



**Performance and Legitimacy in
Nigeria's New Democracy**

Nigeria's 1999 transition to civilian government culminated a long, turbulent period of military rule and failed democratic experiments. At the time of the political handover, many Nigerians expressed hopes for a "democracy dividend" that would expand political liberties, improve the performance of government, encourage accountability among leaders, and revive the ailing economy. After initial euphoria in the wake of the Abacha dictatorship, a greater sense of realism has set in among much of the public.¹ The anticipated benefits of democracy have been slow to emerge, and the new dispensation has failed to fulfill the expectations of many Nigerians. Analysts, commentators and average citizens express deep concerns about political violence, corruption, ineffective government, unresponsive leaders, and economic deprivation.

Recent public opinion surveys reflect this disappointment and frustration with the country's emerging democracy.² What are the effects of such views on the legitimacy and stability of Nigeria's new democracy? Will disillusionment with the performance of democracy undermine public confidence in the democratic system? Is it likely that grievances over governance or the economy will cause people to prefer less democratic forms of government, such as military rule or an authoritarian "strongman" president?

In brief, can democracy persist in spite of the many evident shortcomings in the new regime?

This question obviously has great historical relevance in Nigeria. Two previous civilian regimes – the First Republic in 1966 and the Second Republic in 1983 – have failed. Both were shadowed by widespread complaints of corruption, fraud, political domination, and poor governance.³ While many factors led to military intervention, the loss of popular support and legitimacy clearly weakened these democratic regimes sufficiently to allow the armed forces to step in.

In addition, critics at the time charged that each government had monopolized politics under a dominant party or regional group, which limited political choice and discouraged possibilities for reform. Nigerian experience shows the twin hazards of military intervention and party dominance in endangering democratic development.

Therefore it is relevant to ask where public sentiments under Nigeria's current Fourth Republic stand in relation to the democratic system. A worrisome possibility is that citizens are moving away from commitments to democracy, and toward some form of

non-democratic political arrangement, whether military rule, single-party control, or the rise of strong president to ‘set things in order.’

Alternatively, popular dismay over political performance may not necessarily undermine support for democracy. Nigerians (as is the case with citizens in many other democracies around the world) could distinguish between the government in power and the regime of democracy, directing their dissatisfaction toward leaders and parties rather than the system itself.

In order to answer these questions, we use results from four Afrobarometer surveys in Nigeria, conducted in 2000, 2001, 2003 and 2005. The data provide a unique profile of changing Nigerian attitudes since the inauguration of the new civilian regime in 1999.⁴

To summarize our findings: Nigerians are broadly discouraged by the performance of their political system, and do not generally believe that they have reaped the “dividends” of democracy. Nonetheless, a large majority of Nigerians continue to prefer democratic government over all other options, and many Nigerians remain patient about the anticipated benefits of the democratic system. Further, Nigerians are most critical of the government of the day, and relatively less discouraged by the performance of the general regime of democracy. These popular attitudes suggest that Nigeria’s new democracy remains fragile, and suffers a growing deficit of popular confidence. However, Nigerians are not ready to abandon the democratic system for non-democratic alternative such as military rule or a domineering presidency.

