



**Politics and Governance  
in a Conglomerate Nation, 1977-2017**

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## **PART ONE**

### **IV. The Nigerian 1979 Elections: A Precarious NPN Victory**

*The 1979 Nigerian elections reflected the dedication of Nigerians to pursue democratic governance and the severe challenges to be overcome. The sweeping victory of the NPN, and the election of Alhaji Shehu Shagari as president, required a last-minute manipulation of the formula for achieving victory in the first round. After playing a largely salutary role in guiding the complex transition to the Second Republic, the military regime led by General Olusegun Obasanjo, acting through the Electoral Commission, tipped the scale in Shagari and the NPN's favor. Finding a workable calculus of federal power, with the opposition enjoying strong sectional support, would be a daunting challenge.*

In a demonstration of civic duty well above the ordinary, the Nigerian electorate went to the polls five weekends out of six between 7 July and 11 August 1979, choosing representatives for the State assemblies and the federal Senate and House of Representatives, State governors, and finally the Presidency. Despite the challenging logistical problems, the voting and counting were conducted reasonably smoothly. The gains of each of the five registered parties were, however, balanced by setbacks.

It took creative arithmetic by the Electoral Commission for Alhaji Shehu Shagari of the National Party of Nigeria to be declared the President-elect on August 16. The new constitution stipulates that to be elected president in the first round, a candidate must obtain the highest number of votes and “not less than one-quarter of the votes cast at the election in each of at least two-thirds of all the States in the Federation.” Since Nigeria presently has 19 states, it was believed that the a winner on the first round must obtain a plurality of the total ballots cast and 25% of the votes in at least 13 states (i.e. 12.67 states being rounded up to 13).

The military government, acting through the Federal Electoral Commission, decided otherwise. Its announcement to this effect, following the voting, did not go down well with supporters of the other four parties. According to the ruling, “the candidate who scores at least one-quarter of the votes cast in 12 states and one-quarter of two-thirds, that is, at least one-sixth of the votes cast in the 13<sup>th</sup> state satisfied the requirement.” Matters were not helped by the fact this formula was proposed by the legal adviser of Shagari's party, Chief Richard Akinjide, just days before the government's dramatic announcement.

Although Shagari outdistanced his rivals by winning 34% of the popular vote, followed by Obafemi Awolowo with 29%, the seven states in which he failed to obtain at least 20% of the votes included the four predominantly Yoruba states of the Southwest, the two Igbo states of the East, and the industrial and commercial center of the North, Kano state. Even the governor-elect of Kaduna, the capital of the former Northern region and still the administrative and intellectual center of that region, is a member of the People's Redemption Party (PRP) led by Aminu Kano.

Shehu Shagari had achieved the greatest national support, although the opposition captured the geopolitical and economic centers of the three principal regions. Even the federal capital of Lagos gave over 80% of its votes to Awolowo while the other three predominantly Yoruba states gave him 86, 92 and 94.5 percent. Dr. Azikiwe won the populous Igbo states with 83 and 87 percent of the vote, while Aminu Kano took 76 percent of Kano's votes. It could therefore be called a precarious victory on the part of the NPN and Shagari.

If no winner was declared after the first round, a second balloting would take place between the two leading candidates. The voting would take place this time in an electoral college composed of representatives of all 19 state assemblies and the two federal houses. While the NPN defeated its four opponents, it did not trounce the opposition, whose electoral support was spread among four parties. The NPN often prided itself during the campaign as being the only party that had prospects in all parts of the country. As soon as the results of the first set of elections (for the Senate) were concluded, leading members of the other parties recognized that the most conservative party, the NPN, would prevail with a little more than a third of the popular vote. Tentative feelers led to alliance talks among them. These were inclusive, however, and were suspended pending the outcome of the first round of the presidential elections. Before these talks could be resumed to cement an anti-NPN alliance for the second round, General Obasanjo, acting through the Electoral Commission, declared the race for president over based on the mathematical rejiggering.

Will the NPN's legal opponents use the first four years of Shagari's term of office to enter the 1983 elections as a broad opposition party, or will they be kept apart by ethnic, regional and personal conflicts?<sup>1</sup> Will Shagari be able to govern this large and fractious country with his opponents enjoying virtual single-party dominance in key states of the federation and an overriding majority in each of the federal houses, or will he be able to overcome the heated rivalries generated by the elections and devise a workable governing framework? Will the underprivileged of Nigerian society - whose sufferings, especially in the urban centers, have been temporarily eclipsed by the passion of political rallies and six weeks of voting exercises - hold off their anger to enable a government, much less a conservative one, to attempt short-term reforms? Or will a popular explosion make a mockery of all the constitutional and electoral maneuvering? There are no sure answers to these questions. That adequate ones must be found is a stout challenge awaiting the Second Republic.

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<sup>1</sup> An attempt by a military regime to craft, by fiat, a two-party system seemed to succeed in the 1993 elections only to be cast aside as a result of a division among its leaders. For the 2015 elections, such a victorious alliance was finally consummated.