

Africa: A country of spectacular stories

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A few days after Nigeria's presidential elections, with a disputed winner declared, here are some initial conclusions and prospects.

On Monday, March 1st, Bola Tinubu, the presidential candidate of one of Nigeria's two big political parties, the All Progressives Congress (APC), was declared the winner of Saturday's vote—but his mandate is both weak and contested. The voting was delayed and tainted by technical issues, and in some places was characterized by violence and voter intimidation. Local and international observers have confirmed this, but it is uncertain if that has affected the results, as has been widely claimed by opposition supporters.

A day before the announcement of the result, the Peoples Democratic Party (the other partner in Nigeria's "two party system"), as well as the Labour Party (which sponsored Peter Obi's candidacy), called for the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which runs elections in Nigeria, to cancel the election. The day after the announcement, both [Abubakar and Obi](#) declared themselves winners of the election, and said they will challenge the outcome. So we can expect court challenges lodged by them.

There is also potential for litigation over different interpretations of the election law. The winning presidential candidate needs the largest number of votes plus at least 25% of the votes in "two thirds of all the States in the Federation and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja." Tinubu did not get the required 25% in Abuja. INEC did not interpret the law that way and declared Tinubu the winner.

Tinubu has recognized that his 37% winning percentage with a turnout of only 29% of the registered voters (the lowest in The Fourth Republic, how Nigeria's state is known since the end of the dictatorship in 1999) is a weak mandate, and in his first speech he has asked for national unity and to collectively rebuild their country.

As for Peter Obi's candidacy, there is a lot to think about post-election. In 2019, the Labour Party got just over 5,000 votes. This time, they got 25% of the votes which is over 6 million votes. This is a radical change from the past two-party election races in Nigeria.

Moreso, Obi won majorities in 12 of the 36 states, and notably in Lagos (the economic and cultural capital and the country's largest city) and Abuja (the federal capital). Obi's win in Lagos is also significant since it is Tinubu's home base. Tinubu's campaign centered on his achievements during his governorship in Lagos between 1999 and 2007. Lagos and Abuja are also the physical places that dominate media and the election campaigns next to social media spaces. It may be that the high expectations that Obi would become president is connected to this regional dominance, which led many to overestimate his levels of support. This election also proves once again, as it has elsewhere, that social media support doesn't always correlate to turnout and that insurgent electoral campaigns which rely on the energy of young people need to turn tweets and Instagram posts into actual registered voters.

Nevertheless, the mobilization of support for Obi—from labor, leftists, and a horde of youths—reflect an engagement in democracy and a challenge to the establishment. From here, it will be interesting to see if Obi will remain loyal to the Labour Party (he has crossed parties several times in the past), and if he will prioritize spending the next four years mobilizing with the youth and trade unions for the next election.

Another question is if his supporters will translate the energy from the last six months into a long term political organizing process. (Obi is in his early sixties so he will still be youthful compared to the new president by then. The outgoing president, Muhammadu Buhari, is 80. Tinubu's real age is a mystery and the subject of much speculation in Nigeria. He puts his age at 70 years. Many Nigerians claim Tinubu is at least ten years older.)

Tinubu will take over a country in deep social, economic and security crisis—a country that is also the largest on the continent in terms of economy and population. What happens in Nigeria will ripple beyond its borders.

In the short term, there is a need to tackle an immediate cash and fuel shortage that halts the mobility of individuals and economic flows of the system. Inflation is at 21% and has led to a cost-of living crisis and the state is indebted. Tinubu wants to cut energy subsidies to ease state finances, but which may fuel the cost-of-living crisis and potentially spark popular protests (as subsidy cuts have done some many times before, most notably with Occupy Nigeria in 2011).

More systematic work needs to be done to get rid of corruption. Tinubu has a mixed reputation in improving tax collection and reducing corruption in Lagos. His own record on this corruption and transparency about his business dealings doesn't inspire Nigerians. We may again see a selective corruption hunt, where not all will be included and opposition members will be more exposed. Most Nigerians, tired of graft, agree that whatever ideology one has, corruption needs to go.

There is both a deep need and huge potential in reviving the economy. There is 33% unemployment (higher among youth) in a very resourceful country (in terms of natural and human resources). During the oil boom 2000-2014, Nigeria saw growth and investments (not least in Tinubu's Lagos). Nigeria has not been able to recover from the oil price fall in 2014 or capitalize on the current increased petroleum demands and prices. More so is the need for diversification, as the country is too dependent on a resource that will have reduced significance in the global economy, with an industry riddled by corruption, criminality and environmental spillages and which has fueled the deep inequalities in the country. It is worth noting that Nigeria is also badly hit by climate change, and has been ravaged by desertification in the north, rising sea levels, and multiple, devastating floods (leading to hundreds of deaths and over a million internally displaced in the Niger Delta). Tinubu has vowed not to adjust to climate change unless Western countries pay for it.

All these crises also relate to the security crisis, where violence, insurgency and criminality spreads and feeds on social crisis and deep distrust in the state and its actors and institutions.

Finally, readers may wonder whether the election can have any effect on Nigeria's overall crisis. Most observers (whether Nigerians or those who care for the country and its people), believe that at this stage, any improvement is good. There is no short term or quick fix. Also, Nigeria is a country of spectacular stories, where one may under-communicate the good stories and normal, informal everyday politics. Nigeria has been deemed to "fall off the cliff" many times before, but has always pulled itself away from the abyss at the last minute.

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