

Nigeria and the Liberation of Namibia, 1960–1990: A Study in Nigeria’s Africa’s Policy

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Abstract

The paper examines Nigeria’s role in the liberation of Namibia from colonial and racial domination. The analysis commences in 1960 focusing on Nigeria’s African policy in relation to political developments in South West Africa (now Namibia). The paper explores Nigeria’s diplomatic initiatives in multilateral organizations such as the Organization of African Unity (OAU) now African Union (AU), United Nations Organization (UNO), the Commonwealth in the fight against racism in Namibia. The paper adopts a historical and analytical research method. It utilizes primary and secondary sources of information. The study is organized thematically and chronologically. From what has been done so far in this research, the paper argues that Namibia’s independence in 1990 was a factor of Nigeria’s diplomatic move in the international community and in international conferences held in Africa, Europe and South America in respect of Africa’s liberation. The study recommends that Nigeria and Namibia should explore areas of common interest to enhance political interactions and promote economic relations.

Keywords: anticolonialism, foreign policy, liberation movement, racism, multilateral organization

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Introduction

When Nigeria became independent in 1960, one cardinal objective that formed the basis of Nigeria's African policy is the total elimination of colonialism and racialism in Africa. Tafawa Balewa who became Nigeria's Prime Minister immediately after independence affirmed that on the question of colonialism and racial discrimination, "I am afraid that we in Nigeria will never compromise" (Ogunnubi, 2018).

It was in line with this set objective that Nigeria was involved in the struggle for the liberation of Namibia from racial domination from 1960 to 1990. Before 1990, the Republic of Namibia was known as South West Africa. South West Africa was a creation of Germany in 1884 during the Berlin Conference that resulted in the partition of African territories by the European powers. With the creation of South West Africa as a German territory and the emergence of white settler's colony, marked the beginning of the black-white cleavage, a cleavage between a white minority with political power and an African majority with minimum political controls and influence at its disposal (Wallace and Kinahan, 2011).

With the racial political structure instituted by the white minority government, the seed that was to give birth to political crisis between the white minority and the black African majority was sowed. This development further subjected the black African majority to a state of servitude. Nigeria's policy toward the liberation of Namibia became more vocal and Massive in its military and financial supports to the liberation movements in Namibia.

Namibia at a Glance

Namibia lies alongside the South Atlantic coast of Africa and borders on South Africa, Botswana, Angola and Zambia. It covers an area of 318,261 square miles (824,269 square kilometres), approximately the size of France and Britain put together, but its population according to the 1970 census figures numbered only about 746,300, one of the lowest population densities at that time. (Wallace and Kinahan, 2011). Economically, the country is endowed with mineral resources like gold, diamond, copper

and with a vast land for pastoral farming. The presence of these natural resources in the region was the major reason for Europeans' occupation of the territory. In the early 19th century, the white settlers of the Cape Colony first referred to the territory as the "Transgariep", meaning the land north of the Orange River.

Namibia was under Germany annexation from 1884-1890. With the defeat of Germany in the First World War in 1914, the territory of Namibia was ceded to the League of Nations and administered by South Africa as a mandate territory. In administering the mandate territory, South Africa was to keep to the terms of the mandate which said that the administration should "promote to the utmost the material and moral well-being and the social progress of the inhabitants" (Eva, 2000).

South Africa's inordinate ambitions to colonize and establish racial policy in Namibia was to violate the mandate principle and refused to accept the United Nations supervision of her mandate. Despite the UN opposition, South Africa continued to oppose any form of United Nations supervision over the territory's affairs and continued to implement a racist policy against the majority Africans in Namibia. The subjugation of Namibians and the exploitation of the natural resources continued throughout the periods of South African occupation.

With the introduction of South Africa's apartheid system in Namibia in 1960, the black African majority were excluded from the administration of their country. The white minority virtually dominated the political, social and economic institutions in Namibia. Africans were put in detention without trial. Many of the liberation leaders like Mr David Merero, the National Chairman of the Party and Joseph Kasha, the Secretary of the SWAPO Youth League were detained, tried and imprisoned under Article 6 of the Terrorism Act instituted by the white minority government of Prime Minister Vorster. The hard-line policies of the South African government in Namibia were largely condemned by Nigeria as well as the international community.

