

Nigeria delays elections as it fights Boko Haram

by [Lekan Otufodunrin](#) in the [March 18, 2015](#) issue

*(The Christian Science Monitor)* The decision by Nigeria's electoral commission to postpone the general election until March 28 because of security concerns related to the Boko Haram insurgency has brought the country closer to a political crisis.

The Independent Electoral Commission announced its decision a week ahead of the planned February 14 election based on the military's assessment that it could not guarantee security at the polls amid newly announced military operations in Nigeria's northeastern states.

Critics, however, say the delay is a political move by President Goodluck Jonathan, who is facing fierce competition from main opposition party candidate Muhammadu Buhari.

"The postponement suggests desperation on the part of President Jonathan, who has a very strong contender to beat in the person of General Buhari, who has a nationwide support," said Richard Akinola, a public affairs analyst.

Supporters of Buhari are questioning the security argument and say that the delay solely benefits the president.

"I ask Nigerians to question why these service chiefs decided to launch a major operation a week before the election," Bola Tinubu, a leader of the opposition party, said in a statement.

President Jonathan has promised that the date of May 29, by which the constitution mandates a new president must be installed, is "sacrosanct."

"INEC's decision ought not to generate acrimony since it acted within its powers under the law and in consultation with all relevant stakeholders," Jonathan said in a statement.

Human rights lawyer Femi Falana admits that the INEC acted within its constitutional powers. But he warned in a statement that if Boko Haram is not contained before the new date, the election might be postponed indefinitely, paving the way for an

interim national government.

Darren Kew, a Nigeria scholar at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, recalled when Africa's richest and most populous country regained its democracy after 33 years of on-and-off military rule.

"This is the first time since 1999," he said, "that the opposition is viable enough to unseat the president."

Military sources said that the goal of the Nigerian military is to dismantle all Boko Haram camps before March 28, after which attention can be given to supporting local police during the election. Nigeria and its neighbors have engaged in an intense anti-insurgency operation in which the African Union recently authorized the deployment of a 7,500-strong multinational force.

Many Nigerians, especially those in the worst-hit northern states, are skeptical of the government's ability to root out Boko Haram in such a short period.

"I have my misgivings for the shift in the elections," said Aminu Shettima, a civil servant from the northern town of Maiduguri, in Borno State, the worst hit by Boko Haram. "But we will be very glad if it turns out to be a blessing in disguise for us should the federal government end the insurgency in our region."

Skepticism also runs high within the Nigerian army, which continues to struggle with defections and corruption. A soldier recently deployed from one of the military bases in the northeast pointed to inadequate equipment as a key concern.

"The main problem is lack of weapons, and unless this problem is solved by acquiring superior equipment, the nation may need to wait longer than the period given or choose to go ahead with the election in areas that security can be guaranteed," said the soldier, who preferred not to be named to avoid violating military code. "It's been a long time since weapons were bought, and I am not aware [if] the ones the federal government has been trying to buy have arrived. Even if they have, we need time to assemble them for use. How can we be using AK-47s against anti-aircraft weapons used by the Boko Haram?"

Although Boko Haram fighters have stolen high-level weapons in attacks on Nigerian military bases, it remains unclear how they acquired some of their most sophisticated ones.

[Samson Ayokunle, president of the 3.5-million-member Nigerian Baptist Convention, said Boko Haram has been targeting Christians and burning church buildings and offices.

“Any town they enter, after killing the Christians there, they go ahead to bring down all the churches,” he told Baptist World Alliance. “Major Christian cities such as Gwoza and Mubi, among others, have fallen to them.”

Boko Haram also burned 68 churches in Niger, which shares much of its southern border with Nigeria. Thousands of civilians fled their homes in the southeastern Niger town of Diffa, the Baptist World Alliance reported.

“The church is under siege,” Ayokunle said. “Continue to join us in prayer so that the gates of hell might not prevail.”]