

Nigeria: Political situation

Following general elections in March 2015, Nigeria experienced its first democratic handover of power. Unlike other elections since the 1999 democratic transition, these elections ran unmarred by suspicions of vote rigging and widespread electoral violence. The elected president, Muhammadu Buhari, won with a promise to crack down on endemic corruption.

Background

In 2014, [Nigeria](#) marked 100 years since the British Empire's 1914 unification of the Muslim north and the Christian south, which laid the foundations of modern Nigeria, although deep economic and cultural divisions persist. Nigeria gained its political independence from Britain in 1960, and in 1963 was established as a federal republic, initially composed of four states and subsequently reorganised several times into an increasing number of federal states; Nigeria currently counts 36 states plus the federal capital territory (FCT). In the years following independence, chaos, instability and abuse of power led to the imposition of military rule, which lasted for most of the post-independence period. The adoption of a new constitution in 1999 marked the beginning of the fourth republic, and opened the door to civilian governance and democratisation. For Muslims in several northern states, the return to democracy in 1999 also meant the introduction of Islamic Sharia law – a decision that sowed the seeds of inter-religious conflict.

Political system

Form of government. Nigeria is a presidential republic. According to the [Constitution](#) (Article 130), the president – who is elected for a four-year term, renewable only once – is head of state and chief of the federal government. The president nominates the ministers, who are subject to confirmation by the senate. The legislative body, the bicameral [National Assembly](#), comprises a House of Representatives with 360 members and a Senate with 109 members (three from each state and one from FCT), both elected by universal suffrage for a four-year term. At the federal state level, executive power is vested in governors, who can be elected for a maximum of two mandates; legislative power is exercised by Houses of Assembly.

Electoral system. According to Article 134 of the Constitution, the presidential candidate with the most votes wins the elections as long as they obtain at least 25% of the votes in at least two thirds of the federal states (including FCT). Members of the National Assembly are elected through a system of first-past-the-post voting in single member constituencies. Prior registration is necessary in order to vote. In 2015, biometric cards were used for voter identification for the first time. The electoral law was [amended](#) in January 2015 to allow displaced persons to vote, targeting the scores of people displaced by Boko Haram in particular.

Recent electoral history. After the restoration of civilian government in 1999, elections were marred by irregularities, usually raising [suspicions](#) of vote rigging. The 2011 elections, although deemed to be the most organised, free and fair since 1999, were particularly violent: leaving more than [800 people dead](#) and more than 65 000 displaced, with more than 350 churches burned in rioting by protesters supporting the northern Muslim candidate Muhammadu Buhari, and in other sectarian violence. The presidential and general elections held on 28 March 2015 broke with this pattern of violent and/or rigged elections. Despite being postponed by six weeks due to the Boko Haram insurgency, which hampered voting in the north-east, the elections were a great [success](#); the opposition won for the first time in Nigeria's history of presidential and parliamentary elections and the incumbent president conceded defeat, thus avoiding post-electoral turmoil.

Despite low voter turnout low (with only [29.4 million](#) persons casting their vote out of a total of 67.4 million registered voters) – a common occurrence in Nigerian politics – technology (electronic voter cards) and civic activism [helped ensure](#) that the 2015 elections were free and fair. The EU Electoral Observation Mission [reported](#) numerous shortcomings before and during the elections, but did not consider that they influenced

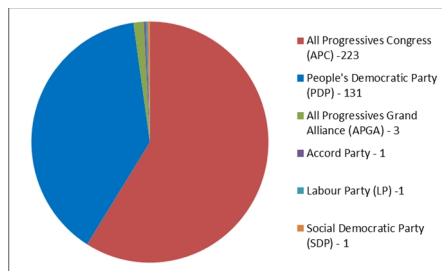


the final outcome, as most of these were technical failures and not attempts at systematic manipulation. These elections considerably [increased](#) popular trust in the strength of Nigerian democracy.

