

The Buhari Administration One Year Later

Friends of Nigeria

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President Muhammadu Buhari's 2015 election victory quite literally changed the course of Nigeria's history—for the better. For the first time, an opposition candidate won the Nigerian presidency through broadly credible elections. The election and its results opened up Nigerian politics in a new, more democratic way. But, bumps in the road remain.

Buhari's campaign had two main themes: to restore security by defeating Boko Haram, and to counter corruption which had assumed baroque proportions. These are the benchmarks against which his administration is assessed, at home and abroad, one year later.

Up to now, the incumbent president or his designee has routinely rigged elections in favor of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). In 2015, however, Buhari and his opposition All Progressives Congress's vote total was the largest in four of Nigeria's six geo-political zones. Incumbent President [Goodluck Jonathan's public concession](#) to Buhari contributed to the relatively peaceful aftermath of the elections. Nevertheless, in the predominately Christian south and east, there is suspicion and disaffection from the allegedly Islamic Buhari administration, and that includes the oil-rich Delta.

It is hard to imagine a better [inaugural address](#) than the one President Buhari delivered on May 29, 2015. It struck all the right notes. He accepted his new role as an international leader

and thanked former president Goodluck Jonathan for his “statesmanship” in the transition.

The speech was plain and devoid of national or personal self-congratulation and rhetorical flourishes. Packed with substance, it was also very short—only 1,909 words. That is slightly shorter than my prepared remarks today.

I also recommend Buhari’s February, 2015, [*Chatham House speech*](#) in which he, a former military ruler, describes credibly his conversion to democracy.

The inaugural speech was remarkable for its candor. On Nigeria’s notorious poor governance: after paying tribute to the heroes of Nigeria’s foundation, he said, “Some of their successors behaved like spoilt children breaking everything and bringing disorder to the house.” And, “The judicial system needs reform to cleanse itself from its immediate past. The country now expects the judiciary to act with dispatch on all cases, especially on corruption, serious financial crimes, or abuse of office.”

Western friends of Nigeria particularly welcomed the specific steps Buhari announced with respect to the struggle against Boko Haram: an overhaul of security service rules of engagement to “avoid human rights violations in operations.” On Boko Haram kidnapping, he said “...we cannot claim to have defeated Boko Haram without rescuing the Chibok girls and all others in the hands of Boko Haram.”

In the eyes of domestic and foreign observers, President Buhari's administration began well. How should we assess its performance a year later?

First and foremost, President Buhari's anticorruption campaign is credible. Indeed, the magnitude of corruption at the top of the Jonathan administration is breathtaking. One example among many: the former First Lady, Patience Jonathan, now in the UK, claims ownership of bank accounts worth \$31.5 million. They have been frozen in the ongoing corruption investigation. She claims that \$15 million of it was a government payment for medical bills she incurred in London in 2013. (\$15 million is more than the entire population of Yorkshire spends in a year on dentistry.)

The point agency is the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). It has arrested the former national Security Advisor, Sambo Dasuki, and scores of top military and others, especially for siphoning off funds intended to be used in fighting Boko Haram. There are now EFCC or other anticorruption processes under way with respect to the former vice president, the former oil minister, and numerous others. Some are calling for the prosecution of Goodluck Jonathan himself. That, however, would open a can of worms.

Altogether, some 140 have been prosecuted, tried, and convicted of corruption -- far more than in any previous administration. However, it is unclear how many have actually been jailed.

The anticorruption campaign may be leading to elite behavior change, or at least diminished conspicuous consumption. There

are anecdotal reports that the luxury housing market in Abuja is at a standstill, though that may also reflect the decline in oil prices. But, the Buhari administration is only addressing corruption at the top. Corruption in Nigeria is structural and with deep anthropological roots. Corruption continues to be a brake on economic development and a misery for most people.

News on the security front is much less positive. Major [Boko Haram attacks](#) in the northeast continue. So, too, do security service human rights abuses, despite Buhari's inaugural rhetoric. They fuel Boko Haram recruitment. And the Chibok school girls remain in captivity.

In the Niger Delta oil patch, which has historically been the source of more than 70 percent of the government's revenue and more than 90 percent of its foreign exchange, unrest is growing, with attacks on the oil infrastructure and high profile kidnappings.

Among some of the Igbo people, there is renewed interest in Biafra, the erstwhile territory that unsuccessfully seceded from Nigeria in 1967.

With oil prices continuing to fall, government revenue shrinking, and the Nigerian Stock Exchange incurring big losses, the Buhari administration is seeking [billions of dollars in loans](#) from international financial institutions. It is succeeding. However, the cost is devaluation of the naira, the national currency, a step President Buhari long opposed and a blow to elite pride.

