

Research Briefing

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By Nigel Walker

Nigeria: 2023 presidential election



Summary

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Summary

Nigeria held a presidential election on Saturday 25 February 2023, the seventh since the country re-established its democracy in 1999.

18 candidates contested the election, although only three had a realistic chance of winning: Atiku Abubakar, Peter Obi and Bola Tinubu.

Nigeria's economy and national security dominated the election campaign, with rising inflation and high rates of violent crime key issues for voters.

Bola Tinubu, of the ruling All Progressives Congress, won the election in the first round, although the two main opposition parties have since filed legal petitions, asking the Appeals Court to invalidate the election and for a new one to be organised.

1 Background

Presidential elections in Nigeria take place every four years and candidates must secure a majority of votes, as well as over 25% of the votes cast in at least 24 of the country's 36 states, to win the election. If no candidate meets these criteria, a run-off is conducted within 21 days, with only two candidates allowed to participate: the one with the highest total number of votes and the candidate who gained the required 25% votes in more states than any other candidate.¹ No run-off vote has been necessary since Nigeria's transition to democracy in 1999.

The 2023 election took place on Saturday 25 February, with voting taking place from 8:30am to 2:30pm. 93.4 million citizens were eligible to vote, casting their ballot in 176,846 polling stations across the nation.²

Only Nigerian citizens over the age of 18 and living in the country are eligible to vote. Proxy voting is not allowed, with voters expected to be physically present at the polling station to show their permanent voter's card. This permits them to be accredited and able to vote.

There is no provision under Nigerian law for out-of-country voting, although Nigerians in the diaspora, civil society organisations and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) continue to advocate for this.³

As well as the presidential election, 25 February saw all 109 senatorial districts and 360 constituencies in Nigeria's bicameral federal legislature on the ballot, as well as several governorships and state positions.

In the INEC's published list of candidates, a total of 15,309 people – composed of 14,043 (91.7%) men and 1,266 (8.3%) women – contested the various seats. There were 18 presidential candidates, 1,101 Senatorial, 3,122 House of Representatives, 837 governorship and 10,231 State Houses of Assembly candidates.⁴

The 2023 general election was the seventh consecutive election since Nigeria re-established its democracy in 1999 and marks the longest span of uninterrupted democracy in Nigeria's history.

With President Muhammadu Buhari having served the maximum limit of two terms in office, he was ineligible to stand in the election.

¹ Ope Adetayo et al, [Nigeria 2023 election: All you need to know](#), Al Jazeera, 21 February 2023

² As above

³ [Elections in Nigeria: 2023 General Elections](#), International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 14 February 2023

⁴ As above

The election came as Nigeria faced double-digit inflation,⁵ with the economy having endured two recessions in the last five years and the currency (the naira) shrinking to one-third of its value in that time.⁶

Security issues also presented a significant challenge to the election, especially in the northeast, northwest and southeast, where multiple armed groups hold grievances against the state and continue to conduct frequent rounds of killings and kidnappings.⁷

All three of the main presidential candidates made improving the economy and strengthening security their key priorities.

Further afield, the 2023 general election had regional implications for West Africa, as successful elections within Nigeria can provide a positive electoral template in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region. Since 2020, there have been democratic struggles across West Africa, with the ECOWAS governments of Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso toppled by military juntas.⁸

⁵ [What to Know About Nigeria's Election](#), VOA News, 25 February 2023

⁶ Ope Adetayo et al, [Nigeria 2023 election: All you need to know](#), Al Jazeera, 21 February 2023

⁷ As above

⁸ [Elections in Nigeria: 2023 General Elections](#), International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 14 February 2023

2 2023 presidential election

2.1 Candidates for President

18 candidates contested the election, although only three had a realistic chance of winning the presidency.⁹

Profiles of these leading three candidates, in alphabetical order, are below.

