



# Nigeria

**Assessment: Fair**

**Trend: ↑**

Capital: Abuja

Type of Government: Republic

Head of Government: President Olusegun

Obasanjo (since 29 May 1999)

Minister of Foreign Affairs: Alhaji Sule Lamido

Population: 126,635,626

Human Development Index Ranking 2002: 148

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since Nigeria's transition to democracy in 1999, it has established a **fair** record of promoting democracy abroad. Under a series of military-dominated governments that controlled Nigeria through most of the 1990s, particularly the Sani Abacha regime, Nigeria actively opposed international efforts to promote democracy in Nigeria or elsewhere. Though a strong advocate of democracy in West Africa and a leading proponent of an Africa-wide peer review mechanism to monitor democratic governance, Nigeria has a poor history of supporting international protocols on human rights and democratization. The election of Olusegun Obasanjo and the continuing process of democratization have begun to produce greater consistency between domestic and foreign policy, strengthening Nigeria's promotion of democracy in West Africa.

In international institutions such as the OAU-AU, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the Commonwealth, Obasanjo has promoted democracy consistently and vigorously. Like most African states, however, Nigeria has maintained good bilateral relations with dictatorial regimes across the globe, largely for economic and political reasons, as reflected by its voting record on key UN provisions.

Although Nigeria has been increasingly active in promoting democratic values in Africa, a fragile democratic base, limited domestic support, and a regional environment rife with civil and interstate conflict have hampered its efforts. Strained relations between the legislative and executive branches have weakened the institutional consensus for Nigeria's democracy promotion goals. Furthermore, Nigeria faces formidable obstacles in moving beyond the early stages of its democratic transition at home to consolidate its own democratic norms and develop a united nation-state.

## FOREIGN RELATIONS BACKGROUND

Through its foreign policy, Nigeria has sought to promote peace and security in the West African sub-region and to help Africa engage the wider world in economic and political development. Since his election, Obasanjo has also added democracy promotion to these foreign policy priorities.<sup>1</sup> In both bilateral and multilateral relations, Nigeria has focused primarily on West Africa, where it wields influence in ECOWAS, and its peacekeeping arm, ECOMOG. After almost a decade of regional military activity, Obasanjo has indicated that Nigeria will reduce its regional military commitments, most notably in Sierra Leone. This move reflects domestic pressures to replace expensive military operations with dialogue and diplomacy.

In the wider African arena, the Obasanjo government has reclaimed an activist role in important international organizations. Within the OAU-AU, Nigeria has collaborated with South Africa, Senegal, and Algeria to exert shared leadership on African issues and to assist in the creation of new interstate norms. Working with these governments, Obasanjo has actively promoted the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), a program linking good governance and respect for human rights with economic and development assistance. Similarly, Obasanjo employed the Commonwealth as a forum for diplomatic intervention in the Zimbabwe conflict.



Nigeria's strong support for democracy acknowledges the importance of international contributions to its own democratic transition, which was spurred by various foreign pressures such as economic sanctions imposed by the European Union (EU) and suspension from the Commonwealth. Obasanjo has regularly insisted that, since Nigeria's democracy owes much to supportive international action, it behooves Nigeria to champion democracy in Africa. Regionally, the de-legitimization of military rule, a trend underscored by the Nigerian transition, has also strengthened that country's democracy promotion policies. Moreover, Nigeria has extricated itself from costly military engagements at a time when the values of democracy and peaceful conflict resolution are becoming the anchors of regional stability.

Foreign policy in Nigeria remains a preserve of the presidency and a few elites within the establishment.<sup>2</sup> The parliament has started to wield a voice in some decisions, and has tried to engage civil society in these issues. However, Obasanjo remains at the helm of foreign policymaking, enacting the role he patterned for himself in the 1990s as a vocal advocate of good governance and a symbol of the resurgence of democracy in Africa. Nigerian democracy promotion emphasizes the importance of a successful internal transformation for the consolidation of democratic gains in the region; thus, Nigeria seeks to cast itself as a "democratic role model," reconciling its size and strategic position with governance structures based on universal democratic norms.<sup>3</sup>

### **RESPONSE TO OVERTHROW OF DEMOCRATICALLY-ELECTED GOVERNMENTS**

Nigeria under Obasanjo has condemned the overthrow of democratically elected governments in West Africa and has engaged in diplomatic efforts to reverse such outcomes. This was demonstrated in the case of Cote d'Ivoire in which Nigeria was one of the first countries to condemn the coup. Obasanjo also held consultations with the ousted president in Abuja and convened a meeting of the ECOWAS in Bamako, Mali, where regional states adopted a coordinated policy of non-recognition. Responding to the junta's appeals for international sympathy, Obasanjo warned, "military coups remain an aberration irrespective of their *raison d'être*," and urged the military to initiate a rapid transition back to democracy.<sup>4</sup>

In July 2000, Obasanjo joined an OAU committee of ten heads of state dedicated to resolving

the crisis. In a meeting with all the Ivoirian parties, the mediation committee proposed concrete guidelines for the upcoming elections. When the junta rejected the OAU proposals, Obasanjo and South African President Mbeki together reiterated that the return of "genuine democracy" to Cote d'Ivoire was important to Africa.<sup>5</sup> That fall, Nigeria also granted political asylum to two Ivoirian military officers who sought refuge in Nigerian Embassy in Abidjan, declining government requests for their release.