Nigeria's Diplomatic Support in the OAU on Namibia

The Organization of African United (OAU) was established on May 25, 1963, by leaders of 31 African states in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. Its main objectives were the promotion of solidarity among the African States and the elimination of racial and colonial rule in Africa. Article II of the Charter clearly spelt out the purposes and standards of the organization on the existence of illegal regimes in Africa. Since the establishment of the Organization in 1963, the Namibian issue has been its major challenge. As a collective organization of African States, the OAU became a platform for collaboration in the fight against colonialism and racism in Southern Africa.

To achieve the determination to eliminate colonial and racial regimes in Africa, the OAU Liberation Committee and the Southern African Liberation Fund was established to coordinate the financial and material contributions from member States including Nigeria. Nigeria provided material and financial assistance to the Coordinating Committee of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) for the Liberation of Africa and the Nationalist Liberation Movement of South Africa, African National Congress and Pan-African Congress (Abegunrin, 2009)

At the end of the Nigerian civil war in 1967, Nigerian government under Gen. Gowon renewed it struggles against the racist regime. At the 7th Anniversary Summit of Heads of State and Ministerial Conference of the OAU, Gowon and the External Affairs Minister, Okoi Arikpo reiterated Nigeria's position to proscribe South Africa as an unfit member of the international community due to its racist policy (Omotosho, 2004).

Nigeria, in keeping with its avowed policy of terminating colonialism and white minority rule in Southern Africa, the Balewa government approved the sum of two (2) million dollars and \$500,000 to African National Congress and Namibia's SWAPO (Wogu and Sholarin, 2015). Aid was provided to Namibian refugees and financial assistance was given to the South West African Peoples Organization (SWAPO) which was the authentic liberation movement in Namibia. Nigeria provided cash grants to the Namibian nationalist leader and scholarships to Namibians

for Secondary Education. Nigeria led a boycott of the Olympic Games in Munich, Germany in protest against apartheid regime.

In the OAU Ministerial meetings, Nigeria was a leading supporters of the OAU Council of Ministers resolution 13 (II), and 31(III) of 1964 respectively, condemning the South African Government whose policy being incompatible with its political and moral obligations as a Member State of the United Nations, constitutes a grave danger to stability and peace in Africa and in the world (OAU: Council of Ministers Resolution 13 (II) and 31 (III) of 1964 respectively). In 1976, Nigeria and other member states of OAU spearheaded a protest which led to the withdrawal of many African countries from attending the Montreal Olympic Games hosted in New Zealand. This was because “Team New Zealand Rugby” visited South Africa. This move was to dismantle apartheid and racial discrimination which South Africa had introduced in Namibia. Nigeria refused to dialogue with South Africa and stood by the policy of equality and freedom of the Namibian people under the leadership of SWAPO. Nigerian government mobilised other OAU member states in adopting a common ground against dialogue.

Nigeria’s Federal Ministry of Information established information dissemination committee at the time SWAPO office was established in Lagos and by 1978; the revolutionary regime of Murtala-Obasanjo shocked the whole world by instilling fear and deterrence to big powers by partially nationalising the British-owned Barclays Bank (Al Hassan, 2010). Nigeria, in the OAU Ministerial conferences pledged her unconditional supports for SWAPO by increasing its material and financial supports to the liberation group until victory was assured for Namibians.

Member states of the OAU, including Nigeria, told the United Nations to expedite actions against apartheid South Africa and impose sanctions in all its ramifications as contained therein in Chapter VII of the UN. Arms, relief materials, drugs and food stuffs were supplied to SWAPO on a regular basis by the Nigerian military transport plans (Pieter and Siemont, 2011). Gen. Obasanjo further reiterated Murtala Mohammed’s message to the Namibians when he stated that Nigeria strongly stands and support

the heroic people of Namibia under the leadership of SWAPO. In 1981, Nigeria and other anti-racial states convened an emergency summit of the Southern African Frontline States calling on the OAU members to extend urgent assistance, especially military aid, to Namibia to repel a South African military attack on Namibians.