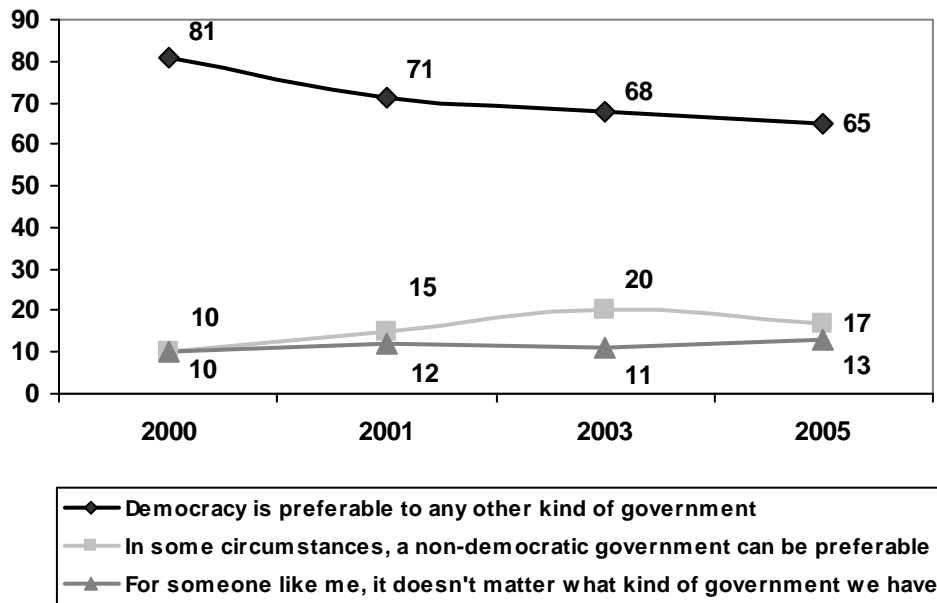
These findings are discussed in greater detail in the following briefing.

Support for Democracy and Satisfaction with Democracy: Demand and Supply

Democratic legitimacy can be viewed as a balance between the public’s *demand* for democracy, and the perceived *supply* of democracy from the political system.⁵ In other words, how much do Nigerians *want* democracy, and how much democracy do they think they are *getting* from their government? In previous Afrobarometer analyses, these dimensions have been measured by composite indexes. Here, we have used simpler measures while preserving the general concepts.

For the purposes of this paper, we measure the general demand for democracy in terms of support for democracy among Nigerian citizens. Figure 1 shows the trends in support for democracy over time.

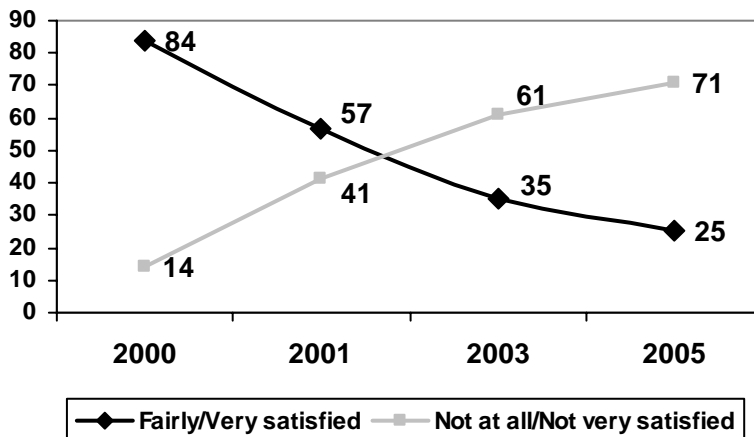
Figure 1: Support for Democracy (%)



In the immediate wake of the transition from military rule, Nigerians expressed very high levels of support for democracy, reflecting a sense of political euphoria after a long period of dictatorship. Since 2000, support for democracy has declined steadily, though modestly. Currently, about two-thirds of Nigerians say they prefer democracy without any reservations.

The perceived supply of democracy is measured here simply in terms of satisfaction with democratic performance. The deep disappointment of Nigerians is evident, as seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Satisfaction With Democracy (%)

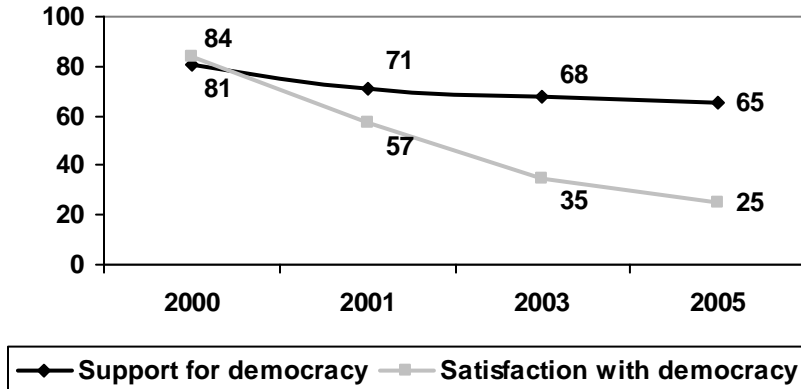


Note: "Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Nigeria?"

