

A REPORT OF THE CSIS
AFRICA PROGRAM

Nigeria

ASSESSING RISKS TO STABILITY

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CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &
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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

This report is part of a series examining the risks of instability in 10 African countries over the next decade. The 10 papers are designed to be complementary but can also be read individually as self-standing country studies. An overview paper draws on common themes and explains the methodology underpinning the research. The project was commissioned by the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM).

The recent upheavals and revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa reinforce the value of taking a hard look at underlying social, economic, and political conditions that have the potential to trigger major change and instability. Few observers predicted the events that have unfolded with such speed in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya since the turn of 2011. But a close analysis of the underlying fault lines in those countries may have offered some clues, uncovering a range of possibilities that would have given U.S. policymakers a head start in framing responses and devising contingency plans. Similarly, an examination of political crises and conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa, such as postelection violence in Kenya in 2007–2008 and the presidential standoff in Côte d’Ivoire in 2010–2011, uncovers patterns of behavior, common grievances, and social dynamics that can help inform assumptions about other countries on the continent. The purpose of these papers is to delve below the surface of day-to-day events and try to identify the underlying structural vulnerabilities and dynamics that help to drive and explain them.

The papers in this study are not meant to offer hard and fast predictions about the future. While they sketch out some potential scenarios for the next 10 years, these efforts should be treated as thought experiments that look at how different dynamics might converge to create the conditions for instability. The intention is not to single out countries believed to be at risk of impending disaster and make judgments about how they will collapse. Few, if any, of the countries in this series are at imminent risk of breakdown. All of them have coping mechanisms that militate against conflict, and discussions of potential “worst-case scenarios” have to be viewed with this qualification in mind.



Map No. 4225 UNITED NATIONS
October 2004

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Cartographic Section



NIGERIA

Peter M. Lewis¹

Key Stress Points

- Poor governance and the zero-sum nature of Nigerian politics remain the country's most important catalysts of instability. Although the 2011 elections represented an important step forward, they left the country sharply divided along northern and southern lines. Northern perceptions of social and economic marginalization, coupled with resentment toward a Jonathan presidency, could lead to instability if it is manipulated by political elites.
- Social tensions in Nigeria are complex, overlapping, and deeply rooted in history. Ethnic, regional, and religious divisions are likely to produce episodes of violence. But provided these fault lines do not converge on a national scale, social violence is not likely to threaten the stability of the Nigerian state.
- Economic inequality and entrenched poverty will continue to fuel competition over resources. In particular, Nigeria's continued reliance on petroleum revenues leaves the country vulnerable to economic shocks. An economic crisis could derail the fragile amnesty in the Niger Delta region, and exacerbate tensions in the predominantly Muslim North.

Overview

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, with an estimated 155 million people, and among its most diverse, with more than 250 distinct ethnic and linguistic groups. Islam and Christianity are nearly equally represented, while African traditional religions are also prevalent. The country has abundant natural resources, including the largest oil and gas reserves in sub-Saharan Africa. Since gaining independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria has reflected deep-seated divisions, pervasive instability, and recurring conflict.

The challenges to stability in Nigeria can be seen along political, social, and economic dimensions. Politically, poor governance and regime instability have marked Nigeria's postcolonial experience. Amid cycles of civilian and military rule, the country has had six successful military

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coups and a spate of failed coup attempts. Democratic regimes have twice been toppled, and a third political transition was abrogated by the military before the current Fourth Republic was established in 1999.

Communal competition and conflict have been important catalysts of instability. Ethnic and regional tensions were central to the collapse of the First Republic, leading to the civil war of 1967–1970, in which at least a million Nigerians died. Although the scale and scope of subsequent violence have been more limited, chronic friction among ethnic, religious, and local groups has persisted over the decades.

Nigeria's economic conditions have also been problematic for national stability. During the first decade of independence, the distribution of revenues from agricultural and mineral exports created the basis for separate regional economies that fueled political contention. In the 1970s, the economy was transformed by the growth of petroleum exports; revenues were centralized, state patronage and corruption proliferated, and the economy was increasingly vulnerable to global oil price changes and domestic mismanagement. Rising inequality and deepening poverty in the face of plenty aggravated social tensions.

During the past decade, two important changes have framed national life. Politically, civilian electoral rule seems to have gained a degree of resilience. The current Fourth Republic has

outlasted previous civilian governments, and there appears to be an elite consensus on the utility of democratic institutions. Economically, serious efforts toward policy reform have yielded significant improvements in economic management and performance. There are signs of growing dynamism and diversity in Nigeria's private sector, as well as indications that improved economic governance can accelerate growth and public welfare.

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Yet there are problems and weaknesses that could easily tip the equilibrium in more negative directions. In the political realm, a succession of flawed elections, the dominance of the ruling party, and scant evidence of political accountability have all undermined the legitimacy and stability of democratic rule. Weak institutions—including the legislature, courts, police, and civil service—foster continuing problems of governance. Persistent inequality and widespread poverty fuel resource competition and communal tensions. At least 18,000 lives have been lost in hundreds of violent incidents sparked by different ethnic, religious, political, and economic tensions. Pervasive violence and insecurity further undermine stability in many parts of the country, notably the oil-producing coastal Niger Delta, the religiously diverse Middle Belt, and several predominantly Muslim northern states.

