The 2015 general elections in Nigeria are particularly significant in their potential to be the first truly contested elections featuring a viable opposition since the transition to civilian rule in 1999. As the country moves towards these critical elections, africapractice will be providing updates on key developments, changes in power structures and profiles of key figures and their roles in the evolving political environment. This initial piece in the series provides an overview of the current political situation in the country, highlighting recent developments and changes in party affiliations. It also draws attention to some of the issues and actors that we can expect to have an impact on the elections, and which we will be actively following in the coming months.

Since Nigeria’s return to civilian government in 1999, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) has ruled the country almost unchallenged. 25 political parties are registered with the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) but only a fraction of them are clearly visible in the political arena. At various times the more popular opposition parties - the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the All Nigeria People’s Party (ANPP) and the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) - have won gubernatorial elections or secured legislative seats at state and federal levels but these wins have come only in regions where these parties are traditionally strong: the South East for APGA; the North for the CPC; the South West for the ACN. Nationally they have been no match for the PDP which has swept all three general elections since 1999.
Winds of change...

Suddenly the arrival on scene of the All Progressives Congress (APC) looks like it could change this: the APC may just be large enough to finally rival the ruling PDP. APC was created in early 2013 when three major opposition parties CPC, ACN and ANPP came together with a faction of APGA in a broad coalition, bringing roughly a third of the current state governors and national legislators together in a single opposition party.

The APC has since undertaken an aggressive membership drive which has been rewarded by mass defections from an already crisis-ridden PDP. The state governors of Sokoto, Kano, Kwara, Admawa and Rivers State - five of the seven governors in the self-styled PDP splinter group, the new PDP - joined the APC in November. Barely a month later, 37 members of the House of Representatives left the PDP for the APC, thereby giving the latter a majority, albeit a slim one, in the lower chamber. In the upper house, 22 senators had indicated their interest in formally crossing over to the APC but only 11 have now done so by formally presenting a defection letter to the Senate President. The Nigerian Constitution provides that a legislator shall vacate his seat if he leaves the party on whose platform he was elected for another, unless that defection is as a result of a division in his original party. Naturally the defectors are holding on to this caveat and were able to secure a court order which prevents their seats being declared vacant until the court gives a final ruling on the matter of the defection. For now the PDP retains leadership of the Senate – with 61 seats to APC’s 44 – but, pending the determination of the matter in court, it is possible there will be further defections to the APC, thereby giving the latter a much-desired, even if slender, majority in the upper house.

The graphics below mapping party affiliations in 2011 versus 2014 demonstrate clearly the huge impact that the APC has had on the political landscape.
... or the same old names?

Yet as the excitement over the emergence of a powerful opposition party dies down, there are lingering questions about whether APC actually brings anything new to the country’s politics. The party is actively wooing former PDP members to its ranks raising concerns that the same old names will be recycled for 2015. This has also caused friction in the new party. Governors who defected from the PDP seem to have assumed that they take over the leadership of the party in their states and nominate the party chairman. Original APC party leaders in those States are rightly aggrieved; they feel they should not be expected to automatically relinquish their positions to the newly arrived Governors. The situation recently came to a head in Kano and Sokoto states where there has been the most tension over the issue; the party leaders, both former governors of their respective states, have now dumped the APC for the PDP. This shows that cohesion within the APC is still fragile and party members who feel their interests are not being represented will become disillusioned and leave the party.

These power tussles can easily be dismissed as teething problems for a new organisation consisting of disparate political groups, but how the party handles those issues will go a long way in determining what it can achieve. Nigerian politics is not based on competing ideology but rival interests and ambitions. It is common practice for a politician to leave his or her party for another simply because he has been passed over for the party ticket in a forthcoming election. The prevailing attitude is summed up in a popular saying - “no permanent enemies but permanent interests”. In this way political rivalries in Nigeria can be acrimonious and even fatal, but there is a flip side which can see long-time adversaries come together in power-sharing arrangements which ensure that both sides win.

The next couple of months will be crucial. The greatest test will be in uniting the party around a presidential candidate that is acceptable nationwide, otherwise it could lose the public support it currently enjoys against the ruling party whose house is in shambles.
The current state of the PDP

The successive defections of governors and legislators have demonstrated to even the most casual Nigeria watchers that the PDP is in crisis. Following the recent resignation of former national party chairman, Bamanga Tukur, the new chairman Adamu Mu'azu has apologised to the departed party members and has spoken of winning them back to the party. He is clearly on a reconciliation drive, meaning the PDP is starting to reorganise ahead of 2015.

Responsibility for the crisis within the ruling party has been in part attributed to the unspoken second-term ambition of President Jonathan, which is contrary to an unwritten – and now contested – power sharing agreement which sees the Presidency rotate between the North and South. In what is a prudent move, Jonathan has so far kept his cards close to his chest, refusing to speak about a possible re-election bid and thereby buying himself time to assess the competition and strategise. For various reasons, the President is less popular now than when he was elected in 2011, not least a failure to significantly deliver on election promises of economic transformation despite the adoption of unpopular policies like petroleum subsidy removal, a weak stance on corruption and a slow response to the Boko Haram insurgency in the North East. That being said, his performance approval rating stood at an average 49% for 2013 and a number of interest groups from his part of the country have come out to publicly declare their support for and canvass a second term for the President.

