

# **African Liberation and Its Continued Relevance to Nigeria's Foreign Policy**

**Franc Ter Abagen, PhD**

**Department of Political Science, Benue State University, Makurdi, Nigeria**

**terabegan@gamil.com;+234-8036802716**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines African Liberation and its continued relevance to Nigeria's foreign policy. It reveals that the total, cultural, social, economic and political liberation of Africa is one of the fundamental objectives of Nigeria's foreign policy since her independence in 1960 till date. In upholding the foregoing foreign policy objective, Nigeria committed moral, material and financial assistance to various liberation movements in some African countries still under any form of colonization or foreign domination. Nigeria was also the brains behind the formations of OAU in 1963 and ECOWAS in 1975 which also served as veritable platforms for Nigeria to further struggle for the liberation of these countries, such as Namibia, Angola, Zimbabwe etc. This sacrifice and commitment made by the Nigerian government resulted to liberate them from their former colonies. Equally, Nigeria also gave financial and technical support to these newly independent (liberated) African countries to take-off. It concludes that Nigeria has played and will continue to play the role of a big brother in the African continent.

**Keywords:** Liberation, Foreign Policy, Commitment, Movements, Committee

## **Introduction**

In the words of Bukarambe (2000:117-119), Nigeria's policy towards African liberation revolved around four related strategies. The first is the pursuit of direct ties with the liberation movements recognized by the Organization of African Union (OAU) Liberation Committee. The OAU conditionally served the purpose of keeping Nigeria's policies in line with agreed African positions, while the direct ties facilitated the channelling of additional resources to the liberation movements. In April, 1976, the South West African Peoples' Organisation (SWAPO) became the

first liberation movement to be permitted to open offices in Nigeria. Therefore, the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) of South Africa followed. The presence of the representatives of the various movements enabled easier co-ordination of direct assistance which usually involved scholarships; relief materials for those displaced living in refuge camps in the neighbouring countries; support items for the guerilla cadre; and generally financial support for their worldwide operations.

The second strategy involved the mobilization of the Nigerian public in support of the whole doctrine of African Liberation which by extension, also spills over to the concept of African unity. Given that apartheid and the organized racism that defined settler colonialism was an emotional issue with all Africans, successive Nigerian governments habitually employed rhetorics that cut a chord with the general public. Such strategies of rousing public sentiments also served the additional purpose of popularizing the government of the day. To this end, the 1970s saw the establishment of the National Committee Against Apartheid (NACAP) and the Southern Africa Relief Fund (SARF) at the behest of the federal government. Principally, NACAP was intended to be the instrument for mobilizing and sustaining public attention, while SARF aimed at drawing direct individual participation by raising voluntary financial and material donations. The processes were then disbursed to the various liberation movements and the affected civilian population living outside their respective countries. Scholarships were also awarded.

Nigeria's third strategy was to engage the foreign powers (usually Western) that were seen as the allies and protectors of the white minority government. There were points of specific reference: Britain was held responsible for Zimbabwe (Rhodesia); Portugal was responsible for Angola, Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde, and all the major Western powers combined (eg, United States, Britain, France, Germany) for the persistent defiance of the white minority requires.

And there were genuine complications as well; these same powers were also Nigeria's main trading partners and creditors such that confronting them over anti-colonialism involved the risks of damaging or else threatening hard national political and economic interests. Furthermore, there was the reality of the Cold War and the East-West rivalry which routinely clouded the judgment of these countries. Still, Nigeria tried to assert itself even within these constraints. There were symbolic high points such as defying the United States to recognize MPLA government in Angola in November, 1975, and the nationalization of British Petroleum (BP) in 1977. And then there was the persistent stream of harsh rhetoric denouncing these powers at every turn and forum. Finally, Nigeria's fourth approach was the grant of instant material support for the newly emerging government as they grappled with their circumstances.

