

Examine the Role of Nigeria in West Africa since 1990

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, was poised to become a powerhouse on the African continent at independence in 1960. In the 40 years since it has largely failed to reach its potential and to reach the level of status and influence it has felt it deserves. Nigeria's foreign policy since 1990 is closely tied up with the troubles of its smaller neighbors and with the world oil market. Some would argue that Nigeria has little to show for its military and financial involvement in West Africa, and that this is largely due to its myriad internal problems. Now, more than 40 years after independence, Nigeria again has the potential to become a power on the continent.

Nigeria has become involved militarily, as part of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), in regional conflicts in the West African nations of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea Bissau. Nigeria provided the bulk of the ECOWAS troops sent to Liberia in 1990 to support the government of Samuel Doe when rebel forces, some led by Charles Taylor, threatened to take the capital, Monrovia.¹ The rebels eventually took the capital, President Doe was killed,² and Taylor eventually took power in Liberia.

According to Gani Yoroms, an official in the Nigerian government in 1993, ECOWAS took action in Liberia because it learned that some of its member states had been arming the rebels and providing bases from which to attack the Doe government.³ ECOMOG was formed by a Mediation Committee within ECOWAS made up of member states Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra

¹ Noble, Kenneth B., "Civil War in Liberia Threatening to Divide West African Neighbors," *New York Times*, 29 August 1990.

² "2 Nations May Leave Liberian Peace Force," *New York Times*, 14 September 1990.

³ Yoroms, Gani J., "ECOMOG and West African Security: A Nigerian Perspective," *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, Vol. 21 No. 1/2. 1993. p. 86.

Leone and Togo.⁴ These states felt that ECOWAS, in setting up the Mediation Committee, gave them the authority to act in Liberia. Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Senegal saw it differently, claiming that Nigeria was using ECOMOG as a tool for achieving West African domination.⁵

Nigeria's involvement in Liberia was ultimately very counter-productive to stability there. If their true goal was a stable Liberia, then they may have been better off allowing Charles Taylor to finish his push to Monrovia and take control of the government in 1990. Instead, Nigeria and ECOMOG forces ended up simply extending the war for many years by keeping Taylor from winning outright. The Liberian civil war then became a regional struggle between the Francophone and Anglophone contingents within ECOWAS. Taylor owed something to the francophone contingent, having launched his Liberian invasion with support from Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, so Nigeria was determined to keep him in a box. As the war dragged on it became a self-sustaining economic enterprise for those involved, including the ECOMOG forces, who participated in the "regional economy based on plunder."⁶

Nigeria, a very large, populous country surrounded by smaller countries, naturally saw itself as destined to dominate West Africa.⁷ Even before the oil boom of the 1970s lifted up its economy, but especially after, Nigerian leaders were able to pursue a very forceful foreign policy with their West African neighbors, further enhancing the idea of a Nigerian manifest destiny.⁸

By 1994, ECOMOG had been attempting to keep the peace in Liberia for four years, but had little to show for its efforts. The civil war went on, and the safe zones and refugees that the

⁴ Ibid. p. 87.

⁵ Ibid. p. 87.

⁶ Ellis, Steven in African Guerrillas. Clapham, Christopher, ed. (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1998) p. 156

⁷ Clapham, Christopher. Africa and the International System: The Politics of State Survival. Cambridge University Press. 1996. p. 108.

⁸ Wright, Steven, ed., African Foreign Policies. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), p. 118.

ECOMOG forces were trying to protect were in greater danger than before.⁹ Nigeria blamed Liberia's French speaking neighbors, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, for allowing arms shipments to continue flowing into Liberia, sustaining the rebel forces.¹⁰ They claimed that France was pulling the strings, attempting to prevent Nigeria from becoming a regional power.¹¹

Nigeria sent forces to Sierra Leone in 1997 when the elected government of Ahmed Tejan Kabbah was overthrown by a group of military officers.¹² Nigerian troops were sent directly from Liberia, where they still were acting as peacekeepers after seven years of on and off civil conflict. Nigeria insisted that it had entered Sierra Leone to restore order and bring peace in the aftermath of the coup, and to preserve the work they had done to bring about democratic elections in neighboring Liberia.¹³ Nigeria's Foreign Minister, Tom Ikimi, insisted, "We have a responsibility in the country of Nigeria to assist Sierra Leone, to insure peace, security and the return of legitimate government."¹⁴

The Nigerians had been involved in Sierra Leone as far back as 1991. Nigerian instructors were sent there to train Ulimo forces as a counterweight to the NPFL forces that were using Sierra Leone as a staging area outside of Liberia.¹⁵ Nigerian forces were sent to Sierra Leone to protect ECOMOG forces in Liberia from NPFL attacks from Sierra Leone, but they also served to strengthen Sierra Leone's national army as they counter-attacked RUF positions

⁹ French, Howard W, "Kakata Journal; War Engulfs Liberia, Humbling the Peacekeepers," *New York Times*, 7 October 1994.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² French, Howard W, "Nigerian Military Actions in Sierra Leone Back a Larger Purpose," *New York Times*, 30 May 1997.