Although Nigeria and its OAU partners never threatened economic sanctions or severance of diplomatic relations, they issued outspoken condemnations of the coup and established regional consultative mechanisms to facilitate a transition back to democracy. Their efforts did not dissuade the junta leader from participating in the October 2001 elections, but his defeat partially vindicated the Nigerian position on the illegitimacy of military coups.

Obasanjo's condemnation of the military coup in Pakistan was unique among African leaders. At the Commonwealth Heads of State meeting in November 1999, he candidly stated that all military coups are the same: "There is no question of whether there is good military government or bad military government. It is either you are a democracy or you are not. It is a matter of principle, not a matter of good or evil."<sup>6</sup> With the Commonwealth leaders deeply divided, Obasanjo urged that the military usurpers in Pakistan be treated as sternly as the Abacha government had been in 1995.

### **RESPONSE TO MANIPULATION OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES**

Nigeria's mixed record of responding to the manipulation of electoral processes abroad is characterized by engagement and quiet diplomacy interspersed with veiled condemnation of target states. This is illustrated in how Nigeria dealt with the crisis in Zimbabwe. Obasanjo's attention to Zimbabwe began before the Mugabe government embarked on the seizure of white-owned farms and the intimidation of political opponents. During a visit to Abuja in November 1999, Mugabe asked Obasanjo to intercede with Britain for monetary compensation on the land question. Although he noted that the land question was an extension of the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe, Obasanjo proposed dialogue as the best way to settle this issue and offered to mediate between Zimbabwe and Britain.<sup>7</sup>



In September 2001, Obasanjo made good on this offer, mediating the Abuja agreement under which the Mugabe regime agreed to put an end to the political violence in exchange for financial assistance from London.

In spring 2001, Nigeria sent an envoy to meet with Mugabe to express concern about the breakdown of law. In addition, as a member of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), Nigeria joined a communiqué that voiced concern “over the ongoing violence, loss of life . . . failure to uphold the rule of law and political intimidation in the run-up to Zimbabwe’s parliamentary elections.”<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, the CMAG dispatched a fact-finding mission to Zimbabwe to investigate the Mugabe government’s record of misrule and human rights abuses. As part of the CMAG, Nigeria was also decisive in the Commonwealth’s suspension of Zimbabwe’s membership, and joined South Africa in quiet but to date unsuccessful efforts to negotiate a power-sharing agreement between Mugabe and the opposition.<sup>9</sup>

Nigeria’s vigorous efforts to promote democracy in Zimbabwe, however, were compromised as its election monitors endorsed Mugabe’s victory, saying that it had “recorded no incidences that were sufficient to threaten the integrity and outcome of the electoral outcome.”<sup>10</sup> This inconsistency reflects an enduring tension between advocacy for democratization and a lingering commitment to the principles of African solidarity. Nigeria is torn between international pressures and expectations for democracy promotion and the fear of alienating key African allies who may not subscribe to democratic norms. One way out of this dilemma is through recourse to organizations such as the AU and the Commonwealth that provide cover for policies and positions that countries are unwilling to take unilaterally or bilaterally. It is in this context that the Commonwealth has emerged as one of the key vehicles for Nigeria’s articulation of democratic principles.

## PROMOTION OF INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

Nigeria has established a good record of democracy promotion in African institutions, but a poor one in other international institutions. Obasanjo has used his status as a former general to stress the values of democracy, advocate for a military that respects civilian control, and lambaste poor leadership in Africa. For example, at a seminar in

Niger in January 2000, he rejected the advocacy of “homegrown African democracy.”<sup>11</sup>

At ECOWAS and OAU-AU summits, Obasanjo has consistently urged other African leaders to embrace democracy and shun military rule.<sup>12</sup> For example, at the 1999 OAU meeting in Algiers, Obasanjo urged his colleagues to focus on collective security founded on democracy, good governance, and respect for human rights. Following the OAU’s adoption of the CSSDCA at the Lomé summit of July 2000, Obasanjo hosted a meeting of African parliamentarians that deliberated on approaches to integrate the principles of the CSSDCA into national legislation. In addition, as part of the 10-member ECOWAS Security and Mediation Council for West Africa and the ECOWAS Council of Elders, Nigeria has been instrumental in the promotion of democracy in West Africa.

This strong record of activism in Africa is undermined, however, by a poor record of support for democracy and human rights principles within the UN. Although it has ratified most of the human rights provisions and treaties, Nigeria has developed a record of abstention on key votes dealing with democracy.

