

Actors, likely alliances and winner of Nigeria's 2023 presidential polls

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Left to right: Atiku, Tinubu, Obi, Kwankwaso. Credit : Sahara Reporters.

Key messages

- Nigeria's general elections are slated for February/March 2023. The presidential election schedule for 25th February 2023 is of particular interest to Nigerians, Africa and the international community given Nigeria's status as the most populous country with the largest economy on the continent.
- Out of a total of 18 presidential candidates, 4 are the most prominent i.e., Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC), Atiku Abubakar of the Peoples Democratic party (PDP), Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) and Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso of the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP).
- Evaluated against the backdrop of historically important electoral dynamics of identity politics, power of incumbency, institutional reforms, 'political logistics', internal party wranglings, and the recent unprecedented rise of third-party candidates, the odds (for now) appear to slightly favour one candidate: Atiku Abubakar of the PDP. However, two months are a long time in politics especially given the growing popularity of two third-party candidates—Obi and Kwankwaso—who could possibly compel a run-off.

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December 2022

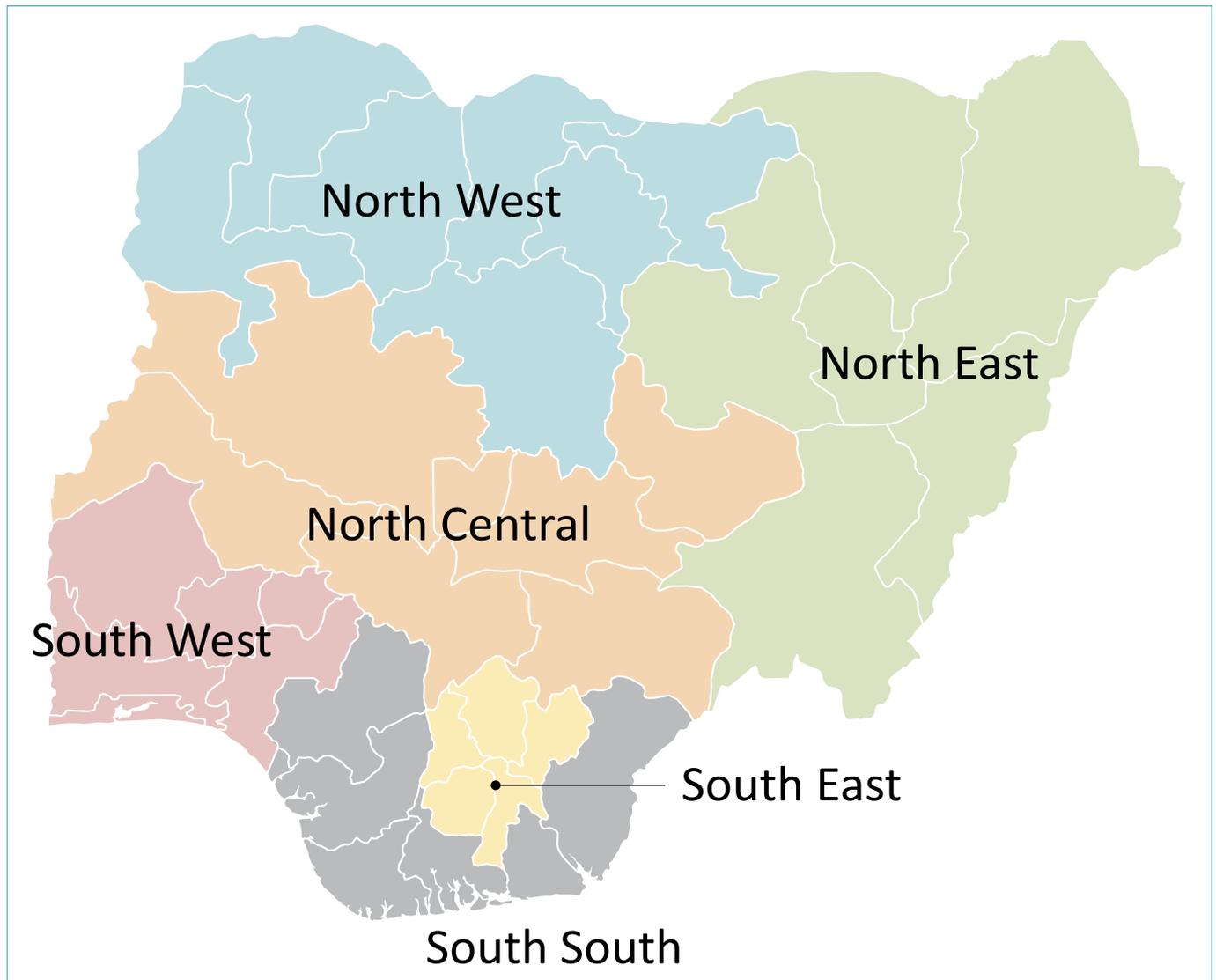
Voters in Africa's biggest democracy, Nigeria, are preparing to go to the polls in February 2023. They will elect governors, state and federal legislators and the president to lead Africa's largest economy after the tenure of the incumbent president, Muhammadu Buhari, ends on 29 May 2023. Mr Buhari, of the All Progressives Congress (APC), came to power on a wave of populist support with the triple promises to fix Nigeria's economy, address insecurity, and ['kill corruption before corruption kills Nigeria'](#). The extent of the success or failure of President Buhari and the ruling APC in fulfilling these promises remains for Nigerians to assess. However, on 17 November 2022, the federal government, through its statistics bureau ([the National Bureau of Statistics](#)), reported that [63% of Nigerians \(133 million people\)](#) are multidimensionally poor. According to the [CIA factbook](#), Nigeria has a total population of 225,082,083 million as of 2022, with youths (under 30) [accounting for about 70%](#).

