

Can Nigeria Bounce Back from its Flawed Election?

Article by **Daniel Adeniyi, Jennifer Kwao, Nneka Okechukwu**

March 23, 2023

With young people mobilised for political change, candidates espousing their vision for prosperity, and an electoral commission with new tools at its disposal, the winds of change swept Nigerians to the polls in February. However, a flawed election process has cast a long shadow over Nigeria's democracy and its future. Jennifer Kwao asked two experts what went wrong and what lies ahead for Africa's biggest democracy.

Jennifer Kwao: After a nervous counting of votes cast in the February 25 presidential elections, Bola Tinubu has been named president-elect. This news has been received with cheers from some, as well as sighs and frustration from others. What does this result mean for the country?

Nneka Okechukwu: Bola Tinubu has had a long history in Nigerian politics, even before the return to democracy in 1999. He was a leading voice in the call to restore democracy, and he was the governor of Lagos state from 1999 to 2007. He then played a pivotal role in the establishment of the current ruling party – the All Progressives Congress – in 2012. Before this election, he was already seen as the frontrunner. Peter Obi's campaign certainly galvanised the populace, but it was understood that he was the outside candidate.

Looking back on his time as governor, Tinubu was instrumental in many legal and financial reforms in the country, so we expect similar initiatives under his presidency. He was also vocal on Nigeria's institutional governance, calling for power sharing between the central and state governments which many states supported. He also influenced and demonstrated ingenuity in revenue-raising during his governorship. So some hope that he will take this experience and influence to the federal stage.

Our latest issue – Priced Out: The Cost of Living in a Disrupted World – is out now!

Read it online in its entirety or get your copy delivered straight to your door.

[READ & ORDER](#)

Daniel Adeniyi: Since 2015, Nigeria has had two recessions. Unemployment is at an all-time high. Inflation is skyrocketing – it's currently 21 per cent. Nigeria is drowning in debt. Between 1999 and 2021, federal government borrowing jumped from 3.353 trillion naira to 26.913 trillion naira. That's a staggering 658 per cent increase in local and foreign debt. This borrowing took place under other presidents and the outgoing administration.

It is high time for a reset as a nation. I expect the new president to put structures, processes, and capable people in place to rejuvenate the economy. We need that. As Nneka stated, Tinubu has a track record of economic and financial reforms so the Nigerian economy could improve under his tenure.

Let's focus on the election itself. There have been several accusations of corruption and vote rigging. Media reported during election week that a candidate for the senate from Peter Obi's

party had been shot dead. What does this troubled context tell us about the state of Nigerian democracy?

Nneka Okechukwu: There were high hopes that this election would be a turning point for Nigeria's democracy. Over 93 million Nigerians registered to vote and there was a sense that the election could produce the greatest turnout since the return to democracy. There was also hope that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) would redeem itself after years of criticism and failures, and to its credit, the Commission had made certain strides, such as switching to electronic systems.

However, the turnout this year was lower than in the last presidential elections; just 23 million voted compared to 29 million in 2019 [Tinubu scored 8.79 million votes – the lowest count for a winner since 1999]. There are many reasons for this low turnout. For one, the allegations and rumours of violence. Although about 68 people have lost their lives since the start of the electoral campaigns, we have not had widespread violence as feared. The attack in southeast Nigeria that caused the death of a senatorial candidate is still being investigated for connections to the election. Yet many feared outbreaks of violence in various parts of the country, especially certain hotspots in the north and the south. The recent cash crunch and fuel scarcity also played a role. So the general atmosphere around the elections was not conducive to greater voter turnout.

The new electoral law and the new election software were supposed to ensure that the allegations of electoral malfeasance that had plagued previous elections would not be repeated in this election. However, INEC officials have been accused of participating in fraud or tolerating the actions of certain interlocutors. These allegations have dealt a big blow to INEC's credibility.

Daniel Adeniyi: The technology in this election was meant to transmit the result from each polling booth directly to the national collation centre. However, the technology failed, preventing electoral officers from uploading the result. So they resorted to manual transmission which meant passing the result to ward level then to the county level and then to the state before finally reaching the national level.

