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UN Preventive Diplomacy

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UN Preventive Diplomacy during the 2015 Nigerian Elections

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Introduction

In March and April 2015 Nigeria held national and state level elections, including for the presidency. The elections were not entirely peaceful, with an estimated 160 people killed in election-related violence.¹ Despite the violence, however, the poll was widely considered a success, both domestically and internationally.² There were several reasons for this: a much higher level of violence had been feared; previous elections had been wracked by fraud; and the 2015 elections, won by the opposition party, marked the first peaceful transfer of power since Nigeria's transition from military to civilian rule in 1999.³ International and local election observer groups concluded that the poll had been generally free, transparent and peaceful.⁴

This paper argues that the absence of large-scale violence was due primarily to the restraint exercised by Nigerian political actors and to the crucial conflict prevention and management roles played by Nigerian institutions, chiefly the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the National Peace Committee (NPC), and peace committees at the state level. Perhaps the most important factor in averting large-scale violence was the decision by President Goodluck Jonathan to concede defeat promptly when it became clear he had lost the presidential election.⁵

The UN's contribution to conflict prevention fell into two categories: technical and political support to the INEC and the NPC; and preventive diplomacy activities undertaken by Dr. Mohamed Ibn Chambas, head of the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA) and the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative (SRSG) for West Africa. Unlike cases where UN preventive diplomacy makes a singular and decisive contribution to averting violence,⁶ in the Nigerian case the UN, along with other international actors, performed a number of activities that collectively contributed to preventing large-scale violence. The paper highlights the methodological difficulty of determining the impact of UN preventive diplomacy in such circumstances, where the prevention of violence is attributable to the efforts of multiple actors, both domestic and foreign.

The success of the Nigerian elections will not necessarily serve as a precedent for future elections. Because of the structural political problems described in this paper, future elections are likely to be characterized by the risk of large-scale violence. This raises the question of how, in the context of elections, peace can be sustained. The paper argues that election-related conflict prevention mechanisms and systems have to be institutionalized, with support from the UN.

This paper has been prepared for the research project on 'Capturing UN Conflict Prevention Success Stories: When, How and Why Does It Work?', housed at the Centre for Policy Research at the UN University. In addition to the published and unpublished material cited in this paper, the study is

based on the author's interviews with UN, Nigerian and other interlocutors in 2017 (Appendix 1). In accordance with the terms of reference of the research project, the paper focuses, in particular, on preventive diplomacy undertaken by the UN.

The paper is organized as follows: section 2 covers the conflict dynamics and risks; section 3 discusses the conflict prevention roles of Nigerian actors; section 4 describes and analyzes the preventive diplomacy and other conflict prevention roles of the UN; section 5 sets out the need to sustain and institutionalize conflict prevention efforts in relation to Nigerian elections; section 6 discusses the methodological challenge of proving the impact of preventive diplomacy; and section 7 draws conclusions.

1. Conflict Dynamics and Risks

Prior to the elections, there were deep concerns among Nigerians and international actors that the poll might be wracked by large-scale violence and provoke a major crisis.⁷ In late 2014, for example, a Nigerian-based thinktank predicted that 16 of the country's 36 states faced a high risk of violence during the elections.⁸ There were several evident areas of risk. First, the country has a troubled history of election-related fraud and violence. In the 2011 general elections, over 800 people were killed and 65,000 were displaced by violence.⁹ The violence began with protests by supporters of General (ret'd) Muhammadu Buhari, a leading presidential candidate, against President Jonathan's electoral victory and then degenerated into riots and sectarian killings in twelve northern states.

Second, there were concerns about the preparedness of the INEC, especially in relation to the introduction of smart technology for voting and vote-counting, which did not seem reliable and well suited to conditions in Nigeria. Moreover, there were doubts that the INEC would be able to produce an up-to-date and credible register of voters in time for the poll. The Commission's decision to create 30,000 new polling units, mainly in the North, was roundly denounced by groups in the South as a move intended to skew the results of the presidential election.¹⁰

Third, the four largest opposition parties had formed a coalition – the All Progressives Congress (APC) led by Buhari – that looked set to mount a strong challenge to the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) led by Jonathan. The potential for a close contest upped the stakes dramatically. In the run-up to the election, there was a complete breakdown of communication and trust between the APC and the PDP. Some of the leaders of both parties made inflammatory statements and appealed to ethnicity as a means of mobilizing support. Tensions were further inflamed by factionalism within the parties and the defection of high profile politicians from one party to the other.

In the worst-case scenarios, the losing party would refuse to concede defeat and some of the losing constituencies would

erupt into violence.¹¹ Prof Bolaji Akinyemi, a former foreign minister of Nigeria, wrote an open letter to Jonathan and Buhari warning that ‘the certainty of violence after the 2015 elections is higher than it was in 2011. If President Jonathan wins, the North will erupt into violence as it did in 2011. If Buhari wins, the Niger Delta will erupt into violence. I don’t believe that we need rocket science to make this prediction’.¹² These worst-case scenarios were manifestations of the structural character and orientation of the Nigerian system of governance and electoral politics. Nigerian elections suffer from a ‘do-or-die’ pathology, with too much political power, economic opportunity and ethnic, regional and personal patronage accruing to the winning party and its leader.

