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A week in the life of the world | 22-28 April 2011

## Nigerians take a hopeful step

**President re-elected**  
**with support of young**

**Giant of Africa still**  
**faces many challenges**

**David Smith**

The result was no surprise, nor was the violent backlash - but there were also tentative grounds to hope that last weekend's Nigerian presidential election signalled a turning point for the underperforming African giant.

Goodluck Jonathan retained the presidency with around 57% of the vote. He defeated Muhammadu Buhari, a former military ruler, who polled around 31%.

There was deadly rioting in Buhari's northern, largely Muslim stronghold. Most significant in the long term, however, was the verdict of observers that this has been Nigeria's fairest election in decades. It was far from perfect, but helped to draw a line under the coups, fraud and vote-rigging of the past.

Furthermore, young people had turned out in high numbers to elect a man who claims to represent a break from the old order. Just possibly, this was the week Nigeria took an important step towards fulfilling its immense potential.

Few countries fail to punch their weight as dismally as Nigeria. It has Africa's biggest population at around 150 million. Its economy has grown 6% or 7% over the past few years. It pumps more oil than any other African country, much of it to the US, and has vast untapped mineral resources.

But between 1960 and 1999,



**Making a difference ... queuing to vote in Otuoke Sunday Alamba/AP**

officials are said to have stolen more than \$440bn from the people. Since 1990, the proportion of Nigerians living in poverty has increased from 49% to 77%. The public education and

health systems have all but collapsed. Power cuts are a daily fact of life.

The stakes on election day could not have been higher, but in the past voting had seemed futile in the teeth

of state-sponsored manipulation. This time felt different.

Most tellingly, there was increased political engagement from young people - an estimated 62% of the country is under 24.

Chude Jideonwo, the co-founder of Enough is Enough Nigeria (EiE), a youth voter registration campaign, said: "Young people came out massively to vote across the country, including in rural areas. This election disappointed the cynics and defied even our expectations."

Jonathan, 53, a fedora-wearing zoologist, had relentlessly courted the youth vote, building his profile on Facebook and recruiting staff who worked on Barack Obama's 2008 campaign in the US.

Jideonwo said: "Goodluck Jonathan spent five or six months trying to engage young people in various ways. His strategy was to emphasise his likeability by being positive and reluctant to criticise. A week ago I would have said it's too passive, but now it seems to have been a good strategy."

The conduct of the polls, overseen by the respected electoral commissioner Attahiru Jega, also gave cause for cautious optimism. "Election day showed a generally peaceful and orderly process," said chief EU election observer Alojz Peterle. EU observers had said the 2007 elections were not credible.

But Shehu Sani, president of the Civil Rights Congress of Nigeria, said: "This election is better than the last ones conducted in 2003 and 2007 but it cannot be said to be free and fair. This is an election that is characterised by violence, financial inducement, forgery, bombings and magical numbers. **Continued on page 22**"