

## **Regional, Ethnic, and Religious Cleavages in the Context of the Dominant Party System**

### **Ambrose Ihekwoaba EGWIM**

**Department of Political Science, Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria.**

**Email: [ambroseegwim@yahoo.com](mailto:ambroseegwim@yahoo.com); [egwima@run.edu.ng](mailto:egwima@run.edu.ng) Mobile: +234 8032750131.**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6554-4805>

### **Abstract**

Eminent scholars and statesmen have argued that a practical way to mitigate the political influence of ethnicity, religion, and regionalism in Nigerian/African politics is to adopt a one-party system, or at most a two-party system. A belief that factions (ethnicity, religion, regionalism) and political competition will disappear with the demise of rival parties. Experience from the Nigerian Fourth Republic, starting in 1999, shows that a dominant party may emerge from democratic elections. The question is whether these parties also have a nationalistic, integrative element, as supporters of dominant or two-party systems claim. Have one or two dominant national parties whittled down regionalism and ethno-religious cleavages in Nigerian politics? There seems to be a connection among ethnicity, religion, regional cleavages, intra-party political competition, and party system dynamics in Nigeria, despite the dominance of the party(ies). This relates to the inability of the dominant party(ies) to manage ethno-religious cleavages and regional politics effectively.

**Keywords:** Dominant-party, ethnic politics, ethnoreligious cleavages, one-party system, plural society, regional politics

### **Introduction**

Eminent scholars and statesmen have argued that a practical way to mitigate the political influence of ethnicity, religion, and regionalism in Nigerian/African politics is to adopt a one-party system, or at most a two-party system. A belief that factions (ethnicity, religion, regionalism) and political competition will disappear with the demise of rival parties (Mimiko, 2014; Amucheazi, 2006; Omoruiyi, 2001; Shaw, 1986). The paper examines the intra-party politics of the dominant party and the (mis)management of ethno-religious cleavages and fault lines. The connection between ethno-religious cleavages, regionalism, intra-party competition, and party system dynamics in Nigeria, 1999-2023, challenges the argument that one-party or two-party systems are a panacea for addressing ethnoreligious cleavages and regional politics in Africa. Findings indicate that the dominant political party(ies) can effectively manage ethnoreligious and regional cleavages if informal ethnic power-sharing agreements are established and respected within the party(ies). Otherwise, the strategies and internal politics of the dominant party(ies) may actually exacerbate these issues.

In the Nigerian system, where ethnic politics were checked or regulated through intra-party ethnic-regional power-sharing (powershift arrangements within the dominant party), debates and contestations around these arrangements have shaped the evolutionary dynamics of party systems and politics. The Nigerian dominant party(ies) context has not reduced or eradicated ethnic identities but has merely rechannelled or coalesced them into intra-party cleavages. The emergence of the APC in 2015 and, later, the Labour Party in 2023, with Peter Obi as the flagbearer, highlights the persisting ethnic-religious cleavages in Nigeria despite the dominance of the dominant parties. The fallout from the 2023 election heightened ethno-religious contestation among Nigeria's major ethnic groups.

This paper, therefore, challenges the expectations of promoters of the dominant party and two-party systems - the argument that one-party or two-party systems are a panacea for tackling ethnoreligious cleavages and regional politics by examining the experience with the dominant multiethnic national party(ies), one and later two, in Nigeria (1999-2023). The findings demonstrate that, although dominant party(ies) may democratically emerge in a multiethnic society, this does not eliminate the ethno-religious and regional politics inherent in national diversity, as argued by the dominant party school of thought (Mimiko, 2014; Amucheazi, 2006; Omoruiyi, 2001; Shaw, 1986). Neither has ethnicity declined as the major cleavage factor in modern-day Nigerian politics, according to the decline-of-ethnicity thesis (Brigewich & Oritsejafor, 2022; Cheeseman & Ford, 2007). Perhaps it is correct to assert that one-party, dominant-party(ies) ruling with an ethnic power-sharing mechanism may try to keep regionalism, ethnicity and religious cleavages in check. It does not eradicate them.

