



The Richards Constitution of 1946: Colonial Constitutionalism, Regionalism, Nationalism, and the Limits of Political Participation in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The Richards Constitution of 1946 occupies a pivotal position in the constitutional and political history of colonial Nigeria. Enacted in 1946 and effective from 1 January 1947, the Constitution was a key British effort to reorganize Nigeria's political system after the Second World War, responding to rising nationalist awareness, administrative difficulties, and growing demands for greater African participation. The Constitution established a central Legislative Council for the whole country and introduced Regional Houses of Assembly in the Northern, Western, and Eastern Regions, thereby bringing previously differentiated administrative territories into a common constitutional framework while simultaneously institutionalizing regional political structures. This article examines the Richards Constitution through the interplay of colonial constitutionalism, regionalism, political representation, nationalism, and constitutional legitimacy. Drawing on the 1945 Colonial Office proposals, the 1946 Order in Council, contemporary parliamentary records, and the relevant historiography, this article argues that the Richards Constitution was a transitional and internally contradictory colonial settlement: it expanded Nigerian participation in government and gave formal constitutional recognition to regional institutions, while preserving substantial colonial authority and leaving Nigerians with limited influence over the constitution-making process. It increased African participation in government, yet the colonial administration kept most executive power. It aimed to promote Nigerian unity while formally acknowledging regional differences. It also established representative institutions, but gave Nigerians little real say in how the Constitution was made. The article further argues that regionalism became the Constitution's most consequential institutional legacy. Although initially justified as a means of accommodating Nigeria's diversity, regional institutions subsequently became important arenas for the organization of political interests and contributed to the regionalization of nationalist politics. The Richards Constitution is therefore best understood as an important institutional precursor to Nigerian federalism and as a constitutional moment in which the contradictions of colonial reform became increasingly visible.

Keywords: Richards Constitution; colonial constitutionalism; regionalism; Nigerian nationalism; political representation; constitutional development; federalism; decolonization.

INTRODUCTION

The constitutional history of colonial Nigeria was marked by a slow and often disputed widening of political participation, even as ultimate authority remained with the British Crown and was exercised through colonial institutions. One after another, constitutional reforms tried to balance conflicting goals: efficient administration, imperial control, greater African involvement, national unity, respect for traditional rulers, and the rising demands of Nigerian nationalists. The Richards Constitution of 1946 stood out because it attempted to meet these challenges by combining stronger central authority with recognition of regional differences.

The Richards Constitution was formally enacted in 1946 and came into operation on 1 January 1947. Its central innovation was the establishment of a Legislative Council with jurisdiction over the whole of Nigeria, accompanied by Regional Houses of Assembly and a House of Chiefs in the Northern Region. The new



arrangement consequently brought the North into a common central legislative framework while giving formal constitutional recognition to regional political institutions.

The importance of this Constitution, however, cannot be understood merely by listing its institutional provisions. The significance lies in the contradictions embedded within the constitutional project itself. The British colonial administration attempted to foster a sense of Nigerian unity while acknowledging the distinct interests and identities of the different regions. At the same time, it increased African participation in government but retained considerable executive power in colonial hands. Although representative institutions were introduced, Nigerians were not given a decisive role in shaping the constitutional framework under which those institutions would function. These contradictions drew strong criticism from Nigerian nationalists. James S. Coleman devotes a substantial chapter of his study of Nigerian nationalism to the Richards Constitution and the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), while J. E. Flint's study emphasizes the tensions surrounding the constitutional process and the relationship between Governor Sir Arthur Richards and the Colonial Office.

The central argument of this article is that the Richards Constitution should be understood as a transitional form of colonial constitutionalism. It represented a significant institutional advance over the preceding constitutional arrangement, but it did not constitute democratic government or a transfer of sovereignty. More importantly, its effort to handle Nigeria's diversity through regional institutions led to outcomes that went far beyond what its designers originally intended. Regionalism became embedded within constitutional politics and subsequently interacted with the growth of political parties, nationalist mobilization, and the movement toward federalism.

This article examines four main questions. First, what political and administrative conditions led to the making of the Richards Constitution? Second, how did the Constitution seek to balance Nigerian unity with the differences among the regions? Third, why did the Constitution face opposition from nationalists even though it increased African participation in government? Finally, how did the regional structure introduced in 1946 shape the later development of federalism in Nigeria?

