Nigeria 1900 – 1960: A History Guide

SECTION C: NIGERIA 1900 – 1960
This section covers the establishment and consolidation of British colonial rule in Nigeria, the administrative structures put in place, the economic and social changes brought by colonialism, the rise of nationalism, and the constitutional journey towards independence.

Constitutional Developments and the Road to Independence

This term explores the crucial constitutional reforms that gradually transferred power to Nigerians and the intensifying struggle for self-governance.

1. Constitutional Developments and Independence

Nigeria's journey to independence was marked by a series of constitutional changes, each granting more autonomy to Nigerians.

- **The 1922 Clifford Constitution and the Rise of Nigerian Nationalism:**
    - **Features:** Introduced the elective principle for the first time, allowing limited Nigerian representation (3 members for Lagos, 1 for Calabar) in the Legislative Council. The North remained outside its legislative purview.
    - **Impact on Nationalism:** This limited elective principle, though small, spurred the formation of the first political party in Nigeria, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) by Herbert Macaulay, marking the beginning of organized political agitation and nationalism.
    - **Nationalism:** The desire for self-rule and independence began to coalesce among the educated elite. Early nationalists used newspapers and associations to critique colonial rule.
- **World War II (1939-1945) and the Agitation for Independence:**
    - **Impact:**
        - **Weakening of Colonial Powers:** Britain, exhausted and indebted by the war, found it difficult to maintain its vast empire.
        - **Atlantic Charter (1941):** Advocated for self-determination for all peoples, inspiring colonial subjects to demand independence.
        - **Experience of Nigerian Soldiers:** Nigerians who fought for Britain returned with broader worldviews, exposed to ideas of freedom and equality, and often felt disillusioned by the discrimination they faced at home despite their sacrifices.
        - **Economic Hardship:** Post-war economic difficulties and inflation in Nigeria fueled discontent and increased anti-colonial sentiments.

        - **Rise of Mass Nationalism:** These factors broadened the base of nationalism beyond the elite, leading to more widespread agitation.
- **The Richards Constitution of 1946:**
    - **Features:**
        - Aimed to promote unity by creating a single Legislative Council for the whole of Nigeria (including the North for the first time).
        - Divided Nigeria into three administrative regions (Northern, Western, Eastern), each with its own regional House of Assembly (and a House of Chiefs in the North).
        - Increased Nigerian unofficial representation in the Legislative Council.
    - **Impact:** Unified Nigeria legislatively but entrenched regionalism. While increasing African participation, it was seen as "imposed" as Nigerians were not adequately consulted, leading to further nationalist agitation.
- **The Macpherson Constitution of 1951:**
    - **Features:**
        - Resulted from extensive consultations with Nigerians at local, provincial, and regional levels.
        - Introduced a quasi-federal system with stronger regional autonomy.
        - Created a central House of Representatives and regional Houses of Assembly, with increased elected Nigerian members.
        - Established regional executive councils with Nigerian ministers, though real power remained with British officials.
    - **Impact:** Significant step towards self-government, as Nigerians gained more legislative and executive experience. It led to the strengthening of regional political parties and heightened regional rivalries (e.g., the crisis over Anthony Enahoro's self-government motion in 1953).
- **Party Politics – Regionalism, Federalism (Features, Advantages and Disadvantages):**
    - **Regionalism:** The Macpherson Constitution's emphasis on regions fostered strong regional identities and political parties.
        - **Northern People's Congress (NPC):** Dominant in the North, led by Ahmadu Bello.
        - **Action Group (AG):** Dominant in the West, led by Obafemi Awolowo.
        - **National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC):** Dominant in the East, led by Nnamdi Azikiwe.
        - **Features:** These parties were largely ethnically and regionally based, competing intensely for regional and national power.
        - **Disadvantages:** Led to inter-regional distrust, competition, and ultimately undermined national unity, making federalism challenging.
    - **Federalism:** A system of government where power is divided between a central (federal) government and constituent regional (state) governments.
        - **Features (as applied in Nigeria):** Division of powers, a written constitution, supremacy of the constitution, a supreme court to interpret the constitution.
        - **Advantages:** Accommodates diversity, allows for regional autonomy, prevents concentration of power, fosters local development.
        - **Disadvantages (in Nigeria's context):** Can lead to regional rivalries, duplication of services, and challenges in revenue allocation.

- **Littleton Constitution of 1954:**
  - **Features:**
    - Established a true **federal system** for Nigeria, making the regions almost completely autonomous.
    - Created the office of **Premier** for each region.
    - Made **Lagos a Federal Territory**, separate from the Western Region.
    - Revenue allocation was reviewed to give more funds to regions based on the principle of derivation.
  - **Impact:** Further decentralized power, reduced the power of the Governor-General, and granted significant internal self-government to the regions. It effectively cemented federalism as Nigeria's chosen structure but also intensified regional rivalries.
- **Constitutional Conferences in Lagos (1957) and London (1958):**
  - **Purpose:** These conferences were held to finalize the arrangements for Nigeria's independence.
  - **Key Decisions:**
    - Set the date for Nigeria's independence.
    - Resolved issues like the fears of minority groups (though these fears were not fully addressed).
    - Agreed on fundamental human rights to be enshrined in the independence constitution.
    - Finalized the structure of the federal government and regional governments.
    - Granted internal self-government to the Western and Eastern Regions in 1957, and to the Northern Region in 1959.
- **Attainment of Self-Rule in 1959 and Independence in 1960:**
  - **1959 Federal Elections:** The first nationwide federal elections were held, leading to a coalition government between the NPC and NCNC, with Abubakar Tafawa Balewa as Prime Minister.
  - **Independence:** Nigeria gained full political independence from Britain on **October 1, 1960**, becoming a sovereign state. The independence constitution adopted a parliamentary system of government with a ceremonial Head of State (Queen Elizabeth II, represented by a Governor-General) and a Head of Government (the Prime Minister).