



Nigeria

Nigeria: Introduction

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Chart 1: Political map for Nigeria



Chart 1 is a political map of Nigeria.

Located in West Africa, Nigeria is by far the most populous country in Africa and a key regional player in West Africa. The country is a multi-ethnic and culturally diverse federation made up of 36 states and the Abuja Federal Capital Territory (FCT) grouped into six geo-political zones (North-West, North-Central, North-East, South-West, South-East and South-South).

For nearly four decades, following its independence in 1960, Nigeria was under military rule, with only brief periods of civilian governance (1960–1966 and 1979–1983). The transition to democracy only began in 1999.

The first military coups in January and July of 1966 triggered the Biafra War (1967–1970), which resulted in over a **million** deaths, mostly due to starvation. In 1979, General Olusegun Obasanjo's military government handed over power to an elected civilian administration. However, economic mismanagement under President Shehu Shagari led to a military coup in 1983, bringing Major General Muhammadu Buhari to power. Two years later, he was overthrown by General Ibrahim Babangida.

In 1993, Babangida annulled the results of nationwide elections, prompting widespread unrest. Under pressure, he

handed over power to an interim civilian government, which was quickly overthrown by General Sani Abacha. His regime, marked by extreme repression, became Nigeria's most brutal dictatorship. Following Abacha's death in 1998, General Abdulsalami Abubakar took over, released political prisoners and initiated democratic reforms. In 1999, elections were held, and former military ruler Olusegun Obasanjo was elected president, marking Nigeria's return to civilian rule.

The legacy of military rule left deep economic and social scars. By the 1980s, nearly 45% of foreign exchange earnings were allocated to debt servicing, while poverty and crime surged. Political leadership was increasingly characterised by ethnic divisions and patronage.

Obasanjo was re-elected in 2003, though the election was marred by irregularities and violence. In 2007, he was succeeded by Umaru Yar'Adua, whose ill health led to Vice President Goodluck Jonathan assuming office shortly before Yar'Adua's death in 2010. Jonathan later won the 2011 elections.

In 2015, Muhammadu Buhari returned to power, this time through democratic elections under the All-Progressives Congress (APC), promising to combat terrorism, corruption and economic instability. He secured a second term in 2019, despite opposition parties contesting the results.

Bola Ahmed Tinubu succeeded Muhammadu Buhari as Nigeria's president on 29 May 2023, following his victory in the February 2023 presidential election. Tinubu, representing the APC, won the election amidst allegations of electoral fraud from opposition parties. Despite these challenges, he was inaugurated as the nation's leader, marking a continuation of APC's governance. The transition from Buhari to Tinubu represents a significant moment in Nigeria's political landscape, reflecting both continuity and change within the nation's leadership.

Nigeria is also the largest crude oil exporter in Africa and holds the continent's largest natural gas reserves. However, despite some socioeconomic progress in recent years, the country continues to face serious economic, social and security challenges. Nigeria has the third-largest number of people living in extreme poverty in the world, and high youth unemployment. Overdependence on oil exports, leadership failure and weak institutions, deplorable infrastructure, human capital bottlenecks, low tax revenue mobilisation, deeply embedded corruption and decades of mismanagement have impeded economic development and made Nigeria symbolic of unfulfilled potential. In addition, security concerns, including banditry, kidnappings, terrorism, communal clashes and separatist agitations in the south-east further threaten economic stability and limit foreign investment inflows. These issues, coupled with vast income inequality, have resulted in low socioeconomic indicators. Many Nigerians lack adequate healthcare, nutrition and education. As a result, Nigeria ranks 161 out of 193 countries in the UN Human Development Index 2024.

However, there are reasons to be optimistic about the future of Nigeria. President Tinubu has continuously pledged to turn around the economy and ensure security across the country. Since assuming office, he has introduced key socioeconomic reforms in an attempt to address these challenges and revitalise the economy. One of his first major policy decisions was the removal of the longstanding fuel subsidy, aimed at reallocating resources to critical sectors such as infrastructure and education. His administration has also unified exchange rates to stabilise the currency and attract foreign investment. These reforms are part of a broader strategy to foster economic resilience and sustainable growth, positioning Nigeria for long-term development.

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About the authors

Dr Kouassi Yeboua previously worked as a Senior Researcher at AFI, where he led significant ISS studies on the long-term development prospects of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Horn of Africa, Nigeria, Malawi, and Mozambique. His research focuses on development economics, macroeconomics, gender, and economic modeling. He holds a PhD in Economics.

Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees, head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the Institute, and is an extraordinary professor at the University of Pretoria. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

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