Nigerian party politics (1999-2023) reveals that the dominant party internalises political rivalry and cleavages when party competition is absent. There is a connection between debates and contestations over ethno-regional and religious power-sharing arrangements (called powershift in the Nigerian local context), intra-party competition within the dominant party(ies), and party system dynamics. The study of political parties reveals the persistence of religion, regionalism, and ethnicity in shaping party system dynamics. Nigeria's dominant national party(ies) failed to overcome ethnic, religious, and statist divisions; instead, ethnic politics coalesced into broader regional politics within the dominant party. In recent Nigerian party politics, schisms within political parties are more about which region, North or South, is the contender for the presidential slot. Factions develop as parties prepare for national elections and select their flagbearer during the election period. *Powershift*/rotational presidency provide the gravitational pull that holds parties together or pulls them apart. Localising the President in the North-South divide is critical to the stability of the party system, democracy, and even the

nation. Dominant parties might indeed result from democratic elections. The question is whether these parties also have a nationalistic, integrative element, as supporters of dominant or two-party systems claim. Have one or two dominant national parties whittled down regionalism and ethno-religious cleavages in Nigerian politics?

### **Dominant Party and Cleavages: A Literature Review**

In Nigeria, multiparty elections from 1999 to 2015 gave rise to a '*dominant party*'. Magaloni and Kricheli (2010, p. 124) believe no significant difference exists between single-party and dominant-party regimes. Both single-party and dominant-party regimes are referred to as one-party regimes. The difference is that single-party regimes bar opposition parties from participating in elections (e.g., China). Dominant-party regimes permit the opposition to compete in multiparty elections, which usually do not allow alternation in political power. Norris (2004, p. 17) explains that a dominant party system can be found in authoritarian states with minimal checks and balances, as well as in countries that are otherwise widely democratic, such as the ANC in South Africa. Duverger defines such dominance (ANC dominance) as a 'question of influence rather than strength (Duverger in Nicola, 2006, p. 17).'

In Nigeria, the dominant party from 1999 to 2015 was the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Sunday Awoniyi (1932-2007) (in Egwim, 2020:98), one of the founding fathers of the Peoples Democratic Party, opined that the PDP was envisioned to resemble the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa from its inception. 'It was to be a huge mass movement that is people-oriented.' Alex Ekwueme (1932-2017) (in Egwim, 2020:98), another founding father of the PDP, believed that the intention for forming the PDP was that 'it would be a party that would be all-inclusive.' The Peoples Democratic Party had, therefore, envisioned Nigeria as a one-party state in the Fourth Republic, projecting itself to be in power for at least sixty (60) straight years from 1999 (TheNews, 11 December 2014; Premium Times, 3 March 2015).

Advocates of the dominant party system argue that it is a demonstrable way to reduce ethnicity, religion, regionalism, and statism, which is the bane of politics in Nigeria/Africa (Shaw, 1986; Mimiko, 2014; Amucheazi, 2006; Omoruiyi, 2001). The unity argument for a single, dominant party in Africa is based on the need to transcend tribal, ethnic, and local identities. This school of thought explicitly argues that one-party/dominant-party rule is necessary to counter tribalism (Shaw, 198, p. 379). A belief that factions and political competition will disappear with the demise of rival parties. According to Omoruiyi (2001: para

24), an empirically verifiable way to reduce the 'political salience' of ethnicity, religion, regionalism, and statism in Nigeria is to have two dominant parties. Omoruiyi argues that 'Nigerians in office would like his party to be the only party. Nigerians competing for office know that only two political formations are necessary (para. 19).' This school of thought believe that multi-partyism is antithetical to forming a stable government in a plural society. The argument is that a one-party/dominant party(ies) system (*at most two*) makes for a unifying factor in a highly pluralistic society, reducing the level of bitterness and division that the multiparty system promotes. Regional or ethnic parties representing primordial interests would be forced to join one of the major parties or be sidelined from national affairs. In this way, it helps to sideline ethnic and regional politics (Shaw, 1986; Mimiko, 2014; Amucheazi, 2006; Omoruiyi, 2001). Such a position was the foundation for the emergence of a dominant party or outright one-party system across African states immediately after independence.

