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Boko Haram and Nigeria's 2015 Elections: A Fighting Chance for Democracy?

MARCH 16, 2015 / AFRICAPLUS

By Brandon Kendhammer

One thing has been certain about Nigeria since the overthrow of the post-civil war military government in July 1975: No one knows what will happen next. Stability has eluded the country under both military and civilian administrations. Brandon Kendhammer, a rising scholar of this bewildering but vital country, provides guidance through the thicket of uncertainties on the eve of the elections on March 28 and April 11, 2015. On February 8, 2015 an ostensible civilian government had its chief security official, a career military officer, declare that democratic elections should be postponed. A former military, and civilian, president, Olusegun Obasanjo

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has campaigned openly for the defeat of President Goodluck Jonathan, whom he steered into the country's highest elected office. The likely beneficiary of Obasanjo's denunciation of Jonathan is the latter's main electoral opponent, retired general Muhammadu Buhari who also served as a military ruler.

To cap it all, a jihadist insurgency – which should have been defeated several years ago by Africa's largest army – has terrorized large swaths of the country's northeast, exploded bombs within and outside this sphere, and obliged the government to permit the troops of its smaller neighbors to join the fight on its own soil. Boko Haram, long dismissed as a local phenomenon, achieved heightened notoriety when its declared allegiance was accepted by the Islamic State. The respected Chairman of the country's "independent" electoral commission has been obliged by security and military leaders to retract his opposition to postponing federal and state elections. Meanwhile, reports of mega-corruption and mega-thefts of crude oil gush forth. Will Boko Haram be defeated? Will Nigerian democracy advance or retreat during the 2015 national elections? Nothing is certain at present in Nigeria but uncertainty.

The announcement by Professor Attahiru Jega, Chairman of Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), that the 2015 elections would be postponed for six weeks was not a total surprise. Several weeks earlier, members of President Goodluck Jonathan's inner circle, particularly the National Security Advisor, Col. Sambo Dasuki, and leaders of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), had begun to lay the groundwork for a postponement. Their remarks focused on the deteriorating security situation in the northeastern states and concerns over the challenges faced by INEC in distributing Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs). Yet, in his press conference, Professor Jega stated that INEC was ready to proceed on time. As he later described it, the INEC decision to postpone the vote was strictly security-based, in response to a direct request from the military and concerns that the safety of poll workers and voters in the northeast could not be assured.

Given that this announcement was one of the first acknowledgements by the Goodluck administration of how badly the Nigerian military had bungled the fight against Boko Haram, the stakes—politically and militarily— could not be higher. Within the political class, there are at least two competing arguments about what the delay will eventually mean, both for the current security situation as well as the future of the country's democratic institutions.



Public protest of the national elections' postponement in February 2015 (Source: Olamikan Gbemiga/AP)

On the optimistic side is Colonel Dasuki's speech at Chatham House in London on January 22, 2015. In an [interview](#) a few days after Jega's announcement, Dasuki offered a spirited defense of the postponement. His most notable claim was that the delay would enable the Nigerian Army (now supported by Chadian and Nigerien forces, and with a potential 8,000-plus AU force on the way) to launch a devastating counterstrike against Boko Haram, ensuring that the election could proceed nationwide without the threat of violence. He promised that by late March "all known Boko Haram camps [would] be taken out. They won't be there. They will be dismantled."

Subsequent comments by President Jonathan and others walked back from this specific timetable, but the word from the Presidency and leading military spokesmen has been one of unremitting confidence. For his part, Dasuki argued that the delay should be understood as a non-partisan act and provides no special advantage to either of the major parties. And, in an obvious retort to Jega, he stated that, despite INEC's assertion that it was prepared for the vote, the additional time would ensure that a satisfactory percentage of the PVCs would be made available to the electorate.

The second perspective was expressed most cogently in an [interview](#), soon after INEC's announcement, by Clement Nwankwo, one of Nigeria's respected human rights advocates and the head of the Policy and Legal Advocacy Center (PLAC), a major election monitoring group. In an exchange with the BBC's Will Ross, Nwankwo argued that given the unlikelihood that the Nigerian military – consistently outgunned on the battlefield – would be able to alter the situation in six weeks, the only explanation for the delay was a desire to undermine the democratic process. It was hard to believe, he claimed, given the growing support for the opposition All Progressives Alliance (APC), that there was not an "... intention here not to conduct elections." APC presidential candidate Gen. Muhammadu Buhari has been circumspect in his reaction to the postponement, insisting that his campaign will continue. Despite the happy front APC officials have put on regarding their electoral chances, concerns about their party's financial constraints, or of possible PDP manipulation of the election process, have grown louder.

