

Nigeria **Principal Issues**

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General Importance

Nigeria is Africa's largest country by population, with some 150 million people. It is one of the world's major producers of oil, at around 2 million bb/d, exporting half of its production to the U.S. It is divided between Muslims and Christians in almost equal number, which is a source of frequent tension and violence, and a factor in the stability of the region. It is nominally democratic, having ended a long periods of military rule in 1999. But elections since then have been fraudulent and many Nigerians have become cynical if not negative about the benefits of civilian rule. Despite being a major oil producer, most Nigerian live in poverty and the country has a reputation for corruption that according to some estimates has led to much if not most of its oil wealth having been stolen. Long standing grievances in the oil-producing delta region have led to an insurgency there that has major implications for both stability and the flow of oil. Nigeria has in the past played an important role in African politics, peace, and security. It is a major contributor to both UN and African peacekeeping operations and has been a major influence (and funder) of the Africa Union, ECOWAS, and the African Development Bank. Recently, however, its continental role has declined.

Presidential Crisis

The most immediate crisis arises from the illness of President Umar Yar'Adua. He went to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment in November 2009 and has not returned. Rumors abound as to his condition, but there is little question that he is seriously ill. Nevertheless, interim authority has not been passed to the Vice President, and there is much political plotting around what to do. Tradition has it that power in Nigeria should rotate between the Muslim north and the Christian south. Yar'Adua, in his first term, is from the north, but his Vice President is from the south, making northern elites nervous about turning over even interim authority to the VP. The absence of presidential authority is making the country unstable, and leaving many critical issues, e.g. the unrest in the delta, electoral reform, and follow-up to the Abdulmuttalab bombing attempt, untended.

Muslim-Christian tensions

Always a sensitive problem for Nigeria, these tensions are currently aggravated by poverty, growing unemployment, especially in the northern cities, competition for land and political hand-outs, and lack of strong leadership. Recently hundreds were killed and thousands displaced in Plateau state. The massacre of Muslims in that case may lead to revenge killings elsewhere. Though not a major factor in Nigerian Islam, radical groups do exist in the north and anti-western preaching takes place among various Islamic sects. Nigeria was nevertheless stunned by the arrest of a Nigerian suicide bomber in Detroit, something contrary to Nigerian images of itself.

Economic decline

Failure to invest in infrastructure, agriculture, and other growth sectors leaves Nigeria dependent on oil and the rentier economy that produces. Meanwhile, factories are closing due to power shortages and the competition from Chinese and Indian consumer goods, increasing unemployment and poverty. The Nigerian elite seems unable or unwilling to address these fundamental problems. Nor does it seem ready to make the political reforms, such as electoral reform, that would produce a more respected and effective government. All of these factors has reduced Nigeria's role on the continent, no longer a leader in the promotion of democracy nor able any more to play a strong role on helping resolve crises in Sudan, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, or Niger.