A Nation's level of involvement in various international issues is often the expression of its general orientation towards the rest of the world. By orientation here, we mean a nation's general attitudes and commitments towards the external environment, its fundamental strategy for accomplishing its domestic and external objectives or interests and aspirations. A nation's general strategy results from a series of cumulative decisions made in an effort to adjust objectives, values and interests to some conditions and characteristics of the domestic and external environments. Accordingly, the foreign policy of a nation-state has to do with the preservation of its independence and security, and secondly, with the pursuit and protection of its economic interests. Foreign policy is the aspect of a national policy that pertains to the external environment, and involves the enunciation of principles and equally indicates a country's position on major international issues-that is to say that, foreign policy is concerned with substance and content of external relations (Abia, 2000:80-81).

Foreign policy has been conceptualized differently by different scholars. According to Abagen and Tyona (2019:66), foreign policy is the promotion and protection of a country's national interest in the international arena. Equally, W. Wallace sees foreign policy as a high diplomacy, as concerned primarily with other states, with international stability and the rules of the international system, and with the promotion of the national interest through the cultivation of good relations with other governments and the negotiation and maintenance of international agreements (cited in Abia, 2000).

There are wide ranges of foreign policy objectives pursued by the Nigerian government in respect to geographic area. According to Section 19 of the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, states that:

The State (Nigeria) shall promote African unity, as well as total political, economic, social and cultural liberation of Africa and all other forms of international cooperation conducive of the consolidation of universal peace and mutual respect and friendship among all peoples and states, and shall combat racial discrimination in all its manifestations.

Therefore, this paper examines African liberation and its continued relevance to Nigeria's foreign policy. In doing this, the paper is divided into three sections, the introduction which is currently running, Nigeria's foreign policy and African liberation, and draws a conclusion.

### **Nigeria's Foreign Policy and African Liberation**

Nigeria, at the attainment of her independence in 1960, spelt her foreign policy towards her African neighbours in four principles viz:

- a) The principle of Sovereign equality of all African States.
- b) The principle of respect for the independence, Sovereignty and territorial integrity of every African State.

- c) The principle of non-interference in domestic affairs of other African States.
- d) The principle of commitment to functional cooperation as a means of promoting African unity (Mbachu, 2011:1996).

Balewa's commitment towards the emancipation of all African territories under foreign domination, and the eradication of racial discrimination, came as an additional principle of Nigeria's policy towards Africa. The nation's commitment to this principle has varied according to regimes. All the same, it has come to the observation of critics that successive Nigerian governments have abided by the above principles strongly. Again, Balewa's role as a brother's keeper in African matters manifested shortly after independence. It became the most overt conflict between Nigeria and a Western power, when France persisted in testing atomic weapons in the Algerian Sahara. After several warnings, the Balewa government suddenly severed diplomatic relations with Paris on January 5, 1961. Nigeria imposed a complete embargo on all French goods and gave the French Ambassador forty-eight hours to leave Lagos (Mbachu, 2011:96-97).

Nigeria came of age when the internal chaos of the former Belgian Congo was ripest. In his 1960 foreign policy address, Prime Minister Balewa declared his knowledge of the fact that Africa was changing every day. His address further asserts:

The good developments thrive with the bad ones, and that Africa was troubled by the signs of the ideological war between the great powers of the world creeping into Africa. Among other things, he stated: we shall persuade the African leaders to take serious note of this distressing trend... so that we may all find a way to unite our efforts in preventing Africans from becoming an area of crisis and world tensions (Mbachu, 2011:97).

Nigeria's activities in African international relations generally was geared towards the promotion of African unity and solidarity, the strength of commitment to the elimination of colonialism and racism in Africa, and the fostering of economic cooperation (Aluko, 1981:24). Therefore, as stated

by Abagen and Tyona (2018:283), Nigeria's commitment to further promote the central tenets of her foreign policy objectives was in the forefront of the establishment of a continental body and a regional body that is, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) formed in May, 1963 and was transformed in 2003 to become the African Union (AU) as well as the formation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975.

