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Nigeria

Successive U.S. Administrations have viewed the U.S.-Nigeria relationship as one of the most important in Africa, given Nigeria's size, political role, and economic weight in the region. It is Africa's largest economy and most populous country, with Muslims and Christians constituting nearly equal shares of the population. Nigeria has one of the world's largest Muslim communities and Lagos, Nigeria's commercial center, is among the world's largest cities. In the United States, Nigerians represent the largest African diaspora group.

Nigeria faces serious social, economic, and security challenges. Its politics have been scarred by ethnic, geographic, and religious conflict. Corruption and misrule have undermined the state's authority and legitimacy. Years of social unrest, criminality, and corruption in the south's oil-rich Niger Delta have hindered oil production, delayed development, and contributed to piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. Perceived neglect and economic marginalization have fueled resentment in the predominantly Muslim north. Meanwhile, intercommunal grievances, competition for resources, and banditry drive mounting conflict and displacement in central and northern Nigeria.

With its neighbors, Nigeria continues to wage military operations in the country's northeast against Boko Haram and an Islamic State-affiliated splinter faction. Corruption, mismanagement, and abuses on the part of Nigeria's security services have hamstrung counterinsurgency efforts. A severe humanitarian crisis in northeast persists: over seven million people are in need of aid in the worst affected states, with some isolated areas at risk of famine.

Politics and Governance

Nigeria is a federal republic with a political structure similar to that of the United States. The country was ruled by the military for much of the four decades after independence in 1960 before transitioning to civilian rule in 1999. Subsequent elections were widely viewed as flawed. Observers viewed elections in 2011 as more credible, although they were followed by violent protests in parts of the north that left more than 800 people dead and illustrated northern mistrust and dissatisfaction with the government.

Nigeria's 2015 elections were its most competitive contest to date and were viewed as a critical test for its leaders, security forces, and people. In what observers widely hailed as a historic transition, the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and its president, Goodluck Jonathan, lost power to Muhammadu Buhari and his All Progressives Congress (APC). The APC also won a majority in the legislature. Buhari, a former military junta leader, and his opposition coalition capitalized on popular frustration with the Jonathan government's response to rising insecurity, mounting economic pressures, and allegations of large-scale state corruption, among other issues. Jonathan was Nigeria's first incumbent president to lose an election.

Figure 1. Nigeria at a Glance



Source: CRS. Map data from Department of State and Esri, Figures are from CIA World Factbook and IMF, 2019.

Buhari won reelection in February 2019, defeating former vice president Atiku Abubakar of the PDP. Buhari's APC won large majorities in the National Assembly. The polls were marred by allegations of fraud, widespread procedural irregularities, and election-day violence that killed dozens. The electoral commission's widely criticized decision, hours before polls were due to open, to postpone the vote by one week likely contributed to historically low voter turnout. State elections held the following month also featured significant shortcomings. One international observer mission concluded that the 2019 elections "did not meet the expectations of many Nigerians," noting serious irregularities such as vote buying and intimidation of voters and election officials. Others described "systemic failings." The elections represented backsliding from the 2015 polls, which were widely hailed as a step forward for Nigeria's democratic trajectory.

Key human rights challenges include extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary detention, and harsh prison conditions; impunity for security sector abuses is widespread. The State Department describes corruption as "massive, widespread, and pervasive...affect[ing] all levels of government and the security services," notwithstanding investigations launched under Buhari, who campaigned on an anti-corruption platform. A vibrant media face periodic harassment and arrest, including under harsh libel and cybercrimes laws.

Security Concerns

Islamist extremist violence and a heavy-handed response by state security forces have created a spiraling humanitarian crisis in northeast Nigeria. Boko Haram grew from 2010 to 2015 to become one of the world's deadliest terror groups, calling for an uprising against secular authority and drawing on a narrative of vengeance for state abuses to elicit recruits and sympathizers. Between 2013 and 2015, it expanded its territorial control until neighboring Chad launched operations, alongside Nigeria's to counter its spread. Boko Haram has killed more Muslims than Christians, who constitute a minority in the region where the group is most

active, but its attacks on Christians have fueled religious tensions. The group's kidnapping of over 270 schoolgirls from Chibok in 2014 raised its international profile, as has its use of women and children as suicide bombers.

Boko Haram's leader, Abubakar Shekau, swore allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) in 2015, rebranding the group the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP or IS-WA). A leadership dispute later fractured the group into a Shekau-led faction that remains commonly referred to as Boko Haram and a larger faction that took the IS-WA name after IS leadership recognized them a regional affiliate in 2016. Unlike Shekau's faction, known for large-scale indiscriminate violence against civilians, the new IS-WA has focused its attacks primarily, but not exclusively, on state targets. It provides some basic services in its areas of operation, fostering ties with local communities that could further complicate counterinsurgency efforts. Both groups appear to pose a threat primarily to northern Nigeria and surrounding areas in the Lake Chad Basin. They also pose a threat to Western targets in the region. Boko Haram has issued threats against the United States, but no U.S. citizens are known to have been kidnapped or killed by the group.

