

For Nigeria's president, a future deeply tied to Boko Haram fight

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(The Christian Science Monitor) It has been a month since Nigeria postponed its presidential election, saying it couldn't hold a safe vote amid Boko Haram's sweep across the northeast.

Since then, the homegrown militant group has suffered a string of territorial losses to a multinational force. Chad and Niger have pushed Boko Haram out of their territory and pursued the fighters well into Nigeria's northeast.

But last week, the group declared an allegiance to the Islamic State, the militant group that controls territory in Iraq and Syria, and raised the specter of more violence and a stronger propaganda campaign that the Nigerian military, even with its influx of new weapons and African Union support, is much less equipped to combat.

Two weeks before the rescheduled election, Boko Haram is suffering more than it has in years. President Goodluck Jonathan, who was neck-and-neck in polling with opponent Muhammadu Buhari heading into the original February 14 vote, is no longer under siege for his inability to contain the group—and he no longer seems likely to be the one who ends his party's almost two-decades in power.

“One of Buhari's most successful campaign themes had been [Jonathan's] inability to provide security for the Nigerian people,” said John Campbell, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and a former ambassador to Nigeria. “Presumably this is read as improving his representation in that area, even if only temporarily.”

Though there is public relief that the Boko Haram insurgency is blunted by its change in fortune, it is still unclear how effective the military operation has been. The rapid about-face has many Nigerians wondering why it took until the final days of the election campaign to begin dealing blows to the militant group. Many question how the government did in a few weeks what it could not for the last several years.

“The recent success recorded in the fight against Boko Haram is a laudable one and should be supported by all. . . . [But] I am tempted to believe that there are some political undertone to this,” said Titus Ilebare, a teacher in Lagos. “There are so many questions begging for answers here. . . . Why has the army not been able to record this feat before now? What strategy has the government put in place now that is different from the previous ones?”

This doubt is a message the Buhari campaign is eager to promulgate.

“I want to think like majority of other Nigerians, who are of the views that if it was possible to solve the problem of insecurity within six weeks, why allow it to fester for six years?” wrote Garba Shehu, director of publicity for the opposition All Progressives Conference (APC) presidential campaign, in an e-mail. “We welcome all the international support that has come in and also salute the gallantry of our military that have done excellently in recording the successes we have seen in the past few weeks. But basically, these are things that could have been done earlier than now.”

Territorial losses

On March 11, Nigeria announced 36 towns had been retaken from Boko Haram since neighboring countries formed the multinational force in early February. Some of those were critical rear bases on Nigeria’s border, that severed Boko Haram’s operational and supply lines and deprived the group of safe havens.

“The multinational forces deserve kudos for reinvigorating the Nigerian troops in the war against the Boko Haram insurgents. They woke up the Nigerian military from its deep slumber,” said Ahmed Adekola, a writer in Lagos who said he was voting for Buhari.

Although details of the operation are hard to come by because of a lack of independent observers in the area, analysts don’t think Boko Haram has been dealt substantive blows yet.

“They’ve just been mopping up around the periphery. It’s been quite easy to push them out of there, and Boko Haram hasn’t tried particularly hard to fight for that territory,” said Simon Allison, a correspondent with South Africa’s *Daily Maverick* focused on security issues and a consultant with the Institute for Security Studies. “I don’t think we’ve yet had a set piece of the might of Boko Haram against the might

of the Nigerian army.”

On top of that, multinational forces have failed to knock out any Boko Haram leaders, and militant cells in Nigeria’s cities are expected to resurface and wreak havoc.

“The narrative is that they’re leaving rural areas and going into cities,” said Ryan Cummings, chief Africa analyst for Red24, a crisis management company, and a member of Nigeria Security Network, a group of experts on the country’s security issues. “Little is being done to address Boko Haram cells in Nigeria’s major cities, which have been the most active if we aggregate over the 10 years.”

A series of suicide bombings in the northeastern city of Maiduguri on March 7 killed dozens of civilians in a warning of what is on the horizon for March 28 and beyond. Boko Haram’s leader released a video earlier this month declaring that the group would wreak havoc on election day, and analysts expect most in the northeast will be too scared to turn out and vote.

“There is no evidence whatsoever that Boko Haram has been definitively defeated. It’s been driven out of certain territories, that’s all,” Campbell said. “In the past it has melted into the countryside and the slums and it has regrouped.”

Additionally, news reports this week revealed the presence of hundreds of mercenaries on the ground, raising doubts about how much credit the multinational forces can claim. The Nigerian government acknowledged they are receiving technical and logistical support from what it calls foreign contractors.

“That could account for the sudden round of military successes,” Campbell said, citing the role mercenaries have played in past African conflicts in Angola, Namibia, and Sierra Leone.

Has Jonathan pulled ahead?

The February 14 vote was too close to predict a winner, leading to accusations that the delay for security reasons was a ploy by the ruling Peoples Democratic Party to delay the vote until Jonathan could shore up his popularity.

He has since been able to turn around some of the negative publicity the insurgency brought to his administration and the Nigerian Army. Civilians in the north have long

complained of indifference to insecurity there, with the army regularly accused of fleeing confrontations with Boko Haram.

"I see it as a total effort for Jonathan's re-election just to appeal to the minds of the people," said Ibrahim Adam, a polytechnic student in Oyo State in the country's southwest.

Whether the sudden attention to Boko Haram was a vote play or not, Jonathan is enjoying a boost. Buhari's message that Jonathan can't keep Nigeria safe is losing some of its momentum and the opposition APC, much less endowed than the longtime ruling PDP, has bled through campaign funds, Campbell said.

"On the fourth of February, [the PDP] were beleaguered, they were on the losing end. They're going in this time around on the ascendancy," Cummings said.

Additionally, Buhari draws much of his support from the north, and with Boko Haram threatening to disrupt the vote, turnout there is expected to be low.

"The delay has definitely worked in Jonathan's favor for two reasons. One is that he's winning the PR battle about how successful this offensive is. The second is that because Boko Haram is still around, [because] he hasn't mopped them up in six weeks, people in the north will be scared to vote," Allison said. "Buhari victory would depend on high turnout in the north and the fact that Boko Haram are still around means that that's compromised."