Several questions can be considered here. Can Boko Haram be stopped in its tracks, an outcome likely to result in a Jonathan/PDP victory? Will Buhari succeed as a presidential candidate the third time around, buoyed by the continued failure of the Nigerian military and more high profile Boko Haram advances? Will the elections be tainted by rigging and violence or, even worse, cancelled with the declaration of a national emergency? Uncertainty prevails. Nevertheless, the pre-election ramping up of the fight against Boko Haram will likely play a major role in influencing the country's democratic future.

Boko Haram's 2014 Surge

To understand how Nigeria arrived at its current "fight or vote" dilemma, it is important to understand the forces behind Boko Haram's meteoric rise since late 2013. Although the group's origins can be traced to the early days of Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999 to the present), the current phase of the insurgency involves a series of events that seemed to presage its defeat. [\[1\]](#)

The first was the declaration of a state of emergency in the two states most affected by the violence (Borno and Yobe), as well as a third (Adamawa) that had not yet become a key target. Despite the efforts of the Jonathan administration and the military to justify this decision as part of a broader strategic plan, the impact on local residents was catastrophic. Mobile communications networks were severed for months, perhaps hampering Boko Haram but also constraining local commerce. Reports of tensions between security forces and local community

leaders, many of whom felt disrespected or even targeted as Boko Haram sympathizers, spiraled into mutual distrust and a decline in cooperation.

The second event was the ramping up of “Operation Flush,” an offensive designed by the Joint Task Force (JTF) and the Nigerian Army to drive the militants out of their strongholds (particularly in and around Maiduguri). In the middle of 2013, state forces experienced unprecedented levels of success, increasing the prospect that the insurgency might actually be crushed. In October 2013, Adam Nossiter of the *New York Times* [quoted](#) a confidential military source who suggested that the country could be three weeks away from peace.



Nigerian soldiers prepare for military offensive in late February (Source: Pius Ekpei/Agence France-Presse)

The third development was the emergence of a loose network of vigilante groups—many operating under the name of the “Civilian” JTF—to assist the national security forces and protect local property and lives. These vigilantes were key players in the push against Boko Haram throughout the last half of 2013, but they quickly developed reputations for being brutal and merciless in the treatment of suspected members of Boko Haram. As several international human rights organizations reported, the Civilian JTF and their military allies stand accused of summary executions of hundreds of local young men, many of whom were detained on the slightest suspicion. Combined with the violence against civilians perpetrated by official security

forces, Amnesty International estimates that in 2013 more Nigerians died at the hands of those fighting the insurgency than were killed by Boko Haram.

In combination, these factors set the stage for a dramatic transformation in Boko Haram's fortunes. Despite forcing the militants to retreat into the countryside, Operation Flush and the Civilian JFT exacted an enormous toll on the residents of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states. Added to the severe economic disruptions caused by the State of Emergency, Boko Haram operated among an increasingly weak, disorganized, and displaced civilian population.

Second, the military successes of 2013 quickly proved to be a misleading indicator of the military's actual fighting strength. Throughout early 2014, word trickled out from army installations and barracks that the living conditions of the troops were abysmal: poor food and bivouac supplies, delayed wages, and insufficient housing for families. The April 2014 abduction of schoolgirls at Chibok, following the February killing of scores of boys in Buni Yadi, were public embarrassments. Reports circulated that despite advance warnings of an impending attack in Chibok, soldiers and officers delayed engaging the enemy regarded as better equipped than they were. Moreover, a series of incidents reported as "mutinies" looked more like the "fragging" incidents during the Vietnam War (attacks on disliked American officers). By mid-2014, there were disturbing incidents in which troops were reported to have discarded their arms and fled from combat. The flight of as many as 500 soldiers across the border with Cameroon in August 2014 received considerable attention. [2]

Boko Haram Strategic Shifts

What impact did these developments have on Boko Haram's strategy and tactics? Beginning in early 2014 and culminating with its notorious (and widely misunderstood) declaration of a "Caliphate" based in Gwoza in August, the insurgents found themselves increasingly able to seize and hold territory. But while many Western media sources suggested that this choice reflected Boko Haram's evolution towards an "Islamic State" model—perhaps influenced by ISIS—it is more useful to understand it as the product of the Nigerian military's failure. In effect, Boko Haram's turn to territory-holding makes sense, not as a natural evolution, but as a response to a strategic environment in which much of Borno State was effectively undefended. In early March 2015, Boko Haram pledged formal allegiance to ISIS. The significance of these formal ties will emerge as the military conflicts evolve, in Nigeria and in Syria and Iraq.