Atiku Abubakar

Atiku Abubakar was born on 25 November 1946 in Jada, what is now Adamawa State, Nigeria. He has been married five times and has 27 children.¹⁰

Abubakar holds a diploma of the Royal Society of Health from the Kano School of Hygiene and a diploma in Law from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Before entering politics, in 1969 he began working in the Nigerian Customs and Excise Service, retiring in 1989 after 20 years of service. He is also a prominent businessman, making his fortune in the oil sector.

Abubakar first contested a presidential election in 1993 and has served two terms as vice president, from 1999 to 2006. The 2023 election was his sixth attempt at the presidency, as the centre-right People's Democratic Party (PDP) candidate.

Abubakar is a northern Muslim from the Fulani ethnic group and chose Ifeanyi Arthur Okowa as his running mate, a Christian governor from the oil-producing Delta state. Abubakar had previously said, when referring to an earlier election campaign, that he favoured presidents and vice presidents being of different religions, telling Arise TV in July 2022:

The Muslim-Muslim ticket has always been my fundamental disagreement. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation and there should be a religious balance in our leadership.¹¹

⁹ Cristina Krippahl, [Nigeria election 2023: Who are the presidential candidates?](#) Deutsche Welle, 24 February 2023

¹⁰ [Biography: Alhaji Atiku Abubakar](#), BBC Monitoring, 26 March 2023

¹¹ As above

If successful, Abubakar pledged unity, peace and to improve the country's prospects, with the theme of his campaign: "My Covenant with Nigeria."¹²

Peter Obi

Peter Obi was born on 19 July 1961 in Onitsha, Anambra State, Nigeria. He holds a BA in Philosophy from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and is married with two children.¹³

Obi is a former Governor of Anambra State, where he served two terms in office from March 2006 to March 2014.

On 12 October 2018 he was selected as the running mate of presidential candidate Atiku Abubakar for his unsuccessful 2019 presidential election campaign.

In May 2022 Obi left the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and joined the centre-left Labour Party (LP). Later that month he won the presidential primaries to become the party's candidate for the 2023 election.

As a relative political newcomer, Obi framed himself as the anti-establishment candidate and amassed support among the mostly young, urban southern Nigerians hit by economic hardship. His supporters call themselves the "Obi-dients".¹⁴

Bola Tinubu

Bola Tinubu was born on 29 March 1952, in Lagos, and is married. He holds a bachelor's degree in Business Administration (Accounting Management) from Chicago State University, Illinois, USA.

He also holds both the chieftaincy of Asiwaju of Lagos and the Jagaban of the Borgu Kingdom in Niger State, Nigeria.¹⁵

Tinubu is a former governor of the affluent Lagos State, where he served two terms from 1999 to 2007 and is credited with attracting foreign investment and improving public transport during his time in office.¹⁶

On 8 June 2022 he won the presidential primaries to be the candidate for the centrist All Progressives Congress (APC) party in the 2023 election. He co-founded the party in 2013 alongside outgoing President Muhammadu Buhari.

¹² James Bwala et al, [Nigeria presidential election 2023: Who are the main candidates and what are the key issues?](#) ABC News, 25 February 2023

¹³ [Biography: Peter Obi](#), BBC Monitoring, 22 March 2023

¹⁴ Cristina Krippahl, [Nigeria election 2023: Who are the presidential candidates?](#) Deutsche Welle, 24 February 2023

¹⁵ [Biography: Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu](#), BBC Monitoring, 28 March 2023

¹⁶ [Nigeria election 2023: Who are the presidential candidates?](#) BBC News Online, 3 February 2023

For his presidential campaign, Tinubu pledged to prioritise national security, the economy, agriculture, oil and gas, transport and education.¹⁷