The opposition parties argue that when the result isn't directly uploaded and the technology malfunctions, it leaves room for manipulation. The technology that was supposed to help, in which we have invested a lot of resources, has failed. Why should it fail? This is a question that remains open.

I think the recourse to the court signifies that Nigeria's democracy is growing. Violence hasn't broken out because of the result. Instead, people are saying, "we are not satisfied but we are going to the courts of law to seek redress."

Nneka Okechukwu: Speaking about the credibility of the elections and recourse to the courts, we should remember that Peter Obi came to power as governor of Anambra state following his successful challenge of the gubernatorial election results. Although it took two and a half years, he was eventually installed as governor of Anambra state. The courts work and he has experience with that.

Daniel Adeniyi: Overall, we can see the emergence of a new order with the potential to displace the old one and its ways of doing politics. This new order is being led by the youth. They engaged in social media campaigning and leveraged the End SARS movement that started in 2020. Veteran senators have lost to minority parties and newcomers to politics. Politicians and the public are beginning to understand how much power really belongs to the people.

The minority parties in Nigeria are getting stronger, for instance, the Labour Party won six Senate seats. This is really incredible and evidence of things changing. No longer can these politicians take the people

for granted. If we continue on this trajectory, especially with new parties coming into the Senate and the House of Representatives, we can expect a greater push to improve the electoral process.

Nneka Okechukwu: The Labour Party won Lagos state in the presidential election, which is Tinubu's home state. To a large extent, they won because Lagosians, following the End SARS movement and the violent suppression of that movement, had said then "see you in 2023". That was a statement that was often repeated on social media to show the public's disappointment in the ruling party.

For the first time in a long time, Nigerians were able to express their discontent with the ruling party quite clearly through the ballot and they expressed similar sentiments at the gubernatorial elections.

Would you say that the level of trust is lower than before the elections?

Nneka Okechukwu: I wouldn't speak to the level of trust at this stage because we're still waiting for the gubernatorial elections which will be another test of INEC's performance. However, there was a higher level of expectation that was not met and INEC also, in a way, promised more than it could deliver. At various polling stations, there was no uniform, formal vote counting which undermined the counting processes.

Daniel Adeniyi: I personally think the title of Mandela's book *Long Walk to Freedom* is an apt description of Nigeria's democracy. This election has shown that getting it all to tally right in Nigeria's democracy will be a very long journey. But I think we are on the right path.

*We can see the emergence of a new order with the potential to displace the old one and its ways of doing politics. This new order is being led by the youth. –
Daniel Adeniyi*

Now turning to the issues on the ballot, what were the main ones? Were there any climate champions among the candidates?

Nneka Okechukwu: Several issues featured in the candidates' manifestoes and campaigns. The economy and national security are major issues, but also fiscal and monetary policies, housing, agriculture, the reform of the oil and gas sector, digital economy and infrastructure, education, health and social development, and investment in human capital development.

The candidates had much to say about these topics. While they used quite development-centric phrasing in their manifestoes, there weren't any quantifiable means of how they were going to reach these goals that they set for themselves.

Daniel Adeniyi: Climate action was relegated to the background in these elections. Nigeria has seen several devastating floods in recent years but these events were not discussed. Nigeria is also a natural resource-dependent country, meaning it relies on natural resources for income and revenue. We rely heavily on crude oil, natural gas, and agriculture. 93 per cent of our total revenue is from crude oil so you can understand its prominence in this election.

The president-elect's manifesto outlines his plans to ramp up oil and gas production in Nigeria. He also wants to develop Nigeria's gas infrastructure given that it ranks number 10 in the world for gas reserves

while having critical electricity shortages.

Electricity production is especially poor. To illustrate the huge gap between production and demand, I'll compare Nigeria and South Africa. Nigeria has 13000 megawatts installed capacity compared to South Africa which generates over 50000 megawatts. This installed capacity is intended to serve a population of 200 million, while South Africa's capacity serves 59 million people. Out of the 13000 megawatts of installed capacity that we have, the authorities have only been able to consistently dispatch 4500 MW for the whole nation over the years.

Nneka Okechukwu: In human terms, one in three Nigerians does not have access to electricity.

