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Nigeria's 2015 Elections:

Lessons and Prospects for Democratic Consolidation

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- **INEC should strengthen public confidence** in the electoral process by maintaining its independence, introducing further innovations, and sustaining existing reforms.
- **Civil society groups should expand their role** as watchdogs and continue to support electoral reforms and educate the public.
- **The politicians should deepen democratic development** in Nigeria by confining their competition for power to the institutions and avoiding any action that would delegitimize the democratic process.
- **The international community should sustain and widen** its proactive engagement with Nigerian stakeholders until the culture of peaceful balloting is institutionalized in the country.
- **The Nigerian public should remain resilient in its support** for democracy and avoid any action that would reverse the progress achieved in 2015.

Despite widely held concerns about the likelihood of a destabilizing outcome, Nigeria successfully conducted its general elections on March 28 and April 11, 2015. The peaceful and positive result came to many as a surprise, considering the difficult political and security environment in which the elections were conducted. Five major obstacles had stood in the way of their going smoothly: the competing claims to the presidency by northern and southern politicians; a keenly contested campaign smeared by inflammatory messages; the grave security threat posed by the Boko Haram insurgency; allegations of politically motivated postponement of the elections; and gaps in electoral preparations. This briefing assesses Nigeria's 2015 general elections, highlighting factors that enabled the country to avoid larger-scale violence and lessons that can be learned from its experience.

THE VOTING PROCESS

Nigeria's electoral success can be attributed in part to several reforms adopted by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which conferred new legitimacy on the country's electoral process. Among other things, INEC introduced machine readable voter cards for voter accreditation and encouraged political parties to deploy their agents at all polling units across the country. These measures were to improve transparency and public confidence in the process.

During the March 28 presidential and parliamentary elections, however, the use of card readers in voter accreditation posed a major challenge. The card readers procured by INEC failed totally in some polling units, while in others they were inconsistent in verifying fingerprints.¹ The magnitude of this problem forced INEC to change its guidelines midway through the election, allowing officials to accredit voters manually in case of card reader failure. Some observers criticized INEC for what they saw as its shoddy response to the failures, which had been anticipated. They argued that reversion to manual accreditation defeated the aim of introducing biometric technology. Perhaps due to the raising of such concerns, INEC announced that polling would be repeated within twenty-four hours in the approximately three hundred polling units where card readers malfunctioned.²

The voting process went on more smoothly in most places during the gubernatorial and legislative elections of April 11, with improved functionality of the card readers. Nevertheless, noticeable lapses in compliance to election procedures led to the cancellation of voting in some polling units. In Abia, Imo, and Taraba states, the cancellation

¹ INEC procured 182,000 card readers, of which about 300 reportedly failed totally.

² INEC conducted elections in 152,031 polling units and voting points all over Nigeria.

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or postponement of polls forced election officials to declare the gubernatorial elections inconclusive. Elections were rerun in the affected areas on April 25.

VOTER TURNOUT AND ELECTION RESULTS

The voter turnout for the 2015 general elections was generally lower than in previous elections in Nigeria (see table 1). The main cause appeared to be security concerns arising from the tense political environment and reports of preelection violence, although some have pointed to apathy arising from alienation of people from governance and low levels of voter education and mobilization.

Table 1. Voter Turnout in Nigerian Presidential Elections, 1999-2015

Year	Registered Voters	Total Votes	Voter Turnout (%)
2015	67,422,005	29,432,083	47.09
2011	73,528,040	39,469,484	53.68
2007	61,567,030	Not available	58.00 (approx.)
2003	60,823,022	42,018,735	69.08
1999	57,938,945	30,280,052	52.26

Source: Int. IDEA, African Elections Database, INEC Official Result, 2015

The results announced by INEC indicate that All Progressives Congress (APC) candidate Muhammdu Buhari won the presidential election, having polled 53.9 per cent of the total valid votes (see table 2). The party also won gubernatorial elections in twenty states, compared to nine states won by People's Democratic Party (PDP) candidates.³ In the parliamentary elections, APC won 64 seats in the Senate and 214 in the House of Representatives, while PDP won 45 Senate seats and 125 House seats.⁴

Table 2. 2015 Presidential Election Results

	Candidate	Party	Votes	%
1	Muhammudu Buhari	All Progressives Congress	15,424,921	53.96
2	Goodluck Jonathan	People's Democratic Party	12,853,162	44.96
3	Adebayo Ayeni	African Peoples Alliance	53,537	0.19
4	Ganiyu Galadima	Allied Congress Party of Nigeria	40,311	0.14
5	Sam Eke	Citizens Popular Party	36,300	0.13
6	Rufus Salau	Alliance for Democracy	30,673	0.11
7	Mani Ahmad	African Democratic Congress	29,665	0.10
8	Allagoa Chinedu	Peoples Party of Nigeria	24,475	0.09
9	Martin Onovo	National Conscience Party	24,455	0.09
10	Tunde Anifowose-Kelani	Accord Alliance	22,125	0.08
11	Chekwas Okorie	United Progressive Party	18,220	0.06
12	Comfort Sonaiya	KOWA Party	13,076	0.05
13	Godson Okoye	United Democratic Party	9,208	0.03
14	Ambrose Albert Owuru	Hope Party	7,435	0.03
	Invalid/blank votes		844,519	—
	Total		29,432,083	100
	Registered voters		67,422,005	

Source: INEC

³ Gubernatorial elections were not held in seven states.

⁴ Senate and House of Representatives seats total 109 and 360, respectively.

THE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Nigeria's 2015 general elections were not entirely without hitches; violent incidents were reported in many states both before and during them. At least sixty incidents, resulting in fifty-eight deaths, were reported during the preelection period. During the presidential and National Assembly elections, more than twenty incidents reportedly resulted in nineteen deaths. The security situation deteriorated during the gubernatorial and state legislative elections, with at least thirty people killed in twenty-eight instances of electoral violence. These were mainly interparty clashes and attacks on polling units by hoodlums, often involving the snatching of ballot boxes and essential materials.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2015 general elections represent significant democratic progress and a major departure from Nigeria's history of electoral failures. From a management perspective, the success of the elections can be attributed to, among other things, the innovations introduced by INEC that improved transparency and public confidence in the process. The elections demonstrated that processes of gradual reform can improve the legitimacy of the electoral system in the short run and may consolidate the democratic system in the long run.

The willingness of Nigeria's incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, to concede defeat after the presidential elections reflects his confidence in the electoral process. President Jonathan's early acceptance of defeat had a tremendous calming effect on the charged political atmosphere and reinforced the message of peace promoted by Nigerian civil society and the international community.

The lessons learned from the 2015 elections should be applied to improving the electoral process and consolidating democracy in the future. To this end, the following measures are recommended:

- INEC should strengthen public confidence in the electoral process by maintaining its independence, introducing further innovations, and sustaining existing reforms.
- Civil society groups should expand their role as watchdogs and continue to support electoral reforms and educate the public.
- The politicians should deepen democratic development in Nigeria by confining their competition for power to the institutions and avoiding any action that would delegitimize the democratic process.
- The international community should sustain and widen its proactive engagement with Nigerian stakeholders until the culture of peaceful balloting is institutionalized in the country.
- The Nigerian public should remain resilient in its support for democracy and avoid any action that would reverse the progress achieved in 2015.