

Nigeria: Poised to Reap the Benefits of Good Governance

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In April 2011, the Nigerian people did something truly historic, conducting arguably the most credible and transparent elections in the country's 50-year history as an independent nation. Those elections were by no means perfect, as illustrated by the significant post-election violence; however, they provided crucial lessons learned that are already helping to shape plans for the next general election cycle in 2015. In preparation for 2015, the United States is ready to work with the Nigerian government, with civil society, and with Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to build upon the successes of April 2011.

Free, fair, peaceful and transparent elections are an important first step, but democracy is much more than the casting of ballots. Credible elections are essential to the consolidation of democratic institutions, since this promotes accountability toward all citizens and good stewardship of national resources, but democracy is also what happens after the elections—namely, good governance. And good governance is about delivering. It means supporting and safeguarding free media. It means anchoring an independent judiciary. It means ensuring the protection of human rights, especially for minorities and members of vulnerable populations. And it means providing for the citizenry, by delivering essential public services, social programs and fostering economic growth—leading to more opportunity, more jobs, and a rising standard of living.

Good governance must be at the heart of Nigeria's continuing political and economic development. In demanding, creating and participating in a credible election, Nigeria's citizens confirmed that they both understand this central truth and yearn for a government committed to democratic principles and the rule of law, run by public servants of tested integrity.

These goals are not easily attained—indeed, as great an achievement as it is to stage successful elections, doing so was, relatively speaking, the easy part. The serious, day-to-day business of governing, the fostering and maintenance of governmental transparency and integrity—these are the truly formidable tasks for Nigeria. But the payoffs would be great, for example by setting the stage for increased foreign investment.

The Nigerian government faces complex challenges in the post-election environment. In this bustling nation of more than 160 million, security, electricity, usable infrastructure, education, and reliable health care top most people's lists of immediate concerns. At the national level, genuine, robust anti-corruption efforts and enforcement of

the rule of law without violating human rights are of top priority. And finally, Nigerian authorities must address inefficient, archaic and opaque regulatory systems.

Nigeria has laudable and achievable goals for the next decade and beyond. The key now is to look internally, to embrace and act upon the principles of good governance. Nigeria's most important asset is its people. And in protecting the rights and liberties of those people, the Nigerian government should be resolute in its commitment to ensuring security without resorting to an exclusively force-based approach that would violate human rights. Adhering to democratic principles, the Nigerian government should ensure that those rights are extended to all, regardless of class, creed, ethnicity, region, gender, political views, or sexual orientation. If it bolsters efforts to ensure democratic rule, to protect and equitably provide for its citizenry, and to contain corruption, Nigeria is primed to reap the benefits, and to secure its status as a nation of global consequence both politically and economically.

Nigeria has a growing middle class and a large pool of trainable young graduates. Its populace is filled with intelligent, motivated, aspiring entrepreneurs. The largest oil-producing nation in Africa, Nigeria is the sixth largest supplier of crude oil to the United States, and the twelfth largest global producer.

In short, Nigeria is a country blessed with abundant human and natural resources. If this West African behemoth takes broad, effective action to fully develop its democratic institutions, empower its justice systems, protect its citizens, and create a welcoming investment climate, the foundation can be set for massive economic growth in its private sector. This also could foster a renaissance in its public sector, where government could again deliver essential services like education, clean water and primary health care. Certainly, income from oil and gas exports, wisely invested, can provide the capital for any project the Nigerian government chooses to undertake. At the same time, Nigeria has the opportunity to further its economic developments by expanding its export portfolios in areas such as agriculture and value-added production. Both foreign and Nigerian investors, large and small, will benefit.