Nigerian public opinion reflects a sharp decline in satisfaction with democracy. Six months after the inauguration of the civilian administration, 84 percent of citizens said they were satisfied with "the way democracy works" in the country. Satisfaction has subsequently plunged, to 25 percent by the end of 2005. Among the group of African countries surveyed by the Afrobarometer, Nigerians have changed their relative position, from the most satisfied citizens to among those least satisfied with their democratic government.⁶

Comparing these shorthand measures of "demand" and "supply," displayed in Figure 3, provides an important perspective. Despite strong dissatisfaction with political performance, support for democracy has declined more slowly. Professed support for democracy has diminished by 16 percentage points in five years, compared with a drop of 59 percentage points in satisfaction. While measures of "support" and "satisfaction" were nearly equal following the transition, there is now a gap of about 40 percentage points between these dimensions.

Figure 3: Support for Democracy Compared with Satisfaction with Democracy (%)



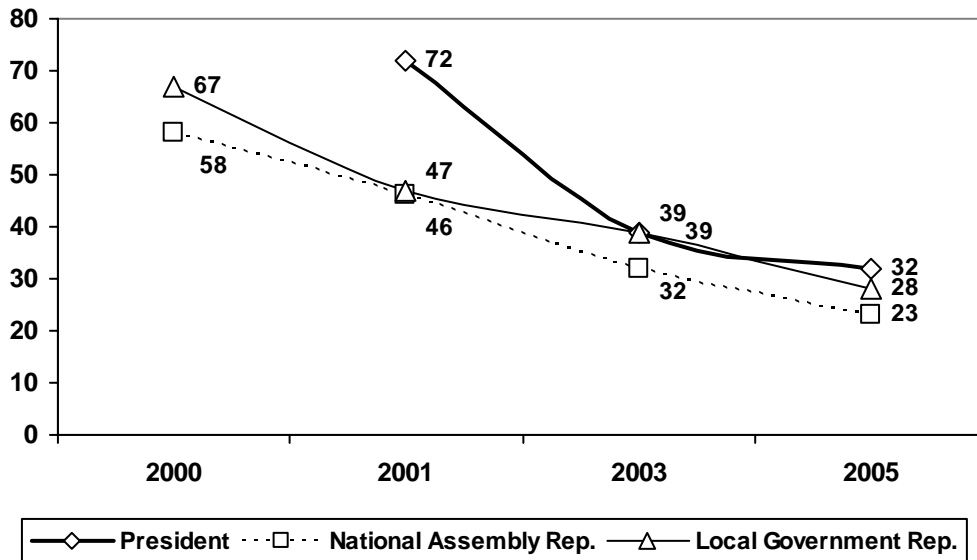
This suggests an important conclusion: the basic commitment to democracy among the public seems to be resilient. Although Nigerians have become increasingly discouraged by the performance of their government, their stated preference for a democratic political system has wavered only modestly. In the following sections, we explore in more detail the sources of dissatisfaction and the depth of democratic support.

Democratic Performance: Government and Regime

Citizens evaluate political performance in different ways, ranging from the effectiveness of leaders, to the outputs of government, to the quality of institutions. When trying to understand the range of public opinion it is helpful to emphasize a distinction between the *government of the day* (those officials and parties who set policy and make decisions) and the *democratic regime* (the institutions, laws, and rules associated with a democratic political system). As seen below, while Nigerians are generally discouraged with political performance, they are not equally discouraged with all dimensions of the system.

Regarding important aspects of the government, Figure 4 illustrates the declining evaluations of the public toward their elected leaders.

