NIGERIA'S PIVOTAL ROLE ON SOUTHERN AFRICA'S PATH TO FREEDOM (1966-1993)

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Abstract:

Nigeria obtained her independence in 1960 and since then she has always been referred to as the "Giant of Africa". This nomenclature no doubt was grown out of the fact that she is reckoned the largest, most populous and the richest with frightening influence in the African continent.This article explores Nigeria's pivotal involvement in the 1966–1993 Southern African independence movement. Throughout this time, Nigeria became a major force in the decolonization effort by providing material and diplomatic assistance to liberation forces throughout Southern Africa. Nigeria's engagement in a number of international organizations, such as the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity (OAU), where it promoted sanctions against colonial Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa, is highlighted in the article. The article also examines Nigeria's military and financial support for independence movements, including the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO), the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) in Rhodesia. It highlights the strategic significance of Nigeria's backing, which is influenced by its leadership in Pan-Africanism, its aspirations to overthrow colonial and apartheid regimes, and its larger geopolitical goals.Through an analysis of Nigeria's military, diplomatic, and economic contributions, the essay shows how the nation's active involvement was crucial to the final end of apartheid and the attainment of independence in a number of Southern African countries. This article explores Nigeria's diplomatic and military support for the independence struggles in Southern Africa during the periods.

Keywords: Decolonization, Pan-Africanism, Apartheid Regimes, Liberation Forces.

Intrduction

Political scientists, historians, and scholars have all referred to Nigeria as the "giant of Africa" on multiple occasions. This is in light of the fact that, in addition to being the largest country in terms of territory and population, Nigeria also has the second-largest economy in Africa, after South Africa (Ukamaka, 2013). The oil boom of the early 1970s is, of course, the source of the nation's wealth. Alhaji (Sir) Abubakar Tafawa Balewa became prime minister and head of government in 1960, but just six years later, the military overthrew the civilian government, and from 1966 to 1993—the study's focus—the Nigerian military controlled the country's internal and external political landscape. With its soldierly orientation and decision-making process that is

typically based on fiat, the military is very unique by all professional standards. This study, which focuses on Nigeria's "contributions towards the independence struggle in Southern Africa during the period of military rule 1966-1993," undoubtedly had a significant impact from the nature of military professionalism, the early 1970s oil boom economy, and the personality traits of the individual heads of state during the period under review.

This study's first military government, as determined by its periodization (1966-1993), was that of General J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi, who served from January 1966 to July 1966. Additionally, in her colonies of Angola and Mozambique in Southern Africa, as well as Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde in West Africa, Aguyi-Ironsi was the first Nigerian head of state to take a strong stand against the Portuguese twin sins of racism and settler-colonialism. The military dictatorship of General Yakubu Gowon, which lasted from July 29, 1966, to July 29, 1975, came right after the Aguiyi-Ironsi regime. Through a brutal coup known as "the retaliatory coup of 2 July 1966," the Gowon regime overthrew the General Ironsi regime. Beginning in mid-1967, the civil war lasted until January 1070. Although the causes of the conflict are outside the scope of this study, the regime's successful execution of the civil war resulted in Nigeria's current status as an indivisible nation. The civil war provided the opportunity for South

The three racist nations who backed Biafra against the federal military government during the civil war were Africa, Rhodesia, and Portugal. They wanted to have their share of Nigeria. General Yakubu Gowon started making preparations to hasten the end of apartheid and settler colonialism in Southern Africa once the civil war was successfully fought. Through a palace coup in July 1975, the Generals Murtala Mohammed and Olusegun Obasanjo (1975–1979) took power. The Gowon legacy was expanded upon by the regime, which took a more radical stance in its efforts to decolonize South Africa. The Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) was swiftly recognized as a participant in the Angolan struggle for self-determination, further reinforcing the regime's rhetoric that Nigeria would continue to make Africa the cornerstone of its.

