

PRESS COVERAGE OF NIGERIA’S RELATIONS WITH THE WEST DURING THE COUNTRY’S SUSPENSION FROM THE COMMONWEALTH C.1993-1998

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the press coverage of Nigeria’s relations with the West during the country’s suspension from the Commonwealth, c.1993-1998. The activities of Nigerian press between 1993-1998 are among other things part and parcel of the causes of suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth organization in 1995. This period automatically carved out new roles for the mass media at national and international levels. These among other things included the formation of a strong and virile public opinion, especially on policy matters as well as the instrument of the mass media towards the attainment of policy idea. This study had been able to establish the way and manner in which the Nigerian press covered certain salient issues, like the annulment of June 12, 1993 elections, persecution of journalists, execution of Ken-Saro Wiwa together with eighth Ogoni activist, might have projected a particular image of Nigeria abroad. It is also on the basis of this perception that Nigeria was said to have violated certain provisions of the Harare Declaration of 1991, of the Commonwealth which consequently led to the eventual suspension. The suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth has also led Nigeria to adopt alternative foreign policies to cushion the impact of the international animosity it faced at the point in time. The press, international pressure and the suspension from the Commonwealth in particular have reshaped Nigerian’s foreign policy as well as galvanized the process of democratization in Nigeria.

Keywords: Suspension, Coverage, Press, Nigeria, Commonwealth

Introduction

Apparently, events and developments that culminated into the suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth were, but repercussions of changing trends in international politics with an unfolding “new world order”. New realities began to emerge, especially on the nature and pattern of relationships between and among nations, as they pursued their respective domestic interest.¹

This period automatically carved out new roles for the mass media at the national and international levels. These include: the formation of a strong and virile public opinion,

¹ Abati Reuben, (1999): “The Media in Nigeria” in The Media, Transition and Nigeria.

especially on policy matters as well as the instrumentation of the mass media towards the attainment of policy ideals.²

It was due to the recognition accorded the mass media in policy making that UNESCO at its general conference in 1987 made a declaration on the contribution of the mass media toward strengthening development, especially in fine tuning her roles to suite changing realities in the international arena. These include: “the strengthening of peace, the right promotion of human rights and countering of racism, apartheid and incitement to war.” It is therefore, noteworthy to point out that the antecedent surrounding the suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth touch on her violation of the Harare Declaration of 1991.³ One way or the other, it seems the pattern of press coverage given to human rights has contributed to the generation of opinion among international bodies and actors on issue of international interest. This is particularly apparent with how it was able to create a particular form of perception of Nigeria abroad. This is why Akinyemi in Pate (1983) said:

One of the functions of the media in every country is to inform the citizens about local and foreign affairs. Because of the role, people have come to rely on the media as their major source of news... based on information obtained from their local media; they acquire knowledge, create images, and form opinion about other nations. It also legitimise the interest and involvement of the country's government in foreign affairs⁴

It is therefore, on this basis that the activities of the Nigerian press between 1993-1998 became part and parcel of the causes of the suspension of Nigeria from Commonwealth in 1995. This study will investigate the way and manner in which the Nigerian press covered certain salient issues, like the annulment of June 12, 1993 election during President Ibrahim Babangida; persecution of journalist; execution of Ken Saro wiwa together with eight Ogoni activists during President Sani Abacha and their effects on the Nigerian image abroad.

Evolution of the Commonwealth

First and foremost, the commonality of the Commonwealth is a worldwide association of Nations and their dependencies, whose members share a common commitment to promoting human right, democracy, and economic development with member nations accepting the British Monarch as the symbolic head of the British Commonwealth. The Commonwealth was formerly known as the British Commonwealth of the Nations, but today is referred to simply as the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth operates by intergovernmental consensus of the member states, organised through the Commonwealth Secretariat and Non-governmental organisations, organised through the Commonwealth

² Adeleke Tuned (1988): ‘The Political Economy of Mass Communication’ In Nur Alkali Et Al Mass Communication In Africa (Ed). Delta Publication, Nig Ltd. Enugu Nigeria.

³ Akinfeleye Ralf (1988): ‘Mass Communication In Nigeria: Problems And Prospects’ In Nur Alkali et al Mass Communication In Africa. Delta Publishers Enugu.

⁴ Akinyemi Bolaji May/June 1987: “Reciprocity In Nigerias Foreign Policy “ “The Akinyemi Doctrine Nigeria Forum’

Foundation.⁵ The Commonwealth dates back to the mid-20th century with the decolonisation of the British Empire through increased self-governance of its territories. It was formally constituted by the London Declaration in 1949, which established the member states as "free and equal". The symbol of this free association is Queen Elizabeth II who is the Head of the Commonwealth. The Queen is also the Monarch of 16 members of the Commonwealth, known as *Commonwealth realms*. The other members of the Commonwealth have different persons as head of state: 32 members are republics and five members are Monarchies with a different monarch.⁶

There are 54 independent nations and more than 20 dependencies that made up the Commonwealth. Commonwealth members share many customs and traditions as a result of their association with British model, and their judicial and educational institution are often similar to those in Britain English as is an official language of many members of the Commonwealth. Since 1977 the second Monday in March has been celebrated as Commonwealth day. Nations and societies are embracing free and equal representation in the affairs of governance and leadership. More importantly, many member nations of the Commonwealth are fully practicing democracy in it's experimental learning process.⁷

