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Nigeria's February 16 presidential elections may be postponed

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country is hurdling towards a chaotic two tracked national election scheduled for February 16 and March 2 despite significant unresolved legal, security and logistical challenges. With over 84 million citizens registered to cast their votes at over 200,000 voting centers to elect a new president, 110 senators, 469 representatives, governors and local legislators in 36 states – the risk that the polls may be postponed is growing. In 2011 and 2015 the elections were postponed due to last minute logistical challenges.

On the security front, a resurgence in terrorist attacks by Boko Haram in the northeast and an ongoing internecine ethno-religious clashes between pastoralists and farmers in the middle belt of the country threatens to prevent millions of voters in the affected areas from casting their votes. Electorally embattled President Muhammadu Buhari could invoke section 135 of the 1999 Constitution, which provides that if the country is at war, and the president considers that it is not practicable to hold elections, the National Assembly may by resolution, extend the president's term by up to 4 years for 6 month periods. (Nigeria's current deeply divided National Assembly is however not likely to accede to a cynical Buhari plea).

On the legal front the necessary legislative instruments which are to govern the upcoming 2019 polls have still not been signed into law by Buhari. With no new electoral law on the books any challenges to the upcoming poll will have to be governed by the much criticized and discredited 2015 regulations.

Logistically it is also not clear that the country's electoral body has adequately distributed all the 84million voter cards, published and vetted a credible election roaster, adequately educated the public and candidates on the electronic materials to be employed at the polls, and made the necessary provisions for internet services and electricity (often in short supply in Nigeria) for collating the votes. To make matters worse, university staff across the country who constitute the bulk of Election Day workers are on a labor strike raising the risk of massive poll worker shortage on the day of the polls.

With DR Congo still reeling from a chaotic and still unresolved election, Gabon grappling with the aftermath of a military coup, and Cameroon verging on a full blown civil war, a botched election in Nigeria, home to nearly 200 million Africans, nearly one-fifth of the entire population of the continent and a major OPEC crude oil producer, will threaten not just Nigeria, but democratic movements across Africa. A failed democratic transition in Nigeria will also test the critical security and diplomatic collaboration between the US, France the UK and Nigeria to contain the expansion of terrorism in Sahalian West Africa.

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