Three rounds of elections – for local, state, and national office – were conducted in 1998 and 1999 to enable the return of Nigeria to civilian government. I had the opportunity to serve as an observer for the first round.

I flew to Lagos and then to Abuja, by then the national capital. In Abuja, election observers attended a number of meetings with election advisors, election officials, and representatives of some of the political parties.

I had never visited Abuja while a Volunteer. In the 60s it was a small town known for its pottery and its geology. The transformation of a small town to national capital must have been very exciting for those involved. The architecture of many public buildings (for example, the National Mosque, and the residential compounds for government officials) was interesting and quite a bit different from what we saw in Nigeria of the 60s. Nevertheless, the sprawl that finds its way into any growing city was abundant.

From Abuja I traveled to Kano by road with another election observer. On the way we drove past Zuma Rock (one of the ‘Abuja rocks’). The road was paved all the way to Kano, but the traffic was sometimes wicked.
One of the more curious sights on the way to Kano was a stretch of road lined on both sides with hijacked and/or abandoned tanker trucks, an impromptu highway rest stop, sort of like Howard Johnson’s. The explanation was that drivers hauling fuel would stop here, sell the fuel, abandon the truck, and head for the hills.

Petrol at the official rate was in short supply, and petrol stations, which were required to sell at the official rate, might be open for only a day or two each week. It was not unusual to see a long line of taxis and other vehicles that had been lined up for days waiting for a station to open.

Strange as it may seem, there appeared to be two types of fuel – fuel sold at the official price and fuel sold at a market price.

It doesn’t say Exxon or Shell of Agip, but a collection of jerry cans alongside the road, as in the upper picture to the left, was as good a place as any to stop for a break and a fill-up – at the market price. The lower picture shows a filling station attendant taking care of our needs.
We were pretty busy in Kano, but I was able to stop by Government Girls College (GGC) where I taught biology. The picture to the left is the building where the biology classroom/lab was located, and the photo below it is another classroom plus the baobab that I walked past on the way to school each day. My house is the white speck off in the distance to the right of the baobab.

Kano government workers were on strike at the time, so the school was closed and locked up, although some of the staff were there. It was quite a surprise to find that Tanko, who was the messenger when I taught at GGC, was still there. Tanko enlisted someone with the keys to give me a tour of the school.

GGC had previously been a medical school of sorts, and the science classrooms were pretty well equipped when it was converted to a secondary school. There were about 250 student at GGC in the 60s.

When I visited GGC in 1974, new classrooms had been added but the school was pretty much the same. By 1998, however, the school was drastically different. The hostels had been converted to classrooms, the student population I was told had grown to about 3,000, and there were no books, chalk, etc. in the classrooms I saw. The biology room was completely empty except for some benches. What I saw at GGC was what I saw at several other schools the next day when voting was underway.
The next three pictures are another girl's secondary school in Kano, not far from GGC.

Because of the strike, the school was locked when we got there on election day. Fortunately, someone was able to locate the principal, who unlocked the gate in time for the poll workers to set up inside the compound. There was another secondary school a few blocks away where the poll workers could not get in and had to set up in the street.

The school in the pictures was in a large compound with classrooms arranged in clusters. The bottom picture is taken from inside one of the classrooms. There was no chalk for the blackboards, nothing on the walls, no books, no supplies or materials, not a stick of furniture, and the adjacent supply room was empty.

Later in the day we visited two polling locations at primary schools in Bichi, (where I talked with someone who had had RPCVs Felton, Swantko, and Boyce as teachers) and another at a Kano primary school along the Katsina Road, where we ended the day.

It was nearly dark by the time the polls closed and they began to count votes at the Kano primary school. There was one room with a working light bulb, but the electricity went out soon after dark and the poll workers continued vote counting by flashlight. I took a couple of walks out to the street to buy candles to supplement the flashlights. After the votes were tabulated, they were transported on the back of a motor scooter to a central location in Kano. We followed the motor scooter in a car, and stayed long enough at the central location to see the votes delivered and logged in.

We take elections for granted in the States although we do have our problems, like the infamous chad or the sometimes unreliable electronic voting machine. Votes are cast in a number of ways – in some towns you use touch screen equipment, in other towns you mark a piece of paper or punch a hole in a card. For the round I observed in Nigeria, a thumb-print beside the logo for the party you wished to vote for was the method used.
Conducting an election in a country like Nigeria is complicated because factors such as design, printing, and distribution of voting materials; registration; rural literacy; logistics; etc. each present problems that we may not have to deal with in the States. For example, elections had not been held in Nigeria for many years and no one was registered to vote. Several months before the 1998 local elections were held a whole separate process of voter registration had to be completed.