Importantly, under the Balewa government, Nigeria had already been concerned with African unity, she did seemingly been content if her stand was supported by a majority of OAU member states, especially by those belonging to the former Monrovia group. Sometimes indeed it would appear that she was unperturbed to find herself opposed even by a majority of OAU members. For example, Nigeria was almost alone in opposing the exclusion of Moise Tshombe, the then Congolese Prime Minister from the OAU summit in Cairo in 1964. On a number of further occasions in 1964-1965, she continued to support the Tshombe government, even going so far as to defend the American-Belgian rescue operation in the Congo (Zaire) when this was attacked by twenty-two Afro-Asia countries in the Security Council of the United Nations. Nigeria has begun to play a much more vigorous part in the task of eliminating colonialism and racism on the African continent. Under the Balewa government this part was largely limited to a modest contribution to the Special Fund of the OAU Liberation Committee and to giving moral support to Liberation Movements. But, since late 1968, when the involvement of Portugal, South Africa and Rhodesia on the side of the Biafrans became evident, Nigeria has been advocating and increase in the contributions made by all African States to the Special Fund of the Liberation Committee. In February, 1969, the Nigerian spokesman at the Council of Ministers in Addis Ababa said that, his government was ready to grant 'additional funds' to the Liberation Movements, apart from its regular contribution (Aluko, 1981:24-26).

In June, 1971, Dr. Okoi Arikpo, the Nigerian Foreign Minister, severely criticized the budget of about £1 million approved for the Liberation Committee for its work during 1971-1972. He described it as 'a pathetically paltry budget... which would cover not more than a day's expenditure for a moderate army. It seems reasonable to suggest that it was this type of appeal, backed by the OAU secretariat and the enthusiasm of King Hassan of Morocco who promised to make a personal contribution of \$1 million, that made the Rabat summit decide to increase by fifty percent members' contributions to the Special Fund of the Liberation Committee. Apart from her contributions to the Special Fund, which before the Rabat increases amounted to about £84,000 a year and later became 'some £126,000, Nigeria has since 1968 (according to Dr Arikpo) been providing direct bilateral assistance to freedom fighters, supplying trucks and other types of military hardware, medical supplies, clothing and food. Leaders of freedom movements have been invited to visit Nigeria, among them, Amiiar Cabral, the leader of the PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau), Oliver Tambo of the African National Congress of South Africa, and the Reverend Abel Muzorewa of the African National Council of Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). Another feature of Nigeria's intensified concern to speed up the total de-colonization of Africa has been the promotion of regional defence pacts. These are linked to the proposal for what Dr Arikpo called 'an African task force' which would help to defend African countries in the front line of colonialist or racist offenses, as well as assisting in the liberation struggle. The idea of a regional defence pact was strongly supported by the OAU Defence Committee (under Nigerian Chairmanship from 1970-1971) and by the secretariat in Addis Ababa. Other Nigerian initiatives included the proposal that the OAU should give specific African countries the responsibility for liberating particular colonial territories, and General Gowon's demand in June 1971 that within the next three years, one colonial territory should be liberated by the OAU (Aluko, 1981:26-27).

The origin of foreign policy radicalism can be located in the open declaration by General Murtala Muhammed that Nigeria would henceforth make Africa the cornerstone of its external relations, a rhetoric that was immediately backed up by the spirit recognition of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) faction in the Angolan struggle for self-determination. This unilateral action, in violation of previously agreed OAU position, was in response to intelligence reports that apartheid South African troops were already deep inside Angola fighting on the side of Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). One of the three guerrilla factions engaged in the struggle for control of the newly independent country. The Muhammed government's swift action received widespread endorsement from Nigerians who saw their country beginning to take the lead as they had expected it to be doing since independence. General Muhammed exuded the confidence of a sure-footed leader who had mastery of the intricate politics of African affairs and was willing to do whatever it would take to make Nigeria the continental *primus inter pares* that its nationals had always dreamt of long before their country gained independence (Fawole, 2003:90-91).

