

**Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale**

<b>Bilagsnr.:</b>	<b>149</b>
Land:	Nigeria
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	"Freedom in the World 2007"
Udgivet:	1. juni 2007
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	4. februar 2008



## Freedom in the World - Nigeria (2007)

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**Population:**  
134,500,000

**Capital:**  
Abuja

**Political Rights Score: 4**  
**Civil Liberties Score: 4**  
**Status: Partly Free**

### Overview

**Nigeria in 2006 geared up for general elections scheduled for April 2007. A proposed constitutional amendment that would have allowed President Olusegun Obasanjo to run for a third term in office was defeated in the Nigerian legislature in May. A rancorous public feud between Obasanjo and Vice President Atiku Abubakar, who planned to seek the presidency, led to competing charges of corruption and official misconduct. Separately, the government brought sedition charges against two journalists who had reported on a corruption scandal involving the purchase of a presidential jet.**

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The military has ruled Nigeria for all but 16 years since independence from Britain in 1960. Generals and their backers argued that they were the only ones who could keep a lid on simmering tensions among the country's 250 ethnic groups, as well as between religious communities; the north is largely Muslim, while the south is mainly Christian.

Nigeria initially appeared to be emerging from several years of military rule under General Ibrahim Babangida in 1993, when a presidential election was held. Moshood Abiola, a Muslim Yoruba from the south, was widely considered the winner, but the military annulled the results. It continued to rule behind a puppet civilian administration until General Sani Abacha, a principal architect of previous coups, took power in November 1993. A predominantly military Provisional Ruling Council (PRC) was appointed, and all democratic structures were dissolved and political parties banned. Abiola was arrested in June 1994 after declaring himself Nigeria's rightful president. He died in detention, after suffering from a lack of proper medical care, just five weeks after Abacha himself died suddenly in June 1998.

The departure of the two most significant figures on Nigeria's political landscape opened possibilities for democratic change. General Abdulsalami Abubakar, the army chief of staff, emerged as the PRC's consensus choice to be the country's next leader, and he promised to oversee a transition to civilian rule in 1999. Olusegun Obasanjo—a former general who had led a military regime from 1976 to 1979 and had spent three years in prison under Abacha—won the presidential poll in February 1999. In legislative elections held that year, Obasanjo's People's Democratic Party (PDP) won the most seats in both the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Nigeria made its first peaceful transition from one elected government to another with the April 2003 election, in which Obasanjo won a second term. Electoral

unrest, though anticipated, did not materialize, but there was violence leading up to the polls, which were marred by irregularities. While Obasanjo faced 19 opposition candidates, the race ultimately was between the southern, Christian Obasanjo and former general Muhammadu Buhari, a northern Muslim and member of the All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP). Obasanjo won with 62 percent of the vote, compared with 32 percent for Buhari, who filed a petition on behalf of some 20 opposition parties to nullify the election results. The Supreme Court in 2005 unanimously rejected the challenge, saying the fraud discovered was not enough to have changed the poll results.

Obasanjo's PDP also dominated the 2003 legislative elections, in which at least 30 parties participated. The PDP won 52 of 109 Senate seats and 170 of 360 House seats. The ANPP captured 25 seats in the Senate and 81 in the House, while the Alliance for Democracy won 5 Senate seats and 30 House seats. Smaller parties secured the remainder.

After initially resisting calls for a national dialogue, Obasanjo opened a national conference in 2005, warning delegates against questioning Nigeria's unity. Although Nigerians had long called for a national conference, the talks drew criticism from Obasanjo's opponents and members of civil society. About 400 delegates met for five months and failed to agree on fundamental issues, such as how to divide the country's oil wealth and how to effectively deal with religious and ethnic tensions. The delegates called for a special commission to devise possible solutions to those problems.

Preparations for presidential, gubernatorial, and legislative elections scheduled for 2007 dominated Nigerian politics in 2006. In May, the legislature defeated a proposed constitutional amendment that would have allowed Obasanjo to run for a third term in office.

Obasanjo's vice president, Atiku Abubakar, who had publicly opposed the amendment, announced his intentions to run for president. However, in September, the PDP attempted to expel Abubakar from the party, and the following month an official report accused him of corruption. He rejected the charges, claiming that the prosecution was politically motivated. The courts ruled in his favor in November, and he was nominated for the presidency in December by the opposition Action Congress (AC) party. Obasanjo's subsequent decision to remove him from his position as vice president due to his joining another party prompted further battles in court.

Two prominent Nigerian politicians were assassinated in 2006, which raised fears of a bloody electoral campaign in 2007. In July, Funsho Williams, a leading Lagos politician and PDP member, was found murdered at his Lagos home. Williams had run twice for governor of Lagos State and had been expected to do so again in 2007. In August, Ayo Daramola, the PDP candidate for governor in southwestern Ekiti State and a former World Bank consultant, was stabbed to death. Rewards were offered for information leading to the murderers, but no one was convicted by year's end.

