



CORRUPTION CHARGES MAR NIGERIAN ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC HOPES

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As Umaru Yar'Adua was declared the victor in Nigeria's presidential election Saturday, international monitors and opposition candidates condemned widespread voting-day corruption by the ruling People's Democratic Party.

At stake is the democratic future of Africa's largest oil exporter and its most populous nation, which has been trapped in cycles of violence and political instability for decades.

Observers from the European Union and the U.S.-based, nonpartisan International Republican Institute reported ballot box stuffing and phony results, among other voting irregularities.

Various media reported cases of voter intimidation, a lack of transparency at voting stations and ballot shortages in regions favoring opposition candidates.

According to the New York Times, some polling stations reported high turnout -- as much as 100 percent -- though few people had been seen voting.

Failures of the voting system

"The system failed the Nigerian people and suffers from a lack of credibility. ... The Nigerian people were failed by their leaders," IRI monitor Pierre Richard Prosper told Reuters. In a statement, chief EU observer Max van den Berg echoed the IRI, adding that urgent action was required to correct the sham elections.

"We are going to call for a rerun of elections. You cannot use the result from half of the country to announce a new president," Innocent Chukwuma, chairman of the Abuja, Nigeria-based Transition Monitoring Group, told Reuters.

State department spokesman Sean McCormick called the elections "flawed" but said the United States was not calling for a new election.

The Nigerian elections were administered by the Independent National Electoral Commission. Though the commission is touted as independent, the International Crisis Group had earlier accused senior officials as being under the direct influence of current Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo, of the PDP.

Even PDP party-mate Senator Ken Nnamani questioned the legitimacy of the results after his polling station in southeastern Nigeria never opened for local elections held a week earlier.

"There will be a legacy of hatred. People will hate the new administration and they will have a crisis of legitimacy," Nnamani told Reuters.

More complaints had been filed in the state elections, when international observers called for the cancellation of results in 10 of 36 Nigerian states.

The electoral commission acknowledged the late arrival of ballots in some parts of Nigeria, but despite all the criticism it has received, its chief, Maurice Iwu, told Reuters the elections were indeed "free and fair."

Complaints from opposition candidates

President-elect Yar'Adua's main opposition, Vice President Atiku Abubakar of the Action Congress party, and former military ruler Muhammadu Buhari of the All Nigeria People's Party, were quick to contest the results.

Abubakar, who had paved the way for the 1999 democratic elections but later opposed his party-mate Obasanjo's attempt to extend the presidential term, told Lagos-based newspaper ThisDay that no credible elections could be conducted under the INEC.

Buhari, Nigeria's military ruler between 1983 and 1985, told Reuters the election would likely be "a fatal blow to Nigerian democracy" and called on the National Assembly to impeach Obasanjo and organize a new election under the leadership of the country's chief justice.

People's Democratic Party spokesman Uba Sani told Reuters that criticism, as well as weekend violence aimed at the INEC headquarters in Abuja, was part of a coup plot from opponents determined to promote chaos.

A history of corruption and violence

Saturday's election was Nigeria's fourth since its independence from Great Britain in 1960, but could be the first in which power exchanges between two elected leaders and not by military coup.

Nigeria is Africa's largest oil exporter, bringing in billions of dollars for the government, but its corrupt military leadership had hoarded the riches, leaving most of the 140 million people that comprise Africa's most populous nation in poverty.

Even now, under its most recent attempt at democracy that began in 1999 with the election of Obasanjo, the nation's military dictator from 1976 to 1979, the country remains one of the most corrupt in the world, according to Transparency International.

It has witnessed political and ethnic violence that has displaced more than 3 million people and killed 14,000, according to the International Crisis Group.

The country remains divided along religious lines, with Christians living in southern states and Muslims living in northern states where strict Islamic Sharia law has spread in past years.

The election of Yar'Adua, currently governor of the northern state of Katsina, also has raised questions about human rights violations in connection with Nigeria's leaders. In 2002, an unmarried mother from Katsina was prosecuted for adultery and sentenced to death by stoning under Sharia law, but her conviction was later appealed and overturned after intense international pressure.

-- *Compiled by Adnaan Wasey for NewsHour Extra*

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