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CONTINGENCY PLANNING MEMORANDUM UPDATE

Nigeria's 2015 Presidential Election

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February 2015

The success or failure of democracy, rule of law, and ethnic and religious reconciliation in Nigeria is a bellwether for the entire continent. With a population of more than 177 million evenly divided between Muslims and Christians, Nigeria is Africa's largest economy and most populous country. A 2010 Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) Contingency Planning Memorandum, "[Electoral Violence in Nigeria](#)," considered the potential for widespread violence associated with Nigeria's 2011 elections and the limited policy options available to the United States to forestall it. This assessment remains relevant today.

The 2015 elections again may precipitate violence that could destabilize Nigeria, and Washington has even less leverage in Abuja than it did in 2011. The upcoming elections are a rematch of the 2011 elections between the incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan (a southern Christian) and Muhammadu Buhari (a northern Muslim and a former military chief). Tension between Washington and Abuja is higher than in 2011, largely over how to respond to the radical Islamist insurgent group, Boko Haram, which is steadily gaining strength in northeast Nigeria. According to CFR's Nigeria Security Tracker, Boko Haram has been responsible for nearly eleven thousand deaths since May 2011. Nigerian domestic instability has also increased as a result of the recent global collapse of oil prices, which are hitting the government and political classes hard. Oil constitutes more than 70 percent of Nigeria's revenue and provides more than 90 percent of its foreign exchange. Since October 2014, the national currency, the naira, has depreciated from 155 to the U.S. dollar to 191.

The 2015 elections are likely to be more violent.

NEW CONCERNS

Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, political power has alternated between the predominantly Muslim north and predominantly Christian south, an informal strategy to forestall the country's polarization. Jonathan assumed the presidency when President Umaru Yar'Adua, a northern Muslim, died in 2010. Jonathan gave private assurances that he would finish Yar'Adua's term and wait until 2015 to run for president because it was still "the north's turn." But Jonathan ran for reelection in 2011, thereby violating the system of power alternation. Following the announcement of Jonathan's victory, the north made accusations of election rigging. Rioting broke out across the north, resulting in the greatest bloodshed since the 1967–70 civil war.

GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF VOTES
IN 2011 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION



The 2015 elections are likely to be more violent. A new opposition party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), has nominated Buhari as its presidential candidate. The APC is stronger than its predecessors and reflects a splintering of the political classes. The government's inability to defeat Boko Haram, the economic hardships brought on by falling oil prices, and a growing public perception that the Jonathan administration is weak have fueled support for the APC. Though the APC's voter base is in the north, it enjoys support all over the country, unlike the opposition in 2011. However, any incumbent Nigerian president has significant advantages: he is at the center of extensive patronage networks; he has access to the government's oil revenue;

and he and his party largely control the election machinery and ballot-counting infrastructure. It is uncertain whether any provisions will be made for voters in the three northern states placed under a state of emergency because of Boko Haram, as well as the estimated one million people displaced by the insurgency. These displaced voters would likely support Buhari and the APC; their exclusion would benefit Jonathan and the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Thus despite the strength of the opposition, Jonathan remains the likely—but not certain—winner.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

An unstable Nigeria with internally displaced and refugee populations and a government unable to quell Boko Haram could potentially destabilize neighboring states and compromise U.S. interests in Africa. Yet, the United States has little leverage over Nigerian politics, which is driven by domestic factors, and even less leverage over the Nigerian security services. Nigeria will be disappointed that the United States has not offered greater assistance to counter Boko Haram, and Washington will be frustrated by Abuja's failure to address human rights abuses by the security service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A November 2014 Council Special Report "[U.S. Policy to Counter Nigeria's Boko Haram](#)" recommends long-term steps the United States should take to encourage a Nigerian response to terrorism that advances democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights. In the short term, vocal U.S. support for democracy and human rights both during and after the elections could help discourage violence at the polls and after the results are announced. Secretary of State John Kerry, in a preelection visit to Nigeria, has already underscored the importance of free, fair, and credible elections to the bilateral relationship.

- In the aftermath, Washington should avoid commenting prematurely on the quality of the elections. Observers from the National Democratic Institute and the International Republic Institute are likely to issue preliminary assessments immediately after the polls close. So, too, will observers from the European Union, the Commonwealth, and the African Union. There will be media pressure for early, official comment. But, following a close election and the violence likely to follow, the timing and content of official U.S. statements should take into account the views of the vibrant Nigerian human rights community, which will likely be the most accurate.
- Washington should forcefully and immediately denounce episodes of violence, including those committed by the security services. But official statements should avoid assessing blame without evidence, and they should take into account the weak ability of party leaders to control crowd behavior.
- Washington should facilitate and support humanitarian assistance. The north is already in desperate need of humanitarian assistance, with the prospect of famine looming. If the postelection period is violent, there may be need for international humanitarian assistance in many other parts of the country. The Obama administration should plan for a leadership role in coordinating an international humanitarian relief effort, including a close study of lessons learned from the Africa Military Command's successful intervention in Liberia's Ebola crisis.

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Read CFR's *Contingency Planning Memorandum, "Electoral Violence in Nigeria,"* (2010) at: www.cfr.org/nigeria/electoral-violence-nigeria/p22930.

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This publication is sponsored by the Center for Preventive Action (CPA). CPA seeks to help prevent, defuse, or resolve deadly conflicts around the world and to expand the body of knowledge on conflict prevention. The CPA Contingency Roundtable and Memoranda series seek to organize focused discussions on plausible short- to medium-term contingencies that could seriously threaten U.S. interests. Contingency meeting topics range from specific states or regions of concern to more thematic issues and draw on the expertise of government and nongovernment experts.

The Council on Foreign Relations acknowledges the Rockefeller Brothers Fund for its generous support of the Contingency Planning Roundtables and Memoranda.

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