Daniel Adeniyi: So the government aims to leverage Nigeria's gas reserves to mitigate this critical energy shortage. It sees gas as a major investment, but this conflicts with the government's climate commitments. At COP26, the outgoing administration committed to achieving net zero emissions by 2060. They also promised to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 20 per cent by 2030 and have said a 47 per cent reduction would be pursued if the EU, US, and other international partners provide support.

We need to leverage our resources but we also need to meet our climate goals and pursue a green transition. We have an abundance of renewable energy resources which we *can* and *should* leverage. Currently, renewable energy is not growing at the desired rate in Nigeria and it mainly provides off-grid access to people disconnected from the main grid. The Renewable Energy Roadmap report by the Energy Commission of Nigeria estimates that the country could meet 59 per cent of its energy demands with renewable resources, mostly solar energy, by 2050. We could really explore renewables but unfortunately, the candidates hardly mentioned a green transition in their campaign and manifesto.

Nneka Okechukwu: It's interesting that Tinubu's energy diversification plans in his manifesto also mentioned a return to coal. Comparing all the manifestoes of the three leading candidates, Obi was the only one whose plans envisioned a place for solar energy in Nigeria's energy diversification. But he also failed to make the link to the existing solar energy system in northern Nigeria.

Daniel Adeniyi: Tinubu's manifesto also spoke about increasing arable land cultivation from 35 to 65 per cent. This would effectively bring more land into cultivation at the expense of vegetation cover. There's nothing wrong with increasing investment in agriculture – in fact, I'll always support that. However, the implications of this policy for biodiversity need to be considered if climate and environmental goals are to be met.

One positive legacy of the outgoing government is the Climate Change Act that was passed last year after a long negotiation process. This instrument is harder to scrap than a policy, and it effectively binds the government to the Paris Agreement goal of limiting global warming to below 2 degrees Celsius. The Act also mandates the minister of environment to set carbon budgets and to release national climate action plans every 5 years. This mandate is very important so we should not play politics with the kinds of people appointed to ministerial roles, especially to the environment and economy ministries. We need capable people who are forward-looking and committed to implementing all aspects of this Act.

Could there be a rollback of the Climate Change Act?

Nneka Okechukwu: This is now law so any rollback would be difficult. However, there could be failings in the implementation of the Act.

Daniel Adeniyi: Investors understand they need to cut their emissions and choose their partners

carefully, but so do governments in the EU. The EU Multiannual Indicative Programme for Nigeria has the green and digital transition as a priority area. So they are paying attention to developments in Nigeria. Under this watchful eye and with so much at stake, I believe the incoming government cannot really renege on its commitments. They must follow through and they need credible people to do it.

Nneka Okechukwu: I also think youth movements and international actors will hold their feet to the fire and ensure that they don't fall back on their climate commitments.

Has it been helpful at all that the EU, US, and UK have been outspoken about this election?

Nneka Okechukwu: It has been somewhat helpful. It brings credibility to the electoral process, especially the comments that were made in the press release by the [EU Election Observation Mission](#). It highlighted system failures as well as improvements.

In recent years, we've been talking about a democratic backslide across Africa, especially West Africa. Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and the continent's largest democracy. In this respect, having the international community closely monitoring the process ensured that Nigeria kept its focus; it ensured that the Nigerian government understood that it had a role to play on the continent and it could not be seen to have major failings in its democratic system.

Having outspoken international observers ensured our electoral process went forward, and that we did not have a president seeking a third term. I think it was already a fear a couple of years ago with the outgoing president, but he handed over power peacefully to a large extent. In his own way, he attempted to disrupt corruption and vote-buying by curbing the amount of Naira flow within the economy but this had an unfortunate knock-on effect on the economy.

*These elections showed the power of young people
and the strength of civic movements in Nigeria. –
Nneka Okechuckwu*

How will the result impact Nigeria's relations with the EU or even the US and China?

Daniel Adeniyi: In terms of trade relations the ongoing energy crisis has created an opportunity for Nigeria to strengthen and leverage its ties with the likes of the EU. I expect Nigeria will go ahead with projects like the Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline project given the agreement signed last year. The pipeline will export gas from Nigeria to other countries including in Europe, via Morocco.