Analysts of Nigeria have often employed the language of crisis to describe the nation's predicament. There is no question that Nigeria contends with multiple vulnerabilities, and that the specter of failure is often present. Yet the country also embodies important sources of resilience, including institutional innovation, elite bargaining, and civic resources for attenuating conflict. Recent changes in governance and the economy have created opportunities for change. It remains an open question whether Nigeria will realize a more positive trajectory, continue to experience stagnation

and violence, or suffer a descent into calamity. The pivotal elements that could determine these alternate paths include elections, leadership, elite strategies, and key economic indicators.

Defining Instability

Nigeria's stability is influenced by key stressors and identifiable triggers of strife. The exercise of "stress testing" Nigeria calls for assessing the relative significance of these factors in an especially turbulent setting. We can usefully array these along a spectrum—ranging from localized, minor, or temporary incidents to broader, more significant, and lasting problems. Nigerians cope with myriad political, social, and economic issues that create problems of stability. Occasionally, these may attain a duration or magnitude that challenges the governability of the country; the insurgency in the Niger Delta is a good example, along with the growing Islamist challenge from Boko Haram elements in the north. Even these difficulties, however, fall short of an existential challenge to the nation, which was posed by the civil war. The following analysis considers these factors in perspective.

The catalysts of instability arise from three areas: political contention, social violence, and economic shocks. Politically, elite contention has frequently contributed to regime change and leadership turnover. Civil/military tensions, factionalism within the military, and corrosive rivalries among politicians have all contributed to turbulence. Further, central governments have not fostered effective institutions or public goods. Poor governance undermines political legitimacy and aggravates popular tensions over distribution and security. Leading triggers of political instability include elections, coups, large-scale social violence, particular elite rivalries, and economic shocks.

A second area of uncertainty arises from social violence. Ethnic, regional, and religious tensions, as well as localized friction, have given rise to multiple avenues of conflict. The civil war of the late 1960s was the most serious manifestation, though it was both preceded and followed by numerous episodes of discord. Social violence is integrally related to governance problems, though societal tensions raise distinct issues (e.g., identity and distribution) and often follow an autonomous logic. Important triggers of social violence include regime changes, elections, institutional turbulence, economic shocks, and political incitement.

The third area of instability is linked with economic shocks. Since 1970, Nigeria's economy has been dominated by petroleum exports, which constitute a volatile source of revenue. Moreover, the era of oil led to a deterioration of economic management, which aggravated the inherent problems of revenue uncertainty. In consequence, Nigeria has regularly been affected by economic crises and downturns, prompted by declining revenues, rising debts, and fiscal shortfalls. The resulting problems of public services, unemployment, and deindustrialization have sparked problems of violence and political instability. Oil prices (and revenues), debt levels, and fiscal conditions are key triggers of instability.

Nigeria at a Glance

GDP per capita	\$2,400 (purchasing-power-parity current dollars, 2010)
Unemployment	22% (2009 estimate)
Life expectancy	47.56 years (2011 estimate)
Population	155,215,573 (2011 estimate)
Population growth rate	1.935% (2011 estimate)
Median age	19.2 years (2011 estimate)
Urban population	50% of total population (2010 estimate)
Urbanization rate	3.5% annually (2010–2015 estimate)
HIV/AIDS adult prevalence rate	3.6% (2009 estimate)
Literacy rate	68% (2003 estimate)

Sources: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook 2011* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, 2011); Afrobarometer, 2009.

Background

Nigeria was colonized incrementally by Britain during the second half of the nineteenth century. Northern Nigeria encompassed the Islamic emirates established in the early nineteenth century by Uthman dan Fodio, as well as much of the Kanem-Bornu Empire. The largest ethnic and language groups in the north were the Hausa, Fulani, Nupe, and Kanuri, along with dozens of minorities.

Federalism created strongly differentiated regions and a comparatively weak political center. Ethnoregional rivalries, and struggles over the control of the national government, eventually led to political breakdown and large-scale civil conflict.

The southern region, developing from the Niger Coast Protectorate, covered the present-day Niger Delta, along with most of the southeastern states and the southwest, excluding Lagos. In 1914, the northern and southern protectorates were merged with the Colony of Lagos to form a single colonial territory.

At the outset, northern Nigeria was governed separately from the south under Lord Lugard’s doctrine of indirect rule, which provided for the continued authority of traditional rulers and the status of Islamic legal and

religious institutions. The southern portions of Nigeria were opened to missionary activity, and Christianity was established throughout the southeast, many central portions of the country, and in segments of the southwest. Among southern Nigerians, the presence of major administrative and commercial centers also fostered education, commerce, and a professional class.

These social and economic differences, along with institutional changes, gave rise to a contentious regional landscape. After World War II, Nigeria was organized as a federal system divided into Northern, Western, and Eastern regions. This regional map was retained after independence

in 1960, along with a “Westminster”-style parliamentary government. Federalism created strongly differentiated regions and a comparatively weak political center. Ethnoregional rivalries, and struggles over the control of the national government, eventually led to political breakdown and large-scale civil conflict.

At the time of independence, the three regions constituted separate social, political, and economic spheres of control for sectional elites. The Northern Region was dominated by the Hausa-Fulani and their leading political vehicle, the Northern People’s Congress (NPC). The regional economy rested on groundnut and cotton exports, along with some solid minerals, which provided a significant revenue base for party and regional elites. In the Western Region, the Yoruba held sway, largely centered on the leadership and political machinery of the Action Group (AG). The southwestern cocoa and palm oil economy furnished abundant resources. In the Eastern Region, the largest single group was the Igbo, who largely supported the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC). Palm oil was initially the foundation of regional revenues, though petroleum began to be developed after 1958.