Scientifically, since democracy is about humans and the human behaviour is both dynamic and unpredictable characterized by change in thoughts and action dependent on geographical location, historical antecedent and resourcefulness, hence the need to stabilize the system upon which free and equal representation of the people is built upon can not be underestimated. In the words of former American president Jimmy Carter, "Democracy is like the experience of life itself-always changing, infinite in its variety, sometime turbulent and all the more valuable for having been tested for diversity".⁸

The Commonwealth brought together the values and aspirations which unite the people of the Commonwealth. These centred on democracy, human right's and rule of law in a single accessible document. The chapter expresses the commitment of member states to development of free and democratic societies and the promotion of peace and prosperity to improve the lives of all peoples of the Commonwealth. It also acknowledges the role of civil society in supporting the goals and values of the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of independent and equal sovereign states, each responsible for its own policies, consulting and co-operating in the common-interests of the people, and in the promotion of international understanding and world peace, and influencing international society to the benefit of all through the pursuit of common principles and values. Its special strength lies in the combination of our diversity and our shared inheritance in language, culture and the rule of law; and bound together by shared

⁵ "AnnexB-Territories Forming Part of the Commonwealth" (PDP). Her Majesty's Civil Service. September 2011. Retrieved 19 November 2013

⁶ The London Declaration 1949: "free and equal members of the Commonwealth of Nations, freely co-operating in the pursuit of peace, liberty and progress".

⁷ Profile: The Commonwealth BBC News, 1 February 2012

⁸ "About us". The Commonwealth. Retrieved 2013-10-03.

history and tradition; by respect for all states and peoples by shared values and principles and concern for the vulnerable.⁹

Further more, the Commonwealth seek consensus through consultation and the sharing of experience, especially through practical co-operation, and further affirm that the Commonwealth is unequally placed to serve as a model and as catalyst for new forms of friendship and co-operation in the spirit of the charter of the United Nations.

The role of the Commonwealth as a recognised intergovernmental champion of small states, advocating for their special needs; like providing policy advice on political, economic and social development issues and delivering technical assistance its valuable contribution of the network of the many intergovernmental parliamentary, professional and civil society bodies which support the Commonwealth and which subscribe and adhere to its values and principles.

The validity and the commitment to the values and principles of the Commonwealth as defined and strengthened over the years include the following: the Singapore Declaration of Commonwealth principles, the Harare commonwealth Declaration, the Langkawi Declaration on the Environment, the Millbrook Action programme, the Latimer House principle, the Aberdeen Agadam, the Trinidad and Tobago Affirmation of Commonwealth values and principles, the Mungonyo statement on Respect and understanding, the Lake Victoria Commonwealth Climate Change Action Plan, the Perth Declaration on Food Security Principles and the Commonwealth Declaration on Investing in young people.¹⁰

The Commonwealth places a high priority on being a community of peaceful and democratic countries and ensuring share fundamental political values-including commitment to human rights, the rule of law and civilian government are activity protected and promoted. In countries where core Commonwealth values are under threat, an independent mechanism can help to assess and address alleged infringement and recommend measures for collective action. Twenty years ago, such a mechanism was established by the Commonwealth to help ensure, and restore democratic governance in our member states and safeguard the constitutional rights of citizens.¹¹

In 1995, Commonwealth leader created a Ministerial Action Group to deal with persistent or serious violations of the Commonwealth's shared democratic values. The Group is composed of nine foreign ministers who assess infringements of the Commonwealth's political values in member states and recommend action to be taken as a result. The Group can suspend a country or even recommend its expulsion from the Commonwealth. A good example of where Commonwealth core values was under threat and had wide coverage by both the Nigerian and international press was in Nigeria where military rule Nigeria and was

⁹“Charter of the Commonwealth”. The Commonwealth. Retrieved 30 June 2013

¹⁰ Queen Elizabeth II (1 July 1959). Queen Elizabeths 1959 Dominion Day Message. Government House (Rideau Hall), Ottawa. CBC Retrieved 9 November 2015..

¹¹ Mole, Stuart (September 2004). “Seminars for Statemen; the evolution of the Commonwealth Summit”. The Round Table 93 (376): 533-546.doi.

suspended from the Commonwealth after a serious of violation of the principles set out in the Harare Declaration (including the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa.

The Nigerian press was able to cover the events two days after the political activist and writer Ken Saro-Wiwa was executed with eight others in 1995. The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) suspended Nigeria from the Commonwealth. In practical terms this suspension excluded Nigeria from receiving new Commonwealth technical assistance-such as agricultural training which took place in 1993, and also prevented government representatives from participating in inter-governmental Commonwealth meetings and events. This suspension also acted as a public declaration from the Commonwealth to the Nigerian government and the international community condemning the undemocratic and human rights abuses which reverberated across the world.¹²

Among other issue that received wide coverage by the press was the annulment of the June 12, 1993 election, which late Chief M, K.O. Abiola was said to have won. The Babangida regime, which was central to the annulment issue, was said to have lost direction on what exactly to adopt. The annulment of the June 12 elections, has led to unprecedented attacks on the Nigerian Government, especially from United States of America and her allies and the local press.