In June 2006, agents of the State Security Service (SSS) arrested two Lagos-based journalists who had covered allegations that a presidential jet purchased by the government was a five-year-old aircraft from the German carrier Lufthansa and not a new jet bought directly from the manufacturer, Boeing, as the government

had claimed. After several days in custody, the journalists were charged with sedition and released on bail. The case received local and international attention, as the journalists, Mike Gbenga Aruleba of African Independent Television and Rotimi Durojaiye of the *Daily Independent* newspaper, were well known and respected, and there seemed to be no grounds for the sedition charges against them. The head of the Nigerian National Human Rights Commission, Bukhari Bello, was removed from his position days after publicly criticizing the journalists' arrests as an affront to free expression and the rule of law.

In August, Foreign Minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala resigned from the government after being moved from her previous post as finance minister in June and having her position as head of a high-level government economics team stripped away weeks later. Okonjo-Iweala was known internationally for her efforts to combat corruption, and analysts said her resignation harmed Nigeria's credibility on economic reform. She had also been seen as a potential presidential candidate for 2007.

The majority of Nigerians are engaged in small-scale agriculture, and most wealth is controlled by a small elite. The agriculture and manufacturing sectors have deteriorated considerably in the pursuit of oil, which accounts for more than 98 percent of the country's export revenues and almost all foreign investment.

### **Political Rights and Civil Liberties**

Nigeria is not an electoral democracy. According to the constitution, the president is elected by popular vote for no more than two four-year terms. Members of the bicameral National Assembly are elected for four-year terms to the 109-seat Senate and the 360-seat House of Representatives. Local and international observers noted irregularities during the 2003 presidential and legislative elections, including ballot-box stuffing, multiple voting, alteration of results, and voter intimidation. Observers said fraud and intimidation were particularly prevalent in the southeast and in the Niger Delta.

Major political parties include the ruling PDP, the ANPP, the National Democratic Party, the Alliance for Democracy, and the People's Redemption Party. Political parties represent a wide array of policy positions, and openly engaged in debate and electoral campaigning in 2006. In September 2006, seven opposition parties merged into an umbrella party called the Action Congress (AC), with the goal of wresting power from the PDP in 2007 general elections. Vice President Atiku Abubakar was nominated as the AC's presidential candidate in December 2006.

Corruption remains a serious problem, having bled Nigeria of many billions of dollars in oil revenue. Nigeria was ranked 142 out of 163 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index. The government has taken steps to improve transparency and reduce corruption, including reforming procedures for contract procurements and bidding. In September 2006, a top official announced that authorities had convicted more than 1,000 people of economic crimes and recovered around \$5 billion over the past two years. In December 2005, the governor of Bayelsa State, Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, was arrested in London after being impeached by the Bayelsa State Assembly and charged with corruption. Governors benefit from immunity from prosecution while in office, prompting state governments to begin impeachment proceedings against at least four governors on corruption grounds. At least two of those impeached remained underground and had evaded arrest at year's end. In May 2006, the

Economic and Financial Crimes Commission announced plans to investigate over a dozen more governors for corruption after the 2007 elections, when many will have had to step down because of term limits. Vice President Abubakar was also charged with corruption-related offenses in 2006, though he was eventually acquitted and claimed the prosecution was politically motivated.

Freedom of speech and expression is constitutionally guaranteed and generally respected in practice. More than 200 private radio and television stations broadcast throughout the country, and scores of print publications operate largely unhindered. However, criminal prosecution continues to be used against journalists covering sensitive issues such as official corruption, separatist movements, and communal violence. In addition, Sharia (Islamic law) in 12 northern states imposes severe penalties for alleged press offenses. The government does not impede internet access.

Local authorities regularly target journalists who criticize them. In 2006, two journalists in southeastern Ebonyi State were arrested, charged with sedition over an article criticizing the state governor, and kept in jail for over two months owing to stringent conditions for bail. The journalists, Imo Eze and Oluwole Elenyinmi, respectively director and editor of the local bimonthly *Ebonyi Voice*, were freed following local and international pressure on the governor, but the charges against them remained pending.

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists has documented a pattern of media repression by the SSS, an elite corps that answers directly to the president. SSS agents have on occasion arrested journalists, confiscated newspapers, and harassed news vendors. In June 2006, the SSS arrested two journalists who had covered a corruption scandal involving the purchase of a presidential jet. They were charged with sedition and released on bail; the charges against one of the journalists were dropped before the end of the year.

Religious freedom is guaranteed by the constitution, but many Nigerians, including government officials, often discriminate against those of a religion different from their own. Religious violence, often reflecting regional and ethnic differences and accompanying competition for resources, is common. Academic freedom is guaranteed and honored in practice.