The General Murtala Muhammed regime's policy thrusts were also aided by the booming oil-based economy that it inherited from its predecessor. Nigeria was already, by the mid-1970s, Africa's richest country and Africa's most prominent member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), a major crude oil supplier to the United States, and a country with enough liquidity not only to refuse external aid, but at the same time dole out largess to other less-endowed African countries. As of 1975 when the Muhammed regime came into power, Nigeria's overall standing in Africa was quite impressive. It had 17.5 percent of Africa's total population, and 22 percent of Sub-Saharan Africa's, with the implication that one in every four black African was a Nigerian. Economically, it had 16.3 percent of Africa's total GNP and 23.6 percent of Sub-

Saharan Africa's. Added to this demographic superiority and a booming economy was a large standing Army of 270,000 men, which constituted 66.9 percent of the entire Armed Forces of Sub-Saharan Africa. Its annual defence expenditure of \$977 million in 1975 was 42.7 percent of the total defence appropriations for the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa. This curious combination of vital statistics and the occurrence of significant African issues of the era made Muhammed/Obasanjo tenure a period of intense and activist foreign policy pursuits (Fawole, 2003:92-93).

Fawole further stressed that the opportunity to act on the Zimbabwean struggle came in the mid-1970s when the OAU sought to bring together the two principal liberation movements, that is, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), and the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU) as the Patriotic Front alliance to co-ordinate their resistance to white minority rule. Prior to this rather novel OAU initiative, Nigeria had always favoured the formation of coalitions, especially in multi-ethnic societies, as a sure way to prevent a situation whereby certain sections would have and use power to the exclusion of others and thus engender domestic rancor and instability. But Nigeria's favourable disposition towards a coordinated approach came for reappraisal when the white minority regime of Prime Minister Ian Smith unilaterally decided to select a few local leaders (especially Reverend Ndabaningi Sithole, Bishop Abel Muzorewa and Chief Jeremiah Chirau) and sought to transfer 'power' to them in a dubious internal settlement that excluded the major nationalist groups. Nigeria had no choice but to set up its support for the ZANU/ZAPU Patriotic Front, whose guerrillas were intensifying the war of liberation. It should be remarkable that there was evidence of Britain's complicity in this dubious arrangement which not have given independence to the people.

Since Nigeria had done everything to persuade Britain of the unacceptability of the internal settlement to no avail, the Obasanjo regime took the most dramatic step of nationalizing the assets of British Petroleum (BP) company in Nigeria. Announced on July 31, 1979, the eve of the commonwealth summit scheduled for Lusaka, Zambia, the action had intended dramatic effect of arm twisting the British government of Margaret Thatcher from recognizing the dubious internal political settlement that excluded the main guerrilla factions that had engaged in the liberation war since the 1960s. The import of the nationalization inhered in the fact that BP was at the time the largest British investment in Nigeria and possibly the whole of Africa. And coming on the heels of the previous nationalization of British-owned Barclays Bank and Standard Bank, and deliberate discrimination against British firms in the award of government contracts, the British were unmistakably put on notice that Nigeria was willing to employ economic measures to achieve its objectives of African liberation and eradication of racism. There was also no doubt that the timing was deliberately chosen for good effect. And the British government got the message loud and clear that its plans to recognize the illegal internal settlement in Zimbabwe would be resisted by all means (Fawole, 2003:107-108). Thus, the Obasanjo economic action on the British hastened the Lancaster Conference that ushered in true independence for Zimbabwe in 1980.