## POLICY TOWARD ENTRENCHED DICTATORSHIPS

Nigeria has a consistent record of supporting entrenched dictatorships in Africa and elsewhere, as evidenced by its relations with Libya, Sudan, Cuba, China and Iraq. In Africa, this policy is a legacy of the principle of non-interference established by the OAU in the 1960s. Even recently, as Africa has enshrined democratic norms in the AU’s charter, Nigeria has been hesitant to condemn dictatorships. Instead, the Obasanjo regime has engaged them in regional and sub-regional forums. For example, under the framework of the Libya-Nigeria joint commission, both sides have strengthened political, economic and cultural cooperation. Moreover, Nigeria’s decision to join the Libya-dominated Community of the Sahelian and Saharan Association (COMESSA) in February 2001 demonstrated its acceptance of Libya’s vision of integration. At the summit meeting of COMESSA in February 2001, Obasanjo joined the other fifteen members in a resolution that called for the lifting of United Nations sanctions against Libya.<sup>13</sup> Obasanjo has also been actively courting the Libyans as they have tried to assert leadership in continental affairs.



Libya has also been central to Nigeria's mediation of the civil war in the Sudan. Since 2001, Obasanjo has tried to intervene in the Sudanese conflict, appointing a special emissary, former dictator Ibrahim Babanginda, to facilitate dialogue among the parties. Standing in Nigeria's way are the Libyan-Egyptian and Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) initiatives. Seeking a compromise between these competing plans, Obasanjo proposed a new program to be led by Nigeria, South Africa, Libya, and Egypt.<sup>14</sup> This initiative faltered, however, when the United States took an active role in strengthening IGAD's mediation capacity.

Beyond Africa, Nigeria has maintained strong diplomatic and economic relations with China,

Iraq, and Cuba. Nigeria's membership in OPEC partially explains its embrace of dictatorships in the Middle East, while trade issues predominate in relations with China and Cuba.

Given Obasanjo's short tenure in power, he has done more for democracy promotion in Africa than most regimes facing the same circumstances. As a consistent advocate for the withdrawal of the military from power, he has helped to validate civilian governance and has given credibility to the regional movement for stability and rule of law. Nigeria's relations with entrenched dictatorships compromise its activism in the promotion of democracy, but this has been balanced by its leadership in other areas important to democracy promotion in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> "President Obasanjo's Inaugural Address to the Nation." BBC Worldwide Monitoring 29 May 1999; "Nigeria: Obasanjo and the Agenda for Africa's Co-operation and Integration," Africa News 22 May 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Suleiman, Zainab O. "Global Junketing as Foreign Policy." Weekly Trust: Kaduna. 24 May 2002; "The Confusing Signals in Obasanjo's Foreign Policy." Africa Today: London. 18 May 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Ejime, Paul. "West Africa: Obasanjo Urges Fellow Leaders To Shun Military Rule." Africa News Service 18 Aug. 1999.

<sup>4</sup> "Nigerian Foreign Minister says ECOWAS Will Not Accept Ivorian Coup." BBC Summary of World Broadcasts 31 Dec. 1999; "Ivory Coast: Guei Calls For Help From International Community." PanAfrican News Agency 29 Dec. 1999.

<sup>5</sup> "Ivory Coast: Ivorian Crisis Dominate Obasanjo, Mbeki Meeting." PanAfrican News Agency 3 Oct. 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Thompson, Allan. "Commonwealth Chiefs Split on Pakistan." The Toronto Star 13 Nov. 1999.

<sup>7</sup> "Zimbabwean President Ends Visit; Obasanjo Urges Dialogue on Land Issue." PanAfrican News Agency 4 Nov. 1999.

<sup>8</sup> "End Violence, Mugabe Told." PanAfrican News Agency 12 Mar. 2001.

<sup>9</sup> "Nigeria Calls for Coalition Government in Zimbabwe." The Financial Gazette 21 Mar. 2002.

<sup>10</sup> "African Responses to Zimbabwe." The Guardian 14 Mar. 2002.

<sup>11</sup> "Nigeria's Obasanjo Addresses Seminar in Niger, Meets New Leader." BBC Worldwide Monitoring 27 Jan. 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Ejime, "West Africa: Obasanjo Urges Fellow Leaders To Shun Military Rule." Africa News Service 18 Aug. 1999; "Obasanjo's Agenda for Africa." PanAfrican News Agency 6 Oct. 2000.

<sup>13</sup> "Nigeria Admitted as Full Member of Sahel, Saharan Community." PanAfrican News Agency 14 Feb. 2001; "Sudan Summit Calls for Sanctions Lift Against Libya." Deutsche Presse-Agentur. 13 Feb. 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Hassan, Yahya. "Nigerian to Assist Sudan Peace Process." PanAfrican News Agency 11 May 2001; "Sudan: Confusion Over Abuja Peace Efforts." PanAfrican News Agency 9 Nov. 2001.