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# An Overview of Party Formation in Nigeria, 1960–1999

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## Introduction

This chapter examines party formation processes in post-independence Nigeria. The chapter serves as a useful background for easy understanding of the character of political parties and party politics in contemporary Nigeria. This is examined against the backdrop of recent transitions to democracy, cognizant of the role that political parties are expected to play as key instruments of democratisation in these transitions. The emphasis on the post-colonial period is to shed fresh light on some of the political features and events of the past that could help critical analysis of the current dynamics of the political environment, including the features, origin, character, organisation and ideological tendencies of the political parties during the transition period.

To begin with, a political party could be defined as a group that is publicly organised with the intention of gaining control of government to realise certain aims or to obtain personal advantages or both (Dunmoye 1990:421). This definition not only captures the essence of what a party should be in terms of its public nature and the fact that it basically seeks to control state power and government. The definition is grounded on the pragmatic understanding of the character of political parties, namely – the quest for personal and group advantages. Indeed, a political party is differentiated from other aggregations of people such as pressure groups because it not only seeks to take over the business of government through constitutionally accepted means, but is also expected to have a relatively longer period of active life.

Over the years, Nigeria has operated a multi-party system of government. This was so during the First Republic (1960-1966), the Second Republic (1979-1983), the aborted Third Republic (1987-1993) and the Fourth Republic (1999 – to date). It was this same system that was recommended during the Abdulsalami Abubakar's transition to democracy between 1998 and 1999. General Abdulsalami Abubakar became Nigeria's tenth Head of State when General Sani Abacha suddenly died in office in June 1998. Surrounded by immense goodwill and encouragement locally and internationally, he initiated a new transition to democracy that ended on 29 May 1999. The point to note is that irrespective of the type of government in place, whether parliamentary or presidential, the party system in Nigeria has remained the same – that is multi-partism – except for the brief period of experimentation with the two-party system which resulted in the 12 June 1983 debacle, when Moshood Abiola, the presumed winner of the largely free and fair election, was prevented from assuming office by a conservative military. Multi-partism in Nigeria is no doubt a recognition of the plural or multi-ethnic nature of the Nigerian society.

### **Post-Colonial Party Formation (1960-1983)**

Though the history of the evolution of political parties in Nigeria dates back to the Clifford Constitution of 1922, the parties that were formed prior to independence in 1960 were all regionally and ethnically based, and were largely the result of the provisions of the parliamentary constitution of 1951. Three major parties and a few minor ones featured predominantly in the politics of the early 1960s. These were the National Council of Nigeria and the Camerouns (NCNC), Northern People's Congress (NPC) and the Action Group (AG); others included the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) and the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU). The oldest of the three major parties was the NCNC which was formed in 1944 (Dudley 1982:45). The NCNC was, in fact, the dominant force in Nigerian nationalism until 1951 when the Action Group rose to challenge it. The NCNC later had the problem of how to transform a structure that was principally organised to oppose colonial rule into a vote-winning political party. At this period, it was broad-based, with its influence significantly felt as far as the Camerouns.

The Action Group (AG) on the other hand, was formed in 1951, as an offshoot of a Yoruba cultural organisation known as *Egbe Omo Oduduwa* formed by Chief Obafemi Awolowo and his friends. This party made it clear that it intended to operate principally from the regional level. In a press release issued in 1951, the party announced that it was a "Western Regional Political Organisation, pure and simple". Its aims and objectives were for the advancement of the Yoruba race (Nnabuihe et al 2004:167). This revelation was later to set the tone for other parties to lay claim to hegemony of their regions during subsequent elections (Post

1963:31). This may be regarded as the prelude to the emergence of some regional and ethnically-based political parties in Nigeria.