In its early years the Group focused on unconstitutional changes in government, including military coups. In 2011 Commonwealth leaders broadened its mandate so it could engage more proactively and constructively with countries where democracy values are at risk. The Group now assesses wider concern such as threat to human rights or the unreasonable postponement of elections. When it detects warning signs, it offers positive support encouraging countries to respect share political values.¹³

Since its establishment, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group has suspended member states eight times. All suspended countries except Zimbabwe-which opted to leave the Commonwealth-were returned to full membership following the restoration of democracy. For 20 years, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group has helped to champion democracy, human rights and the rule of law globally. Among intergovernmental organisations, its authority to suspend member government or to take other collections action is unmatched. The Group's expanded mandate enable it to address, in addition to systematic violations of human rights and the unjustified postponement of elections, the undermining of the judiciary, a lack of space for the opposition, and systematic constraints on civil society and the media,¹⁴

Violations of the Commonwealth's fundamental political values, such as unconstitutional changes in government, are not only dealt with, they are deterred or prevented as a result of

¹² ²⁸Dayo Duyile 1987: Makers of the Nigerian press. Gong Communication Nigeria Limited-Lagos

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Mole, Stuart (September 2004). "Seminars for Statesmen; the evolution of the Commonwealth Summit". The Round Table 93 (376): 533-546.

the presence and positive work of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group-our values are also shared by many non-member countries and their reinforcement has a positive effect on all region of the world.

As an association, the Commonwealth embraces diversity and firmly rejects discrimination on the basis of race, culture, size or level of development. Where member held different perspectives in issues, there is agreement to disagree but to continue dialogue, and effort are made to pursue peaceful reconciliation of disputes to its values and principles.

Human Rights Issues in Nigeria and the Press

Among other things, the issue that received wide coverage by the Nigerian press was the annulment of the June 12, 1993 election, which late Chief M, K.O. Abiola was said to have won. The Babangida regime, which was central to the annulment issue, was said to have lost direction on what exactly to adopt. Babatope (1999) argues that since inception, the Babangida administration had made (26) twenty six political changes up to the time of the June 12 saga.¹⁵

At a period when the torrent of international relations revolved around the globalization of democracy, with the United States at the forefront, the June 12 election was said to be the fairest in comparison with other elections in Nigeria. This was well noted by both local and international observers. There was less rigging and less corruption as well. The annulment had been observed to have affected the country in a number of ways apart from political unrest that loomed. For instance, the value of the naira had begun to dwindle, which was followed by a high incidence of withdrawal of deposits from banks. There was also an incitement of civil disobedience, especially by organisations like Campaign for Democracy (CD).¹⁶

Pressures, both externally and internally, were mounted on the Babangida administration, which eventually forced the junta to yield. Among others pressures were the announcement by the European Community of a sanction package for Nigeria if she failed to resolve the political impasse related to June 12, as well as visa restriction threats. General Babangida finally yielded to pressures and handed over power to an Interim National Government (ING), which was eventually toppled by the Abacha junta.¹⁷

On assumption of power, the Abacha junta dissolved the hitherto existing structures of the two parties, namely the Nigerian Republican Convention (NRC) and Social Democratic Part (SDP), and also sacked the elected officers in the three tiers of Government (African concord. 4 April, 1994). Abiola was subsequently arrested on June 23rd 1994 on grounds of treason, for announcing himself as the winner of the annulled election. The annulment of the June 12 elections, has led to unprecedented attacks on the Nigerian Government, especially from

¹⁵ Mohammed B. Yakubu 1991: Nigeria's Image Crisis in International System, Unpublished Project.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Danladi Musa 1994: "Media Hegemony and Political Stability In Nigeria", ABU

United States of America and her allies and the local press. The annulment of the June 12 elections had heightened tension in the country. The Local press went ahead to hammer on the annulment and other issues as pointers to human rights abuses in Nigeria. The press that mounted the most pressure was the Lagos-Ibadan press, and conspicuous among them were the Concord press, Vanguard, Tribune, Tell Magazine, News Watch, TSM, and The News etc.

Another human rights related issue that may have contributed to the heightening tension and the pressures on Nigerian Government was the Ogoni crisis, which began in 1990, and it attained its peak in 1995, when Ken Saro Wiwa was executed along with eight other Ogoni activities. Ken Saro – Wiwa a prolific writer of international repute was known to have championed the course of the Ogoni people, which bordered on environmental degradation suffered by people in Ogoni land, due to the activities of Shell, a multi-national oil company, In his numerous writings Ken Saro- Wiwa once observed that despite the fact that Shell had made more than 3 billion dollars from oil extracted from the Ogoni – land, the people therein had nothing in return for that. He insists that: “Oil exploration has turned the Ogoni land into a wasteland: lands streams and creeks are totally and continually polluted. Acid rain, oil spillage and oil blowouts have devastated the Ogoni territory.”¹⁸

The bottom line therefore remains that the Ogoni people are demanding for a fair share of the benefit of what is extracted right beneath them. This is even compounded by the fact that activities of the oil company have done harm to the ecology of the Ogoni land, and remains a perpetual threat to human lives too. But it became clear that government was not responding to the plight of the Ogoni people. Ken Saro – Wiwa, therefore, opted to seek for international intervention to resolve the Ogoni quagmire once and for all. In July 1992 Ken Saro – Wiwa was invited to brief the 10th UN session of the working group on indigenous population in Geneva, to brief them on his outcry. (News watches, November 13th, 995). In the address, he lamented that: “my Ogoni people are the object of genocide in which environment degradation has been a lethal weapon in the war against them. Oil exploration has turned the Ogoni into a wasteland”. It was the effects of Saro – Wiwa that brought the Ogoni crisis into the international glare. Non – governmental organisations became involved and other members of the international community soon developed interest in the Ogoni crisis.

