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Former Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari Dies in London, Aged 82

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Nigeria's former President Muhammadu Buhari, who ruled Africa's most populous nation both as a military strongman and democratically elected leader, died in London at 82.

A presidential statement confirmed that he passed away on Sunday following a prolonged illness. President Bola Tinubu has instructed Vice-President Kashim Shettima and his chief of staff to travel to the U.K. and bring Buhari's body back to Nigeria for burial according to Islamic rites.

Buhari, born in Daura on December 17, 1942, joined the Nigerian Army at 19 and quickly rose through the ranks. He seized power in a 1983 coup and ruled as a military head of state for 18 months before being overthrown. Yet his story did not end there. Three decades later, he became the first opposition candidate to defeat an incumbent president at the ballot box, toppling Goodluck Jonathan in 2015.

Many Nigerians saw his rise as an elected leader as a second chance. Campaigning as a “converted democrat,” Buhari presented himself as a principled reformer with zero tolerance for corruption. His supporters, particularly in Nigeria’s poorer, Muslim-majority north, saw him as a moral force capable of restoring order and accountability.

Unfulfilled Hopes

However, the reality of governance soon collided with the weight of expectation. Buhari’s first term was marked by sluggish decision-making and economic turbulence. He took six months to appoint a cabinet, frustrating both his allies and critics, while plummeting oil prices dragged Nigeria into its first recession in 25 years. His cautious leadership style earned him the moniker “Baba Go Slow”.

Security, too, worsened under his watch. The Boko Haram insurgency persisted, and violence spread to other parts of the country. Armed bandits terrorised the northwest, separatist movements grew bolder in the southeast, and widespread kidnappings became an all-too-common headline. Despite promises to rein in lawlessness, large parts of the country remained unsafe and under-policed.

Economically, Buhari’s policies often seemed stuck in the past. He refused to devalue the naira, Nigeria’s currency, despite repeated calls from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). His government held firm on maintaining an artificially high exchange rate, a stance reminiscent of his military-era economic nationalism. In 2022, Nigeria’s oil production, as its main revenue stream, fell to a 20-year low, largely due to theft and mismanagement in the Niger Delta.

Buhari’s much-heralded anti-corruption campaign also lost steam. Though it began with fanfare and a firm message, it failed to result in the high-profile convictions many had hoped for. Critics accused his government of selective prosecution and a lack of transparency.

His administration's handling of civil unrest drew widespread criticism, especially during the 2020 End SARS protests against police brutality. Security forces opened fire on unarmed demonstrators, prompting nationwide anger and some of the most serious street protests since the end of military rule in 1999.

Despite this, Buhari's backers point to his achievements in infrastructure. His government invested in railway lines, road construction, power projects, and airport upgrades. Buhari often said these projects were part of his plan to build a stronger foundation for Nigeria's future.

His legacy remains complex and deeply contested. While many admire him for his integrity and discipline, others view his time in office as a missed opportunity to address Nigeria's deep-rooted challenges.

Buhari's funeral will take place in Katsina in the coming days. A quiet yet forceful presence in Nigerian politics for over 40 years, he leaves behind a country still searching for the solutions he once promised to deliver.