

Nigeria braces for elections amid Muslim-Christian rifts and Boko Haram threat

by [Heather Murdock](#) in the [October 29, 2014](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and has its largest economy. Yet the nation has only a brief democratic history and has experienced a host of serious rifts, including a bloody insurgency, corruption, and deep divisions between a poorer Muslim north and a richer Christian south.

So Nigeria's elections early next year are hotly contested, with a united opposition challenging President Goodluck Jonathan's ruling party.

Current dynamics could push Nigeria into its most volatile moment since a civil war in the late 1960s. However, optimists say that carrying off free and fair elections could help build a more mature democracy.

"The security environment in Nigeria is likely to deteriorate in connection with the elections due to an increased risk of terrorism, political tensions, and localized electoral violence," said Thomas Hansen, a senior analyst for Africa at Control Risks, a U.K.-based security consulting firm.

Nigeria boasts Africa's largest oil output, mostly in the south, and previous conflicts there have raised oil prices worldwide. The extremist group Boko Haram is grabbing land in the chaotic northeast, conducting attacks in neighboring countries, intensifying religious tensions, and draining national resources.

Nigeria's economy is already in turmoil with enormous oil wealth in a place where most people live in abject poverty, says E. J. Hogendoorn at the International Crisis Group in Washington, D.C., who adds that a serious crisis would ripple outward.

"Large-scale civil strife would decimate the economy of the entire region," he said.

Civil war is not a "likely scenario," Hansen said, since Nigeria's elites have an interest in keeping the oil flowing and the nation muddling through. But tensions between the north and south are already intensifying, and no one is quite sure how bad it will get.

Technically, no one is yet campaigning for the 2015 elections. But already Nigerian parks and public spaces are filling with posters and banners for what could be the country's first real contest since the restoration of democracy in 1999.

In Abuja, where President Jonathan is in power, signs say things such as "One good term deserves another" and show pictures of the president looking pensive or grinning under his signature hat.

On the other side of the political ledger, opposition groups that once competed with each other have joined forces to form the All Progressives Congress. That party will challenge the ruling People's Democratic Party, which has been in power for the past 14 years.

If the new combined opposition party chooses a single candidate, it has a chance of defeating the ruling party, according to Abubakar Umar Kari, a University of Abuja political science lecturer. However, potential candidates may not stick with the party if not chosen.

"If they lose the primaries," Kari said, they may "leave the party or help the party."

While there is overlap, the two rival blocs roughly represent northern and southern leadership, with the ruling party under the southern-based Jonathan and the opposition led by northerners.

After the 2011 elections some 1,000 people were killed in clashes between Muslims, who generally support northern leadership, and Christians, who generally support southern leadership.

The founders of Nigeria's democracy saw this coming and arranged what they called a "gentlemen's agreement" in which power and the presidency would rotate between north and south every eight years.

The arrangement broke down after northern president Umaru Yar'Adua died in office in 2010, leaving then Vice President Jonathan from the south in charge. As a result, northerners have held the presidency for only three of the last 15 years.

Northerners blame southern politicians for neglecting their region, while southerners complain that northern elites take oil profits from the south, bank them, and leave ordinary people in the north impoverished.

In the Middle Belt between north and south, many say that 2015 will be a bloodbath no matter who wins, according to Hafsat Baba, a local opposition politician in the city of Kaduna. But the election, she said, must go forward despite the danger of violence.

“The government, we are holding them accountable,” she said. “They must conduct free, fair, and credible elections. That is what they promised us and that is what we are looking for.”

Three northern states have been under emergency rule for more than a year as the Boko Haram insurgency continues to grow. Thousands have been killed and hundreds are missing this year alone. It’s unclear if free elections can take place in war zones, with the risk of even deeper tension over northern representation in the political process.

In the south, Nigeria is losing as much as \$1 billion a month to oil theft, and Nigerian oil elites are accused of paying tens of thousands of former militants not to fight.

Transparency International ranks Nigeria as the 33rd most corrupt country in the world. The situation angers ordinary Nigerians and creates pervasive distrust—and public discontent is the most dangerous issue in the 2015 election, said Kari. The result is “an army of youths who are jobless, illiterate, poor and who have nothing to lose.”

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