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Nigeria postpones elections

Presidential and National Assembly elections scheduled in Nigeria for February 16, 2019 have been postponed until February 23. The governorship and state assembly elections are now scheduled to take place on March 9, 2019.

Dr. Vladimir Kreck.

Around 2.30am on Saturday morning, just hours before the election began, the Independent Electoral Commission of Nigeria surprisingly postponed the presidential and National Assembly elections scheduled for February 16, 2019, until February 23. Incumbent President Muhammadu Buhari remains standing for the All Progressive Congress and is being challenged by Atiku Abubakar, candidate of the People's Democratic Party and a former vice president of the country. Experts continue to predict a narrow outcome of the election, warning of voter fraud and politically motivated violence. The elections of new governors and state parliaments scheduled for March 2, 2019, are now scheduled to take place on March 9, 2019.

With a population of just under 200 million, Nigeria is not only the most populous country in Africa, but also the continent's largest economy. In the crisis-ridden West African giant, the Presidential and National Assembly elections are now not, as first planned, on February 16, 2019, but on February 23. The gubernatorial and state assemblies elections scheduled for March 2,

2019, have also been postponed. They will now take place federally organized on March 9, 2019. On Friday evening, just hours before the start of the elections, the country's Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) had to admit that it could not guarantee a smooth course for free, fair and credible elections. In the last months and weeks, both the government and the Electoral Commission had repeatedly stressed that the

preparations for the elections would proceed optimally and that there would be no complications.

Now the 84 million eligible voters, more so than ever before, are once again called upon next Saturday to determine the president and the makeup of the National Assembly. Experts and politicians now fear that the electoral push will have a negative impact on turnout. Many people eventually had to travel to various locations where they had registered to vote. Whether many of them will take the trip again or can pay for it is questionable.

Who is standing for election?

A total of 73 presidential candidates, 91 parties and more than 22,000 politicians will run in both rounds of voting. In addition to the president, 360 seats in the House of Representatives, 109 seats in the Senate, 29 governor posts and 991 seats in the 36 state legislatures are to be filled. To win the election, a presidential candidate will also need a simple majority this year and over 25% of the vote in at least two-thirds of the 36 federal states. Governors are determined on the same principle at state level. To become an MP, it is already enough to get the most votes in a constituency. Voting will be held at more than 120,000 polling stations.

The best prospects for success are the candidates of Nigeria's two largest parties – the All Progressive Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP). The APC was founded in 2013 as a merger of political parties and in 2015 it was able to win both the presidential election and the majority in the House of Representatives and the Senate. PDP ruled the country since its return to democracy in 1999 until the elections in 2015.

For the APC, Muhammadu Buhari, the current president is running again for election. The now 76-year-old former general, a Muslim from the North who, after a military coup, was already running government business from 1983 to 1985, prevailed over his predecessor Goodluck Jonathan of the PDP in the 2015 election. This election is described as historic in Nigeria because, for the first time since the country gained independence in 1960, an opposition

politician was able to bring about a democratic transition of power. In 2019, Buhari will be challenged by Atiku Abubakar. The heavy-handed 72-year-old Hausa-Fulani Muslim, who is also from the North, is running for the PDP. From 1999 to 2007, he ruled the country as vice president alongside President Olusegun Obasanjo.

Voters are disappointed in Buhari

Buhari's election success in 2015 was auspicious for many Nigerians, because Jonathan failed to convince as president. At the end of his term of office, the terrorist organization Boko Haram controlled large areas in the northeast of the country, the economy was already in recession and the corruption endemic in Nigeria had reached unprecedented proportions under Jonathan. Buhari's promise to defeat Boko Haram within a few months, lead the economy out of the crisis and consistently crackdown on corruption, as well as popular fatigue after 16 years of PDP in power, were crucial to the election success at the time. However, the initial postelection euphoria has since given way to widespread disillusionment. Many Nigerians are disappointed in Buhari. This is not only due to his period of illness in 2017, but above all the lack of energy of the government. The country is still in the economic crisis, corruption continues to reach the highest political offices and the security situation has recently deteriorated drastically throughout the country.