Each of the regional elites consolidated electoral control and political patronage, seeking to maintain party dominance in its region while jockeying for central parliamentary advantage. The northern NPC, by virtue of the region’s population and the party’s electoral hold, gained control of national government at independence. The NPC entered into a tenuous alliance with the NCNC and sought to weaken the southwestern AG by dividing the Western Region and jailing the AG’s leader, Chief Awolowo. Growing regional antagonism was reflected in further controversies over the national census and the conduct of the 1964 elections. Increasing social restiveness and sporadic violence undermined national stability.

The central logic of state creation was to break up major ethnic blocks, and to furnish political representation and resources for a greater number of minorities.

In 1966, a military coup toppled the civilian government under the First Republic and set in motion a series of events leading to national crisis and civil war. A group mainly comprising Igbo officers took power in the bloody January revolt, which killed major northern leaders and replaced federal arrangements with a unified administration. This incited powerful regional resentments, especially across the north.

A countercoup in July 1966 brought to power a middle-belt officer, Yakubu Gowon. This was accompanied by anti-Igbo pogroms in the north, prompting widespread flight back to the southeastern heartland. Igbo military elements joined this exodus, and attempted to secede as the Republic of Biafra in July 1967. During the next two and a half years, more than a million Nigerians died, mainly southeastern civilians who suffered from hunger and disease. Federal forces ended the secessionist bid in January 1970. General Gowon’s regime pursued a policy of reconciliation in the wake of the civil war.

In the years that followed, Nigerian elites responded to these cataclysmic events with three broad strategies to stabilize the polity and promote national accommodation. The design of the federal system was the first of these. Beginning with Gowon’s regime, successive governments replaced the regional structure with a system of states and steadily expanded the number of units. The central logic of state creation was to break up major ethnic blocks, and to furnish political

representation and resources for a greater number of minorities. From 4 regions, the country was subdivided in 1967 into 12 states, increasing subsequently to 19 (1976), 21 (1987), 30 (1991), and 36 (1996). Although various commissions and proposals over the years called for additional states, the 1999 Constitution codified the current 36-state structure, and there has not been a serious discussion of new units.

A strategy for revenue sharing among the federation's components has paralleled the creation of states. Initially, regions could retain half their locally derived revenues, which originated mainly from export receipts. But with the growth of petroleum production in the 1970s, the central government accrued nearly 60 percent of revenues, with 30 percent distributed to the states and 10 percent to local governments. A complex series of formulas were used to determine allotments according to size, development, and other special needs. Since that time, the revenue distribution plan has been altered repeatedly, with the federal take currently at about 52 percent, about 27 percent going to the states, and about 21 percent to local authorities. Among the differently weighted allocations to the states, 13 percent of onshore petroleum revenues accrue to states with oil production. Debates over revenue allocation are a centerpiece of distributional politics.

In a third approach, Nigerians have repeatedly turned to democratic institutions as a mechanism to provide representation and accommodate diverse interests. After the failure of the parliamentary model in the First Republic, a constitutional conference in the 1970s selected a United States-style presidential system as the basis for a new democratic regime. The Second Republic lasted little more than a single term, from 1979 to 1983. Corruption, political violence, and electoral fraud undermined the legitimacy of the new regime, and the military again intervened. The regime of General Muhammadu Buhari was short-lived.

General Ibrahim Babangida floated another democratic transition after taking power in 1985, but he ultimately annulled the 1993 presidential election and paved the way for the intervention of General Sani Abacha. Abacha's autocratic regime—marked by repression, targeted political violence, and unrestrained corruption—represented the nadir of a 16-year period of military rule. With Abacha's death, reformers in the military supervised a rapid transition to civilian rule in 1999, establishing the most enduring democratic government to date.

The nation's changing political economy since 1970 has shaped national institutions and distributional politics. Petroleum production expanded quickly in the wake of the civil war, and the abrupt price increases of 1973 prompted an oil-led windfall. More than three-fourths of government revenues and more than 95 percent of export receipts were derived from crude oil. The emergence of a "rentier" state, imbued with the economic rents from petroleum, shifted the structure of the economy as well as state institutions.

Oil rents had a powerful centralizing effect on fiscal affairs, as export proceeds were paid directly to the central government, which had broad discretion in accounting and allocating for the finds. The windfall also spurred rapid expansion of the state, including a major growth of the civil service and government control over the economy. Spending programs, government-owned enterprises, and regulation were extended broadly. The speed and scope of government intervention encouraged the expansion of patronage by official elites. Competition for access to state-mediated rent and favors intensified, as the stakes of political office grew.

To summarize, postcolonial Nigeria has reflected a contentious diversity, with potent distributional conflicts among strongly defined ethnic and regional interests. In the aftermath of demo-

cratic failure and civil war in the late 1960s, Nigerian elites sought to maintain national equilibrium through institutional change, formulas for distribution, repeated democratic experiments, and extensive patronage and rent seeking. Elite bargaining and accommodation helped to stabilize the political process, though disaffected groups periodically upset this equilibrium. Moreover, elite politics largely excluded popular groups, and Nigerian regimes have not delivered prosperity or equity to a largely disaffected public. The ruling strategies of recent decades embody the potential for stabilizing a restive polity, along with the risk of polarization and crisis.