Fourth, the risk of violence and disruption was compounded by severe tensions between and within Nigeria’s various regions. These tensions included the country’s dominant religious and political cleavage between the Muslim North and Christian South, as well as the long-standing turbulence in the Niger Delta region, where militants warned they would take up arms if Jonathan did not win.¹³ More dangerous still was the Boko Haram insurgency in the North East. Boko Haram threatened to disrupt the ‘pagan practice’ of elections.¹⁴ In any event, it appeared likely that the insurgency would result in the disenfranchisement of hundreds of thousands of voters.¹⁵ There was also a sense that all the political parties were using the Boko Haram crisis as ‘a political football’ to sow mistrust and exploit ethno-religious divisions.¹⁶

Fifth, in February 2015 a new crisis arose when the INEC postponed the elections by six weeks on the grounds that the delivery of permanent voters’ cards was behind schedule and that the security forces could not guarantee security for the poll in fourteen local government areas where Boko Haram was active.¹⁷ The government insisted that the multinational force fighting Boko Haram needed more time to ensure security. The postponement evoked a negative reaction from opposition parties and international actors, some of whom were convinced that the PDP was simply buying time in order to rig the election.¹⁸ Further exacerbating these anxieties, there were rumors of a possible military coup to pre-empt an APC victory.

2. Conflict Prevention by Nigerian Actors

At the national level, three Nigerian institutions played notable roles in resolving disputes, preventing violence and promoting free and fair elections. First, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) investigated human rights abuses related to the electoral process and issued statements condemning violations by all sides. Second, the INEC conducted the elections in a manner deemed free and fair by local and international observers.¹⁹ The chairperson of the INEC, Attahiru Muhammadu Jega, earned much praise for his independence, courage and integrity.²⁰

Third, the NPC made a substantial contribution to conflict management and prevention by facilitating dialogue,

reducing tension and building confidence between the APC and the PDP and by troubleshooting in hot spots at local level. The Committee was chaired by a former Nigerian head of state, General (ret’d) Abdulsalami Abubakar, and included prominent religious leaders from across the spectrum. The Kukah Centre, headed by Bishop Matthew Kukah, served as the NPC’s secretariat.²¹

The NPC was established in the context of a ‘sensitization’ workshop for political parties, held on 14 January 2015. The workshop was initiated by Senator Ben Obi, Special Adviser to the President on Inter-Party Affairs, and facilitated by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and former Commonwealth Secretary-General Emeka Anyaoku. At this event all the political parties contesting the elections signed an electoral code of conduct, known as the Abuja Accord. The parties pledged to accept the results of the elections, refrain from inciting violence, avoid religious incitement and ethnic or tribal profiling, and accept the mandate of the NPC to monitor adherence to the Accord.²²

The NPC’s terms of reference were to observe and monitor compliance with the Abuja Accord; provide advice to the government and the INEC on the resolution of political disputes and conflicts arising from issues of compliance with the Accord; and be available for national mediation and conciliation in the case of post-electoral disputes or crises.²³ In pursuance of this mandate, the NPC met with the leaders of the political parties, the chiefs of the security services, INEC officials, business leaders, civil society organizations, the executives of media regulatory agencies, and the international electoral observer missions. These meetings enabled coordination, exchange of views, identification of trouble spots and targeted election monitoring.²⁴

Most importantly, the NPC provided a vital channel of communication between the PDP and the APC. It sought to downplay rumors, address allegations of misconduct and discourage negative campaign tactics. Both parties expressed appreciation of the NPC’s role in this regard. The PDP chairperson referred publicly to the committee as a ‘watchdog for peaceful and credible elections’.²⁵ Responding to concerns raised by the NPC, he acknowledged problems in the PDP’s campaign and assured the NPC he would investigate misconduct and encourage party members to act properly.²⁶ The APC chairperson similarly praised the NPC, describing it as the ‘most influential body at the most critical time’; he undertook publicly to put an end to inappropriate campaigning and to advocate non-violence among the party’s supporters.²⁷

From the outset, the NPC was concerned that the loser of the elections would not accept the outcome. This concern intensified as the electoral campaigns built up steam, escalating to the point that ‘the country was on a knife edge, a national implosion waiting to happen’.²⁸ Two days before the voting took place, the NPC convened a meeting between Jonathan and Buhari

in order to get them to renew publicly their pledge to respect the results. The meeting was extremely acrimonious, with the two leaders exchanging heated criticisms of each other's campaign. Nevertheless, it succeeded in 'letting off steam' and clarifying misunderstandings.²⁹ It concluded with the two leaders signing an agreement on 'Renewal of our Pledges'.³⁰

The 'Renewal of our Pledges' agreement is often referred to as a pivotal moment in terms of conflict management, de-escalation of tension and prevention of large-scale violence.³¹ It heightened public confidence in the poll, sent a clear message to the supporters of the two major parties and provided a basis for holding their leaders accountable in the event of any violence breaking out.³² However, it should be noted that the agreement reflects only a qualified commitment to respect the election results: it states that the signatories 'pledge to respect the outcome of *free, fair and credible* elections' (emphasis added).³³ A losing party that did not consider the elections to have been free, fair and credible might thus have argued that it was not bound to accept the outcome.³⁴

Some respondents claimed that at the 'Renewal of our Pledges' meeting, the NPC facilitated an agreement between Jonathan and Buhari that the winner would not subject the loser and his senior officials to political harassment and criminal prosecution.³⁵ Well-informed interlocutors, on the other hand, insist that this is an 'urban myth' and that there was no such agreement. The NPC's own position at the meeting was that 'corruption is a cancer and must be stamped out', but that this should be done in a non-discriminatory manner and in accordance with the law.³⁶

The Abuja Accord was intended to be binding at the state level as well as at the federal level. In the short period between the date of the NPC's establishment and the date of the elections, however, the NPC did not have time to set up sub-structures at state and local levels. Instead, on an ad hoc basis it deployed its members to trouble spots around the country and co-opted other prominent people to do this as well. Furthermore, the formation of the NPC inspired similar initiatives and structures in certain states.³⁷

The work of the NHRC, the INEC and the NPC was supplemented by the efforts of a large number of Nigerian civil society bodies, including the Council of the Wise and the Centre for Democracy and Development, all of which contributed to peaceful elections.³⁸ In addition, local, regional and international electoral monitoring missions provided early warning of potential violence, identified human rights violations and helped to discourage fraud and voter intimidation.