## Methods

The paper adopts a single-case study design. Nigeria serves as an important case of a more general problem in Africa (one-party/dominant system). It is a test case for examining the observable integrative capacity of one-dominant-party and two-dominant-party structures in a highly diverse society. Its context, in terms of ethnic, religious, linguistic, and geographic, is key to understanding the complexities and potential mechanisms for managing ethno-religious diversity in Africa. The article presents a descriptive, qualitative account based on an extensive literature review and textual analysis. A variety of political leaders and academics in Africa express opinions relevant to the issue in the study. The study focused on analysing the opinions of political activists and academia that were most explicit. Then it examined the context of Nigeria between 1999 and 2023, guided by research questions to reach conclusions. Data were sourced from books, journals, periodicals, articles, seminar papers, dissertations, government official documents, and official party documents, including party constitutions and policy documents.

## Dominant Party and the Management of Nigerian Cleavages: The PDP 1999-2015

There is evidence that the strategies and internal politics of the dominant party(ies) may exacerbate ethnoreligious cleavages and regional politics. The dominant political party(ies) can manage ethnoreligious and regional cleavages if informal ethnoreligious power-sharing arrangements are established and respected within the party(ies). These ethno-religious and regional power-sharing arrangements could also become divisive, heightening ethnic, regional,

and religious cleavages. The debates and contradictions of these arrangements were enough to shift Nigeria's politics from a dominant-party system to a two-party system and, later, to a three-party system (a multiparty system). The crucial realignment issue in 2015 and the 2023 general elections was the dominant party's mismanagement of ethno-religious and regional politics; the expectation that it would be the North's or South's turn to produce the President has been the predominant factor.

Before the All Progressives Congress in 2013, Nigeria had one strong ruling party and several weak opposition parties that did not effectively play their opposition role. The 2013 merger of four opposition parties to form the All Progressives Congress (APC) marked the end of the Peoples Democratic Party's dominance, which had been hinged on power-sharing debates. The mismanagement of Nigeria's ethnoreligious cleavages and fault lines by the then-dominant party, the PDP, transformed the party system and heightened ethnoreligious contestations among the major ethnic groups. Despite the PDP's claim to rule Nigeria for 60 uninterrupted years, in 2015, after just 16 years in power, there was a sudden shift from a dominant-party system to a two-party system. Buhari won the presidency against PDP's Goodluck Jonathan on the APC (All Progressives Congress) platform, giving birth to a two-party dominant system.

PDP betrayed the founding objectives of the founding fathers by refusing to shift power to the North in 2015. LeVan (2019) traced the PDP's electoral defeat in 2015 to the erosion of power-sharing agreements that alternated the presidency between the North and South. The Buhari/APC presidency, according to Obadare (2022), symbolised a resetting of the clock and an apparent return to the elite pact on a powershift, which President Jonathan's PDP administration had undermined. The rotational President or powershift remained a pivotal issue in the Labour Party's (LP) emergence as a 'third party' in the 2023 dynamics. The emergence of the third force (Labour Party) in the 2023 election relates to the inability of the dominant parties to manage Nigeria's ethno-religious cleavages and regional politics. The era of the dominant national party did not eliminate ethnicity, regionalism, religion, and statism; instead, ethnic politics and sundry issues merely rechanneled into intra-party cleavages within the dominant parties, which were managed through ethnic-regional-religious power-sharing arrangements. Debates and contestations around these measures have shaped the evolutionary dynamics of party systems in Nigeria's current civilian dispensation (1999-2023). Regionalism/ethnoreligious cleavages persist in matters that underpin party system dynamics. Schisms within political parties are more about which region, religion, North or South, Muslim or Christian, the contender is from. Factions develop as parties prepare for national elections

and select their flagbearer during the election period. Powershift/rotational-President provides the gravitational pull that holds parties together or pulls them apart. A one-party or dominant-party ruling system with a power-sharing mechanism may have religion, regionalism, and ethnicity in check if the power-sharing mechanisms are established and respected. When competition between parties is non-existent, the political rivalry is internalised within the dominant party.