Precarious security situation in Nigeria

The many security problems of the country affect Buhari's image too. In the northeast of the country, the Islamists of Boko Haram, already declared defeated by the administration, are still raging. At least 1,200 people died in violent clashes, attacks and raids by the terrorists last year. At the turn of the year, the Islamic State supported splinter faction Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) also occupy numerous bases of the Nigerian army, thus gaining control of vast areas along the country's borders with Niger and Lake Chad. The terrorists achieved similar successes in 2014.

However, the security situation is not only problematic in the north east of the country. The resource conflict in Central Nigeria (Middle Belt), initially around land use, between the ethnically mixed but predominantly Christian farmers and the Muslim-majority Fulani herders, has been underestimated by the government for too long. Has been and is now escalating along ethno-religious boundaries. The conflict is said to have claimed more than 1,600 lives in 2018. In the past three years, the figure is said to have been more than 3,700 in total.

The conflict between farmers and herders has also triggered a humanitarian crisis together with Islamist terror in the north-east. In 2018 alone, both conflicts are responsible for a new volume of almost 500,000 internally displaced persons. The UN estimates the total number of people fleeing or living in refugee camps in the north of the country due to the conflicts at about 1.9 million. The situation of many refugees in areas terrorized by Boko Haram and ISWAP is particularly precarious. International aid organizations, including UNHCR, Caritas and the Maltese, make every effort to alleviate the suffering of the people in the often crowded camps as best as they can.

In 2018, ethno-religious conflicts such as the recent escalation of violence in Kaduna or the clashes with the Shiite Islamic Movement in Nigeria have also claimed numerous lives. Organized banditry, kidnappings with ransom demand and murder have also increased in all parts of the country. In 2018, in particular residents in the northern states of Zamfara, Katsina and Sokoto have been affected. Several hundred civilians have died in Zamfara alone in the last year. About 30,000 have left their settlements in fear of renewed raids.

Waiting for economic recovery

The security situation is not the only serious problem challenging the country. Buhari took over government business in 2015 amid the country's most severe economic crisis in 25 years. He promised not only to lead the country out of recession quickly, but also to diversify economic activity to create more jobs. The

problem with Nigeria is that the economy and the state's revenues, are highly dependent on the oil and gas production in the south of the country. Oil and gas exports add up to 90% of Nigeria's total exports and contribute up to 70% to the national budget. However, the industry is responsible for only about 9% of Nigeria's GDP.

With the fall in the price of oil and gas on the world market in 2014, the country plunged into a deep recession. The Nigerian economy's once high growth figures of up to 7% fell down, hitting a low point in 2016. According to the IMF, GDP at the time – accompanied by a rapid fall in the value of the native Naira – by 1.62%. Meanwhile, oil and gas prices have rebounded and the country has passed the bottom of the recession. In 2017, Nigeria achieved economic growth of just under 1%. In 2018, the figure is likely to have been 1.8%. However, these growth rates are insufficient in a country with 42% unemployment or underemployment to significantly reduce widespread poverty. About 87 million people depend on less than \$1.90 a day. This makes Nigeria the country with the most people living in extreme poverty worldwide. In addition, there is a birth rate of just under six children per woman on average. The country's population is growing rapidly and will be about 400 million people in 2050, according to the UN. In view of this demographic development, double-digit growth figures would be needed to significantly increase prosperity in the country.

With an average age of about 18, Nigeria's population is also very young. Many young people are affected by unemployment and poverty and are leaving the country for Europe. For years, migration from Nigeria has also become noticeable in Germany. In the BAMF's statistics, the country ranks fourth among the asylum-seekers' countries of origin with just over 10,000 applications in 2018, almost at par with third-place Iran. There are also about 9,000 Nigerians living in Germany whose asylum application has been rejected. They are waiting to leave. Another 20,000 Nigeria residents have sued against expulsion, but most face defeat in court. Only about 15% of asylum seekers from Nigeria are granted asylum, and they are mostly

refugees from the North-East of the country terrorized by Boko Haram.

