

**AFRICA**

Nigeria Votes in Sharply Contested Presidential Election

By **ADAM NOSSITER** MARCH 28, 2015

KANO, Nigeria — Eager voters waited to cast ballots all day as the most contested election in Nigeria's post-independence history wound down to a tense conclusion on Saturday amid fears that the polarized electorate would clash regardless of the outcome in a country sharply split on ethnic and sectarian lines.

There appeared to be little middle ground between partisans of President Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the south hated in the north for mismanaging a Islamist insurgency at a steep cost, and those of his challenger, Muhammadu Buhari, a former military ruler, a northerner and a belated democratic convert whose Muslim faith and authoritarian past are feared in the south.

Voters crowded around registration stations here in Kano, the north's largest city, a packed metropolis of more than five million, as hitches in the process added to the tension. Election officials were more than two hours late in some places, and malfunctioning electronic registration machines — part of a new system designed to limit endemic fraud — stymied voters in others.

Officials extended voting into Sunday in some parts of the country because of the malfunctions, which affected even Mr. Jonathan as he tried to vote.

There were reports of sporadic violence around the country on Saturday, with six people killed in attacks by Boko Haram in the northeast, according to Reuters. Two car bombs exploded at polling places in the south-central state of

Enugu without causing casualties, The Associated Press reported.

By late afternoon in Kano, dense crowds were still building at polling places in the city, the voters pressed against each other stomach to back, pushing against election officials to vote, many having waited for hours.

Their fervor was echoed in the partisan anger seething in this city, which has been hit hard by Boko Haram bombings. There were hints that, as in previous Nigerian elections, the contest might not end when results are announced in the coming week. Nearly 1,000 people were killed after the 2011 vote, dozens of them here in Kano, in an election nonetheless judged to have been one of Nigeria's most peaceful.

This year, the stakes are far higher as the governing party's hold on power is threatened for the first time since the end of military rule in 1999. Analysts reckoned that the contest was too close to call, though the momentum may have shifted slightly to Mr. Jonathan after his military chiefs forced a six-week delay in the voting, which was originally scheduled for February.

But Mr. Buhari's supporters have spoken of declaring a parallel government if they believe the vote was rigged, or of taking their grievances to the streets.

"I'm apprehensive," said Clement Nwankwo, who runs a leading political study group in Nigeria's capital, Abuja. "I've just seen so much desperation on all sides. People have dug in, and I don't see that anybody is willing to compromise."

In Kano's dirt-street, trash-encrusted Fagge district, many people warned against a declaration of victory by Mr. Jonathan.

"We will not accept it," said Mannir Bala, 32, a trader. "We are only interested in Buhari." Others shouted their agreement. "We won't allow Jonathan this time," Mr. Bala said. Others chimed in with complaints that echoed official statistics showing an increase in poverty in Nigeria in recent years. Their district has no electricity, one man shouted. No water, another said. No education, said a third.

Other would-be voters here brandished their plastic identification cards and spoke of wanting change after years of Islamist violence, corruption

scandals and stagnant living standards.

“There is hardship in this country. No good security,” said Dayyabu Yahaya Inuwa, a civil servant, waiting to register in the shadow of the ochre-colored walls of the emir of Kano’s palace in this centuries-old center of Islamic culture.

The crowd had been waiting over two hours to register, but still no election officials had appeared. “By the grace of Allah, we will change the government,” Mr. Inuwa said.

At the Kawaji Jigiry school, poll workers wielding tree branches beat back would-be voters trying to push their way in as the sun beat down. “Ninety-five percent are for Buhari,” said Aminu Omar, a civil servant. “If they are disappointed, we don’t know what will happen.”

The ballot was hardly secret. In full view of others, voter after voter pressed an inked finger next to the broom symbol for the opposition All Progressives Congress — most of them unable to read the party’s “APC” label, poll workers said. Voting was sure to go into the night at many polling places, and into Sunday in areas where machinery had failed.

In the background of this year’s vote hovered Boko Haram, its violent insurgency stretching into a sixth year. The tide appeared to have turned in the fight against the Islamists in the period right before the election — particularly during the six-week delay demanded by the military chiefs — after years of halfhearted engagement by the Nigerian military. South African mercenaries hired by the government have made a substantial difference, officials in the north, diplomats and analysts said. So has a regional military push by Chad, Cameroon and Niger and the Nigerians themselves, though the other countries complain there is little to no coordination with the Nigerians.

But election-eve shootings and beheadings attributed to Boko Haram were reported by officials, a reminder that the sect had not been defeated.

Mr. Jonathan has taken advantage of the extra six weeks to unleash a hoard of cash from the country’s oil bounty, filling airwaves and newspapers with pro-government advertising and claims of victory in his belated campaign against Boko Haram. Entire front pages of national newspapers have been

bought by the government, and a 36-page color supplement in the papers last week minutely detailed his claimed accomplishments.

Analysts said there was little doubt that the long delay had benefited the governing party, the People's Democratic Party, by giving it more time to use its large cash advantage. "The P.D.P. has got a swagger that they did not have before," said Darren Kew, a Nigeria expert at the University of Massachusetts Boston, who is observing the election here.

Voters, however, were still waiting patiently as the sun went down, determined to express themselves in a country where daily life produces an outside set of challenges.

"It is not comfortable," said Ali Sani, 58, a retired security guard, trying to vote in the Kankarofi ward. He had been there since 5 a.m. "But I am here to claim my right. I am a Nigerian citizen. And we are not in peace in Nigeria."

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