

Call for Nigerian presidential election to be annulled after massive corruption

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Even before Nigeria's ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) was announced the winner Monday, calls mounted for the country's April 21 presidential election to be annulled.

The winning candidate, Umaru Musu Yar'Adua, is the handpicked successor of incumbent President Olusegun Obasanjo. His party had already won a majority in the state and local elections last week. But there is evidence of widespread fraud and intimidation both in those elections and in the presidential race.

Local observers from the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) said that in some states no elections had taken place. In others, voting had started late after the arrival of ballot papers was delayed. The organisation's chairman, Innocent Chukwuma, said, "That's why we're calling for the cancellation of the entire exercise."

A European Union representative said that the presidential elections were a "charade" and warned that no administration resulting from them could have any legitimacy.

A catalogue of malpractice has been reported. Some ballot papers lacked the serial number that is intended to prevent fraud. Polling stations in opposition strongholds seem to have received too few ballot papers. Local journalists reported that thugs working for the main parties were seen driving off with ballot boxes and threatening voters with physical violence. Election officials were abducted from some polling stations. An attempt to blow up the Independent National Electoral Commission's headquarters in the capital of Abuja failed when a truck bomb did not explode.

Armed police and the army were in evidence in many states. In Bayelsa, there were gun battles between the police and local militants. In Delta, security was tight after protests denouncing the local elections the previous week as rigged. In the capital, a no-movement order came into force as the polls opened.

There were at least 50 deaths in the state elections, and it is estimated that a similar number occurred in the presidential poll. In Kano, a prominent Islamic cleric and member of the state government, Ustaz Ja'afar Adam, was gunned down in a mosque the day before the state elections. He had just been involved in a dispute with President Obasanjo.

Following the shooting, armed police launched a crackdown on what they claimed was a Taliban group. A television station was closed down and yet-to-be broadcast tapes of a programme about the eight-year rule of Obasanjo seized.

Against this background of a police and military clampdown, it is impossible to imagine genuinely democratic elections going ahead. The turnout was generally low, expressing the profound alienation of ordinary Nigerians from the corrupt political elite that dominates power.

The International Republican Institute (IRI), a US-government-funded outfit run by the Republican Party, sent observers to monitor the election. It sought to play down the level of corruption, while voicing nominal concern. In a gross understatement, the IRI declared: "Nigeria's election process, which we recognise is still continuing and thus far incomplete, falls below the standards which Nigeria itself has set in previous elections and also falls below international standards, witnessed by IRI and members of this delegation throughout the world."

Acknowledging "irregularities," the IRI called on "any aggrieved parties to use the courts and the constitutional process—and not the streets—to resolve those disputes." With political violence already at a high level—Human Rights Watch estimates that 100 people have been killed in political violence since last November—this plea to observe democratic procedure is likely to fall on deaf ears.

Set up in 1983, the IRI was one of the constituent bodies—along with organizations run by the Democratic Party, the AFL-CIO union bureaucracy and the US Chamber of Commerce—of the National Endowment for Democracy, an agency created to carry out openly many of the kinds of political interventions previously run covertly by the CIA.

Senator John McCain is chairman of the IRI's board of directors, which includes former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, former Presidential Envoy to Iraq Paul Bremer and former National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft.

This election had been promoted by Washington as the first Nigerian election in which one civilian government handed power over to another. In every previous case since independence from Britain in 1960, a military coup has replaced a civilian regime.

However much the IRI tries to put an optimistic spin on the situation in Nigeria, however, the elections represent a major setback for US policy in West Africa and worldwide. The US administration wanted to present Nigeria as a regional power and political model for the rest of Africa. The very public character of the corruption and malpractice in the elections undermines that policy.

Although the IRI still insists that "Nigeria has the ingredients of a vibrant democracy and the potential to be a shining example to the African continent and the rest of the world," the inability of the US to manage the election is a sign of its diminishing political power. Following the debacle in Iraq, the US is less able than in the past to play a hegemonic role.

Nigeria has long been earmarked as a key player in US policy in West Africa and beyond. It is a vital part of US military strategy in Africa, where it intends to work with local allies as it has done with Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa. Nigeria is the basis of ECOWAS, the

West African economic organization that has intervened militarily in other West African states. Politically, Nigeria is also essential to US policy in the area. Obasanjo recently persuaded President Lansana Conte of Guinea to make concessions to his opponents after a general strike stopped the bauxite industry and political instability threatened to spread to other West African states. Economically, Nigeria is vital to US interests because it is the sixth largest oil producer in the world and the fourth largest source of imported oil for the US, just ahead of Angola. Oil prices rose on the international markets when it seemed that the election would be disputed.

