Introduction to the 2004 Edition
of *Nigerian Political Parties: Power in an Emergent African Nation*, pp. xxv-xxxii;
only published, 1963; first paperback edition, 1983;

Forty years after its original publication, in 1963, this volume continues to be consulted by scholars and others who wish to revisit the origins of Nigerian political parties and the mechanics of late-colonial Nigerian nationalism. My introduction to the 1983 edition, reprinted herein above, draws attention to continuities in both party leadership and the system of political parties despite a fourteen-year interlude of military rule, including two and one-half years of civil war, before the restoration of constitutional democracy in 1979. Twenty years later, after nearly fifteen and one half additional years (1984-1999) of military rule and four more years (1999-2003) of elected civilian government, I wish to propose an idea about Nigerian national politics that I have formulated tentatively on the basis of reflections on the pattern of political competition since the 1930s.¹

Ever since the Second World War, when nation-wide political parties, as distinct from parties with national aims, emerged for the first time, there has often been a party of political barons or elites, widely distributed throughout the country, opposed by sectional parties or a coalition of sectional parties. While the party of widely distributed elites has always had ethno-sectional strongholds and centers of gravity, its top-down national, as opposed to bottom-up coalitional, structure has been a major asset in national electoral campaigns. I find that national elite coalitions have regularly out-performed electoral coalitions created by politicians who have tried to reach out from a primary ethno-sectional base to ally with similar parties and factions in other parts of the country. Nigerian history suggests that coalitions of sectional groups are unlikely to win national elections. I shall briefly sketch the historical background for this proposition.

The first coalition of modernizing Nigerians claiming to represent the national interest was the Nigerian Youth Movement, founded in 1936. Although the ethnic

¹See also Richard L. Sklar, “Unity or Regionalism,” in Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *Crafting the New Nigeria: Confronting the Challenges* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004) for a parallel elaboration of this thesis.
identities of its founders and leaders were almost exclusively southern, the political values of the Youth Movement were national. The Movement’s chief aim was to wrest control of the Lagos Town Council from the Nigerian National Democratic Party, which represented the parochial interests of the indigenous community of the capital city. In 1945, the Youth Movement’s influence in national politics was eclipsed by a more broadly-based political association, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons, which incorporated the communal party of Lagos. Subsequently, the Youth Movement became an instrument of the Yoruba-speaking intelligentsia. Guided by Obafemi Awolowo, onetime secretary of its southwestern provincial organization, the Movement evolved into the governing party of the Western Region, with Awolowo acceding to the office of premier in 1954. The Independence election of 1959 was contested by three major political parties thus: the Northern Peoples’ Congress, led by Ahmadu Bello, who represented the Hausa-speaking people of the northern emirates (where the highest traditional authorities are Muslim rulers, known as emirs); the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), led by Nnamdi Azikiwe, with its center of gravity in the southeast, where Igbo-speakers were predominant; the Action Group, led by Awolowo, which formed alliances with ethnic minority groups in the north and east, some of them being incorporated into the party itself. Since no single party had a majority in the House of Representatives, it would be necessary to form a two- or three-party governing coalition. In light of Awolowo’s pronounced belief in strong party leadership for programmatic purposes, it was logical for the leaders of the other two major parties to form a coalition government headed by the deputy leader of the northern party who had served in that capacity prior to the attainment of independence in 1960.

By the time of the next federal election, in December 1964, the governing coalition had collapsed and two broad electoral blocs had emerged to compete for control of the deeply troubled federation; they were the northern-based Nigerian National Alliance and the southern-based United Progressive Grand Alliance, each with important allies in the other’s primary sector. The dividing line between these rival coalitions was an historic issue, namely “regional security,” meaning that political parties in control of regional governments should not employ the resources at their disposal to support
opponents of other regional governments.\(^2\) Conservatives in control of the northern and western regional governments did not recoil from the use of force to defend the principle of regional security. Eventually, electoral chaos and incessant political turmoil culminated in the coup d’etat of 1966.

Political parties were dormant between 1966 and 1979, when five parties were authorized to contest elections at the state and federal levels. One of them, the National Party of Nigeria, embodied the tradition of the northern-based Nigerian National Alliance of 1964. However, the National Party was more broadly based than its northern-oriented predecessor; it was indeed a nationally comprehensive elite party of “heavyweights,” or “men of timber and caliber.” Three of the other four parties were clearly sectionalist – the Yoruba-based Unity Party of Nigeria, led by Awolowo, the Igbo-based Nigerian People’s Party, led by Azikiwe, and the Borno (northeastern)-based Great Nigeria People’s Party, led by Waziri Ibrahim. The People’s Redemption Party, led by Aminu Kano, represented the ideological cause of populist democracy.