Other candidates

The remaining presidential candidates and their political parties, in alphabetical order were: Kola Abiola – People’s Redemption Party (PRP); Adebayo Adewole – Social Democratic Party (SDP); Malik Ado-Ibrahim – Young Progressives Party (YPP); Okwudili Anyajike – National Rescue Mission (NRM); Ojei Chichi – Allied People’s Movement (APM); Christopher Imumolen – Accord Party (AP); Dumebi Kachikwu – African Democratic Congress (ADC); Rabiū Musa Kwankwaso – New Nigeria People’s Party (NNPP); Hamza al-Mustapha – Action Alliance (AA); Daniel Nwanyanwu – Zenith Labour Party (ZLP); Adenuga Oluwafemi – Boot Party (BP); Nnadi Osita – Action People’s Party (APP); Omoyele Sowore – the African Action Congress (AAC); Peter Umeadi – All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA); and Sani Yusuf – Action Democratic Party (ADP).

2.2

Election campaign

Ahead of the election, the International National Electoral Commission (INEC) stated the presidential election campaign would commence on 28 September 2022.¹⁸

Economy

The economy was one of the key issues among voters, with inflation standing at 21.8% at the time of the election and the rising cost of living leaving many families struggling.¹⁹

A shortage of Nigeria’s newly redesigned local currency, the naira, had also caused anxiety. In October 2022 the Central Bank of Nigeria announced it would redesign three naira notes to address inflation and counterfeiting, with citizens asked to turn in their old banknotes. However, struggles to obtain new versions of the currency sparked long queues outside banks across the nation and violent protests in some areas.²⁰

Unemployment

Increasing unemployment rates was another concern, especially among the younger population: figures from Nigeria’s National Bureau of Statistics show

¹⁷ [Biography: Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu](#), BBC Monitoring, 28 March 2023

¹⁸ Maryam Ahmadu-Suka et al, [Campaigns For 2023 Begin Sept 28 – INEC](#), Daily Trust, 10 March 2022

¹⁹ Cecilia Macaulay, [Nigeria elections 2023: What you need to know](#), BBC News Online, 26 February 2023

²⁰ James Bwala et al, [Nigeria presidential election 2023: Who are the main candidates and what are the key issues?](#) ABC News, 25 February 2023

33% of the overall population is unemployed, rising to 42.5% for younger adults. This has resulted in many university students fearing they may not find work after graduating, with many looking for work overseas.²¹

This is a key issue for the presidential candidates to address as Nigeria has one of the world's largest youth populations, both in number (64 million people aged 18-35) and as a percentage of the total population (almost 40% of registered voters are under 35).²²

The People's Democratic Party candidate, Atiku Abubakar, pledged: to create three million new jobs and lift 10 million people out poverty every year; to launch a more efficient, cost-effective and sustainable national job creation programme; and to create commercial hubs to help small and medium-sized businesses.

Peter Obi, the Labour Party candidate, promised to improve access to finance for medium and small enterprises, for younger citizens and women, to help reduce unemployment. The All Progressives Congress candidate, Bola Tinubu, meanwhile, set out a policy to create one million new ICT jobs within two years and to cut youth unemployment by encouraging commercial banks to give low-cost loans to youth-led enterprises.²³

Security

Nigeria's security situation was another main concern for voters, with high levels of violent crime across the nation. Armed gangs have established a kidnapping-for-ransom crisis in the northwest, Jihadist groups including Boko Haram wage insurgencies in the northeast and there is a separatist insurgency in the southeast. In Nigeria's fertile central region there is conflict between farmers and herders over scarce resources.²⁴

During the election campaign all the leading candidates set out policies to try and address the electorate's security concerns.²⁵

Atiku Abubakar pledged: to restructure and decentralise security institutions; to improve civil-military relations; to recruit up to one million personnel into the police to meet the UN police to citizen ratio of 1:450; and a policy to enable better crime detection.