In conclusion, all of the military regimes during the period under review launched some k ind of antiapartheid campaign against colonialists in Southern Africa in order to accomplish their goal of completely decolonizing the region; this article will discuss how successful Nigeria was in this fight.

Nigeria's Role in the Independence Struggle in Southern Africa

Prior to the military coup of January 15 1966 and the subsequent military takeover of the Alhaji (Sir) Abubakar Tafawa Balewa government of the First Republic, the Nigerian leadership had a generally lukewarm attitude to the twin evils of settler-colonialism and racism in southern African. While the Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa opposed apartheid, he did nothing to discourage it, instead he invited the South African white supremacists to Nigeria's independence celebration in October 1960 (Aluko1977).

The regime of General J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi January 1966-July 1966

Due to his assassination in a military coup, General Aguiyi-Ironsi's term as Nigeria's Head of State, which lasted from January to July 1966, was brief. Aguiyi-Ironsi did, however, make great progress in establishing Nigeria as a champion of African freedom and unity during his brief tenure in office. The majority of Southern Africa was still ruled by colonial powers at the time, with South Africa, Namibia, and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) battling against both British and Portuguese colonization as well as the apartheid government in South Africa.Aguiyi-Ironsi's government attempted to strengthen Nigeria's diplomatic engagement in the Southern African

independence movements, despite his brief term. General J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi's regime became the first to adopt a radical stance against South Africa and Portugal, outlawing the use of Nigeria's airport, airspace, and seaport facilities by both countries' aircraft and ships as well as those of other nations traveling to or from South Africa and Portugal. The regime also ended the Portuguese diplomatic presence in Lagos (Eke, 1990).

Nigeria pushed for the decolonization of the African continent and supported liberation movements as the main focuses of its foreign policy. Nigeria started to join other African countries in denouncing the apartheid system and assisting groups such as the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa and other liberation organizations in the region, as Aguiyi-Ironsi's government also aimed to maintain a strong opposition to the system**.**

The regime of General Yakubu Gowon 1966-1975

After Aguiyi-Ironsi was assassinated in August 1966, General Yakubu Gowon came to power, ushering in a new era of Nigeria's involvement in Southern Africa. During Gowon's tenure, Nigeria's foreign policy was based on the principles of Pan-Africanism, African unity, and support for anti-colonial and anti-apartheid movements. Gowon's government, which oversaw Nigeria's efforts during the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), did not neglect its international obligations, especially in the area of aiding African liberation struggles.

After the Nigerian civil war in 1970, General Gowon was awakened from his diplomatic slumber arising from his war years' experience with South Africa, Rhodesia and Portugal which aided the Biafran Secessionists attempt to dismember Nigeria. This experience made the review of Nigeria's policies toward these countries and their obnoxious policies a compulsory option after the War (Nnoli, 1976). During the Organization of African Unity's 1971 summit conference, General Gowon urged African leaders to establish courts in order to speed up the liberation of African countries still under colonial rule.

They were given the task of banding together to "liberate at least one colonial territory within the next three years" by the general. The racist minority regimes in Portugal and its allies, as well as in South Africa and Rhodesia, he said, "will do whatever it takes to turn the clock back" (Polhemus, 1977). This scathing speech was intended to highlight Nigeria's shift from a conventional diplomacy-based stance of indifference to armed liberation movement. Nigeria has now increased its anti-apartheid and liberation efforts by giving meaningful support to all liberation forces. When General Gowon was elected OAU chairman in Addis Ababa in mid-1973, his prominent role in Nigeria's anti-apartheid and liberation efforts was quickly acknowledged on a continental level. This elevated position as OAU chairman further propelled Nigeria to a vantage point from which it coordinated African resistance to racism and colonialism and pursued other African issues that were important to national unity.

Nigeria led the African boycott campaigns against South Africa's participation in the 1972 Munich Olympic Games, the massive boycott of the 1976 Montreal Olympics, the Davis Cup tennis competition, and the 1976 World Amateur Squash championships (Oye, 1976). Nigeria's massive support for African liberation undoubtedly contributed to the independence of Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, and Cape Verde in the mid-1970s. However, Gowon was still seen as two moderate and gradualist, preferring the collective approach rather than taking the initiative that its size, wealth, and influence provided.

