

**A**S re-alignments for the 2003 presidential election in Nigeria gather momentum, it is, perhaps, helpful to recall the prelude to a similar election exactly 20 years earlier, in 1983. Any radical democrat who also happens to be a member of my own generation will be sad over the political combinations and dissociations now taking place in the country. Remember 1983. But why do I refer to presidential election and not general elections — after all what took place in 1983 were general elections and what will take place in 2003 will be general elections, comprising presidential election, gubernatorial elections, legislative elections and, perhaps, even local government elections? I focus on the presidential election because our post-independence political history has so far shown that the presidential election is decisive — whether it takes place first or last. The reason can be found in the distribution of power between the centre and the states and hence the hegemony of the former — whatever the constitution may say. Nigerian politicians are largely conscious of this; but I doubt if their political practice is sufficiently informed by this consciousness. In any case, those that are harassing their opponents at state and local government levels, those that are prepared to kill, decimate and immobilise their opponents to brighten their chances of re-election, should become conscious of the fact that the centre is the king-maker at all levels of the polity — federal, state and local. By centre I mean not just the government, but the Nigerian state comprising the institutions of ideological persuasion and falsehood (e.g. government media), public administration (e.g. INEC) and coercion (e.g. police, security services and the army).

Five political parties contested the 1979

## The state and political re-alignments

By Edwin Madunagu

general elections which ushered in the Second Republic (1979-1983). In descending order of electoral fortune these were: the National Party of Nigeria (NPN); the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN); the Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP); the Great Nigerian Peoples Party (GNPP); and the People's Redemption Party (PRP). The electoral body, the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDEC), declared Shehu Shagari, the NPN candidate, the winner of the presidential contest. It was a very controversial declaration, as we all know. In the gubernatorial race, of the 19 states into which the country was then divided, UPN took the five contiguous states of Western Nigeria: Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Ondo and Bendel; NPP took Anambra, Imo and Plateau; GNPP took Borno and Gongola, while PRP took Kaduna and Kano. NPN took the remaining seven states: Kwara, Benue, Bauchi, Niger, Sokoto, Cross River and Rivers.

In an article written shortly after the elections and titled "The stolen presidency", late Tai Solarin predicted that by the next elections in 1983, the NPN would have become virtually the only political party in the country as it would have "drained" all the other parties. The election would then either return the NPN massively at all levels or lead to a general bloodbath in the country. Said Solarin in the *Sunday Tribune* issue of November 4, 1979: "If this Government lasts four years, the four-year-old NPN will have been firmly planted as Government Party everywhere, and the UPN, the GNPP, the NPP and the PRP will have been drained to annihilation, both in membership — it is already starting — and in morale. The 1983 election would therefore

be between the NPN and the Revolutionary Party which, having studied how the NPN came to power, knows exactly what to do to supplant the NPN for the presidency". Solarin based his prediction not simply on the fear that NPN would try to preserve and strengthen what he believed it had stolen, but on the ruling party's fascist methods of governance which started to emerge as soon as the Second Republic was inaugurated. I remember that I was so impressed by Solarin's prediction that I quoted it several times in my political writings and speeches during the life of that republic, and after. I believed that perceptions similar to that of Solarin informed the various re-alignments of political forces that took place between 1980 and 1983.

First, the governors of the states controlled by UPN, GNPP and PRP constructed a platform called the Progressive Parties Alliance (PPA) for co-operation and regular consultations; then the NPP joined the platform; then there were talks about forming a party, the Progressive Peoples Party (PPP) which would be a merger of UPN, NPP, GNPP and other previously non-electoral, but radical groups. The UPN did not subscribe to this, preferring an alliance of independent parties. As expected, these broad re-alignments produced internal crises in PRP and GNPP and, to some extent, the NPP. PRP first broke into two factions; FEDEC gave recognition to the faction supporting the NPN. Later the faction supporting NPN broke into two, with one actually merging with NPN. GNPP broke into several factions some of which later dissolved into the NPN. The PRP faction opposed to NPN later broke into two factions

with one opting to fight the 1983 election under the banner of NPP which, in effect, meant adopting the NPP presidential candidate as its own. A rally organised under this arrangement in Kano in March 1983 and addressed by Nnamdi Azikiwe and Abubakar Rimi, drew one of the largest crowd in the politics of the Second Republic. FEDEC refused to recognise the PPA and PPP for election purposes, insisting that the parties in these groupings must first dissolve themselves before seeking registration under the new names. The political crisis of the Second Republic, I now see more clearly in retrospect, was in particular the crisis of re-election, and in general the crisis of bourgeois democracy.

By the middle of 1983, Tai Solarin's prediction had come to pass. All the parties and groups opposed to the NPN had come under siege. The entire country had been polarised as if preparing for war. On one side was the ruling NPN supported by the main institutions of state that had constitutional roles to play in the impending elections: FEDEC, the police, secret security organs and the courts. At a stage the country could be called not just a fascist state, but also a police state in the literal sense: the police became openly partisan and violent in its engagement with anti-NPN parties and groups. I remember Wole Soyinka and Yemi Ogunbiyi writing two of the strongest political denunciations of the NPN government, with the latter calling the Inspector-General of Police, Sunday Adewusi, the *Deputy President* and the former shouting at the police boss: "you are not God". Adewusi was indeed the *Deputy President* and at times, the *defacto President*. He was almost a god. On the other side of the divide were other electoral polit-

ical forces: traditional, reformist, radical and revolutionary. They were supported, though critically, by the major non-electoral organisations of the civil society — the labour movement, the academic unions, the student movement and radical leftist groups. I remember that from December 1982 when the Left held a conference *Towards a progressive Nigeria* in Bagauda Lake Hotel, near Kano, under the auspices of Abubakar Rimi, the Kano State governor, until the election in 1983 the radical movement to which I belonged campaigned vigorously for the unity of all anti-NPN forces. In short NPN had the Nigerian state; its opponents had the civil society. It was a massive mobilisation of the people against the NPN.

But it was futile. The NPN not only won the 1983 elections but massively improved its electoral status. The party retained the centre in a landslide; it took Anambra State from NPP; it wiped out GNPP; it took Kaduna State from PRP and installed its favourite in Kano; in the West, it took Ondo, Oyo and Bendel states from the UPN; but mass uprising compelled it to return Ondo. The conclusion here is also the lesson, a sad lesson: In the electoral struggle between the Nigerian people and the Nigerian state, the latter won. The latter won not only in 1983, but also in 1964, 1965 and 1993. My fear is that the nation's political compass today does not point away from 1983. In other words 1983 may repeat itself in or before 2003. More directly, the state may win against the people in 2003. A patriotic duty is to work to prevent at least two elements of 1983 from repeating themselves: in the first place, the security forces and the electoral body should be blocked from partisan involvement in the elections; and secondly, the armed forces should be prevented from intervention — partisan or not.