

Nigeria 2023 Decides: Politics Brief



IN BRIEF

- To win the presidential election, a candidate must secure 25% of the votes in two-thirds of Nigeria's 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory, as well as a simple majority. Failure to do both, leads to a run-off between the candidate with the highest number of votes and the candidate with the highest number of votes in the most states. The initial rules still apply for the first run-off and only if no candidate wins then, will a second and final run-off take place where getting the most votes will be enough.
- Key factors in the coming elections surround the question of how the 'Buhari coalition' of roughly 12 million, predominantly northern, votes that he has been able to command since 2003 will realign given that he will not be on the ballot in 2023 and if the PDP can maintain its grip on 14 southern states that historically have voted for its presidential nominee.
- Together, home to 43% of all Nigerian voters, the electorate in the southwest and northwest geopolitical zones will again be crucial in determining the national outcome.
- Already faced with a gargantuan logistical operation, those charged with managing the elections across the country are further challenged by prevailing insecurity and the Central Bank of Nigeria's efforts to push a cashless policy.

By the time Nigeria marks 63 years as an independent country on 1 October, the country will have seen three prior attempts at democracy truncated by coups (1966, 1983 and 1993). Since the Fourth Republic (1999 to date), the country has seen two presidents serve the maximum two terms in office (2007 and 2023), succession to the presidency after a death in office (2010) and one lose a re-election bid (2015).

In that time, despite coalitions and party mergers, all six previous elections have ended during first round ballots. Most predictions for the 2023 elections expect that no candidate will achieve the necessary 25% in two-thirds of the states to be declared the winner, leading to a potential run-off, a first in Nigeria's history.


THE CANDIDATES

The 2023 presidential election will feature 18 candidates, with four established frontrunners: Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Peter Obi of Labour Party (LP) and Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso of the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP). All have, in the not-too-distant past, worked together and against each other in a bid to get elected president. In 2015, Atiku, Tinubu and Kwankwaso were all part of the then newly created APC which backed the now outgoing president to defeat the then ruling PDP. In 2019, Kwankwaso, and Atiku decamped to PDP, joining Obi, who was Atiku's running mate.

Former two-term Lagos state Governor Tinubu was instrumental in not just the formation of the party in 2013, but also Buhari's successful election in 2015. However, his relationship with the president has become frayed since and especially during the current election campaign. A major point of disagreement is Buhari's support of the Central Bank of Nigeria's (CBN) decision to redesign high denomination Naira notes to address vote buying, which will likely affect the candidate with the most resources at his disposal. Tinubu has also faced scrutiny during the campaign regarding accusations of identity fraud, allegations of corruptions and speculations about his health. The latter is especially important to Nigerians given the recent ailments that have afflicted those holding the highest office. Finally, his selection of Kashim Shettima, a fellow Muslim and former senator and governor from Borno, as his running mate has been controversial: a Muslim-Muslim ticket would provide an 'imbalanced' ticket atop government for the first time.

Atiku Abubakar, the vice president between 1999-2007, has been described "a serial contender", having taken part in every presidential election since 2007. Atiku, who like Tinubu is in his 70s, is banking on his experience in government and in business. Opponents point to his alleged involvement in an international bribery scandal as one of the main reasons why he is not fit for the top job. Atiku chose Governor Ifeanyi Okowa of Delta state as his running mate, but the decision further splintered the opposition PDP as it excluded the runner-up in the party primaries – powerful Rivers state Governor Nyesom Wike, who subsequently established a breakaway G5 faction of the party. This faction has alleged a campaign for northern dominance, given that both the party chairman and presidential flagbearer are northerners.





Peter Obi, a former banker and two term governor of Anambra state has generated significant support from young and middle-class Nigerians for his third force movement that will likely benefit from higher turnout than in 2019. However his party controls no states and has no governors, and without these structures it may be difficult to deliver votes. Obi's running mate, Datti Baba-Ahmed, a businessman and owner of Baze University is from Kaduna state but this has not substantively addressed concerns about the tickets ability to penetrate effectively in northern states. A candidate who has no problem winning votes in northern states – specifically those in Nigeria's northwest – is Rabi'u Musa Kwankwaso of the NNPP. Kwankwaso, a two-term former governor of Kano state, one of Nigeria's largest vote banks, and the leader of the *Kwakwasijya* political movement, is unlikely to challenge effectively on a national level but he will perform well in the northwest, taking away votes from other leading contenders in the process.