Since Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, the high rate of poverty in the oil-rich West African country, especially in rural areas, has forced many voters to barter their votes for monetary and/or material rewards from power-hungry politicians. However, two recent developments could significantly curb electoral malpractices related to vote buying and results manipulation. First is [the insistence by Professor Mahmood Yakubu](#), the chairman of Nigeria's electoral body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), to deploy the Bimodal Voter Accreditation (BVA) system and to transmit 'election results to the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV) in real time on election day'. On this issue, the INEC chair is backed by section 50 sub-section 2 of the [Electoral Act, 2022](#), which states that 'voting at an election and transmission of results under this Act shall be in accordance with the procedure determined by the

Commission'. If this is done, election-rigging, which usually manifests in manipulation of results at the local and state collation centres, could be greatly curtailed, if not eliminated. Also, the rampant use of 'incident forms' by manipulative politicians to transform registered ghost voters into accredited ones will be significantly minimised by using the BVA system. Second, [the decision in October 2022 by Nigeria's apex bank \(the Central Bank of Nigeria\)](#) to redesign and replace the country's top-three naira notes (N200, N500 and N1,000) within a three-month window (until 21 January 2023) is seen by many analysts as [targeting political moneybags](#). The CBN, however, maintains that its currency redesign policy was to mop up the excess unbanked N2.7 trillion (85%) of money in circulation out of the total supply of N3.23 trillion. Whether the currency redesign policy, introduction of the BVA system and new provisions in the Electoral Act 2022 will help engender free and fair elections remains to be seen in the forthcoming 2023 polls.

