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An Analysis of Nigeria-U.S.A Relations, 1960-1993

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the Nigeria-USA relations from the period of 1960-1993. It discusses the foreign policy drive of Nigeria from 1960 which was Pro-West. It analyzes the strained relationship between the two countries during the Nigerian Civil War and over the Angola issue. The benefits of the relationship came to focus. The researcher obtained data from primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include oral interview while the secondary sources include books, newspapers, journals, articles, periodicals, theses, dissertations, internet sources etc. It was found that the Pro-west foreign policy drive of Nigeria from 1960 favoured cordial relationship with USA. It was also found that both countries benefited from the relationship. It was also demonstrated that there was strained relationship between the countries because of the refusal of U.S.A to provide military assistance to Nigeria during the Nigerian Civil War, the Angola issue and the annulment of Presidential election of June 12, 1993. In conclusion, despite the relevance of the relationship there were serious challenges from time to time.

KEYWORDS: Nigeria, USA, Relations, Foreign Policy, Civil War.

INTRODUCTION

The international relationship between Nigeria and United States started in 1960 after Nigeria got independence from Britain. Nation needs other nations for exchange of ideas, for the promotion of trade and for diplomatic purposes (Ediagbonya, 2015: 207). No country is an Island unto itself and no country or kingdom can provide all the resources it needs for development within her territorial borders. The needs of states have therefore created an interdependence international system that affords countries of the world the opportunities of securing from other countries what they lack themselves (Ibid) S. E. Orobator sees international relationship as constituting the sum total of the relationship between two or more sovereign nations at both governmental and non-government levels (Orbator, 2002).

It may be necessary at this point to examine the concept "foreign policy" for proper understanding of the paper under focus. Foreign policy is an essential tool with which states relate to states and non-states actors in the international system (Adofuye, 2014: 12). According to Kolawole, foreign policy aims at influencing the international system towards what it perceives as ideal in consonance with its national interest (Kolawole, 2003: 40).

Reynolds argues that it involves the range of actions of government of a state in its relation with other bodies similarly acting on the international state supposedly in order to advance the nation's interest (Reynolds, 1917:25). Holsti posits that foreign policy deals with the actions of a state towards its external environment (Holsti, 1983: 19)

Foreign policy is a set of tools which are used to pursue and achieve country's national interest. The foreign policy of Nigerian State has continued to change under different governments and leaders. That is usually influenced by the type of government and to a great extent personality of the country's leadership (Osuntoken, 2012: 53).

Since Nigeria got independence in 1960, there has existed robust relationship with the United States of America. It is important to note that strained relationship sometimes existed between the two countries. A glaring example was the strained relationship between the two countries during the period of Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970. Again, the relationship was not cordial during the era of Ramat Muhammed as Head of State, 1975-1976 over the Angola issue.

The USA have been providing various forms of assistance to Nigeria including intelligence sharing, training and equipment support to Nigerian Security Forces (An Interview with Dr. Duyile on 16-4-25). Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and the largest economy on the continent (An Interview with Dr. Ukhurebor, on 8-01-26).

The United States has been an important economic partner for Nigeria with bilateral trade and investment playing a crucial role in the relationship. It is important to note that USA is one of Nigeria's largest trading partner particularly in the oil sector as Nigeria is a major oil producer and exporter.

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1960-1975

USA enjoyed strong affiliation with Nigeria after independence. Most of the country's leaders prior to independence were united that post-independence Nigeria should associate with the western countries especially Britain and U.S.A (Ediagbonya, 2022: 249). In its 1959 election manifesto, the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) which later became the major partner in a post-independence Federal Government had counselled that "Nigeria must maintain the closest relationship with the United Kingdom and should aim at retaining and expanding her existing ties and friendship with the United State of America (Ajayi, 1972:3). The pro-western posture of Nigeria after independence was because of most of our educated elites had their education and training in the west.

Again, during the period of Tafawa Belawa's administration, 1960-1966, the Nigerian press was entirely in the hands of the government and was made to serve as a strong instrument of propaganda in support of western allies as against the communist bloc. The United Kingdom, France, Italy, Spain and other countries in the Western Europe were presented by the press in good light and seen to be ideal and friendly.

The relationship was particularly noticed in the economic and political sectors during this period. The year 1961 was essentially noted in the economic and political ties between the two countries. This was facilitated by the pledge of President John F. Kennedy of $222 million for Nigeria. On December 12, 1961 the President pledged a long-term aid package of $222 million for Nigeria. The economic purpose of this act had a particular significance (Ate, 1988:43). This aid offer was in support of Nigeria's first independent National Development plan. This laid the foundation for the later expansion in Nigeria-US economic relations.