The regime of Generals Murtala Mohammed/Olusegun Obasanjo 1975

The situation was viewed as a challenge that needed to be approached seriously by the Generals Mohammed/Obasnajo regime that followed. The initial indication of General Murtala Mohammed's assertive foreign policy concerning decolonization was his prompt acknowledgement of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) faction in the Angolan independence movement. Intelligence reports indicated that apartheid South African troops were already in Angola, fighting on the side of Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), one of the three factions involved in the Angolan struggle for independence (Gowon, 1971). This unilateral action violated the OAU's previously agreed position.

In a swift and decisive reaction, General Mohammed bluffed the US government and told President Ford to mind his business and stop insulting the intelligence of African leaders. According to the intelligence report, the US government of President Gerald Ford advised African leaders not to recognize the Marxist MPLA because the Americans believed it to be a Soviet proxy to gain an ideological beach head in Africa (Polhenus, 1977). This advice implied that America was only out to protect her interest and other entrenched Western interests in Africa, not whether Angola had a legitimate government.He even attempted burning the said Fords diplomatic note at the floor of the OAU Extra-Ordinary Summit in Addis Ababa.

Despite General Mohammed's efforts, the Angolan issue could not be resolved at the summit because members were divided in their opinions, so Nigeria engaged in a tactful diplomatic offensive to persuade the dissenting member states to support the Angolan government. The diplomatic tactic succeeded as more countries were won over to Nigeria's side, and eventually the OAU accorded formal recognition to the People's Republic of Angola on February 11, 1976, only two days after. The Nigerian government also promised the Angolan authorities additional 100 million dollars as interest-free loans for development. Nigeria also threatened reprisals against the American Gulf Oil company's operations in Nigeria if it did not pay the royalties it had earlier withheld to the MPLA government in Luanda for its oil exploration activities in that country (Fawole, 2003). Happily enough the Nigerian threat achieved its purpose and the Angolan government under Agustinho Neto was no longer denied it's just entitlements.

The assassination of General Murtala Mohammed in the February 13, 1976 abortive coup d'etat ushered in the military regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo as Nigeria's head of state. Before his new leadership position, General Obasanjo was Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters under the late General Murtala Mohammed. As a two-ic who shared similar aspiration with his master for their country, General Obasanjo did not only continue with the radical approach of his predecessor on the issue of colonialism and racism in Southern Africa, but also adopted open-door policy for African exiles from Southern Africa. The General Obasanjo military regime stepped up its virulent opposition to racism and apartheid and recorded considerable success in securing real independence for Zimbabwe under majority African rule by the close of the 1970s. The opportunity to act on the Zimbabwean independence struggle came in the mid-1970s when the Organization of African Unity (OAU) sought to amalgamate the two principal liberation movements, that is, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU) to form a Patriotic Front alliance to coordinate their resistance to white minority rule. Before this OAU's initiative, Nigeria had always favoured the formation of coalitions, especially in multi-ethnic societies to prevent a situation whereby certain sections would have and use power to the exclusion of others and thus engender domestic rancour and instability. When the white minority regime of Prime Minister Ian Smith unilaterally decided to select a few local leaders which included Reverend Ndabaningi Sithole, Bishop Abel Muzorewa and Chief Jeremaih Chirau, and sought to transfer 'power to them in an unwholesome internal

settlement that excluded the major nationalist groups, Nigeria had no choice than to muster support for the ZANU/ZAPU Patriotic Front for the Zimbabwean struggle for independence.