Indeed, like Sisyphus, President Buhari pushes the rock uphill with respect to corruption, only to have it roll back down with respect to economic and state security.

Elite criticism of President Buhari centers on the slow organization of his government and on his allegedly unrealistic economic policy. Critics also complain that his prosecutions for corruption are slanted toward his political opponents. I would add that he probably does not pay enough attention to what is going on in the Delta.

President Muhammadu Buhari was elected president on March 31, 2015. He was inaugurated on May 29. Yet, he took three months to [appoint his chief of staff and the secretary to the government of the federation](#) – key positions in any administration. It was almost five months before he announced his cabinet appointments. As in the United States, Nigerian cabinet appointments require Senate confirmation. Hence, on October 1, 2015, Independence Day, the Nigerian media noted that for the first time since independence from Britain in 1960, there was no cabinet in place on the country's national day.

There are still no ambassadorial appointments. Right now, there has been no Nigerian ambassador in Washington for more than a year. There is also no American ambassador in Nigeria, though one has been named and is going through the sclerotic Senate confirmation process.

In his 2015 [national day broadcast to the nation](#), President Buhari defended the slow and deliberate pace of his appointments, saying "Our government set out to do things methodically and properly." His broadcast recalled his

achievements since coming into office. Most of them involved the fight against Boko Haram and corruption.

However, the broadcast was no sugar-coating exercise. It noted that fifty-five years after independence, “Countries far less endowed have made greater economic progress by greater coherence and unity of purpose.” His broadcast closed with an exhortation: “We must change our unruly behavior in schools, hospitals, market places, motor parks, on the roads, in homes, and offices. To bring about change, we must change ourselves by being law-abiding citizens.”

In general, the Buhari administration is criticized for moving too slow in almost every area of governance. His nickname is ‘Baba go slow.’

Why does the president move so slowly? First, Buhari, personally incorruptible, campaigned on the basis that he would clean up Nigeria’s corrupt governance. He has consistently said he would not appoint the corrupt to his cabinet or his staff. Are his standards too high? Probably. The Nigerian media complains that he makes ‘the perfect the enemy of the good.’

Second, Nigeria is a notoriously difficult country to govern. Buhari must balance many rivals and factions.

Third, Buhari has raised the need for structural reforms in government institutions. But, downsizing anything in Nigeria raises difficult political problems. Buhari has raised the possibility of reducing the number of Nigeria’s diplomatic missions because of their cost. (Nigeria has about as many

embassies abroad as the United States.) But, ambassadorships are an important source of patronage.

Finally, Buhari's presidential electoral victory surprised almost everybody. Hence, there was little practical advance preparation for governing before the elections actually took place.

In the meantime, the revival of the Delta insurrection significantly cuts oil and gas production. World oil prices are unlikely to recover in the short term. Both developments reduce the revenue of the state. A bottom line is that Nigeria remains a poor country with some of the worst social statistics in the world.

Despite the poverty of most people, Nigeria is famous for the delight in display taken by the governing class and the rich. Hence, elite houses may be bedecked with gold-plated taps, and, at one point, the Hummer was the national elite vehicle of choice.

President Muhammadu Buhari, by contrast, values simplicity: plain dress, a private house appropriate to a retired military officer who never made money on the side, and a modest private vehicle. There is little doubt that the president's personal simplicity contributes to his continued popularity on the "street" and adds credibility to his anti-corruption campaign.

Anthropologists will argue that Nigeria's culture of display has deep roots. But, its over-the-top quality really dates only from the coming of the oil boom and the end of the Biafra war, both in 1970. It was the unimaginable wealth generated by oil, and the lack of institutions to channel it productively, that fed the

conspicuous consumption that underpinned elite corruption. Meanwhile, most Nigerians live simply not out of choice but because of their poverty. In too many areas, half of all children are stunted.

After a year, Buhari's honeymoon with the elites is probably over. Especially among the political class – the people you and I talk to -- there is frustration over his macro-economic policy, which has resulted in a shortage of foreign currency. There is criticism that Buhari waited too long to devalue the naira. They do not accept Buhari's argument that in a country where nearly everything is imported, including toothpicks as he has said, devaluation increases the burden on the poor. Nevertheless, under international and domestic pressure from the business and financial community, Buhari finally relented.

But, of course, most Nigerians worry about paying school fees at home, not in the U.S. and the U.K. A shortage of foreign exchange impacts them little. For those Nigerians, Buhari's simplicity of style matters more than high economic policy. I see little evidence that Buhari's popularity on the street has declined.

Nigeria faces declining state revenue, insurrections in the northeast and the southeast, weak institutions of governance, and a fractious and divided people. In this environment, Buhari must exercise extraordinary political and leadership skills. In comparison, in my view, Barack Obama has it easy.

Thank you.