

The election that surprised us all

At a glance

The Nigerian presidential elections in March 2015 provided an interesting look at the progress of democracy in the largest economy in Africa. How did Coffey assure the safety of its project team during this time?

Risk management – and the safety of our people – is at the heart of our work

Nigeria's 2015 presidential elections were expected to be the most closely fought since the country's independence. While the majority of the country's population and international observers were calling for peaceful elections, history was not on their side. In 2011, the announcement of the results between incumbent president Goodluck Jonathan from the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Muhammadu Buhari from the All Progressives Congress (APC) was followed by three days of violence. At least 938 people were killed and 735 were injured.

Just like then, in 2015 many Nigerians expected the election to be an extremely tight contest between Jonathan and Buhari. Tension only elevated when Jonathan delayed the original elections by six weeks, stating security concerns, something many saw as a ploy to buy more votes.

Preparations for the election

Coffey was well aware of the potential for violence surrounding the elections. With preparations beginning almost a year in advance, the project team in Nigeria and our Health, Safety, Security and Environment team in the UK designed an election plan. This was drawn up as an information piece for all project staff in our offices in Lagos, Abuja and Kaduna. Our extensive experience managing risk, throughout Africa and beyond, allowed us to include relevant and appropriate guidance in the case of unrest. The final plan was agreed with the team and implemented several weeks in advance of the election. As part of

this, project offices were scheduled to be closed over the elections and all staff were kept informed via a *WhatsApp* text message group and email updates from our Security Risk Analyst in Abuja. All offices were also stocked with emergency funds, food and water; and emergency procedures were highlighted and tested.

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The election

The election was finally held on 28 March 2015. Early on the day, it emerged that some polling stations had not started the registration process by 10.30am, two hours after the scheduled start. A small number of stations did not start their accreditation at all. These delays forced the election into a second day. By the evening of 29 March, polling stations had closed, and with all possible votes being cast the collating process was begun. Despite tension surrounding the delay in accreditation and voting, as well as isolated incidents of violence in some polling stations, voting had passed relatively trouble-free. Only minor clashes between supporters of political parties were recorded in Lagos, Rivers and Osun states, while Boko Haram militants targeted polling stations in Gombe and Yobe states.

On 30 March, each state started releasing results. Reporting at the end of the day was showing Buhari and the APC in the lead. On the morning of 31 March, a PDP representative delayed further results announcements. In a verbal assault, he openly accused the chairman of the Independent National Election Commission (INEC), Attahiru Jega, of influencing the results in favour of the APC.

By 6pm on the 31 March, the results of all but three states had been announced. With a lead of over 2.5 million votes, and only Buhari strongholds still to be announced, it was clear that Buhari was on the verge of winning. When the BBC reported that Jonathan had congratulated Buhari via a phone call, Buhari's supporters began their celebrations. A final announcement by INEC at 2.30 am on 1 April confirmed Buhari's win.

As Buhari's lead became clearer, speculation began on how Jonathan and the PDP party would react. Rumours circulated of armed youths being sent to Kaduna to start violence, and of the government preparing to implement a 24 hour curfew. It's likely that Jonathan's phone call to concede defeat defused the situation and signalled a peaceful transition in power.

Eight hours after the final result had been announced, Coffey's Abuja and Lagos offices re-opened. A day later the office in Kaduna, a particular hotspot for violence in 2011, also re-opened.

Moving forward

Muhammadu Buhari will be inaugurated as the new President of Nigeria on 29 May. The Nigerian public will be expecting him to resolve the Boko Haram issue in the north as well as eradicate a government bureaucracy riddled with corruption, promises he has made repeatedly.

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This election, which was concluded in a largely free, fair and peaceful manner, can be seen as an example to a number of nations throughout Africa. Free and fair elections in such a diverse and sometimes divided nation can give hope to all other countries looking for a democratic transfer of power.

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