In addition to the impact of the US humiliation in Iraq, the situation in Africa is complicated by the emerging role of China, which is becoming a major competitor for resources and political influence. Nigeria has turned to China for military support to protect the oil facilities in the Niger Delta, where local militants have been attacking offshore platforms and taking foreign workers hostage. Vice-President Atiku Abubakar complained last year that American policy did not “appear to be moving as fast as the situation is unfolding” in the Delta.

A senior Nigerian naval officer told the *Financial Times* last year that he “felt let down” that the US had not provided more military assistance. The US has offered Nigeria four old coastal patrol boats, but Nigeria wants 200 high speed boats that can operate in the creeks of the Delta. China is said to have sold the Nigerians “dozens” of such boats and is fast becoming one of Nigeria’s main military suppliers.

“The Chinese are very competitive players and we have to come to terms with that. They are going to places that really do matter,” said Stephen Morrison, director of the Africa programme at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

China’s willingness to supply military hardware to Nigeria reflects its growing interest in Nigerian oil. China has invested \$4 billion in Nigerian oil refineries, power plants and agriculture in return for oil rights. In 2005, PetroChina signed a deal worth \$800 million with Nigeria and in 2006 CNOOC, a Chinese offshore oil company, bought a block in the Nigerian offshore oil field. China’s oil imports rose by 8.8 percent last year, and as its economic growth continues its demand for oil is set to increase.

As China’s interest in Nigerian oil increases, so the stakes in the elections have risen. No less than 25 candidates contested the presidential election. Victory offers the possibility not only of personal enrichment, but of extensive political patronage based on oil. Regional, ethnic, tribal and religious divisions that were fomented by British rule have come to the fore in the competition for oil revenue.

Initially, President Olusegun Obasanjo intended to stand for a third term in contravention of the constitution. There was strong opposition from other factions of the Nigerian elite, who resent Obasanjo because he is from the south of the country. He was only able to win power in 1999 because of backing from Ibrahim Babangida, a former military head of state whose power base is in the mainly Muslim north of the country.

The Nigerian Senate ultimately rejected a proposed amendment to the constitution which would have allowed him to stand. But it is hard to escape the conclusion that the deciding vote against Obasanjo came from across the Atlantic, where then-Director of US Intelligence John Negroponte warned that if Obasanjo won a third term, Nigeria would be plunged into turmoil. Such a move “could lead to disruption of oil supply, secessionist moves by regional governments, major refugee flows, and instability elsewhere in West Africa,” Negroponte told a US Senate sub-committee.

Vice-President Atiku Abubakar opposed Obasanjo’s bid for a third term. He quit the ruling PDP and announced his intention to stand as a candidate for the AC. Obasanjo responded by accusing him of fraud and had his candidature declared invalid. The Supreme Court ruled that Abubakar should be allowed to stand and his name was put on the ballot papers only days before the election.

Abubakar’s candidacy was highly unwelcome to the US because of his willingness to pursue a closer military relationship with China. This was regarded as a direct challenge to US interests in West Africa. But equally, Obasanjo could not be allowed to continue in office without antagonizing powerful interests in Nigeria.

Umaru Musu Yar’Adua, the PDP candidate, was selected in an attempt to bridge the factional differences within the elite and keep out any candidate who might want to develop closer co-operation with China. He is a Muslim from Katsina state in the north, where he has been governor for the past seven years. He is a political nonentity whose main claim to fame is that he is the younger brother of General Shehu Musa Yar’Adua, who was Obasanjo’s deputy when he was military dictator.

The military still plays a major role in the structure of the Nigerian political elite. Obasanjo is a former military dictator. Muhammadu Buhari of the All Nigerian People’s Party (ANPP), who came second with 6.6 million votes, is also a former military dictator as is Abubakar who placed third with 2.6 million votes.

Obasanjo used a mixture of bribery and threats of corruption investigations to persuade 10 of the most influential state governors to back his choice of successor. Umaru Musu Yar’Adua is committed to continuing Obasanjo’s policies. Despite his reputation as a student Marxist, this means that he will continue to implement International Monetary Fund policies in Nigeria, which include privatization of state assets, cuts in social spending and price hikes in basic essentials such as food and fuel.

The majority of Nigeria’s 140 million people live on less than \$800 a year, making it one of the 20 poorest countries in the world despite its vast oil reserves. Nigeria has a trade surplus of \$3.4 billion because of its oil exports, but this wealth is monopolized by the elite, who carve up political power among themselves. Average life expectancy is just 47 years.



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