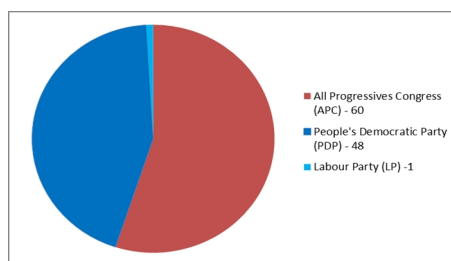
In its April 2015 [Resolution](#) on the situation in Nigeria, the European Parliament commended the candidates who conceded defeat, starting with the incumbent presidential candidate Goodluck Jonathan, and welcomed the continued commitment of all political parties and candidates to peaceful elections.

[Buhari](#), backed by the All Progressives Congress (APC) party, was declared the presidential winner, by a margin of almost 10%, over incumbent president Jonathan. Having lost the previous three presidential elections (the last one to Jonathan), Buhari had the advantage of being the candidate of a unified opposition on this occasion. He won the election on a platform focused on fighting endemic corruption and swiftly ending the Boko Haram insurgency in the north. A former military ruler between 1984 and 1985, Buhari has a [reputation](#) as a strong leader opposed to corruption and indiscipline. Following his investiture, it took Buhari six months to nominate a [government](#) largely composed of technocrats.

Distribution of seats after elections in the House of Representatives



and Senate



Source: [INEC](#), [Vanguard](#).

Political parties

In line with the [provisions](#) of the 1999 Constitution, parties cannot be formed on ethnic or religious principles; their membership and support base must reflect the country's diversity. Formal requirements aside, [research](#) shows that ethnicity and religion is 'an indisputable fact' influencing voter choices in Nigeria. The division between the predominantly Muslim north and the mainly Christian south is particularly striking. In the past two presidential elections, Buhari, (a Muslim from the north), was backed overwhelmingly by northern voters, while Jonathan (a Christian from the south), enjoyed firm support in the south. This pattern was not completely repeated in 2015 in the predominantly Christian south-west, where Buhari gained massive support. Just two of a total of [29 registered political parties](#) dominate the political scene:

All Progressive Congress (APC) – governing. The most important party in Nigerian politics today is the [All Progressives Congress \(APC\)](#), founded in February 2013. The APC coalition brings together the largest former opposition parties: Congress for Progressive Change

(CPC) from the north, the All Nigerian People's Party (ANPP) with support from the far north, the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) supported mainly in the south-west, and elements of the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) from the south-east (Igboland). The APC was also strengthened by the [defection](#) of several high-ranking PDP members (including state governors). It dominates the north, central and south-west regions (but has little following in the south-east). The party declares itself to be social democratic, favouring a regulated market, but is conservative on social issues. The APC ran on a platform [emphasising](#) change.

People's Democratic Party (PDP) – in opposition. The [PDP](#) governed with an absolute majority in the legislative assembly between 1999 and 2015. It was founded in August 1998 by a group opposed to the self-succession plans of military ruler General Sani Abacha, whose unexpected death opened the path to democracy. The PDP evolved as a mass party (styling itself 'Africa's largest party') and was the only party of a truly national character. The party consists of representatives from both north and south and from different interest groups, but was united more through being in power than by real party ideology. The 2015 elections [reduced](#) the PDP to a regional organisation, with solid backing only in the south-east and south. Its decline was also caused by the violation of the '[zoning principle](#)': the presidency was supposed to rotate between the north and the south every eight years. When President Umaru Yar'Adua died in office in 2010, the north was still due a further five years in power. Jonathan's decision (backed by the south) to run for office in 2011 and again in 2015 alienated the north, leading to the APC's rise. The PDP is on the right of the political spectrum, supporting a free market economy. While in power, it nurtured vast networks of patronage, thus ensuring its political survival. Several high ranking PDP members are now under [investigation](#) for corruption, leading to allegations of a politically motivated '[witch hunt](#)'.

See also complementary EPRS notes on the [human rights](#), [economic](#), [social](#) and [security](#) situation in Nigeria.