3. Conflict Prevention and Preventive Diplomacy by the UN

The UN attached a high level of importance to the 2015 Nigerian elections because of the risk of large-scale violence,

the size of the country's economy and population, and the potentially catastrophic consequences of violence. The UN played two major conflict prevention roles: it supported the Nigerian institutions that engaged in conflict prevention and management; and it undertook preventive diplomacy directly, through the efforts of SRSB Chambas.³⁹ There was no single, decisive intervention by the UN. Rather, as described below, the UN performed a range of activities that collectively contributed to conflict prevention. In short, the UN 'was not a [conflict prevention] leader in this case, but an enabler and facilitator'.⁴⁰

This section provides an overview of UN support to Nigerian actors; discusses the preventive diplomacy conducted by SRSB Chambas; and identifies the conditions and dynamics that enabled the UN to play an effective conflict prevention role.

UN support to Nigerian actors

The UN Country Team (UNCT) based in Abuja supported conflict prevention efforts in numerous ways. It facilitated good offices and engagement with the PDP and APC; generated positive messaging through public information and media statements; enhanced the capacity of national institutions to prevent and manage conflict by supporting the NHRC, as well as local NGOs, media and other partners; and assisted with the design of an elections dispute resolution mechanism.

More specifically with respect to the NPC, the UNCT supported Senator Obi's sensitization workshops for political parties that culminated in the Abuja Accord; helped to develop the terms of reference of the NPC; provided funding to the NPC; seconded personnel to the Kukah Centre, which served as the secretariat of the NPC; and provided logistical and advisory support for the establishment of peace committees throughout the country.

The UN Electoral Assistance Division (EAD) undertook an electoral needs assessment mission to Nigeria, which led to an integrated framework for coordinated UN electoral assistance. The UNCT supported the ECOWAS election observer mission, INEC's reforms and institution-building, voter education, ICT-driven election management systems, human rights training for the security sector, and initiatives to ensure women's participation in the elections. The UN did not itself deploy an electoral observer mission but liaised closely with the international, regional and local election monitoring teams on the ground.

Preventive diplomacy by SRSB Chambas

As noted in section 1, SRSB Chambas was the head of UNOWA, the first regional conflict prevention and peacebuilding office established by the UN. Its overall mandate is to enhance the UN's contribution to the achievement of peace and security in West Africa and to promote an integrated approach in

addressing issues that impact on regional stability. This includes monitoring political developments, engaging in preventive diplomacy, good offices and mediation, and assisting regional institutions and states to enhance their respective capacities in these fields.⁴¹

Given the risk of large-scale violence in Nigeria and the potential impact of a major crisis around the elections, the UN Secretary-General appointed Dr. Chambas as his High Level Representative to Nigeria. Chambas visited the country over fifteen times between October 2014 and April 2015, and UNOWA deployed five political affairs officers to Nigeria. Chambas' interventions took the form of advocacy, facilitation and good offices rather than mediation. He targeted, in particular, the leaders of the APC and the PDP, as well as the security chiefs; he supported the conflict prevention and management efforts of the NPC; and he undertook good offices at the state level in a number of hotspots.

According to UN officials, Chambas made a number of significant contributions to conflict management and prevention: he helped to choreograph the way forward at moments when the situation seemed to be heading for disaster (discussed below); defused tension in relation to both the presidential contest and a number of gubernatorial elections at the state level; played an instrumental role, together with the UN Resident Coordinator, in establishing the NPC; reinforced the peacemaking efforts of national and local actors; marshaled the regional and international actors on the ground in Nigeria to adopt a common approach; alleviated the crisis caused by the postponement of the elections; and contributed to Jonathan's decision to concede defeat.⁴²

Dr. Chambas' overall approach to conflict prevention in Nigeria was to work discreetly behind the scenes, often in support of the NPC and always in an affirming, non-provocative and non-threatening manner. In essence, this approach entailed 'leading from behind' and projecting the UN as 'a friend in an hour of need'.⁴³

In his approach to conflict management, Chambas believes that it is generally best to avoid playing up a crisis. It is preferable to downplay the crisis, accentuate the positive, affirm the country's leaders and 'warn gently of troubling' developments'. This was the strategy Chambas followed in Nigeria. He preferred the 'soft pressure' of discreet high-level engagement to the tougher option of admonishing Nigerians and issuing warnings and threats.⁴⁴ He advised UN Headquarters not to push too hard and publicly on human rights concerns, convinced that this would antagonize the Nigerian leadership, prejudice the UN's conflict prevention efforts and do nothing to enhance respect for human rights.⁴⁵ This did not exclude a focus on human rights, however. The UN collaborated with the Nigerian Human Rights Commission and was involved in human rights training for the security forces.

