

*Fr Jock writes: 'Last Sunday morning, the 9.30am congregation at St John's were shocked to learn at the start of Mass that Smith Okorie, whose sons Danny, Ozil and Grant were about to be baptised, had received a telephone call at 9.25am from one of his brothers in Nigeria alerting him to the fact that his father David had just been kidnapped. The Okories conducted themselves with considerable dignity at a traumatic time but it was a long week before they learnt that David had been released on Wednesday, a couple of days after a ransom of £16,500 had been paid by the family in Nigeria. David is now in hospital being checked over after his awful experience.....this recent article from The Tablet gives the background to the instability of life in Nigeria at the moment, in anticipation of the general election there this weekend. Can we pray for the country – and for David, and Smith and Joyce and their family, as we welcome and seek to support our increasing number of Nigerian parishioners.'*

## WAITING FOR A MESSIAH

by Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani



*Nigeria is racked by terrorism, kidnapping, banditry, corruption and falling living standards. Might the presidential election later this month prove a turning point for Africa's most populous nation?*

Around 7.15pm on Saturday 17 December, Fr Christopher Ogide was driving out of his parish residence in Abia state in southeastern Nigeria, when another car suddenly blocked his exit. A crippling fuel scarcity had plagued Nigeria for weeks and he was on his way to search for fuel to run the church's electricity generator for Mass the following morning. Four or five men with guns jumped out of the car and dragged him into their vehicle.

After what felt like a two-hour drive, Fr Ogide was held captive inside a dense forest. "I was blindfolded for nine days," he said later. His congregation at the Maria Assumpta parish in Umuopara organised constant prayers for his release. The Catholic Church in Nigeria has a policy of not paying ransoms for kidnapped priests. Fr Ogide was released on the evening of Christmas Day after his siblings had managed to raise five million naira (approx. £9,000), a fifth of what the kidnapers had originally demanded.

"We are in a state of mess, a state where the government can't do anything to protect its citizens," Fr Ogide told me. "I think every human being in Nigeria needs good governance and someone who will stop all this nonsense." Security – above all – is what many Nigerians hope whoever wins the presidential elections on 25 February will deliver. President Muhammadu Buhari may have been more successful than his predecessor, Goodluck Jonathan, in checking Boko Haram jihadists who for more than a decade terrorised the northeastern region of the country, but he has failed to address the armed robbery and kidnappings that now ravage the country. "There is virtually no family in Nigeria that has not been directly or indirectly a victim of banditry," former president Olusegun Obasanjo said in London last week in an interview with the Financial Times.

Nigeria's security agents are infamously poorly trained and poorly paid, with little motivation to risk their lives for the people they are meant to protect. "How can you kidnap somebody, and you ply a road where there are usually police officers at checkpoints, but whenever there is a kidnapping, every security agent would disappear?" Fr Ogide said. "Moving on with the same government and supporting this same government, I don't think the story of Nigeria will change."

Fr Ogide was one of the lucky ones. In the past few years, dozens of priests across Nigeria have been kidnapped for ransoms. Some never made it back to their parish alive. The attacks have occurred across the country and are usually carried out by criminal gangs. The murders of priests are sometimes religiously motivated, but framing them as attacks on Christianity or on the clergy would be to ignore the full picture. Church services have been attacked by gunmen, but so have mosques during prayer. Teachers, students, doctors and farmers have also been targeted by kidnapers, with many losing their lives in the process. More than 352 farmers were kidnapped or killed in Nigeria in 2021, for example, while about 1,436 school children and 17 teachers were abducted from Nigerian schools between December 2020 and October 2021.

Kidnapping for ransom is just one of the many security challenges that Nigeria has faced in recent years. There have also been a number of assassinations, violent conflicts between farmers and herders over land for grazing, ethnic insurrections, and armed robberies. Every region of the country has been affected, and every demographic – rich, poor; male, female; elderly, young. "The nation has become a massive killing field, as both government and the governed look on helplessly,"

said Matthew Hassan Kukah, the outspoken Bishop of Sokoto in Nigeria's northwest region, in his December 2021 Christmas Day message. "A thick and suffocating cloud of desperation, despondency, desolation, gloom, and misery hangs in the hot air. We have no message and have no idea how long this will last."

