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Democracy and Elections in Nigeria

Nigeria's forthcoming elections in April, 2007 signal a political milestone. For the first time since independence, Nigerians expect a turnover from one elected civilian administration to another. This potential democratic landmark, however, is set against a backdrop of uncertain election preparations and a contentious political arena.

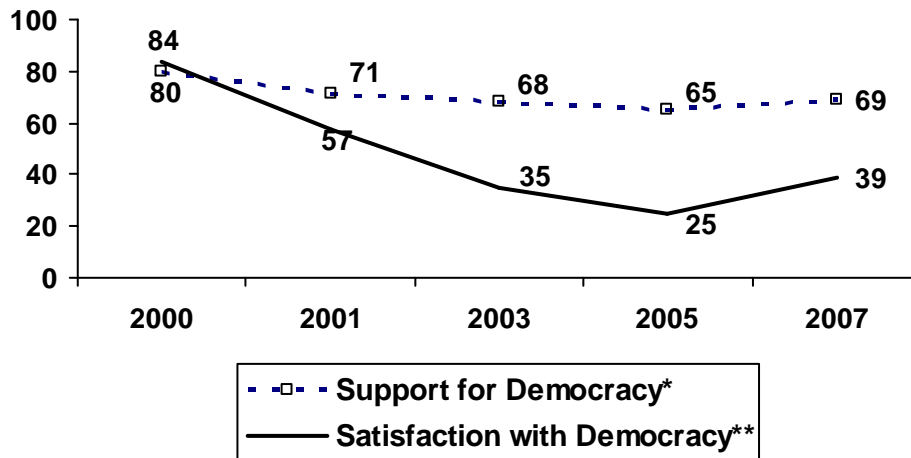
In order to gauge the political climate in Nigeria during the run-up to elections, the Afrobarometer research network conducted a national survey of public attitudes in January-February 2007. The survey of 2,410 Nigerians covered a random, nationally-representative sample of citizens above the age of 18. All states of the federation were included, and the sample was evenly divided among men and women.

This survey was the fifth conducted by Afrobarometer since the transition to democracy. In this release we look at trends in Nigerian attitudes toward democracy, and views toward elections in early 2007. Further information is available at:
www.afrobarometer.org

- ***Support for a democratic system is resilient, but there is low satisfaction with Nigeria's democratic practices.***

The figure below shows changes in popular support for democracy and satisfaction with the actual practice of democracy. 'Support for democracy' measures Nigerians' general political values: how much do Nigerians prefer democracy as a general system of government? The figure shows that support for democracy diminished moderately after the political transition (from 80 percent to 71 percent), and has been relatively steady since 2001. Today, seven out of ten Nigerians express support for democracy over all other systems. In sum, Nigerians' support for democracy is resilient.

Support and Satisfaction with Democracy over Time



*Answer: "Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government"

** Question: "How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Nigeria?"
(Answer: Fairly/Very satisfied)

While Nigerians may consistently support democracy, they are much less enthusiastic about the way that democracy actually works in their country. From a high of 84 percent in 2000, immediately after the transition to democracy, popular satisfaction with democracy has plummeted to a low of 25 percent in 2005, before rebounding somewhat in 2007. Today, about four in 10 Nigerians express relative satisfaction with democracy, many fewer than in 2000.

- *Nigerians have low confidence in elections as a mechanism of political change.*

How much confidence do Nigerians have in elections as a mechanism of democracy? As seen in Table 1, about two-thirds of Nigerians believe that elections do not enable voters to remove ineffective leaders, and only about a quarter believe the elections serve as a vehicle of political change. As a matter of interest, these 2007 results are consistent with answers to our previous (2005) survey). Nigerians do not have high levels of confidence in the electoral process.

Table 1: Confidence in Elections

%	Not at all/Not very well	Well/Very well
"How well do elections enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?"	68	24

- *Nigerians are very critical of the previous elections, though hopeful about the 2007 elections.*

How do Nigerians assess the last [2003] elections? What do they anticipate for the 2007 polls? In Table 2, we see views on the relative credibility of elections. Nigerians clearly have major misgivings about the 2003 elections; only a third view the past elections as relatively free and fair, while more than half felt the elections fell short.

Yet there is surprising optimism toward the forthcoming polls. In early 2007, six out of ten Nigerians predicted that the April polls would be relatively free and fair, while little more than a quarter expressed serious reservations. This may represent a triumph of hope over experience, but it suggests that cynicism is not the dominant mood, and Nigerians hold out some expectation that the quality of elections can be improved.

Some of this expectation may spring from the vigorous efforts of civic activists and political parties to urge free, fair and peaceful polls. At the time of the survey, initiatives by the anti-corruption commission (the EFCC), and efforts by the electoral commission (INEC) to expedite the voter registration process were also prominent in the public eye.

Table 2: Assessments of Elections

	Not free and fair/ Free and fair, but with major problems	Completely free and fair/ Free and fair, but with minor problems
<i>“How free and fair were the 2003 presidential elections?”</i>	55	36
<i>“How free and fair do you expect the 2007 presidential elections to be?”</i>	28	60

- *Confidence in elections affects satisfaction with democracy, though not support for democracy.*

When we match public attitudes toward democracy and elections, we find some important effects. Confidence in elections seems to have no effects on support for democracy, but a clear association with democratic satisfaction.

As seen in Table 3, there is virtually no difference in preferences for democracy among Nigerians with different opinions of elections, About 70 percent of citizens support the democratic system, regardless of whether they believe that elections enable voters to change leaders.

Table 3: Elections and Attitudes to Democracy (%)

<i>'How well do elections enable voters to [change leaders]?':</i>	Not Well	Well
Prefer Democracy	70	68
Satisfied with democracy	36	48
Not satisfied with democracy	63	50

Nigerians' levels of satisfaction with democracy, however, are associated with their opinions of elections. Among those who believe that elections do not do a good job of allowing voters to change leaders, nearly two-thirds are dissatisfied with democracy, and only about a third are relatively satisfied. For those who believe that elections do serve to allow for choice of leaders, half are satisfied with democracy.

Summary

- An Afrobarometer survey in January-February 2007 finds that Nigerians hold steady in their commitment to a democratic system, though they are quite discouraged about the performance of democracy since 1999.
- Most Nigerians view the 2003 elections as seriously flawed, but they hold higher expectations for the April 2007 polls.
- Relatively few Nigerians have confidence in elections as a mechanism for changing leaders, and their estimation of elections influences their satisfaction with democracy,
- The conduct and credibility of the 2007 elections will have a significant impact on popular views of the Nigerian political system, especially citizens' willingness to look to elections as a vehicle of political change.