²¹ Cecilia Macaulay, [Nigeria elections 2023: What you need to know](#), BBC News Online, 26 February 2023

²² [Young voters in Nigeria mobilize in record numbers ahead of presidential election](#), PBS, 22 February 2023

²³ Cecilia Macaulay, [Nigeria elections 2023: What you need to know](#), BBC News Online, 26 February 2023

²⁴ James Bwala et al, [Nigeria presidential election 2023: Who are the main candidates and what are the key issues?](#) ABC News, 25 February 2023

²⁵ Cecilia Macaulay, [Nigeria elections 2023: What you need to know](#), BBC News Online, 26 February 2023

Bola Tinubu promised to recruit, train and better equip additional military, police, paramilitary and intelligence personnel, and to improve the salaries and welfare of security personnel.

Peter Obi's campaign pledged to end banditry and insurgency by increasing trust in security forces and building intelligence; to co-operate with neighbouring countries to secure the borders; and to boost numbers in the armed forces, police and other security agencies and properly equip, train and fund them.

2.3 Election results

On 1 March 2023 the chair of Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Prof Mahmood Yakubu, declared Bola Tinubu the winner of the presidential election held on 25 February 2023.

Tinubu, of the ruling All Progressives Congress, secured almost 37% of all votes. He also met the requirement of winning at least 25% of votes in two-thirds of the 36 states and Federal Capital Territory (Abuja).

Candidate	Party	No. of valid votes	% of valid votes
Bola Tinubu	All Progressives Congress (APC)	8,794,726	36.6
Atiku Abubakar	People's Democratic Party (PDP)	6,984,520	29.1
Peter Obi	Labour Party (LP)	6,101,533	25.4
Rabiu Kwankwaso	New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP)	1,496,687	6.2
Others	-	648,474	2.7
Total		24,025,940	100.0

Source: [Nigeria election results 2023: Up-to-date results of presidential and parliamentary races](#), BBC News Online, 30 March 2023

Bola Tinubu won most states in his home region of the south-west, while Peter Obi won in Christian-dominated states and former strongholds of the main opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP) in the south, while PDP support shrank back into its northern heartlands.²⁶

Official results showed voter turnout was 27%, the lowest since the end of military rule in 1999.²⁷

²⁶ Nduka Orjinmo, [Bola Tinubu wins Nigeria's presidential election against Atiku Abubakar and Peter Obi](#), BBC News Online, 1 March 2023

²⁷ Dr Leena Koni Hoffmann, [Nigeria's election results put disenfranchisement in the spotlight](#), Chatham House, 1 March 2023

2.4

Challenges to the election result

Nigeria's two main opposition parties, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the Labour Party (LP), called for the presidential election to be overturned and for a new one to take place, branding the 23 February election a sham and alleging the results had been manipulated.²⁸

Julius Abure, chair of the Labour Party said: "I demand that this sham of an election be cancelled and we call on INEC to conduct fresh elections within the window period provided by the electoral act."²⁹

Civil society groups, international observers and former presidents were also critical of the election. In its preliminary statement immediately after the election, the EU's Election Observer Mission cited a lack of transparency and operational failures leading to challenges when trying to vote and a reduced trust in the process.³⁰

A lot of the anger was directed at the Independent National Electoral Commission and former president Olusegun Obasanjo said it was "no secret that INEC officials... have been allegedly compromised to make what should have worked not to work", suggesting ballots could be manually manipulated and doctored to circumvent the new election technology and enable manipulated results to be manually transmitted.³¹

On 21 March 2023 the PDP and the LP filed petitions seeking to cancel the results of the disputed presidential election, asking the Appeals Court to invalidate the election.

A legal battle could take several months to resolve: first the Appeals Court has 180 days to hear and make a ruling on Obi's challenge. Then, if a candidate is not satisfied with the outcome of the tribunal, they can approach the Supreme Court which will deliberate on an appeal within 60 days.³²

Given the likelihood of court rulings taking some months to process, the inauguration date of 29 May will not be affected and will go ahead as scheduled.³³

²⁸ Nduka Orjinmo, [Nigeria election results 2023: PDP and Labour want poll to be scrapped](#), BBC News Online, 28 February 2022,