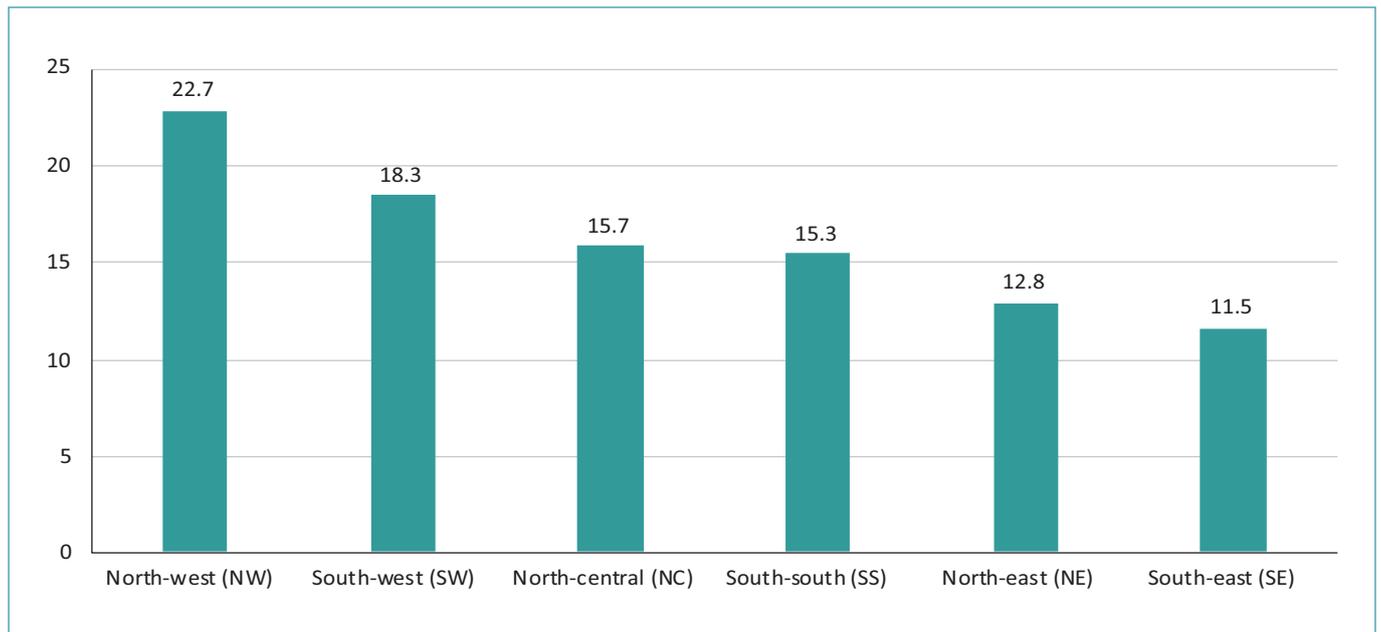
However, President Buhari's [vow to bequeath a legacy](#) of free and fair elections in 2023 may be a promise Nigerians can hang onto if the president's apparent neutral posture during his party's primaries signifies the absence of any personal stake in the next elections. The presidential election is of particular interest to Nigerians and to the international community. Of the 18 presidential contenders, 4 appear to be the most prominent, namely: former Lagos state governor Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the ruling APC; former vice president Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP); former Anambra state governor Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP); and former Kano state governor Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso of the New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP). What are the strengths and weaknesses of these presidential contenders? Who is likely to carry the day?

Figure 1: Map of Nigeria depicting six geopolitical zones



To address these questions, I should begin with the caveat that Nigeria's 2023 presidential election scheduled for 25 February has never been this complicated for the political bookmakers to forecast. There is no doubt that two major political parties – the ruling APC and opposition PDP – still remain the dominant parties. However, the emergence and increasing popularity of third-party candidates such as Peter Obi and Rabiu Kwankwaso has made the presidential contests unpredictable, which is unprecedented. This is even acknowledged by no less a stakeholder than the electoral body, INEC, which stated on 18 November 2022 through its commissioner, Mr Festus Okoye, that it [prepares for a possible presidential run-off](#). This position is obviously underpinned by certain new dynamics on the political scene in Nigeria. Since the first republic's Chief Nnamdi