Awolowo’s Unity Party rallied erstwhile allies of the old Action Group more effectively than Azikiwe’s People’s Party could energize the former NCNC’s network of affiliates. But the Unity Party’s challenge to the National Party, a truly national elite coalition, fell short of success. Awolowo has been described as “the best president Nigeria never had.”\(^3\) His strategy of reaching out from a core constituency (the Yoruba) to allies who were disaffected from dominant political groups in other parts of the country had been defeated once again.

Four years later, in 1983, Awolowo’s final attempt to reach out to other sectional leaders foundered in the face of resistance to his leadership by potential allies. That assessment is unlikely to be challenged by historians even though the official results were badly tainted by gross malfeasance in the electoral process and therefore utterly unreliable. The ensuing coup d’etat of New Year’s eve 1983 ushered in fifteen years of military rule punctuated by the restoration of elected local and state governments in 1990 and 1991, federal parliamentary elections in 1992, and the annulled presidential election


\(^3\) This memorable tribute to Awolowo was uttered on the occasion of his death in 1987 by a former political opponent, namely Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, who had been military leader of the secessionist Republic of Biafra (1967-1970). *ThisDay Online* (Lagos), March 2, 2003.
of June 12, 1993. These electoral battles were fought by two political parties created in 1989 by the military government in an avowed attempt to minimize ethno-sectional and sectarian tendencies in party formation. In the presidential contest, M. K. O. Abiola, a Yoruba business magnate, stood under the banner of the Social Democratic Party; Bashir Tofa, an emirate-area financier, was nominated by the National Republican Convention. It is noteworthy that both parties were national elite coalitions. Although Abiola was solidly supported by the Yoruba, the Social Democratic Party itself was the end product of a coalition-building process that included core elements of the northern emirate elite. But the two-party system of 1989-1993 was a product of military contrivance rather than natural evolution. The competition between them did not involve any matter of principle or cause of serious debate that was even remotely comparable to the content of debate in 1964, when rival coalitions clashed on the great issue of regional political security.

On June 23, 1993, the military government annulled the presidential election and terminated the transition to civilian rule. Reliable albeit unofficial reports released on June 18, by the independent Campaign for Democracy in defiance of censorship, indicated that Abiola had won a decisive victory, with 58 percent of the vote and substantial support throughout the country. However, Nigeria was destined to endure six more years of military rule before the assassination of a dictator, evidently arranged by a cabal of his subordinates, led to the restoration of constitutional and civilian government in 1999.

The 1993 pattern of balanced competition between national elite coalitions was not, however, reproduced for the electoral sequence, local, state and federal, of December 1998 - February 1999. In these elections, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), a new national elite coalition, vanquished a coalition of two sectional parties, namely the emirate-based All Peoples’ Party and the southwestern Alliance for

---

4 For a lucid account of the descent of these parties from political groups in the Constituent Assembly of May 1988, and other political associations animated by that event, see Babafemi A. Badejo, “Party Formation and Party Competition,” in Larry Diamond, Anthony Kirk-Greene, and Oyeleye Oyediran, eds., Transition Without End: Nigerian Politics and Civil Society Under Babangida (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 1997), pp. 171-191.
Democracy, whose political orientations were diametrically opposed to one another. The PDP’s electoral slogan was “power shift,” meaning that the next president should be chosen from the southern part of the country in order to dispel a widespread belief that leaders of the northern emirate sector were unwilling to relinquish their control of federal executive power. The PDP then nominated Olusegun Obasanjo, a retired general of Yoruba heritage and former head of state, who had presided over the 1979 transition to civilian rule. Subsequently, he became famous as an advocate of democracy in Africa and a critic of the Nigerian military dictatorship, which imprisoned him for three years (1995-1998). His candidacy for president in 1999 was backed by influential members of the military establishment, including wealthy retirees, who had stolen the election from Abiola in 1993. For that very reason, he was opposed by the leading politicians of his own Yoruba people, many of whom favored increasing regional autonomy within a weakened federation, an idea that Obasanjo firmly rejected.