The president-elect said in an interview he had with the Nigerian Economic Summit Group that he is looking to attract foreign direct investment into the country and he is ready to put in place incentives for investors. He is interested in learning from other countries that have successfully attracted investors for their industries. It's a model he's tried in Lagos and wants to replicate for the whole of Nigeria. So, I believe Tinubu will be strengthening relations with the EU and US.

Will there be a favourite partner?

Daniel Adeniyi: Nigeria is a friend of many countries. Historically we've had good relations with the EU and US. The EU, for instance, has been supporting Nigeria through its Multiannual Indicative Programme for 2021 to 2027. Nigeria also has good relations with China. If you want to know where we

stand in our international relations, I would point you towards the last UN General Assembly vote a week or two ago which called for the immediate end to the war in Ukraine. Countries' voting patterns reveal a lot about who their allies are as well as their foreign policy positions. While some African countries abstained, Nigeria voted in favour of ending the war. It shows who Nigeria's major allies are and which partnerships it will be investing in. I personally think it will be the EU first, followed by the US, then maybe China.

Looking to the future, what do you expect for Nigeria's democracy, development and outlook?

Nneka Okechukwu: Things can only get better. We often say that in Nigeria and then things get worse. However, there have been positive trends. There's the commitment to improve the electoral process, for example. Perhaps before the gubernatorial elections the system failures during the presidential elections will already be resolved.

These elections showed the power of young people and the strength of civic movements in Nigeria. One of the candidates ran his entire campaign almost exclusively on digital platforms which was amazing in a country like Nigeria. That only speaks to the possibility of not only taking Nigeria even further into the digital age but also giving a voice to the Nigerian diaspora. In these elections, the Nigerian diaspora felt a lot more involved than ever before.

Daniel Adeniyi: We are at a critical juncture and I hope the incoming president will do the needful and bring together the calibre of people that can take Nigeria in the right direction. He has promised a GDP growth of 10 per cent. That is a tall order but it's good to set your targets high and see how you want to follow up on that.

Nigeria needs to deal with its security challenges if it wants to attract foreign investors; investors need to have confidence in where their money goes. If it can address the security situation, the economy will get better and there will be better jobs. Then there is also Tinubu's promise to attract foreign direct investment and leverage Nigeria's natural resources, which he must keep. Nigeria's digital economy is also growing as young people innovate and exploit new technologies. This could turn Nigeria into a hub for technology development or innovation on the continent.

Regionally, Nigeria will need to be more present and show leadership, particularly at the African Union, on the protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, and on the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCTA). Nigeria has a youthful population and resources at its disposal which it can use to implement regional agreements to its and other African countries' benefit.

This interview was conducted shortly after the election on 2 March 2023.

Daniel
Adeniyi is a
policy officer
in ECDPM's
sustainable
food systems
and climate
action and
green

transition teams. Daniel has been a professional officer at ICLEI Africa, working on food systems, urban planning and circular development in Africa. He was formerly a postdoctoral fellow at the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security in South Africa, conducting research on food systems governance in South Africa.

Daniel holds a master's degree and a PhD in development studies from the University of the Western Cape, an MPhil degree in monitoring and evaluation from Stellenbosch University, and a

bachelor's degree in urban and regional planning from Obafemi Awolowo University. Daniel is a professional city planner and a member of the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA).



Jennifer Kwao is the editorial assistant of the *Green European Journal*. She holds an MA in European Studies from KU Leuven, where she wrote her master's dissertation on Ghana's colonial legacy in its trade and development relations with the EU and China.



Nneka Okechukwu is a senior policy officer in ECDPM's inclusive governance and accountability team. Nneka worked with the Africa projects of the Max Planck Foundation for International Peace and the Rule of Law and as a senior research fellow and country manager of the South Sudan projects. Prior to this, Nneka worked at Saferworld UK and OHCHR. Nneka holds a master's in law degree from Queen Mary, University of London and a PhD from the University of Hull.

Published March 23, 2023

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/can-nigeria-bounce-back-from-its-flawed-election/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space.

Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.