Subsequently, Ken Saro – Wiwa was arrested and executed along with eight Ogoni activities, on murder charges of four other Ogonis whom were allegedly were said to have betrayed the noble course of the Ogoni people. The international community responded with a barrage of criticisms ranging from the condemnation of the trial procedure, to the legitimacy of a trial through tribunal. Amnesty International looked at the execution against the backdrop of Wiwa’s environment campaign. The organisation called him a “prisoner of conscience” and was believed to be an advocate of peace.

¹⁸Mohammed B. Yakubu 1991: Nigeria’s Image Crisis in International System, Unpublished Project

Furthermore, there were two alleged coup plots against the General Sani Abacha regime between 1995 and 1997. To date, the international community perceived the plots as simple attempts by the military junta to justify the arrest of hand-picked individuals who were deemed to constitute threats to Abacha's self-succession plan. (Mohammed 1999 and Babatope, 1999). Implicated in this coup plot were General Shehu Musa Yar'aduwa, General Olusegun Obasanjo, Colonel Lawan Gwadabe, Dr Beko Ransome Kuti, Bello Fadile, and Several journalists. Sentences passed on the accused ranged from execution, life sentences and others. Appeal for clemency came from all corners of the world. People like John Paul II; the United State of America, Amnesty International, and even the Commonwealth Organization had asked the Federal Government to temper justice with mercy at various levels.

Furthermore, Mohammed argues that other human rights related issues have soiled Nigeria's image in the international community. There were also arbitrary closures of press houses, detention of journalists. Thus: General Sani Abacha escalated his brutal tactics aimed at decimating the independent press and driving journalists, out of their profession into bile's. The incommunicado detention without trial of Tell Editor, Nosa Igiebor, The News Editor, Bayo Onanuga, Media professional and their legal representatives paled in comparison with the assassination in broad day light of Kudirat Abiola and the attempted assassination of Alex Ibru publisher of the Guardian.¹⁹

The unprecedented attacks on the press, especially the private press, may have been precipitated by the fact that they have also contributed their quota in criticising the Federal Government and painting a particular picture of the Government to the glare of both national and international observers. It is also understandable that, the private press in this instance is invariably the Lagos-Ibadan press. This is even justified by the fact that the individuals enmeshed in the arbitrary arrests as well as the press houses they represented were categorically part of Lagos – Ibadan press. By analogy, it is apparent that Government became weary of the private press due to its perceived influence both nationally and internationally. It is also apparent that organisations, like the Amnesty International, may have depended on the local press for thier inputs on human rights issue, which may have aided certain conclusion about human rights situation in Nigeria. For instance, Pate (1999) deserves, thus:

*Much of information about human rights issue emanated from the mass media especially the newspapers, and magazines. In discharging their social responsibility, to the nation, the press try to remain vital in regulating social relations and ensuring that to some extent those in power do not misuse it to the detriment of the other individuals in the society.*²⁰

¹⁹ Mohammed B. Yakubu 1991: Nigeria's Image Crisis in International System, Unpublished Project.

²⁰ Pate Umaru 1999: 'Africa In Nigerian Press: The Study Of Reporting Of News About African Countries In Selected Nigerian Newspapers' Unpublished M.Phil Dissertation, University Of Ghana, and Legion.

It is therefore, glaring that the Nigerian press being a vital organ of the society has apparently played a role in rejecting the extent and consequences of human rights abuse in Nigeria. The persecution suffered by most private media organisations was largely out of their fight against Human Rights abuse. That should be the justification behind the persecution of the press especially under successive military regimes.²¹

Nigerian Suspension from the Commonwealth itself in 1995

The immediate and remote causes of Nigeria's suspension from the Commonwealth were the execution of Ken-Saro Wiwa and the other eight Ogoni activists and the annulment of the June 12 Presidential election constituting the immediate causes. The remote cause include human rights abuses in Nigeria and failure of Nigeria to democratize and variables like rivalry between Nigeria and South Africa of the growing power of Nigeria in the African region.²² In 1995, the Commonwealth leaders went ahead to suspend rather than expel Nigeria from the body, allowing for possible readmission or expulsion depending on if the oil-rich West African nation cleaned up its poor human rights record. The suspension had also removed one level of participation in international relation. Nigeria had used the Commonwealth to project the interest, it was surrounded by Francophone countries, guarding her territorial boundaries against more hostile neighbours, and the Commonwealth to her is a platform to her security. It removed certain privileges that Nigeria could enjoy. For instance Nigeria had before the suspension benefited from the Commonwealth scholarship and education grant as well as having Commonwealth technical advisers in a key a project in a country.²³ The suspension had negatively affected Nigeria's image in international relations. Nigeria was painted black globally and was seen as a country with bad record of human rights abuse. The suspension had once again brought to light, the issue of correlation between foreign policies and domestic policies. On the part of the commonwealth, the suspension had removed a very important and vital member and Nigeria was a strong force in Africa and on any matter she takes internationally receives attention. The suspension had reemphasized the simplicities in maintaining and enforcing certain provision of international conduct for example, human rights and democracy.²⁴

Nigeria is the first country ever to be suspended from the body although previously South Africa and Pakistan had withdrawn, while Fiji allowed its membership to lapse.²⁵ The historic suspension of Nigeria follows the setting of new standards for membership to the body as agreed during the 1991 meeting in Zimbabwe. "Member states are now measured against the resulting standards which were laid down and approved, and which Nigeria flagrantly violated," The Harare Declaration determined that multi-party democracy, respect for the rule of law, human rights and equal opportunity, were

²¹ Ibid

²² Op cit, U.C.Clementina.