¹³ Howard W, "Once Again, Africa Deals With a Crisis on Its Own."

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Abdullah, Ibrahim and Patrick Muana in African Guerillas. Clapham, Christopher, ed. (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1998) p. 178.

within Sierra Leone.¹⁶ So Nigerian involvement in Sierra Leone, even before the 1997 intervention, can be seen more as a piece of Nigeria's regional struggle against Charles Taylor and his backers.

The military dictatorship of Nigeria was known for its harsh control over its own people. Just two years before the Nigerian entry in to the Sierra Leone conflict, Nigerian author and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others were executed after a trial condemned by outsiders as being criminally flawed.¹⁷ So it seemed ironic to some that Nigeria, a nation with a non-elected government, would come to the aid of a democratically elected government in Sierra Leone. This led to the charge that Nigeria had ulterior motives for their action there.¹⁸

Nigeria's critics could point to several possible reasons for Nigeria's actions. Nigeria's support for the Doe government and opposition to Taylor in Liberia, and their support for the Kabbah government's return to power in Sierra Leone, were seen by outsiders as part of a power struggle between France and Nigeria for regional dominance and control of natural resources. According to the New York Times, "for many experts, the key to the recent history of Sierra Leone and Liberia lies in Nigeria's push to extend its political and economic influence along the West African coast. At virtually every step of the way, these analysts say, France has maneuvered to keep the Nigerian giant in check. The French motivation: eagerness to retain a hold on heavily dependent former colonies."¹⁹

Some saw Nigeria's support for the elected Kabbah government in Sierra Leone as a way for Nigeria to send a message that coups against existing governments would not be tolerated,

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 181.

¹⁷ French, Howard W. "Deadly Logic in Nigeria." *New York Times*, 12 November 1995.

¹⁸ French, Howard W. "Once Again, Africa Deals With a Crisis on Its Own," *New York Times*, 9 June 1997.

¹⁹ French, Howard W. "A Muscular Nigeria Proves a Flawed Peacekeeper," *New York Times*, 26 June 1997.

because Nigerian leaders feared a coup in their own country.²⁰ Coups were all too common in Nigerian history, and Sani Abacha's government was no exception.

Still others saw Nigeria's moves as a way to secure Liberian and Sierra Leonean natural resources for themselves, especially diamonds and gold. As one West African diplomat said at time of the Nigerian action in Sierra Leone, "You won't ask me to believe that all of the operations they are undertaking are driven by a sense of noblesse oblige. Nigeria has always seen itself as rightfully dominating this region, and that often involves the grabbing up of resources by their own generals or for their own companies."²¹

According to Nigeria, its involvement was purely altruistic – to restore peace and order in Liberia and Sierra Leone as part of the multi-national ECOWAS organization. According to its critics, Nigeria was fighting a pitched battle with other nations and forces both within and outside of West Africa for power, influence, prestige and control of valuable West African resources. Whatever the motivations for their actions, what did Nigeria actually manage to achieve?

For as much as Nigeria was involved in Sierra Leone and Liberia, they seemed to not have gained much for themselves in return. Nigeria spent as much as \$1 billion dollars in the 1990s providing the bulk of the funding and troops for ECOWAS operations in the two countries.²² As oil prices declined from their peak in the 1970s, this expense began to put serious strain on the Nigerian economy.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Wright, p 128.

By 1996, after six years of nearly continuous conflict in Sierra Leone and Liberia, Nigeria was able to set the stage for a national election in Liberia.²³ This is certainly viewed as a positive achievement for Nigeria. But the landslide winner in the election was Charles Taylor, Nigeria's Liberian nemesis. And as soon as he took office, he pushed to get the Nigerian-led ECOMOG (ECOWAS Monitoring Group) forces out of Liberia,²⁴ reducing the chance that Nigeria could profit from its years of investment there. Taylor had always seen the ECOMOG forces as supporters of the Doe regime rather than impartial peace keepers.²⁵ Even before coming to power, Taylor was in competition with Nigeria for influence in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Nigeria may have won some points in international circles and brought some much needed stability to one of its neighbors, but if it had hopes of immediate return in the form of direct influence or control of resources in Liberia, those hopes were not immediately realized.

And in any case, it may have been more Taylor's doing that elections were held than anything Nigeria did. Taylor realized that if he wanted to become president of Nigeria, he could not do it without Nigerian support.²⁶ Once he agreed to elections the war stopped, and the Liberian people voted him into office because they figured that Taylor would not allow peace if he were not in power.

Steven Wright and Julius Emeka Okolo argue that Nigeria put all of its eggs in one foreign policy basket, ECOWAS, and has not seen a very good return on its investment. In the 1970s, Nigeria had been able to leverage its oil profits to pay for its role in ECOWAS and in turn use ECOWAS as a tool to influence West African affairs and compete effectively with the

²³ French, Howard W, "A West African Border with Back-to-Back Wars," *New York Times*, 25 January 1998.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "Liberia Talks Produce Disarmament Accord," *New York Times*, 18 September 1991.

²⁶ Clapham, *African Guerillas*. P 157.