Jonathan's *realpolitik* in 2015 fostered the sense that, notwithstanding this unwritten, extra-constitutional agreement, power may reasonably 'shift' to whichever region has the greatest desire and brazenness (Obadare, 2022). In that line, Atiku toppled the apple cart of rotation and zoning in 2015 and again in 2023, emerging as the PDP Presidential candidate (Dare, 2023). Atiku's action was attributed to the larger North's disposition to retain power at all costs, thereby perpetuating Northern hegemony. 'The emergence of Atiku confirmed the hypothesis that, beyond the party line, the North is desperate for power' (Nkannebe, 2022). The fear was that the core Muslim North wished to retain power by all means. The power rotation (powershift) consensus, a legally non-binding party agreement on power-sharing, is predicated on time and situations that frontline politicians could easily scuttle. It is the main factor driving change in Nigeria's party system and politics.

In defeating the PDP in the 2015 presidential election, the APC shifted power from the South to the North. The Constitution of the APC copied the zoning formula of the PDP, signifying the Nigerians' consensus across party elites to rotate power between the North and the South:

Without prejudice to Article 20(2) (iii) of this Constitution, the National Working Committee shall, subject to the approval of the National Working Committee, make rules and regulations for the nomination of candidates through primary elections. All such rules, regulations, and guidelines shall take into consideration and uphold the principle of federal character, gender balance, geo-political spread, and rotation of offices to, as much as possible, ensure balance within the constituency covered (Article 20 (IV) (e)).

Tinubu emerged as the APC's presidential flagbearer in 2023, backed by the party's Northern state governors—an indication of a power-rotation consensus. A letter by Northern Governors to President Muhammadu Buhari indicated a powershift consensus within the APC:

After careful deliberation, we declare that, given President Muhammadu Buhari's eight years in office, the presidential candidate of the APC in the 2023 election should be one of our teeming members from the southern states of Nigeria. It is a question of honour for the APC, an obligation unaffected by decisions taken by another political party. We affirm that upholding this

principle is in the interest of building a stronger, more united, progressive country (Uzodinma, 2022).

In 2015, APC zoned the presidential ticket to the North, with the understanding that it would shift to the South in eight years. Earlier in 2015, APC displaced PDP through a power shift. On the existence of powershift as a national consensus, former President Olusegun Obasanjo, the first President under the PDP (1999-2007), states: 'I was part of the meeting when the agreement was made between Northern and Southern Leaders' (Uzodinma, 2022).

The PDP faced the consequences of failing to adhere to this pact in 2015 and 2023; the outcome remained the same: they lost the presidential election and contributed to a change in the party system. In 2015, the development led to the formation and viability of the APC, marking a shift from a dominant-party system to a two-party system. In 2023, a shift occurred in a multiparty system as Peter Obi (South) joined the Labour Party, following Atiku Abubakar's (North) preferred position in the PDP presidential primary. According to Mr Osita Okechukwu, the Director-General (DG) of Voice of Nigeria (VON), breaching the power rotation principle 'crippled' Alhaji Atiku Abubakar's last bid to preside over Nigeria. Atiku breached the PDP's Constitution, which expressly provided for power rotation. In 2014, he decamped to the APC to protest former President Goodluck Jonathan's breach of the power rotation to the North. He was the primary beneficiary in 2018, when, following the power rotation convention, Southerners zoned the ticket to the North for the presidential candidate. The Chairman of the PDP, Senator Ayu, a northerner, was elected based on the turn of the South (Uzodinma, 2022). In anticipation of the continuation of the power shift, the South relinquished the National Chairman position to the North. Mr Iyorchia Ayu emerged as the consensus candidate after Uche Secondus (South) was removed from office.