Country Assessment

During the past decade, Nigeria has pursued stability while contending with weakness. Civilian rule and improved economic management have yielded potentially favorable trends. At the same time, the country confronts basic problems of governance, social peace, and development that pose risks of crisis. Politically, democratic rule appears to have gained greater resilience, and there is a sense that the country may have turned the page on its past failures. It has managed four consecutive elections, three of which have been overseen by civilians, and the 2007 election, though very problematic, did usher in a transition from one administration to another. The 2011 elections represented a significant improvement over previous polls in their organization and competitiveness. Throughout this period, the military has generally stepped back from political involvement and has shown signs of greater professionalization.

Core elements of the fledgling democratic system—including electoral machinery, political parties, and the legislature—have fostered political oligarchy rather than responsive government.

Economically, a turn toward more stable technocratic oversight has also improved performance, which has frequently been aided by high oil prices. In addition to accelerated growth (averaging more than 7 percent since 2003), the government has sustained macroeconomic stability and has made efforts to tackle such long-standing problems as corruption and poor management of the petroleum sector. Better policies and an improved regulatory setting have fostered investment in such areas as telecommunications, where spectacular growth has significantly broadened economic activity. The performance of the financial sector has been more uneven, though banking and services have also aided diversification of the economy.

These trends, however, are overshadowed by basic institutional deficiencies, social violence, and economic vulnerability. Core elements of the fledgling democratic system—including electoral machinery, political parties, and the legislature—have fostered political oligarchy rather than responsive government. Over the course of four election cycles, the conduct of polls has often been tainted by fraud, misconduct, and violence, with declining credibility in each successive exercise until the most recent elections. The Independent National Electoral Commission, under executive control, has embarked upon a process of internal reform under the capable leadership of Attahiru Jega, but it continues to struggle with problems of capacity and has frequently been captured by incumbent governments.

The ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP)—a coalition of veteran politicians, notables, and elite aspirants—achieved early dominance of the Fourth Republic. The party has wielded its electoral machinery and patronage resources to broaden its hold on political power. More than 60

political parties are registered in Nigeria, several of which can claim significant popular support. Despite the presence of a potential electoral opposition, the PDP steadily increased its declared electoral majorities and expanded its control of states and legislative seats during the first 12 years of the Fourth Republic. The 2007 elections, marred by disarray and evidence of widespread vote rigging, gave signs of consolidating a rigid dominant-party system under PDP hegemony. The 2011 elections considerably opened political competition, as the PDP's majority diminished and several new parties were represented in the legislature and state governments. Moreover, the party itself was reshaped by the defection of many prominent members, the internal dispute over regional "zoning" among candidates, and the emergence of new challengers in a number of constituencies. The PDP remains strong, though not nearly as dominant as it has been during the last decade.

The ruling party's ascendancy highlights the general weakness of programs or ideologies across the party system. The PDP and its leading challengers have generally operated as machines for winning elections and sharing the spoils of political control. Political competition is organized

Political competition is organized around personalities and parochial appeals, which are typically pursued through the use of money, intimidation, and the compromise of election authorities. Local notables or "godfathers" frequently anoint candidates and furnish resources for capturing elections.

around personalities and parochial appeals, which are typically pursued through the use of money, intimidation, and the compromise of election authorities. Local notables or "godfathers" frequently anoint candidates and furnish resources for capturing elections. In consequence, the party system has evolved as a set of clusters among competing elites rather than a vehicle for voter preferences or political choice. The ruling party has reflected greater capabilities and reach, though its tactics are emblematic of party operations nearly across the board.

In a political system with a strong presidency and a dominant party, other branches of government may offer modest restraint on the executive. In this case, Nigeria's National Assembly is a contentious body that regularly opposes presidential privilege and queries the operations of government. Legislators have threatened impeachment, blocked presidential aspirations for an extended term in office, and launched investigations into numerous public programs and expenditures. Unfortunately, however, the legislature has itself also become noteworthy as a profligate and inefficient body that claims extravagant salaries and allowances (more than \$1.5 million annually per representative), while delivering minimal legislation or constituent service. The judiciary is more highly regarded, especially in light of its many independent rulings on electoral standards and disputed polls. Below the senior levels, however, there are widespread problems of integrity, competence, and capacity.

The institutions of federalism remain especially problematic for stabilizing the fractious Nigerian political system. Although Nigeria's federal arrangements have continually been reviewed and amended, major segments of the country believe that they are not well served by the status quo. Southern advocates have raised demands for the implementation of "true federalism," including greater latitude for states to shape their own economic policies, increased retention of revenues by states with abundant resources or dynamic economies, and greater transparency in transferring federal revenues to lower tiers of government. The most contentious arguments over federal-

ism originate in Lagos and the core states of the Niger Delta, which would reap the greatest fiscal advantages from revenue sharing. Northerners often regard “true federalism” as a call for greater economic segmentation, and they tend to favor redistribution mechanisms that equalize revenues across the federation.