In order to stop Britain's plan to sustain white minority rule in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in Southern Africa, the General Obasanjo military regime took the most dramatic step of nationalizing the assets of British Petroleum company in Nigeria (Fawole, 2003). It should be noted that BP was at that time, the largest British investment in Nigeria and possibly the whole of Africa. One can therefore imagine the economic embarrassment Nigeria's action in this regard might have caused Britain. Prior to the Nigeria's action on the British Petroleum BP, the British owned Barclays Bank and Standard Bank had earlier been nationalized and deliberate steps were taken to discriminate against British firms in the award of government contracts. All these were measures taken to achieve the objectives of African liberation and eradication of racism. As it was in the Angolan case, Nigeria's action forced Prime Minister Thatcher to change her stance on Zimbabwe at the Lusaka Commonwealth Summit, and Zimbabwe eventually got her independence in 1980. It is instructive to mention here that Nigeria achieved this feat of genuine independence for Zimbabwe on the strength of her dogged commitment to the African course.

During the General Obasanjo military regime, anti-apartheid activism also received a great attention. In the first place, Nigeria was voted as chairman of the UN Committee against Apartheid, a post she occupied until the committee was dissolved after the demise of apartheid government in South Africa in1994. (African Research Bulletin, (Economic Series), Vol. 16 No 7, (August 31,1979).

Besides, Nigeria hosted the UN sponsored World Conference for Action Against Apartheid in Lagos in August 1977 during which it unfolded the agenda of employing stringent economic measures against all foreign multinational corporations in Nigeria that also had business dealings with South Africa.The General Obasanjo Military administration financed various manpower training programmes for Southern Africans who were nominated by the different Liberation Movement from the sub region, in addition to launching the Southern African Relief Fund (SARF) in December 1976 to which the general public donated generously. The objectives of the SARF are stated below for a clearer understanding of General Obasanjo military administration commitment to the African course;

- to raise fund through appeals, public campaigns, exhibitions, and other activities;
- to administer relief assistance to the citizens of Southern Africa through scholarships, emergency materials, social assistance and the amelioration of the condition of the civilian population, the wounded and sick in the Southern African regions (Uwechue, 1991)

To this end, assistance from the fund assumed the form of awards of educational scholarships; cash grants donations, buses, generators, clothing, food pharmaceuticals and tents etc. to refugee camps, Liberation Movements and front-line states devastated by racist regimes. This fund supplemented the regular Nigeria's contributions to the OAU Liberation Fund which was increased to about N5m annually (Fawole, 2003).

Under the Obasanjo military regime, Nigeria also sponsored the South African Youth Revolutionary Council (SAYRCO) some of whose members took part in the Soweto uprising of June 1976. The SAYRCO was provided with military training while its members were also awarded scholarships to study in Nigeria. ZANU and ZAPU Liberation, Movement of Zimbabwe also received material and financial support from the military regime of General Obasanjo. Besides, Nigeria, under Obasanjo used the platforms of various international organizations to conduct its anti-apartheid campaigns to isolate South Africa from the community of civilized nations. The intensification of the General Obasanjo regime's anti-apartheid policies soon began

to constrain the apartheid state of South African. Arising from the widespread riot of 1976, which resulted in the Soweto massacre, and detention of thousands of protesting Black youths, Nigeria decided to turn the global searchlight on the racist country. The Nigerian authorities literally imported many of the Soweto children including other South African Black Youths into Nigeria and placed them in the country's educational institutions on scholarship (Eluwa, 1968). It was a significant contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa.

One other measure taken by the General Obasanjo regime was the conscious attempt to exclude South Africa from participating in international sporting activities. All Commonwealth member states were barred from having sporting links with South Africa. Nigeria sponsored the African boycott of the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal, Canada and the 1978 Commonwealth Games in Edmonton, also in Canada. Nigeria also served notice that it would boycott all other international sporting event if apartheid South Africa or any country having Sporting links with it was represented. This action was calculated to isolate New Zealand, a Commonwealth member that continued to romance with South African sporting activities, from further participating in global sports. The doggedness of Nigeria's fight against apartheid through boycotts, eventually led to a strain in her relationship with the US, Britain, Canada etc.