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Op cit, U.C.Clementina.

²⁵ The Guardian. June 18. 1993

requirements for Commonwealth membership. To execute the activists during the leaders' meeting in New Zealand, was a slap in the face, and the Commonwealth had no option but to take strong action.²⁶

Nigeria's Relations with the West

General Babangida's maiden speech touched on the commitment of Nigeria to International Organisation as useful for pursuing foreign multilateralism which exclaims not only Nigeria's enthusiastic and instinctive search for membership in both the global and regional levels but also her support for and leadership in the establishment of some of these regional organisations.²⁷ Realising that international organisations provide numerous opportunities for multilateral negotiation and collaboration among states, the Babangida administration showed full commitment to Nigeria's membership of the United Nations and its specialised agencies, the Commonwealth of Nations and the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). The government also supported the course of OAU and ECOWAS; it was against this background of President Babangida's understanding of the crucial role international organisation play in moderating the international political game, that his government invested so much time, energy and resources in sponsoring Nigerians in this multilateral organisations.²⁸

The elections of Chief Emeka Anyaoku as the Secretary General of the Commonwealth of Nations and Major- General Joseph Garba (rtd) as the President of the 44th session of the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 was in furtherance of this objective. In 1991, General Olusegun Obasanjo, with government's assistance made an unsuccessful bid for the UN Secretary General. In 1992, prince Bola Ajibola was elected a judge of the world court at the Hague in replacement of the former president of the court, Dr. Taslim Elias, also a Nigerian, who died in 1992.²⁹ Multilateralism as a factor in Nigeria's foreign relations was misconceived out rightly. Nigeria in the United Nations or in the organisation of African Unity had been reluctant to enter into the politics of international organisations. Successive leadership never found it dignifying to sponsor Nigeria citizens to such international organisations.³⁰

The result was that the Nigerian's policy impact in Africa and the world in general was not commensurate with the country's size and potential or even contribution to these bodies. The Babagida government immediately stopped the country's low profile foreign policy posture because of the realisation that membership in international organisations is for among other reasons, to advance a country's national interests. The election of Nigeria as the chairman of the OAU in 1991 and various contribution of Nigeria to ECOWAS and the Non-aligned

²⁶ Daily Times of Nigeria May 15, 1995 page 1

²⁷ ⁹⁹General. Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, 20 January, 1986, page 4

²⁸Ibid

²⁹ Olusanya and Akindede 1986 : Nigeria's External Relations Agenda for the Future NIIA Vol 12.

³⁰ Mohammed B. Yakubu 1991: Nigeria's Image Crisis in International System, Unpublished Project.

Movement (NAM) was in furtherance of this objective. When the Gulf crisis broke out in 1990, Nigeria joined the rest of the global community to condemn the Iraqi aggression against Kuwait, endorsing the UN resolutions asking Iraq to leave. But when America decided to force the Iraqi out, Nigeria attempting to reconcile domestic opinion, with the international opinion supported the allied forces, but declined to contribute men and materials.³¹

There is no gainsaying the fact that the United States is presently the most influential key actor in global politics. This preponderant position of the United States derives from the fact that she is the only super power left at the eve of the 21st century, following the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the former Soviet Union. It is partly in recognition of the fact that the Abacha administration considered its relations with the United States as crucial, thus it tried to maintain the tradition of cordial and friendly relations existing between the two countries.³²

However, three main areas had overshadowed Nigeria's United States relations during the Abacha regime: democracy, human rights and drug trafficking. The United States maintained hostile attitude towards Nigeria in the period under review. It imposed sanctions on Nigeria, which include the restriction of the higher level contacts between officials of both governments. On its part, Nigeria considered United States' position on the issue of democracy, human rights and drug trafficking totally unacceptable. The Abacha Government insisted that by seeking to determine the pace, manner and content of Nigeria's democratic process, the United States had taken a position of unwarranted interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state.³³

Regarding the question of drug trafficking, the Abacha Administration, right from its inception, was acutely aware of the dangers posed by trafficking to the country's national security and to the international community. The administration determined to check the menace of drug-trafficking in Nigeria. It initiated and implemented bold policy and administrative measures to curb the problems. Successes in this area can be inferred from the achievement of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA). To a large extent, the United States attitude to Nigeria over the drug issue could be viewed as viewed as hypocritical and discriminatory.³⁴ For instance, producer and exporter countries of hard drugs like Columbia receive fantastic financial and logistic support from the US Government to combat the menace, while countries like Nigeria, which are merely transit routes in the drugs business, hardly get anything instead, throughout the Abacha period, Nigeria was continuously annually black-listed by the US Government. To a large extent, the US attitude to the Abacha Administration on the drug problem had strong political undertones. Despite

³¹ Shedrack Gaya Best: Nigerian Forum NIIA Publication January 1991, page 21

³² Mohammed B. Yakubu 1991: Nigeria's Image Crisis in International System, Unpublished Project .

