

Nigeria: The 2023 Presidential Election

The regular presidential election was held in Nigeria on February 25, 2023. There was a change of leadership in the country, as the term of office of President Muhammadu Buhari, who had held this post for two 4-year terms (since 2015), ended on May 29.

Unlike the 2019 elections, which featured 73 candidates from 91 parties, in 2023 Nigerians had to choose one of 18 candidates from 18 parties. 93,469,008 people were registered to vote, almost 10 million more than in 2019 (84,004,084), but the turnout in 2023 was only 27.7% (23,377,466 people, in 2019 - 35.6%), which can partly be explained by the lack of security of movement and the expected attacks on polling stations, which did occur in some areas.

Bola Tinubu, the candidate from the ruling party All Progressives Congress (APC), was elected as the new president of Nigeria, receiving 8,794,726, or 36.61%, of the votes, much less than Muhammadu Buhari in 2019 (55.6%), and less than any other elected Nigerian head of state since the beginning of civil rule, i.e. since 1999, which is evidence of the dissatisfaction of the country's citizens with the policy of the APC and the 8-year rule of Buhari, who supported Tinubu during the election.

The second place (6,984,520; 29.07%) went to Atiku Abubakar from the People's Democratic Party; third (6,101,533; 25.4%) - to Peter Obi from the Labour Party; fourth - to Rabiu Kwankwaso (1,496,687; 6.4%) from the New Nigeria People's Party. These candidates were the main rivals of Tinubu, together with whom they received the total of 100% of the vote. The remaining 14 contenders, judging by the official results, did not win a single vote at all, or so few that they did not fall into the general calculation.

The voting results were consistent with an informal agreement between the North and South of Nigeria on the rotation of representatives of these regions at the highest state position: after the northerner Buhari, the southerner Tinubu came to power. The fact that he is a Yoruba, but a Muslim, also played in favor of the elected president, and this is very important due to the instability in the northern states with predominantly Muslim population: Nigerians, by inertia, adhere to the point of view that it should be easier for a Muslim to resolve the long-term inter-confessional conflict in the North, although under Buhari this confrontation was not only not overcome, but also became more acute.

The election was held against the backdrop of a marked polarization of the country along ethnic and religious lines, exacerbated by the divisive rhetoric of some presidential contenders. For example, Abubakar repeatedly urged northerners not to vote for Yoruba or Igbo candidates. For the Igbo, the voting results were especially disappointing: during the years of the Fourth Republic (since 1999) there was not a single president in Nigeria who represented this nationality (the third largest after the Hausa and Yoruba), and the Igbo had high hopes for the election of Peter Obi - a Catholic Igbo, a well-known politician and big businessman, former governor of Anambra state. During the election campaign, thousands of demonstrations were held in his support. The voting results testify to Obi's popularity among the southerners and not only, so his defeat, combined with the rise of separatist sentiments in Biafra, can become a serious destabilizing factor. In addition, the relatively young (61 years old) - compared to 76-year-old Abubakar and 71-year-old Tinubu - candidate was supported by a significant part of Nigerian youth (40% of voters under 34 years old) striving for change. Tinubu was also challenged by Obi's victory in the state of Lagos, the homeland of the elected president.

Bola Asivaju Ahmed Tinubu was born on March 29, 1952. He received his primary and secondary education in Lagos and Ibadan. In 1975 he went to the USA, where he studied at the

Chicago State University. In 1979 he received a bachelor's degree in accounting and finance and worked in the American companies Arthur Andersen, Deloitte, Haskins & Sells, and GTE Services Corporation. In 1983 he returned to Nigeria and began working as Treasurer of Mobil Oil Nigeria. In the 1990s he entered politics; from 1999 to 2007 he was the governor of the state of Lagos; in this position, he significantly modernized the infrastructure of the largest Nigerian city and its environs; built houses for the poor, roads, and schools. He also repeatedly found himself at the center of corruption scandals and was accused - both in the United States and in Nigeria - of involvement in the drug trade, but successfully avoided any serious punishment (although in the United States, he had to pay a large sum in compensation for illegal income). Bola Tinubu, the holder of the honorary title of "jabagan" (military commander), made a great contribution to the election victory in 2015 of Muhammadu Buhari. He was also the architect of the overthrow of the Saraka dynasty in the Kwara State. For his behind-the-scenes activities, he received the unofficial title of "kingmaker", but he saw the presidency as the finish line of his political career. While preparing for the elections, Tinubu risked sacrificing the Christian electorate by taking the Muslim Kashima Shettima as his partner, so in the south, he won only one state - Rivers. But, despite the results of opinion polls that promised victory either to Peter Obie or Attik, it was he who won the election.

Opposition parties called for an annulment of the voting results and a repeat election. The justice authorities have to investigate many episodes of violations in flawed elections.

The new president will face a myriad of challenges, ranging from a security crisis to a mismanaged economy. Political instability persists in many parts of the country: in the northeast, there operate numerous factions of the terrorist organization Boko Haram, which collapsed in 2021 after the death of its leader Abubakar Shekau, and the Islamist group Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), which broke away from it (a branch of the Islamic State, which is banned in Russia); conflict between pastoralists and farmers is on the rise in the northwest and central regions; in the south - in the Niger Delta - anti-government groups are engaged in oil theft and vandalism; in Biafra there is an increase in separatist sentiment; and even in the southwest - in a region that until recently was relatively calm, adherents of traditional and pseudo-traditional religious cults have begun to pose a security threat and tried to interfere in the electoral processes to make themselves known. In 2022, the number of victims of violence carried out by armed groups across the country exceeded 10,000, and approximately 5,000 people were abducted.