On the other hand, the Northern People's Congress (NPC) with its base in the North was formed in 1949 on the initiative of some young men, including Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Yahaya Gusau and Dr. R.A.B Dikko. It was an offshoot of the cultural association known as *Jam'iyyar Mutanen Arewa*. By and large, the North had remained untouched by the nationalist movement that had significant followership in the South of the country. Deliberate British policy, more especially the principle of absolute non-interference with Islamic beliefs, the discouragement of missionary activities for this same reason, and the relative insulation of the North from the effects of modern economic development, had ensured that no significant radical group emerged to challenge the colonial administration. Though, initially perceived with suspicion by the traditional rulers, the party later gained support from them by stating that it intended to work strictly within the limits of the traditional political systems. The NPC subsequently controlled the politics of the North due to its link with the Native Authority.

As earlier mentioned, apart from these three dominant parties, there were many other smaller ones such as the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), which emerged to challenge the hegemony of the NPC, the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) which claimed to represent the Northern minority groups of the Middle Belt, the United Nigeria Independent Party (UNIP) and others (Dudley 1982: 50). These were highly localized parties anchored basically on sectional interests and personalities. Apart from the NCNC, which was initially broad-based in its membership, the NPC and the AG were basically regional parties representing the interests of the ruling class in their respective regions. Of course, these interests were masked as ethnic interests, which contributed gravely to the events which occurred in the 1959 and 1964 Federal Elections. Political unrest and loss of lives and property consequently led to the declaration of a state of emergency in the Western Region and subsequent military intervention of 1966.

The acrimonious politics of the Federal Elections of 1964, the manipulation of ethnicity and lack of political consciousness on the part of the people combined to remotely set the stage for the events of 1966. Pogroms were carried out against easterners in the north of the country resulting in the declaration of the breakaway Republic of Biafra by Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu on May 30 1966, when it became clear that the Federal Government was not ready to protect the lives and property of easterners. At this juncture, it is important to pause and ask ourselves – what has changed? Are the present parties, in terms of origin, membership, cohesion and ideology any different from the parties of the 1960s? The scenario in the Second Republic (1979-1983) tended to support the view that nothing had changed. On the other hand, the trend of activities in party-formation in

the 1998-1999 transition (1998-1999), appears to indicate a fundamental shift. Furthermore, the emergence of the All Progressives Congress (APC), a mega-party of opposition parties and groups with Muhammadu Buhari as presidential candidate for the 2015 general elections could be an improvement of sorts in respect of political party organization. We will come later to this after briefly examining party formation in the Second Republic.

On the Second Republic, by September 1978, the ban prohibiting the formation of political parties was lifted by the military government of General Olusegun Obasanjo, giving rise to a plethora of political associations numbering about one hundred and fifty. By the end of the year, only five of these associations were registered as political parties, namely the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the Nigerian Peoples' Party (NPP), the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), the Great Nigeria Peoples' Party (GNPP), and the Peoples' Redemption Party (PRP). The Nigerian Advance Party (NAP) led by Tunji Braithwaite later joined the fray to contest the aborted 1983 elections.

Of these, the UPN had been in the making long before it emerged in October 1978. In fact, most of the leadership of the UPN were the same set of people that had led the Action Group (AG) in the First Republic (Dudley 1982:186). The UPN claimed to be 'democratic socialist' in orientation, but in practice pragmatic considerations diluted its ideological commitment to democratic socialism. The NPN, on the other hand, initially was nothing more than a collection of rich individuals with enlightened self-interests and a commitment to the maintenance of a free market economy. Though broad-based, it represented the interests of the rich business-managerial class and had a firm base in the North. If the UPN was a reincarnation of the AG, the NPN was a descendant of the NPC and was firmly positioned to the right of the ideological spectrum. The original NPP, led by Ibrahim Waziri was an amalgam of young moderate well-to-do businessmen and representatives of minority groups who felt marginalized in the power equation. Disagreement over leadership led to a split which saw the emergence of the GNPP which professed 'consensualism' ('politics without bitterness'), and the NPP, which espoused a liberal ethic based on 'individualistic'/'collectivist' paradigm. A placing of these parties on an ideological spectrum had the PRP at the extreme left, followed by the UPN, with the NPP at the Centre, followed by the GNPP and then, the NPN at the extreme right of the centre. At least, there was some semblance of ideological predisposition by these parties. This had completely vanished, however, by the beginning of the Fourth Republic.

