



Presidential Election in Nigeria

February 16, 2023

Nigeria, the world's sixth most populous country, is scheduled to hold presidential and legislative elections on February 25, 2023. A credible process could further consolidate Nigeria's democracy and send the region a positive signal at a time of democratic backsliding in West Africa, though violence, logistical challenges, and risks of vote buying and electoral fraud threaten to undermine the polls.

Nigeria's demographic size and regional influence make it important for the attainment of U.S. security, development, and public health objectives in Africa. It is the United States' second largest trade partner in Africa, and one of the top recipients of U.S. foreign aid globally. Amid growing concern over security and governance trends in Nigeria, some Members of Congress have called for a [reassessment](#) of the bilateral relationship, or a [review](#) of U.S.-Nigeria [security cooperation](#) in light of reported human rights abuses by Nigerian security forces. In the 118th Congress, S.Res. 36 would call for fair and transparent elections in Nigeria.

Background and Major Candidates

Now home to an estimated 215 million people, Nigeria's population is [on pace](#) to exceed 375 million by 2050, when it is projected to surpass the United States to become the world's third most populous country behind India and China. Its population is highly diverse, comprising hundreds of ethnic and linguistic groups, roughly evenly divided between Muslims (a majority in the north) and Christians (a majority in the south). Formal and informal conventions to share and rotate power, public services, and state employment opportunities along ethno-regional lines have been a [defining feature](#) of Nigeria's politics.

The February elections would mark Nigeria's seventh presidential elections since its return to multiparty politics in 1999 after decades of military rule. (State-level elections, for governors and state legislatures, are due two weeks after the national-level polls.) Incumbent President Muhammadu Buhari is ineligible to run for reelection after two four-year terms in office and is not on the ballot. Of 18 presidential candidates, the [frontrunners](#) are:

- Bola Tinubu of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC), who served as governor of vote-rich Lagos State in the South-West (see [Figure 1](#)) from 1999-2007;
- Atiku Abubakar ("Atiku") of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), a North-Easterner who served as vice president from 1999-2007 and [ran unsuccessfully](#) for president in each subsequent election; and

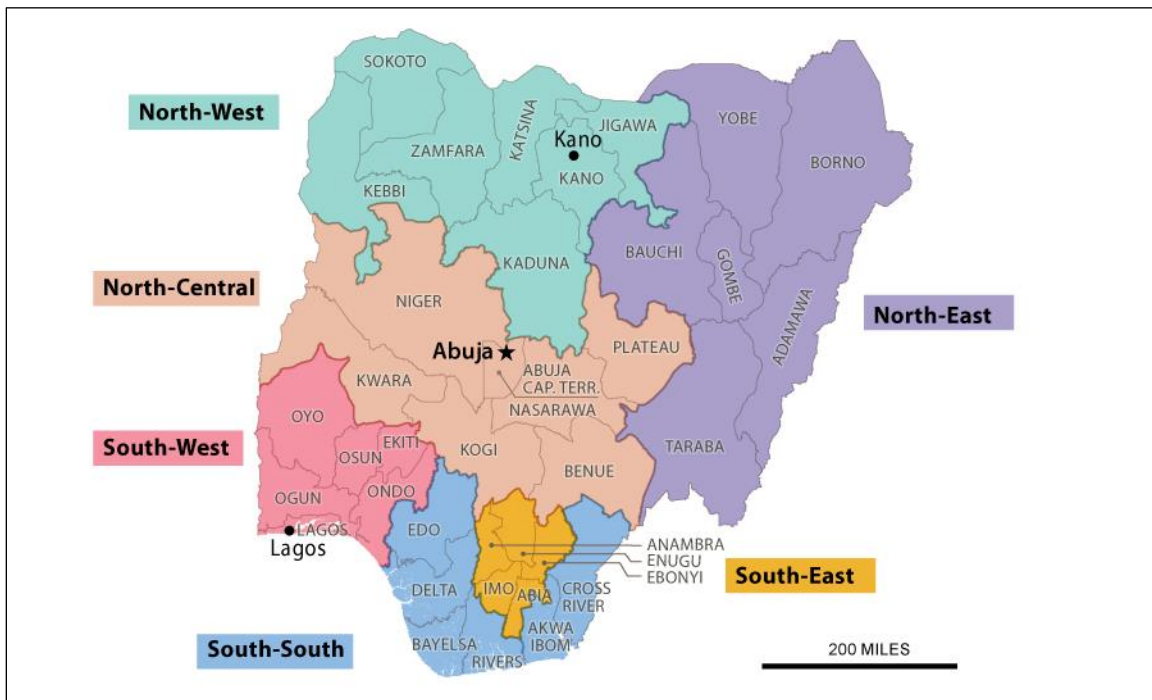
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- Peter Obi of the Labor Party (LP), a former governor of Anambra State in the South-East and Atiku's running mate in 2019, who left the PDP for the smaller LP last year.