When Chambas engaged with the political and security elites, he appealed to their collective sense of pride in Nigeria's status as a leading African nation. This status is based predominantly though not exclusively on the country's decades-long involvement in the promotion of peace and stability, both in West Africa and on the continent as a whole. Chambas highlighted Nigeria's membership of the UN Security Council at the time of the 2015 elections, which affirmed its importance as a leading African nation. Consequently, Nigerians had a responsibility to set a positive precedent and lead by example in these elections. Chambas pointed out that Nigeria's prominent role in regional peacemaking would lack credibility if it could not keep its own house in order.⁴⁶

When talking to the security chiefs after rumors of a potential coup surfaced, Chambas insisted that any unconstitutional acts, even if they were intended to prevent chaos, would in fact have the effect of plunging the country into chaos, which no institution would be able to contain. The days of African coups were long over and a coup in Nigeria would never be accepted by the AU and ECOWAS.⁴⁷

When the electoral commission postponed the elections by six weeks, Chambas and others found it necessary to address the ensuing agitation in Buhari's camp. Chambas encouraged the APC to see the postponement as well intentioned, whether or not it was well advised, and as constituting not a threat but rather an opportunity for further campaigning.⁴⁸

At the critical moment before the election results were announced, Chambas requested the NPC, as well as the African heads of state and former heads of state who were present in the country to observe the elections, to urge the loser of the presidential contest to accept the outcome, encourage the winner to adopt a conciliatory stance, and remind both parties that Nigeria had a long history of respecting its former heads of state.

SRS G Chambas liaised with key international partners on the ground in Nigeria, including states serving on the UN Security Council; regional and sub-regional organizations (i.e. ECOWAS, the AU, the Commonwealth and the EU); neighboring countries; former African heads of state; and other stakeholders.⁴⁹ Dr. Chambas' aims in these discussions were to ensure 'consistent messaging to the Nigerian politicians' and generate gentle but firm pressure from a united international community'.⁵⁰ The UNCT supported his efforts by arranging regular joint meetings with observation missions, and DPA liaised with the relevant Permanent Missions in New York. These efforts collectively helped to ensure that the international community 'spoke with one voice'.⁵¹

At the key junctures referred to above (i.e. rumors of a coup; postponement of the elections; and imminent announcement of the results), Chambas called on key stakeholders to make phone calls to Jonathan and Buhari, advocating restraint, calm and non-violence. These calls were also intended to reinforce the sense of Nigeria's prestige in Africa and

beyond.⁵²

Critical success factors

The conditions and dynamics that enabled the UN to play an effective conflict prevention role are presented below.

Conflict prevention by Nigerian actors

The UN's conflict prevention efforts took place in a context where numerous Nigerian organizations were engaged in conflict prevention and management. As described in section 3, these organizations included national, state and local level bodies, some of which were official and others non-official, working in different but complimentary ways to ensure free, fair and non-violent elections.⁵³ This meant that the prevention role of the UN and other international actors was less onerous than it might otherwise have been. The UN could 'add value' and it 'did not have to do all the heavy lifting'.⁵⁴ It was part of a broad stream of prevention endeavors and could support local initiatives rather than having to 'go-it-alone' or 'swim against the tide'.⁵⁵

Acceptability of preventive diplomacy by the UN

Nigeria's acceptance of a preventive diplomacy role by the UN was not a foregone conclusion. In situations of crisis, African leaders often resist interventions by UN envoys as 'external interference in domestic affairs'. The resistance is heightened by apprehension that the interventions are a prelude to unwelcome attention and pressure from the UN Security Council. In the case of the Nigerian elections, the UN's entry and acceptability were made possible by the organization's prior and ongoing involvement in addressing the humanitarian impact of the Boko Haram crisis.⁵⁶ This involvement had greatly enhanced the UN's legitimacy in the country.⁵⁷

The acceptability of preventive diplomacy by the UN was also due to the fact that the organization pursued a relatively low-key approach to the elections: it refrained from public criticism of the government and political parties regarding electoral concerns; avoided approaching the elections 'with guns blazing on human rights'; and instead, as noted above, worked quietly behind the scenes.⁵⁸

The after-action report prepared by UN DPA suggests a different perspective. It observes that Nigeria's presence on the UN Security Council at the time of the elections 'greatly diminished the UN's capacity for effective conflict prevention' because it was difficult to table the subject of Nigeria on the Council's agenda.⁵⁹ The report does not explain why or how the absence of a Council discussion on Nigeria diminished the UN's conflict prevention capacity. By contrast, a number of UN officials interviewed for the current paper felt strongly that attention from the Security Council would have been unhelpful – in all likelihood, it would have generated resistance from the Nigerian government to the UN's prevention efforts.⁶⁰ The UN had initially planned to deploy a Human

Rights Upfront 'light team', comprising political and human rights officers, to Nigeria. The deployment did not take place, however, because the Nigerian authorities did not approve it.⁶¹

Acceptability of the UN SRSG

Dr. Chambas was well placed to play a preventive diplomacy role in Nigeria. He had previously served as the deputy foreign secretary of Ghana, as Executive Secretary of the ECOWAS Secretariat based in Abuja and, when the regional body was transformed, as President of the ECOWAS Commission. In the course of this experience, he developed an extensive network of close relationships with Nigerian political leaders across the spectrum, as well as with security chiefs and civil society leaders. He had a deep understanding of Nigerian politics and of how Nigerians viewed themselves. He enjoyed a high level of trust, so much so that he was regarded by Nigerians as 'one of us'.⁶² This understanding and trust gave Chambas access to the most senior politicians and security officials at short notice and enabled him to speak frankly and critically, without being perceived as intrusive and interfering in domestic affairs.