³³ Kunczik. M 1990: Images of National and International Public Relations. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Germany.

³⁴ See Andrew M. Scott: The Functioning of the International Political System. Macmillan Company. New York 1967 for discussions on actors in the International system

the strained diplomatic relations between Nigeria and the United States, some measures of economic relations were however, maintained between the two countries.³⁵

It is unrealistic to assume that the group of countries, together with Japan, will remain the dominant scientific, technological, military, political and perhaps, economic centres on the global scene for the foreseeable future. Such a possibility, no doubt, has far-reaching implications for the defence of our vital national interests and hence the management of our foreign policy. The realisation of this fact informed the thinking of the Abacha Government in pursuing Nigeria's national interest.³⁶

Nigeria's relations with the West shifted, requiring the diversification of our "Basket of friends," as the Abacha regime reached out to countries like China and the dynamic economies of South and North East Asia must be understood in this context. In other words, the failure of Nigeria's erstwhile traditional friends in the West to understand her circumstances pushed the Abacha Government to forge or upgrade its relations with China, North Korea and South and North East Asian countries. For instances, on May 11, 1997, Li Peng, the Chinese vice premier, visited Nigeria for two days, during which China and Nigeria signed four agreements in oil, power and steel industries. Nigeria also reciprocated with many visits by its Ministers, including that of Foreign affairs. As part of the new relationship between the two countries, the rehabilitation and modernisation of Nigeria's rail tracks have been carried out by the Chinese in a multi-Billion naira contract. China has also shown in Nigerian crude oil. Bilateral economic and cultural agreements were also signed with North-Korea. By reaching out to Asia, and indeed to other developing countries, the Abacha administration laid the basis for a forward- looking diplomacy and greater South-South cooperation that would see Nigeria well into the 21st century.³⁷

Impact of the Suspension on Nigeria's Foreign Policy

The activities of the press in Nigeria had doubtlessly, impacted on public opinion in Nigeria as well as that of the government. The press houses in Nigeria, which invariably guided by sectional and ownership interests, the Nigerian press had been able to play its quota in informing and guiding Nigeria's foreign policy.³⁸ The coverage by Nigeria press of the antecedent surrounding the suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth had projected Nigeria's image in a particular light. This made it necessary for Nigeria to make efforts to adapt to seeming hostility it was beginning to face from Commonwealth countries led by Britain. Such a response was a manifestation of what the press to which other antecedents and agents like pressure groups etc had been able to make of Nigeria's image in terms of image

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Olusanya and Akindele 1986 : Nigeria's External Relations Agenda for the Future NIIA Vol 12

³⁷ Olusanya G.O 1985: Nigerian Commonwealth Relations in Olusanya and Akindele (Ed) Nigeria's External Relations: First 25 Years, Limited Ibadan.

³⁸ CMARG (1996): Concluding Statement Commonwealth Secretary General

making.³⁹ New Nigerian Newspaper expectedly took a categorical stance on Nigeria's suspension from the Commonwealth, insisting that it was not just to rush into suspending Nigeria from the organization. Specially, in 1996, the paper tried to justify that it was not only Nigeria that was abusing human rights. Citing the instances of other marginalized people elsewhere, especially in Austrialla, New Zealand, and Canada went on to say that democratisation and human rights are only two items out of which were enumerated by the Harare Declaration categorically in defrauding Nigeria. For the CMAG at Auckland consumed by passion and rail wasted by Western conspiracy to humiliate a major African country violated its own procedural rules in suspending Nigeria from the Organisation.⁴⁰

Other newspapers, even the ones that were most critical of the government as at then had subtly asked for a change attitude from the Commonwealth. The punch newspaper of 22nd July 1997, even though blamed Nigeria's travails with the Commonwealth on continued military dictatorship, insisted that the Commonwealth reconsiders her stance on the suspension. Thus, with particular regard to the Commonwealth, we note that although, the time available maybe short, appropriate measures can still be taken to avert Nigeria's seemingly inevitable fate as a whipping boy at the forthcoming Edinburgh summit of the Commonwealth Heads of Government.⁴¹

Furthermore, in an article contained in This Day of October 4, 1997, titled, "The Beauty in Abacha's Diplomacy, "there was a bid to justify that the move by Nigeria to look elsewhere in the face of animosity and hostility from the West, such countries that Nigeria began to fraternize which included Libya, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, North Korea,.etc.⁴² Generally, while considering the suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth to be unfair, it does not mean that there was no reaction what so ever. Such reaction included the re-channelling of Nigeria's foreign policy especially towards or away from the west to suit the ever-increasing hostility the country was beginning to face. Nigeria made effort to restore relations with the Commonwealth and Commonwealth countries. On return from Queens town (Australia) where the Commonwealth leaders met, the then Nigeria's foreign policy Affairs Minister Chief Tom Ikimi, held a world press conference insisting that the action meted out to Nigeria by the Commonwealth was unjust and that such an injustice should be released immediately.⁴³

Subsequently, Nigeria had made concerted efforts to show the world that it was on the verge of democratisation. Using her oil riches, Nigeria used multinational oil corporations like shell, Mobil, Chevron, to push further her campaign to redeem Nigeria's image abroad. The crux of the campaign was centred on assuaging westerns' from imposing sanction on Nigeria, arguing that it would only affect the ordinary citizen in the country (Yusufari, 1999). Furthermore, Nigerian government had also began to look elsewhere especially towards Asia

