

Strategic Insight

The Import of Nigeria's April 2003 Elections

by [Jessica Piombo](#)

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Over three weeks in April 2003, Nigerians went to the polls to elect representatives to local, state and national governments. These elections represented a crucial test for a country that has had a long and tortured relationship with consolidating democratic governments. Political alternation in Nigeria has historically occurred between civilian and military regimes, rather than between elected civilian administrations, and April's presidential election was the first held under the auspices of an elected civilian government in over 20 years. Therefore, should the civilian government of the Fourth Republic stay in power for its full second term, this will represent the first time in more than forty years that Nigeria has successfully transferred power from one elected civilian regime to another.

What are the implications of these elections for the future of democratic government in Nigeria? Is it important to US interests whether or not Nigeria remains under civilian control? How does Nigeria's past experience with civilian rule, and the problem of military intervention, speak to the prospects for the current situation? Since the elections were held only a few weeks ago, this Strategic Insight represents a preliminary analysis of the current situation in light of Nigeria's historical experiences, in order to better understand the import of these elections, and their likely impact on Nigeria and West Africa's future. While the transition from bullets to ballots is not yet complete, significant improvements have been made. Whether or not those improvements will become fully consolidated into a stable democratic regime has yet to be seen.

Nigeria's Strategic Importance

Whether or not Nigeria remains under democratic civilian control is more than a merely academic question. Nigeria is one of the giants of Africa, demographically, economically, and politically. Nigeria's strategic importance for Africa lies in its potential to be a regional hegemon in West Africa, and in the international arena is tied to the country's status as a major oil producer and hub for narcotics trafficking. Within the African continent, then, a stable and prosperous Nigeria can become a force for regional and continental security, while a faltering Nigerian state can have ripple effects that are felt throughout the international arena.

First and foremost, Nigeria's strategic importance lies in its role as a continental and regional leader in Africa. As the continent's most populous nation, virtually one in four Africans are Nigerian. The global diaspora community of Nigerians spreads the demographic and cultural impact of the country even farther. Nigeria is also the economic powerhouse of West Africa, contributing nearly 50 percent of West Africa's GDP.^[1] Politically, Nigeria is one of the driving forces behind the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the West African regional peacekeeping force, ECOMOG. Therefore, Nigeria can constitute a powerful force for stability in a region that has been devastated by endemic civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and most recently Cote d'Ivoire.

Yet Nigeria's ability to contribute to regional stability is greatly affected by the character of its government. First of all, a stable Nigeria with firm civilian control over the military can indeed improve the prospects for regional stability, since Nigeria is one of the main contributors to ECOMOG. If consumed by internal dissension, however, Nigeria will have less resources to contribute to ECOMOG, a situation that would vastly undermine the ability of the regional peacekeeping forces. If a weakened Nigeria withdraws support for ECOMOG, this will have a ripple effect that undermines the UN peacekeeping missions in the region that rely heavily on ECOMOG participation.

Even if Nigerians can contribute to this regional force, however, it matters whether they do so under the direction of accountable civilian authorities or despotic military rulers. One analyst characterized Nigerian foreign policy under the last two military rulers as "activism without moral authority and political legitimacy...held hostage to the megalomaniacal imbecilities of its last two reprobate despots."^[2] Furthermore, while under control of the personalized and extractive dictatorship of Sani Abacha, Nigerian "peacekeepers" in Liberia and Sierra Leone came to emulate and even surpass the corruption and destruction of the warlords they had been deployed to combat.^[3] Without firm control to an accountable government, therefore, the Nigerian military only serves to increase the chaos in the region. Since the inauguration of the civilian administration in 1999, the government has exercised more control over the military and forced them to curb these excesses. Therefore, the continued stability of the country is of crucial strategic importance for West Africa and the entire continent.

Nigeria's strategic importance carries over into the international arena as well. Not only is Nigeria a member of the Oil-Producing Export Countries (OPEC), but it is also the world's 12th largest producer of crude oil. Nigeria's oil is of direct strategic importance to the US government, since the country is the fifth largest supplier of crude oil imports to the United States.^[4] With the instabilities and strikes in Venezuela decreasing that country's supply of oil in international markets, and given the US government's determination to render the country less reliant on Middle Eastern suppliers for oil, the supplies from Nigeria become even more crucial.

Stability in Nigeria is important for the war on drugs as well: during the Abacha military regime (1993 - 1999), Nigeria's Lagos International Airport became one of the major transport hubs for the international drug trade. The volume of drug trafficking became so intense that by 1999, the Clinton administration had named Nigeria in its list of the leading global narcotics transit points.^[5] Shortly after the Obasanjo administration assumed power in 1999, it entered into an agreement with the US government to cooperate on the war against drugs. While the country is still on the list of high-traffic countries, the civilian administration has made more headway than its military predecessors.

