

Nigeria: What is to be done

As Nigeria awaits results from the 2015 elections, Ebenezer Obadare introduces a new ebook, entitled **Nigeria: What is to be done published on Africa is a Country**.

Since Nigeria returned to civil rule in May 1999, every election has been labeled by scholars and general observers as the most pivotal and most momentous in the country's history. Yet, irrespective of their outcomes, the country has hobbled along, poised, all too familiarly, between the potentiality of glory and the probability of disaster. Nigeria has not exactly flourished, but it has not disintegrated either, even if Boko Haram, with its sworn determination to impose a semblance of a Paleolithic political order, has bitten off a not insignificant chunk of territory. Whatever it is then that throws the commentariat into regular panic every four years, it is most certainly not just a fear of possible physical collapse, but something definitely deeper. It is, one suspects, a philosophical regret that, perhaps with every electoral cycle that produces the 'wrong' victor, the country drifts further away from the possibility of genuine political renaissance.

True to form, the March 28 presidential election is being billed as a make-or-break affair, the last opportunity for Nigerians to liberate their country from the clutches of those who have held it to ransom for fifty odd years and some, and who continue to milk it for the exclusive gratification of a small elite. It is a tantalizing prospect, when you think of it—get this one election right, and all else shall be added unto you. Except that when you are dealing with a country so complex and troubled, and so marinated in its own contradictions like Nigeria, it is going to require more than a single election—or elections *in toto* for that matter—to have a shot at getting things right.



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This is not to diminish the significance of March 28. For one, it offers an opportunity to take the country back, if we can call it that, from an incumbent who is not known for being cerebral, and whose sheer maladroitness has come as a real shock to Nigerians, many of whom, it should be remembered, have been conditioned to expect a basic level of incompetence from their leaders. For another, there is a real chance to upstage the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP), winner by all means necessary of all presidential elections since 1999, if only for the symbolism of

leveling the playing field and keeping honest a ruling coalition that, with the passing of every electoral cycle, grows in entitlement and diminishes in moral stature and social responsibility.

Yet, and not for the first time in Nigeria's political history, the alternative is not so easy to embrace. Indeed, in matters of political substance and strategic vision, it is hardly an alternative at all. If, on the one hand, the incumbent, President Goodluck Jonathan seems incapable of communicating the most basic ideas about political goods and social justice without falling over, General Buhari on the other treats the past and any suggestion of moral reckoning as anathema. At a critical historical moment, therefore, when the yearning of millions of Nigerians for a leader of some distinction could not be more palpable, circumstances have conspired- once again- to saddle Nigeria with two perfectly unacceptable candidates.

Why does a nation in desperate need of bounty almost invariably have to be content with such thin gruel? How, for instance, does one account for President Goodluck Jonathan, complete with his flagrant intellectual limitations, in a country brimming with such extraordinary talent, both at home and in the diaspora? And why General Buhari (again!) thirty years after he laid waste to common decorum and decency, plunged the Fourth Estate into corporate misery, and oversaw arguably the most one-sided persecution of a political class in the history of postcolonial Africa?

There are no easy answers. But whatever explanations are advanced, there is no escaping the sober reality that Nigeria's current fate is, shall we say, not a matter of coincidence, but a perfectly logical accumulation of the political 'work' that has been several decades in the making, and whose dynamic continues unabated. Nigerian scholars and scholars of Nigeria agree that these dynamics were incubated and unleashed long before the birth of Nigeria as an independent country in 1960. This means that any attempt to understand, say, Boko Haram's medieval fury, the dissoluteness of the political class, the moral culpability of the theocratic elite, and the apparent impotence of the mass of the citizenry, must be cognizant of the layout of the Nigerian political arena, and its frustrating synthesis of constraints and possibilities.

Whether collectively or individually, the essays in this collection assume this analytic stance. While they take the March 28 elections as their immediate empirical provocation, each contribution is located within a broader ambience of intellectual debates and conversations about the overall Nigerian political process. For example, Said Adejumo, whilst immediately agitated about the threat the Boko Haram insurgency poses to the territorial integrity of the Nigerian state, is, in the long run, more worried about the Islamist group as a cipher for state failure in Nigeria. In his reading, Boko Haram offers a timely lens into problems of state incapacity, deterritorialization, and the diminution of state sovereignty, problems which increasingly confront states, and not just their postcolonial African variant. Perhaps finding little by way of substance, Akin Adesokan takes aim at President Jonathan's style, and concludes, having mobilized several examples, that "The president's style is to opt for the commonplace: do the needful, stretch nothing, be seen to have done what is necessary." Should the president be held to account for this signal flaw? Adesokan has no doubt. After all, he (President Jonathan) "is an executive president and his office comes with a lot of discretionary powers. But he is an ordinary person, far from the risk-taker needing courage, loyalty or wisdom to act."