A parallel argument focuses on informal power sharing within the political parties through the arrangement known as “zoning,” which calls for a rotation of major candidates among different ethnic and regional groups during successive elections. The ruling party chose a southwestern candidate, Olusegun Obasanjo, for the first two terms of the Fourth Republic, with the presumption that a northerner would be his successor. The 2010 death in office of President Umaru Yar’Adua, however, advanced Vice President Goodluck Jonathan, who is from the Niger Delta. He secured the PDP nomination against a northern challenger, and prevailed over northern rivals in the 2011 general election. Tensions around power rotation have the potential to aggravate elite divisions and regional polarization, as clearly reflected in the postelection violence throughout several northern states.

Institutional weakness also hampers the general functions of the state, fostering poor delivery of public services, inadequate policing, and erratic administration. The central government has been deficient in the provision of collective goods, including infrastructure, social provisions, regulation, and public order. In the absence of a neutral, effective source of public goods, Nigerians seek amenities on a particular basis from politicians and officials. The resultant corruption and inequality aggravate social divisions and undermine the legitimacy of government. Weak governance has contributed to deepening poverty, which creates a foundation for social restiveness.

Communal violence in Nigeria reflects diffuse tensions and myriad catalysts, creating challenges for predicting and containing strife.

Social tensions and communal violence present crucial challenges to stability. Since the transition to civilian rule in 1999, at least 18,000 Nigerians have died in more than 600 violent incidents—ranging from large urban conflicts as in Jos and Kaduna, in which hundreds or even thousands of fatalities have resulted from a single episode, to the low-intensity conflict in the Niger Delta, where violence is chronic but casualties are intermittent, and extending to scores of local disputes over land, rights, or representation, which escalate to violence and occasional fatalities. Violence among groups and communities has regularly raised concerns over national stability during the past decade.

Communal violence in Nigeria reflects differences of ethnicity, religion, language, region, locality, livelihood, and partisan allegiance. The sources of division and conflict do not converge along a single fault line or identity. Multiple dimensions often come together—as with the factors of ethnicity, religion, and economic position in Jos; the importance of ethnicity, clan, and locality in the Niger Delta; or the convergence of religion and region in presidential support in the 2011 election. Communal violence in Nigeria reflects diffuse tensions and myriad catalysts, creating challenges for predicting and containing strife.

Analytically, several dimensions of identity may give rise to social or political discord. Ethnic identities, defined by language and locality, form a basis for group solidarity and the competition over resources. Historically, ethnic identity has overlapped in Nigeria with broader conceptions of

region, whether labeled north and south, the southwest, the southeast, or the Niger Delta. Religion is another potent source of identification. Northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslim, though with many Christians in the cities and in minority communities throughout the region. Throughout much of the “middle belt” (including Plateau State and the city of Jos), Christian and Muslim communities are more equivalent and are often contentious. The southeastern areas of the country are overwhelmingly Christian, whereas the Yoruba in the southwest are religiously plural; marriage and conversion between different faiths is a common occurrence.

Locality frames identities as well. Yoruba from the towns of Ife and Modakeke have been rivals for decades, whereas the cities of Jos, Kaduna, and Warri constitute significant flashpoints among ethnic or religious communities. Groups that identify as “indigenes” of a particular area frequently contend with those regarded as “settlers” in the competition for land, economic outlets, or natural resources. Quite often “indigenes” and “settlers” reflect different ethnic and/or religious backgrounds. Partisan politics also comes into play, especially during election cycles, as different groups mobilize around parties and notables.

Although particular conflicts have their own dynamics, communal tensions are broadly related to problems of poverty and poor governance. The general scarcity of economic opportunities fosters competition over resources, whereas a large pool of unemployed (predominantly male) youth creates a ready source of mobilization. Governance problems are evident in the weak

provision of public services and the favoritism often shown by public officials. Low levels of government legitimacy and social trust often drive communal groups to organize for their own security or political aims, creating dangerous competition that can easily erupt into violence. The general “youth bulge” among the population, and the increasing availability of small arms throughout Nigeria, provide additional elements in a toxic mix.

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Important challenges for Nigeria’s stability arise from particular areas of conflict. The insurgency in the Niger Delta directly affects the country’s economically vital petroleum production, which accounts for more than three-fourths of government revenues. Protests and militancy have spread across the states of this coastal region during the past two decades. From a localized protest among the Ogoni minority, activism and militancy extended to Ijaw, Itsekiri, Urhobo, and other areas in the late 1990s. The 2003 elections were pivotal in the development of insurgency as local politicians armed and financed militant groups to serve as personal auxiliaries. After the elections, many of these groups turned increasingly to abductions and oil smuggling as economic activities. This formed the basis of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), a loose network of commanders and followers that advanced the core grievances of the Niger Delta communities (for development, environmental remediation, and resource control) while also pursuing economic agendas.

A government offensive in mid-2009 significantly damaged the cohesion and capabilities of the key militant camps. The Yar’Adua administration followed the military effort with an amnesty program for militants, in which more than 25,000 enrolled. President Goodluck sought to follow through on this program, despite problems with implementation and continuity. Most of the senior commanders participated in the amnesty program and important elements of MEND were

diminished or dismantled. These initiatives achieved tenuous stability throughout the region, yet violent incidents in the Delta and a wave of car bombings in Abuja signal the continuing hazards of conflict. A tier of junior commanders has emerged in the wake of the departing factions, and militants invoking the name of MEND have taken responsibility for several bombings and attacks.

