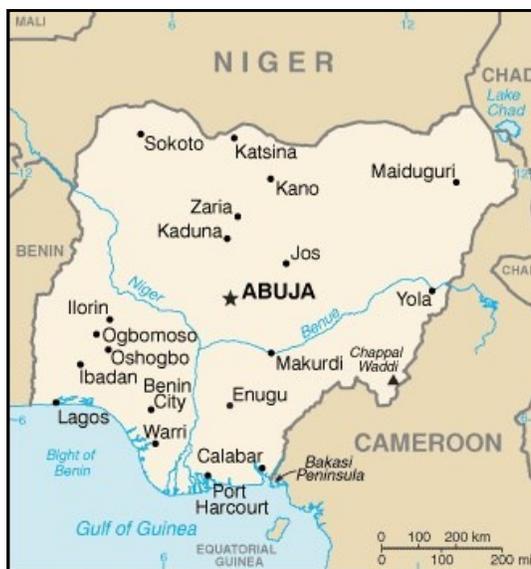


Factsheet

Nigeria

January 2015

Religious Freedom and Nigeria's 2015 Elections



The upcoming February 2015 elections in Nigeria will be an important moment for its Muslim and Christian communities and the status of religious freedom in West Africa's largest nation. The backdrop for these pivotal elections includes a history of Muslim-Christian sectarian violence, relentless Boko Haram attacks and threats against Christians and Muslim critics, misuse of religion by politicians, and worsening interfaith relations. Existing regional, ethnic, and religious grievances, northern demands for the presidency, and politicians reverting to identity politics and misusing religion increase the likelihood for post-election violence.

THE U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress.

732 N. Capitol St. N.W.,
Suite A714
Washington, D.C. 20401
Phone: (202) 786-0613
media@uscirf.gov

www.uscirf.gov

NIGERIA

What type of elections are being held and when are they scheduled to occur?

Nigeria will hold presidential, federal parliamentary, and state parliamentary elections on February 14, 2015. A presidential candidate is declared the winner if he secures a majority of votes nationwide, as well as meets the constitutional requirement of garnering at least 25 percent of the votes in two-thirds, or 36, states.

Gubernatorial elections will be held on February 28th in 29 states. These elections are equally important given that, in Nigeria's federal system of government, federal funding is devolved to governors. It is at the state level where governors institute economic, infrastructure, and social development programs that influence unemployment rates and security, and can increase ethno-religious inequities.

Who are the major political parties and candidates?

This will be Nigeria's first closely-contested presidential election between two major political parties – the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the new opposition All Progressives Congress (APC). The PDP has won every presidential election since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999. The APC was formed in February 2013 when a number of prominent PDP politicians left the party and merged with four previous opposition parties¹ from all six of Nigeria's geopolitical zones.²

In December 2014, the PDP and the APC officially nominated their presidential candidates, who subsequently selected vice presidential candidates. The PDP presidential ticket will include incumbent president Goodluck Jonathan and vice president Namadi Sambo. President Jonathan is a Christian from Bayelsa State in the south. Prior to becoming president, he served as Bayelsa State governor from 2005 to 2007 and then as Nigeria's vice president from 2007 to 2010. Vice President Sambo is a Muslim from the Middle Belt state of Kaduna and served as its governor from 2007 to 2010.

The APC ticket will be led by Major General Muhammadu Buhari for president and Yemi Osibanjo for vice president. Gen. Buhari, a Muslim from the far northern state of Katsina, ruled the country from 1983 to 1985. He also unsuccessfully campaigned for president in 2003, 2007, and 2011. Osibanjo is a Christian from Lagos State in the south who served as that state's Attorney General and Commissioner for Justice from 1999 to 2007. He also is a pastor at the Redeemed Christian Church of God.

This will be the second contest between President Jonathan and Gen. Buhari – they were the leading presidential candidates in 2011.

¹ Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) and a faction of the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA).

² South South, South West, South East, North Central, North East, and North West.

President Jonathan's candidacy is controversial. In May 2010, then Vice President Jonathan became president following the untimely death of President Umaru Yar'Adua. President Jonathan then ran successfully in his own right in 2011.³ If President Jonathan wins in February and serves his entire term, he will have governed a total of 10 years as president. His opponents contend that 10 years would violate the constitutional provision limiting the cumulative tenure of a president to a maximum of eight years, as well as the spirit of term limits. President Jonathan's supporters maintain his current re-election campaign is not unconstitutional given that the Nigerian Constitution allows for a president to be elected twice. To date, court cases challenging President Jonathan's candidacy have not found it to violate the constitution.

What are the national implications of this election?