Azikiwe, no Igbo politician – perhaps not even the Biafra secessionist commander-turned-politician Chief Odumegwu Ojukwu and his All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) – has succeeded in uniting the hitherto politically passive and rudderless mainly Christian south-eastern Igbo voters under one political umbrella (the Labour Party). Thus, effectively, each of Nigeria's three major ethnic groups – Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo – now has a formidable presidential candidate in Atiku, Tinubu and Obi respectively. [Historically](#), region (or ethnic group) and religion have exerted huge influence on politics and voting patterns in Nigeria (see figure 1 above for the various regions/geopolitical zones in Nigeria). Against the backdrop of these and other factors that we will highlight in our analysis, how could one rate the chances of these four prominent presidential contenders?

Figure 2: Distribution of registered voters (RVs) in millions among the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria

Source: The authors.

A Yoruba, Muslim and former governor of Lagos, Tinubu hails from the south-western zone, which accounts for the second highest number of registered voters (18.3 million out of the total 96.3 million – that is, 19%) in the country (see the above figure 2 for the distributions of registered voters among Nigeria's 6 geopolitical zones). As a candidate of the ruling APC, Tinubu should enjoy the incumbency advantage. However, the circumstances of his winning the party's primaries – without the overt support of the incumbent president, whom he had earlier publicly lampooned in the build-up to the primaries when he allegedly got wind of him not being the preferred presidency choice – mean that the incumbency factor may not yet be assured for Asiwaju.

Also, the choice of a Muslim vice-presidential candidate, in former Borno state governor Kashim Shettima, has [pitted Tinubu against the Christian Association of Nigeria \(CAN\)](#) which, justifiably or not, feels threatened by the APC's same-faith ticket. Tinubu's choice of a northern Muslim (rather than a northern Christian) as running mate can hardly be faulted on tactical grounds; for although choosing a northern Christian would have indeed balanced the APC ticket on both the regional and religious fault lines, that choice would have alienated the majority of voters in three predominantly Muslim northern geopolitical zones – north west, north east and north

central (see Figure 1) – which together account for 53.1% of total registered Nigerian voters.

However, although religious identity – as opposed to identity based on region or ethnic group – is the main thing that makes the average northern Muslim voter tick, it is highly unlikely that APC/Tinubu's same-faith ticket will confer any extra electoral advantage on Tinubu for two reasons. First, the predominant mood in the Muslim-dominated north right now is one of deep and widespread resentment towards the ruling APC and, surprisingly, towards Buhari himself who was, before coming to power, almost deified in the region. This dramatic change is attributed to worsening multidimensional poverty and pervasive insecurity, which seem to have thrown the average northern (and, of course, Nigerian) voter into such a despondency and disillusionment that they have surrendered the choice of the next president to God – since they, without deferring to His omniscience, voted for Buhari and the result was not as expected or, for many, even catastrophic. Second, the PDP's candidate, Atiku, is also Muslim, which means that both candidates cannot weaponise what [Lewis \(2007\)](#) rightly identifies as the most potent instrument for collective action in the Muslim north – that is, religion. However, the apparently neutral impact of Tinubu's same-faith ticket on the majority Muslim northern voters contrasts sharply with the protest it elicited from CAN and other prominent Christian figures and followers.

But Tinubu is a politician with vast 'political logistics' (a euphemism for the money required to win elections) and astute organisational capabilities. He also appears to have understood the rudiments of the [patron–clientelist politics](#) that typifies Nigeria. At the inauguration of his campaign in Jos, Tinubu was able to assemble all 20 APC governors, ministers and even President Buhari to flag off his campaign. He also has significant political capital to make from the rebellion of a group of five (G5) PDP governors who have, since the end of PDP primaries, appeared unwilling to support their own party's candidate – Atiku. Moreover, northern APC governors' open support for Tinubu before, during and after the APC primaries will, if sincere, see them deploy institutional and monetary 'resources' to help Asiwaju sweep substantial amounts of the bloc northern votes. I use the conditional 'if sincere' here to underscore the growing unease among influential northern elites/powerbrokers and electorates with the treatment Atiku is subjected to at the hands of the G5 – a group made up of all Christian governors and all (but one) southern governors.