Second time lucky or ‘the power of incumbency’

We believe that Jonathan does intend to run for a second-term in 2015 and recent cabinet appointments lend credence to this. He sacked 11 Ministers last November and has just announced replacements which are overwhelmingly from the Northern part of the country; an attempt to head of accusations of partisanship and project an image of an inclusive government. It is likely that he also hopes the appointments will win him support in the North-East and North-West, the two regions where his approval ratings are lowest.

Jonathan's first task will be to secure his party's ticket: as a sitting president indeed it would be unprecedented for him not to. Presidential candidates are chosen by 3000 to 4000 party delegates from across the country, comprised of appointed and elected officials. Many are loyal to him – ministers and board chairmen of federal agencies that he has appointed, legislators who have not defected, and delegates from states whose governors will back his second term bid. This loyalty, simply put, equates to votes. Jonathan needs to ensure that nothing erodes this support base before the primaries which are just a few months away.

The countdown begins

The 2015 election timetable just released by INEC fixes the Presidential and National Assembly elections for 14 February 2015, while the elections for governors and state houses of assembly will take place exactly two weeks later. This indicates that parties can be expected to conduct primaries and submit lists of selected candidates to INEC in October or November, although the Commission is yet to confirm this. There have been mixed reactions to the announcement of the election dates. Perhaps the biggest concern for those who are not in support of the current timetable is that it encourages a “winner takes all” effect where the outcome of the Presidential election could influence the state elections as politicians immediately decamp to the party that has produced the President-elect. Be that as it may, it is doubtful the dates will be changed for that reason and most politicians are pleased the timetable has been released early, as it gives them more time to prepare.
Having the polls in February is also meant to give enough time for the resolution of any electoral matters that may arise before the tenure of the current administration expires on May 29, 2014. However this is only partly true – 3 months may be more than enough time to conduct supplementary polls where necessary but it is largely insufficient for the conclusion of election related litigation. Election results are regularly contested in Nigeria but as the courts are not obliged to prioritise election petitions over other matters, cases have been known to go on for 2 to 3 years.

Three things to watch

In addition to the internal party politics we suggest there are three things to watch as election period approaches.

**INEC:** INEC has to perform for the elections to pass off smoothly and current confidence in the commission and its Chairman Attahiru Jega is low following botched governorship elections in Anambra State. Alleged irregularities in voter registers and electoral malpractice by INEC officials, the latter admitted by the Chairman, led to the conduct of supplementary polls in several local government areas, while some parties called for the elections to be annulled altogether. Naturally this has raised questions about the Commission’s capacity ahead of 2015. The INEC Chairman still commands a lot of respect however and admitting the lapses on the part of the Commission seems to have worked in his favour. He has requested N93 billion to conduct next year’s elections (a 10% drop from 2011) but there is a possibility this figure might be further increased by the legislature in a bid to ensure that the Commission has adequate resources. With two more states due to hold elections this year, INEC has another chance to get it right and there is no doubt everyone will be watching closely.

**Violence:** Elections in Nigeria have often been marred by violence and the activities of armed thugs in volatile regions have kept voters at home during previous polls. Ahead of 2015, election motivated violence appears to have prematurely reared its ugly head in Rivers State. There have been several skirmishes between Governor Amaechi’s supporters and those who
oppose him, and after police forcefully broke-up a rally in support of the Governor and injured a serving senator, concerns are high that the instruments of state power may be employed against opposition party members. During the 2011 elections, the nation was outraged when several members of the national youth service corps engaged by INEC as ad-hoc electoral officials were killed in the Northern part of the country. After the announcement of the election results, which declared Goodluck Jonathan the winner, groups loyal to CPC candidate Muhammad Buhari rioted across the North, leading to several more deaths. There is no guarantee that such a situation may not repeat itself.

In the North-East, the three states where the Boko Haram insurgents have been most active are also red flags. In May 2013, a state of emergency was declared in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa and the INEC has since expressed concerns that it may not be possible to conduct elections in those states. The governors of those states disagree: they argue that violence is greatly reduced and are lobbying for emergency rule, which was extended in November for six months, to be lifted, in a bid to ensure that their states remain relevant in the electoral equation. It is another tough call for the INEC Chairman.; what happens, or does not happen, in those States, can be used a sticking point to challenge unfavourable national election results.

Money: Previous election years have been marked by falling exchange rates and increased inflation as patronage led spending floods the economy with cash. This year the Central Bank has already noted a spike in the demand for dollars and has indicated it will take steps to address the supply and demand imbalance in the bureaus de change. The Central Bank Governor is well known for not being afraid to go head to head with Government and he may use his control of monetary policy to mitigate the impact of expected election year cash injections on the economy. Already he has promised to continue to focus on anti-money laundering, a move that may curtail the fiscal leakages usually associated with an election year. He has also announced an increase in the cash reserve ratio for public sector funds from 50% to 75% effective from February. While this may not have any impact in terms of reducing the money available to government, it does curtail the possibility of dollar speculation by the banks themselves. Altogether it may not be business as usual for politicians this time around.