

Nigeria election commission abruptly postpones presidential poll

By Eddie Haywood
18 February 2019

In the early morning Saturday just hours before the polls were set to open, Nigeria's Independent National Election Commission (INEC) abruptly postponed the presidential election, claiming that it lacked the proper election materials and equipment at various polling locations around the country. In its announcement of the delay, INEC declared that the election has been rescheduled for Saturday, February 23.

In addition to postponing the presidential poll by a week, INEC also rescheduled the polls for the National Assembly to February 23, and the gubernatorial and House of Assembly elections to March 9.

INEC chairman Mahmood Yakubu gave reporters in capital city Abuja little explanation for the sudden delay, asserting, "This was a difficult decision to take but necessary for successful delivery of the elections and the consolidation of our democracy."

The presidential contest, taking place between incumbent president Muhammadu Buhari and chief rival and former Vice President Atiku Abubakar, is in a virtual dead heat, with each candidate expected to take an even number of votes.

After the announcement of the election's postponement, Buhari and Abubakar traded accusations against the other of improperly influencing INEC, with each candidate calling the delay an attempt by the other camp to get breathing room in the hotly contested poll.

President Buhari's All Progressives Congress Party called the delay "a huge disappointment" and told the media, "We do hope that INEC will remain neutral and impartial in this process as the rumor mill is agog with the suggestion that this postponement has been orchestrated in collusion with the main opposition, the PDP [People's Democratic Party], that was never ready for this election."

Uche Secondus, the chairman of the People's

Democratic Party (PDP) to which rival candidate Atiku Abubakar belongs, blasted the postponement, calling it "dangerous to our democracy and unacceptable." He accused President Buhari of influencing INEC's ruling as an attempt to cling to power amid a stiff challenge.

The postponement was immediately met with an outcry of anger by voters across the country, who were prepared to cast their ballots on Saturday. Having no absentee voting system, voters in Nigeria must travel to their home province in order to participate in elections. Many voters traveled from other areas of Nigeria at significant personal expense in anticipation of voting.

INEC's Twitter account was inundated with tweets by angry voters, who excoriated the electoral body for the delay.

Summing up the general outrage, one voter wrote: "I am in my villa with friends who traveled 7 hours for this election. So we will just travel back to come back on Saturday. What a waste! For me, postpone 3 times, I must vote and nobody can stop that which its time has come!"

The fundamental issue of the election, a contest between two multimillionaires, essentially boils down to deciding which candidate can best represent the economic interests of the wealthy Nigerian elite, and takes place in a country blighted by the extreme poverty experienced by the majority of Nigerians.

With a population of 190 million and home to vast oil and gas wealth, Nigeria is one of the most socially unequal countries on earth, with just 10 individuals controlling a total net worth in excess of \$26 billion.

In contrast, over 50 percent of the population subsist on less than two dollars a day, according to figures published by the World Bank, and more than 23 percent of Nigerians are unemployed. Amid this social devastation experienced by the Nigerian population,

Buhari and Abubakar have poured over \$2.7 million into their respective campaigns.

Buhari first rose to power in 1983 after the former student of the US Army War College became military dictator of the country in a violent coup. His rule was characterized by immense brutality and cronyism, with his regime carrying out the detention, torture, and killing of political opponents. Buhari and his ruling clique became immensely wealthy from looting Nigeria's vast oil and gas resources.

Holding power for two years, he was routed in 1985 by a subsequent military putsch. Buhari subsequently returned to power when he was elected president in 2015, defeating incumbent Goodluck Johnathan.

Buhari's current administration is beset by similar brutality, corruption, and cronyism. Last year, the United Nations Human Rights Commission released a 49-page report which extensively documented the Buhari government's crimes, including extra-judicial killings, arbitrary detention, torture, rape, and the sexual mutilation of political opponents, including children. The report additionally condemned the Buhari regime's rampant corruption and looting of the Nigerian economy.

As for Atiku Abubakar, he served as Vice President for the years of 1999 to 2007 in the government of Olusegun Obasanjo and was employed as a customs officer from 1969 to 1989, eventually becoming Deputy Director of the Nigerian Customs Service.

As Deputy Director, Abubakar leveraged his position to set up Nigeria Container Services (NICOTES), a shipping company, partnering with Gabriele Volpi, an Italian-born Nigerian businessman in 1982. NICOTES, now known as Intels, became the largest logistics company in Nigeria, netting Abubakar a significant fortune.

Coinciding with the election and its postponement are the ongoing paramilitary skirmishes in the north, with the Nigerian army engaged in an intractable fight with the Boko Haram Islamist militia.

Over the last week, at least 70 people have been killed in the northern part of the country, an area wracked by years of paramilitary conflict and overrun by criminal gangs engaging in kidnappings, extortion, and assassinations.

There is little doubt Washington is closely monitoring the election and its outcome, as evidenced

by its vast military presence in the region, with more than 1,000 military personnel, including special forces troops, deployed in the neighboring countries of Cameroon, Niger, and Mali.

Key to American economic and geopolitical interests in Western Africa is the growing economic influence of China in Nigeria, and the Buhari government's close relations with Beijing. Washington views China as the chief threat to American dominance of the African continent and is keen to neutralize Beijing's encroaching influence.

Over the last decade, Chinese companies have invested heavily in Nigeria, bankrolling projects totaling in the billions of dollars, including in the oil and gas sectors, as well as construction, electricity, transportation, and manufacturing industries.

Over the next several years, Beijing plans a vast increase in its trade with Nigeria, and Nigeria figures prominently as part of Beijing's Belt and Road initiative. Plans are underway for a transcontinental railway, already begun in 2017 in Kenya, to be built across the continent through to Nigeria, connecting Western Africa to Chinese trade routes.

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