Upon finding themselves with a *de facto* state, Boko Haram struggled mightily to decide what to

do with it. They adopted few of the ostensible “state-building” strategies evident in the areas directly controlled by ISIS or in northern Mali under Ansar Dine. Instead of sharia courts and the enforcement of new rules on a captive population, Boko Haram has continued to allow local residents to flee or (more disturbingly) to simply execute them en masse. Videos of these executions have circulated widely, while photos of Boko Haram-occupied territory distributed on Twitter in January and February 2014 show mostly empty scenery, with villages and towns appearing nearly deserted. As recently as the end of January 2015, Boko Haram seemed able to operate nearly unchallenged in as many as 20 local government areas across three states. Videos posted by the group and its associates show attacks on Damaturu and Gombe that brought Boko Haram fighters right up to state capital buildings and into central business districts with minimal opposition; while the attack on Baga (despite what appear to be exaggerated death counts) received wide international media attention. It has only been since late February 2015 that Boko Haram has suffered important losses in its core territories.

The Allied Response

Just as Dasuki promised, the election postponement has been accompanied by a greater federal commitment to the war effort and initial military successes. It is too soon to say if a tipping point has been reached and Boko Haram's demise is imminent. The Nigerian and American governments have taken steps to heal the rift regarding the supply of military equipment and human rights abuses by Nigerian security forces. The promised multinational African Union force exceeds what U.S. intelligence estimates Boko Haram can field (6,000 regulars). Military operations by Chad, Niger, and Cameroon since late January 2015 have already made a substantial dent in the territory under Boko Haram's control. The motivations these countries have brought to the decision to engage in the conflict were as much domestic as predicated on collective regional security. In response, Boko Haram has launched attacks in Niger and Chad and a dramatic assault on the Cameroonian town of Fotokol in which hundreds of civilians perished.

The acceptance of foreign military forces operating on Nigerian territory reflects a major change in attitude on the part of the Nigerian government. Nigeria has a long history of tensions with its neighbors over borders and sovereignty, and public cooperation between its military command and the allies has been strained. In particular, Nigeria's imposition of strict territorial limits on the international force means that its army will still have to perform the lion's share of the fighting.

Another new factor is the apparent upheaval within Boko Haram. An audio recording on March 6, purportedly featuring Shekau himself, shows Boko Haram pledging allegiance to the Islamic State. Connections have been drawn between ISIS media production and Boko Haram's growing presence on Twitter and the improved quality of its videos (as well as footage of beheadings that mimics ISIS). The ISIS link will likely mean more people and goods moving between West Africa and Libya (where Islamists have also declared the Islamic State affiliation) to Boko Haram's financial advantage. It could also mean more foreign fighters being recruited which would be an important departure from the group's reliance on financial incentives and bonuses (as well as forced inductions). Undoubtedly, this connection is likely to provoke increased American and European military and intelligence engagement.

Voting and Fighting

Although the challenge of conducting a national election while combating an insurgency should not be minimized, the fact is that only about 20 local government areas out of 775 would be "no-go" areas for voters. [3] And as Professor Jega and INEC have repeatedly stated, the distribution of voter cards in Boko Haram-affected areas has outstripped efforts in other areas. Outside the most devastated precincts, Nigerians appear ready and willing to cast their ballots.

The Jonathan administration has lived up to some of its promises regarding taking the fight to Boko Haram. Several local government areas have been cleared of insurgents, and the insurgency is less menacing outside its core areas in Borno state. Suicide bombings continue across the northeast, suggesting that even military victories cannot guarantee peace and security on polling day. Boko Haram will most likely seek to disrupt voting in major northern cities thereby posing a huge challenge to security services. More importantly for the long-term, cooperation and coordination between Nigeria and its allies remain fraught. The limited concessions the Jonathan government has made to regional forces suggest he still believes that his army is capable of conducting most of the fighting.

The concern of Clement Nwankwo, mentioned above, that the delay in voting would undermine the opposition and provide the PDP opportunities to rig the electoral process is still pertinent. Rumors of the possible removal of Attahiru Jega have circulated in the Nigerian press, but such a step would be hazardous for the government. The PDP's campaign machine has ramped up its publicity, drawing on its vast coffers. Despite a reasonable bill of health from the international community, the 2011 elections were marred by implausible voter turnout figures in many states (particularly in the pro-PDP southeast and the south-south Delta region). In some regards, the

voting delay could be helpful to INEC's planning. In others, fears about rigging and other electoral manipulation will increase. Although there is a new-found optimism about the battle against Boko Haram, there is as yet no guarantee of a more efficient, fairer, and less violent election. The Administration can demonstrate that Nigerians can both vote and fight the jihadist forces. Will that be enough to win Goodluck Jonathan a second elected term? Nigerians hope to freely answer that question at the polls on March 28, 2015.

[1] For a brief discussion of Boko Haram's rise after the 2009 death of its founder Mohammad Yusuf, see Andrew Walker's fine 2012 report for the U.S. Institute for Peace [hyperlink: <http://www.usip.org/publications/what-boko-haram%5D>

[2] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28927898>

[3] <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2015/02/muhammadu-buhari-nigeria-reduced-failed-state-150208121316691.html>



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