The article's contribution is therefore interpretive. Rather than treating the Richards Constitution merely as one stage in a chronological sequence of Nigerian constitutions, it examines the constitutional settlement as a site of competing conceptions of political participation, territorial organization, and colonial authority.

Historiography and the Research Gap

The Richards Constitution has long occupied an important place in scholarship on Nigerian constitutional development. Early constitutional historians generally treated it as an important stage between the Clifford Constitution of 1922 and the more advanced constitutional arrangements of the 1950s. Kalu Ezera's (1964) study remains an important reference point for the institutional development of Nigerian constitutional government, while Benjamin Nwabueze (1982) provides a broader constitutional history of Nigeria extending from the origins of British jurisdiction to the postcolonial period.

G. O. Olusanya places Nigeria's constitutional development within the broader political and social consequences of the Second World War. His study of wartime Nigerian politics draws attention to the connections between social change, the growth of nationalist activities, and the demand for constitutional reform (Olusanya, 1973). His later contribution to *Groundwork of Nigerian History* provides a broader account of Nigeria's constitutional development from 1861 to 1960 and helps to place the Richards Constitution within the longer history of British colonial rule and constitutional change (Olusanya, 1980).

Coleman's *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* is particularly important for understanding the relationship between constitutional reform and the growth of nationalist politics. His discussion of the Richards Constitution and the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) examines constitutional change within the wider development of Nigerian nationalism. Coleman also traces the increasing regionalization of Nigerian political activity, thereby showing how constitutional reforms influenced the changing character of nationalist politics (Coleman, 1958).



Richard L. Sklar provides another important perspective in *Nigerian Political Parties: Power in an Emergent African Nation*. His study demonstrates the close relationship between constitutional development and the organization of political parties during the final phase of colonial rule. His discussion of regionalism is particularly relevant because it shows how constitutional institutions and emerging political organizations increasingly reinforced one another. Political parties did not simply operate within the constitutional system; they also adapted to, and were shaped by, the regional political structures that developed during the period (Sklar, 1963).

J. E. Flint approaches the Richards Constitution from a somewhat different perspective by examining the relationship between Governor Arthur Richards and the Colonial Office. Rather than focusing only on the provisions of the Constitution, Flint draws attention to the process through which it was formulated. His work demonstrates that British constitutional policy was not entirely uniform and that tensions existed between colonial officials in Nigeria and policymakers in London (Flint, 1960). This perspective is important because it cautions against treating the British colonial administration as a completely unified actor and encourages closer attention to the competing interests and debates that shaped constitutional policy.

Recent scholarship has continued to examine the relationship between regionalism, nationalism, and the emergence of Nigerian federalism. This body of scholarship has produced different interpretations of the consequences of colonial regionalization. Some scholars emphasize the extent to which regional structures contributed to later political fragmentation, while others draw attention to the administrative, geographical, and sociopolitical conditions that made regional organization attractive to the colonial administration. These debates suggest that regionalism should not be understood simply as an imposed colonial arrangement but also as a constitutional response to the complex political and social realities of colonial Nigeria.

The main gap addressed by this article is conceptual rather than chronological. Previous studies have examined the importance of the Richards Constitution from different perspectives, but these aspects are often discussed separately. Although scholars have written extensively about constitutional reforms, nationalist opposition, regionalism, and the development of federalism, there is still room for a more connected understanding of how these issues influenced one another during the colonial period. In particular, less attention has been given to the way the Richards Constitution was used to respond to Nigeria's social and political diversity, growing nationalist demands, the strengthening of regional structures, and the gradual development of federal ideas.

This article seeks to fill this gap by examining these issues together rather than treating the Richards Constitution simply as another stage of colonial constitutional reform. It argues that constitutional reform, nationalist resistance, regionalism, and the emergence of federal principles were closely related developments arising from a common challenge: how the British colonial administration could govern a large and diverse Nigeria while still retaining political control. Looking at these developments together provides a clearer understanding of the significance of the Richards Constitution and its contribution to Nigeria's later constitutional and political development.

The Richards Constitution can therefore be understood as an attempt to address one fundamental problem while simultaneously creating others. The British administration sought to develop a constitutional structure capable of governing Nigeria's territorial size and social diversity, but the arrangements it introduced also raised difficult questions about representation, regional political identity, political participation, and constitutional legitimacy. In this sense, the significance of the Richards Constitution lies not only in the institutions it established but also in the political tensions that its structure generated. These tensions became increasingly important in the subsequent development of Nigerian nationalism, regional politics, and the federal constitutional arrangements that emerged before independence.

SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

This article uses a qualitative historical approach based mainly on documentary analysis. It brings together constitutional and political history to examine not only what the Richards Constitution provided, but also the circumstances in which it was introduced, the people and institutions involved, and the reactions it generated.



The primary sources were chosen because they were produced during the period under study, had official or contemporary status, and were directly relevant to the constitutional changes of 1945–1946. The major sources include the British Colonial Office's *Proposals for the Revision of the Constitution of Nigeria*, published as Command Paper 6599 in 1945; the 1946 *Nigeria (Legislative Council) Order in Council*; writings by colonial officials at the time; and relevant parliamentary records. The 1945 Colonial Office document is particularly useful because it contains both the proposed constitutional changes and Governor Arthur Richards's dispatch of 6 December 1944. The 1946 Order in Council is equally important because it provided the legal basis for the new constitutional arrangement. The Berkeley Law Library catalogue identifies it as the original text of the Richards Constitution, published in *British and Foreign State Papers*, volume 146, pp. 271–298.

The primary materials were read critically rather than taken at face value. Attention was paid to who produced each document, when and why it was produced, its intended audience, and the assumptions behind it. The documents were also compared with other contemporary evidence to identify areas of agreement, differences, and issues that may have been left unaddressed. This helped the study to understand both the official explanation for the constitutional changes and the wider political interests that may have influenced them.

The study also draws on the works of Coleman, Ezera, Flint, Nwabueze, Olusanya, Sklar, Tamuno, and Falola and Heaton. These secondary sources were selected because of their relevance to Nigerian constitutional history and their different interpretations of colonial rule, nationalism, regionalism, and constitutional development. They provide a basis for comparing existing scholarly arguments and placing the primary evidence within the wider historical debate.

The materials are interpreted within their historical context. Constitutional provisions are considered alongside the political conditions in which they were developed, the interests of colonial officials and Nigerian political actors, and the responses that followed their introduction. By comparing official records, contemporary accounts, and later scholarly interpretations, the article provides a more balanced understanding of the Richards Constitution and shows how it both reflected colonial interests and influenced the changing political structure of Nigeria.

The Colonial Constitutional Context

The Richards Constitution emerged from an earlier period of constitutional experimentation. The Clifford Constitution of 1922 introduced the elective principle, but elected representation was largely limited to Lagos and Calabar. The Northern Provinces remained outside the central Legislative Council, creating an imbalance that later constitutional reforms sought to address.

This imbalance was further complicated by the administrative and political differences between Northern and Southern Nigeria. Although the 1914 amalgamation brought the territories under one colonial administration, it did not immediately create a uniform political system. As a result, the development of a shared Nigerian political identity remained difficult.

The Second World War further intensified demands for political change. Economic pressures, urbanization, labour activism, military service, education, and growing political awareness increased pressure for constitutional reform. Coleman (1958) notes that the war accelerated social and political mobilization in West Africa, while Olusanya (1973) links wartime developments to Nigeria's constitutional evolution.

The colonial administration therefore faced the challenge of introducing political reforms while retaining sufficient control over the pace and direction of constitutional change.

Bourdillon and the Origins of the Richards Settlement

The 1946 constitutional reforms did not originate entirely with Sir Arthur Richards, as important groundwork had already been laid during the administration of Sir Bernard Bourdillon. Sir Bernard served as Governor of Nigeria from 1935 to 1943. During his tenure, the Southern Provinces were reorganized in 1939 into Eastern and Western administrative areas. This reorganization subsequently provided an important territorial basis for



the regional organization institutionalized by the Richards Constitution. Contemporary and later scholarship has therefore identified Bourdillon's memoranda as an important part of the intellectual and administrative prehistory of the 1946 settlement.

Bourdillon's constitutional thinking is particularly important because it demonstrates that regionalization did not suddenly appear in 1946. His 1939 *Memorandum on the Future Political Development of Nigeria* examined alternative forms of political development and considered the relationship between Native Authorities and a future central government. His next memoranda refined these ideas (Lugard, 1939).

The evidence also challenges the assumption that the British administration followed a single, unchanging constitutional strategy. In fact, Bourdillon had already recognized the difficulties arising from the relationship between Northern and Southern Nigeria, while officials in the Colonial Office were considering different regional approaches to constitutional reform. Archival evidence therefore suggests that constitutional development was shaped by competing ideas and debates within the British administration.