Figure 4: Performance of Elected Officials



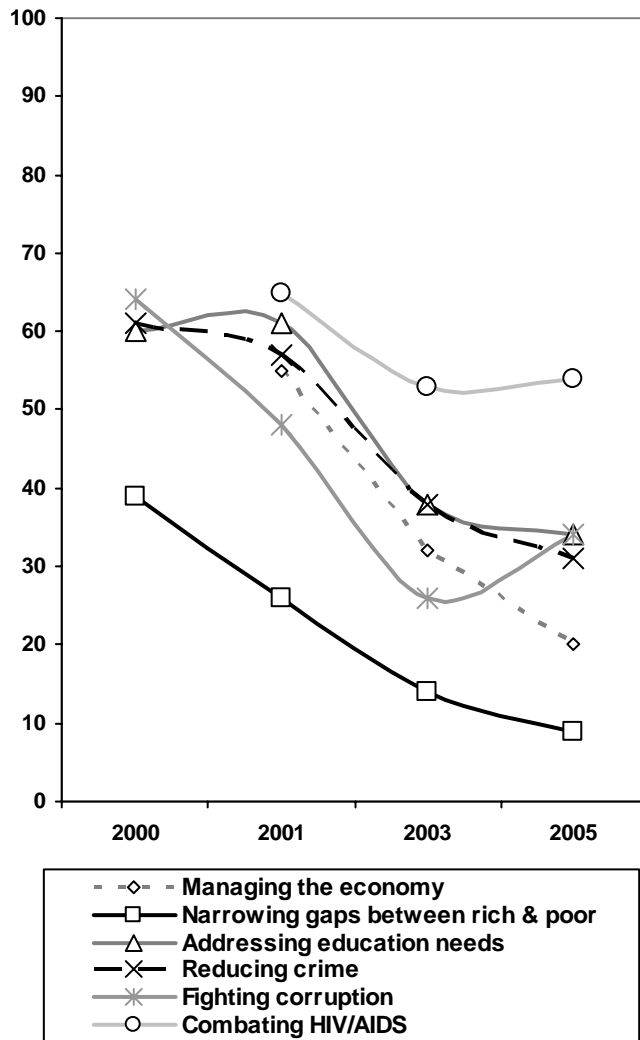
Note: % who Approve/ Strongly Approve of performance

The most noteworthy trend is the downward convergence of all these evaluations. In the early years after the transition, a majority of Nigerians expressed general approval of the performance of their elected officials, with President Obasanjo receiving the highest approval (72 percent in 2001, the first year this question was asked), trailed by approval for local government officials and National Assembly representatives. By 2003, these evaluations merge at much lower levels. In the most recent poll, President Obasanjo's approval rating was 32 percent (a drop of 40 percentage points from 2001), followed closely by approval for local government and legislative representatives.

A large majority of Nigerians currently disapprove the performance of their elected leaders. Constituents are more critical of the officials they observe more closely, though the National Assembly representative consistently earns the lowest assessments. While the President may enjoy advantages of distance, visibility, and public relations, the popular view has become increasingly critical.

Figure 5 illustrates changing public assessments of the government's policy performance.

Figure 5: Government Policy Performance



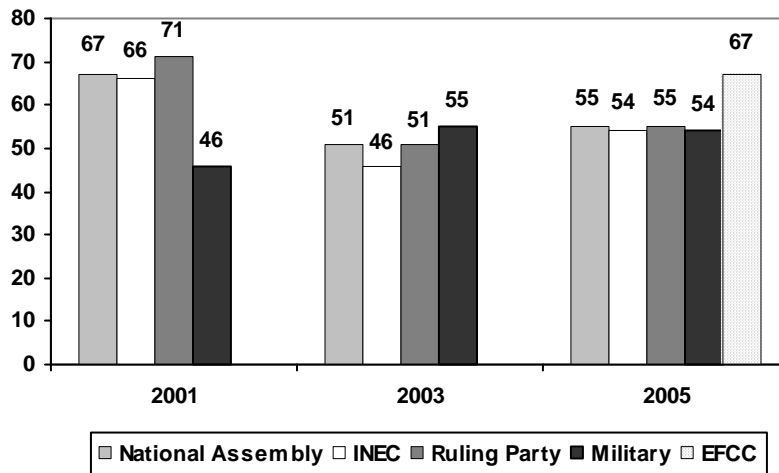
Note: % answering Fairly Well or Well; “How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters?”