The Burden of the Past and Prospects for the Future

Yet, despite its potential to become one of the leaders in Africa, Nigeria has been hobbled by turbulent and unstable governments. Nigeria attained independence from Britain in 1960, and since then has become one of the paradigmatic cases of an African country unable to institutionalize democratic governance. By January 2003, Nigeria had spent more years under military rule than civilian: 29 to 14, while those 29 years of military rule were under approximately seven different rulers. Virtually all regimes in Nigeria, whether civilian or military, have been marked by corruption, abuse of office, and gross mismanagement of the economy. Specifically, civilian regimes have been destabilized by ethnic tensions and corruption, and each to date has been overthrown. It is against this backdrop that the stability of the Fourth Republic (the current civilian regime) must be measured.

Civilian governments in Nigeria have tended to fall prey to ethnic favoritism and economic mismanagement. Officials in power have tended to skew economic development towards their home regions and to treat political office as personal property. Richard Joseph most famously has

characterized Nigerian politics as "prebendalism," borrowing from Max Weber's conception of an extremely personalized system of rule in which all public offices are treated as personal fiefdoms. By creating large patronage networks based on personal loyalty, civilian officials skewed economic and political management to such an extent that they largely discredited themselves.

Compounding this mismanagement, fluid ethnic, regional and religious tensions have critically wounded most civilian regimes. Ethnic tensions have been highly susceptible to institutional manipulation, and ethnic and religious riots have periodically erupted. The First Republic (1960-1966) was riven by tensions between the numerically (and therefore politically) dominant North and the economically dominant South. This was in part due to the fact that at independence, the country was divided into three regions that guaranteed that northerners would permanently dominate the national government, exacerbating north-south divisions. In the 1967-70 Biafran Civil War, ethnic tensions escalated into a full-scale secessionist civil war as Igbos in the south-east attempted to create an independent republic. Changes in the federal and electoral systems saw the Second Republic (1979-1983) divide the dominant ethnic tensions into the three-fold ethno-regional divisions that most associate with Nigeria, with divisions arising primarily between the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Ibo in the south-east, and the Yoruba in the south-west. By the time of the aborted Third Republic, an increase in the number of states multiplied the number of politically active ethnic groups so that today, people discuss Nigerian political geography in terms of six "zones," each with distinct economic, agro-climactic and ethnic characteristics.

As a result of all these factors, Nigerian democracies have been characterized by transition elections that were relatively peaceful and accepted by the populace (1959, 1973, 1993, 1999), followed by "second elections" (1964, 1983) that were corrupt and often violent as incumbents manipulated the process in order to stay in power. Thus, the electoral process has tended to discredit civilian regimes, already strained by a common theme of economic mismanagement and ethnic tensions, even further.

These civilian administrations were each toppled by military coups. The First and Second Republics were overthrown within a year of their second elections, while the Third never even completed the transition. Given the specter of permanent domination, military officers from southern regions launched the military coup that toppled the First Republic. The motivation for the coup against the Second Republic had less to do with ethnic divisions than with the ineptitude of the Shehu Shagari regime and his blatant rigging of the 1983 elections. Controversies over election fraud and electoral provisions requiring presidential candidates to obtain a certain percentage of support in a number of states played into ethnic tensions, eventually leading to a military coup on December 31, 1983. In this context, the degree of corruption that took place during the April elections, the second elections of the Fourth Republic, becomes an important consideration in whether or not a military coup might follow in the coming year.

The military officials who launched coups against the First and Second republics invariably claimed that they were launching "corrective measures" to replace inept and corrupt civilian regimes. They also ingrained a temporary nature into their terms of office by claiming that they would govern the country only until a credible civilian authority could be elected and re-installed to lead the country. The ethic, at this point, was of a politicized military that temporarily intervened in politics, but never with the intent to remain the governing authority. In the first two decades of independence, military rulers even made these promises credible: when a military ruler began to hold onto power for too long, other officers would stage a counter-coup and begin the transition back to civilian rule. For these exact reasons, Brigadier General Muhammed deposed Lt. Col. Gowon in 1975, and Maj. Gen. Ibrahim Babangida overthrew Maj. Gen. Buhari in 1985. Even though Babangida had staged a coup against Buhari for the latter's intransigence in returning Nigeria to civilian rule, he was the first military ruler to genuinely undermine the public's faith in the military's commitment to clean and temporary military government. The Babangida regime pursued power for personal interests and prolonged the proposed transition to the Third Republic for so long that people began to believe that the government never intended to cede

power. While Babangida eventually initiated the transition process to the Third Republic and let the initial five year process unfold over eight years, at the last moment he annulled the presidential election results in June 1993 when he disagreed with the outcome. Instead, he appointed a puppet civilian transitional regime, which in turn was overthrown by General Sani Abacha.