It remains to be seen whether the rebellion of G5 governors would be an undisguised blessing for Tinubu or a blessing in disguise for Atiku – if the seeming G5 attempt to play the regional/religious cards triggers an equal and opposite reaction in the north. For now, two major uncertainties face the APC presidential candidate: uncertainty about the commitment of the presidency and northern governors/elites whose apparent stakes in Tinubu's candidacy appear to be limited to the fear of post-tenure probe – something they can risk negotiating over with Atiku if the current general disenchantment with APC lingers on and INEC insists on the use of the BVA system, which will severely curtail governors' influence to swing their states to their favoured presidential candidate, as they have been used to. The second major uncertainty concerns the real electoral consequences of the Christian community's protests against Tinubu's Muslim–Muslim ticket. All things considered, I give Tinubu/APC a 35% probability of winning.

A Hausa/Fulani, Muslim, and former Nigerian vice president, Atiku hails from Adamawa state in the north-east— a zone that has the second lowest number of registered voters (12.8 million or 13.3%). Atiku's major strengths are built on five pillars. First, the northern region he comes from has substantial electoral

strength, with a combined total of 53.1% of registered voters, and should it go down to the wire, he will be the clear favourite to sweep most of those votes. Second, his party's balanced (Muslim–Christian) ticket has attracted no opposition from the Christian community. Third, Atiku is also a man of enormous 'political logistics' and experience in political mobilisation, having contested the presidency on five previous occasions. Fourth, although without *de jure* incumbency advantage, Atiku looks set to gain from the lukewarm attitude of some APC politicians, ministers and other interests who are not favourably disposed to the Tinubu candidacy. For instance, in an [interview in October 2022](#), the current Minister of Labour and Employment, Chris Ngige, refused to show open commitment to the ruling party's presidential candidate. The body language of almost all current federal ministers betrays this palpable nonchalance to Tinubu's candidacy. Finally, connecting some critical dots, Atiku appears to enjoy the support of one of the two powerful camps of former military officers/rulers – that is, the camp of former general Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, consisting of such influential retired generals as TY Danjuma and Aliyu Gusau. The other one-man camp of former general and president Olusegun Obasanjo appears to be somewhat neutral – that is, if we gloss over the surprisingly very warm reception Obasanjo recently accorded the APC candidate, Tinubu, with whom he has had bitter political bones to pick.

However, the major challenge for Atiku now is the rebellion of the G5 governors led by Nyesom Wike, governor of Nigeria's oil-rich Rivers state, which also has the fourth highest number of registered voters in the country. The extent to which the G5 rebellion will affect Atiku's chances of winning the presidential election will substantially depend on whether or not INEC deploys the BVA system, which, as argued earlier, will significantly curtail the influence of governors to swing their states as they desire. Also, the open belligerence of G5 members to Atiku appears to be having the unintended effects of slowly but surely shifting the sympathy of northern elites and electorates in Atiku's favour. In just the same way, the persistently vehement opposition to APC's Muslim–Muslim ticket from some prominent northern Christians (such as the former Secretary to the Government of the Federation Babachir Lawal and former House of Representatives speaker Yakubu Dogara) is beginning to shift the sympathy of some sections of voters in the north

towards the APC candidate. All things considered, I give Atiku a 37.5% probability of winning.