This list covers a selection of core economic, social and political concerns. Nigerians are increasingly downbeat about the government’s efforts to manage the economy, encourage equity, provide education, and limit crime. The public has responded positively to recent anti-corruption initiatives, although little more than a third of Nigerians approved the government’s performance in the most recent survey. With regard to HIV/AIDS, the public expresses relatively consistent, if modest, approval. Nigerians evidently show diminishing confidence in the government’s ability to handle crucial issues affecting their lives.

Turning to features of the regime, one significant measure is the degree public trust in important institutions of democracy, displayed in Figure 6. Here we find an interesting

distinction: popular trust in major institutions has subsided, but not nearly as steeply as assessments of government performance. Trust in the National Assembly, the electoral commission (INEC), and the ruling People’s Democratic Party has receded since the first civilian term, but the decline has been comparatively modest (on the order of 12-16 percentage points).

Figure 6: Trust in Major Institutions



Note: % expressing some degree of trust

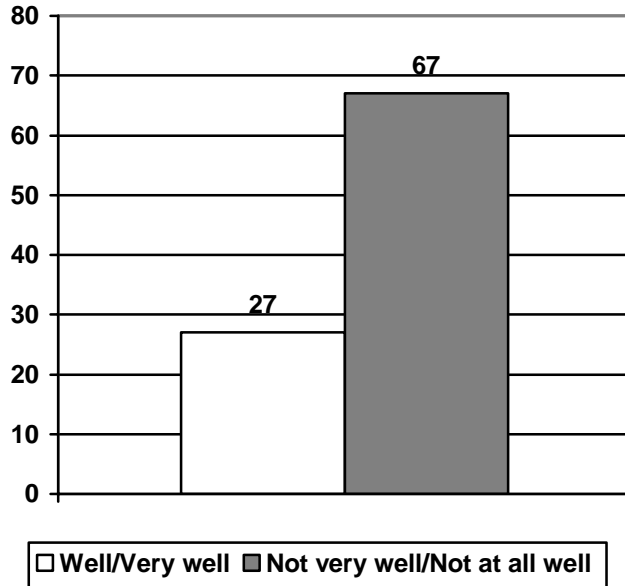
Interestingly, trust in these institutions has remained firm (or rebounded slightly) since 2003. This probably reflects a small recovery after the contentious period of the last elections, when the legislature, the electoral authority, and political parties came under much public criticism. Whatever the driving factors, it is significant that a majority of the public expresses some trust in key democratic institutions, and that levels of institutional trust have not consistently declined, in contrast to assessments of incumbent leaders and current policies.

Some other measures of institutional trust commend special attention. Trust in the military has moderately increased since 2001, and a slight majority currently expresses some trust for the armed forces. The small shift in trust for the military is generally equaled by increased popular tolerance for military rule, and greater acceptance of a “non-democratic” regime. This indicates somewhat greater popular acceptance for non-democratic political options, including a possible role for the military. We will explore this in more detail below.

We also note the high degree of trust (67 percent) for the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), which has spearheaded the government’s anti-corruption efforts. Whether viewed as part of the government or the regime, the high public trust for this major institution of public accountability is significant, particularly when matched with growing approval for anti-corruption efforts.

In one important area, however, there is a substantial deficit of public trust. As seen in Figure 7, the Nigerians express minimal trust in elections, one of the core institutions of democracy.