Sir Arthur Richards succeeded Bourdillon in 1943 and inherited this unresolved constitutional problem. Richards major task was to translate earlier administrative reforms and proposals into a formal constitutional framework. In particular, Richards sought to address the political and administrative imbalance between the Northern and Southern regions, while developing a system that could accommodate regional differences within a united Nigeria.

Richards and the Constitutional Problem

Richards's constitutional proposals of 1944 were designed to address the political and social diversity of Nigeria while promoting greater African participation in government. In his dispatch of 6 December 1944, Richards noted the need for a political system that could advance Nigeria while accommodating the different levels of political and social development among its communities. His proposals therefore sought to promote three broad objectives: Nigerian unity, recognition of Nigeria's diverse communities, and greater African participation in political affairs.

These objectives highlight the fundamental tension underlying the Richards Constitution. While it sought to promote national unity, it attempted to achieve this by formally recognizing Nigeria's regional and social diversity. Richards did not intend the constitution to usher in immediate self-government or full democratic sovereignty. Instead, his approach was gradual, emphasizing the progressive development of political institutions within the existing colonial administrative structure. The Colonial Office's reaction further suggests that the proposals generated debate among British officials and were not universally regarded as a significant milestone in Nigeria's political development.

Consultation and Constitutional Legitimacy

The significant criticism of the Richards Constitution concerned the process through which it was made. Although the Constitution increased opportunities for Nigerians to participate in formal political institutions, Nigerians had limited influence over its initial design. This distinction between participation in constitutional institutions and participation in constitution-making is important.

Earlier proposals associated with Bourdillon had raised expectations of wider consultation. The limited consultation surrounding Richards's proposals therefore generated dissatisfaction among sections of the elite Nigerian political class. Coleman documents nationalist objections to both the substance of the Constitution and the manner of its introduction, while Flint similarly emphasizes the importance of the constitutional process in explaining nationalist resistance (Coleman; Flint).

The central legitimacy problem was therefore that the Constitution widened political participation without sufficiently widening Nigerian participation in constitutional authorship. Its institutional innovations consequently did not automatically produce nationalist acceptance.



The Constitutional Structure

The 1946 constitutional arrangement established a central Legislative Council for the whole of Nigeria. The Council was made up of the Governor as president, sixteen (16) official members, and twenty-eight (28) unofficial members. Although unofficial members therefore formed a numerical majority among members other than the Governor, this should not be interpreted as equivalent to democratic representation because only a limited number were directly elected.

Richards Constitution consequently represented an important movement toward greater Nigerian participation while retaining substantial nomination and indirect representation. It moved Nigeria beyond predominantly official colonial government but failed to establish popular sovereignty.

The establishment of a central legislative framework was nevertheless significant. The Northern Provinces were incorporated more fully into the same constitutional structure as the Southern territories, strengthening the institutional conception of Nigeria as a single political entity. At the same time, regional institutions were established, creating a new dimension to Nigeria's constitutional development.

Regionalism as the Central Constitutional Innovation

The prominent feature of the Richards Constitution was the institutionalization of regionalism. Nigeria was organized into the Northern, Western, and Eastern Regions, each with a House of Assembly. The Northern Region also had a House of Chiefs, reflecting the greater constitutional role given to traditional authorities in that part of the country.

The Richards Constitution regional institutions should not, however, be confused with the more autonomous regional governments that emerged under the federal system after 1954. Their powers remained limited and substantially advisory. The Richards Constitution therefore did not establish a fully developed federation. Rather, it retained a fundamentally centralized colonial administration while introducing regional political institutions.

Nevertheless, regionalization was an important institutional development. It created territorial political structures that subsequently became significant in the evolution of Nigerian federalism.

Unity and Diversity

The central constitutional problem addressed by Richards was the relationship between Nigerian unity and diversity. British administrators recognized that Nigeria was politically and socially heterogeneous. Regional institutions were therefore intended, among other purposes, to accommodate differences and bring political participation closer to local communities and traditional authorities.

Constitutional recognition of regional differences, however, had consequences beyond administration. Once regions became formal political units, they also became arenas for political organization and mobilization. Political leaders could increasingly organize around regional interests, making political differences more institutionally visible.