From all manifested indications, Africa was the centre-piece of Shagari's Nigeria foreign policy and received priority attention. While speaking at a dinner at the Nigerian Institutes of International Affairs in 1982, the first Executive President of Nigeria, Shehu Shagari articulated what he called our principal objectives in dealing with fellow African States:

- (a) The strengthening of African solidarity through continental and regional organizations and institutions like the OAU, ECOWAS, and the ADB.
- (b) The promotion of peace and stability on the African continent and security in our sub-region, by re-emphasizing our commitment to the principles of respect for the provisions of the OAU Charter, especially those relating to

the inviolability of inherited frontiers, sovereign equality and territorial integrity of all countries, and peaceful accommodation and settlement of all disputes without foreign interference; (c) To support the rights of people to self determination and freedom from colonial and foreign subjugation and for all authentic national liberation movements in their struggle for independence, and (d) To give unalloyed support for all efforts to destroy the obnoxious apartheid system, racial bigotry and prejudice (Ate and Akinterinwa, 1990).

The foregoing principles or objectives of Nigeria's foreign policy are the same with that of Balewa and succeeding military regimes. The Shagari's Nigeria foreign policy objectives toward Africa is simply a restatement of Nigeria's foreign policy thrust since independence in 1960.

The Shagari regime during a review of its foreign policy stated that Nigeria has declared that the continent of Africa was no longer open to colonization. By its geographical position, size, population, economic potentials and resources, Nigeria is left with no option but to play a crucial role in the liberation of South Africa. In fact, the decolonization of Mozambique and Angola, racism in South Africa and imperialism in Zimbabwe and Namibia, still constitute the most potent threats against international peace and security in Southern Africa. For the above reason the Shagri administration contributed immensely to the fund of the OAU Liberation Committee, and also gave considerable financial assistance on bilateral basis to African Liberation Movements.

Equally, in keeping with Nigerian dynamic foreign policy and its fervent commitment to the freedom of the suffering masses in Southern Africa, the Federal Government sponsored and launched the South African Relief Fund (SARF) in Nigeria. The establishment of the fund stemmed from the view that West African States cannot be free until the entire continent is liberated from the evils of colonialism, apartheid and racism. Since the relief fund was launched, donations in cash have been received voluntarily from civil servants in the Federal and State public

services, corporations and parastatals, voluntary organizations, businessmen, institutions of learning through out the country and other well wishers. More than seven million Naira collected by the National Committee on Apartheid and the first consignment of relief materials consisting of blankets, adult boots, children sandals and some large quantities of brown canvas for adults have been sent by Nigeria to South Africa as relief under the Shagari administration (Mbachu, 2011:146-147).

General Muhammadu Buhari overthrew the Shagari administration in a military coup in December, 1983, and became Head of State of Nigeria. To Fawole (2003:138-140), in the furtherance of the anti-apartheid objectives, the Buhari government continued to give financial assistance to the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) while insisting on the unconditional release of Nelson Mandela and all other jailed anti-apartheid activists. The platforms of the OAU, the UN, Commonwealth and the Non aligned Movement were effectively utilized in the campaigns to further isolate South Africa. One other significant African problem that got prominent attention and nearly caused a split of the OAU was the lingering problem in former Western Sahara. In line with its support for African liberation and independence, Nigeria suddenly recognized the Saharawi Arab. Democratic Republic (SADR) against the objections of Morocco and its supporters. Morocco has laid claim and forcibly held on to the territory since the Spanish left the country in 1970s to the chagrin of the OAU and the international community, especially after the World Court declaration that Morocco had no rights to lay claims to the territory. For Nigeria, therefore, the case of the Western Sahara was a straightforward case of self-determination.

