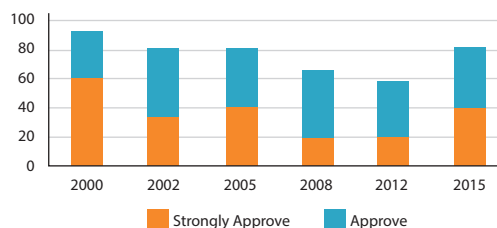


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By Dr. Stephanie M. Burchard

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Museveni Presidential Approval,
2000 to 2015



Data taken from [Afrobarometer](#) surveys.

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Nigerian former Gen. Muhammadu Buhari speaking to journalists in Abuja, Nigeria, Wednesday, April 1, 2015. (Source: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba.)

Ambassador (ret.) George F. Ward is editor of Africa Watch and a Research Staff Member at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

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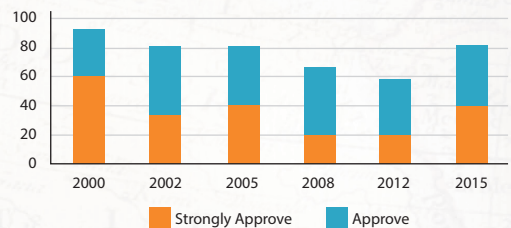
IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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The Conduct of the 2016 Elections

Two days after the polls closed, and amid [allegations of fraud](#), the Electoral Commission swiftly and officially declared National Resistance Movement (NRM) candidate Museveni [the victor](#) in the country's February 18 presidential poll. Museveni allegedly garnered 60 percent of the vote to first runner-up Kizza Besigye's 35 percent. Besigye's party, the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), has rejected the results and vowed to challenge them in court. Besigye has called for his supporters to protest the election results. Amama Mbabazi, a former ruling party stalwart who split with Museveni in 2015 and announced an independent candidacy, received only 1.6 percent of the vote. Mbabazi also claims that the election results are [fraudulent](#).

During the lead-up to the elections, the opposition was repeatedly harassed by government forces and many were concerned that the [elections would not be free or fair](#). Besigye was arrested four times in eight days. He has been [accused](#) of planning to incite violence. One protester [died](#) as a result of fighting between opposition supporters and the police. Citing [security concerns](#), the government shut down social media sites, including Facebook and Twitter, on the day of the election.

The [United States](#) and the European Union (EU) have been highly critical of the elections. In particular, the EU [criticized](#) the Electoral Commission for its lack of independence and transparency. The Commonwealth's observation mission, led by former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo, [had similar concerns](#).

Previous Elections

The 2016 elections bear more than a passing resemblance to the 2011 polls. In that election, Museveni defeated Besigye 68 percent to 26 percent. [Accusations](#) of fraud, intimidation, vote buying, and harassment were numerous. Besigye led weeks of opposition [protests](#) in the capital Kampala, but they amounted to little in the end. Museveni also won the 2006 election, the country's first multiparty election held in decades, 59 percent to Besigye's 38 percent. Besigye was arrested multiple times before that election on various charges, including treason and rape. The opposition claimed the elections were characterized by fraud and intimidation.

A [detailed analysis](#) of several public opinion polls conducted before the 2011 election suggest that Museveni's electoral support was, to a large extent, genuine. He enjoyed high approval ratings and was trusted by the majority of the population. Vote buying was a factor (estimates of 15 percent of those surveyed were offered money to vote for the ruling party), but most who reported accepting bribes said they voted how they wanted to anyway.

Museveni's Popularity Explained

The past 15 years of Afrobarometer surveys demonstrate a persistent trend of high public support for Museveni (see figure at top of article). In the most recent edition of the survey, conducted in 2015, more than 80 percent of respondents either approved or “strongly approved” of Museveni’s presidency. Almost 60 percent of Ugandans trust President Museveni “a lot.” Urban and younger voters are less approving and supportive of Museveni, but the numbers are still in the 70-percent range. Approval ratings are significantly lower if a respondent assessed the previous election as being fraudulent, but 50 percent of those asked said that the 2011 election was completely free and fair.

Given the conduct of elections in Uganda, with intimidation, fear, and harassment being par for the course, it may seem surprising that Museveni enjoys such a wide base of support. Several factors figure in Museveni’s popularity. First, his rule, although authoritarian in nature, has brought stability and relative peace to the country, which had experienced several coups before 1986. Some Ugandans may value stability over freedom and democracy.

Another interpretation, however, is that Museveni uses intimidation to his advantage to convince the population that there is no real alternative to his rule. According to an [August 2015 poll](#), 61 percent of Ugandans don’t think that Museveni would accept an electoral defeat. Although the Afrobarometer survey is conducted across the continent by a nongovernmental, nonpartisan organization, in the 2015 Afrobarometer survey, 40 percent of respondents thought that the government sent the team to conduct the survey. Nearly 32 percent of those surveyed said they feared becoming a victim of political violence “a lot,” 13 percent “somewhat,” and 18 percent “a little bit.” Fifty-seven percent responded that you “always” or “often” need to be careful about what you say about politics.

In sum, Museveni may have significant voter support, but his regime has gone to extreme lengths, using undemocratic means to secure it. The processes that have produced his electoral victories have been flawed and coercive. It is difficult to say if truly democratic processes would produce the same result, but under his leadership, we are unlikely to find out.