Several UN officials asserted that a key lesson to be drawn from the Nigerian experience is that the effectiveness of UN preventive diplomacy and good offices depends to a great extent on the political and personal suitability and acceptance of the UN envoy. The confidence in Chambas across the political spectrum in Nigeria was essential and was due primarily to respect for the individual and not simply respect for his UN status.⁶³

International alignment

In situations of crisis or potential crisis in African countries, there is frequently tension between the UN, the AU and the relevant sub-regional body regarding the objectives, strategies, norms and leadership of external peace interventions.⁶⁴ Whereas a lack of international alignment on these matters contributed to the failure of preventive diplomacy in the recent cases of Burundi, the Central African Republic and South Sudan, this did not occur in the case of the Nigerian elections.⁶⁵ The positions of the UN, the AU and ECOWAS were aligned in favour of free, fair and non-violent elections, without a preference for or against any political party. Moreover, there was willingness amongst regional actors to grant the UN the lead role in the process.⁶⁶ AU and ECOWAS respect for SRSG Chambas contributed to this willingness.

More broadly, the positions of the major powers were aligned to those of the UN and the African organizations. This created a compelling sense of collective international pressure in favor of free, fair and peaceful elections; prevented mixed messages and in-fighting among external actors; and avoided the possibility that Nigerian political parties could exploit divisions within the international community.

UN officials also highlight as an important factor the absence

of interference by Nigeria's neighbors. Unlike the situations in Burundi, Central African Republic and South Sudan, where neighboring states pursued their own interests to the detriment of unified multilateral peacemaking and preventive diplomacy, none of Nigeria's neighbors tried to influence the 2015 elections in a parochial or partisan manner.⁶⁷

Internal UN co-ordination

The UN's engagement with the Nigerian elections was characterized by good coordination and collaboration at different levels: within UNHQ; between UNHQ and the field; between DPA's conflict prevention efforts and electoral support; between UNOWA / DPA and UNCT / UNDP; and between SRSNG Chambas and the UN Resident Coordinator in Nigeria.⁶⁸ The collaboration between UNOWA and the UNCT capitalized on the respective strengths, orientations and methods of these UN entities, creating synergies for technical and political conflict prevention activities and, in particular, for supporting the NPC. It also proved useful to have a high-level UN official, in the person of Assistant Secretary-General Parfait Onanga-Anyanga, co-ordinating the UN Headquarters response to the regional impact of the Boko Haram crisis. This entailed preparing common messaging, ensuring high-level attention in the organization and developing a UN system-wide approach (which included the secondment of staff from the EAD, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights).⁶⁹

4. Sustaining Preventive Diplomacy

Both the Nigerians and the non-Nigerians interviewed for this paper believe that the relatively successful elections of 2015 would not necessarily serve as a precedent for the next elections, scheduled for 2019. On the contrary, the respondents were concerned that the risk of violence and major crisis remained high. This concern was based on the disproportionate political and economic benefits derived from winning elections, the commensurate 'do-or-die' nature of elections in Nigeria, and the severe inter- and intra-regional fault lines and sub-national crises (c/f section 2).

It is widely believed that large-scale might have broken out had the APC lost the election.⁷⁰ The APC warned repeatedly of 'trouble in the streets should chicanery deny their side its victory', and there was talk of Buhari forming a parallel government if the elections results were unfavorable.⁷¹ In all likelihood, neither the NPC nor the UN would have been able to contain a violent crisis.⁷²

Consequently, there is a need not only for long-term structural efforts to address governance, development, socio-economic equality, and ethnic and religious divisions in Nigeria. There is also a need to ensure that election-related conflict prevention mechanisms are viable, sufficiently resourced and effective. This perspective is reinforced by the observation that election campaigning in Nigeria begins, albeit indirectly,

as much as two years before the actual contest takes place.⁷³ Since adequate structural conflict prevention is not likely to be achieved in the foreseeable future, operational conflict prevention remains a priority and must be sustained.⁷⁴ The Nigerian case thus highlights the need to view peace sustainability in terms of *continuous and institutionalized operational prevention*.⁷⁵

With assistance from the UN, the NPC seems to be heading in the direction of institutionalized prevention. The committee was set up to manage conflict and prevent violence specifically in relation to the 2015 elections. After the elections, the committee was effectively disbanded. In August 2015, however, SRSNG Chambas encouraged the NPC Secretariat to transform the committee into a statutory National Peace Council that would undertake prevention activities on an ongoing basis. The Secretariat then met with the leaders of political parties, civil society and the National Assembly, all of whom were enthusiastic about turning the committee into a statutory body. With help from UNDP, draft legislation has been prepared and tabled. It appears to be stalled, though, and will probably not be ready in time for the next elections.⁷⁶

The NPC Secretariat recognizes that there are dilemmas associated with the NPC becoming a statutory body. This move would presumably ensure sufficient funding for the committee. This is a crucial matter because the NPC was not adequately financed during the 2015 elections, and reliance on foreign funding raises concerns about dependency and external interference. Transforming the NPC into a statutory body also has the benefit that the committee will have formal authority and be properly institutionalized throughout the country at state and sub-state levels. On the other hand, government funding is potentially problematic because the government is hardly non-partisan during elections.⁷⁷ Becoming a statutory body may compromise the NPC's independence and, as important, undermine public perceptions of its independence, rendering it less effective. At the time of writing, these dilemmas had yet to be resolved.

While the legislation is still pending, the NPC has begun the process of repositioning itself and revitalizing its membership. It recognizes that the critical problems related to conflict and violence are structural. The NPC itself cannot solve these problems but it can serve as a platform for advocacy and dialogue on the structural issues.⁷⁸

Since the 2015 elections, the NPC has worked behind the scenes to help douse tension in the volatile Rivers State, enabling the INEC to conduct the elections that had been postponed to December 2016. Since January 2017 the NPC has also focused on containing and resolving the ethno-religious conflict in Kaduna State, which over the past year has claimed over a thousand lives and displaced many more.

