4 Background: Party Formation in Africa

4.1 Party Formation at Independence

LaPalombara and Weiner (1966: 3) note that... the circumstances under which parties first arise in a developing political system - together with their initial tone and configuration – clearly have an important effect on the kinds of parties which subsequently emerge.

For this reason, it is necessary to return to the initial stage of party formation in Africa and place their evolution in the wider context of social change.

The first political parties emerged in the late colonial era typically outside the electoral sphere and in the undemocratic setting of the colonial state (see Salih 2003: 2; Hodgkin 1961: 46). Party formation was driven by three interrelated processes: the self-organisation of Africans in various proto-political associations, the rise of nationalism, and the gradual political reform introduced by the colonial powers. These developments had a mutual impact that stimulated and shaped party formation.

Colonialism was its own gravedigger as it had to create new social categories, such as cash-crop farmers, migrant labourers, clerks, and teachers (Peel 1990: 63). These new and mostly urban-based social groupings set up the very first African associations, some of which later became building blocks of political parties. A wide range of different associations came into existence and multiplied especially in the interwar period. They included hometown associations, ex-servicemen’s associations, students’ organisations, old boys’ societies and groupings, sports associations, ‘tribal’ unions and ‘improvement associations’, religious bodies and movements, literary societies, study circles, research groups, or burial societies (Hodgkin 1961: 47; see also Wallerstein 1964). In the beginning, most of them were not political groupings as such, they rather comprised a wide range of self-help organisations which substituted the social networks of rural communities and helped their members to accommodate to the new social realities of the fast growing urban centres and mining towns. Effectively, these associations provided a ‘training ground’ for future party leaders and enhanced the communication and self-consciousness of the new African elite (Hodgkin 1961: 47; Ziemer 1978: 45).
The colonial administration took an ambivalent stand as they

... needed voluntary associations to help them spread certain values essential to the
direction of a modern economy, yet they feared that these groups would turn from
promoting approved social change to advocating political change (Wallerstein 1964: 334-335).

Nationalist and Pan-Africanist ideas were pronounced by the urban intelligentsia
since the late 19th century but developed no mass appeal until the interwar period. Proto-parties with avowedly political goals, like the West African
National Congress of British West Africa (WANC), founded 1920 in Accra, were completely unrepresentative of Africans at large (Peel 1990: 63). After the
relatively prosperous 1920s which had drawn more people into the colonial
sphere as cash-crop farmers, migrant labourers, clerks and teachers, the
depression of 1930-31 radicalised many people and gave the nationalist
intelligentsia a chance to make more effective contact with their grievances
(ibid.: 64). Thus, the post-war period saw a rapid growth of nationalism and the
politicisation of voluntary associations, which often became affiliated with
nationalist movements (Wallerstein 1966: 336). Furthermore, the development
of an African press contributed to the dissemination of nationalist ideas.

The leadership of many nationalist parties was drawn from returning
students, like Kwame Nkrumah or Jomo Kenyatta, who were heavily influenced
by Pan-Africanism and sometimes Marxist ideas. The mobilisation of
underprivileged social groups by educated elites became the basic pattern of
successful anticolonial movements (Ansprenger 1997: 19). Many parties drew
on a network of preexisting associations and sought to expand their audience by
turning the multiple grievances of ethnic and occupational demands into
political demands (Wallerstein 1966: 335). In Senegal, Senghor and Dia drew
leaders of ethnic and regional associations into the BDS (Bloc Démocratique
Sénégalaise), for example of the Union Générale des Originaires de la Vallée
du Fleuve or the Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de la Casamance. In
the cities, parties were built around popular groupings of socially inferior
inhabitants, for example the Section des Bijoutiers de Dakar, the Comité des
Jeunes Griots de la Guéle Tapée, or the Section BDS des Chauffeurs de Taxis à
Dakar (Hodgkin 1961: 48). Nationalism started to take up the interests of
various groups, aggregated them and directed them against the colonial
authority.

After the end of the Second World War, a growing resistance to European
domination was apparent in all colonial territories. Even within the colonial
centres, objections against colonialism were raised and a cost-benefit analysis
started to suggest that there were only few advantages from attempting to