The return to democracy and elected leadership created a winner-take-all fight for presidential power between regions. Nigeria's population of 170 million is roughly divided between Muslims and Christians and is composed of more than 250 ethnic groups. The vast majority of the population of northern Nigeria identifies as Muslim, and primarily is from the Hausa or Fulani ethnic groups, often referred to as Hausa-Fulani. In southwest Nigeria, the Yoruba is the largest ethnic group and the region has approximately equal Christian and Muslim populations. Southeast Nigeria is dominated by the Igbo ethnic group and is largely Christian. The Middle Belt in central Nigeria is home to numerous smaller ethnic groups that are predominantly Christian, although there are also large Muslim populations.

Managing this diversity and developing a national identity has been, and continues to be, a problem for Nigerians and the Nigeria government, especially between its "Muslim North" and "Christian South." To address this challenge, the practice has been for presidential tickets to include candidates from both regions, a tactic referred to as "zoning," and religiously balanced. The ruling PDP's charter requires its presidential candidates to switch between the north and south every eight years. Yet there is no constitutional requirement of a balanced ticket or rotation of the presidency between the north and the south. However, critics argue that President Jonathan upset this informal agreement when he succeeded the late President Yar'Adua and continued to seek re-election. As a result, this year's presidential election and President Jonathan's campaign will increase northern feelings of resentment.

For Nigeria's northern Muslim population, the transformation to democracy since 1999 has been especially difficult. During the 20 years prior to 1999, military generals of northern origins had controlled the government. Five of eight military rulers were Muslim and all three of the previous elected heads of government were Muslim as well. Southerner Olusegun Obasanjo's presidency significantly altered the political power structure of Nigeria and northerners have since lost political influence.

³ President Jonathan lost every northern state in the 2011 election.

Today many in the north feel that it is still their turn for the presidency after eight years of Obasanjo's rule, and now six years of President Jonathan's rule.

Nigerians in the Niger Delta region, however, have a vested interest in ensuring that President Jonathan remains in power. President Jonathan comes from the region and his presidency has benefitted those states. President Jonathan's administration has developed the Presidential Amnesty Programme, which pays former Delta militants monthly stipends, the Niger Delta Development Commission, and the federal Niger Delta Affairs Ministry. Nigerians from the Delta region fear a northern president will end these initiatives. While these are legitimate disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration initiatives, many in the north view them as patronage programs, especially in light of President Jonathan's unwillingness to implement similar schemes to help end the Boko Haram insurgency.

What is the connection between religion and the elections?

Religious identity is becoming of primary importance to many Nigerians. A 2006 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that 76 percent of Christians and 91 percent of Muslims say that religion is more important to them than their identity as Africans, Nigerians, or members of an ethnic group. A U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) delegation to Nigeria in March 2014 was told by many interlocutors that religious identity and practice are very important to Nigerians.

In an electoral context, the religious and ethnic affiliations of persons running for public office are important to most Nigerian voters and are always known to them; indeed many observers note how these are two of the most important bases on which people vote. If given a choice, Muslims tend to vote for Muslims and Christians for Christians.

Both political parties understand the importance of the confluence of religious identity and politics, and both are highlighting religion in the campaign.

The APC is portrayed and seen by many as a Muslim alliance with a strong presence in northern areas. In fact, the PDP has labelled the APC the "Muslim Brotherhood" or "Janjaweed" ticket and accused some of its leaders of fueling the Boko Haram insurgency and the terrorists' goal to Islamize the country. Many Christians view Gen. Buhari himself as a radical Muslim. While Gen. Buhari is known to be devout, there is no evidence to support these accusations and he has been the target of a Boko Haram assassination attempt. Prior to the formal announcement of a presidential ticket, the PDP speculated that the APC would depart from the interfaith tickets since 1999 and put forward a Muslim-Muslim ticket. Former president Obasanjo and other Nigerian leaders warned that either a Muslim-Muslim or Christian-Christian ticket would be dangerous, stating "It will be insensitive to the point of absurdity for any leader or any political party to be toying with [a] Muslim-Muslim or Christian-Christian ticket at this juncture...Nigeria cannot at this stage raise the specter and fear of Islamisation or Christianisation."

Conversely, the PDP is portrayed and seen by many as a Christian alliance with strong presence in southern areas. Many Nigerians accuse Jonathan of pandering to Christian voters. Several interlocutors in March 2014 expressed anger to USCIRF Commissioners that President Jonathan was campaigning in churches throughout the country to bring further attention to his Christian faith. He continues this practice. Further highlighting himself as a Christian president and candidate, President Jonathan became the first president to lead an annual pilgrimage of Nigerian Christians to Israel in October 2013 and met with Pope Francis in March 2014. And during his official acceptance of his party's nomination, President Jonathan said his decision was based on God's wishes.

Additionally, both the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Muslim groups have protested that voter registration efforts have under-registered their members.

What is the likelihood of religious violence before, during, or after the elections?

As previously noted, regional, ethnic, and religious identification overlap in Nigeria – a majority Muslim north and majority Christian south. As early as March 2014, interlocutors expressed to USCIRF their concern that politicians were already playing to religious identity politics and that they were expecting violence to break out along religious lines. Several interlocutors told the USCIRF delegation that while a conflict may start as a fight for political power, individuals actually engaged in the violence view it as religious and as necessary to protect their religious community from the other. The conflict thereby increasingly takes on religious undertones and becomes a religious fight for those involved.

