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## **A Failed Coup or Party Politics Gone Wild? Nigeria Facing General Election**

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In early August 2018, Nigerian security forces, dressed in black uniforms, assembled at the gates of the National Assembly building in Abuja, Nigeria, and physically blocked the entrance to the building. The men of the DSS (Department of State Security Services) prevented the entry of workers and senators from the opposition party – the PDP (People's Democratic Party)– to the Assembly<sup>1</sup>. Journalists and media representatives also found themselves outside the building, but news of the event nevertheless spread across social networks as well as news sites in Nigeria and other African countries, thanks to photographs shared from inside.

The images of security personnel positioned at the entrance of an institution that, above all others, symbolizes democracy were seen by many as the sign of an imminent threat to electoral democracy<sup>2</sup>, and the media were quick to begin investigating whether in fact a military coup was possibly taking place. The premature announcement of an attempted coup caused a media frenzy, but was quickly debunked as a false alarm.

As will be shown here, the importance of the current event is that it represents the opening shot in the upcoming 2019 federal elections. As in past elections in Nigeria there is always the question – how stable or fragile is the Nigerian democracy?

The security forces had in fact been called in on behalf of the government in the interest of strengthening the ruling party's standing, and not on behalf of its opponents. To a large extent, the security forces in this instance served as a backdrop to internal politics, inter-party conflicts

and the beginning of the struggle for the upcoming presidential elections in Nigeria - both practically and metaphorically.

The photographs, live reports and tweets told the world that Dr. Abubakar Bukola Saraki, or ABS for short, President of the Nigerian Senate, had been blocked from entering the Assembly.<sup>3</sup> This was a measure designed to effectively remove ABS from office, bypassing the procedure prescribed by law for the President's dismissal, which requires a special majority vote of at least 73 senators. While members of the opposition were prevented from entering the building, senators from the ruling party were allowed to go in and were photographed engaging in casual, relaxed conversation once inside. At the same time, opposition members continued to look for a way into the building through the back entrances. The photograph of opposition senators climbing over the closed gate of the National Assembly became the image of the day.

The entire incident turned out to be a prelude to the presidential elections scheduled for February 2019. The forceful blockade of the doors to the National Assembly accurately reflected the tension between the two major parties, as well as the personal rivalry between their leaders, but, more importantly, it did **not** win the approval of the public, who called for their elected officials to return to order.

The APC (All Progressive Congress) party, who had traditionally been the underdog opposition party until their triumph in the 2015 elections, rose to power on the waves of discontent that washed over the country's majority-Muslim north and their complaints about the previous President Goodluck Jonathan's indifference to their situation. The APC was headed by Muhammadu Buhari, a veteran leader who had "made his bones" in the army and during the period of military rule in Nigeria (1983- 1985).

Another event in the campaign that culminated in the closing of the National Assembly building took place several months earlier, when at least 30 senators defected from the ruling party to the opposition parties, undermining the power of the ruling party in the House of Representatives<sup>4</sup>. These desertions had not only weakened the status of the ruling party in the National Assembly (and consequently stripped it of the power to dismiss the President of the Senate by a special majority vote), but also provoked serious internal discord within the party. It was not long before these disagreements came to light and were widely covered in the Nigerian press, which revealed

more meetings secretly taking place between dissidents within the ruling party and members of the opposition party.

The main bone of contention, within the spicy stew of intensifying inter-party tensions leading up to the upcoming elections, became Senate President Saraki. Abubakar Bukola Saraki is a medical doctor by training with a rich history of business and public service experience. As the governor of Kwara State he enjoyed widespread public support and admiration. Kwara State is located in the North Central part of Nigeria (Middle - Belt) and is dominated by the Yoruba. About a week before the events at the Assembly building, Saraki had announced, in typical public fashion, that after intense deliberations he had decided to leave the APC party, on whose behalf he had served as President of the Senate, and “go pitch his tent elsewhere”. His departure from the party, according to Saraki, did not necessitate his abdication of the Senate Presidency. Above all, this announcement is indicative of recent developments in the corridors of government; Saraki deserted the ruling party but did not hesitate to declare that he would not give up his post as President of the National Assembly, a position gained as a result of his status as a party member and one that he no longer holds.

This points to the real challenges facing Nigerian democracy, including the challenge of achieving a balance between the three branches of government, the challenge of clear delineation between the ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres, and instances of challenged political integrity, as in the case of Saraki.

The ‘closed doors episode’ is therefore but a chapter in a campaign that is set to continue for many more months, during which Nigeria will struggle to determine the identity of its next leader and at the same time to preserve the strength of its democracy. The fear of the military’s involvement in the political system, and of a possible military coup has faded away, but the fear for the welfare of Nigerian democracy is still present and troubling, based on the rich history of Nigerian military regimes.

These political events have been taking place against the backdrop of two central issues in which the government has been involved over the last few years: actions against Boko Haram and the fight against corruption. While public attention has been mostly directed towards the fight against Boko Haram, the anti-corruption governmental campaign is no less important.

