

Interfaith pair wins Nigeria election

by [Lekan Otufodunrin](#) in the [April 29, 2015](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) When Nigerians talk of General Muhammadu Buhari, their newly elected president, they use words like *strict* and *iron-fisted*.

These traits are ingrained in society's image of him from his days as Nigeria's head of state in the early 1980s. After leading a successful military coup in 1983, he declared that, among other things, he would wage "war against indiscipline."

Now, at 72 years old, he is still remembered for his regime's no-nonsense policy. Buhari's record includes numerous allegations of human rights violations. He has also had to clear himself of accusations of being a religious extremist because of his past support of strict Islamic law in northern Nigeria, accusations he has consistently denied.

After three decades spent in the opposition, Buhari regained Nigeria's seat of power March 31 after defeating incumbent president Goodluck Jonathan.

Buhari's choice in running mate, Yemi Osinbajo, a law professor and a pastor in Nigeria's largest Pentecostal movement, won him Christian votes. [The vice president elect is a senior pastor at the Olive Tree House of Prayer for All Nations, a parish of the Redeemed Christian Church of God. On his campaign website, Osinbajo described himself as "a spiritual leader who is dedicated to the promotion of ethics and orderliness."]

Olusola Ojo, professor of international relations at McPherson University in Ogun State, said that Nigeria was in "a state of lawlessness" when Buhari came to power in 1983.

"Buhari and his next-in-command gave us the kind of leadership we needed to restore sanity to our society," Ojo said. "Unfortunately, his government was brief, and we returned to the state of unbridled indiscipline, which is still where we are today."

Buhari was toppled by another military regime two years after he took power and has lost his bid for the presidency three times before. With his victory, Nigerians have decided that the state of the country called for another Buhari-style administration to retain order. A combination of national fatigue with the federal government, the growing threat of Boko Haram in the North, and the parlous state of the economy decided the fate of President Jonathan.

To the oft-disenfranchised North, a win for Buhari also allows the region to redeem an unfulfilled agreement from the late 1990s—between political leaders nationwide—to rotate power between the Muslim North and the Christian South. Buhari is from north-central Katsina State.

The northern elite, many of whom backed Buhari, feel the region has been treated unjustly by the ruling People's Democratic Party, said Ango Abdullahi, a spokesman of the Northern Elders Forum, a political interest group. The party settled the agreement between northern and southern leaders in 1999, with a southern president in office from 1999 to 2007.

"The North was expected to follow suit with eight years, but unfortunately this did not happen," he said. "Is that not good enough as a reason for our agitation?"

The rotation was disrupted in January 2010 when President Umaru Yar'Adua, a northerner, died halfway through the first of two consecutive terms. Jonathan, a southerner, was his vice president and caused major debate when he took over.

But it was Jonathan's reelection run and win in 2011—still during a period promised to the North—that sorely increased the displeasure of the northern elite. Key northern members of the ruling party defected to create the All Progressive Congress, a coalition of three leading opposition parties, Buhari's party today.

“The North has reasons to feel betrayed,” said Junaid Mohammed, a top northern former legislator. “We can't carry on as if nothing is wrong with the political arrangement in the country.”

With a northern president ruling for only two out of 16 years since 1999 the region has lost out on key positions in government and overall wealth. Northern states are some of the poorest in the country.

Anthony Sani, a former publicity secretary of the Arewa Consultative Forum, a northern social political group, said the next president needs to address problems confronted in the North, including Boko Haram, endemic poverty, youth unemployment, and high levels of illiteracy.

Few believed that a nonnorthern president would make these issues, especially the problem of Boko Haram, a priority. The insurgent group has terrorized the North for years and only gained the full attention of the government in the six weeks before the election.

Many see Buhari's past military experience as necessary to bring discipline to a dispirited and underfunded Nigerian Army. And having had his convoy attacked by Boko Haram last July, he has seen the threat of the group firsthand.

There are questions of whether he will be a president for all of Nigeria. Yet, in addition to his running mate, the make-up of voters who picked him may lead him to look outside the North as well. With the APC, he has moved beyond the northern region as his main support base, a significant change from previous elections. He had surprise wins in states like Ondo in the South and Benue and Kogi in the central region.

“The North wants a president who can deliver on good governance by providing order, peace, direction, and prosperity for the people of Nigeria and not for northerners alone,” Sani said.

*Ariel Zirulnick contributed reporting from Nairobi, Kenya.*

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