General Mohammadu Buhari 1984-1985

In the early 1980s, Nigeria was under military rule, with the country's leadership shaped by General Muhammadu Buhari, who took power after a military coup in December 1983. His regime lasted until August 1985 when he was ousted by another military coup led by General Ibrahim Babangida. During his brief tenure as Nigeria's leader, Buhari not only sought to address Nigeria's internal issues but also played a significant role on the international stage, particularly in support of the fight for freedom in South Africa. Although Buhari's time in power was relatively short, his administration made an enduring impact on Nigeria's foreign policy, particularly in its unwavering support for the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

During the 1980s, South Africa was under the brutal and oppressive rule of the apartheid regime, which institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination against the black majority population. The apartheid system was met with widespread international condemnation, and many countries around the world, including Nigeria, actively supported efforts to bring an end to it.Buhari's government was a strong supporter of the African National Congress (ANC) and other anti-apartheid movements. Nigeria, under Buhari, remained committed to the liberation of South Africa and the dismantling of apartheid. The Nigerian government took various steps to support the fight for South African freedom, both diplomatically and through practical means.

Buhari's administration continued the policy of Nigeria's previous governments, which included the provision of financial, diplomatic, and military support to the anti-apartheid movement. Buhari was a vocal critic of the apartheid regime and consistently advocated for stronger international sanctions against South Africa. Nigeria, under his leadership, supported the imposition of sanctions and the boycott of South African goods, as well as the expulsion of South Africa from international organizations.

Nigeria also played a key role in the establishment of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), which was a major platform for African nations to coordinate their efforts in ending apartheid. Buhari's government provided support for ANC fighters and other liberation movements through the provision of training, weapons, and other resources. One of the most notable actions taken during Buhari's rule was the hosting of the United Nations Special Committee against Apartheid, which worked to increase global awareness and pressure on the

apartheid regime. Buhari's support was seen not just as a diplomatic gesture, but as a moral stand for justice and equality for all Africans.

Buhari's Legacy and South Africa's Liberation

While Buhari's rule was short-lived, his commitment to supporting South Africa's liberation struggle was one of the defining aspects of his foreign policy. Nigeria's support for the ANC and other anti-apartheid groups during Buhari's time in power played a vital role in ensuring that the struggle against apartheid remained an international priority.

Buhari's actions also aligned with the broader sentiment of African solidarity during the period, as many African countries saw the liberation of South Africa as integral to the continent's overall freedom. His support for South Africa's freedom can be seen as part of a wider African unity effort, demonstrating Nigeria's leadership role in advocating for the rights of oppressed peoples in Southern Africa.

Buhari's time in office ended in August 1985 when he was overthrown in a military coup led by General Ibrahim Babangida. Although his time in power was short, his contributions to Nigeria's foreign policy, especially in relation to South Africa's freedom, left an enduring impact.

The regime of General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida 1985-1993

During Babangida's rule, Nigeria maintained its strong stance against apartheid, the system of racial segregation and discrimination that was institutionalized by the South African government. Nigeria, under Babangida's leadership, continued the country's long-standing support for the African National Congress (ANC) and other liberation movements fighting for an end to apartheid.As one of Africa's most influential and economically powerful nations, Nigeria had already been a leading force in the struggle for South African freedom, even before Babangida's ascension to power. Under Babangida, this commitment to supporting the liberation of South Africa became even more pronounced, with Nigeria playing a pivotal role on the international stage in denouncing apartheid and helping to coordinate efforts to end it.

Economic and Diplomatic Support for Anti-Apartheid Movements

Babangida's regime, much like that of his predecessor General Muhammadu Buhari, aligned itself with the broader international effort to isolate and undermine the apartheid regime. Nigeria continued to provide both economic and material support to anti-apartheid groups such as the ANC, Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), and other liberation movements. Babangida's government was instrumental in ensuring that these groups had the necessary resources, including financial aid, diplomatic backing, and military support, to continue their struggle. Babangida's Nigeria hosted ANC leaders and allowed the organization to operate in exile within the country. The Nigerian government also provided training for ANC fighters, who were engaged in armed struggle against the apartheid regime, and sent troops to support peacekeeping missions in Southern Africa.