In his criticism, Saraki argued that Buhari's anti-corruption policy is more a means to silence opposition than a worthy struggle to put a stop to malfeasance. This was a rather obvious allusion to the accusations of corruption of which he himself has been the target, and of which he has been entirely cleared by the courts. While Saraki points an accusing finger at the government's undemocratic conduct, the ruling party prefers to invest its efforts in waging a personal war against the man and blames him for intentionally dragging his feet and slowing down legislative processes in a way that impedes the Senate's day-to-day functioning.

While the country prepares for the upcoming elections, data have recently been published showing that 78 million Nigerians (44/3% of the whole population) live in extreme poverty, meaning that they live on less than \$1.9 a day<sup>5</sup>. This damning figure could overshadow other positive developments that have been achieved during Buhari's rule. On the personal front, there is also the issue of the uncertain health of the aged incumbent president, who spent long months in medical treatment outside the country in 2017,<sup>6</sup> and was outside the country for an indefinite period of time during the above-mentioned incident. This too fails to contribute to the stability of the current political situation and raises doubts about the future that the elections might bring.

Military involvement in politics is hardcoded in Nigeria's political DNA. It is therefore understandable that the deep fear of a repeat of such involvement and the aggressive activity of security forces, especially when the president is abroad, will always be seen as a warning sign. Even before Buhari's return to Nigeria, the head of the security services was fired by the acting president, indicating that he had acted improperly. However, when the president returned to Nigeria, political pressure was successfully exerted for his reinstatement.

Meanwhile, the process of drawing up party lists in preparation for the coming 2019 elections has already begun. The degree of voter involvement in the appointment of candidates is high, and many candidates, including ministers and governors of states, have had their candidacies rejected for various reasons. Some of these rejections have been motivated by legitimate reasons, while others have come on the heels of what has been identified as problems of political loyalty.

The events of August 2018 and their aftermath serve to once again underline the fact that Nigerian politics are still in the process of long-term stabilization. Questions about the acceptable extent of security forces' involvement in politics, the manner in which political figures are appointed, and party rivalries that turn into extreme personal conflicts continue to be an integral

part of Nigeria's political sphere. These will likely continue to resonate in the near future leading up to the 2019 elections.

Above all, the sense of unease about the dangerous over-involvement of the military in politics continues to underlie Nigerian politics and threaten the stability and future of the country's democracy<sup>7</sup>. The fear in Nigeria reflects a more general concern for military involvement in politics in Africa<sup>8</sup>.

As of now, the social activism of various human rights and pro-democracy organizations as well as active role of social media in Nigeria<sup>9</sup> ensure that the public is kept on its guard as the watchdog of its elected officials.

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Ogbonna, "Breaking(Video): Drama as DSS takes over National Assembly, deny lawmakers access", Vanguard, 7 August, 2018, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/08/breakingvideo-dss-takes-over-nass-deny-lawmakers-access/>; Nsikak Nseyen, "NASS siege: EU reacts to DSS action", Daily Post, 9 August, 2018, <http://dailypost.ng/2018/08/09/nass-siege-eu-reacts-dss-action/>.

<sup>2</sup> The constant fear is historically based on assumptions regarding the fragility of democratic institutions. As for the past see - Larry Diamond, "Nigeria in Search of Democracy", *Foreign Affairs* 62, no. 4 (1984): 905-925.

<sup>3</sup> Wale Odunsi, "DSS blocks NASS Clerk from entering premises", *Daily Post*, 7 August, 2018, <http://dailypost.ng/2018/08/07/breaking-dss-blocks-nass-clerk-entering-premises/>

<sup>4</sup> "Nigerian security operatives barricade entrance to National Assembly", *Journal du Cameroun*, 7 August, 2018, <https://www.journalducameroun.com/en/nigerian-security-operatives-barricade-entrance-to-national-assembly/>

<sup>5</sup> Homi Kharas, Kristofer Hamel, and Martin Hofer, "The start of a new poverty narrative", *Brookings*, 19 June, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2018/06/19/the-start-of-a-new-poverty-narrative/>. See also: World Poverty Clock, <https://worldpoverty.io/>

<sup>6</sup> "Timeline of President Buhari's Unhealthy Start to 2017", *Nigerian Bulletin*, 8 May, 2018, <https://www.nigerianbulletin.com/threads/timeline-of-president-buharis-unhealthy-start-to-2017.238345/> More on the phenomenon of leaders receiving medical treatment outside Africa can be seen here: Damian Zane, "Why do Buhari, Dos Santos and Mugabe go to hospital abroad?", *BBC News*, 13 August, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-40685040>

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed account on electoral politics in Nigeria see: Adigun Agbaje, Said Adejumobi, "Do Votes Count? The Travails of Electoral Politics in Nigeria", *Africa Development* XXXI, no. 3 (2006): 25–44.

<sup>8</sup> "As Nigeria goes, so goes Africa" See in Robert I. Rotberg, "Nigeria Elections and Continuing Challenges", *Council on Foreign Relations*, no. 27 (2007): 3.

<sup>9</sup> On current Nigerian Civil society see : Lafenwa Stephen Akinyemi, "Civil Society and the Anti-Corruption Struggle in Nigeria", *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2016, Pp.115-127. For an older, but still relevant perspective, see: Michael Bratton, "Beyond the State: Civil Society and Associational Life in Africa", *World Politics* 41, no. 3 (1989): 407-430.