

## **Nigerian Elections 2011: Embracing an Historic Opportunity for Democracy**

**Op-Ed by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson**

On April 9, 2011, Nigeria held the first of a series of elections that will impact the direction of Africa's most populous country and second-largest economy, and set the course for the future of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. What we have seen so far in West Africa this year is promising – peaceful and credible elections in Burkina Faso, Benin and Niger, and the triumph of democracy over dictatorship in Cote d'Ivoire. Some forty years ago, I began my first tour as a newly-minted Foreign Service Officer in Lagos. Arriving just seven years after its independence, the Nigeria I found was one locked in a brutal civil war with an uncertain future. I am proud of Nigeria's achievements over the last decades, and its role as a leader in Africa and the world.

On April 9, I observed along with 17 other U.S. Embassy and Consulate teams, Nigeria's National Assembly elections. We were heartened by what we saw. In sharp contrast to its elections of 2007, Nigeria was demonstrating that it can hold credible elections that allow the Nigerian people a meaningful opportunity to elect their leaders. Together with U.S. Ambassador Terence McCulley, I visited polling stations in the Federal Capital Territory and adjacent Nassarawa and Kaduna States. I was struck by how well Nigeria's civil society and the democratic institutions worked together and the broad-based and enthusiastic participation of Nigerian citizens exercising their right to choose their leaders. The commitment and professionalism of the young people of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) who performed extraordinarily well in carrying out their important work is an encouraging sign of Nigeria's bright future. I also saw the incredible dedication of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Chair Attahiru Jega, who remained steadfast in pulling off the round despite the initial false-start on April 2. Deemed a "general success" despite delayed delivery of election materials, the presence of "under-age" voters, and some incidents of violence, Nigeria has the chance to do even better by holding a fairer, freer, and more peaceful Presidential election on April 16. I urge election and security officials to build upon this foundation for an even stronger and more peaceful showing on April 16 and April 26.

Times are changing. Social media played an important role in this cooperation. INEC and voters exchanged messages via Short Messaging Service (SMS) texts, Twitter, and Facebook, with camera images sent from cellular telephones, all to promote a more transparent process, to verify adherence to correct procedures, and to alert authorities and the media to potential challenges. This Saturday, I will join Nigerians in watching @inecnigeria and @swiftcount on Twitter as they transparently work towards a credible election process.

Democracy is important to all of us. No one person or any single electoral event can transform an entrenched political culture. Sadly, this past weekend some opponents of democracy tried to

derail the process by resorting to thuggery and violence. Political intimidation and violence have no place in a democratic society. As we move forward, Nigeria's political leaders - and those who aspire to lead - must refrain from inflammatory rhetoric or acts of intimidation. Any election violence is unacceptable, as it casts a shadow over the entire electoral process. The United States not only condemns violence and intimidation, but we are prepared to take appropriate measures against those individuals who violate basic democratic norms, as we have done in places such as Cote d'Ivoire, Zimbabwe, and Madagascar..

The 2011 Presidential, National Assembly, Gubernatorial, and State Assembly elections provide an historic opportunity for Nigeria to become a model for the rest of Africa and the world, especially for those citizens demanding democracy in their countries. All Africans deserve smooth, peaceful, transparent, and credible elections. The conduct of the first round of elections indicates that Nigeria is ready to be that example. We stand with the Nigerian people in seeking free, fair, and credible elections and I challenge all Nigerians to work together with even more patience and determination this weekend to produce leaders elected by the Nigerian people.

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