WOMEN IN POLITICS

Female participation in politics continues to be inhibited by issues of political violence and godfatherism, as well as by the prevailing patriarchal attitudes of prospective voters, particularly in northern Nigeria. A review of the geographic distribution of female candidates for all election contests in 2023 shows that northern regions have lower levels of female candidature than those in the south. In fact, Bayelsa state is the only state in the three southern political zones that has fewer female aspirants (26) than the best-performing state in the northwest, Kaduna, which has 29 female aspirants. At the presidential level, just one female candidate will be on the ballot, Princess Chichi Ojei of the Allied People's Movement. No party is fielding a woman vice-presidential nominee. Of 416 gubernatorial candidates, just 6% are women, with similar figures for female House of Representative (9.2%) and Senate aspirants (8.4%). One of the reasons so few women win seats is because the majority contest on the tickets of smaller parties that rarely win seats in the first place.

DETERMINING FACTORS: THE FIVE 'I'S

Identity

Nigeria's political system, both at the federal and state levels, is characterised by prebendal patronage where political actors capture state power and use the same to advance the well-being of their ethnic or religious groups. A consequence of this is that state resources are unevenly distributed to the advantage of majority groups, thereby making political representation and access to power highly competitive in the country. In addressing these concerns, the political elite, across party lines, have adopted approaches such as power rotation and zoning to improve the inclusivity of minority groups. However these zoning and power rotation rules were jettisoned by the PDP's decision to throw open its ticket which was eventually clinched by a northern Muslim, following eight years of the presidency being held by another northern Muslim. The issue of representation and access to power could be a determining factor in the outcome of the 2023 elections, especially with regard to the presidential poll.

The three leading presidential candidates Ahmed Bola Tinubu of the APC, Atiku Abubakar of the PDP and Peter Obi of the LP are from the Yoruba, Fulani and Igbo ethnic groups respectively. Candidates are expected to perform better than their opponents in their 'home' geo-political zones, while opposition party members may face repression from state and non-state actors in these areas. Religion may also be a prominent determinant of the outcome of the 2023 elections. The APC's decision to run a Muslim-Muslim ticket has heightened religious tensions in the country. Conventionally leading parties have sought to balance their presidential tickets to ensure that both major faiths are represented and there are concerns about what a single ticket victory would have for faith relations in the country. The lack of a coherent national identity in Nigeria and the overarching reliance on ethnicity, religion and regionalism for political identity has historically accounted for electoral violence and attendant insecurity.

Insecurity

The 2023 elections are to be held within the context of high state fragility with parts of the country ungovernable spaces due to pre-existing localised and regionalised conflicts which could undermine security and impede the free and fair voting process. All six geopolitical zones of the country are confronted with rampant insecurity. Northern states are engulfed in long-standing violence with extremist jihadist groups, criminal bandit gangs, and other non-stated armed groups. In the south, civil unrest continues against the backdrop of ongoing violence between farmers and herders and secessionist agitators. The situation is worsening amidst fuel and currency scarcity which is increasing economic hardships on the more than 130 million Nigerians classified as multidimensionally poor. Insecurity could even determine whether elections will hold on time all across the country given the threat it poses to the security of voters, electoral materials, and poll officials across the more than 176,000 polling units.

Institutions

The success of any electoral process is dependent on the credibility, transparency and efficiency of stakeholders that manage, regulate, and secure the process. Saddled with the responsibility of establishing the rules of play and conducting the 2023 elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is a central election stakeholder. The introduction of the 2022 Electoral Act supports the use of technology such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), a facial recognition system aiding voter accreditation, and the INEC result viewing portal have boosted confidence in the system. However, the decision of an election petition tribunal quashing the 2022 win of the PDP governor in Osun on grounds including overvoting and non-synchronisation of the BVAS has dampened citizens confidence in the ability of technology to solve Nigeria's election challenges. The management of the permanent voters card collection exercise also created citizen discontent, with many alleging INEC staff in key strongholds of either ruling or opposition parties denied citizens the opportunity to collect them.

Already faced with a gargantuan logistical operation, those charged with managing the elections across the country are further challenged by the prevailing insecurity and the CBN's efforts to push a cashless policy. INEC and its supporting agencies rely heavily on cash to deploy more than a million field staff and to ensure the safe delivery of election day materials. The all-important role of securing the electoral process necessitates an efficient, neutral, and apolitical security infrastructure. However, in previous elections cycles, security agencies have been implicated in partisan enforcement. The police's reputation for brutality and citizen intimidation has led to increasing distrust and suspicion from citizens with the 2020 #ENDSARS protests the most visible manifestation of this. The judiciary is another integral institution in the electoral framework given that it will handle significant amounts of pre and post electoral litigation. It too can be politically compromised.