The years leading up to the 2023 elections were quite difficult for both the Nigerian economy and the social sphere: due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the country experienced high inflation (up to 19%) against the backdrop of massive unemployment and a sharp rise in food prices.

By the end of 2022, Nigeria's total debt is estimated to have risen to \$172 billion; servicing it takes up 80% of budget spending, and in the event of a default, the country may face hyperinflation and a catastrophic depreciation of the naira. Under Buhari, who combined the presidency with the post of oil minister, revenues from this industry fell by 3.83%, while the non-oil sector grew by only 1.31%. Due to poor management, insufficient investment, aging of oil deposits, and theft, the country was unable to meet the OPEC quota for the extraction of "black gold" and lost its position to Angola.

Nigeria remains Africa's number one economy, with GDP in 2020 and 2021 of \$432 billion and \$441 billion respectively (data not yet available for 2022) and growth rates of 3-3.5%. However, GDP per capita fell from \$5.4 thousand in 2015 when Buhari came to power to \$2.4 thousand in

2021, which is especially unfavorable for a country whose inhabitants spend on food about 60% of the monthly budget. In 2022, 72% of rural residents and 42% of urban residents lived below the poverty line.

According to several surveys, the proportion of Nigerians dissatisfied with the way the country is developing doubled between 1999 and 2022 and increased by more than 40% from 2019 to 2022. This dynamic coincided with a deepening generational divide: the country of 220 million has more than 65 million people aged 10 to 24, and 40% of Nigerians are under 15. However, the emergence of this “demographic bulge” is not accompanied by either an increase in youth political representation or an expansion of employment opportunities: youth unemployment reaches 37%. The threat of a large-scale social explosion prompted the authorities to adopt a law in 2018 to reduce the allowable age of a presidential candidate from 40 to 35 years, which, however, did not affect the results of the 2019 and 2023 elections; Nigerians still take to the streets to protest against policies shaped by the older generation.

Buhari's rule will be remembered for the adoption of several important decrees - the Law on Companies and Related Matters (2020), which weakened the regulatory policy, the Law on the Petroleum Industry (2021), etc., as well as the growth of investment in agriculture and the implementation of several infrastructure projects (modernization of the international airport in Lagos, construction of new railways). However, only 36% of Nigerians use the Internet and only 55% have access to electricity. It should be noted that Tinubu promised to "upgrade and expand public infrastructure" by employing the unemployed in the construction of roads and water and energy facilities. Some of the successes he achieved in these areas during his tenure as governor of Lagos state suggest that Tinubu will be able to make significant progress in the infrastructure sector nationwide.

The 2023 election showed that politics in modern Nigeria is completely neutral ideologically: none of the contenders for the highest state post showed commitment to any particular set of values, and did not express any particular sympathy or antipathy for foreign policy and foreign economic partners. The policy statements contained promises common to Nigerian candidates: to fight corruption, increase levels of security, material well-being, and so on. Since Nigerians have long realized that it is almost impossible to defeat corruption, the political elite cannot ensure security because they do not know how, and the improvement of living standards, although objectively achievable, faces such a set of obstacles that few people in the country rely on anyone - no one expects a solution to all these problems, except for himself, i.e. the voting results depended more on the patronage connections of the applicant and his ethnic/religious affiliation, rather than on his business qualities and political experience.

Meanwhile, the coming to power in Nigeria of Bola Tinubu, who actively participated in the political life of the country under the rule of Muhammadu Buhari and supported the former president in many undertakings, is unlikely to lead to cardinal changes in relations between Moscow and Abuja. Currently, Russian-Nigerian trade and economic cooperation is expanding at a fairly rapid pace: the volume of trade increased from \$336 million in 2017 to \$920.7 million in 2021 (data for 2022 are not yet available). The trade balance of Russia with Nigeria in 2021 was positive at USD 846 million, having increased by 119% compared to 2020.

The main items of Russian exports to Nigeria in 2021 were mineral products (57%), food products and agricultural raw materials (31.4%), chemical industry products (8.6%), metals and metal products (1.4%), wood and pulp and paper products (1.25%). Food products and agricultural raw materials (98%) are exported from Nigeria to the Russian Federation - mainly

oil seeds, medicinal and technical plants, fish, vegetables, root crops and tubers, fruits, nuts, coffee, tea, essential oils, rubber, etc.

The most promising areas for the development of Russian-Nigerian economic relations are the exploration and production of hydrocarbons and solid minerals, the supply of engineering and chemical products, aviation and military equipment, and cooperation in the field of nuclear energy and ICT. In 2022, the July 15, 2021 agreement was reactivated, after a short pause, with plans to build nuclear power plants at Gerega (central Nigeria) and Itu (southern Nigeria). It is expected that the cost of building each of these nuclear power plants will reach about \$10 billion and that Russia will provide loans for the implementation of these projects.

An important area of bilateral cooperation remains the training of Nigerian students in Russian universities. Currently, about 1.5 thousand Nigerians study in Russia.

It can be assumed that until the next election the scale of Russian-Nigerian cooperation, primarily trade and economic, might decrease (due to anti-Russian sanctions, etc.), but most likely will remain at the current level.

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