The six positions: President/Presidential candidate, Vice President, Senate President, House of Representatives Speaker, Secretary to the Government of the Federation, and the party's National Chairman are rotated between the North and the South according to Article 7 of the PDP constitution. Atiku's decision to contest the primary and eventually win the PDP candidacy disrupted the expected power rotation to the South. It put the North in control of the PDP's organs, including the Presidential candidate, the Chairman of the National Working Committee, and the Board of Trustees (BOT). According to Abidoye (2022), zoning is 'not about whether or not a particular section has the monopoly of competent persons; it is about fairness, justice, and equity. By the PDP's Constitution, the national chairperson and presidential positions cannot be held simultaneously in the same zone. The crisis generated by

Atiku's disrespect for the powershift again cost the PDP the 2023 presidential election and may, according to Abidoye (2022), 'end the PDP in Nigeria's political space.'

### Two Dominant Parties, 2023 Presidential Election and the (Mis)management of Nigerian Cleavages

The 2023 general elections deviated from Nigeria's tradition of power shifts and religious balancing between the two dominant political parties. In selecting candidates to replace Muhammadu Buhari, the PDP, one of the two dominant political parties, ignored conventional protocols that ensure the geographic rotation of power. In contrast, the other party, the APC, abandoned its customary commitment to religious representation. In the buildup to the 2023 presidential election, the major opposition Peoples Democratic Party abandoned its North-South power rotation formula, as prescribed by its Constitution, while the ruling APC presented a Muslim-Muslim ticket. The APC fielded a former Governor of Lagos State, Asiawaju Bola Tinubu (Muslim, South, see Table 1), as its presidential candidate, and a former Governor of Borno State, Kashim Shettima (Muslim, North, see Table 1), as its vice-presidential candidate. In the tradition of extra-constitutional, intra-party cleavage management mechanisms in Nigeria, the presidency should have rotated to the South and the vice presidency to the North, with a Christian-Muslim or Muslim-Christian.

**Table 1: Presidential Candidates and Regions**

| S/N | South                         | Party                                 | S/N | North                           | Party                                |
|-----|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1.  | Imumolen Irene Christopher    | Accord Party (A)                      | 14  | <i>Al-Mustapha Hamza</i>        | Action Alliance, AA                  |
| 2.  | Sowore Omoyele Stephen        | Africa Action Congress, AAC.          | 15  | Yusuf Yabagi Sani               | Action Democratic Party, ADP.        |
| 3.  | Kachikwu Dumebi               | Africa Democratic Congress, A.D.C.    | 16  | Musa Mohammed, Rabiu Kwankwaso; | New Nigerian Peoples                 |
| 4.  | <b>Tinubu Bola Ahmed</b>      | <b>All Progressives Congress, APC</b> | 17  | <b>Abubakar Atiku</b>           | <b>Peoples Democratic Party, PDP</b> |
| 5.  | Umeadi Peter Nnanna Chukwudi  | All Progressives Grand Alliance, APGA | 18  | Ado-Ibrahim Abdulmalik          | Young Peoples Party, YPP.            |
| 6.  | Ojei Princess Chichi          | Allied People's Movement, APM.        |     |                                 |                                      |
| 7.  | Nnadi Charles Osita           | Action Peoples Party, APP;            |     |                                 |                                      |
| 8.  | Adenuga Sunday Oluwafemi      | Booth Party, BP.                      |     |                                 |                                      |
| 9.  | <b>Obi Peter Gregory</b>      | <b>Labour Party,</b>                  |     |                                 |                                      |
| 10. | Osakwe Felix Johnson          | National Rescue Movement, NRM.        |     |                                 |                                      |
| 11. | Abiola Latifu Kolawole        | Peoples Redemption Party              |     |                                 |                                      |
| 12. | Adebayo Adewole Ebenezer      | Social Democratic Party, SDP          |     |                                 |                                      |
| 13. | Nwanyanwu Daniel Daberechukwu | Zenith Labour Party, ZLP              |     |                                 |                                      |

