



Nigeria's Historic 2015 Elections: What does it Mean for the Country and the Continent?

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In Nigeria's state elections, Muhammadu Buhari's All Progressive Congress party (APC) won two-third of the country's 36 states, two weeks after it made history by unseating the incumbent president Goodluck Jonathan in a presidential poll. President Jonathan's People's Democratic Party (PDP), which had controlled the presidency and a majority of Nigeria's 36 state governments since the end of military rule in 1999, has suffered its worst ever defeat in both elections – presidential and governorship at the state level. The incumbent president, in a spirit of statemanship, has accepted his defeat very graciously, allaying the fears of post election violence. This election is indeed historic, as it has witnessed various positive changes in the Nigerian political landscape, which needs further analysis to understand what it means for the country and the continent.

First of all, the election symbolizes the institutional change that made the overthrow of PDP's rule possible. Amidst numerous challenges, Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) played a key role in delivering credible elections, unlike the past when election victories of PDP presidents were partially "assisted" by electoral malpractices. There were a few technical hitches and sporadic incidents of violence during the elections, but over all, the observers hailed the elections as smooth and orderly. A large part of the success of the elections has been attributed to the relentless impartiality of

Attahiru Jega, the chairperson of the Independent National Electoral Commission, a former university lecturer known for his integrity. He has been able to reform the electoral process after painstakingly studying the rigging methods used in previous elections. He adopted various measures, such as implementation of a voter registration system, training of thousands of electoral staff, and introduction of biometric readers, to help reduce vote fraud and boost the election's credibility. Analysts have stated that he didn't succumb to pressure from any side, and he was very careful about the results he declared. His honest approach made a huge difference to the elections, boosting the confidence of voters and helping them to accept the results. The implications of such institutional strength are deep. It inspires that in future, Nigeria might emerge as a economic powerhouse with sustained reforms.

Secondly, the incumbent president's willingness to relinquish power is a welcome change observed in this election, which has drawn worldwide attention and praises. In a continent where leaders often refuse to give up office, Goodluck Jonathan has set an example for the continent that democracy and peaceful transition of government can work. This puts him in the league with those incumbents, who lost elections and peacefully handed over power to the opposition in countries, such as Senegal, Benin, Zambia, Ghana, Kenya, Namibia and Malawi. But in most of the African countries, battles have been very different. In countries, such as Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the latest developments show that the presidents are open to staying in power beyond the term allowed by their country's constitution. President Paul Kagame, for instance, has started a media campaign for constitutional change that would permit him to run for a third term in 2017. And in Sudan, which held presidential elections on 13 and 14 April, regime change seems highly unlikely. While it remains to be seen whether Nigeria would have an impact on the continent, but certainly, Jonathan's acceptance of defeat is a challenge to entrenched autocracy. Within Nigeria, it is a significant move towards strengthening democracy.

Third noteworthy change is the emergence of a strong opposition platform, which contributes to the strengthening of the electoral and democratic process. The surfacing of a

viable opposition party with a diverse national support has generated hope for a more inclusive and stable political system in Nigeria. Since 1999, there has been a power-sharing pact in place within the ruling PDP, between the elites of Christian South and Muslim North for alternate presidency every four years. This elite pact came to an end with Buhari's victory, proving the viability of an opposition party and the emergence of a real two-party system – which seems to many analysts a sign of democracy maturing in the continent. Some see this also as a challenge to many African nations that have an entrenched one-party rule. According to the Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, such an outcome is likely to reverberate across the continent from South Africa where the ANC has been holding power for 21 years to countries, such as Angola, Ethiopia, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Rwanda and Equatorial Guinea that are effectively one party rule democracies, paying mere lip service to the concept of opposition politics. Some analysts, however, have argued that such an impact on the continent is unlikely. Nevertheless, the Nigeria example sends a strong message to the continent, inspiring hope that the opposition politics will continue to get stronger.

Finally, the most significant transformation noticed in this election is the political culture – a move from apathy to active political participation. The people have come to understand the critical role they can play in deepening the democratic process by the use of their votes. It was seen that despite fears of violence, presumptions of vote-rigging and an election day delayed by six weeks, the turnout was unprecedented. These elections also saw a youth population that has become more politically involved in the democratic process. Their involvement is not surprising considering the fact that they constitute 70 per cent of its 170 million-strong population, and are under 30, born after Buhari's 18-month rule. There were reports of voters staying up late in the night at polling centres to monitor the voting and collation process. This reveals that the people this time were serious about making their government accountable, which has immense significance for better governance in the future. There seems to be a link established between performance and accountability. It sends a strong signal to the rest of the continent. Leaders in Rwanda, Burundi, DRC, Sudan, who are thinking of staying in power, would not welcome this. But surely, this change in political culture is critical for the consolidation of democracy.

The 2015 Nigeria election will be remembered as one that attracted worldwide attention for the democratic changes it has ushered in. It has improved Nigeria's democratic credentials, giving the country more credibility, clout and bargaining power within the regional grouping, ECOWAS, at the African Union, and in the international community. Within the country, these changes have opened up prospects to strengthen governance, clean up corruption, and reverse the spread of the Boko Haram insurgency.

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