The execution of USAID projects in Nigeria is another dimension. This implementation of USAID projects in the framework of the six-year development plan served as a momentum for increased trade ties. It also provided the opportunity for the great influx of Americans technical assistance personnel into Nigeria. It stimulated the interest of American Companies concerning investment prospects in the country (An Interview with Hon Efosa Igunbor on 4-4-26). The pioneering and pivotal role of USAID and consequently of foreign aid in the development of the foundation of Nigeria-US economic ties in the period is thus underscored (Akinyemi, 1989: 65).

The implication was that by 1966 the USA has established an impressive presence in Nigeria's economic development. Capital aid and technical assistance was the milestone of Nigeria US economic ties in the first phase of their relations. The period between 1967 to 1970, Nigeria witnessed a civil war. There was Nigeria-Biafra war. The Nigerian civil war which started on July 6, 1967 and ended on the 12th January, 1970 was an avoidable collision which occurred when the Nigerian and the Biafran troops exchange salvoes inside the Republic of Biafra (Oluleye, 1985). Judging from the numerical strength of the Nigerian Army and inferiority of the Biafran Army in all respect neither side expected a prolonged war (New Nigeria, 1967).

Unfortunately during this period, there was strained relationship between Nigeria and US. The relations deteriorated when General Gowon in-charge of the Nigeria Federal Government requested weapons from the US to prosecute the war. The United States refused to accept the request probably because, the government was not sure how the war would end bearing in mind her interest in the oil rich Biafra, instead the United States gave humanitarian assistance to Biafra in the form of relief materials.

Thus from 1966-1970's, the United States provided more than $600 million financial aids to provide relief materials to Biafra, eradication of small pox and control measles in Nigeria (Akinyemi, 1989: 65).

The United States made its policy clear at the beginning of the civil war that the government would recognize only the Federal Government of Nigeria, however, it declared that it would not sell any arms to any of the belligerents in the Nigeria Civil War (Oniosilade, 2019). Infact the United State refused to give Nigeria export permit allowing the purchase of arms on a commercial basis from US manufacturers ostensibly because the United States was basically opposed to interference in the internal affairs to another state (Ibid, 24).

Indeed President Nixon and Senator Edward Kennedy, who both belonged to different political parties and were usually disagreeable on issues were openly in support of Biafra (Kolawole, 2003: 53). That, the US refused Nigeria permit to buy arms from its traditional source in time of conflict signaled to Nigerian decision makers that the US did not wish their country well (Omosilade, 2019: 24). In refusing to sell arms to federal Nigeria, both President Johnson and President Nixon considered Nigeria a British responsibility (Tamuna, 1989: 20). Little surprise that relationship between the two countries was not cordial. Consequently, there was an abrupt decline in the economic ties between the two countries in foreign trade, foreign investment and capital aid.

According to Ate, US-Nigeria total imports dropped from 16.2 percent to 12.8 in the first quarter of 1968, there was no new investment by American companies during the war period and the work of USAID virtually came to a standstill (Ate, 1988: 43). When the war ended in 1970, Nigeria diversified following her sphere of influence because of US betrayal. However, the relationship between Nigeria and USA improved after the civil war. United States overtook Britain as the major recipient of Nigeria's exports to the United States were dominated by crude oil (Ibid, p. 180).

Again, Nigerian became the second most important supplier of crude oil to the United States in a period of critical demand for oil in the world market correspondently, there was expansion of the United States investment presence in the Nigerian economy. The investment was in the oil sector by American companies such as Phillips, Exxon, Mobil, Gulf etc.

Ojo noted that also barely four years after the civil war, the US investments in Nigeria stood at about ₦658 Million which was second to that of Britain which was ₦823 Million (Ojo, 1981: 48). The non-alignment doctrine came to focus during this period as the country associated with both the west and east depending on what was considered as those issues that would promote her national interest.

1975-1979

This period is seen by scholars as the golden era in Nigeria's foreign policy. On 29 July 1975 Brigadier Muritala Ramat Mohammed assumed the leadership of Nigeria through a bloodless coup. This is often regarded as a counter coup which removed General Yakubu Gowon as the Head of State. He was representing Nigeria as the Head of State in a meeting at Kampala in Uganda. Under Muritala Ramat Mohammed, the idea of Africa as centre-piece of Nigeria's foreign policy was finally concretized. He helped to shape the political out-look of Nigeria and Africa as a whole (An Interview with Dr. Duyile at Ado on 16-4-2025).

From the onset, he made it very clear that Nigeria would no longer sit on the fence on important issues affecting African sovereignty. The most outstanding period was when Nigeria openly supported the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and urged on all members of O.A.U to support it. Nigeria refused to support National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) which was the interest of USA.

Akinyemi noted that Nigeria under Murtala's government disagreed with the United States preferred position of withholding recognition from the Soviet and Cuban-backed MPLA (Akinyemi, 1989: 88). This disagreement with the USA's position on Angola issue signalled Nigeria's intention to pursue an independent Africa-centered foreign policy regardless of cold war pressure from western powers.