This positioning notwithstanding, ideological consideration has never been a strong element of Nigeria's party politics. More common has been the politics of personalities based on the ability of local politicians to cajole, buy and ride on the ethnic card as a way of getting to political offices. Indeed, it is clear from the foregoing that the parties of the Second Republic differed little from the

major parties of the First Republic. Does this then mean that circumstances have remained the same? Does this mean that ethnic considerations based on the lack of political consciousness still influence the political behaviour of Nigerians? We will next examine the type and nature of parties which subsequently arose during the Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha military-guided transitions, in order to decide whether indeed any changes had occurred or not.

### **Party-formation under the Babangida-era transition to democracy**

The military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993) was characterised by a phased-approach to the political transition project. An important aspect of this programme was the debate over the type of political system Nigeria should adopt. To this end, a *Political Bureau* was set up in 1986 and came up with a report, which recommended among other things a two-party system for Nigeria's Third Republic. Two parties were subsequently decreed into existence by the government – the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC). With the benefit of hindsight, it appeared that this recommendation was apparently an effort to address the cankerworm of ethnicity in Nigeria's troubled political life. However, it could also be said that the 1979 Constitution on party formation enforced a national outlook for all registered parties, which largely attenuated ethnicity. Since then the class interests of the political elite, recruited nationally, have tended to bind them together against the mass of Nigerians. Nothing shows this better than the levity with which worsening corruption has been treated since May 1999.

However, the creation of the two parties was later to be criticized as basically undemocratic, on the grounds that people should ideally be allowed a free choice to associate and galvanize their interests in the way they want and in as many a political grouping as they wish. More significant however, was the result of the annulled June 12 1993 presidential election which saw Moshood Abiola, the billionaire politician poised to win in all sections of the country even in the North, though he was ethnically Yoruba. This was indeed, a novel development which seemed to point to the fact that with consensual agreement on how to organize the political system, it is possible to overcome certain inherently structural and constraining factors that inhibit political development. In this case, it would have been best if the two parties that contested the elections were allowed to *ab initio* evolve independently outside of government interference through the articulation of the interests of groups and individuals. This apart, the former president, Ibrahim Babangida, termed the herding of the various political associations either into the Social Democratic party (SDP) or the National Republican Convention (NRC) as simply a compartmentalization of these interests a little to the left – (SDP), and a little to the right 0 (NRC). (But the constitution of the latter, the military junta's preferred party, was more left-leaning than the former, thus sowing the seeds of confusion in the minds of

politicians and the electorate alike). In terms of organisation, the government not only founded these parties, it built their offices all over the country, funded them and had overwhelming influence in their decision-making process.<sup>7</sup> Obviously, both were broad-based, but basically ideologically suspect. It suffices to state that an undemocratic government cannot enthrone democracy, especially one in which it single-handedly dictated the nature and character of the political parties.

### **The Abacha Transition**

Right from the outset, the transition programme master-minded by General Sani Abacha was characterised by insincerity and designs for self-succession. It was a pointer that Nigerian politicians had learned little and forgotten quite a lot when a disproportionate number of them went along with the charade that was then playing itself out in the name of 'self-succession'. Though five parties were eventually registered, namely the United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP), Democratic Party of Nigeria (DPN), Congress for National Consensus (CNC), National Centre Party of Nigeria (NCPN), and the Grassroots Democratic Movement (GDM), there was very little room for the parties to manoeuvre as the military junta abused all known principles of democratic practice in its bid to achieve Abacha's self-succession design (Agbu 1998). Basically, all the five parties were made up of a mixed-bag of politicians out for what they could get when it was clear that the whole transition was a ruse. Candidates were being disqualified by the government supposedly on security considerations which was really nothing but a way of eliminating anti-Abacha and potentially politically threatening candidates from challenging the hegemony of the favoured party – the UNCP. Basically, all were institutionally and ideologically bankrupt and paraded a significant array of unprincipled characters masquerading as politicians. It, therefore, appeared that not only had things not changed, it had indeed gotten worse. The high point of the charade was when the five political parties mysteriously adopted Abacha as the sole candidate for the planned presidential elections. The sudden death of the dictator on 8 June 1998 put a stop to the travesty and created the opportunity, yet again, for another political transition programme.