During the 2011 election season, a number of incidents were associated with MEND, though the violence was more restrained than in previous election cycles. The polls in the key states of the Niger Delta were generally peaceful and credible, offering a buffer of political legitimacy that could mitigate future militancy. However, if economic and political conditions do not significantly improve, there is strong potential for a revival of insurgency, given that weapons and recruits are abundant. Improved security in the region will depend upon concerted efforts by the political leadership and the security forces to consolidate the amnesty program, accelerate visible development efforts, and cultivate support among a restive population. The situation could rapidly deteriorate, however, if government attention were to lag or the military were to become more punitive. The likely outcome would be renewed restrictions on oil production and possible bombings in Abuja or elsewhere.

However, if economic and political conditions do not significantly improve, there is strong potential for a revival of insurgency, given that weapons and recruits are abundant.

Islamist movements in the northern states present another challenge. It is important to distinguish political currents among the Muslim population of the north from militancy that directly challenges the religious or

political establishment. The expansion of Sharia legal codes in 12 northern states after 1999 was pursued through constitutional means by elected state governments. The push for Islamic legal reforms reflected a combination of religious values, populist frustration, and regional assertion.

This reformist trend was distinct from the growing militancy among diverse armed groups during the last several years. Different groups have emerged under the names Taleban, Kala-Kato, and Boko Haram, with little in common except a turn to armed action, animated by “antisystem” views with some reference to Islamic principles. The Taleban appear to have been rooted among youth—many of them relatively elite—in Maiduguri and other northeastern cities, taking partial inspiration from Islamists in South Asia. Kala Kato, most prominent in Bauchi, is a descendent of the millenarian Maitatsine movement of the early 1980s. They have been loosely related to Boko Haram, an antiestablishment sect that emerged across several states during the past few years. Boko Haram rejects the secular state and its politics, as well as the mainstream Muslim traditions prevalent in northern Nigeria. Although these various groups differ in their doctrines, leadership, and supporters, they embody a deep current of alienation from the government and religious authorities, and a potential challenge to security in various sections of the north.

Important elements among the Muslim north were animated by the 2011 elections, in which former general Muhammadu Buhari was the principal challenger to President Goodluck Jonathan. Buhari, a former military ruler and perennial presidential candidate, is widely popular in the northern states, where he is seen as ascetic, honest, and largely sympathetic to a “reformist” agenda. His loss in the presidential race, and the relatively weak showing by his party, the Congress for Progressive Change, set off rioting across several northern and middle-belt cities, along with pockets of localized rural conflict. The violence reflected not only political rivalries but also deeper social and economic tensions. The rioters, made up mainly of young men, targeted many

Muslim elites including emirs and prominent politicians associated with the ruling party. Some of the violence was clearly organized, suggesting influence from antiestablishment organizations or sects. Security forces quickly established order, though the scope of violence provides a clear sign of underlying tensions.

The middle-belt city of Jos has been gripped by recalcitrant communal violence. Jos is both a site of conflict and a hub for wider strife in Plateau State. The violence of the past several years, with thousands of deaths and casualties, brings together ethnicity, religion, settler/indigene, and land use conflicts. Christian Berom are often arrayed against Muslim Hausa-Fulani, though other ethnic groups have also been involved in the strife. Local politicians have aggravated tensions, and the military units arrayed around Jos have not effectively quelled tensions or preserved order. The conflict in Jos, though driven by local motives and factions, is emblematic of the wider problem of armed ethnic and religious mobilization. Militias can be found in Lagos, Anambra, Zamfara, and many other areas. The mobilization of armed groups creates a ready context for disparate violence, especially during election cycles.

Catalysts, Triggers, and Mitigating Factors

Nigerians confront myriad challenges to stability and security. Social and political strains have proved difficult to manage, while jarring violence is often unpredictable. There are, however, identifiable medium-term catalysts of tension and near-term triggers of strife. Political competition has

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emerged as one of the most potent catalysts of instability. The high stakes of political office and the general weakness of electoral rules and institutions have made political competition a do-or-die affair, in the words of former president Obasanjo. Political competitors often employ financial inducements, fraud, intimidation, and violence to capture elections and secure control. The weight of political “godfathers” shapes rivalries and the relative strength of various factions in local

and national contests. The readiness of elites to stoke communal anxieties and to sponsor armed groups aggravates insecurity, while the misconduct of politicians and parties incites frustration among average citizens. There is strong evidence from polling data that communal identities are sharpened during election times, and tend to recede between elections. Moreover, heightened competition often aligns with greater tolerance for violence, whether seen as a defensive or belligerent act. Although the 2011 elections showed marked improvements in transparency and organization, political violence was still prevalent throughout the political season.

Economic shifts also influence stability, though more slowly than political cycles. During the 1980s, weak oil markets gave rise to fiscal pressures and a debt crisis that hampered economic growth for more than a decade. Economic turbulence and popular discontent clearly influenced military coups in 1983, 1985, and 1993. The uneven reforms of military rulers, however, failed to spur recovery, and economic growth was virtually stagnant until a buoyant petroleum market improved performance after 2001. During a period of two decades (1980–2000), the poverty rate doubled to about 70 percent, and per capita income diminished by about a third in real terms. The faltering

economy created immediate liabilities for governments that relied on patronage for their stability, which fueled political uncertainty. Over the longer term, economic privation aggravated the poverty, inequality, and uneven development that formed the groundwork of other social tensions.