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*Authors, 2026: adapted from <https://inecnigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Final-List-of-Candidates-for-National-Elections-1.pdf>*

This was between two dominant political parties (APC) with the power of incumbency and a major opposition party (PDP). On paper, the duo had the clearest path to influencing and winning the presidential election. The APC controlled twenty-two (22) governors out of the thirty-six States (36) and sixty-six (66) senators out of 109, two hundred and eleven (211) out of 360 Representatives (Esele & Esan, 2022). The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) had thirteen (13) state governors and the Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) one (1) in the period immediately after the 2019 general elections. LP (Obi's third force) had a single seat in the Senate and House of Representatives. While the APC and PDP seemingly dominated the federal structure, Peter Obi's decamping from the PDP to the LP highlights the persistent ethnic-religious cleavages in Nigeria. The fallout from the 2023 election heightened ethno-religious contestation among Nigeria's major ethnic groups. The mismanagement of the intra-party power-sharing mechanism remained a pivotal issue in the Labour Party's (LP) emergence as a 'third party' in the 2023 dynamics.

Within the two dominant parties (PDP and APC), without a 'third force' or a 'third party,' no matter how the election had gone, the consensus on 'power shifting to the South' or 'religious balance of power' would be scuttled. The APC/PDP proposal tested the established order, resulting in a 'new configuration of Nigerian politics.' A clear reconfiguration of the character of modern-day Nigerian politics. According to Kolawole (2022), 'Nigerian politics used to be marked by ethnic and regional identities, later added religious or ethnoreligious identity.' Effiong (2022) argues that 'those who seek to exclude religion from their interpretation of the Federal Character (balancing charter) are doing so dishonestly. If there is nothing wrong with a Muslim-Muslim ticket, then there should be nothing wrong with a Christian-Christian, North-North, or East-East ticket.' The election of the APC presidential candidate, Asiwaju Ahmed Tinubu, a Southerner, on a Muslim-Muslim ticket reconfigured the modern-day religious representation. If Atiku and Okowa had won, their ticket would have meant that power would have remained in the North. On the one hand, APC leadership yielded to a powershift, but on the other hand, it succumbed to Bola Tinubu's Muslim-Muslim ticket, making a mess of the final step in equity as a cleavage-management mechanism within the dominant party(ies), thereby exacerbating regionalism and ethnic-religious politics rather than reducing them.

## Conclusion

The study challenged the argument that one-party or two-party systems are a panacea for tackling ethno-regional and religious cleavages by critically analysing the role and strategies of the dominant parties in Nigeria, which, on the contrary, have exacerbated ethno-religious cleavages and regional politics. It described how ethnicity has persisted within the dominant party(ies) by focusing on the interplay of internal politics of political parties and the management of Nigeria's ethno-religious faultlines. Ethnicity, religion, and regional cleavages are indeed merely managed by the dominant party, and the mismanagement has escalated ethnic politics. It is essential to recognise that ethnic cleavages associated with party politics extend beyond intra-party politics and manifest in the various actions of political actors outside the parties. The argument is that the dominant party, or the two dominant parties, failed to manage Nigeria's ethno-religious cleavages due to the complex realities of Nigeria's pluralism and the attitudes of frontline politicians. The fact is that a dominant party in a plural society like Nigeria can foster political repression and domination without practical power-sharing arrangements. The idea of a dominant or one-party system in Africa has nothing to do with promoting national unity; rather, it serves to perpetuate incumbents in power.

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