

NIGERIAN FOREIGN POLICY: AN ASSESSMENT OF ABDULSALAMI ABUBAKAR'S ADMINISTRATION (1998-1999)



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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the foreign policy of Nigeria during Abdulsalami Abubakar regime from 1998-1999. This is important in view of the fact that an analysis of external relations of a country is often understood within the context of its foreign policy principles, statements and objectives, which define her national interests. The paper examines the achievements and challenges faced during Abdulsalami Abubakar's administration at both bilateral and multilateral levels. The paper uses qualitative method to analyse data collected from secondary source. The objective is to discuss merit and demerit of his administration. The paper recommends the need to strengthen economic transactions, diplomatic engagements, security relations among other in Nigerian foreign policy. The findings of the paper reveal that there is the need to strengthen bilateral and multilateral relations in order to further boost and promote future relationship between Nigeria and other countries.

Keywords: *Foreign policy, Abdulsalami Abubakar Administration, Nigeria*

Introduction

Nigeria's foreign policy environment is, both internal and external, and intricately connected to one another. Largely, foreign policy cannot be divorced from domestic environment and domestic politics. Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and had experimented democratic systems of government firstly, from 1960 to 1966, then from 1979 to 1983 and now from 1999 to 2007. Nigeria had vast economic and human resources. In particular, it

is a major oil producing country. The buoyant state of Nigeria's economy in the 1970s, in the continent, where most countries have continued to face chronic economic difficulty, is one of the chief factors that have made it possible for Nigeria to have played a leading role in Africa. This role was accomplished bilaterally, multilaterally or via such international institutions like Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), African Union (AU), Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the United Nations Organization (UNO) and Organization of Islamic Conference of which Nigeria is a member (Gambari, 2004).

In Africa, Nigeria as the giant played a major role in the socio-economic, political and cultural development of the continent. This is evident by the country's contributions to mediation, and peace keeping operations in Africa and other parts of the world. This can be seen in its role as one of the founders of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Organization of African Unity (OAU). Nigeria has played a key role in the support for African Liberation Movements, as well as in the promotion of the realization of independence in many African countries.

Independence has allowed Nigeria to exercise its sovereignty until the attainment of independence in 1960, foreign policy issues were essentially at the prerogative of Britain; Nigeria's former colonial master. Thus, after independence, the Federal Government of Nigeria, to whom the country's constitution vested the question of foreign policy, formulated and exercised its foreign policy objectives. These included; the safe guarding the country's independence, unity and security; the promotion of the economic and social well-being of Nigerian citizens, the defense of the territorial integrity of African states; and the promotion of world peace and security (Akinyemi, 1999).

Conceptual Clarification

According to Akinyemi (1999) he argued that foreign policy is the action of state which has effect beyond the border of state taking the activities in the international behaviours of state. The element of such state behaviours include, (a) the declaration and implementation of state policies which affect other states. (b) the partners, trends and direction of a state trade and economic relations with other states. (c) types of friends and enemies they make. (d) The beliefs and attitudes of states towards peace, war, change among others. Therefore, foreign policies are the outcome of a complicated process in which many actions both within the state and beyond its borders are influential. No state can provide the welfare of its people without participation in the

international system or without continuous cooperation with other states. Gambari (2004) is of the opinion that foreign policy is any mutually adopted and fundamentally agreed principles that a state adopts in pursuing its interest in the international system. While Adeniji (2005) provide a definition slightly different from other scholars when he says foreign policy is the pattern of behaviours a state adopt in pursuing its goals, objectives and interests in its relations with other nations in the international arena.

Theoretical Framework

The paper uses linkage theory as its theoretical framework. The theory posits that there are linkages between foreign policy of a country, domestic and international environments. Realists emphasize on the normal channels of inter-state relations. This involves ties between governmental as well as bureaucratic arrangements. Formal ties among Non-Governmental Organizations and those developed through Trans National Organizations such as corporations. The linkage theory takes care of realism, and idealism. The usage of this theory is not new. This is not only because of its significance but also because of the relative ease and comprehensiveness with which it approaches the question of what determines relations among nations. Their background, beliefs and predispositions have important bearings upon foreign policy and the behaviour of nations. The role of Nigeria's leaders such as Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, Shehu Aliyu Shagari and Obasanjo in the establishment, severance, and restoration of diplomatic relations with some African states serves to demonstrate the point under consideration. The linkage theory goes beyond the domestic roots of foreign policy. It argues that whatever the strengths or weaknesses of the domestic factors in determining relations among nations, foreign policies of nations are also influenced by the external or the international environment.

Methodology

The data is predominantly empirical rather than speculative. The data was obtained through a thorough and careful examination of the existing literature on Nigeria-Foreign Policy during General Abdulsalami Abubakar. Therefore, the sources of data included textbooks, journals, magazines, newspapers, internal sources, and government publications.

Nigerian Foreign Policy: An Assessment of Abdulsalami Abubakar's Administration (1998-1999)

In fact, the sudden death of Sani Abacha on June 8, 1998, paved the way for the emergence of Abdulsalami Abubakar as the Head of State. This was

made possible by the incarceration of the erstwhile second-in-command to Abacha, Lieutenant General Oladipo Diya for planning an abortive coup de'etat. Thus, General Abubakar can be described as a "child of circumstance". Although General Abubakar ruled for barely a year, it is still possible to access his foreign policy, since every country's foreign policy continually revolves around their domestic environment (Ayam, 2004).