Figure 1. Nigeria's Geopolitical Zones



Campaigns and Major Issues

Several [surveys](#) have indicated a [surprise lead for Obi](#), who has sought the support of voters disenchanted with the politically dominant APC and PDP. According to some observers, he is the [strongest third-party candidate](#) since the return to multiparty democracy. At 61, he is the youngest of the top candidates, and [appears](#) popular on social media and among southern youth, though questions persist about his popularity outside of the South-East.

The Tinubu and Atiku campaigns have departed from electoral conventions adopted after Nigeria's transition to civilian rule to share power across ethno-religious lines. Tinubu, a Muslim from the South-West, has selected a Muslim from the north as his running mate, breaking from an informal arrangement whereby parties have split tickets between a Muslim and Christian. The move has riled some Christian leaders, [including](#) members of Tinubu's party. Meanwhile, the PDP has [aggravated](#) some southern leaders by nominating Atiku—a Muslim northerner like President Buhari, who hails from Buhari's ethnic group—breaking with a practice under which parties have sought to rotate the presidency between the north and south after two terms. Obi, meanwhile, is endeavoring to become Nigeria's first president of South-Eastern extraction since the 1960s, which many [South-Eastern leaders](#) and [others](#) say is overdue; a Catholic, he has selected a Muslim northerner as his running mate. How these choices may shape voting patterns and risks of violence in a country that has seen recurrent conflict along ethnic and religious lines remains to be seen.

All three leading aspirants have faced allegations of corruption and other wrongdoing, and tensions have escalated as they have [sought to discredit](#) their opponents as unfit for the presidency. Tinubu and Atiku have each been accused, without charge, of crimes under U.S. jurisdiction—for

profiting from drug trafficking and grand corruption, respectively—while Obi allegedly failed to resign his private-sector position and declare his assets, as required by Nigerian law, while serving as Anambra State governor.

Outlook

Nigerian elections have often been marred by violence and corruption; political intimidation and vote buying have seldom resulted in prosecution. Perpetrators have destroyed election facilities and materials and threatened and assaulted candidates and police ahead of the 2023 polls; the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has reported dozens of attacks on its facilities since 2019, principally in the South-East. Conflict and displacement elsewhere in Nigeria also threaten voter participation, even as severe fuel and cash shortages—the latter due to a currency exchange program launched in late 2022—may impede electoral preparations. The last general elections, in 2019, were postponed hours before polls were to open; INEC has sought to dispel speculation about a delay in 2023. The introduction of new technologies for voter accreditation and results transmission in this year’s election have the potential to improve the conduct and credibility of the polls, though their roll-out on a national scale could prove challenging, particularly in areas with poor electricity access.

According to Nigeria’s constitution, if no presidential candidate attains at least 25% of the vote in two-thirds (24) of Nigeria’s 36 states, the election would advance to a runoff—Nigeria’s first ever—to be held by March 18. The emergence of a credible third-party candidate has increased the likelihood of the election going to a second round. In any event, some analysts have warned of a risk of post-election legal battles, political uncertainty, or violence should top candidates or their supporters dispute the credibility of the election or refuse to accept defeat.

Author Information

Tomás F. Husted
Analyst in African Affairs

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