In August 2018, German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited Nigeria. In a meeting, she assured Buhari of Germany's support in developing the country and thus in eliminating causes of migration. Another issue discussed between her and Buhari is the rather sluggish repatriation of Nigerian citizens whose asylum applications were rejected in Germany. Nigeria has not been particularly cooperative in accepting back migrants so far.

Corruption and infrastructure impede economic development

Buhari is now accused of failing to run the country efficiently enough without depending heavily on oil and gas over the past four years. Important reform steps to diversify the economy and deregulate markets have failed or fallen victim to corruption. Corruption in the country in particular is described as one of the greatest impediments of development. While the government has achieved success in prosecuting corrupt officials and repatriating misappropriated funds, they cannot hide the fact that Nigeria is suffering from one of Africa's highest rates of corruption and illicit financial flow. In Transparency International's latest Corruption Perceptions Index, Nigeria ranks 144 out of 180 countries, slipping by eight places since Buhari took power.

Buhari's opponent is an old acquaintance

With the nomination of Atiku Abubakar as the PDP's presidential candidate, Buhari has received a serious counter-candidate. Atiku, a former customs official who grew rich with deals in the logistics and oil sectors, is not an unscripted leaf in Nigeria's political landscape. Back in 1992, he made an attempt to be nominated as the presidential candidate of the Social Democratic Party. At the time, however, Atiku could not prevail in the primaries against Moshood Abiola, the eventual winner of the election annulled by General Ibrahim Babangida. With the death of military dictator Sani Abacha and the beginning of the country's re-democratization, Atiku joined

the PDP in 1998. Just a few months later, he won the presidential election alongside Obasanjo and ruled the country as vice president from 1999 to 2007. In 2007, he was suspended on corruption charges. However, his suspension was preceded by a falling out with Obasanjo. Atiku refused – also to push through his own presidential ambitions – to support an amendment to the constitution that would have allowed Obasanjo a third term. Atiku left PDP, survived the corruption allegations unscathed and ran unsuccessfully in the 2007 presidential election as the leading candidate of the opposition Action Congress party which is now a major political arm of the APC.

In 2010, Atiku made two more attempts for the PDP and in 2014 for the APC to be nominated as the presidential candidate of a major party. In 2010, however, he failed in the primaries to the then president, Goodluck Jonathan. In 2014, he had to give precipitation to Buhari and supported his campaign first and later his presidency. At the end of 2017, Atiku left the APC to rejoin the PDP. In October 2018, he was confirmed as the frontrunner for the upcoming presidential election at the party's primaries.

Party crossings as a result of opportunism

Atiku's recent party crossing has been the most prominent, but not the only one, in the past year and a half. Other prominent changes from the APC to the PDP included those from Senate President Bukola Saraki and that of Yakubo Dogara, the speaker of the House of Representatives. The party crossing of several APC senators last July shifted by eventually the majority in the Senate in favor of the PDP. As recently as last summer, many critics saw these party overpasses harbingers of defeat by Buhari in the upcoming elections, comparable transitions from the PDP to the APC indicated the defeat of Jonathan in 2015. In recent months, however, the APC has managed to consolidate. Now the party is successful in attracting members and elected representatives of the PDP.

The monetary incentive system of Nigerian politics is accompanied by a structural problem for parliaments. The mandate in the National

Assembly, as well as in the state parliaments, is characterized by nepotism. It remains either with a small circle of political elites or – which happens much more often – it rotates between ethnic groups, religious affiliation and deserving party members whose turn hasn't come, yet. As a result, about 60% to 70% of MPs are not nominated for a second term by their party. This, in turn, results in a considerable loss of experience in parliaments after each election. Newly elected MPs must first familiarize themselves with the functioning of a parliament, which is why the National Assembly and the state parliaments take a long time to get fit for work. Their position in the separation of powers, especially in relation to the executive, is therefore comparatively weak.