Freedoms of assembly and association are generally respected in practice. However, Amnesty International reported in 2005 that brutal repression of protests remained a routine tactic of Nigerian security forces in the oil-rich Niger Delta, and that communities protesting in the region often suffered collective punishment by security forces. In 2006, security forces clashed with demonstrators in southeastern Anambra State who supported the banned separatist Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra, known as MASSOB. The organization claims that ethnic Igbos suffer discrimination by the government and seeks a separate Igbo state in the southeast. Human rights groups report that dozens of pro-Biafran activists have been killed in the past seven years and hundreds have been detained. (A civil war in the 1960s, in which Biafra attempted to secede from Nigeria, claimed some one million lives.) MASSOB's leader, Ralph Uwazuruike, was jailed in 2005 on treason charges; he maintains that the movement is nonviolent.

Despite several statutory restrictions on the rights of trade unions, workers—

except members of the armed forces and those considered essential employees—may join trade unions, and the right to bargain collectively is guaranteed. About 10 percent of the workforce is unionized. Legislation passed in 2005 prevents umbrella unions, such as the Nigeria Labor Congress (NLC), from calling strikes; such action is now decided by individual unions. The legislation makes union membership voluntary and gives unions the right to form outside the umbrella group. It also bans strikes in essential services such as health and education. According to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, Nigeria has “serious shortcomings” in the application and enforcement of core labor standards.

The judiciary is subject to political influence and is hampered by corruption and inefficiency. Defendants do not always have legal representation and are often ill-informed about procedures and their rights. Lengthy pretrial detention remains a problem. In the 12 northern states where Sharia is in effect, human rights groups say Islamic courts fail to respect due process rights, which leads to harsh and discriminatory sentences. Nigeria’s prisons are overcrowded, unhealthy, and life-threatening. In January 2006, the government agreed to speed up the trial of and/or unconditionally release up to 25,000 inmates out of an estimated total prison population of 45,000. Amnesty International reported that the effort was aimed at reducing prison overcrowding and improving access to fair trials.

Nigeria continues to suffer from abuses by security forces and a climate of impunity. In 2005, Human Rights Watch said police still routinely torture detainees. According to the report, rape and mutilation are commonly used to extract confessions, and in various coercion techniques, suspects are suspended from the ceiling by their hands, beaten with metal objects, sprayed in the eyes with tear gas, or shot in the feet; sometimes the injuries result in death. A UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions said in 2005 that Nigerian police use armed robbery as a blanket charge to jail people when they refuse to pay bribes and to justify the unlawful killing of civilians. The local Centre for Law Enforcement Education in Nigeria estimates that police at checkpoints shoot about one in 20 motorists who refuse or fail to pay bribes.

A human rights commission appointed by Obasanjo concluded that three of Nigeria’s former military rulers were personally liable for extrajudicial killings perpetrated while they were in power. The commission recommended that all three men—General Babangida, General Buhari, and General Abubakar—be banned from holding high office in the future.

The constitution requires government offices to reflect the country’s ethnic diversity. The Hausa-Fulani from northern Nigeria generally dominated the military and the government from independence until Obasanjo was elected in 1999. Obasanjo’s government is both ethnically and religiously diverse. Although the constitution prohibits ethnic discrimination, societal discrimination is widely practiced, and clashes frequently erupt among the country’s many ethnic groups. A number of armed youth groups have emerged to defend their ethnic and economic interests. A national census was completed in March 2006, for the first time since 1991. The census could determine regional distribution of state revenues. However, in a bid to prevent ethnic unrest, it did not contain questions on religion or tribe.

Ethnic minorities in the Niger Delta feel particularly discriminated against, primarily with regard to distribution of the country’s oil wealth. Several militia groups, some

based on ethnicity, operate in the Delta region and frequently target oil workers for kidnapping and extortion. Militants loyal to Niger Delta ethnic militia leader Moujahid Dokubo-Asari claim to be fighting for political autonomy and a bigger slice of oil revenues for the Ijaw ethnic group, the largest in the Delta region. Clashes between the Ijaws and their rivals, the Itsekiris, have claimed hundreds of lives in the Delta. News reports in 2006 cited an increase in violence in the Delta linked to the lead-up to 2007 elections.

Nigerian women face societal discrimination, although educational opportunities have eroded a number of barriers over the years. In some ethnic groups, women are denied equal rights to inherit property, and marital rape is not considered a crime. According to a 1997 World Health Organization study, about 60 percent of Nigerian women are subjected to female genital mutilation (FGM), though the precise incidence is unknown. Although the federal government publicly opposes FGM, it has taken no legal action to ban the practice. Women's rights have suffered serious setbacks in the northern states governed under Sharia. Human trafficking to, from, and within the country for purposes of labor and prostitution is a problem. The government in 2004 outlawed human trafficking and set up an agency to deal with offenders.