5. Difficulty of Determining the Impact of Preventive Diplomacy

The Nigerian case highlights the difficulty of determining the impact of UN preventive diplomacy in cases where many domestic and international actors have engaged in a variety of conflict prevention activities.⁷⁹ If the outcome had been negative in the sense that large-scale violence had erupted, we could readily conclude that none of the prevention activities was successful. But if the outcome was positive in the sense that the expected violence did not arise, it may be unclear whether the success was due to the cumulative effect of all the prevention activities, to some of them in particular, or to none of them in any decisive way because the relevant domestic actors decided largely of their own accord to refrain from violence.

In the Nigerian case, the difficulty is compounded by the large number of high profile international interventions, in addition to the work of Nigerian groups. The African and non-African leaders who called publicly or privately for peaceful elections included former President Thabo Mbeki, former President John Kufuor, President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, US Secretary of State John Kerry, Prime Minister David Cameron, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and senior officials from the AU, ECOWAS and the EU.⁸⁰

The difficulty of determining the impact of specific preventive diplomacy initiatives is further heightened by a natural inclination on the part of conflict prevention actors to emphasize, if not overstate, their own contributions to positive developments.⁸¹ Institutional and personal interests are well served thereby. The converse applies to domestic decision-makers, who, as a matter of personal pride and national sovereignty, may be reluctant to attribute the prevention of violence to external interventions.

These dynamics were strongly evident in the interviews conducted for this paper. Some UN interlocutors give credit to SRSB Chambas for contributing to President Jonathan's decision to accept promptly the election results.⁸² However, Jonathan himself and his senior advisers attribute the decision solely to Jonathan's determination to place the country's interests above his own, insisting that this was a reflection of his integrity and political temperament.⁸³ On many occasions during the campaign Jonathan had stated publicly that 'nobody's ambition is worth the blood of any Nigerian'.⁸⁴ When the election result became known, he honored that commitment despite the fact that many of his senior political and military advisers were urging him to reject the outcome.⁸⁵ It should be stressed that this positive perspective of Jonathan's decision does not emanate only from his own camp. It is shared by members of the NPC secretariat, who maintain that Jonathan stepped down because he is a 'political gentleman, so all credit to him'.⁸⁶ Dr. Chambas himself adds that he did not doubt Jonathan's sincerity.⁸⁷

Jonathan and his senior advisers do not believe that the UN played a significant preventive diplomacy role in relation to the leaders of the political parties. They maintain that the UN's most important contribution to conflict prevention was by convening and coordinating a 'steering committee of international actors', which served as a platform for harmonizing the position of the international community.⁸⁸

The difficulty of establishing the impact of external preventive diplomacy interventions can also be illustrated with a non-UN example from the Nigerian elections. Some interlocutors suggested that US pressure on the Nigerian government and political leaders to ensure free and fair elections was an effective strategy.⁸⁹ The pressure apparently included the threat of smart sanctions, such as a freeze on personal bank accounts in the US, and a visit to Abuja by John Kerry when the elections were postponed. Other interlocutors thought that the US pressure and Kerry's visit were inconsequential.⁹⁰ The officials who served in Jonathan's government claimed that Kerry's 'bullying talk' was insulting, unhelpful and motivated by a 'regime change agenda', which 'almost precipitated a crisis'.⁹¹ There is no way of resolving conclusively such differences of opinion.

6. Conclusion

The absence of large-scale violence in the Nigerian elections is attributable primarily to Nigerian political leaders and parties, which acted with sufficient restraint. It is also attributable to the INEC for its conduct of free and fair elections; to the NPC and peace structures at local level; and to a host of civil society groups operating at national and state levels. The NPC, in particular, facilitated communication between the two major parties, eased tension between them and constrained their behavior through an electoral code of conduct. The efforts of the Nigerian groups were bolstered by support from, and conflict prevention efforts by, the UN and other international actors. It seems reasonable to conclude that these national and foreign efforts had a *significant collective effect*.

In the light of the above, it is necessary to avoid exaggerating or 'absolutizing' the role of the UN.⁹² With regard to conflict prevention, the most important contributions of the UN were to support the establishment, work and revitalization of the NPC; support the INEC; liaise with international actors on the ground in Nigeria in order to ensure consistent messaging and soft pressure; and undertake preventive diplomacy with the leaders of the major parties.

A number of general methodological conclusions can be drawn from this case study regarding the difficulty of determining the impact of preventive diplomacy:

- Reviews of UN preventive diplomacy cannot rely solely on the reflections of UN officials but need to be triangulated with the views of relevant non-UN actors. Most important in this respect are the perspectives of people who have

credible insight into the decision-making of the conflict parties. The parties' decisions, possibly influenced by UN and other actors, are the 'engine room' of conflict escalation and de-escalation.

- It cannot be assumed that being active is synonymous with being effective and that apparently good preventive diplomacy and other conflict prevention interventions are necessarily the cause of positive outcomes. Ideally, what is required instead is evidence of the impact of those interventions on the conflict parties' decisions. Yet it may not always be possible to prove that the interventions were influential, and the best that can be done is to draw reasonable conclusions from the available evidence.
- In some instances, the most reasonable conclusion may be that a positive outcome is 'over-determined', meaning that it is a consequence of multiple interventions by many actors. In such circumstances, it is still necessary to assess the relative weight of the different interventions. The bottom line, however, is that the primary responsibility for resorting to violence, or refraining from violence, always lies with some or all of the conflict parties.
- The inability to prove a direct causal link between an intervention and an outcome does not mean that the intervention was necessarily ineffectual and should be avoided in the future. Sometimes the positive effect of a particular dynamic in a given case can be inferred by considering cases where that dynamic was absent. For example, the importance of the unified international position on the Nigerian elections can be inferred from cases where there was no such unity and, as a result, the conflict parties were able to take advantage of divisions among international actors.