What do the top candidates promise?

At first glance, the aim of both parties is reflected in the election promises of the two leading candidates. Both want to boost the economy, creating millions of jobs as a result, both promise to improve the country's security situation and fight corruption, and both want to invest in the country's infrastructure. Nevertheless, in the election manifestos that have emerged in recent months, there are differences in economic policy, which, for the first time since the re-democratization of the country in 1999, is likely to see an approach of ideological demarcation in an election campaign.

Buhari would like to continue to adhere to the mixed system of the economy provided for by the country's constitution, i.e. state-owned enterprises, state participations and direct subsidies. He wants to deregulate markets slowly and gradually. In return, the public sector is to be strengthened, thereby creating jobs. Atiku, on the other hand, relies on streamlining the state and thus on privatization and deregulation. He also wants to incentivize investors by cutting corporation tax.

The election programs of the two leading candidates are also very ambitious. It is not saved on either side with promises that will only be financed with large amounts of state money. Buhari, for example, wants to create at least 7.5 million jobs in the agricultural sector with the

help of support programs. In addition, more than 10 million people are expected to qualify for the labor market in government-funded education programs. The technology and creative sector is also expected to receive \$500 million in funding. This is intended to create 500,000 jobs and train 200,000 young people. Further jobs are to be created through the creation and promotion of industrial parks to be spread across the country.

Atiku, on the other hand, promises to give the economy new impetus by privatizing the state and deregulating the markets. As a result, GDP is projected to double to \$900 billion by 2025. Across sectors, three million extra jobs per year would be created. His plan also calls for \$ 90 million a year to be invested in the country's infrastructure so that roads can be restored and the rail network expanded rapidly. He also wants to connect 80 million people to the electricity supply and get 50 million people out of extra poverty. To achieve all that, however, experts estimate that the country's economic output would have to grow at least 12% annually. Doubts that Nigeria will be able to do so in the short term are more than justified. Experts also complain that both candidates do not provide information on where the state investment funds for the development of the country should come from.

A dilemma for the voter

Many now fear that Buhari's victory will mean a continuation of the past, and with it, development in the country will stagnate. In addition, Buhari recently did not seem very convincing in public appearances, even at times not focused and not well informed. This, in turn, has sparked fresh rumors that his health is not particularly good. Atiku, in turn, is more likely to be trusted by many to lead the country's economy out of crisis. Against an election victory, of Atiku, however, it is noted that he is not particularly popular among the population. Many people have not forgotten the corruption allegations against him. He is said to have enriched himself in privatizing state-owned enterprises, which he was responsible for as vice president. Atiku campaigns with a promise to streamline the state, and many citizens worry

that few will benefit from a renewed wave of privatization under him, and that corruption in the country could again prevail.

The voter in Nigeria thus faces an electoral dilemma. In fact, the country desperately needs a new, fresh face. Someone who is vibrant and can ignite optimism. In Nigeria, however, such a candidate is not up for election. There are therefore quite a few who disregard political issues, and are therefore likely to refuse to vote. Quite a few also say on the quiet that the democratization of the country has failed. After 20 years, they say, it is time again for a military dictatorship to put an end to the violent conflicts and put an end to the corrupt establishment. These voices, however, seem to forget the experiences Nigeria had to make under the Abacha regime. Between 1993 and 1998, Abacha ruled the country with a hard hand. His instruments were a merciless police state, censorship, prison and torture.

Are free, fair and peaceful elections to be expected?

