

NIGERIAN-BRITISH RELATIONS UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF GENERAL MUHAMMADU BUHARI 1984-1985: IN RETROSPECT

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Abstract

Nigeria since the attainment of political independence on 1st October 1960 has enjoyed in most cases cordial diplomatic relations with Britain. This cordial diplomatic relations is partly due to the fact that Nigeria is a former colony of Britain. Most of the structures left behind by Britain, were designed to serve their interest. The political class was groomed by the British to succeed them. After political independence Britain was Nigeria's largest trading partner and also a major source of her foreign capital.

However this cordial diplomatic relationship became uneasy in the period under review. This was when both countries recalled their ambassadors. The paper thus examined Nigeria's relations in the period under review. The paper is divided into three sections. Section one is the introduction, methodology and a theoretical framework. Section two examined Nigeria's relations with Britain in the period under review. The last section is a summary and conclusion.

Introduction

The colonial incursion in an area that later became Nigeria started in 1851 with the bombardment of Lagos. Ten years later in 1861 Lagos was annexed as part of British colony (James, 1993:87). From 1861-1903, the whole of the area that later became Nigeria was brought under British colonial rule. In 1914 the Northern and Southern protectorates were brought together under a single administration (Tamuno, 1987:384). The amalgamation in 1914 has given Nigeria its present size, complexity and heterogeneity. Nigeria's march to independence was through constitutional means. This meant that Nigeria's foreign policy after the attainment of political independence will not be radically anti-Britain. And true to the predictions Nigerian-British relations after the attainment of her independence was cordial. Apart from the fact that Nigeria adopted the parliamentary system of government, which was practiced in Britain, she willingly entered into a defence pact in 1962. The defence pact was later abrogated after a protest by the Nigerian public. Furthermore Nigeria's volume of trade with Britain was very high in comparison to other western European countries. Nigeria has with few exceptions maintained cordial relations with Britain until 1984-5.

Methodology

The methodology of the research is the content analysis. It has been defined in various ways, in this research content analysis will be seen as "research technique for the objective systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Seiltize et al, 1977:335). To this end the research will involve a review of existing secondary source in books, journals, magazines and newspapers.

Theoretical Frame

Theoretical framework for the analysis of this topic is the decision making theory. Decision making theory focuses attention on official decision makers and their activities in the making of foreign policy. The proponents of this approach are: Richard C. Synder and Edgars Furnish Jr. (1954). The argument of Synder and his colleagues is that to understand international politics that is the actions, reactions and interactions among political entities called nation-states, there is need to embark on process analysis. Analysis of process involves above all explanation of decision-making process, because it is decision that leads to policy, produces conflicts and fosters co-operation. To throw more light on any foreign policy actions and reactions therefore, the makers of the decision leading to actions and reactions must be identified and more significantly an evaluation must be made of the intellectual and interactive processes by which decisions were reached (Dauda, 2001:22). Decisions are made in the day-to-day administration of government and in the implementation of public programmes. There are political and non-political decisions. A decision that is political relates to the

use and distribution of power. It was the decision to use power even though beyond the territorial boundaries of Nigeria that prompted the government of General Buhari to try abducting Umaru Dikko from Britain to Nigeria. This provoked diplomatic uproar between Nigeria and Britain.

Nigerian-British Relations (1984-1985)

The presidential system of Shehu Usman Shagari was overthrown on December 30, 1983 in what a military spokesman then Brigadier Sani Abacha described as a "bloodless and painstaking operation" (Sunday Sketch January 1, 1984). He further emphasized that the coup became necessary due 'to the grave economic predicament and uncertainty which an inept and corrupt leadership had imposed on Nigerians for over four years'. He also claimed that "in the discharge of our national role as the promoters and protectors of our national interest, the armed forces had decided to effect a change in the leadership of the federal government. They would not let Nigeria remain a debtor and beggar nation" (Sunday Sketch, January 1, 1984:12). Thereafter forty-three year old Major-General Muhammadu Buhari became the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria.

General Muhammadu Buhari's Foreign Policy

Under the administration of General Muhammadu Buhari, Africa remained the area of primary focus, but the country's national security and economic well being constituted the axis around which the country's foreign policy revolved. A new concept expressed in a clearly set out scale of priorities or "concentric circles" was to be operated in Nigeria's external relations (Gambari, 1989:240).

At the centre of the circles would be national economic and security interests, which were intricately tied up with the security, stability and economic well being of our immediate neighbours. The next important circle in Nigeria's external relations was the West African sub-region embracing the sixteen members of ECOWAS. This would be followed by the circle of relations with individual countries and intergovernmental organizations in Africa and the rest of the world including our country's commitment to the principles of self-determination, whether in Southern Africa, Western Sahara or the Middle East (Gambari, 1989:281).