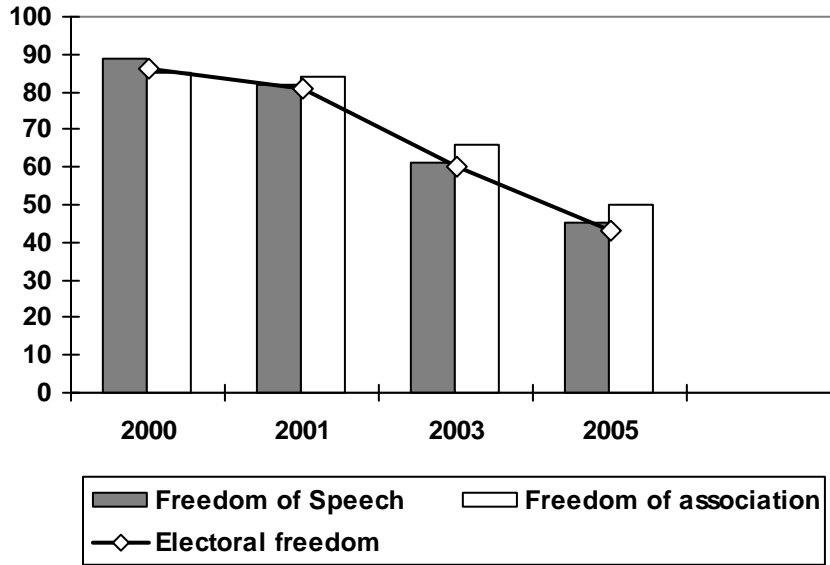
Figure 7: Do Elections Enable Voters to Remove Leaders?



This is a further reflection of the negative popular reactions to the controversial 2003 elections. Assessments of the relatively ‘honesty’ of the preceding elections dropped from 76 percent among Nigerians in 2000, to just 44 percent in 2003. Currently, about two-thirds of the public believes that elections are *not* effective mechanisms for selecting leaders. There is considerable skepticism toward some important democratic structures.

The state of political rights and liberties provides a further measure of performance associated with the democratic regime. Since 2000, Afrobarometer surveys have asked Nigerians to assess the present state of fundamental liberties such as freedom of speech, freedom of association, and free electoral choice, and to compare current political conditions with the situation under previous military regimes. The results are seen in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Assessments of Political Liberties: Current system compared with military rule

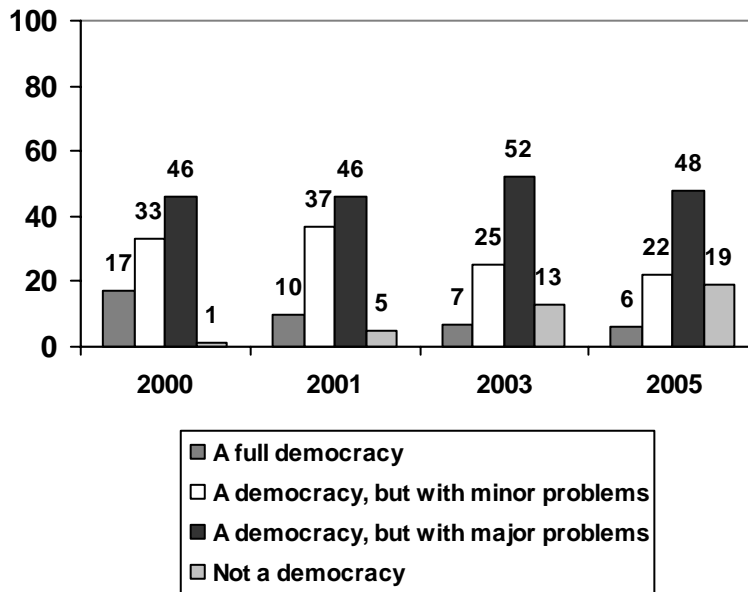


Note: % saying present system is relatively better than past

Nigerians are disheartened by the state of political liberties in the new regime. Currently, only about half of citizens view the political climate as freer than under previous military rulers. This is an especially adverse judgment, since it speaks to the essential political qualities we associate with a democratic regime.

These various dimensions of democratic performance show substantial disenchantment among the Nigerian public. A final, summary measure of the regime is the perceived extent of democracy in Nigeria, seen in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Extent of Democracy in Nigeria



Note: % for each view

The shifting views at opposite ends of the spectrum are notable: currently, about one-fifth of Nigerians believe the country is “not a democracy” (up from just 1 percent in 2000), while only 6 percent view the country positively as a “full democracy” (down from 17 percent in 2000). A relatively constant segment of citizens (about half) see the country as a “democracy [with] major problems.” All told, some two-thirds of Nigerians believe the supply of democracy is sorely lacking, while little more than a quarter are relatively content with the degree of democracy in the country.