Information Disorder

More than in previous polls digital misinformation and disinformation on social media is shaping the coverage of the campaigns of mainstream media, with online influencers having an outsized role in setting the agenda. Whilst social media has opened avenues for citizens to engage more robustly with their prospective representatives the volume of false information circulating online can also lead to citizen actions based on incorrect information. Trust is a scarce commodity in Nigeria and this fact is only being exacerbated by the volume of misleading content online that promotes candidates, attacks political opponents and undermines key electoral institutions. Some attacks on opponents and the promotion of candidates have been instrumentalised to entrench pre-existing social cleavages around ethnicity and religion. This type of disinformation has the potential to foster insecurity, dampen citizens trust in the electoral process and incite violence post-election.

The APC initially experienced some internal division with Christians in the party, unhappy at the unwillingness of Tinubu to balance the presidential ticket. But more substantive divisions have emerged, and spilled into the public sphere, following the CBNs demonetisation policy. Prominent APC governors have openly accused senior officials in the presidency, and tacitly the president himself, of working against the interest of the party and in favour of Atiku, a fellow Fulani and northerner. Atiku himself has endured a divided party throughout the campaigns, with the G5, refusing to support his candidacy in frustration at the PDPs failure to adhere to zoning principles in the selection of its flagbearer. This could result in the PDP losing the south-south, historically a stronghold of party.

PROJECTING VOTING PATTERNS

Nigerian presidential elections are a numbers game with the successful candidate looking for a majority of the total vote, plus at least 25% of the vote in two-thirds of the states and FCT. Presidential tickets are developed with these national and regional calculations in mind. Over 9 million newly registered voters will be eligible to cast their ballots in 2023. The highest number of newly registered voters as a percentage increase on 2019 is in the north-central zone which has increased its voter population by 15% since 2019 and which may lead to it playing a more influential role in the outcome. Historically voters in the southwest and northwest have held the potential to be key determinants of the election outcome, given that they are home to the largest number of voters and in the case of the northwest higher than average turnout – it was 43% in the zone compared to 35% nationally in 2019. This is again in the case in 2023, with the two zones combined accounting for 40.2 million voters – 22.3 million in the northwest and 17.9 million in the southwest.

A key factor is the question of where the 'Buhari coalition' of around 12 million predominantly northern votes he, more than his party, has been able to command since 2011 will realign given that he will not be on the ballot in 2023. During the 2003 polls Buhari was able to flip several states that Obasanjo carried in 1999 into states that reliably voted for him such as Jigawa, Kano, Katsina and Sokoto. But these could be up for grabs in 2023 as Buhari's personal appeal has not always translated down the ballot. Having Kwankwaso on the ballot will also impact on the APC's performance given the level of support he enjoys in Jigawa and Kano states. Turnout too may be affected by prevailing insecurity.

The northeast includes the home states of PDP aspirant Atiku (Adamawa) and APC vice-presidential candidate Shettima (Borno), while the governorships in the other four states are split evenly between APC (Gombe, Yobe) and PDP (Bauchi, Taraba). In north-central, APC currently controls five of the six states, but most have sizable Christian populations which may pose a problem for the party given its all-Muslim ticket, a potential advantage for the Obi-Datti ticket will seek to make inroads into, particular given the increased numbers of new voters in the zone and the fact that over 70% of those newly registered across the country are youth – a key demographic supporting his campaign. High turnout is key for the LP candidate but without significant grassroots party structures its ability to ensure this is the case and to protect votes cast for its candidate remains in question.

In the southwest, home to almost 18 million registered voters, Tinubu commands significant support among governors and will be looking to improve on the 53% share of the vote the APC secured in 2019. But Lagos, the state with the most voters in 2023, is cosmopolitan in nature and has sizable Igbo and youth populations, offers an opportunity for Obi to make inroads. The southeast, from where Peter Obi hails, has the smallest share of the voting population at just under 11 million and traditionally has seen particularly low turnout, a reality that could be repeated in 2023 given prevailing secessionist activities in the region. Both are hindrances to the LP candidates overall chance of victory even though he will likely take a significant share of votes that historically have been won by the PDP. The PDP is also under pressure in the south-south following factional disputes. Even though Atiku's running mate is from the zone, he will struggle to secure a repeat of the 68% he won in 2019, with Obi likely to be the main beneficiary of lost votes.

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