

Nigerian President Re-elected
April 23, 2003

For the first time in history, Nigerians have voted to re-elect a civilian government. But the election process in the oil-rich West African nation was marred by accusations of fraud, violence and vote rigging.

On April 19, 24.2 million Nigerians voted for **incumbent** President Olusegun Obasanjo of the Peoples Democratic Party. Obasanjo's main opponent, former military and Muslim leader Muhammadu Buhari, received more than 12 million votes.

Buhari joined election monitoring groups from Europe and the U.S. in filing complaints with Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission.

"The presidential and a number of gubernatorial elections were marred by serious irregularities and fraud -- in a certain number of states, minimum standards for democratic elections were not met," a statement released on Tuesday by a team of European Union observers said.

In the U.S., the National Democratic Institute (NDI) said it found evidence of voter intimidation, fraud, **ballot box stuffing** and rigging.

"We have serious concerns about the legitimacy of the results in certain constituencies," NDI president Kenneth Wollack said.

In parts of the country, particularly in the oil-rich southern states, voters reported intimidation at the polls and thieves making off with ballot boxes, according to Associated Press reports. Eight people died in gun battles between party supporters.

However, the election has been legitimized by the Commonwealth, a 54-nation group of former British colonies, which said it believed Nigeria made a successful effort to allow people to vote freely.

Ethnic and political unrest

Voters first elected Obasanjo in 1999, instituting a new constitution and ending 15 years of military rule. It marked Obasanjo's second time in office. From 1976 to 1979, he ran the government as a military dictator before stepping down.

Buhari also ran the country as a military ruler from 1983 to 1985.

Since Obasanjo's election in 1999, Nigeria has experienced violence and civil unrest. Some 10,000 people have died in ethnic and political clashes, partly due to the adoption of the sometimes-severe Islamic **Sharia** law in the north.

U.S. officials, including former Secretary of State Madeline Albright and former President Bill Clinton, have made diplomatic trips to Nigeria, in an effort to aid in the country's full transition to democracy.

The journey to democracy

Nigeria has the largest population in all of Africa, with close to 130 million people living in 36 states. Nigerians have elected civilian governments twice since the country gained its independence from Britain in 1960, but each time military dictators have overthrown the governments before re-elections could occur.

The Hausa and Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups wield the most power in Nigeria, which is home to some 250 ethnic groups. Religion divides the country into two regions: the Christian south and the Islamic north.

Although Nigeria is the eighth largest distributor of oil in the world, political corruption and mismanagement have caused economic disaster and prevented wealth from trickling down to the poor. Fifty-four percent of Nigeria's population lives below the poverty line.

By Kristina Nwazota, NewsHour Extra

Vocabulary

Ballot box stuffing - to give more votes to a candidate in an election than there are people who actually voted for him. (source: Barron's Dictionary of American Idioms)

Incumbent - a person who holds an office or ecclesiastical benefice: The incumbent was reelected to another term. (source: The American Heritage Dictionary)

Pop-up box

Sharia: the code of Islamic law based on the Koran (source: The American Heritage Dictionary)

Sharia law has led to forms of judgment and justice considered excessive and brutal by Western standards. In one instance, officials in Nigeria's northern Katsina state outraged international human rights activists by condemning 31-year-old Amina Lawal, a mother of three, to death by stoning for adultery. Her execution is scheduled for 2004, but around the world, celebrities, including Oprah Winfrey, have raised money for her appeal.