

# Obasanjo to be recognised despite rigged Nigerian election

By Trevor Johnson and Chris Talbot  
30 April 2003

The response of the Bush administration as well as media reports makes clear that Olusegun Obasanjo and his People's Democratic Party (PDP) will be accepted as the legitimate victor in the recent Nigerian elections, despite widespread vote-rigging.

When it suits them the United States and other western powers have raised their concerns about the legitimacy of an election in a developing country. In Nigeria, however, despite widespread reports of ballot box stuffing, under-age voting and 100 percent returns from some areas for the incumbent president, barely a murmur can be heard.

In a short statement, the US government states, "Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) on April 22 declared President Olusegun Obasanjo the victor in last Saturday's presidential election" and "congratulates the overwhelming majority of the Nigerian people for what was a peaceful exercise of their right to vote in many parts of the country". It merely calls for all complaints to be taken to "competent tribunals" to be considered "in a timely, impartial and transparent manner."

The *New York Times* initially labelled the elections as "botched", described some of the "irregularities" and said that Nigeria could not "afford to ignore charges of regional disenfranchisement." It has since dutifully toned down its criticisms, with an article on April 27 entitled "Nigeria Holds a 'Credible' Election. Is That Enough?" The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* ran an editorial headlined "Impressive but imperfect/Despite fraud allegations, Nigerian election is progress" while the *Christian Science Monitor* commented that "given Nigeria's long history of military rule and rampant corruption, these elections were a relative success for civilian control of the country and for attempts to prevent voting fraud."

The British BBC commented, "observers say that Mr Obasanjo does enjoy considerable support and probably would have won the election, even without the 'over-zealousness' of some of his supporters."

It goes on to say that since the difference between Obasanjo's total number of votes and that of his nearest

rival, Muhammadu Buhari, was greater than the number of votes cast "where the worst irregularities occurred," the overall result should not be in doubt.

This forgiving approach to the ruling Nigerian elite comes despite the obvious lack of progress towards even a semblance of democratic rule and the refusal of the wealthy ex-generals who run Nigeria to use any of the country's oil wealth to alleviate the growing poverty and unemployment.

Before the election the BBC's correspondent wrote accurately on the situation in Nigeria and the nature of the civilian rule under Obasanjo from 1999 in an article entitled: "The general's election in Nigeria." Referring to the succession of military dictatorships that have run Nigeria for most of the years since the mid-1960s, it noted how "a small group of senior officers became both extremely wealthy and also very powerful in business and political circles. It was also widely recognised to have been a time in which massive high-level corruption and economic mismanagement severely undermined the country's development."

Civilian rule was supposed to be a "transitional" period explains the BBC article, so that by the next election in 2007 the generals were supposed to have moved aside. But "former military officers and their allies dominate politics not just at the level of presidential candidates [four of the election candidates were former generals], but behind the scenes as well."

Obasanjo could only win the election with the backing of General Ibrahim Babangida: the general who ruled Nigeria from 1985 to 1993, "reputed to be one of Nigeria's best connected and wealthiest individuals in a country where money plays a central role in politics."

As well as continuing to be dominated by a corrupt ex-military elite, regional conflicts over the distribution of Nigeria's oil wealth have fuelled ethnic and religious clashes. Financing gangs of unemployed youth to carry out ethnic-inspired attacks has become the stock in trade of Nigeria's political elite. Since Obasanjo came to power in 1999 some 10,000 have been killed in ethnic and religious fighting, with hundreds massacred by army troops.

The conflicts increased in the run-up to the elections. Since the legislative elections on April 12, more than 35 people have been killed in election-related attacks. Some of the worst violence took place in the Niger Delta, in Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers states.

Many of the groups observing the elections reported the widespread vote rigging. “The election was generally peaceful, but it does not necessarily mean it was fair,” said Ifeanyi Enwerem of the Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC), which has 30,000 election monitors. Enwerem said the authorities had announced results in many places where no voting took place at all, such as parts of the Niger Delta and the southeastern state of Anambra. In other places where very few people voted, results were announced with supposed turnouts of up to 98 percent.

If the BBC and others could note the apparently large vote for Obasanjo despite the widespread disaffection with official politics, the reason is not difficult to find. Over the past five years large amounts of money have gone into Obasanjo’s PDP. According to the BBC every village has a PDP office and in cities it operates from large new buildings. PDP officials hold key posts in government administration and para-statal. Even discounting the ballot rigging, a system of patronage has been built up to bribe an impoverished electorate.

The most critical overseas election observers came from the European Union (EU). A team of 118 EU observers covered 31 of the 36 states. Max Van den Berg, the EU’s chief election observer, said that his team had witnessed ballot box stuffing and had “obtained evidence of widespread election fraud in 13 states”—including several in the oil-rich Niger Delta where recent protests and armed interventions meant that the vote was otherwise unlikely to go the PDP’s way. A statement by the EU observers noted, “The presidential and a number of gubernatorial elections were marred by serious irregularities and fraud—in a certain number of states, minimum standards for democratic elections were not met.”

Obasanjo, with close ties to the US administration, clearly realised that this was an opportune occasion for an attack on “old Europe”. At a press conference from which foreign journalists were excluded, he denounced the EU team.

“The Europeans should not think we are Europeans. Our culture and environment are different from theirs,” he said.

“Whereas democracy must have certain standards that are common, the cultural milieu of the place where your democracy is practised must be borne in mind.”

Obasanjo’s information minister called the EU report on the elections “unacceptable”.

In contrast Obasanjo praised the largely compliant local media for their “patriotism.” He also praised the

Commonwealth observer team’s report as a “neat job” that took into account the “peculiar” Nigerian environment. The Commonwealth Group of former British colonies that last year led the attack on election rigging by President Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe had told Obasanjo that his re-election was “a clear indication that your vision and hardwork for Nigeria and Africa as a whole continues to enjoy the support of the people of Nigeria.”

Unlike Mugabe, Obasanjo has continued to enjoy US backing as the world’s sixth largest oil producer, with most of its exports going to the US. As the *New York Times* pointed out: “Nigeria, along with South Africa, is Washington’s most important strategic partner in sub-Saharan Africa.”

It may be that the evidence of vote-rigging will not be completely forgotten by the US, but will be recalled later to put pressure on the new administration in the same way that the US has previously protested over the issue of the barbaric sharia law—now imposed in much of Northern Nigeria without opposition from Obasanjo. Obasanjo’s spokesman may have had this in mind when he warned against the use of standards for Nigeria that even the US did not meet—a reference to how the US Presidential elections in 2000 were stolen by George W. Bush.

The World Bank now estimates that Nigerian income per head has fallen to \$290 per year, with an illiteracy rate of 34 percent and 38 percent lacking access to clean water. Another four years of Obasanjo’s policies will be even more disastrous for the Nigerian working class and rural poor. Living standards are expected to fall more drastically in his second term, due to falling oil prices and increasing pressure from creditors and the IMF, which allowed Nigeria some leeway while the elections were approaching.

With the elections over, demands will now be made for an increased pace of privatisation and opening Nigeria up for exploitation by western corporations. *Africa Confidential* commented on April 18: “More state companies will come under the hammer; the sale and restructuring of some of the mega-operators, such as telephones, electric power, Nigeria Airways, and even subsidiaries of the sacred state oil company will have to be completed.”

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