Even before the two parties' officially announced candidates, political and community leaders were threatening violence. Northern leaders have been especially problematic. Gen. Buhari and APC politician Bola Tinubu both threatened violence if their party does not win the presidency and if they do not see the election being free or fair, with Buhari as early as 2012 stating, “[i]f what happened in 2011 should happen again in 2015, by the grace of God, the dog and the baboon would all be soaked in blood,” referring to southerners. APC National Chairman John Odigie-Oyegun recently warned that the party will form a parallel government if they suspect President Jonathan of winning a rigged election. The International Crisis Group reports that Kano State politician Junaid Mohammed said, “if Jonathan insists on running, there will be bloodshed” and the Northern Elders Forum (NEF) has called Jonathan and the PDP an enemy of the state. The NEF also stated that “the North magnanimously conceded power to the South in 1999” and that “there is no going back on the presidency returning to the North in 2015.”

In the south, Niger Delta militia leaders have also warned of electoral violence if President Jonathan does not win. For instance, former Niger Delta militant Alhaji Asari-Dokubo recently stated that a President Jonathan loss would be met with “fire and brimstone.”

Where is the potential for violence greatest?

While violence could start in the south should President Jonathan lose the election, the most likely scenario for post-election violence follows the pattern of the 2011 post-election violence. In this scenario, should Gen. Buhari and the APC lose, violence could erupt in one northern city and then spread throughout the north and Middle Belt and break down along religious lines.

The potential for electoral violence is especially high in the Middle Belt, where Christians fear Muslim domination and where political victories frequently result in the granting of “indigene”⁴ benefits to and development for specific ethno-religious communities.

Some of the most recent and deadly incidents of electoral violence took place in Kaduna and Plateau states. For example, communal violence between Muslim and Christian mobs after a Jos North Local Government Area election on November 27, 2008 left hundreds dead and 46 churches, 22 mosques, and 15 Islamic schools burned. Nigeria’s 2011 presidential post-election violence claimed 800 lives over three days in northern Nigeria and displaced 65,000 people, making the elections the most violent in Nigeria’s history. Muslims burned churches and attacked Christians and southerners in their homes, businesses, schools, and on the streets. Human Rights Watch reported that more than 500 were killed in Kaduna State, the vast majority Muslims. The CAN reported that at least 187 Christians were killed, 243 injured, and more than 430 churches burned or destroyed throughout the north.

A number of USCIRF’s interlocutors expressed concern in March 2014 that Nigerians were already preparing for electoral violence. USCIRF heard reports of Muslims and Christians in Kaduna moving to areas with their co-religionists, and in Plateau and Kaduna states churches and mosques were starting to stock arms and individuals being told to store food.

However, unlike 2011, violence could also spread into the south. While there is little history of northern religious violence spreading south, there are recent isolated incidents of southerners retaliating against northern Muslims living in the south for Boko Haram violence. Muslims and mosques in several southern states were targeted in January 2012 after Boko Haram attacked churches and Christians that same month.

How will Boko Haram impact the elections?

For years, Boko Haram’s violence has terrorized Nigeria’s northeast. In May 2013, President Jonathan declared a state of emergency in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states,⁵ sending the military to the area in an attempt to defeat the terrorists. The fighting between Boko Haram and the military (joined by the northern militias, also known as the Civilian Joint Task Force) has escalated in the lead-up to the elections. As of this writing, Boko Haram controls 12 of 17 Local Government Areas in Borno state and additional territory in Adamawa and Yobe states. Two hundred thousand

⁴ “Indigenes” are persons whose ethnic group is considered native to a particular area.

⁵ The state of emergency has been renewed and remains in place.

persons have been displaced by Boko Haram violence. Additionally, actual or suspected Boko Haram attacks in Kano, the north's largest city, have increased.

In this environment of constant violence and fear, real questions arise about the viability of holding elections in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states. Despite President Jonathan's pledge that these three states will vote, it is impossible for the presidential campaign not to be impacted. Moreover, given that Boko Haram is ideologically opposed to democracy and regards politicians as corrupt, election-related locations and events, such as campaign rallies or voting stations, would be natural targets.

Indeed, Boko Haram violence has already prevented poll workers from fully registering voters in the three states. It also will likely prevent candidates from fully campaigning and/or distributing voting materials. Additionally, questions remain about whether and how displaced persons can vote.

Yet cancelling or restricting voting in Boko Haram-affected areas would overwhelmingly impact the APC and could lead to questions about the election's legitimacy. Potentially more seriously, it could be seen as an attempt to disenfranchise northern voters. Restricted voting could also affect the ability of a presidential candidate to reach 25 percent in two-thirds of the states, raising serious constitutional and other legal challenges.