French.²⁷ But when the price of oil plummeted in the 1980s and 1990s and the Nigerian economy began faltering, this strategy stopped working, even as the French began to lose interest in the region.²⁸ If Nigeria was indeed competing with France for influence among West African states, France seemed to be winning, or at least keeping Nigeria from advancing.

Nigeria may also have sought some measure of respect from the international community through its efforts to stabilize and bring peace to its smaller neighbors. After all, it was quite an accomplishment to bring about free elections in Liberia in 1996, after such a bloody civil war. But Nigerian Political Scientist Julius Ihonvbere argued that any prestige Nigeria might have gained from its foreign affairs successes was nullified by its backward internal state. “It is contended that Nigeria, in spite of its vast human and material resources, cannot make claim to leadership in Africa as long as it is characterized by mindless corruption, mass poverty, gross inequality, mismanagement, waste, and social, political and economic tension, contradictions, and conflicts.”²⁹

Since finally returning to democratic governance in 1999, Nigeria has seen more foreign policy success than it did in the 1990s. Where France was once a rival for influence in the region, now France and Nigeria have started to build an alliance with each other. Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo, as president of the African Union, backed the French intervention in Côte d’Ivoire.³⁰ West Africa has been much more stable in the period since 2000. Perhaps this has something to do with Nigeria’s return to democratic rule and to cooperation between France and Nigeria. This has also coincided with a dramatic increase in the price of oil in recent

²⁷ Wright, p 128.

²⁸ Wright, p 128.

²⁹ Wright, pp. 125-126.

³⁰ International Crisis Group, “Nigeria: Want In The Midst Of Plenty,” 19 July 2006. p. 17.

years, which has brought about more interest to Nigeria from outside powers, notably the US and China.³¹

Nigeria helped avert another crisis in Liberia when it agreed to take Charles Taylor into exile, under pressure from Britain and the US. While in Nigeria, Taylor continued to be a source of trouble, and was accused of still trying to meddle in Liberian affairs. President Obasanjo urged him to stop, but he was eventually turned over to Liberia for prosecution. Nigeria may have had motives other than Western pressure for taking Taylor in. They obviously would have wanted to neutralize his influence in the region, as he had always been a thorn in Nigeria's side. But having someone like Taylor living in your own country, even if under some sort of control, was like sitting on a bomb. It was an embarrassment to Nigeria that Taylor disappeared from custody before he could be turned over for prosecution, just as President Obasanjo was in Washington visiting President Bush.³² He was eventually recaptured, but it was unclear what role Nigeria played in his escape.

Nigeria has been actively involved in the African Union in recent years. In 2006 President Obasanjo gave a speech to the African Union in which he pressed African leaders to pressure Sudan put a stop to the genocide in Darfur and accept a UN peace keeping force.³³ Nigeria provides the biggest contingent of troops to the African Union forces that have been trying to keep the peace there.³⁴ President Obasanjo has been seen have had a positive influence on the African Union when he was its head.

³¹ Ibid, p. 18.

³² Polgree, Lydia. "Nigeria Says Ex-President of Liberia Has Disappeared." *The New York Times*. 29 March 2006.

³³ "Nigeria Leader Warns Africa About Strife In Darfur." *The New York Times*. 11 October 2006.

³⁴ Ibid.

President Obasanjo played a role in keeping the Commonwealth of Nations from splitting over the suspension of Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe had been suspended in 2002, and in 2003 the issue of readmitting it came up at the Commonwealth summit in Abuja. Member states began to line up behind Britain, New Zealand and Australia, which called for continued suspension, and South Africa, Mozambique and Zambia, which felt that continuing Zimbabwe's isolation was counter-productive. A crisis was averted when member states agreed to appoint Obasanjo to negotiate Zimbabwe's eventual return, keeping the Commonwealth itself from splitting along Black and White lines.³⁵

Eleven of 16 West African states are expected to hold political elections in 2007, and Nigeria's presidential elections are seen as the key to the success or failure of all the others.³⁶ According to an Oxford Analytica report, President Obasanjo's leadership in the region will be missed. He has chosen not to run for a third term, and it is unclear if another state's leader will pick up the slack, or if Nigerian elections will turn violent, overshadowing elections and events in the rest of the region.³⁷

It remains to be seen whether Nigeria can continue on its path toward becoming a more democratic, better governed state. If history is a guide, Nigeria's popularly elected government may be short lived. The high oil prices that are attracting foreign investment may not last forever. The same internal regional tensions that have determined Nigerian history since independence are still there, and may perhaps lead to violence in the upcoming presidential elections. This may be a critical time in West African history. If Nigeria can keep on its path

³⁵ Wines, Michael. "Commonwealth Split by 'Zimbabwe Problem.'" *The New York Times*. 9 December 2003.

³⁶ Oxford Analytica, "Prospects 2007: Polls challenge West African stability," 15 December 2006, <<http://proxygw.wrlc.org/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/pqdweb?did=1184586951&sid=1&Fmt=4&clientId=31812&RQT=309&VName=PQD>>.

³⁷ Ibid.

and avoid election troubles, it can continue to be a positive influence on the region. If Nigeria returns to the autocratic rule of its past, its neighbors may see a return to the crises and civil conflicts that characterized the 1990s.

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