The Umaru Dikko Affair

The frosty diplomatic relations between Nigeria and Britain was as a result of the aborted kidnapping of Alhaji Umaru Dikko. Alhaji Umaru Dikko was a senior Cabinet Minister and Director-General for the re-election of Shehu Shagari. He was regarded as one of the powerful ministers in the Second Republic. He managed to escape from Nigeria immediately after the military terminated the Second Republic in January 1984. The administration had declared Umaru Dikko and several other high-ranking government and party officials wanted in connection with alleged misappropriation of public funds. Furthermore the British Press had given Umaru Dikko a wide coverage in his crusade against the Buhari administration. He had threatened to wage a Jihad against the administration (Dauda, 1998:138). On 5th July 1984, four men, one a Nigerian attempted to kidnap him. The men wanted to return Umaru Dikko to Nigeria to face criminal charges in connection with misappropriation of public funds. The abduction attempt failed when British security forces intercepted two wooden crates, which were to be placed in a plane chartered from Nigerian Airways bound for Lagos. The crate labeled "Diplomatic baggage" was later discovered by security men at Gatwick Airport (Gambari, 1989:143). Although some Nigerian diplomatic officials were found at the scene of the incident, it was one Mohammed Yusuf said to be a member of Nigerian Security Forces and three Israelis who were involved in the plot that were later charged to court and given heavy prison sentences ranging from 10 to 14 years (Gambari, 1989:147).

The British government impounded the Nigerian Airways cargo plane that was to have transported the crated Umaru Dikko and blamed the Buhari Government for the kidnap attempt. The Buhari Government responded by ordering a British Caledonian plane which was already air-borne on its regular flight from Lagos to London via Kano to return to Lagos. The plane was put under detention. Diplomatic relations between Nigeria and Britain was far from being normal. Both countries recalled their respective High Commissioners from Lagos and London (Newswatch March 3, 1986:13-17). The tit-for-tat approach adopted by the Nigerian government in responding to the

British government's actions against Nigerian diplomats in Britain was generally applauded by the Nigerian public. The Nigerian public demanded for tougher measures against the British. Such as severing diplomatic relations, nationalizing British investments in the country and withdrawing from Commonwealth, which was seen as a relic of colonialism. In a strongly worded front-page editorial, the New Nigerian newspaper was reported to have questioned British motives in the entire episode.

The paper argued that Britain had not tried to hide the fact that Nigerian prosperity and progress were incompatible with her own national interests. Hence imperialist like Britain had made the defeat and humiliation of Nigeria a fundamental aim of her diplomacy.

In its own press release, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) speaking through the University of Jos Branch expressed solidarity with the government and urged the government to take firm and decisive actions if Britain failed to extradite the Nigerian fugitives living there. The press release signed by its chairman, Dr. Aaron Gana condemned the British government thus:

Britain insensitivity of the British ruling class to the tragedy that had befallen every Nigerian family of worsening conditions of existence, resulting from four years of looting and robbery of the public treasury by a gang of unarmed robbers led by Umaru Dikko (quoted in Gambari, 1989:46).

With the Dikko affair in mind, the Head of State Major-General Muhammadu Buhari lamented in the following words:

Britain, which has been for so long regarded by Nigerians as a traditional friend, has caused us once again in recent times to doubt the genuineness of this friendship. Just as we did in the 1960s when our young nation faced the greater threat to its national unity and in the period immediately following the senseless assassination of General Murtala Mohammed in the abortive bid to replace the federal military government in February 13, 1976. Today as Nigeria faces the test of economic survival and the maintenance of its national unity and stability, Britain is once again sitting on the fence over the question of returning to this country close to economic and social ruin and are hiding there. Yet Britain protests its friendly intention towards Nigeria loudly (N11A Lagos December, 3 1984: 11).

The government was willing to sever diplomatic relations with Britain. Britain was still the major trading partner of Nigeria, substantial portions of Nigeria's debts were owed to British companies. The administration believed it required the support of the British government and the United States to reschedule the debts and open the blocked credit lines. Military also Nigeria's reliance on Britain made it quite difficult for Nigeria to turn its back upon Britain (Adeniran, 1978:43).

Summary and Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen Nigeria-Britain relations under the leadership of General Muhammadu Buhari. Britain over the years has been Nigeria's biggest trading partner. Relationship over the years has been largely cordial. However, this cordial relationship became frosty after the attempted kidnap of Umaru Dikko. Diplomatic relations reached its lowest ebb with the recall of their ambassadors. Nigeria was unable to break diplomatic ties with Britain. This was because her economy was heavily dependent on the British economy. A substantial amount of Nigeria's debts were owed to British companies. Nigeria could not play a free diplomatic hand because of this dependence. The message is very clear, for Nigeria to play a dominant role in international politics; her economy must be in order. This will free her from dependency and the shackles of neo-colonialism.

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