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Nigeria is extremely diverse, with hundreds of ethnic groups and even more languages governed through a federal system of 36 separate states, each with their own ethnic and religious composition. Though this has contributed to the country's rich cultural life, it has also at times been the source of tensions between different groups over power and control of local resources. Nigeria's practice, at the state level, of giving groups 'indigenous' or 'native' to each region preferential treatment over 'settler' or 'immigrant' groups – many of whom may have been based for two generations in the areas – has at times contributed to inequality, competition and conflict between ethnicities. The country's presidential, parliamentary and state elections, slated for March and April 2015, saw President Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian southerner, defeated by a strong opposition that brought to power Muhammadu Buhari, a former military leader and Muslim northerner.

A key issue in the election was the ongoing campaign of violence perpetrated by the armed group Boko Haram. The group is responsible for the deaths of thousands of civilians since launching an armed insurrection in 2009 from its base in the city of Maiduguri in north-eastern Nigeria. In August 2014, the group declared an Islamic state in the areas of north-east Nigeria then under its control. While Boko Haram has targeted Christians, a minority in Nigeria's largely Muslim north-east, the bulk of its victims have reportedly been fellow Muslims. Boko Haram is known for targeted attacks on moderate Muslims whose views conflict with their own.

In 2014 Boko Haram continued its attacks on soft targets, often in urban centres, including bus stations, schools, churches, mosques and markets, as well as continuing to target moderate Muslim politicians and clerics. It also staged attacks outside the northern states most affected, including a bomb that killed 75 people in the capital Abuja in April. The most high-profile incident during the year, however, was the abduction by militants of 276 girls at gunpoint from their secondary school in the north-eastern village of Chibok, Borno State. In a video released by the group, its leader reportedly referred to the girls as 'slaves' and threatened to sell them 'in the market' or 'marry them off'. HRW has estimated that, since 2009, Boko Haram has abducted over 500 women and girls, targeted for being students or Christian, with victims then coerced into converting to the group's radical version of Islam. In November, a suicide bomb attack staged during assembly at a boys' school in Potiskum killed almost 50 students and wounded nearly 80.

Communal violence also continued elsewhere. Around Jos, Plateau State, in the Middle Belt, violence continued between 'indigene' farmers of the Christian Berom group and Fulani Muslim pastoralists considered 'settlers', with more than 1,000 people killed in the first few months of 2014. Elsewhere, suspected Fulani attackers killed more than 100 people in three largely Christian villages in central Kaduna State in March.

The indigenous Ogoni people of the Niger Delta continued to urge the government to act on the findings of a UNEP (UN Environmental Programme) environmental assessment report into the impact of Shell oil spills on their lands in 2008 and 2009. The UNEP report was released in 2011, but the devastation caused by the spills remains, endangering the living conditions and livelihoods of residents of small villages and towns such as Yenagoa. The damage to surrounding agricultural land, and other stresses brought on by the urbanization of the region related to the oil industry, has forced many Ogoni to migrate in search of work, further disrupting the traditional culture and cohesion of the group.

Nigeria's population is relatively urbanized, with around half the population now based in towns or cities. Lagos, with over 11 million inhabitants in 2011, is now Africa's most populated city. With roughly three-quarters of the country's industrial base, as well as the bulk of its financial and commercial resources, it is now the main destination for rural migrants in search of employment. Unsurprisingly, it is also the Nigerian city most affected by unplanned, unregulated growth. Though the capital concentrates many of the country's ethnic groups, other sources indicate that this is not an accurate image. Some describe the centre as largely populated (and controlled) by 'native' Lagos-dwellers, while the slums and shanty towns on the periphery are largely made up of migrants from other regions, at times grouped in ethnically oriented neighbourhoods. While Lagos State itself now offers a relatively open system of registration to all residents, regardless of their ethnicity or place of origin, in many urban areas elsewhere inequalities between relatively privileged 'indigenes' and the 'settler' populations are sharply evident, in areas such as land rights, service access and other benefits. As pressure on land increases with rapid population growth and migration, these disparities have the potential to create further conflict if unaddressed.

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