In the southern Niger Delta region, local grievances related to oil production have fueled conflict and criminality for over a decade. Government negotiations with local militants and an amnesty program introduced in 2009 helped reduce the violence, but attacks on oil installations continue to impede production and create destructive oil spills. Some Delta militants reportedly remain involved in various criminal activities, including piracy and drug and arms trafficking networks. These networks overlap with oil theft networks and contribute to piracy off the Nigerian coast and in the wider Gulf of Guinea. The U.N. suggests that most piracy in the region can be traced back to the Niger Delta. Involvement in the theft and illegal trade of crude oil is not limited to Delta militants—politicians, security officers, and oil industry personnel are widely reported to be involved.

In Nigeria's center and north, violent competition over resources has increased between nomadic herdsman, many belonging to the largely Muslim Fulani ethnic group, and predominantly Christian settled farming communities. The land-use conflict has been exacerbated by ethno-religious tensions, availability of sophisticated weapons, expanded farming, and desertification. Clashes have killed thousands and displaced hundreds of thousands over the past two decades. Meanwhile, hundreds have died in 2019 amid a surge in armed banditry in northwestern Zamfara state. In neighboring Kaduna state, the government has cracked down on a small Shia Muslim sect known as the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN). The army killed over 300 IMN members in late 2015 and has since arrested hundreds of IMN anti-government protesters.

Multiple factors have undermined Nigeria's response to these security challenges. Corruption is systemic and drains resources at all levels of the security apparatus. By many accounts, Nigerian troops are inadequately resourced and equipped. Abuses by Nigerian forces in the context of counterterrorism operations have taken a toll on civilians and reportedly fueled extremist recruitment in some areas, undermining counterinsurgency efforts and complicating U.S. efforts to pursue greater counterterrorism cooperation.

Development Prospects and Challenges

Nigeria's economy is the largest in Africa. The petroleum sector accounts for the majority of government revenues and export earnings. The country is recovering from a 2016 recession linked to low global oil prices. The IMF estimated GDP growth of 1.9% in 2018 and 2.1% in 2019. Inadequate infrastructure and chronic electricity shortages threaten development prospects, as do poor service delivery, notably in education and health, and weak tax revenue mobilization. Decades of mismanagement, instability, and corruption have stymied investment and industrial growth.

Nigeria ranks poorly on the U.N. Human Development Index. There is massive income inequality, and a majority of the population faces extreme poverty. The situation is most acute in the northeast. Observers have accused the government of inadequately responding to conflict and humanitarian crises in the country's north and center. Relief efforts reportedly have been hampered by mismanagement, systemic corruption, and abuses (including sexual violence) against displaced civilians.

U.S. Relations and Assistance

Nigeria's size, political role, and economic weight in Africa elevate the country as a policy priority for the United States. President Trump's call to Buhari in early 2017 was the first to any sub-Saharan African leader, and then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visited Nigeria in March 2018. Buhari was the first African leader to visit the Trump White House, in April 2018. Diplomatic engagement has been tempered at times by Nigerian perceptions of U.S. intrusion in Nigeria's domestic and regional affairs, and by U.S. concern with human rights, governance, and corruption issues. The two countries established the U.S.-Nigeria Binational Commission, a strategic dialogue to address issues of mutual concern, in 2010.

The United States is the largest source of foreign direct investment in Nigeria, much of it concentrated in the oil and gas sectors. Nigeria once ranked among the largest suppliers of crude oil to the United States, but imports have plummeted as U.S. domestic energy production has risen.

Congress oversees on average more than \$600 million per year in U.S. foreign aid to Nigeria—one of the largest U.S. bilateral aid packages in Africa. The United States provided \$520 million in bilateral, non-emergency assistance in FY2018, largely focused on health programs. The State Department requested \$432 million for FY2020. This does not include humanitarian aid in response to the Lake Chad Basin emergency, which totaled \$435 million in FY2018, with \$333 million for Nigeria alone. Security assistance to Nigeria has historically focused on enhancing counter-narcotics, maritime security, and peacekeeping capacities. U.S. counterterrorism assistance has been constrained by various factors, including human rights concerns and a lack of cooperation from Nigerian officials. In 2017, the Trump Administration approved the sale of 12 light attack aircraft to Nigeria, reversing an Obama Administration decision to suspend the sale over human rights concerns.

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