Against the background of political and economic stressors, four types of triggers merit close attention. Elections are clearly moments of great hazard. The period around elections tends to sharpen most of the factors analyzed here—political rivalries, legitimacy problems, communal identity, economic inequality, and the competition over resources. Politicians and parties frequently aggravate these problems by sponsoring militias, inflaming resentments, and rigging polls. All Nigeria's postindependence elections have been accompanied by violence and fraud, and several have been quickly followed by military intervention or social conflict. Quite simply, elections are important flashpoints of strife as well as potential vehicles for democratic development.

Second, changes in federal arrangements—notably boundaries and revenue plans—often create turbulence. Major conflicts in the Niger Delta and the city of Jos have been triggered by shifting the placement of local governments, or by contested elections for local officials. Revenue allocation for the Niger Delta remains a contentious issue, along with general questions of transparency in the use of revenues. Institutional changes are generally unsettling, especially where representation and distribution are involved.

Within the dynamics of conflict, violence in itself may constitute a trigger for strife. A history of violence in a particular area increases the likelihood that tensions will erupt into overt conflict. Large conflicts are often sparked by small events, such as a fight in a market, a dispute over grazing land, or a perceived religious insult. These incidents are more likely to escalate in a context of ongoing tension and previous violence—notably in Jos, Plateau, Kaduna, Kano, or Bauchi, which were the sites of postelection rioting in April 2011. In the charged environment of the Niger Delta, provocations by the security forces or militants quickly spiral into violence. Further, incidents in one portion of the country may incite reprisal actions in another, where the religious or ethnic composition is different (e.g., Kano in the north and Aba in the southeast). Although violence is widely distributed across Nigeria, there are evident flashpoints where the threat of strife is more apparent.

Economic shocks can also trigger instability. Fiscal shortfalls at election time, banking crises, local unemployment and deindustrialization, or significant shifts in economic fortunes among locals and newcomers—any of these dislocations may spur anxieties, incite resentment, or undermine the government's ability to preserve a modicum of stability. Economic disruptions are often less visible and more gradually felt, but these factors should be regarded as a significant trigger for instability in some contexts.

Despite multiple sources of instability and violence, Nigerians have avoided another large-scale conflict along the lines of the civil war, and they have been able to manage or contain numerous local incidents of strife. The country's social tensions, though potentially explosive, have not escalated into large scale fault lines. Moreover, national politics, defined by electoral cycles and

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competition under a continuous civilian regime, are more stable than in earlier, turbulent decades. A number of mitigating factors operate to assuage or reduce the key stressors and sources of conflict.

Elite bargaining and accommodation is a crucial source of resilience. Civilian politics are built around diverse parties and institutions for bargaining. Major ethnic, regional, religious, and factional groups are brought into the “big tent” of the ruling party, the arena of the legislature, and other venues for political negotiation and the distribution of rents. Although informal deals among elites have generally reinforced incentives for cooperation and stability rather than confrontation and violence, elite accommodation often frays and political notables sometimes turn to violence in order to gain advantage. The disputes over political “zoning” in the 2011 election cycle were especially provocative, with repercussions seen in the fragmenting party system and political violence. Moreover, an elite “cartel” reinforces inequality and impedes broad-based development. The anti-elite backlash following the 2011 polls was an important manifestation of these tensions.

Elite bargaining is encouraged and sustained by institutional supports. The federal system allows for a degree of local autonomy, adjustments in the distribution of resources, some measure of representation for various groups, and the possibility of negotiating new bargains over old

complaints. Further, institutions such as the judiciary provide recourse for grievances that emerge from flawed elections or contention over federal rules. The armed forces, though historically a source of governance problems, has also worked to preserve national cohesion and to develop the structures of federalism. Despite concerns among politicians and the public, the military generally remained in the background during the succession crisis under

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President Yar’Adua and the turbulent election season of 2010–2011. The armed forces stepped in quickly, however, to quell postelection violence.

Although elite political arrangements are important for stability, the civic realm is also resilient. A vibrant, diverse civil society has emerged in Nigeria with considerable capacity and depth, operating under both authoritarian and democratic regimes. A range of associations encompass labor, business, women, students, the professions, Muslim and Christian communities, local development interests, and agendas including governance, anticorruption, legal rights, and social service delivery. A diverse independent media also operates across Nigeria with substantial capacity to cover national and local issues. Civic actors have played crucial roles in challenging authoritarian rule, addressing the social costs of economic austerity, pressing for government accountability, observing elections, and managing local strife. Conflict resolution is an especially valuable function among civic and religious actors. Various clerics, religious associations, and community organizations have made efforts to mitigate tensions and avoid further violence in areas such as Lagos, Kaduna, Kano, and Jos. Local initiatives are rarely sufficient to manage conflict, but civic actors offer an important layer of mediation and social norms.

Scenarios

The analysis can be brought into focus by considering specific circumstances influencing Nigerian stability in the near to medium terms. Three scenarios are illustrated here, including a best-case

situation of reform and stabilization; a more likely “muddling through” circumstance with both hazards and positive elements; and a worst-case scenario of polarization, breakdown, and widespread conflict.

Reform and Stabilization

In a best-case scenario, Nigeria would surmount critical problems of governance and economic performance, moving to a trajectory of reform and stabilization during the next several years. The relatively peaceful and credible elections of April 2011 offered a promising foundation. President Jonathan secured the election with a substantial majority, and many opposition candidates were satisfied with the conduct of elections and their relative showings. General Buhari initially charged fraud, and his party is likely to pursue legal objections, as they have in previous elections. However, the majority of parties and candidates accepted the vote as legitimate.