To that effect, at its inception on June 9, 1998, General Abubakar's regime inherited an explosive and volatile socio-political situation. Under his predecessor, General Abacha, Nigeria had become a pariah state as a result of its poor human rights record, and sanctions imposed on it for not returning the country to a full blown democracy. At the domestic level, many opposition figures were either in jail, underground or had fled into exile, while the wounds caused by the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential Elections by General Ibrahim Babangida were still festering. General Abubakar thus, emerged as the leader of a traumatised country that was in need of healing. He also had the duty of withdrawing a military that had been badly bruised by decades of involvement in political governance, back to its traditional forte of national defence (Garba, 2001).

General Abubakar, in his early policy pronouncements, and actions demonstrated his willingness to de-escalate political tension by embarking on the disengagement of the military from the Nigerian political arena, and restore a peaceful transition to civil rule.

According to General Abubakar (1999:p12)... even if the Nigerian military had carried out ambitious programmes, there is always a time in the history of the country that democracy must take over. When Abacha died, I understood that it was time, for we, the military, were totally discredited (Fawole, 2003:36).

In this regard, all political detainees and prisoners of conscience were released, while opposition members in exile were encouraged to return home to contribute their quota to nation-building. Also, there were fundamental improvements in the rule of law, a better relationship with civil society and the press, and the establishment of a presidential committee on the Niger Delta. Most important of all, was the establishment of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) which led to the successful accomplishment of the transition programme and the handover of power to a democratically elected President on May 29, 1999.

With the concrete steps taken to transfer power to an elected democratic government, the international community applauded the Abubakar regime, an indication that Nigeria was out of isolation. The heavy traffic of international

dignitaries such as the then Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), Kofi Annan and US delegation led by Susan Rice provided some credibility to the government. Indeed, Abuja, the Federal Capital of the country suddenly became a Mecca of international political and religious leaders (Adeniji, 2005).

On the external dimension, the war in Sierra Leone gave an opportunity to the regime to launch itself and prove that Nigeria was still relevant in the scheme of things in West Africa, an area where Nigeria had stamped its authority. The ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) stepped into Sierra Leone to restore President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah who was overthrown by Major Johnny Paul Koroma to power. Also, as regards the imbroglio in Guinea-Bissau, General Abubakar as ECOWAS Chairman demonstrated his willingness to find a peaceful solution to the crisis, instead of forceful intervention via ECOMOG as was the case with Sierra Leone. The mediation of ECOWAS leaders culminated in the signing of the Abuja Accord on November 1, 1999. However, disagreement over the implementation of the peace accord led to the take-over of power on May 6, 1999, and the deployment of ECOMOG troops that comprised 110 Togolese, 146 Nigerians and 145 Beninois nationals (Edwin, 2005). In a nutshell, the peace initiative in Guinea Bissau recorded limited success under the leadership of Nigeria.

What can be considered as the biggest snag on the administration of General Abubakar was the sudden death in detention, of Chief MKO Abiola, the supposed winner of the aborted June 12, Presidential Elections, who was detained under Decree Number 2 by the former military administration of General Abacha. Chief Abiola's death on July 6, 1998, while at a meeting with a high profile delegation from the US led by Susan Rice was mired in controversy and attracted wide scale violence domestically and international condemnation from notable figures like Reverend Jesse Jackson and Walter Carrington, the former US ambassador to Nigeria. Susan Rice gave a graphic detail of the sad event that resulted in the death of Chief Abiola's thus:

At the beginning of our discussion, Moshood Abiola had a coughing fit. First of all we thought that it was an irritation of his throat before it dawned upon us that it was a heart attack. We then decided to call a medical doctor who came immediately. Unfortunately, it was too late (Fawole, 2003:37).

General Highlight on His Foreign Policy

General Abdulsalami Abubakar inherited a nation almost tottering on the brink of implosion, a political transition programme wracked by suspension and disbelief, some dangerous polarized military establishments, a

civil society that was up in arms against continue military rule and a dangerously isolated country held at arm's length by most of erstwhile friends and allies, and palpably hostile international community. At the inception the country was already plagued by the various sanctions which had been imposed since 1995 which include withdrawal of economic aids, scholarship grants, cultural exchanges, suspension of bilateral and multi-lateral military cooperation, visa restriction etc.

One may likely say that the modest foreign policy success of Abdulsalam's regime cannot be measured in absolute terms or independently from other variables. It may rather be measured against the backdrop of its inheritance from his predecessor. It was under Abdulsalam's regime that Nigeria was gradually accepted once again into committee of nations with major international organizations, such as the Common Wealth and the Unite Nations looking more favourably disposed towards the country. He showed by example to African countries the implementation and the demilitarization of politics and governance, which gave hope to other African countries hoping to end military rule and return to democracy. At the international level he established cordial bilateral relations between Nigeria and its major allies in the West. He can be cridited with leaving a relative healthy foreign policy legacy for his successor. His willingness to terminate military rule endeared him to the rest of the world.

Conclusion

Nigeria's foreign policy under General Abubakar's one year in office as the Nigerian Head of State reflected the country's domestic priorities, particularly reconciliation and democratisation. This won a lot of respect for the regime as it facilitated the return of Nigeria to the mainstream of the international community, and once more gave credibility and legitimacy to Nigeria's leadership credentials in Africa, and beyond.

Recommendations

In order to ensure strong and viral foreign policy pursuit, the paper recommends the need to strengthen bilateral and multilateral relations in order to further boost and promote future relationship with the community of nations as a result of Nigeria's status as a pariah nation during General Sani Abatcha's administration. These should include economic transactions, diplomatic engagements, security relation, and political relation, among others

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