In fact, regionalism had a dual effect. It provided a mechanism for political accommodation while also creating institutional conditions for greater regional political differentiation. Coleman's analysis of Nigerian nationalism and Sklar's study of political parties demonstrate the relationship between regional constitutional structures and the subsequent development of regional political organization (Coleman; Sklar).

Colonial Constitutionalism and the Limits of Representation

The Richards Constitution illustrates a central contradiction of colonial constitutionalism: representative institutions could be expanded without transferring ultimate political authority. The Legislative Council



contained a majority of unofficial members, but most were not directly elected. Regional institutions also widened participation, yet their powers remained restricted and the Governor retained substantial authority.

It is therefore more useful to understand the Constitution as a transitional arrangement than to classify it simply as either democratic or undemocratic. It expanded Nigerian participation compared with earlier constitutional arrangements but remained firmly embedded within a colonial executive structure. Nwabueze's broader account of Nigerian constitutional development similarly demonstrates that constitutional change occurred through gradual modifications in the distribution of governmental authority rather than through a single transition from colonial rule to self-government (Nwabueze).

Traditional Authority and Representative Institutions

The Richards Constitution introduced traditional political institutions into closer relationship with emerging representative institutions. The Northern House of Chiefs reflected the continued importance of Native Authorities and traditional rulers within the colonial system of indirect rule. This arrangement provided administrative continuity and incorporated institutions that already possessed authority within many communities.

At the same time, traditional authority and representative government rested on different foundations. Traditional authority was associated with custom, lineage, established institutions, and colonial recognition, whereas representative government increasingly emphasized political participation and representation. The Richards Constitution did not solve this problem; instead, it brought both forms of authority into the same constitutional framework.

The Richards Constitution and Nigerian Nationalism

Nationalist opposition to the Richards Constitution resulted from several interconnected concerns. These included the limited consultation that preceded its introduction, the continued dominance of the colonial executive, and dissatisfaction with the representative institutions established under the Constitution.

The National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) strongly opposed the Constitution, a position that carried considerable weight because the party presented itself as a national political movement representing interests across the country. By placing greater emphasis on regional political structures, the Constitution challenged the NCNC's vision of a unified Nigerian nationalism. Coleman identifies the period between 1945 and 1948 as a crucial stage in the growth of nationalist politics, arguing that opposition to the Richards Constitution became a major rallying point through which the NCNC mobilized public opinion (Coleman).

Sklar extends this argument by showing that constitutional reform did not simply respond to political parties but also shaped their future development. According to him, the regional framework created by the Constitution provided institutional spaces through which regional political interests became more organized, laying the foundation for Nigeria's later three-party political system (Sklar).

Recent scholarship largely supports these earlier interpretations while offering additional insights into the Constitution's broader political consequences. Falola and Heaton (2022) argue that although the Richards Constitution introduced new constitutional arrangements, it failed to satisfy growing nationalist demands because meaningful political authority remained firmly under colonial control. Similarly, Afigbo (2019) contends that the Constitution's regional framework unintentionally strengthened ethnic and regional political identities, making it increasingly difficult for nationalist movements to sustain a unified national agenda. Osuntokun (2021) further observes that the constitutional reforms of the 1940s marked a turning point by expanding political participation while simultaneously exposing the contradictions between Britain's gradualist approach to reform and Nigerian demands for greater self-government.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the relationship between constitutional reform and nationalism was reciprocal. Nationalist agitation influenced constitutional change, while the institutional arrangements



created by the Richards Constitution reshaped the political environment in which nationalist organizations operated, contributing to both the expansion of political mobilization and the growing prominence of regional politics in late colonial Nigeria.

Regionalism and the Development of Federalism

The relationship between the Richards Constitution and Nigerian federalism requires careful examination and qualification. The 1946 Constitution did not establish the federal system that emerged in 1954. It retained a unitary colonial administration, while introducing regional institutions.

Nevertheless, Richards was an important precursor to federalism. The Constitution established a central legislature for the whole country, recognized three regions, created regional representative institutions, and provided mechanisms through which regional structures interacted with the central government. These arrangements introduced a constitutional framework within which later debates about regional autonomy and federalism could develop.

The next constitutional sequence is therefore important. The Macpherson Constitution of 1951 expanded consultation and strengthened representative institutions, while the Lyttleton Constitution of 1954 established a more explicit federal structure and increased regional autonomy.

