

AFRICA

Can Tinubu Tame Boko Haram? Nigerian Politics and Security After the 2023 Elections

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The Nigerian presidential election took place on February 25, and, consistent with prior elections in the country; it did not go smoothly. The winner was southern Nigerian Muslim, former Lagos governor, and longtime business magnate Bola Tinubu. After the election, the other two main candidates, Peter Obi, and Atiku Abubakar claimed [widespread vote-rigging](#).

Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) asserted that "technical glitches" and other delays were minor and did not [affect the result](#). In the end, it appears the Nigerian government as well as the international community, including the U.S. State Department, are validating Tinubu's victory. Despite the blemish of the disputed election, it was a positive sign that there was no subsequent political, inter-ethnic, or religious violence in the country.

The Nigerian populace has seemingly moved on from previous eras in which the country faced incessant bouts of violence during election season. Cities in central Nigeria, such as Zangon-Kataf, have been synonymous with the legacy of contestation of political power and the deaths of hundreds of civilians in election-related violence. On top of the conduct of elections, land degradation, "new" [radical ideologies like Khomeinism](#) or Pentecostalism that emerged in the 1980s, and constant corruption that have all exacerbated Muslim-Christian violence in Nigeria—and still exist today—have not undermined the nation's stability since February 25.

Lessons from the 2011 Election

The most recent bout of widespread election violence in Nigeria occurred in 2011 when the southerner Christian president Goodluck Jonathan won amid even more numerous reports of voting irregularities than during this latest election. Adding to the controversy was that

Jonathan had assumed the presidency from his predecessor, northerner Muslim Musa Yar'adua, who died unexpectedly in 2009 after serving two years in office. Then, after winning the disputed 2011 election, Jonathan served until 2015, despite that, under [Nigeria's "unwritten rule,"](#) a Muslim should have served as president from 2007 through 2015 because a southerner Christian, Olusegun Obasanjo, had been president from the restoration of democracy in 1999 until 2007.

In Nigeria, there is an "unwritten rule" whereby the public expects presidential power to alternate between Muslims and Christians to ensure that both religions, which comprise a [roughly equal percentage](#) of the country's 180 million people, have a chance at the top of the political hierarchy. Yet, Tinubu, a Muslim, succeeded Buhari, another Muslim, after this latest election. The fact that no violence ensued shows Nigeria is moving in the right direction.

One reason why this latest election saw no violence is that between the 2011 and 2023 elections, Boko Haram has become a part of Nigerian life unlike anyone in the country could have imagined in the pre-Jonathan era, and the country has experienced more than enough violence. The group launched its insurgency against the Nigerian government in July 2009. However, after being clobbered in only a few days, the group went underground and [trained with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb \(AQIM\)](#). It was not until the first weeks of the Jonathan administration in 2011 that Boko Haram and the al-Qaeda-aligned faction, Ansaru, began conducting regular suicide bombings, kidnappings of foreigners, and raids of police stations and government buildings.

What was notable about Boko Haram's violence from 2011 was not simply the scale involving hundreds of fighters and dozens of civilian deaths in individual attacks, but the fact that the group was able to strike central Nigeria. Boko Haram's base for preaching and recruitment from the very [inception of the group](#) in 1994-1995 (for 2002-2003 formally) was in northeastern Nigeria. However, the group's penetration in the volatile central Nigerian, or "Middle Belt," region resulted from the group's ability to recruit in central Nigeria from aggrieved Muslims who suffered during the 2011 election violence. This is why the then-Boko Haram leader, Abubakar Shekau, constantly brought up the 2011 elections in his videos in 2011 and 2012 while condemning Jonathan and the Muslim scholars who legitimized

democracy and, therefore, the Jonathan presidency.

Fortunately for Nigeria, the interventions of civil society and international counter-intelligence collaboration combined with the fracturing of Boko Haram due to Shekau's ruthless killings of civilians and sub-commanders led to the group's weakening in central Nigeria. The region witnessed a sharp reduction of attacks, albeit at the expense of the group's further consolidation in northeastern Nigeria. Now Boko Haram is basically a northeastern Nigerian insurgency—and still extremely brutal there—but with only [occasional forays](#) into central or southern Nigeria.

Time for Transition with Tinubu

Despite a career in the military before entering politics and declaring Boko Haram as [“technically defeated”](#) early in his first term, Muhammadu Buhari did not eradicate Boko Haram at all. On the contrary, Buhari appeared aloof from the conflict during his two terms from 2015 to 2023 and was often in the U.K. for health reasons. As a result, ever since Boko Haram pledged loyalty to Islamic State (I.S.) in 2015 and became Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), the group maintained a steady hold on its territory in northeastern Nigeria. The military has attempted several offensives against the group. It has established “super camps” by fortifying northeastern Nigerian towns, but in each case, ISWAP retreated to rural areas, where ambushes on the military prevented ISWAP territory from being retaken.

Tinubu was Buhari's vice president and, similar to Buhari, he [did not prioritize](#) the fight against ISWAP, Ansaru, or the late Shekau's faction during his campaigning (Shekau was ousted from ISWAP in 2016 and then self-detonated a suicide bomb during an ISWAP offensive to kill him in 2021). Tinubu's apparent disinterest in the conflict in the northeast might have been because, unlike in 2015, when Boko Haram was a significant campaign issue, the Nigerian public has all but accepted the inevitability of the continuing Boko Haram crisis. As a result, Nigerian politicians do not even bother to promise to defeat the group anymore, even as the governor of the conflict-ridden Borno State, Babagana Zulum, continues to devote his energy towards rehabilitation efforts in areas under military control.

While Tinubu's presidency is unlikely to lead to any sea changes in the battle against jihadism in the country, he still might have a successful term. Although he is a Muslim and the president

“should” have been a Christian, Tinubu is still from the majority Christian south, has a Christian wife, and is strictly non-sectarian. Therefore, he can appeal to broad swathes of the Nigerian population. Moreover, if Nigeria cannot defeat ISWAP on the battlefield, Tinubu may still be able to do for the Nigerian economy what he did for the [booming Lagos economy](#). Therefore, his administration may be able to indirectly reduce ISWAP’s recruiting power by providing job opportunities for youths, who otherwise might be tempted to join the jihadists for the financial benefits the factions have to offer.

Conclusion

It is no longer realistic to expect Boko Haram to be “defeated” simply because of a change in the Nigerian presidency. However, the country is seemingly coming together by rejecting election violence, and there are signs that the economy may improve under Tinubu. In this regard, so long as the military maintains the [status quo with ISWAP](#), the hope for Nigeria and the international community is that a healthier nation economically and politically during Tinubu’s term will cause the security situation to flow upstream from those trends.

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