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Auckland CHOGM 1995 Communiqué

⁴¹ The punch newspaper of 22nd July 1997

⁴² This Day, October 4, 1997, vol. 3 No 896

⁴³ Akinyemi Bolaji 1987: "Reciprocity in Nigeria's Foreign Policy " "The Akinyemi Doctrine Nigeria Forum" May/June

from the west, with a view to re-channelling the investments to the continent as an alternative.⁴⁴ Government had already begun negotiations with a view to transferring their investments to countries like China, Russia, Iraq and so forth (Sklar, 1997). It could be recalled that it was during this period that the then minister for Defence General Abdul Salami Abubakar paid high profile visits to Korea and China. The visit was aimed at looking for alternative source of arms supply (This Day June 26, 1997).⁴⁵ This was a response to the replacement of embargo on Nigeria by the European Union on Nigeria on Arms Supply and Training of Nigerian Military Personnel, following the political crisis arising from the annulment of the June 12, 1993 elections and execution of nine Ogoni Activists in 1995.⁴⁶ (The Guardian, August 12, 1997). Justifying the move, the chief of Defence Staff further spoke thus: “Nigeria is ready to make friends with those countries that are ready to make friends with us” (Guardian 12th August 1997).⁴⁷

Even in other areas, Nigeria made concerted efforts to remain in touch with the outside world especially Europe and America. It reached out to them through organising football friendlies. It was able to maintain its oil relations with both the European and American oil exploitation giants. For instance, despite the sanction on Nigeria, there was an \$8 billion dollar investment by Shell, Mobil, and Chevron in the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas (Sklar, 1997 and Yussufari, 1999). Furthermore, Nigeria’s bid to look towards Asia attracted a reasonable degree of sympathy to the country despite the sanction, especially from, China, Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia and Turkey (Sklar, 1997). There has also been a wide range of campaign to justify to the world that Nigeria did not deserve the treatment it was receiving from the European Union and States (Yusufari, 1999). Yusufari further observes thus:

*By and large, Nigeria’s response to her suspension at the international level was successful, as it was able to truncate further sanctions and deride global opinion towards the impasse at hand. It was also to cushion the effort of sanction already invoked making them look piecemeal and inconsequential.*⁴⁸

Nigeria’s response to her suspension had been attempts to redeeming her image. For instance, the Nigerian government employed the services of certain American public relations firms namely Borno Birrel and Washington strategic group. They were paid 2.6 million dollars to tell the world the “Nigerian story” (News watch, Aug 29 1996: 14). Furthermore, foreign groups and individuals had made efforts to restore better relations between the United States and Nigeria during the Nigeria-Commonwealth impasse.⁴⁹ It should therefore be noted that the response made by Nigeria to redeem her image where the consequences of what local press was able to project to the world in concert with other press groups like NADECO, CD

⁴⁴ Akinyemi Bolaji 1987: “Reciprocity in Nigeria’s Foreign Policy” “The Akinyemi Doctrine Nigeria Forum” May/June

⁴⁵ Yuyuf,A.Y(1999) “Nigeria Commonwealth Relations’. The Dilemma of Democracy and Human Rights in International Relations” MSc Dissertation, University of Maiduguri.

⁴⁶ This Day June 26, 1997

⁴⁷ Guardian 12th August 1997

⁴⁸ Yuyuf,A.Y(1999) “Nigeria Commonwealth Relations’. The Dilemma of Democracy and Human Rights in International Relations” MSc Dissertation, University of Maiduguri

⁴⁹ Ibid

and the MOSOP. What then are the consequences of the suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth? It should be understood that it had led to the adoption of new foreign policy thrusts and had forced Nigeria to recheck her diplomatic endeavours. This invariably gave the Nigeria press a role in bringing forth the adoption of particular policies in the attainment of Nigeria's foreign policy ideals. By and large, the opposition projected by the Nigerian press culminated into the suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth, which triggered Nigeria's response the way it did.

The outcome of the Nigeria's suspension can be better appreciated when considering the loss of status Nigeria faced in the international scene after the suspension. Nigeria became the pariah nation and her ability to articulate her policy ideals and conduct her foreign relations on the multi-lateral front of international co-operation was eroded as the Commonwealth used to provide Nigeria a solid platform which it uses to enhance such ideals. Beside the suspension exposed Nigeria to international sanction which has had a biting effect on her.⁵⁰

Nigeria has compensated for its diplomatic isolation from the West by increasing its link with other "pariah" countries. In May 1997, minister of information Walter Ofonagoro stated: "The sooner the West reserves the current trend the better for them because we are moving to China and other nations for support," adding that "we believe everything is planned racial prejudice against Nigeria. Delegation from United State visited Nigeria several times over the last year and signed cooperation agreements in several areas, including the oil industry, following other trade agreements signed in 1995 and 1996; China is reportedly engaged in rehabilitating Nigeria's railways system. The North Korean vice premier stated in March that his country was impressed with the "steady" implementation of transition program," and pledge continued support. Chief of defence staff Maj. Gen Abdulsalam Abubakar visited China and North Korea in August 1997, exploring possibilities of military cooperation and arms deals.⁵¹

In June 1997, Nigeria was one of eight Islamic countries meeting in Turkey to form the "D8" or group of eight developing countries; signing the Istanbul Declaration", which defines a broad area of economic cooperation. Turkey's Islamist Prime Minister visited Nigeria in October 1996. In May 1997, the Iranian charge the affairs in Nigeria urged the Nigerian government "not to yield to the pressure and blackmail of Western imperialism".

