

# Nigeria's Humanitarian Crisis

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Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#)

*On February 27, Nigerian voters re-elected President Muhammadu Buhari, leader of the All Progressives Congress party (APC), in a poll marred by large-scale violence, accusations of vote-rigging, last-minute delays and military intervention. When Buhari was first elected in 2015, turnout among registered voters was 44%. In this election it hit an all-time low of 35%. More than 260 people were killed in election-related violence between October, when campaigning started, and election day. Buhari's main opponent was Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), who got 41% of the vote (11 million) compared to the victor's share of 56% (15 million). Abubakar rejected the result of what he called a "sham election" and pledged to file fraud charges with the election tribunal.*

Nigeria is Africa's largest economy, biggest oil producer, and most populous country with 190 million people. In spite of its resource wealth, the country suffers from massive poverty, unemployment, inequality, chronic economic weakness, and is struggling to get out of a 2016 recession partly caused by the collapse of oil prices. Nigeria has the world's highest number of people living in extreme poverty (87 million), while 75% of the population lives below the poverty-line income of US\$3.20 a day, and 50% are denied access to basic health care and education. Forty per cent of the country's workforce is unemployed or underemployed and inequality has increased in recent years, with the top 10% of the population having more than 40% of the national income, and the bottom 20% surviving on less than 5%.

Ejike Bob Udeogu, senior lecturer in economics at the University of East London (U.K.) and author of the book *Financialization, Capital Accumulation and Economic Development in Nigeria* (Cambridge Scholars, 2018), claims that the Buhari administration's handling of the economy has fallen "somewhere between poor and dreadful." Since 2017, for instance, Nigeria has occupied the bottom of Oxfam's Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index (CRI), which Udeogu blames on the government's inadequate spending on health, education and social protections. The country fares equally badly on the UN Human Development Index (HDI).

Udeogu, who once worked as a statistical analyst within Nigeria's public sector, points out that Buhari has not made much progress on fighting corruption either, which was the main platform he was elected on in 2015. An estimated US\$20 trillion was stolen from state coffers by officials between 1960 and 2005, according to Oxfam. In fact, corruption has worsened under the current president's watch, with Nigeria falling from 136th place to 148th (out of 180 countries) on Transparency International's corruption index between 2016 and 2017. Buhari's fight against graft is viewed in many quarters as primarily targeting the government's political opponents and has not been effective "in controlling the pervasive corruption still bedeviling the public sector," says Udeogu.

The combination of extreme levels of corruption, poverty, unemployment and inequality has spawned several insurgencies across Nigeria, including the deadly campaigns of Islamist group Boko Haram in the country's northeast, the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) in the south, and a renewed secessionist movement in Biafra, which borders Cameroon. Omolade Adunbi, associate professor of Afroamerican and African studies of the University of Michigan, wrote in 2017 that the rise of ethnic and religious nationalism in Nigeria "has led to such high levels of tension that it's prompted people to ask if it will survive as a country." Udeogu calls it Nigeria's humanitarian crisis.

"The poor performance of the economy could be argued to have played a significant role in the rise of extremism, insurgency and the secessionist movement in some parts of the country in recent years," he tells me. "Nigeria is not only poorly developed, when compared globally, but it also has one of the worst forms of horizontal inequality. There is a high level of poverty in the north and in the Niger Delta region, where oil — Nigeria's main export and the government's chief source of revenue — is extracted. Here there is a severe shortage of basic infrastructural amenities and development. The secessionist movement in the southeast [Biafra] is largely a result of perceived underrepresentation of the region at the federal level."

The Boko Haram insurgency has killed 27,000 people and displaced two million over the past 10 years, including 30,000 during the last elections. The group attacks army bases and drives the military out of towns, while millions of dollars earmarked for arms to fight the insurgency have been stolen by officials. The conflict has spread to the neighbouring countries of Chad (to the east), Cameroon and Niger (to the north), causing an international humanitarian crisis.

The Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) is a militant group active in the oil-rich south of Nigeria since 2016 whose attacks on Shell, Exxon and Chevron installations reduced oil output to a near three-decade low of 1.1 million barrels per day, worsening the Nigerian recession. As in the northeast, the Nigerian army has been unable to defeat insurgent groups active in the Niger Delta. The NDA backed Abubakar in the election and warned it would attack oil facilities if Buhari got back in. This could not only prolong Nigeria's recession but compound global oil shortages resulting from U.S. sanctions on Venezuela and OPEC's production cuts.

Further east, a new separatist movement in the country's Biafra region is being led by the officially banned Indigenous People of Biafra (Ipub) alongside the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (Massob). According to the BBC, Biafran separatists "crippled Nigerian cities in the southeast" with a stay-at-home protest in May 2018. Many Igbo, who comprise the largest share of the population in southeast Nigeria, feel marginalized by a Nigerian state they claim only serves the interests of the country's Hausa and Yoruba ethnic groups. Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of Ipub, fled Biafra in 2017 and disappeared after Nigerian troops invaded his home. He gave a statement from Israel in October in which he repeated Ipub's demand for a referendum on separation.

Nigeria's social divisions have long historic as well as contemporary sources. The country itself was a British imperial creation based on a logic of divide and rule, with largely Muslim territories in the north fused together with a mainly Christian south in an unwieldy combination for colonial convenience that made nation-building extremely difficult. British colonization lasted from 1900 to 1960 when Nigeria became independent only to become a

U.S. client state ruled mainly by military dictatorships until 1999, at which point formal democracy was established. Military rulers have looted the country and enforced strict neoliberal austerity under the direction of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

“The policies of deregulation, liberalization and privatization...have largely contributed to the subordination and continued underdevelopment of Nigeria’s peripheral economy in many ways,” says Udeogu. “First, the policy of trade liberalization results in the uneven competition between the backward processes prevalent in Nigeria and the advanced processes abroad. The cheap imports reinforce the growing ineffective demand for the relatively expensive local produce. Secondly, the liberalization of the financial sector along with the deregulation of the capital account has resulted in both the outright and subordinate financialization of the Nigerian economy and has further narrowed the chances of development in the real economy.”

Corruption is also not simply an internal Nigerian problem but one that was facilitated by British and Western neocolonialism. Transparency International has been accused of ignoring Western governments’ corruption and focusing solely on that of states in the Global South. But its former managing director, Cobus de Swardt, said in May 2016,

“This affects the U.K. as much as other countries. We should not forget that by providing a safe haven for corrupt assets, the U.K. and its overseas territories and crown dependencies are a big part of the world’s corruption problem.”

The previous month, 95 civil society organizations in Nigeria had written to then British Prime Minister David Cameron urging the U.K. to “do more to prevent corrupt officials from laundering stolen money through the U.K.’s property market.” Cameron and his successor Theresa May have done nothing.

“When you look at the supply side of corrupt practices you find armies of private sector company directors, lawyers, bankers, accountants, company formation agencies, and tax haven officials who facilitate dirty money flows, concoct complex schemes for tax cheating, lobby politicians on behalf of their clients for tax reliefs and special treatments,” John Christensen, director of the Tax Justice Network based in the U.K., tells me. “At the very core of this institutionalized corruption, which spans the globe, lies the British spider’s web of tax havens which facilitate corrupt practices at the grandest level.”

According to Christensen, the fact that the British government is un- willing to take action against offshore tax secrecy “tells us that the colonial mentality which gripped the British political and economic elites for centuries has never really gone away.”

For its second term, the Buhari administration has proposed the biggest budget in Nigerian history, to finance significant growth and infrastructure development, as reported in the Financial Times. Part of the money needed will be raised by reducing the government’s stake in joint ventures with oil companies from 60% to 40%. The move is as desperate as it looks, and there is some doubt the government can see it through. As of March 28, the country’s presidential election petition tribunal has allowed Abubakar to challenge Buhari’s victory. In the petition, Abubakar is asking the tribunal to announce that he won the election, based on claims he received more votes than Buhari.

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