To summarize, this section illustrates the strong views among the Nigerian public that they have not reaped a “democracy dividend” of improved governance or economic management. Nigerians are increasingly discouraged by the performance of elected leaders, progress on major policy issues, and the state of basic rights and liberties. Public trust in major institutions has also fallen to modest levels, and a large majority of citizens believe that Nigeria is a troubled democracy, or no democracy at all.

Trends in public attitudes suggest a substantial deficit of legitimacy in Nigeria’s governance. However, the patterns of opinion also suggest that Nigerians do draw an implicit distinction between the government of the day and the democratic regime. Elected officials and the government’s policy performance receive very low assessments by the public. Yet trust in basic institutions, assessments of political liberties, and overall evaluations of the extent of democracy, suggest that about half of Nigerians believe the democratic regime is delivering acceptable results.

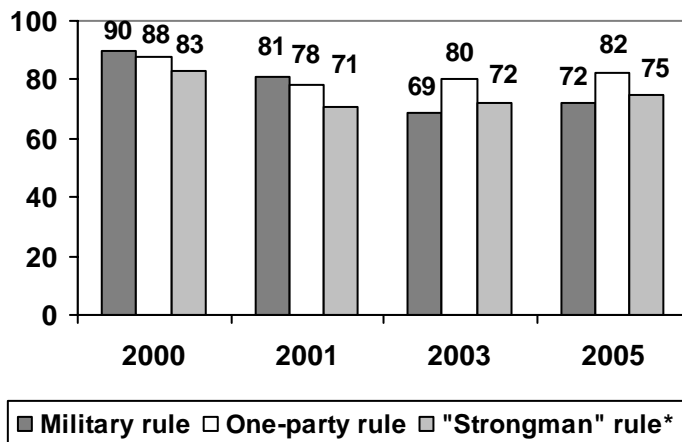
Thus, Nigerians, while highly critical of their government, appear to be less discouraged by the regime of democracy.

Demand for Democracy: Weighing Alternatives

We have already seen that the general preference for democracy diminished somewhat after the political transition, and has been relatively consistent in the past few years. We can probe the depth of this commitment by considering alternatives to democracy, and patience with the challenges and shortcomings of democratic change. How willing are citizens to consider non-democratic political options, and how much are they willing to wait for the present system to deliver the benefits that Nigerians desire?

Popular views about alternatives to democracy are shown in Figure 10. In each survey, Nigerians have been asked whether they accept or reject the prospect of a return to military, the creation of a single-party system, or the rise of a domineering “strongman” president.

Figure 10: Alternatives to Democracy



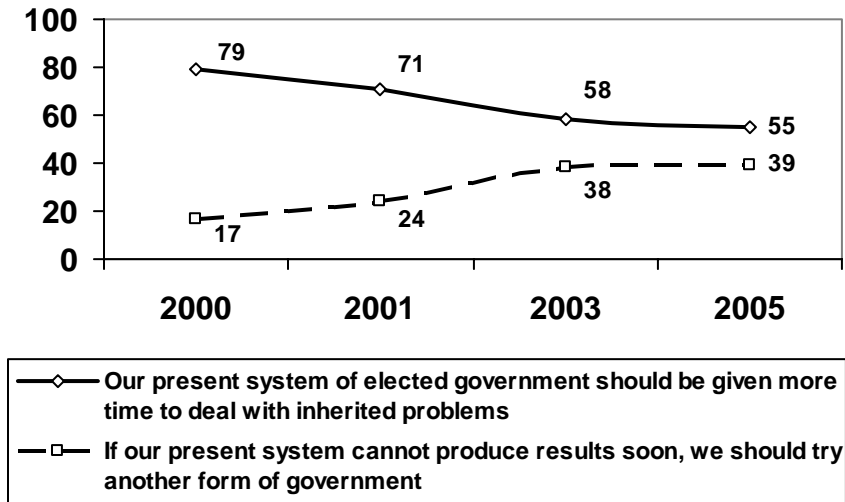
Note: % who Disapprove/Strongly disapprove of each option

In the wake of the transition to democracy, Nigerians expressed staunch opposition to all forms non-democratic rule. Nine out of ten citizens disapproved military or one-party rule, while eight in ten objected to a presidential “strongman.” Since that time, popular disapproval for these alternatives has softened, though it has stabilized at high levels. Presently, about seven in ten Nigerians disapprove the idea of military rule, while eight in ten reject a single dominant party, and three-fourths resist the idea of an autocratic executive.