The Nigerian case highlights the necessity, conceptually and strategically, to transcend the conventional distinction between structural prevention of violent conflict as a long-term endeavor, and operational prevention of violent conflict as a short-term response to an immediate crisis. Where the political space for structural prevention is small or does not exist, and the risk of large-scale violence is consequently ongoing, it is essential to develop appropriate forms of institutionalized mechanisms and systems for continuous operational prevention. The UN can continue to play an important role in stimulating and supporting this endeavor. This perspective applies equally to other cases where the risk of violence is high and adequate structural prevention appears unlikely.

People Interviewed for This Paper

Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, former President of Nigeria

Amb. Godknows Iboli, former Chief of Staff of President Jonathan's office

Mr. Hassan Tukur, Principal Private Secretary to former President Jonathan

Dr. Mohammed Ibn Chambas, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and Head of the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA)

Mr Ahmed Rufa'i Abubakar, Senior Special Assistant to the President (Foreign Affairs/ International Relations), and previously Director, Political Affairs, UNOWA

Dr. Babatunde Afolabi, Consultant, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Abuja

Mr Kehinde Bolaji, Team Leader, Governance, UN Development Program, Abuja

Dr. Arthur-Martins Aginam, Executive Director, Kukah Centre (which served as the Secretariat of the National Peace Committee during the 2015 elections)

Dr. Abdel-Fatau Musah, Director, Africa II, UN Department of Political Affairs

Ms. Cherrie-Anne Vincent, West Africa Team Leader, Africa II Division, UN Department of Political Affairs

Mr. Amadou Sow, desk officer for Nigeria, Africa II Division, UN Department of Political Affairs.

Mr. Pascal Holliger, Political Advisor, Embassy of Switzerland to Nigeria, Chad and Niger, Abuja

Endnotes

Cover Image: SRSB Chambas and Bathily Meet. UNOWA.

- 1 European Union Election Observation Mission, 2015, 'Final Report, Federal Republic of Nigeria', July, pg. 5.
- 2 For example, Peter Lewis and Darren Kew, 2015, 'Nigeria's Hopeful Election', *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 26, No. 3: 94-109; Olly Owen and Zainab Usman, 'Briefing: Why Goodluck Jonathan Lost the Nigerian Presidential Election of 2015', *African Affairs* Vol. 114, No. 456, pp. 455-471.
- 3 In addition to winning the presidency, the main opposition party took control of both houses of the National Assembly, as well as state legislatures and governorships in twenty-one states.
- 4 Lewis and Kew, 'Nigeria's Hopeful Election'.
- 5 This is a widely held view, shared by the UN officials interviewed for this case study. See Babatunde Afolabi and Sabina Avasiloae, 2015, 'Post-Election Assessment of Conflict Prevention and Resolution Mechanisms in Nigeria', Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Geneva, pg. 8.
- 6 See, for example, the case studies on UN preventive diplomacy in Malawi and Yemen, prepared for this research project.
- 7 For example, Nkwachukwu Orji, 2014, 'Nigeria's 2015 Election in Perspective', *Africa Spectrum* Vol. 49, No. 3, pp. 121-133; International Crisis Group, 2014, 'Nigeria's Dangerous 2015 Elections: Limiting the Violence', *Africa Report* No. 220, November; J. Shola Omotola and Charles Nyuykonge, 2015, 'Nigeria's 2015 General Elections: Challenges and Opportunities', Policy & Practice Brief No. 33, ACCORD, March.
- 8 Cited in Orji, 'Nigeria's 2015 Election in Perspective', pg. 124.
- 9 Human Rights Watch, 2011, 'Nigeria: Post-Election Violence Killed 800', 16 May.
- 10 International Crisis Group, 'Nigeria's Dangerous 2015 Elections', pg. ii.
- 11 For example, International Crisis Group, 2015, 'Managing Nigeria's Election Tensions', *Africa Commentary*, 24 March.
- 12 Quoted in Omotola and Nyuykonge, 'Nigeria's 2015 General Elections', pg. 3.
- 13 International Crisis Group, 'Managing Nigeria's Election Tensions'.
- 14 'Nigeria Braces for More Boko Haram Attacks in Election Buildup', *Daily Mail.com*, 2 February 2015.
- 15 By August 2014 the Boko Haram insurgency had created approximately 650 000 internally displaced persons and many more refugees in neighboring countries (cited in Omotola and Nyuykonge, 'Nigeria's 2015 General Elections', pg. 3).
- 16 Afolabi and Avasiloae, 'Post-Election Assessment of Conflict Prevention and Resolution Mechanisms in Nigeria', pg. 10.
- 17 International Crisis Group, 2015, 'Nigeria's Elections: A Perilous Postponement', *Africa Commentary*, 12 February.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 For example, European Union Election Observation Mission, 'Final Report'.
- 20 Interviews, Abuja, December 2017; Owen and Usman, 'Briefing: Why Goodluck Jonathan Lost', pp. 464-5; Lewis and Kew, 'Nigeria's Hopeful Election', pg. 104.
- 21 The NPC received support from many actors, including UNDP, DFID, HD Centre, the Swiss and Australian missions in Abuja, the Office of the Special Adviser to the President on Inter-Party Affairs, and the Kofi Annan Foundation.
- 22 'Abuja Accord on the Prevention of Violence and Acceptance of Election Results by Presidential Candidates and Chairpersons of Political Parties Contesting the 2015 General Elections', 14 January 2015.
- 23 'Text of the Press Conference by Bishop Kukah Announcing the Inauguration of the National Peace Committee (January 28th 2015)', press release.
- 24 Afolabi and Avasiloae, 'Post-Election Assessment of Conflict Prevention and Resolution Mechanisms in Nigeria', pp. 10-16.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pg. 11.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 Interview, Abuja, December 2017.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 'Renewal of Our Pledges to Peaceful Elections, Joint Statement Issued by His Excellency, President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, GCFR, and Major General Muhammad Buhari, GCFR, on Thursday, 26 March, 2015, ahead of the 2015 Presidential Elections', press release.
- 31 Interviews, Abuja, December 2017.
- 32 Afolabi and Avasiloae, 'Post-Election Assessment of Conflict Prevention and Resolution Mechanisms in Nigeria', pp. 14-15.
- 33 'Renewal of Our Pledges to Peaceful Elections'.
- 34 This interpretation was raised with the author by a participant in the 'Renewal of Our Pledges' process (interview, Abuja, December).
- 35 Interview, Abuja, December 2017.
- 36 *Ibid.*