### **Abubakar's Transition**

The country, once more, embarked on a new transition under General Abdulsalami Abubakar's military government, which assumed the reins of leadership on 9 June 1998. Abubakar promised to hand over power to a democratically elected president by 29 May 1999. To this end, nine parties were given provisional registration out of the 26 political associations that sought registration. These included the All People's Party (APP), People's Democratic Party (PDP), Democratic Advance Movement (DAM), Movement for Democracy and Justice (MDJ), United People's Party (UPP), Alliance for Democracy (AD), and the National Solidarity Movement (NSM). According to the Independent National

Electoral Commission's (INEC) guidelines for the transition, for any of these parties to qualify for permanent registration, it must score 10 per cent of votes cast in at least 24 states of the Federation and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) at the Council polls scheduled to be held on December 1998. INEC subsequently issued a code of conduct for parties and warned that 'any political party that fails to abide by the conditions shall have its registration withdrawn' (The Guardian 1998). These conditions included cooperation with INEC, respect for the rights of other parties, freedom to campaign, avoidance of violence and the use of inflammatory languages, rejection of corrupt practices... and assisting in ensuring peaceful and orderly voting on polling day. These conditions notwithstanding, some politicians accused INEC of incompetence and alleged malpractices during voters' registration.

For those political organisations given provisional registration, a comparison with past experiences based on general aggregation of interests, and role of personalities reveal some interesting tendencies. Whereas the parties of the 1960s had very clear objectives, be it national or regional control and/or protection of traditional and minority interests, some of the associations which metamorphosed as parties during this dispensation appeared vague in their party objectives apart from the common goal of seeking political office. However, one thing that was agreed upon by all the parties as a common objective was the fact that they all wanted an end to military rule.

The three registered political parties that satisfied the provisions laid down by Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) were the Alliance for Democracy (AD), the All Peoples Party (APP) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Let us briefly examine the origin of these parties.

### **Alliance for Democracy (AD)**

The AD was formed by a number of Southern pressure groups – *Afenifere*, Eastern Mandate Union, People's Consultative Forum, National Democratic Alliance (NADECO), and the Southern Leaders Forum. These groups were basically opposed to the self-succession bid of Sani Abacha (Maja-Pearce 1999).

It is of interest to note that the groundwork for the formation of the AD was very quickly done (Maja-Pearce 1999). Its major component, the People's Consultative Forum (PCF) initially pulled out of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), and then also left the All Peoples Party (APP) after raising objections to the presence of pro-Abacha politicians in its fold. They then approached the United Democratic Congress led by Ambassador Tanko Yusuf, and the two formed an alliance known as the Alliance for Democracy (AD). This party dominated the six Yoruba-speaking states of the South-West of Nigeria between 1999 and 2003.

In respect of party philosophy, the AD believed that a restructuring of the Nigerian federation was imperative, including a restructuring of the Police

and Armed Forces. It also believed that revenue allocation should be based on derivation and that a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) was a *sine qua non* in deciding how the country should be made to progress. Underlying the restructuring of the Nigerian state is the demand for the devolution of more powers to the states, in the true spirit of federalism. Prominent members of this party were Chief Ayo Adebajo (Acting National Chairperson), Bassey Etubom Bassey (National Vice-Chairperson), Dr. Chukwuemeka Ezeife, Alhaji Abdul Kadir Daiyabu (National Vice Chairperson), Chief Olu Falae, Chief Bola Ige, Alhaji Yussuf Mamman (National Organising Secretary), Chief Segun Osoba, Dr. Udentia O. Udentia (Secretary) and Senator Bola Tinubu.