In his address to O.A.U summit in Addis Ababa, he said:

Mr. Chairman, Africa has come of age, it is no longer under the orbit of any extra continental power. It should no longer take orders from any country however powerful. The fortunes of Africa are in our hands to make or to mar. For too long, have we been kicked around. For too long have we been treated like adolescents who cannot discern their interests and act accordingly. For too long has it been presumed that African needs outside expert to tell him who are his friends and who are his enemies. The time has come when we should make it clear that we can decide for ourselves that we know our own interest and how to protect that interest. That we are capable of resolving African problems without presumptuous lessons in ideological dangers which more often than not have no relevance for us nor for the problem at hand. (A Speech delivered at the extraordinary summit of O.A.U in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, January 11, 1976 by General Ramat Muritala Muhammed)

The speech showed that Africa would be self-reliant and within the confine of the law would continue to fight human enslavement especially against Black Africa. As a result of Muritala's effort on African Liberation movements, many countries were gendered and fought for their independence e.g. Cape Verde, Morocco, Mozambique Angola.

This radical foreign policy under General Muritala Ramat strained the country's relationship with the USA to the extent that twice, Henry Kissinger, the then United Stated Secretary of State was denied, permission to visit Nigeria. The open grant of financial and military assistance to the MPLA marked a radical departure where such aid was small and not openly given.

Following the assassination of General Ramat Mohammed on February 13, 1976 by Lt. Col. Diinka, Lt. General Olusegun Obasanjo became the Head of State. The regime made Nigeria proud and gave her a voice in international politics Fawole noted that Nigeria under him succeeded in monopolizing the chairmanship of the UN Anti-Apartheid Committee throughout the period (Fawole, 2003).

Again under this regime, there was strain relationship between Nigeria and USA during the period of President Gerald Ford. It is necessary to state that the relationship between the two countries improved during the administration of President Jimmy carter who was concerned about the freedom of Africa states.

1979-1983

In October 1979, President Shehu Shagari was sworn in as the President of Nigeria having won the Predential election under the banner of National Party of Nigeria (NPN) Aremu and Adu noted that the brief period of Shagari regime of four years did not stop the military from coming back to power in 1983 December (Aremu and Adu, 2017: 10). The four years of Shagari was considered a foreign policy recess because there was no notable achievement (Ibid). This era covered Nigeria's Second Republic under President Shehu Shagari and US administrations under Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagain.

The relationship during this period was mainly in the area of oil trade and democratic practices inspite of the political disagreements, USA remained a major buyer of Nigerian crude oil hence the relevance of economic ties between the two nations. Nigeria disagreed with USA during the period because of US support for apartheid regime in South Africa. Nigeria was strongly opposed to white minority rule in Zimbabwe and apartheid regime in South Africa.

This is against the backdrop that the idea of Africa as centre-piece of Nigeria's foreign was reflected during this period. The main aim and objectives of Nigeria's foreign policy may have been more sharply and pointedly defined by successive regimes over the years, but they have undergone no major changes or modification since independence. The orientation had remained basically a commitment to Africa and Pan-Africanism. Fawole posited that Nigeria under General Obasanjo succeeded in monopolizing the chairmanship of the UN Anti-Apartheid Committee throughout the period (Fawole, 2003).

It is particularly noted that the successful transition to a US style Presidential system in Nigeria in October, 1979 from parliamentary system, 1963-1966 was well received in Washington which improved the diplomatic exchanges compared to the previous military governments.

In December 31st, 1983, there was a military coup in Nigeria led by General Muhammad Buhari which terminated the Second Republic of Nigeria. The coup removed President Shehu Shagari from power. General Buhari now became the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed forces. Genearl Muhammadu Buhari was a military dictator. "It was that glorious Saturday morning of 31st December, 1983 that the termination of the era of our corrupt politicians of the Second Republic came to the hearing of millions of Nigerians" (Ediagbonya, 1984). Infact Sani Abacha's radio broadcast that Saturday morning raised the hopes of over 75 millions who lived four years of despair under the turpitude of the Second Republic (Ibid). Adeyemi noted that having overthrown the corruption-infected Shehu Shagari's regime, the General Buhari tried to instill discipline (Adeyemi, 1999). The relationship between Nigeria and USA was strained because of human rights violation and lack of respect for the rule of law. His reputation at the level of foreign policy was nothing to write home about. General Buhari was rather xenophobic in his treatment of neigbouring countries and was engaged in prolonged border closure and aliens expulsion and appeal to re-open the borders failed (Fawole, 2003: 134).

