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'The President is dead, long live the acting President!'

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By **Christian Kramer**

The uncertainty of Nigeria's leadership is over: President Umaru Yar'Adua died yesterday. Elected in 2007 Yar'Adua was, in what observers claim to have been a flawed and rigged election, elevated to the top post in Nigeria. Already at the time when he assumed office his health was reported to be fragile as he was suffering from heart and kidney problems.

Fragile health is already a handicap for the leader of any country, but especially in a state that is suffering from a festering civil conflict in the oil-rich Niger delta, ethnic tensions between the largely Christian south and the Muslim north as well as an incomplete process of establishing a transparent, effective and accountable government. Yar'Adua, a softly spoken professor of chemistry who had run on a platform of anti-corruption and political reforms, aimed at narrowing the gap between the 'have's' and the 'have-not's'. The 2007 elections, despite the criticism they received, marked the first peaceful transfer of power from one civilian president to another. But Yar'Adua stood for more than this: as the first university educated president of the country, he represented for many Nigerians a symbol for replacing the closely knit public and private network of personal relationships with a more open and just system that would help the growing number of young people to find work based on their skills, rather than their background.

Besides initiating reforms in the financial and regional political sector, Yar'Adua was able to offer an amnesty to the rebels in the Niger delta before falling sick in November last year. His condition turned out to be so critical that he had to leave the country to receive treatment in Saudi-Arabia. Due to what is rumored to be pressure from his family and close supporters, he did not resign or appoint an acting head of state and thus caused what many observers called a 'power vacuum'. The peace process of the Niger delta got stuck in limbo, ethnic tensions in the borderland between the Christian and Muslim areas flared up occasionally and domestic reforms stalled, especially in the infrastructure and petrol sector but also in education and electoral law.

More than that: during the first period of the former president Olusegun Obasanjo, Nigeria had established itself as one of the countries with the most active foreign policy in Africa. Nigerian peacekeepers were found in Liberia and Sierra Leone; in Togo the pressure coming from Lagos was decisive in weakening the rebels and generally Nigeria's foreign policy provided stability in a turbulent region. The promise of this stability was also to support the exploitation of the fossil fuel sector of Nigeria itself: not only were the rebels in Niger delta threatening foreign investments necessary for the oil to flow, but also Nigeria lacks its own refineries and has, as a major oil exporter, imported petrol that then disappears in the dark channels of a corrupt network, leaving most Nigerians without reliable access to energy. The absence of a leader that can offer stability and leadership has largely blocked improvements in this sector.

Nigeria's leadership crisis has reduced its position in Africa and the rest of the world, and has increased the difficulties for the acting president, Goodluck Jonathan. In February 2010, when the Nigerian parliament finally decided to bury its hope for a word from Yar'Adua and declare Jonathan acting president, he was facing an uphill struggle: as a Christian he was endangering the careful balance that rules the presidential office – based on the principle of alternating the office by a Christian and Muslim occupant. Jonathan's next step will be to announce a Muslim vice-president, hoping that this step will calm the religious tensions that divide the country.

The question now is not only whether Jonathan can start where Yar'Adua had stopped, but also whether he will be able to reenergize the reputation and influence of Nigeria abroad, stabilize the domestic sector in order to attract foreign investment and push ahead with the fight against corruption. The other major obstacle he is facing is related to the office of the president in Africa's most populous nation. The prolonged absence of a strong man at the helm of the country for the first time since independence has shown many Nigerians that the country can function without a president – especially in regards to use of personal networks and favoritism. This is seen by many as a good sign, but a bad one for Jonathan.

It is also important to bear in mind that he only has only one year to go before the next elections. His vice-president will have the highest chance to become the next president, and so Jonathan's decision for whom he will choose for the post will contain

the deliberation between an influential politician from the north and the risk that this will further weaken his presidency. While he was able to consolidate some of his powers by appointing his own cabinet without major obstacles, the remaining time of Jonathan's tenure may become infamous of what in the US would be known as a 'lame duck' president. It is too early to call, but Nigeria may well find itself in a prolonged political deadlock until the next elections. Nigeria has a new president, but in political terms he will be short-lived.

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