An Igbo and Christian, and former governor of Anambra state, Peter Gregory Obi comes from the south-eastern zone, which has the lowest number of registered voters (11.5 million or 11.9%). However, Obi's strength comes from his passionate youthful supporters (nicknamed *Obidients*) who appear to be in the majority among the registered voters in the south-east and south-south zones. Being the only prominent Christian candidate, Obi also appears to enjoy the sympathy of some voters from this community across the zones. Like the PDP, Obi's Labour Party ticket is also balanced with his vice-presidential candidate, Datti Baba-Ahmad, being a northern Muslim – although an insignificant figure politically. However, in terms of 'political logistics', it is doubtful whether Obi or the Labour Party have the potential to 'mobilise' voters on a national scale. I can, on a first thought, project Obi to win, hands down, the majority of votes in the south-east and south-south and, possibly, to secure the 25% minimum votes in Lagos and, probably, a few other states – that is, if current opposition to Tinubu's same-faith ticket is of any real electoral significance. However, I can wager my bottom dollar that Obi cannot garner the minimum required 25% votes in 24 states and a simple majority in the first round, just as it is also quite unclear as to who can actually pull off that feat between Tinubu and Atiku.

Now who, between Atiku and Tinubu, stands to gain or lose from the Obi phenomenon? I think the fact that the bulk of Obi's supporters were hitherto traditionally pro-PDP and could have otherwise been supporting the PDP/Atiku would plausibly mean that Atiku has lost one of his strongholds. However, Atiku's loss is obviously no gain for the APC here. In fact, if the presidential polls go down to the wire and a re-run is required, as is widely speculated, alliances between Obi and Atiku look more likely than between Obi and Tinubu – because although they share the same region and, to a large extent, religion, the Igbos and Yorubas do not see eye-to-eye politically. The two major southern ethno-linguistic groups still struggle with solving the [Olsonian collective action problem](#), unlike the predominantly Muslim north. This highlights the ambiguity of Obi's impact on the candidates of the two major parties (APC and PDP). All things considered, I give Obi a 17.5% probability of winning.

Former Kano state Governor and Minister of Defence, Rabi'u Musa Kwankwaso is also a Hausa/Fulani Muslim contesting on the platform of the NNPP. Kwankwaso's main strength derives from his influence in Kano – a state with the highest number of registered voters in the north (more than 6 million). Kwankwaso's populist policies have earned him the support of some voters in many northern states. However, Kwankwaso's political reach outside the north is limited mainly to northern migrant workers resident in a coterie of affluent southern states. Like Obi, Kwankwaso is also of limited 'political logistics' and looks set to be to Atiku what Obi is to Tinubu. Falling out with the PDP and its top brass, including Atiku, Kwankwaso broke away to form his NNPP apparently on a personal mission to play the spoiler role for PDP/Atiku in the north. If the presidential polls go down to the wire, it is more likely for Kwankwaso to ally with Tinubu than with Atiku – especially if Kwankwaso is able to weather the storm of multi-faceted pressure currently directed at him by pro-Atiku northern powerbrokers to drop his ambition. All things considered, I give Kwankwaso a 10% probability of winning.

To sum up, it is obvious that the emergence of two increasingly popular third-party candidates, in Peter Obi and Rabi'u Kwankwaso, has to some extent altered what would traditionally have been a two-horse race between Nigeria's two major political parties – the APC (Tinubu) and PDP (Atiku). However, when the evidence is considered, none of the two third-party candidates has the real potential to win the presidential contest, although they now look set to play a significant, even indispensable role in determining who eventually wins the ticket – something that is unprecedented. Other important factors that can influence the outcome of the presidential election pertain to recent amendments in the Electoral Act, especially on the use of the BVA system and electronic transmission of results from the polling units to the collection centre in real time. Also, depending on dynamics related to the actions, inactions and utterances of political actors, we can expect alignment and re-alignment of forces in both predictable and unpredictable directions before voters make their choice on 25 February 2023. But, in the final analysis, and for now (because time is of the essence in politics), the odds seem to slightly favour the PDP presidential candidate, Atiku Abubakar.

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Disclaimer: This publication is an output of a research programme funded by UK aid from the UK Government. The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of UK Government's official policies.

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