In the circumstances described, it is hard to name a favorite. Moreover, the typical lines of conflict for Nigeria, such as religiosity and ethnicity, do not play an outgoing role this time. Buhari and Atiku are both Fulani and Muslims from the north. Both have also nominated a Christian candidate from the South for the vice-presidency. Standing alongside Buhari is acting Vice President Yemi Osinbajo, a Yoruba from the Southwest. Atiku has chosen former Anambra State governor Peter Obi, an Igbo from the southeast. The North therefore seems to be just as much as the South, to be divided. Experts therefore predict a narrow election victory for either Buhari or Atiku. The tone in the election campaign subsequently grew sharper and sharper. In recent weeks, it has long ceased to be about substantive politics, about the better concepts of development for the country, or about who would be more competent to the government. The headlines were instead determined only by statements from both sides designed to undermine the integrity of top candidates and top party officials. The saber-rattling was also increasingly accompanied by reports informing of attempts to manipulate the

elections. It is said the Independent National Electoral Commission, which is responsible for organizing free and fair elections, has already uncovered several cases of election fraud.

Relating vote-buying or buying up voter registration cards, this is intended to prevent either voting for one or the other candidate in certain strongholds or use the cards for electoral falsification.

INEC itself faced accusations from the PDP that the elections were not well prepared, that INEC was also not neutral, but that it would help Buhari win the election. The PDP also accused the APC of distributing state money to the people in the form of direct aid and micro-credits, thereby buying their support for Buhari against the 2019 elections. This accusation is not, in fact, unfounded. Well informed circles say that the government's "gifts" have recently increased sharply nationwide and mainly benefit citizens who can show their permanent voters' cards (PVC). In late January, Buhari also suspended Walter Onnoghen, the chief justice of Nigeria's Supreme Court. Onnoghen is accused of failing to declare assets in foreign accounts in accordance with the regulations of Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB). The problematic is however, that the suspension of the chief justice requires senate approval under Nigeria's constitution, but it has not been sought. The Nigerian Bar Association and the opposition accused Buhari, to have acted unconstitutionally. Moreover, the US embassy, the British Embassy and EU representatives described the suspension of the Chief Justice so shortly before the elections as extremely questionable and called for a constitutionally compliant solution. The Chief Justice would be a key protagonist should one side not know the results of the elections and challenge them in court. Then, as a last resort, the Nigerian Supreme Court would decide whether the elections had been lawful. Now it is said that Onnoghen has also been suspended because the APC fears the judge could have a significant influence on the decision which may favor PDP of the PDP. However, the representatives of the government claim that the suspension is not only legally compliant, but is also not related to the elections. It is about corruption allegations.

But the PDP also had to deal with a serious allegation. Alhaji Lai Mohammed, Minister of Information and Culture, recently told at a press conference that the government had credible information that the opposition would financially support uprisings along ethno-religious borders and mercenaries hired from Niger. This should further destabilize the country before the elections and discredit the competence of the government. However, the government has not provided any evidence to support the allegations.

The accusation that the Electoral Commission did not prepare the elections well came true on the night of Friday to Saturday. The APC and PDP now accuse each other of being partly responsible for the postponement and that this is a mutual attempt to manipulate the elections. Buhari and Atiku, the two leading candidates, also called the population to behave calmly and cast their ballots next Saturday. Above all, that it should remain peaceful is an important call. For just hours before the postponement was announced, the Kaduna state government revealed that security forces had found 66 dead in villages in the state on Friday, including many children and women. It has been made clear that these people had been killed in raids days earlier. On the evening before the election, however,

they were presumed to be victims of politically motivated violence, connected to the elections.

How free, how fair and how peaceful the elections in February and March will be is a question that not only the people in the country are asking themselves, but also the international community. In Nigeria, attempts at manipulation and politically motivated violence have overshadowed most elections in the last 20 years. Why should things turn out differently in 2019? Experts therefore warn of politically motivated violence, which may escalate probably not in Abuja or Lagos, but in many other regions. In the last one to two weeks, the country's newspapers have already reported about the first clashes between APC and PDP supporters which have claimed lives. The EU has also sent a team of election observers. ECOWAS will also participate in the election observation with its own representatives. The US and UK are even threatening Visa sanctions against those guilty of electoral fraud. But anyone who knows Nigeria and the "winner-takes-it-all" character of Nigerian elections knows that both parties, the APC and the PDP, and many of their candidates will seize every chance to win the upcoming elections.

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