Many Nigerians link the swelling insecurity to the country's failing economy. At the time President Buhari began the first of his two terms in May 2015, a US dollar was sold for 250 naira in the black market. The rate in January 2022 was 740 naira to the dollar. A 100kg bag of rice cost 10,000 naira in 2015 but was sold for 45,000 naira in December 2022. Rice is one of the most consumed staple foods in the country, eaten at least twice weekly by most Nigerians. The costs of many other food items such as pepper, tomatoes, onions, eggs, chicken, vegetable oil and cassava flour have also increased by more than 100 percent since 2015. With many farms in remote areas forced to shut owing to fears for the safety of their staff, the inflation in prices for food looks set to worsen.

Nigerians are now hanging their hopes of respite from these economic and security woes on 25 February. They are hoping for a messiah to emerge. A survey by Afrobarometer – a pan-African research network – published in 2020 showed that faith leaders in Africa were more widely trusted than any other group of public leaders, and many Nigerian clergy have been openly encouraging their congregations to register to vote. "This is the last Christmas for this present government's administration," Bishop Kukah said in his 2022 Christmas message. "Let us all do our duty as we have a chance to choose new leaders." One video clip that went viral showed another Catholic priest, in southeastern Nigeria, compelling his congregation to show proof of their registration before being allowed into the church building.

Like all Nigeria's recent presidential elections, there is almost a score of candidates – and this time, unusually, there are three with a realistic chance of success. The two establishment candidates, both with deep pockets, are Bola Ahmed Tinubu, officially 70, of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC), and Abubakar Atiku, 76, of the main opposition (Peoples Democratic Party (PDP); but Peter Obi, 61, of the lesser known and relatively new Labour Party (LP), has emerged as a credible contender. All three are seasoned politicians who have held top government positions before. Each is from one of Nigeria's three main ethnic groups. Tinubu, a Yoruba, was once the governor of Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital. Abubakar, a Hausa/Fulani, was Nigeria's vice president for two terms. Obi, an Igbo, was the governor of Anambra State in the southeast. Tinubu and Abubakar are Muslim; Obi, who was educated at Christ the King College, a boys' school in Onitsha founded by Irish missionaries in the 1930s, is a practising Catholic.

Votes in previous Nigerian elections have often been cast along clear ethnic and religious lines, but Obi's massive popularity has led many pundits to wonder if Nigerians will finally jettison these sentiments when selecting their leader. Celebrities, clergy, intellectuals, and statespeople from across the country have endorsed his candidacy, including former president Obasanjo. More than half of Nigeria's 216 million population is below the age of 30, according to the UN, and Obi's candidacy seems to have inspired hope in many young Nigerians, who have crowded out voters' registration centres. His rallies in major cities like Lagos and Abuja have also been packed full. He has wowed local and international audiences with his vision for the economy and his determination to end corruption and insecurity. When he visited London last month to speak at Chatham House, there was a large crowd of his supporters in St James's Square waving banners and chanting his name, and over 100,000 watched him speak online.

The generation of young Nigerians rooting for Obi are frequently referred to as the "Soro Soke" generation. The Yoruba term that means "Speak Up" was the rallying cry for the #EndSars protests which rocked Nigeria for two weeks in October 2020, when thousands of mostly young people across the country poured into the streets to demand the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit of the Nigerian Police known and feared for its brutality. The campaign ended suddenly when soldiers opened fire on peaceful protesters in Lagos, killing an unconfirmed number and wounding many. The #EndSars protests were mostly organized on social media, which is also where the massive support for Obi is most visible.

Some Nigerians wonder if Obi's regular grand talk about GDPs and fiscal policies might be alienating to a section of the population. About 38 percent of the country is non-literate, according to the UN, with the majority concentrated in the northern region – which has the largest population. Additionally, only 15.4 percent of Nigerians are on social media, according to the 2022 Digital Global Digital Overview. While Obi might be making an impression on younger and more educated Nigerians in the big cities and in the diaspora, the multitudes in remote regions of the country may barely know who he is.

If Obi's online popularity translates to votes at the polls and he wins the 25 February elections, it will be a clear sign that Nigeria has finally transcended religion and ethnicity, that its people are now more united by shared pain than by blood and creed. If he does not win, the Soro Soke generation could cry foul, and once again take to the streets in protest. Nigeria is no stranger to election violence, with many previous polls ending with disgruntled supporters embarking on a spree of destruction of life and property to air their disappointment. Some fear that the days after 25 February might see another #EndSars situation, creating more havoc and insecurity and further damage to the economy.

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