Nigeria's Diplomatic Support in the UN on Namibia

The United Nations Organization was established in 1945 with the major aim of promoting peace and security in the world. Nigeria became 99th member of the UN after independence in 1960. Nigeria supported the UN General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) of 14 December 1960 condemning colonialism and all practices of segregation and discrimination.

In 1966, the General Assembly of the United Nations passed resolution 2145 (XXI), bringing South Africa's mandate over Namibia to an end and as a result of this, Namibia was placed under the United Nations Council for Namibia (UNCN)- an arm of the United Nations. In 1968, the General Assembly passed Resolution 2372 (XXII) renaming the South West Africa as Namibia and reiterates that Namibia is the direct responsibility of the United Nations until genuine self-determination and national independence are achieved in the Territory and, for this purpose, reaffirms the mandate given to the United Nations Council for Namibia as the legal Administering Authority for Namibia until independence. By this development, South Africa ceased to have any legal right over Namibia and the decision of the United Nations was supported by the International Court of Justice in 1971 declaring South African presence in Namibia as illegal.

South Africa's response to the United Nations' declaration and the ICJ verdict was to ignore them and continued to administer Namibia as part of South Africa which contravened the United Nations Resolution 1514 (XV) adopted in 1960. The people of Namibia were continually denied their legitimate right to self-determination. With the formation of the South West Africa People's Organization in 1960 (SWAPO) under the leadership

of Sam Nujoma, the fight for the liberation of Namibia from South Africa was intensified. SWAPO became a forerunner of the Namibian independence and enjoyed supports from the people of Namibia as well as anti-apartheid states like Nigeria. UN recognition of SWAPO as the sole authentic group that will give leadership to the people of Namibia in their quest for freedom and self-determination, gave SWAPO an international status. SWAPO was allowed representative as an observer in the United Nation General Assembly (UNGA). This development gave far-reaching impetus to the liberation struggle in Namibia. With this recognition, SWAPO People Liberation Army (PLAN) which was the military wing of the organization was given military assistance by Nigeria.

Nigeria, under the auspices of the UN, condemned in strong terms the unjust trial and detention of freedom fighters by the racist South African government and ordered that all political prisoners should be released forthwith. The Namibian people embarked on demonstration with placards inscriptions “Viva SWAPO; long live all freedom fighters, one Namibia one nation; Vorster away with your apartheid; no more Caetano, no more Vorster, no more Bantustans...release all SWAPO political detainees; independence is the only solution to Namibia dispute” (Miskarik, 2019). The plight of the people of Namibia gained supports from other anti-racial states and the need to end South Africa domination gained worldwide supports.

Several Conferences were sponsored by Nigeria and the Frontline states of Zimbabwe, Zambia among others in conjunction with UN concerning South African racist policies in Namibia. Prominent among them is the *International Seminar on the Eradication of Apartheid and in Support of the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa and Namibia*, held in Havana, Cuba from 24-28 May 1976. Participating countries strongly condemned racialism and colonialism in all its ramifications and gave massive supports- material, financial and humanitarian- to liberation groups in Southern Africa.

The Frontline States (FLS) also played a vital role in the fight against the existence of racial and colonialist regimes in Southern Africa, but unable

to do more to pressure South Africa's occupation of Namibia because of its economic implication on some members of the Front Line States (FLS) that were economically dependent on South Africa. For example, Zimbabwe could not do much to oppose South Africa, but this did not prevent Zimbabwean political and material support for SWAPO (Ronald Dreyer, 2016), in collaboration with Nigeria. Nigeria provided the Front-line States with foreign aid to reduce the economic reliance of member states on South Africa. In 1976, the Southern African Relief Fund (SARF) was set up to raise funds through public campaigns and appeals. The fund was to support citizens of Southern African in scholarship awards, cash grants, and provision of relief materials such as ambulances, clothing, food, pharmaceuticals, and tents for refugee camps devastated by South Africa. From the fund, Nigerian medical doctors were sponsored to Namibia, South Africa and Mozambique to complement their efforts in providing medical relief assistance to refugees.