### **All People's Party (APP)**

This Party originated out of a meeting held between the Southern Leaders Forum led by Chief Bola Ige and the Conference of Fused Associations led by Umaru Shinkafi in Lagos. Described as a 'rainbow coalition', it initially had Associations like the Peoples National Congress (PNC), United Nigeria Peoples Party (UNPP), the People's Consultative Forum (PCF) also known as *Afenifere*, the All Nigerian Congress (ANC), and the National Unity Party in its fold. The PCF later broke ranks with the APP citing incompatibility with politicians in the party who publicly supported the designs of General Sani Abacha for self-succession.

Prominent members were Alhaji Usman Shinkafi, Dr. Olusola Saraki, Senator Mahmud Waziri (National Chairperson), Chief Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu, Dr. Bode Olajumoke, Chief C. C. Onoh and Gamaliel Onosode.

### **Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)**

Its genesis could be traced to a popular opposition movement called the G34. The G34 had metamorphosed from the Institute of Civil Society which was formed in late 1997 with the aim of enlightening citizens about their rights and obligations under military dispensation. This Institute initially transformed into the Group of 18, mostly northern politicians who were unhappy with the self-succession plan of General Abacha. This group would later be enlarged to 34 members – G34, comprising eminent Nigerians from across the country who privately wrote General Abacha on 24 February 1998 asking him to retrace his his steps (Maja-Pearce 1999). Believed to be fairly well-funded, the organisation had within its fold many retired generals and other senior military officers, which made many sceptical about its objectives and sincerity. The party proper was formed by some of the leading members of the G34 led by Dr. Alex Ekwueme, former Vice-President of Nigeria (1979-1983) in association with other political groups. Some of these groups included the All Nigeria Congress (ANC), New Era Alliance (NERA), and the United Nigerian People's Party (UNPP). With a



blend of old and new breed politicians in its fold cutting across all states of the federation, it was considered a broad-based party and stood to gain from the nature of its composition and origin.

Prominent members of the party included Chief Alex Ekwueme (chairperson, Board of Trustees), General Olusegun Obasanjo, Mallam Adamu Ciroma, Chief Solomon Lar (national chairperson), Alhaji Sule Lamido, Chief Jim Nwobodo, Alhaji Abubakar Rimi, Chief Don Etiebet and Dr. Tonye Graham-Douglas. This party was later to win the 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 general elections, even though the elections, apart from the 2011 elections, were considered largely flawed, characterised by unreliable voters' registers, poor organisation, intimidation, vote rigging and generally poor election security.

## Conclusion

This overview and analysis of the situation during the Abubakar transition with respect to party formation suggests that pluralism is still a major feature of Nigeria's political development. Fundamentally, it appears that nothing has changed in terms of articulating national objectives for the survival of the Nigerian polity. The ideal was the desire for democratic governance, while the reality was the lack of transparency in the political processes. However, what was observed was the reconfiguration of new parties from old ones, with very little changes in terms of core parochial/ethnic and personal interests. However, what should also be noted is the opposition of the new parties to military rule. All wanted an end to military rule. Again, it is fairly evident that the high level of ignorance on the part of the people, which the politicians of the 1960s exploited, was no more readily obtainable on the same scale as before, especially after the destructive manipulations of the Babangida and Abacha transitions which were non-transparent, self-serving and highly destructive of the Nigerian unity project.

A lot still needs to be understood with respect to the myriad of social and political forces in Nigeria with subjective and centrifugal tendencies in the body-politic. Politicized ethnicity and the undue emphasis on the subjective criteria of regional ascendancy have frustrated efforts at national integration and inhibited the healthy growth of a political culture. For Nigerians, at no other time in recent memory were they expected to take more interest in their internal politics than during this very interesting, but volatile Fourth Republic.

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