Moreover, Nigeria, under Babangida's leadership, continued to advocate for strong sanctions against South Africa. This included supporting the imposition of comprehensive international economic sanctions and calling for the boycott of South African goods. Babangida's administration pushed for the exclusion of South Africa from key international organizations, including the United Nations and the Commonwealth of Nations.

Babangida also worked diplomatically within the frameworks of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and other international bodies to keep the pressure on the apartheid regime. Nigeria was consistently at the forefront of the global movement to isolate South Africa politically and economically. Babangida's government made it clear that Nigeria would not relent in its commitment to ending apartheid, and it encouraged other African nations, as well as international powers, to join in the fight for racial equality and justice in South Africa.

Nigeria's Role in the United Nations and Global Diplomacy

Under Babangida, Nigeria used its diplomatic clout within the United Nations (UN) to push for stronger international action against apartheid. Babangida's government played a pivotal role in shaping global sentiment about the need to support the liberation movements in South Africa. Nigeria was instrumental in lobbying for and adopting sanctions against South Africa, including an arms embargo, which sought to prevent the apartheid government from receiving military support.

Furthermore, Nigeria continued its support for the United Nations Special Committee Against Apartheid, which worked to expose the atrocities of apartheid and bring global attention to the plight of black South Africans. Babangida's diplomatic efforts were essential in galvanizing African and global support for the dismantling of apartheid.

Support for Nelson Mandela and ANC Leaders

A significant aspect of Nigeria's support under Babangida was its strong backing for Nelson Mandela and the ANC. As the international community increasingly recognized Mandela's leadership in the anti-apartheid movement, Nigeria emerged as one of the foremost supporters of his cause. Babangida's government maintained close ties with Mandela and other ANC leaders, providing both moral and material support for their struggle. In 1990, after Mandela's release from prison, Nigeria was one of the first African nations to extend an invitation for him to visit, marking a historic moment in Nigeria's continued support for the anti-apartheid movement.

The Legacy of Babangida's Support for South Africa's Freedom

Babangida's contributions to the liberation of South Africa were significant and played a key role in the broader African and global efforts to dismantle apartheid. Under his leadership, Nigeria remained a strong advocate for the ANC, Mandela, and the broader anti-apartheid cause. While Babangida's domestic policies were often controversial, his foreign policy towards South Africa stands as one of the more positive aspects of his regime, marked by unwavering commitment to the liberation struggle.

Babangida's support for South African freedom also helped to further solidify Nigeria's role as a leader in African diplomacy and as a key advocate for human rights across the continent. His actions helped to ensure that the international pressure against apartheid remained strong, culminating in the eventual dismantling of the apartheid system in the early 1990s

Conclusion

In this study, Nigeria's pivotal role on southern Africa's path to freedom (1966-1993)Nigeria's contributions to the independence struggle of Southern Africa under the military regimes have carefully been examined. It can be undoubtedly asserted that while the First Republic administration of Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa laid the foundation of Africa as a centre piece or Nigeria's foreign policy, the administration paid little attention to the independence

struggle in Southern Africa. However between 1966 and 1993, Nigeria played a significant and complex role in Southern Africa's struggle for independence. Successive governments in Nigeria played prominent roles in assisting Southern Africa's struggle against colonialism and apartheid. As a pioneer in the struggle against colonialism and apartheid, Nigeria offered critical assistance to different liberation organizations and used its diplomatic influence to push for justice and equality on a global scale. Nigeria's role in Southern Africa not only helped to liberate numerous nations, but it also placed Nigeria as a key player in the pursuit of Pan-African unity and peace. This time is a proud chapter in Nigeria's history, reflecting the country's long-standing dedication to the values of freedom and justice across Africa.

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