Although the presidential election of 1999 was marred by widespread fraud, Obasanjo’s margin of victory was great enough to indicate that he would have won handily even in the absence of gross malpractice. In addition to his 63 percent of the total vote, Obasanjo easily exceeded the breadth requirement of 25 percent of the vote in at least two-thirds of the states and the federal capital territory by reaching that mark in 32 of the 36 states. While Obasanjo and the PDP were overwhelmed in the sectional strongholds of the Hausa and the Yoruba, they still won the presidency, 21 of the 36 gubernatorial contests, and decisive majorities in both houses of the National Assembly. A party of common national purpose had yet again vanquished an electoral coalition composed of ethno-sectional allies.

In the immediate aftermath of the 1999 election, the PDP loomed over the Nigerian political landscape in the manner of a big tent. The incongruous coalition that had formed to oppose it fell apart; it appeared likely that the surviving opposition parties would become little tents, or satellite parties, as many of their members and supporters gravitated from their redoubts of sectional dissent to the house of national power and influence. When the Obasanjo administration assumed office, the likelihood of effective competition for the PDP at the national, as distinct from the state or regional, level appeared to be remote. To be sure, political parties would be free to compete in federal
and state elections so long as they qualified under the relatively permissive distribution requirement by obtaining 5 percent of the vote for local government councilors in two-thirds of the states. But there was no national issue on the visible horizon that could sustain a truly competitive contest for the presidency. Proposals to consolidate the 36 states of the Nigerian federation into a small number of large regions, favored by some thinkers in the south, had been firmly rejected in most parts of the country. Apart from the fading regional question, no other political or economic issue was sufficiently potent to inspire and sustain nation-wide, as distinct from local and sectional, opposition to the big tent party of national purpose.

Toward the end of 1999, however, the government of the state of Zamfara, a northern state in the emirate sector, announced its intention to adopt the entire legal system of Islam, known as Shari’a, as the official legal system of that state. Within eighteen months, eleven more northern states, containing a vast majority of the emirates, followed suit in clear violation of a constitutional provision that prohibits the adoption of an official religion by the federal government or any state. Although the Shari’a movement was initiated by political opponents of the Obasanjo administration, its popularity in the emirate sector threatened to split the PDP itself. At the same time, a compensatory reaction bolstered Obsasanjo in the Yoruba southwest, his home section of the country. The Alliance for Democracy, which had opposed him in 1999, endorsed his candidacy for a second term in 2003. Obasanjo’s reconciliation with this substantial voting bloc, and strategic maneuvers designed to strengthen the PDP in other, potentially disaffected, sections of the country, minimized the ability of his principal opponent to build a competitive nation-wide opposition.

Muhammadu Buhari, candidate of the All Nigeria Peoples’ Party (ANPP) and, like Obasanjo, a retired general and former head of state under military rule, won in 10 of the 12 Shari’a states, but nowhere else; Obasanjo carried the other 26 states, receiving 62 percent of the 39.5 million votes cast. The PDP won 28 gubernatorial contests to 7 by the ANPP and 1 (Lagos) by the Alliance for Democracy. The PDP also won substantial majorities in both houses of the National Assembly and gained outright control of a decisive majority of the 36 state Houses of Assembly. Although the PDP did suffer losses in the emirate areas, it remains a formidable presence in that sector, having won 5
of the 12 governorships in the *Shari’a* states and control of at least 4 of the Houses of Assembly in those states. Moreover, Vice President Atiku Abubakar, an emirate sector personality from a non-*Shari’a* northern state, is Obasanjo’s presumptive political heir for the election of 2007. If he, or a comparably influential northerner, secures the party’s presidential nomination, then a substantial portion of the emirate-state electorate and leadership might be inclined to follow the Yoruba example of 2003 and forsake their sectional party for the truly national PDP.

The rule of political supremacy for national elite coalitions is consistent with the evidence presented in this book of ever-increasing political cohesion of the dominant stratum, or sub-class, of the Nigerian national bourgeoisie. As I wrote with regard to the National Party of Nigeria in 1983, that it “represents dominant class interests more comprehensively than any other party,” so would I describe the present day People’s Democratic Party. The theoretical implications of this finding are indicated in my introduction to the 1983 edition and need not be repeated here.

Richard L. Sklar
Los Angeles, California
March 2004

---

7 The vagueness in this account of state assembly results is due to incomplete official reports at the time of writing. Given the extent of electoral malpractice reported by domestic and foreign election observer teams alike, it would be imprudent to rely heavily on official results of the 2003 elections for an analysis of the evolving system of political parties. The thesis presented in this introduction is based mainly on an interpretation of non-quantitative empirical evidence.