Under Abacha's regime, the military finally became fully discredited in the eyes of the public. Abacha ran a brutal military dictatorship, extracted resources from the country at an unprecedented rate, oppressed ethnic minorities that were agitating for greater rights, and made no plans to cede power to a civilian regime. Nigeria finally achieved full "pariah state" status under Abacha's rule. Change came only after Abacha's sudden death from a heart attack in 1998, after which Gen. Abubakar took over the military government. Abubakar attempted to redeem the military in the eyes of the international community and domestic public by promptly initiating a transition to a Fourth Republic, which culminated in the election of former General Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999.

Implications for Nigerian Democracy

Given this turbulent history, the import of the current elections becomes clear. The nature of civilian rule in the Fourth Republic; the degree to which ethnic, regional and religious tensions surface; and whether or not the populace and military consider the April elections to have been credible emerge as the primary factors to consider when assessing the stability of the current civilian regime.

Politics in the Fourth Republic have been turbulent, yet so far democracy has endured. Obasanjo's inauguration in June 1999 was heralded as a seminal event and his administration was greeted with cautious hope by the international community. Many around the world welcomed President Obasanjo's election, since he had been the only military ruler to quickly and genuinely transfer power to a civilian administration (the Second Republic). Thus, his verbal commitment to democratic civilian rule was more credible than the rhetoric of many of his competitors. Early on, the new administration made great headway in combating the drug trade flowing through Nigerian airports, joining with the United States as a partner in the war on drugs. Finally, the Obasanjo administration has brought more credibility to Nigerian foreign policy than many of his predecessors, and he has reigned in some of the worst excesses of Nigerian peacekeepers.

Yet there are worrying signs. Between 1999 and the elections in 2003, political, ethnic and factional violence have all increased. The Niger Delta states, the heart of the oil producing region, witnessed a sharp rise in local ethnic violence. Christian-Muslim hostilities have erupted in several northern states, culminating in the riots surrounding the Miss World Pageant in November 2002. Eleven states in the north have implemented Islamic sharia law as the legal framework at the state level, despite the fact that several of these states have significant Christian minority populations.

In terms of the electoral process, opposition political parties have felt that the odds have been stacked in favor of the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). They cite that the ruling party has circumscribed access to state owned media, that they have received insufficient information from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to participate in electoral processes, and that the ruling party has used state resources for partisan purposes.

One sign, both worrisome and reassuring, is that opposition parties are challenging the election results of the Presidential election in court. On the one hand, opposition parties do not believe that the election results were valid, and this could undermine the stability and legitimacy of the government. On the other hand, however, is the fact that these parties are not violently rejecting

Obasanjo's regime by taking up arms or calling for military intervention. Instead, they are protesting the results of the electoral process by participating within the political system, by taking the elections to court. This may indicate that at some level the democratic system of rules is being accepted, even if political players are contesting electoral results. One positive reaction to opposition protest so far has been that INEC has announced that gubernatorial elections in several states will be re-run. This should help to increase the legitimacy of the electoral results. What needs to be watched over the next few months is the conduct of the military, for they have historically proven to be the ultimate court that resolves conflicts over election results in Nigeria.

International election observer missions from the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, the Carter Center, the Commonwealth and the European Union all declared that the April elections were substantially compromised by electoral fraud. The most serious abuses occurred at the gubernatorial level, as politicians competed for the lucrative governorship positions. These allegations are important, for widespread electoral fraud would undermine the integrity of elections and sap public confidence in the electoral process. This disenchantment could cause popular support for civilian rule to decline, which could in turn raise the spectre of yet another military coup to topple an illegitimate government.

Despite all these difficulties, President Olusegun Obasanjo was sworn in for a second term as the President of Nigeria's Fourth Republic on May 29, 2003. Last month's inauguration, however, does not mean that Nigeria is out of the woods just yet. Barely a month has passed since the April elections, which is hardly enough time to judge whether or not the elections have been accepted by Nigerians. Given the time-lag between elections and coups in the previous two Republics, developments over the next few months will need to be closely monitored by the international community. The likelihood of such a coup is lessened by the fact that the excesses of the Abacha regime severely discredited the public's perception of military as a valid guarantor of democracy. Yet if the opposition parties fail in their court cases, and if widespread electoral abuses are not addressed by INEC or Obasanjo's administration, the public may once again come to view the military as the only solution. For the sake of Nigerian democracy and regional African stability, hopefully this situation won't come to pass.

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