7 The 1964 Federal Election Crisis

'I have one advice to give to our politicians: If they have decided to destroy our national unity, then they should summon a round-table conference to decide how our national assets should be divided, before they seal their doom by satisfying their lust for office.... Should the politicians fail to heed this warning, I will venture the prediction that the experience of the Democratic Republic of the Congo will be child's play, if it ever comes to our turn to play such a tragic role.'—President Nnamdi Azikiwe, 10 December 1964, in a 'Dawn Address' to the nation (Mackintosh, 1966: 581).

If the General Strike had deflected politics from the running ethnic and regional conflict to a fresh line of cleavage, this effect was short-lived. As the campaign for the Federal Election heated up during the second half of 1964, all of the energy of Nigerian politics was sucked into the vortex of ethnoregional conflict. Historic tensions between North and South and between the Igbos and their ethnic rivals now reasserted themselves with a vengeance. Vituperative rhetoric was joined by widespread violence and repression, as the main political parties – now polarised into two competing alliances – clashed head-on in a momentous 'struggle for supremacy' that would produce the worst political crisis in Nigerian history. Several elements of this crisis were foreshadowed in the Mid-West Regional Election of February 1964.

PRELUDE: MID-WEST REGIONAL ELECTION

A decisive shift in Nigerian politics began to unfold in October 1963 in a Federal by-election in the Mid-West, when the NPC intruded directly into Southern politics for the first time (Chapter 5). The coalition whose campaign the NPC successfully led, the Mid-West Democratic Front, was composed of Premier Akintola's UPP and 'The Apostle' John Edokpolor's Mid-West People's Congress. The
NCNC bitterly attributed its narrow defeat to 'the introduction of dirty tribal politics by the leaders of the NPC into their campaigns'. The NPC, which had not been averse to exploiting long-standing Urhobo-Igbo tension, denounced the NCNC allegations as proof that the NCNC was only paying lip-service to Nigerian unity. Earlier, Northern Premier Sir Ahmadu Bello had predicted that the NPC would win the Mid-West Regional election the following year (West Africa, 26 October 1963: 1211).

The stakes in that approaching election went beyond the spoils of regional power. This was the opening battle for the Federal Election, due to follow only ten months later. An NPC victory on what the NCNC considered virtually home turf would be a devastating strategic setback, given the tendency of the ruling party in each region to develop overwhelming electoral dominance. It was clear to NCNC leaders that, whatever the new allocation of seats resulting from the second census count (yet to be announced), control of the Mid-West was essential if they hoped to win Federal power. The NPC, on its part, needed a Southern political base, and it apparently lacked confidence that Premier Akintola's party could win an election in the West. An electoral base in the Mid-West would help to insure against an NCNC sweep of the South, which could give it national power if the forthcoming census revealed a Southern population majority (Abernethy, 1964: 10).

A key question in the Mid-West Election was how the Action Group (once a strong political force in the area) would align itself as it struggled to regain its political stature. On 30 November, talks between Chief Osadebay, NCNC Mid-West Leader, and Alhaji Adegbenro, Acting Leader of the Action Group, concluded in the announcement of an electoral alliance between the two parties. Both leaders emphasised the long-term national significance of the pact. Chief Osadebay said, 'It is now time for these two parties to come together.... It would then be a struggle between the “progressives” of the South and the “conservatives” of the North’ (quoted in Post and Vickers, 1973: 93–4).

But the NCNC was bitterly divided on whether to ally (and had even been negotiating simultaneously with the UPP). In December, the NCNC Central Working Committee refused to ratify the alliance with the AG and Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh–NCNC National Treasurer, Federal Finance Minister, and perhaps the most powerful Mid-Western politician – openly denounced it as ‘an act of bad faith’. With him stood the potent political machine of the Otu Edo (the