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- 37 See Afolabi and Avasiloae, 'Post-Election Assessment of Conflict Prevention and Resolution Mechanisms in Nigeria'.
- 38 Ibid, pp. 11-13.
- 39 This section is based on the author's interviews in New York and Abuja, and on UN Department of Political Affairs, 2015, 'UN Engagement in Support of Peaceful Elections in Nigeria: After Action Review', December.
- 40 Interview, UN official, December 2017.
- 41 For more information, see the UNOWA website at <https://unowa.unmissions.org/mandate>.
- 42 Interviews with UN officials; UN Department of Political Affairs, 'UN Engagement in Support of Peaceful Elections in Nigeria'.
- 43 Interview with Dr. Chambas, Abuja, December 2017.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Interview with UN official, New York, November 2017.
- 46 Interview with Dr. Chambas, Abuja, December 2017.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 UN Department of Political Affairs, 'UN Engagement in Support of Peaceful Elections in Nigeria', pg. 9.
- 50 Interview with Dr. Chambas, Abuja, December 2017.
- 51 Interviews with UN officials, November and December 2017.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Afolabi and Avasiloae, 'Post-Election Assessment of Conflict Prevention and Resolution Mechanisms in Nigeria'.
- 54 Interviews with UN officials.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Interviews, Abuja, December 2017.
- 58 Interviews with UN officials, November and December 2017.
- 59 UN Department of Political Affairs, 'UN Engagement in Support of Peaceful Elections in Nigeria', pg. 6.
- 60 Interviews with UN officials, November and December 2017.
- 61 UN Department of Political Affairs, 'UN Engagement in Support of Peaceful Elections in Nigeria', pg. 12.
- 62 Interviews with UN officials, November and December 2017.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 Laurie Nathan, 2017, 'How to Manage Interorganizational Disputes over Mediation in Africa', *Global Governance* Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 151-162.
- 65 Interview with UN official.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 Interview with UN official.
- 68 UN Department of Political Affairs, 'UN Engagement in Support of Peaceful Elections in Nigeria'.
- 69 Ibid.
- 70 Interviews, Abuja, December 2017. See also UN Department of Political Affairs, 'UN Engagement in Support of Peaceful Elections in Nigeria', pg. 2, ft. 4.
- 71 Lewis and Kew, 'Nigeria's Hopeful Election', pg. 102.
- 72 Interviews, Abuja, December 2017.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 On the UN's distinction between operational conflict prevention, which entails measures taken in the midst of an immediate crisis, and structural conflict prevention, which entails long-term efforts to address the root causes of violent conflict, see UN Security Council, 'Can the Security Council Prevent Conflict?', Research Report No. 1, 2017.
- 75 On peace sustainability, see United Nations, 'Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace: Report of the Secretary-General', UN doc. A/72/707-S/2018/43, 2018.
- 76 Interview, Abuja, December 2017.
- 77 Ibid.
- 78 Ibid.
- 79 These cases can be distinguished from those where preventive diplomacy was undertaken primarily by a single or 'most prominent' actor through a distinct intervention or set of interventions. See the case studies on UN preventive diplomacy in Malawi and Yemen, prepared for this research project.
- 80 Afolabi and Avasiloae, 'Post-Election Assessment of Conflict Prevention and Resolution Mechanisms in Nigeria', pg. 13.
- 81 For example, among the people interviewed for this paper there was a difference of opinion on whether the NPC had its origins in initiatives supported by UNDP or in other initiatives supported by the Swiss government and HD Centre. Yet another perspective was that President Jonathan was indirectly responsible for the establishment of the NPC because the committee emerged from an initiative taken by Senator Ben Obi, Special Adviser to the President on Inter-Party Affairs.

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- 82 Interview with UN official, November 2017
- 83 Interviews with former President Jonathan and members of his government, Abuja, December 2017.
- 84 Jina Moore, 2015, 'Nobody's Ambition Is Worth the Blood of Any Nigerian', 1 April, available at https://www.buzzfeed.com/jinamoore/nobodys-ambition-is-worth-the-blood-of-any-niger?utm_term=.mxGogw662#.lh3Np0BBV.
- 85 Interviews with former President Jonathan and members of his government, Abuja, December 2017.
- 86 Interview, Abuja, December 2017.
- 87 Interview with Dr. Chamba, Abuja, December 2017.
- 88 Interviews with former President Jonathan and members of his government, Abuja, December 2017.
- 89 Interviews, Abuja, December 2017.
- 90 Ibid.
- 91 Interviews with former President Jonathan and members of his government, Abuja, December 2017.
- 92 Interview, UN official, Abuja, 2017.