Gambari (1989), Nigeria could not continue to recognize Morocco's illegal claim to the territory in the face of the overwhelming desire of the people for self-determination expressed through their

liberation movement, POLISARIO, as well as their declaration in February, 1976 of Western Sahara as the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic. But it had always been Morocco's greed and arrogance that had prevented genuine independence for the people of Western Sahara. Its intransigence had also almost wrecked the OAU because of the split in its ranks over whether to support Morocco or SADR. Sensing that Nigeria could no longer continue its fence-sitting in the face of overwhelming cry for self-determination, the Buhari government decided to rescue the OAU from imminent collapse by announcing its recognition of the SADR on November 11, 1984 at the 20<sup>th</sup> OAU Summit in Addis Ababa. Therefore, Nigeria's bold action permitted SADR to take its seat at the summit. Morocco, feeling humiliated by Nigeria's action, staged a walkout at the summit. The bold and assertive recognition not only won greater recognition and acceptance for the SADR and saved the OAU from Morocco's perpetual blackmail, but it also received great endorsement from the generality of Nigerians.

Generally on the African level, Nigeria recorded impressive performance befitting its acclaimed leadership status and in the tradition of previous military regimes. Its accomplishments were however most prominent in the West Africa sub-region where the country had always held undisputed sway. Nonetheless, it also made some significant impact at the continental level outside its immediate geopolitical environment. For example, its continental sway was evident when General Babangida was elected Chairman of the OAU for the 1991-92 session, during which events of epic proportions took place in African politics. This election, the second time for the country in the history of the continental organization, was in recognition of the breadth of Nigeria's reach and the esteem in which it was held by its peers. In the first instance, his dogged commitment to the decolonization of Africa led to an intensification of the process of the independence of Namibia, Africa's last colony. Namibia became independent in 1989, crowing Nigeria's efforts.

The regime had no problems implementing Nigeria's existing principle concerning the question of independence for all African States (Fawole, 2003:164).

In addition, according to Fawole (2003:164 -165) it was in the same Babangida tenure that last changes were taking place in South Africa. The racist regime of President Fredrick de Klerk had reached the conclusion that apartheid could no longer be continued and he needed a way out of the logjam. Nigeria was there to offer a helping hand nudge de Klerk on the path of dismantling the evil apartheid system. The efforts led to the unbanning of the African National Congress, the Pan-Africanist Congress and other liberation movements that had fought apartheid for decades, and the release of Nelson Mandela, Walter Sizulu, a host of the other freedom fighters jailed by the apartheid system. In the process de Klerk was even allowed to visit Nigeria, the first by any South African leader. Not only were changes occurring in South Africa, but, also Nigeria was there every inch of the way to help the process. While there was a general thaw in the icy relationship, diplomatic ties were not established between the two countries. Nigeria waited cautiously until irreversible and convincing changes had taken place before such a vital step could be taken. South Africa eventually dismantled all the ramparts of apartheid and held the first ever multi-racial democratic elections that led to Mandela becoming President of the country in 1994, not long after Babangida left office. It was not until then that the first ever exchange of Ambassadors between erstwhile moral enemies took place.

## **Conclusion**

This paper looks at African liberation and its continued relevance to Nigeria's foreign policy. It sees Nigeria's commitment towards a strong Afro-centric posture in foreign policy since, she gained independence in 1960. Nigeria played a big brother role in the African continent in liberating other African countries from colonialism and racism, which is one of the fundamental

objectives of her foreign policy. When Nigeria became an independent nation, her founding fathers and elites agreed that Nigeria's independence was incomplete, if other African countries were still under colonial rule or governed by the white minority supremacists. Therefore, Nigeria was solidly behind and actively supported the liberation struggle in some African countries, such as Angola, Zimbabwe, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Namibia and the apartheid South Africa. In doing this, Nigeria committed both financial and technical assistance.

In promoting Africa unity and solidarity as well as fostering of economic cooperation, therefore, Nigeria played a pivotal role in the coming into being of a continental and sub-regional body, that is, the OAU and ECOWAS. These platforms, the OAU and ECOWAS were also effectively utilized by Nigeria to further campaign for the liberation of some of the African countries still under colonization or dominated by white supremacists. This efforts and commitments made by Nigeria resulted to the independence of the above named counties. Again, even after their independence, Nigeria gave them financial support. Thus, Nigeria became a key player in international affairs and politics.

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