He promulgated decrees No. 20, 21 and 22 of 1984. These decrees prescribed death penalties including death by firing squared for a variety of economic crimes such as tampering with electricity and NEPA installations, cocaine addiction, drug trafficking, currency counterfeiting and trafficking, illegal oil bunkering etc (Promulgation of Decrees, 20, 21 and 22, 1984).

Many persons in Nigeria became victims of death sentences e.g Ojuolape, Ogedegbe, Barthomew Owoh despite widespread condemnation from home and abroad. As part of gross abuse of human rights, he jailed two-Guardian journalists, Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor.

General Buhari's closure of the borders and the sudden currency change virtually wrecked the economies of some of the states particularly those of Lake Chad, Niger Republic and Benin that were dependent on Nigeria for survival (*News watch,* 1985).

From the foregoing the relationship between Nigeria and USA was battered during this period as there was static style of discipline, high-handedness, military fiat, coercion and arbitrariness in governance. General Buhari was ousted from power in a palace coup and removed from office on 27 August, 1985.

1985-1993

General Ibrahim Babangida, came to power on 27th August, 1985 after the palace coup that removed General Buhari from office. Initially, he made a lot of friends at home and abroad and was loved by Nigerians because of his policy and disposition to government (Eteborn, 2021: 71-85). He strengthened Nigerian foreign relations. The proximate neighbours in West Africa were particularly delighted when he began to distance his regime from the policies of the ousted Buhari's regime that had literally destroyed the economies of the immediate neighbours (Fawole, 2003:151).

The excellent performance of Babangida's regime at this initial stage attracted much commendation worldwide. Initially there was cordial relationship between Nigeria and USA because of the way and manner he conducted the IMF Loan. The government instituted a ruthless economic restructuring in line with IMF standard prescription for debt ridden economies and devaluated the naira through the instrumentality of the Second tier Foreign Exchange Marked (SFEM) in 1986 (Ibid, 168-169). With a favourable standing with IMF, the regime was able to negotiate debt reschuling with the Paris club of official creditors with other commercial banks in 1986 (IMF Survey, 1988: 88).

In line with the good relationship with the West, USA assisted the Babangida regime to establish the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA). However, the relationship between Nigeria and USA became strained when General Babangida annulled the Presidential election of June 12, 1993. The election was assessed to be free and fair by both local and international election observers in which Chief M.K.O. Abiola won.

The USA issued a public statement in Lagos warning that it would not take kindly at any pretext to frustrate the transition programme (Public Statement Issued by Brien, Director of the USIS, June, 1993). The reaction of Nigeria was to expel Brien from the country. USA recalled its military attach from Lagos and expelling his counterpart in Washington (Ibid, 172).

USA also suspended all assistance relating to military and imposed restrictions on the issuance of visas for senior government personnel and military. So the relationship between the two countries became totally strained.

CONCLUSION

USA enjoyed strong affiliation with Nigeria after independence because of the nature of Nigeria's foreign policy drive. USA and other countries in the Western Europe were presented by the press in good light and seen to be idea and friendly. The foreign policy of Nigeria at independence in 1960 during the era of Sir Tafawa Balewa was pro-west.

Even in its 1959 election manifesto, the Northern People's Congress (NPC) had counselled that "Nigeria must maintain the closest relationship with the United Kingdom and should aim at retaining and expanding her existing ties and friendship with the United States of America. So the state of the relationship between Nigeria and USA could be said to be cordial. This was clearly demonstrated in the political and economic sectors.

However, the relationship was strained between the two countries during the period of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970. The strained relationship was a result of the refusal of the USA to supply the necessary military weapons to Nigeria to persecute the war. The United States of America made its policy clear that the beginning of the Civil War that the government would recognize only the Federal Government of Nigeria, however it declared that it would not sell any arms to any of the belligerents in the Nigeria Civil War. So USA refused to give Nigeria export permit allowing the purchase of arms on a commercial basis from US manufacturers.

It must be noted that during this period, the Federal Government needed weapons to stop the Biafran forces from seceding. The government relied on Britain and USA to supply the weapons, unfortunately they failed. It was at this point that the Federal Government directed her attention to USSR for the supply of military weapons and fortunately USSR rose to the challenge and assisted Nigeria. After the civil war ended in 1970, cordial relationship began between Nigeria and USA. Again between 1975-1979, the relationship became strained especially during the regime of General Ramat Mohammad over Angola issue. However the cordial relationship during this period was in the era of General Olusegun Obasanjo when President Jimmy Carter came to power in USA. This was due to the fact that Jimmy Carter promoted the interest of African nations.

The same could not be said of the period, 1985-1993. The period, 1983-1985 could be described as foreign policy recess. The USA's support for apahrtied regime in South Africa and the closure of borders by General Buhari strained the relationship further. Initially there was cordial relationship between Nigeria and USA during the era of IBB, however the relationship became strained when General Babangida annulled the Presidential election of June 12, 1993.

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