In this scenario, President Jonathan would seriously pursue a reform agenda, leveraging the relative goodwill that emerged from the election. This would entail serious efforts to address grievances in the Niger Delta and development concerns in the north. Macroeconomic management would be a priority, and the government would seek to refurbish the electric power system and the petroleum refineries, addressing two of the most critical infrastructure problems in the economy. An improved political and economic environment would attract investment from Nigerians and overseas firms, allowing for substantial non-oil growth. Nigeria would see a resurgence of portfolio capital, broader growth, and possibly a more efficient and robust petroleum sector. Government initiatives to manage violence in Jos and in the northern states would contribute to stability. The best case is not the greatest probability, though it is a plausible projection of events.

“Muddling Through”

The more likely outcome is a prospect in which the country continues to struggle with challenges to stability and development, while mitigating factors continue to operate. The 2011 elections were significantly better than past polls in the public view. However, pockets of disorganization, fraud, and sporadic violence have clouded the results in several states. Although President Jonathan has won and the PDP has sustained some political advantage, strains in the electoral process will continue to shadow the government. However inclined to pursue reform and effective governance, Jonathan will face powerful crosscutting pressures for patronage and favors from the ruling party and allied interests. This could easily result in uneven and inconsistent policy efforts, and indecision on key issues such as the Niger Delta, economic management, and electricity sector reform.

Without decisive political and development initiatives toward the Niger Delta, the insurgency could gain renewed momentum, though perhaps not as intensively as in the previous period (2005–2009). Weaker incentives for militants and a more vigorous security response are likely to contain the scope of violence, though insurgents may still carry out some high-profile attacks. Similarly, a weak or ineffective political stance toward Islamist pressures in the north and religious tension in the middle belt will aggravate frustrations and likely give way to intermittent violence.

If oil prices remain high (and food prices do not escalate further), the country could maintain tolerably good economic conditions. Much will depend on whether President Jonathan can rein in the fiscal excess that has been a problem throughout his administration and the political campaign.

In the middle scenario, incidents of violence, an economic downturn, or unanticipated political shocks all have the potential to rapidly unsettle the situation. Governability remains fundamentally at issue. However, processes of elite bargaining and dynamism in the civic realm will work to mitigate polarization and instability.

Deepening Polarization

In a worst-case scenario, increased polarization and a breakdown of major institutions could create a crisis of governability and a basis for large-scale conflict. The most immediate trigger would be a future election fiasco, with a process so badly compromised that groups throughout the country feel essentially disenfranchised. If a major segment of Nigerian elites (e.g., northerners, who are currently unhappy about President Jonathan's presidency) perceive that they are excluded from the arena of elite bargaining, they could foster a deep rift in national politics and social life. This might initially be reflected as political acrimony, splits in the party system, and spreading violence at local levels. If political and social stability deteriorated rapidly, the military could be tempted to intervene. In the worst case, an attempted coup might result in the deaths of various politicians and individuals from certain parts of the country, but coup leaders (possibly junior officers) might be unable to consolidate power, and the armed forces would splinter, creating conditions for wider civil conflict. This scenario has a low probability, though it would clearly have a high impact. The promising improvements in election management and elite accommodation seen in 2011 have reduced the salience of this scenario for the medium term.

Conclusion

In contrast to the aggressive hegemony of the Sudanese state, the divisive segmentation of the Ethiopian regime, or the violent disarray of state weakness in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria has arguably succeeded in identifying a more successful formula for adapting and managing its contentious diversity. The April 2011 elections demonstrated both the promise and peril of the Nigerian model: The elections were widely judged to be the freest and fairest in Nigerian history, the first in which elite impunity was publicly confronted through both institutional reforms and responsible leadership. But clear improvements in democratic process belied an apparent paradox: These were also the most violent elections in Nigeria's history. Preelection and postelection violence killed many hundreds of people, demonstrating that democracy in Nigeria remains an imperfect tool for political accommodation, giving voice to some while leaving many more feeling frustrated and disenfranchised.

Nigeria must confront several pressing challenges to achieve durable stability. Catalysts of dissension and frequent triggers of violence are provided by weak governance, political contention and misconduct, polarization among ethnic and religious groups, and inequality and conflicts over resources. For the most part, conflict in Nigeria is episodic and localized, avoiding convergence on a large national fault line of politics or identity. Intervening institutions, elite politics, and civic actors provide some avenues for managing stability. Observers frequently employ the language of crisis to describe Nigeria's predicament. Issues such as the deeply flawed 2007 elections, the succession crisis surrounding the late president Umaru Yar'Adua, the downward spiral of insurgency in the Niger Delta, or the recurring violence in the city of Jos sometimes appear to outsiders as signs of national calamity. Yet the image of crisis is often rejected by Nigerians, who prefer to emphasize qualities of resilience.

It is notable how often Nigerians apparently edge to the precipice only to pull back through some momentary settlement or expedient arrangement. Brinkmanship is a common theme in the nation's politics. The stresses in the system are offset by key sources of bargaining and accommodation that help to maintain a fragile equilibrium. Elite arrangements over the distribution of influence and rents often provide a semblance of balance. A range of civic actors also help to manage tensions, vent grievances, and press for particular interests. Democratization, however frayed and imperfect, has offered an important mechanism for managing change in Nigeria's dynamic and often contentious society.



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