These measures suggest that democratic preferences remain strong in Nigeria, and the public is not strongly inclined toward authoritarian nostalgia or a desire for a dominant ruling group. Further, preferences for these non-democratic alternatives have not shifted much in the last five years (with the exception of military rule). This reinforces the general impression that demand for democracy, though subsiding since 2000, has been resilient in recent years

Nonetheless, it is clear that the public's patience is strained and democratic legitimacy is at risk. In view of the obvious popular dissatisfaction with the performance of democracy, we are especially interested in Nigerians' expectations about the future outputs of the political system. This is displayed in Figure 11.

Figure 11: Patience With Democracy



Note: % agreeing with each statement

Once again, the strong support for democracy immediately following the transition has weakened, though attitudes have been fairly consistency in recent years. After the change of government, eight in ten Nigerians expressed patience with the new democratic system, and fewer than one in five were evidently frustrated with the regime. Currently, a majority (55 percent) of citizens is inclined to be patient, but a substantial minority expresses impatience with the pace of change. Nearly forty percent of Nigerians now say that they will consider other political options if circumstances don't improve soon.

In our view, these attitudes do not yet suggest a critical deficit of democratic legitimacy. Nigerians are frequently unhappy with current political and economic conditions, but strong majorities support the broad democratic ideal and reject alternatives to a competitive, accountable democracy. However, public opinions clearly reflect the strains on the system, and the dangers of deep, persistent popular frustration with present governance. The forthcoming 2007 elections could significantly affect the legitimacy of Nigeria's fragile democracy. A credible, peaceful electoral process is likely to reinforce confidence in basic institutions and to restore a measure of patience with the democratic system. On the other hand, a highly flawed and unstable election exercise could further discourage voters and undermine the foundations of democratic rule.

Afrobarometer

This Briefing Paper was prepared by Peter M. Lewis

The Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from 18 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) and Michigan State University. For more information, see: www.afrobarometer.org

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¹ Peter Lewis, Etannibi Alemika and Michael Bratton, "Down to Earth: Changes in Attitudes Toward Democracy and Markets in Nigeria," *Afrobarometer Working Paper* No. 20, Michigan State University, August 2002.

² Peter Lewis and Etannibi Alemika, "Seeking the Democratic Dividend: Public Attitudes and Reform in Nigeria," *Afrobarometer Working Paper* No. 52, October 2005

³ Larry Diamond, "Nigeria: The Uncivic Society and the Descent into Praetorianism," in Larry Diamond, J. Linz, and S.M. Lipset, eds., *Politics in Developing Countries: Comparing Experiences With Democracy* (2nd Edition), Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995; Eghosa Osaghae, *Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.

⁴ This survey was carried out from September-December 2005 among a random, representative sample of 2,400 Nigerian citizens age 18 and above. All geographic regions and language groups were included. Interviews were conducted in Nigeria's major languages, plus English and Pidgin.

⁵ See "The Status of Democracy, 2005-2006: Findings from Afrobarometer Round 3 for 18 Countries," Afrobarometer Brief Paper No. 40, June 2006; Michael Bratton and Peter Lewis, "The Durability of Political Goods? Evidence from Nigeria's New Democracy" *Afrobarometer Working Paper* No. 48, April 2005; Lewis and Bratton 2005; and Richard Rose, William Mishler & Christian Haerpfer, *Democracy and its Alternatives: Understanding Post-Communist Societies*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

⁶ "The Status of Democracy, 2005-2006."