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Nigeria in 2007: A Close Election as Allegiances Shift

Nigeria's forthcoming elections in April, 2007 signal a political milestone. For the first time since independence, Nigerians expect a turnover from one elected civilian administration to another. This potential democratic landmark, however, is set against a backdrop of uncertain election preparations and a contentious political arena.

In order to gauge the political climate in Nigeria during the run-up to elections, the Afrobarometer research network conducted a national survey of public attitudes in January-February 2007. The survey of 2,410 Nigerians covered a random, nationally-representative sample of citizens above the age of 18. All states of the federation were included, and the sample was evenly divided among men and women. This survey was the fifth conducted by Afrobarometer since the transition to democracy.

In this release we look at the competitive terrain in the 2007 elections, and general patterns of partisan preferences. Further information is available at:
www.afrobarometer.org

The most recent Afrobarometer survey in Nigeria (January-February 2007) included detailed questions on the partisan preferences of potential voters. For those Nigerians who were registered and intended to vote, we asked who they would vote for "if the elections were held today." The survey asked for preferences in all national and state offices.

In this release, we will describe the general patterns of the competitive landscape in Nigeria. *We do not report the actual figures on partisan preferences from this survey.* The reasons are twofold: First, information on partisan choice is unstable. In U.S. and European elections, it is common to see voter preferences shift 10 percentage points or more in the course of a few weeks. Therefore, information collected in February might be misleading in April. Second, figures on party popularity can easily be misinterpreted and used by partisan groups. As an independent research network, Afrobarometer prefers not to project electoral outcomes or partisan contests.

With these qualifications, there are important findings from the 2007 Afrobarometer survey:

- *Nigeria's political arena is increasingly diverse and competitive.*

No party has a clear majority of the national vote, as reflected in the partisan preferences expressed by intending voters. The largest plurality of any party is 38 percent for the presidency, and 41 percent for all gubernatorial races. The leading contender shows 27 percent allegiance for the presidency and 24 percent for state governors. Another party indicates 10 percent national support for the presidential race.

This pattern of partisanship is a dramatic departure from previous elections (1999 and 2003) in which the ruling PDP registered about 60 percent of the vote for national and state offices. The political party arena is increasingly fluid and plural, indicating substantial competition in the 2007 elections.

- *Support for parties varies significantly among regions.*

No party has national dominance in all of Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. Different parties have advantages in different regions.

Among the regions, one party is clearly predominant in the South West; another party is strong in the South East, South South, and the Middle Belt (North Central); and a third is popular in the northern states.

As in the national figures, few political parties reflect an outright majority in any of the regions; most leading parties show pluralities. At least five different parties show pluralities in separate states. It is also significant that a regional party has some influence in the South East.

Summary

- The Afrobarometer survey in early 2007 showed strong indications of a divided electorate who support different parties, and who lean differently according to region. This impression has been affirmed by additional surveys conducted by other researchers in Nigeria between January and March 2007.
- The party system in Nigeria appears to be diversifying from its previous concentration on a single party.

If the 2007 election returns show a large majority for one party, or dominance in all regions by a single contender, this would conflict with survey data from the pre-election period, and will prompt questions about the validity of election results.