Nigeria's Diplomatic Support in the Commonwealth on Namibia

The Commonwealth of Nations is an association of sovereign independent States of former British colonies. As a voluntary association of independent States, each of which is in absolute control of its foreign policy (Adeleke, 2004), Nigeria became a member of the Commonwealth immediately after independence in 1960. Nigeria used the Commonwealth platform in pursuing her Afro-centric policy in relations to the dismantling of apartheid from Southern Africa. Nigeria supported the resolutions leading to the expulsion of South Africa in 1961 from the Commonwealth because of its racial practices in Namibia.

The Gleneagles Declaration, Scotland of 1977 by the Commonwealth member States, helped promote the boycott of apartheid South African sport. Also in its meeting in Nassau in 1985, the Commonwealth considered sanction against South Africa despite British reservation. Nigeria, under the auspices of the OAU, led other African counterparts in a walkout when in 1963 South Africa attended an ILO meeting in defiance of an earlier

resolution on the independence of Namibia. (*From the Archive: Gleneagles Agreement on Sport, 2016*).

Nigeria, in collaboration with anti-apartheid countries, declared Apartheid South Africa “pariah” due to its apartheid policies in Southern Africa. Other anti-apartheid countries provided economic and humanitarian assistance alongside Nigeria to aid the African nationalist party (SWAPO). Mugabe verbally stood in disagreement with South Africa’s apartheid policy in Namibia. Owing from Zimbabwe’s racial experience, Mugabe provided a safe haven for members of the liberation struggle in Namibia and her territory became a mobilising point for the campaign against South Africa racist regime in Namibia. Nigeria, in the various Commonwealth Ministerial Conferences, objected every South Africa attempt to make the Walvis Bay part of the Territory of South Africa by the South African apartheid government. On March 21, 1990, Namibia became a sovereign independent State from South Africa.

Nigeria’s role in the liberation of Namibia did not end in direct supports to SWAPO. The role she played in the international fora that led to Namibian independence in 1990 were remarkable. For example, Nigeria deployed 183 policemen and 40 election supervisors to Namibian in 1989. The Nigerian contingent was the largest that any country provided by UNTAG. Nigeria’s Police Commissioner Ezedinna Ifejika was appointed Deputy Policy Adviser of UNTAG (Federal Ministry of Information and Culture, Lagos September 18, 1989).

Nigeria actively took part in the various negotiations in the floor of the United Nations concerning the road map to Namibian independence. For example, in 1977, when talks began of Namibia’s independence, Nigeria and some OAU member states gave the five western countries that were present in the Security Council during the negotiation their strong support to negotiate and terminate South African lordship over Namibia. This diplomatic move was done outside the General Assembly framework. In the same vein, Nigeria was consulted by the “Contact Group”, a group constituted by the Security Council. The Group was to institute plans and programmes for the independence of Namibia. After a series of

negotiations with South Africa, several resolutions were adopted by the Security Council, aimed at implementing the plans. The UN plans which were contained in Security Council Resolution 435 of July 1978 requested the Secretary-General to appoint a Special Representative for Namibia to ensure independence through free elections under the United Nations' control (Garba, 1987). On March 21, 1990, Namibia became independent.

Conclusion

One of the cardinal objectives of the Nigerian government immediately after independence in 1960 was the liberation of African states still under racial regimes. It was as a result of this objective that Nigeria gave military and material supports to SWAPO which was the leading liberation group in Namibia. Nigeria and other African states, under the auspices of the United Nations, Organization of African Unity (OAU) now African Union (AU) and Commonwealth of Nations, campaigned against and supported the liberation of Namibia from racial regimes. These assistance and supports given to SWAPO which was the authentic liberation group in Namibia paid off with the independence of Namibia in 1990.

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