The development can consequently be summarized as follows: (a). Richards Constitution (1946): regionalization within colonial unity, (b). Macpherson Constitution (1951): wider consultation and stronger representation and (c). Lyttleton Constitution (1954): federalism and greater regional autonomy. Richards was therefore not the culmination of Nigerian federal development but an important stage in its evolution.

The Double Legacy of Regionalism

The most important long-term consequence of the Richards Constitution was the institutionalization of regionalism. Its effects were complex. On the one hand, the creation of regional institutions provided new avenues for political participation, allowing communities and political leaders outside Lagos to become more actively involved in government. They also provided a framework for accommodating Nigeria's diversity.

On the other hand, regional institutions created arenas in which regional political interests could be organized and defended. Later studies have linked the growing regional character of Nigerian political parties to the constitutional and political changes of the late colonial period (Coleman, 1958; Sklar, 1963). However, regionalization should not be understood as an automatic or sufficient cause of ethnic conflict. Political institutions shape the opportunities available for representation, competition, and the distribution of power, but their effects also depend on how political leaders, parties, and communities use them. Recent scholarship similarly stresses that ethnic and regional identities become especially politically significant when they are mobilized by elites in struggles over power, resources, and inclusion (Akinyemi, 2020; Eze et al., 2024).

The significance of the Richards Constitution, therefore, lies less in the claim that it directly produced ethnic conflict than in the way it reshaped Nigeria's political environment. By strengthening regional structures and widening arenas for representation and political contestation, it encouraged the articulation of regional interests and provided a framework within which political mobilization increasingly developed along regional lines. Over time, this setting contributed to the institutional consolidation of regional political interests, even though the outcomes were neither inevitable nor beyond the influence of political actors.

The Constitution as a Transitional Settlement

The Richards Constitution was transitional in several important respects. It stood between colonial executive government and representative government, centralized administration and federalism, traditional authority and modern representation, and colonial rule and emerging Nigerian nationalism.

The Constitution's transitional nature helps explain its mixed and sometimes contradictory legacy. On the one



hand, it marked an important step forward by widening political participation and integrating the Northern Provinces more fully into Nigeria's emerging constitutional order. On the other hand, its limitations were clear: most Nigerians still had no direct electoral representation, the Governor retained broad executive authority, and Nigerians had only limited involvement in shaping the Constitution itself.

These perspectives are not necessarily contradictory. The Constitution's historical significance lies precisely in the tensions between its limited reforms and the continuing structure of colonial authority.

Constitutional Legitimacy and the Process of Constitution-Making

One of the most important lessons of the Richards experience concerns the relationship between constitutional content and constitutional legitimacy. A constitution may broaden representation and still face political resistance when the process through which it was produced is regarded as exclusionary.

The British administration expanded African participation within existing institutions without giving Nigerians substantial control over the constitutional process itself. Nigerians could therefore participate in institutions they had played little role in designing.

The Macpherson constitutional process subsequently placed greater emphasis on consultation and involved Nigerians more extensively in constitutional discussions. The contrast between the two processes is therefore important. It demonstrates that constitutional legitimacy depends not only on institutional arrangements but also on the degree of public participation in creating those arrangements.

Reassessing the "Divide and Rule" Interpretation

Some scholars' interpretation is that the Richards Constitution introduced regional government mainly because the British wanted to divide Nigerians and weaken the growing nationalist movement. According to this view, separating the country into regions made it harder for Nigerians to unite and demand independence.

This argument is important because regionalization did contribute to political differences and competition among the regions. However, it should not be accepted without further examination. The Constitution may also have been influenced by practical concerns, such as the size of Nigeria, its cultural diversity, administrative difficulties, and the need to include the Northern Provinces more fully in national politics.

Colonial authorities were increasingly concerned about the growth of nationalist agitation and the need to retain effective control over Nigeria's political transition. The introduction of regional institutions partly responded to Nigeria's size and diversity, but it also altered the terrain of politics. Political debate and representation no longer operated mainly at the national level; regional bodies became important centres for pursuing influence, negotiating interests, and building political support.

This development did not automatically produce ethnic or regional conflict. Rather, it created institutional settings that political leaders and organizations could use to mobilize supporters around regional, cultural, and ethnic interests. For example, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), which began with broader nationalist ambitions, became especially influential in the Eastern Region. The Action Group (AG) developed a major support base in the Western Region, while the Northern People's Congress (NPC) emerged as the dominant political force in the Northern Region. These examples illustrate how party competition increasingly became connected to regional political structures and identities in the late colonial period.