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Nigerian former Gen. Muhammadu Buhari speaking to journalists in Abuja, Nigeria, Wednesday, April 1, 2015. (Source: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba.)

Starting in Measured Fashion

President Buhari was elected at the end of March 2015 and assumed office two months later. He organized his administration at a deliberate pace, waiting to [announce](#) his choices as cabinet ministers until November 11, 2015. He then reduced the number of cabinet departments to from 28 to 24. He named himself Minister of Petroleum Resources. In between his inauguration and the formation of his government, the ascetic Buhari set the tone for his tenure by vowing to fight [corruption](#) and to [defeat Boko Haram](#) before the end of 2015.

Rumors of Boko Haram's Death Were Premature

Nigeria's army has recently had significant successes in operations against Boko Haram, but the movement has not been defeated. The extent of territory in Nigeria's northeast controlled by the insurgent movement has been sharply reduced, and civilian deaths have declined. According to the [Nigeria Security Tracker](#), the mean monthly number of deaths due to violence motivated by political, economic, and social grievances in Nigeria declined from 1,657 in the first six months of 2015 to 790 in the second half of the year. Tragedies on the scale of Boko Haram's massacre of an estimated 2,000 people in the city of [Baga](#) in January 2015 have not been repeated. The decline in violence and reduction of territory occupied by Boko Haram were motivations for Buhari's statement in late December 2015 that the Islamist movement had been ["technically" defeated](#). Only days later, however, Boko Haram launched an attack with rocket-propelled grenades and suicide bombers in the major northeast city of [Maiduguri](#) in which at least 50 people were killed. Since then, Boko Haram has continued to launch hit-and-run attacks against population centers, often using suicide bombers. These attacks, coupled with the fact that civilian administration has not been re-established in most towns and villages in the northeast, have deterred most of the [over 2 million displaced persons](#) in the northeast from returning to their homes.

Moves against Corruption

Like Boko Haram, corruption in Nigeria has not been defeated, but as in the fight against the Islamists, there has been progress. President Buhari has supported the efforts of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), which has undertaken several investigations into instances of diversion of government revenues. These investigations have resulted in high-profile interrogations and arrests. Most notably, [Sambo Dasuki](#), the national security advisor of former President Goodluck Jonathan, has been arrested for stealing over \$2 billion through awards of phantom contracts to buy military aircraft and ammunition. Another investigation is targeting the former Chief of Defense Staff [Air Chief Marshal Alex Badeh](#), who is alleged to have illicitly diverted around \$22 million in government funds. In addition to these investigations of

corruption in the military sector, the EFCC has taken action against senior figures involved in Nigeria's oil industry, including the arrest of a [former minister of petroleum resources](#). While none of these actions have yet resulted in convictions, Buhari's government has made a promising start.

Human Rights Concerns Remain

One area in which President Buhari and his government have made less visible progress is in dealing with allegations of human rights violations by Nigerian security forces. In two recent instances, the government could be faulted for a lack of transparency. The first involved the [violent clash](#) between the Nigerian army and members of a Shiite Muslim sect in the city of Zaria in December 2015, in which hundreds of civilians appear to have been killed. The army's account is that members of the sect blocked a convoy carrying the chief of staff of the army and attacked soldiers. Leaders of the Shiite group allege on the contrary that soldiers overreacted to a peaceful demonstration, engaging in widespread extrajudicial killing and torture. The circumstances surrounding the violence in Zaria remain murky and promise to remain so in part because the Buhari government has not moved with any degree of dispatch to make the facts public.

In another move that has prompted international concern, in February 2016 the leadership of the armed forces reinstated to active duty Major General Ahmadu Mohammed. The general had been retired in 2014. In a June 2015 report, Amnesty International claimed that 1,200 people had been arbitrarily executed by Nigerian military forces and 7,000 had died in military detention. The report recommended that nine Nigerian military officers be investigated for war crimes, including Major General Mohammed. At the time of the report, [President Buhari stated](#), "this administration will leave no stone unturned to promote rule of law and deal with all cases of human rights abuses." The reinstatement of Major General Mohammed casts doubt on that pledge.

The Economy—Buhari's Achilles Heel?

There is no doubt that President Buhari was dealt a bad hand in the economic sphere. Nigeria depends on oil revenue to fund around 75 percent of the government budget. In response to the decline in the price of oil, at a [12-year low](#) in late January, Buhari has promised to reduce the cost of government administration and to increase the efficiency of tax collection. He has also, however, included \$2.5 billion in [cash transfers to the poor](#) in his budget. Although the needs of the poor and growing unemployment certainly demand attention, Buhari's budget has contributed to rising inflation and pressure on Nigeria's currency. Buhari has stoutly resisted calls to [devalue the naira](#), even though its value on the open market has declined to half the official rate. With little promise of near-term relief through increased tax collections or the return of illicitly diverted revenues, the likelihood is that Nigeria's financial situation will continue to worsen. At some point, recourse to international financial institutions may become inevitable.

Conclusion

President Buhari has made a brave start against the twin challenges of Boko Haram and corruption. The bulk of the challenge of restoring security in the northeast and rebuilding government integrity nevertheless remains. Unless President Buhari moves decisively to put the government's financial house in order, his freedom of action to make progress on security and governance issues may be restricted.

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