In grappling with the moral economy of power sharing as it affects the 2015 elections, Brandon Kendhammer attributes the relative stability of the Fourth Republic to the success of the ruling PDP in using "the incentive structures of Nigeria's post-civil war power sharing systems to its advantage." For him, "By adhering to a rigid but highly transparent system that rotated key positions and appointments across ethnic, regional, and religious lines, the PDP effectively monopolized access to the political resources necessary under the power sharing requirements to compete in national elections." Kendhammer argues that whatever the outcome of these elections, the power sharing "big umbrella" formula perfected by the PDP is unlikely to lose its luster. Moses Ochonu's essay thematically complements Kendhammer's. Whilst Kendhammer is interested in accounting for the PDP's tenacity despite its programmatic poverty, Ochonu offers a coruscating assessment of the oppositional landscape. Although he agrees with a majority of scholars that the PDP's "cozy dalliance with corruption and the corrupt" may well be its undoing, Ochonu argues

that the opposition All Progressive Congress (APC) forfeits what should have been a moral high ground by embracing “the pragmatic politically effective strategy of courting former members of the PDP and corrupt but influential political actors.”


Asonzeh Ukah’s contribution analyses the deeply troubling twinning of religion and politics in contemporary Nigeria, and the role of an increasingly powerful religious elite in politics and political claim-making. In the context of the struggle to win over what he calls a “Pentecostal electorate,” Ukah shows how “The power to religiously define Buhari and shape public perception of him has become an electoral resource for the ruling political party.” On the whole Ukah offers a succinct reminder of the pivotal, if destabilizing, role of religion in electoral engineering, and how, for desperate political candidates, “the ability to mobilize large congregants is an electoral resource.”

The March 28 presidential election features a northern Muslim candidate against a southern Christian minority incumbent, hence the enhanced role of religion against a general backdrop of pervasive Pentecotalization. But as Godwin Onuoha argues, (these) elections are also about other issues throbbing just below the surface. The example he addresses is Igbo politics and the, so far, elusive quest of the Igbo for presidential power. Onuoha contends that although the idea of “power rotation” is implicitly embedded in the structure of power relations within most political parties,” “the Igbos have not profited...in a manner that will enable them attain the highest office” in the land. Having provided a snapshot of the distinct phases in post-civil war Igbo politics, Onuoha concludes, very much against the grain, that “the Igbo Presidency Project and demand for incorporation is basically an invention of the Igbo faction of the ruling elite, and is not necessarily emancipatory.”

With the dominant focus of the majority of the contributions on ‘high politics,’ Rudi Gaudio’s emphasis on the realm of ‘low politics,’ the everyday domain where Nigerians of all stripes meet, hate and love, enacting quotidian dramas of selfhood in which the state is largely distinguished by its absence, is a crucial change of gear. For Gaudio, it is important to articulate these dramas, not just because they often confound scholarly hypotheses, but because they help to expose “simplifications that mask the nation’s actual problems, as well as its actual and potential synergies and opportunities.” While, all too often, divisions at the level of ‘high politics’ appear firmly set in stone, Gaudio provides an excellent portrait of a parallel universe in which political allegiances are fickle, not because people are incapable of loyalty, but because they feel connected and committed to one another as human beings first and foremost.

This collection is, if nothing else, an intellectual tribute to this ecumenical spirit. It registers the fervent desire by Nigerians to live and work together in harmony, and to create and nourish a properly democratic space where all can enjoy a sense of belonging. That spirit endures, over and above the overpowering din of a single election, and the problems that appear to smother it and hinder its flourishing will have to be engaged, long after a winner and a loser has emerged.

But how will this engagement be done, and through what forms of agency? One answer to the first part of the question is that this will have to involve exactly the same kind of trans-ethnic and pan-religious sensibility that, Gaudio reassures us, is already a fact of life across various Nigerian communities. The power of such a coalition was in robust evidence in January 2012 when the Occupy movement, galvanized by a combination of local disaffection and external example, extracted concrete concessions from the Jonathan government. The problem with Occupy, as with similar examples of spontaneous people power in Nigerian history with which it invites comparison, is that the original rage is hardly ever canalized into enduring civic institutions.

For that to change—and here we come to the second part of the question—a conscious effort must be made, mustering the country’s considerable human capital at home and in the diaspora—to build alternative structures of political engagement. Primarily, such structures will provide a focal point for those who wish to influence the system without being necessarily involved in the pull and shove of everyday politics. In the long run though, they, i.e. the structures, will serve as *generators* of socially usable ideas for a country badly in need of them. 

If, ultimately, the essays here are adjudged as preparing the groundwork for this kind of alternative politics, they will have fulfilled their objective.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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