

*In April 2003, voters throughout Nigeria will go to the polls to elect new leaders at the state and national levels of government. This is the first in a series of reports on the electoral environment in Nigeria as the country approaches these critical elections, the first civil transfer of power since the 1983 elections. This first volume provides background on the pre-election environment.*

## **Two Heavyweights to Contend for Presidency**

Thirty parties are expected to contest April's historic elections in Nigeria. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) set February 11 as the date for submission of candidate lists, making January and early February a busy time for primaries and political party conventions. Thus far, the presidential election is shaping up to be a contest of two former military rulers: current President Olusegun Obasanjo of the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Muhammadu Buhari of the All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP). A number of smaller parties, most recognized by INEC in November 2002, have selected presidential flagbearers as well. Additional candidates with high name recognition have yet to emerge though the other 28 parties convened a conference in Abuja on January 29 to discuss prospects for mounting a consensus candidate to contend with Obasanjo and Buhari.

Obasanjo, a Christian from southern Nigeria, first served as president when military leader Murtala Muhammed was assassinated in 1976 and paved the way to

the return of a civilian government in 1979. He regained the presidency in the 1999 elections and now seeks a second term.

Buhari, a northern Muslim, assumed power in a 1983 coup that removed the unpopular Shagari regime. However, his heavy-handed administration quickly wore out its welcome and gave way to General Ibrahim Babangida in 1985.

A North-South, Christian-Muslim match up could reopen old wounds from the country's militaristic past and raises the stakes for a successful transfer of power.

## **INEC Rebuffs Changes to the Electoral Calendar**

Citing constitutional requirements, the INEC declined to modify the electoral calendar as requested by ANPP candidate General Buhari, who expressed concern about the conduct of elections during Easter week. Currently, the presidential election is slated for the Saturday before Easter Sunday.

INEC publicized the full elections timetable in December:

- National Assembly: April 12
- Presidential and Gubernatorial: April 19
- Presidential run-offs: April 26 & 29
- State Houses of Assembly: May 3

Local government elections, which fall under the authority of the State Independent Election Commissions (SIECs), have not been scheduled, and will most likely be held after the national and state elections.

An INEC spokesman insisted that holding elections during Easter week was necessary in order to allow time for the possibility of run off elections and any litigation that may

arise before the constitutionally-mandate inauguration date of May 29.

### **Human Rights Watch Report: Electoral Violence on the Increase**

Despite government-led crackdowns on vigilante groups, electoral violence is rising, says a January 29 report from the NGO Human Rights Watch. In some places, electoral competition has aggravated longstanding ethnic conflicts; in others, primaries and rallies have led to new confrontations.

Most notable of late, violence broke out over a PDP senatorial primary in the city of Warri in Delta State and led to fifteen deaths and the destruction of at least 150 houses and the city market. Earlier in January, the disqualification of a candidate from an ANPP gubernatorial primary in Asaba caused militants to physically attack members of the electoral panel.

Some political leaders have publicly condemned violence and vowed that their supporters would not take part. In addition, the National Orientation Agency has initiated an anti-violence campaign across the nation. In Plateau State, for example, the Agency has embarked on a Peace Campaign mission in threatened communities.

### **INEC Conducts Second Voter Registration**

Aiming to address complaints that millions of citizens were prevented from registering during the September 2002 national voter registration due to unequal distribution and hoarding of voter cards, under-trained registration staff and inclement weather, INEC carried out a second registration exercise from January 21 to 23. Approximately seven million names were added to the rolls according to an INEC spokesman.

All sides criticized INEC's conduct of the first registration. The media and civil society groups reported many instances of duplicate registrations, registrations of underage

voters, and election workers and politicians selling voter cards. In mid-January, police in Lagos uncovered a scheme to print nearly five million fake voter cards. Overall, the second registration went smoother though registration took place only at the 774 local government centers as compared to the estimated 120,000 polling places in September.

INEC has yet to set a date for the public release of the voter rolls.

### **Term Limits**

The 1999 Nigerian constitution currently limits presidents and governors to two terms in office. In what is likely to be a test case for elected officials who held office during military rule, Governor Abubakar Audu of Kogi State won a lawsuit that sought to bar Audu from running for a third term. Audu successfully argued that the constitution does not apply to terms served prior to its ratification. The federal government is expected to appeal the ruling.

In a related report, the National Assembly will consider a constitutional amendment to remove term limits. Controversially, the proposed amendment would also eliminate constitutional provisions for local governments and turn that authority over to the states.

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