As Nigeria looks to grow and diversify its economy, it is important to remember that Nigerian farmers once fed much of West Africa. Recapturing agricultural market share promises significant benefits to Nigerians. When Nigeria begins again to expand agricultural trade within its borders and export food and commodities to its West African neighbors, to Europe, and to the United States, supported by the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), the personal incomes of the 70 percent of Nigerians dependent on agriculture could increase markedly. Women and the poor will play a more prominent role in this market-driven economy, and agriculture-led growth could help lift everyone engaged out of poverty. Nigeria will expand its regional and global trade relationships and create an improved environment for international commerce. And regional security, of particular importance now, will improve as agricultural exports help bolster the region's food supply. Critical to all of this is a policy environment that attracts responsible private investment in Nigeria's agriculture sector.

Public and private sector economic development is crucial, but cannot succeed if Nigeria's population is weakened by poor health and disease. Despite its bounty of natural resources, Nigeria struggles with issues of poverty, access to potable water, poor education and low literacy rates, all of which contribute to healthcare crises within the country. An estimated four million Nigerians live with and suffer from HIV/AIDS—and the number is growing, not shrinking. Already with the second highest HIV burden in the world, Nigeria with its large population and high birthrate could well move up on a list it would not want to top.

The US government invests close to \$600 million every year in Nigeria's health sector and has begun to shift its focus from treating the ill to increasing the capacity of Nigeria's own health systems to assume this basic responsibility. US global health programs recognize that stronger health care delivery systems, focused on basic maternal, child, and newborn health and on prevention, can reduce the deadly consequences of HIV/AIDS, and also help fight other diseases, including malaria and tuberculosis. A coordinated partnership among Nigeria's federal, state, and local government entities is needed: the Nigerian government has already committed to funding half of what is needed to treat HIV/AIDS patients by 2015. But this commitment must translate into concrete budgetary resources, and we are waiting for our Nigerian partners to demonstrate such resolve. This will allow the United States to shift its resources from treatment to prevention and capacity building. A healthier Nigeria can be a natural result of good governance and an essential element of the US-Nigeria partnership.

An honest discussion about Nigeria requires addressing Nigeria's image as a country rife with public and private sector corruption. The Nigerian government has announced a number of campaigns against corruption, and has strengthened the country's anti-corruption institutions—both positive steps that the US government applauds. Nigeria needs to do more, however, to end a culture of impunity. Corruption in Nigeria diverts financial resources from building roads, hospitals, schools, and otherwise investing in infrastructure that would serve businesses, attract foreign investment, and create jobs. Ultimately, corruption serves to promote criminal and extremist activity by creating barriers to legitimate economic endeavors. By attacking corruption, Nigeria will send a clear signal the country is indeed committed to good governance, to the security and well-being of its citizens, and to a future of legitimacy on the world stage. In turn, domestic and foreign investors will respond to the enormous potential that Nigeria represents.

Even as we celebrate the success of the 2011 elections and their aftermath, the United States hopes that the Nigerian government will honor the judgment of the voters by building and sustaining strong and transparent institutions that deliver essential services to the nation and setting a standard by which all federal, state, and local government entities hold themselves publicly accountable. Back in 2011, the Nigerian people, bolstered by the international community, served as the ultimate arbiters of the credibility of their election, and now, only the Nigerian people can determine the future of a democratic Nigeria. Only the Nigerian people can judge whether government is meeting their expectations.

The time is right for Nigeria. For both the Nigerian government and for the Nigerian people, the time is now to capitalize on the democratic momentum unleashed in 2011. President Goodluck Jonathan boldly stated in his inaugural address, “We fought for decolonization. We will now fight for democratization.” President Jonathan’s Transformation Agenda points to the “critical policy thrust of governance” as providing for the citizenry, in terms of law and order, security and opportunity. Achieving these goals requires action. The US government welcomes continuing efforts at the national, state, and local government levels to make Nigeria’s democratic vision a reality, and will continue to expand its support for strong, transparent institutions dedicated to improving the lives of all Nigerians. As it forges ahead in its efforts in democratic governance, citizen support, peace, and security, Nigeria has the full backing, friendship, and partnership of the United States of America and its people.