²⁹ Dr Leena Koni Hoffmann, [Nigeria's election results put disenfranchisement in the spotlight](#), Chatham House, 1 March 2023

³⁰ [First Preliminary Statement - Elections held on schedule, but lack of transparency and operational failures reduced trust in the process and challenged the right to vote](#), European Union Election Observation Mission Nigeria 2023, 27 February 2023

³¹ Aanu Adeoye, [Bola Tinubu leads disputed Nigerian vote as opposition calls for election rerun](#), Financial Times, 28 February 2023

³² Camillus Eboh, [Nigeria's Obi, Atiku challenge presidential election results](#), Reuters, 21 March 2023

³³ Nduka Orjinmo, [Can Nigeria's election result be overturned?](#) BBC News Online, 3 March 2023

2.5

International reaction to the election result

United Kingdom

In a tweet on 1 March 2023, after the election results had officially been confirmed, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak congratulated Bola Tinubu on his victory, adding:

The UK-Nigeria relationship remains strong. I look forward to working together to grow our security and trade ties, opening up opportunities for businesses and creating prosperity in both our countries.³⁴

UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverly, meanwhile, issued a statement commending the Nigerian population for their participation in the election and congratulated Tinubu on his victory. He also addressed the challenges being made to the result:

We note the position of opposition parties on the election outcome and the concerns expressed by observer missions and civil society about the organisation of the process, including delays and technical challenges. We encourage the authorities to examine all concerns carefully, take action to resolve outstanding issues and focus on delivering the will of the Nigerian people.³⁵

On 14 March 2023, answering questions on Nigeria's elections in the House of Commons, Foreign Office Minister Andrew Mitchell noted the UK Government had congratulated President-elect Tinubu and that "We look forward to working with his Administration."³⁶

United States

The US Government also congratulated Tinubu on his election, with US State Department spokesperson Ned Price issuing a press release hailing Nigerian politics and democracy, while also noting the frustration felt by some regarding the shortcomings of some technical elements of the voting process.

The press release also recognised the ongoing appeals contesting the election result:

There are well-established mechanisms in place for the adjudication of electoral disputes, and we encourage any candidate or party seeking to challenge the outcome to pursue redress through those mechanisms. We call on all parties, candidates, and supporters to refrain from violence or inflammatory rhetoric at this critical time.³⁷

³⁴ Rishi Sunak (@RishiSunak), 1 March 2023 [accessed 3 April 2023] Available from: <https://twitter.com/RishiSunak/status/1630981656470224928>

³⁵ [Nigerian Presidential elections 2023: Foreign Secretary's statement](#), Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office press release, 1 March 2023

³⁶ [HC Deb 14 March 2023 c686](#)

³⁷ [2023 Presidential Election Results in Nigeria](#), US Department of State press release, 1 March 2023

In a statement issued on 5 March 2023, the US Ambassador to Nigeria, Mary Beth Leonard, said the election a week earlier had failed to meet Nigerians' expectations and urged the INEC to promptly address the problems that transpired during the elections and determine how they can be fixed.³⁸

The Ambassador also commended Atiku Abubakar and Peter Obi for their recent statements committing to challenging the elections in accordance with the legally established process.

The statement closed with the US government pledging: "As Nigeria goes through these next weeks and months, we stand with you."

African Union

On 3 March 2023 the chair of the African Union, Moussa Faki Mahamat, "warmly" congratulated Tinubu on winning the presidential election, and further congratulated the people of Nigeria for "demonstrating resilience in their commitment to democratic values by casting their votes for the leaders of their choice".³⁹

Mahamat also renewed the commitment of the African Union to support Nigeria in deepening democracy, good governance, sustainable development and to consolidate peace, security, and stability in the country.

³⁸ [The elections of February 25](#), US Embassy and Consulate in Nigeria, 5 March 2023

³⁹ [The Chairperson of the AU Commission congratulates H.E Tinubu for being proclaimed winner of Nigerian presidential polls](#), African Union press release, 3 March 2023

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