

Nigeria's election

By Gwynne Dyer

Lengthy delays before announcing the results of African elections are commonplace (the Democratic Republic of Congo last month, Zimbabwe last July, etc.). It just means that people voted the wrong way, and the government needs time to rig the results before publishing them. Postponing the vote at the last moment is much less common, and not so easy to explain.

That's what happened in Nigeria last Saturday. Only five hours before the polls were due to open, the Independent National Election Commission postponed the election for a week, citing as reasons attempted sabotage, bad weather and problems with delivering the ballot papers. It's weird, but it's hard to see who benefits from it. It may be down to simple incompetence.

There are 79 candidates for the presidency, but only two count. The incumbent, former general Muhammadu Buhari, is running again despite a less than stellar performance in his first term as an elected president. (He also held the office as a military dictator for twenty months in the 1980s, before being overthrown by another general.)

Buhari won power in 2015 by claiming to be a born-again democrat and a 'new broom' who would sweep away corruption, and many Nigerians dared to believe him. He was the first opposition candidate ever to win a free presidential election. But four years later Nigeria has fallen another 12 places on Transparency International's corruption index: it now ranks 144th out of 180 countries, just ahead of Mauretania.

Buhari is personally clean, but his anti-corruption measures almost exclusively targeted politicians of other parties. Nigerian average incomes fell by more than a third and unemployment doubled on his watch (mostly because of the collapse in oil prices). He didn't deliver on his promise to eliminate the Islamists extremists of Boko Haram, affiliated with ISIS, who have terrorised the north-east of the country.

Buhari should lose, and he probably will, because three ex-generals (all former presidents) who once backed him have switched to his challenger, businessman Atiku Abubakar. 'Atiku' is a billionaire who started out as a humble customs officer. People speculate that this made him very useful to generals and other powerful people who wanted to parlay a small fortune into a big one.

Be that as it may, Atiku then went into the oilfield supply business and prospered mightily (maybe with a little help from his friends). He served two terms as vice-president, after the first of which he was accused of having diverted \$125 million of public funds to his own business interests.

This is the choice that faces Nigeria, and it's really no choice at all. Both candidates embody exactly the characteristics that define the country's problems.

First, they are very old - Muhammadu Buhari is 72, Atiku Abubakar is 72 - in a country where half the voters are under 35, and half the population is under 18. The country is run by a congeries of mostly rich old men, mainly for their own benefit, and it has been thus ever since the return of democracy twenty years ago. Before that it was run by a bunch of somewhat younger soldiers, also mostly for their own benefit.

The other thing the two chief presidential candidates have in common is a plethora of children. Buhari has ten offspring from two marriages (one after the other). Abubakar has 28 children from four marriages (simultaneous). Humbler people can't afford quite that many, but most people are doing their bit to ensure that Nigeria's population outgrows its resources.

This is a sensitive topic, obviously, but not to talk about it is to ignore Nigeria's biggest problem. In 1960 Nigeria had a quarter of the population of the United States. Now it has more than half as many people, and by 2050 it will overtake the United States to become the world's third most populous country.

At that point it will have over 400 million people. Nigeria is only slightly larger than Texas (pop. 28 million).

It will probably be a 'free and fair' election next Saturday, but it won't change any of that.