While it seemed cumbersome to have three separate elections – local, state, and national – the election process used in 1998 and 1999 reflected the resources and circumstances unique to Nigeria at the time. While there were many problems, the overall conclusion was that the first round was pretty successful. It was quite an education.

It was also quite an opportunity to revisit Kano thirty years after living there. The Kano I remembered had a population of 250,000 to 300,000 that was located largely within the city wall, or in nearby areas to the east, such as Sabon Gari. While the Kano I saw during a visit in 1974 didn’t strike me as being too much different, The Kano I saw in 1998 was a different city altogether.

At this point, the population had grown to about 2.5-million and growth had consumed formerly undeveloped areas all around the City. For example, the mile-long footpath I followed northward from my school through Kofar Lunkui to the Katsina Road was now a two lane paved road passing through a large densely developed area, and the approach from Zaria, which had been lightly developed almost to the entrance to the city at Kofar Nassarawa, was now densely developed miles before the gate. If you take a trip to Kano via Google maps, satellite/aerial photography shows the outline of what is left of the city wall, and the extent of development outside the wall.

There were many other notable changes. In Kano of the 60s, the predominant forms of transportation by wheel were the bicycle and the lorry. I don't remember that there were many taxis. One thing that struck me during my visit in 1974 was the abundance of taxis, although there were still plenty of bicycles and lorries. By 1998, however, there were relatively few bicycles, cars and taxis were plentiful, and motorbikes and motorcycles had taken over. While the air was free of the dust you normally associate with Harmattan, it still looked like Harmattan because of the exhaust from all the vehicles, in particular the motorbikes with two-cycle engines.

Currency was another surprise. In the 1960s, the Nigerian pound was worth about $2.80. In 1973 a decimal currency system based on the Naira was introduced. There were two Naira to the old pound, 100 Kobo to the Naira, and the Naira was worth $1.52. In 1998 the street value was about 1,000 Naira to the dollar, so the Naira was worth about $0.001, a tenth of a penny. Relative to the dollar the Naira had hardly any value. I didn’t see a single coin during the trip and the paper money was so badly worn and soiled that it was sometimes difficult to tell the denomination of a bill.

I remembered the Kano post office as a beehive of activity, with traders doing business in the outdoor courtyard and the lobby always full of people standing in line to conduct one sort of business or other. I went to the post office one afternoon in hopes of sending a letter, only to find a great empty building. The post office was open but there was no one in the lobby, no postal workers at the windows, and very little activity outside in the courtyard. I did find one person working there but he was not able to help me with stamps. To large extent, the beehive had moved to a building across the street where banks of pay telephones had been set up. All the phones were in use and the place was jammed with people waiting in line. Several days later at Murtala Airport in Lagos I found that the airport post office was closed. Despite many attempts, at the hotels where we stayed, and at post offices in Kano and the airport in Lagos, I was never
able to purchase postage stamps. The postal system was defunct and Nigeria had taken to the telephone for communication. For the two-and-a-half years I lived at GGC the telephone never worked. In 1998, our driver had a cell phone and telephone service seemed to be pretty reliable

In the 60s, Kano's piped water supply originated at the Chelawa River. Water was pumped to storage tanks in Goren Dutse (one of two hills inside the city walls) and distributed to the city. A new sight in the Kano of 1998 was the abundance of elevated water tanks sprouting from compounds throughout the city. In a 1999 summary of its activities in Nigeria, Medicins sans Frontieres (MSF or Doctors Without Borders) refers to an effort to provide health information to water vendors, "who supply the drinking water for more than half of all Kano households." The fact that the city system was not sufficient to meet demand begs the question: What was the source and quality of water distributed by the vendors? In the United States, most of us are served by public water supplies for which stringent requirements are in place for the control of waterborne pathogens and other contaminants. It is doubtful that Kano city, much less the private water purveyors, adhered to a similar standard. MSF also undertook the training of "over 200 monitoring and evaluation officers in 11 northern states, to monitor, report, control and respond to outbreaks" of cholera and other waterborne diseases. Despite these efforts, a cholera epidemic broke out in and around Kano in March of 1999. The severity of the outbreak was compounded by a nation-wide strike of government personnel, including medical personnel in Kano.

Well, there you have it, some ten-year old snapshots, mostly of Kano. The changes I saw were sobering. The changes seen by the group of RPCVs that traveled to Nigeria in 2008, ten years later, must have been even more pronounced, and the gravity of these changes is compounded by the continuing friction in the former Eastern region over oil revenues and environmental degradation, ethnic and religious clashes throughout the country, and the recent riots in Maiduguri and elsewhere, all of which point out that all is not well in today’s Nigeria.

To close on a lighter note, I leave you with some posters that were distributed in Kano during the secession. The posters remind us of at least two things: don’t be afraid because the soldiers will protect us, and always proofread your material before going to press.