Sklar (1963) argues that Nigerian party politics developed through the interaction of nationalism, cultural particularism, and emerging class interests, rather than through ethnicity alone. Coleman (1958) similarly shows that, as constitutional reforms progressed, nationalist politics had to operate alongside increasingly influential regional identities and interests. Olusanya (1980) further observes that constitutional reforms widened political participation while strengthening the political importance of the regions. Taken together, these studies suggest that regionalization had a double effect: it opened additional opportunities for political

participation and representation, but it also made regional interests more central to the development of Nigeria's emerging party system.

Examples of regionalization

- a. **Regional legislatures and councils:** The Richards Constitution gave the North, West, and East separate regional political structures. These bodies gave regional leaders greater visibility and a platform from which to organize political support.
- b. **Party support bases:** The NPC became closely associated with the Northern Region, the AG with the Western Region, and the NCNC with the Eastern Region. Although these parties made national claims and attracted support beyond their major regional bases, their strongest political influence was regionally concentrated.
- c. **Minority concerns:** The three-region arrangement often placed numerous minority communities within regions dominated by larger ethnic groups. This later encouraged minority groups to demand stronger safeguards and, eventually, the creation of additional states. The three-region system therefore did not simply unite existing communities; it also generated new debates about representation and political inclusion.

However, regionalization also reflected several other considerations, including administrative geography, the Native Authority system, differences in political development, the challenge of integrating the Northern Provinces, and disagreements within the Colonial Office. Bourdillon's earlier proposals demonstrate that regional organization was already under consideration before Richards finalized his constitutional proposals.

It is therefore more historically defensible to regard the Richards Constitution as a multi-purpose colonial settlement whose consequences included stronger regional political organization rather than reducing the entire constitutional project to a predetermined strategy of political division.

Contribution to Nigerian Constitutional History

The Richards Constitution remains important for at least three reasons.

First, it demonstrates that constitutional development under colonial rule was not simply a linear movement toward democracy. Political institutions could become more representative while ultimate authority remained in colonial hands.

Second, it shows how constitutional design can influence subsequent political organization. The Constitution did not merely reflect existing regional differences; it also institutionalized and gave formal expression to those differences.

Third, it demonstrates the importance of constitutional procedure. Who participates in making a constitution can be as politically important as the institutions and powers established by the constitution itself.

CONCLUSION

The Richards Constitution of 1946 marked an important stage in Nigeria's constitutional development. Coming into operation on 1 January 1947, it established a central Legislative Council for Nigeria and introduced Regional Houses of Assembly in the Northern, Western, and Eastern Regions. It also brought the Northern Provinces more fully into national constitutional politics and created institutional arrangements that later reforms developed further.

Its significance, however, lies not so much in its formal provisions as in the contradictions it revealed. The Constitution sought to promote Nigerian unity through regional differentiation, expanded African participation without transferring sovereignty, and created representative institutions without giving Nigerians a decisive role in their design. At the same time, its regional structures provided mechanisms for accommodating diversity while creating new arenas for regional political organization.



The Richards Constitution should therefore be understood as a transitional constitutional arrangement that sought to balance British administrative interests with emerging nationalist demands and Nigeria's growing regional political divisions. Its significance lay not simply in the institutions it established, but in how it attempted to manage these competing forces while simultaneously deepening the regional structure of Nigerian politics. Its most important long-term consequence was the institutionalization of regionalism. Regional structures widened opportunities for political participation and strengthened the incorporation of the Northern Provinces into national constitutional politics. At the same time, they created institutional spaces in which regional political interests could develop (Coleman, 1958; Sklar, 1963).

The Constitution also demonstrated the limitations of constitutional reform undertaken without broad participation in constitution-making. The subsequent Macpherson Constitution's greater emphasis on consultation reflected, in part, the political difficulties exposed by the Richards experience. Nigerian constitutional development therefore shows that legitimacy depends not only on the institutions a constitution creates but also on the process through which those institutions are established.

Finally, the Richards Constitution did not establish Nigerian federalism in its mature form. That development came later, particularly with the Lyttleton Constitution of 1954. Nevertheless, Richards created institutional precedents that contributed to the later emergence of federal government. Its historical importance therefore lies in its role as a precursor to federalism and a critical stage in the transformation of Nigerian constitutional politics.

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