A number of significant contracts have recently been awarded to Israeli companies, and the Israeli ambassador to Nigeria announced in March that "Israel is convinced that the transition program is very much on course and that sanctions are unnecessary.⁵² Washington can not enthrone democracy in Nigeria because their action is not in consonance with the desire of Nigerian people". The Nigerian press has been a vital source of government policy, news for opinion leaders and decision makers within a political structure as well as for the whole

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ News watch, June 3 1996:14

⁵² Mazrui Ali February 1990: "Islamic Revivalism and Expansionism" Africa Events London.

public.⁵³ Those in decision making position who are not able to come in contact with the international communities for foreign policy rely on the press for such information. The press (newspapers) stand as link between old and new. A regime that newly arrives into power can blame its predecessor for some economic problem and it uses. The press (newspapers) to compare it's record in funding popular service with past regime and reminds public the oppression they felt from the oppositions when they were in power, and to also praise government for the good work done when were in power. All these tactics work effectively when they use the press. It helps policy makers and opinion leader as it shows them that the (newspaper) is their link with the international community for foreign policy and news which help them in their policy making.⁵⁴

African countries remained generally reluctant to condemn Nigeria's human rights record in strong terms during 1997. In October 1996, an OAU Spokesperson stated in response to proposal by U.S. Secretary of state Warren Christopher during an African tour that "we have to be very careful about isolating Nigeria" preferring "diplomatic pressures" to sanctions". Also in October, an assessment team from the OAU was sent to evaluate Nigeria's peacekeeping capability. During the OAU summit in Harare in June 1997, Nigeria's internal problems were not mentioned either by OAU Secretary-General Salim Ahmed Salim or by newly elected OAU chair Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe. These reticences have been influenced by the fact that Nigeria is one of the largest financial contributors to the OAU, while Salim was seeking re election.⁵⁵

Some African countries maintained close relations with Nigeria. Nigeria and Ethiopia signed cooperation agreements in October 1996, for example; while a high level delegation of Nigerian military officers travelled to Namibia in March 1997 for a week "familiarization visit". Colonel Mu'ammar al Qaddafi of Libya visited Nigeria's in May 1997, and was made a Grand Commander of the federal Republic, Nigeria's highest honour (much to annoyance of U.S. government). The outgoing Tunisian ambassador to Nigeria, at a farewell dinner given for him by the Nigerian government, advised the Nigerian government to ignore "the ranting of the west". West African countries despite their unwillingness to endorse Nigeria's intervention in Sierra Leone, were not prepared to speak out against Nigeria in other area.⁵⁶

In contrast, a new socialist government elected in France in May 1997 continued to take a conciliatory line towards Nigeria, including ruling out the possibility of excluding Nigeria from playing in 1998 world cup Soccer tournament due to be held in France. General Sani Abacha attended the December 1996 Francophone summit in Burkina Faso and in January 1997 announced that France would become second "official language" of Nigeria. The French government has on several occasions granted visas "on humanitarian grounds" to members of Nigerian government theoretically covered by the ban on visas; it has been reported that the French are planning to oppose renewal of visa restrictions, and possibly

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ CMARG (1996): Concluding Statement Commonwealth Secretary General.

⁵⁶ Ibid

other sanctions, when the E.U. Council is reviews measures in place in early December 1997. As a result of the softer French line. Nigeria has moved the European office of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation to Paris from London.⁵⁷

Conclusion

In conclusion, from the foregoing, the assessment of the state of human rights in Nigeria in the period of 1993-1998 has demonstrated the truism that all realities were made up of two aspects, the positive and the negative. With the commitment of the nation, through its constitution and membership of international organisation, to the enforcement of human rights, and all time framework for the promotion of human rights has been created. The liberation of the rampant abuse of human rights in Nigeria during the period under review was a dark side of our national history which should not be allowed to repeat itself. The period 1993-1998 has been described as the darkest hour of human rights in Nigeria in view of the assault on the rights of life by faceless security agents. The victims were prominent critics of the government, champion of minority rights and crusaders of the June 12 election. The execution of Mr. Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other leaders of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), caught the attention of the international community which regarded the whole affair as ‘judicial murder’. This gave Nigeria a very bad publicity. Subsequently, Nigeria was suspended from the Commonwealth while stringent sanction was imposed on the Nigerian government and its officials.

The press and the mass media played important roles of agenda settings, apart from their traditional roles of information dissemination, enlightenment and entertainment. While the government should be more tolerant of diverse opinion in the press, the mass media practitioners should bear in mind the need to protect national interest, unity and development and avoid subverting the nation’s existence. The concern expressed by the international community, the Nigerian press and media, non-governmental organisation and courageous individuals contributed enormously in restoring the observance of human rights in Nigeria. General Abdulsami Abubakar correctly assessed the mood of the nation and swiftly restored the rule of law, expedited the restoration of democracy and eventually returned Nigeria to its rightful place in the comity of civilised nations.

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