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## **Nigerian Foreign Policy and Diversionary Mechanism Under Major General Sani Abacha**

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### **Abstract**

*Foreign policy is a tripod of external relations. State formulates foreign policy to reward as well as to punish states within the global system. Nigerian foreign policy under General Sani Abacha entered into another milestone hitherto unknown in the foreign policy terrain of Nigeria. The manner with which General Abacha mishandled the delicate domestic political structure pitted the regime against the western states who regarded the regime as authoritarian and unconstitutional. Nigeria was subsequently castigated at international level as a pariah state and such political appellation resulted in series of economic and diplomatic sanctions against the regime. General Abacha regime was not only sanctioned at international level but also at domestic level. Various civil societies sprang up to launch assault and campaign against the high-handedness of Abacha regime. Thus, in order to survive within the global political system, Abacha evolve a diversionary mechanism to ensure his regime survived the political ravages of the time. This article thus examines the diversionary mechanism as formulated by General Abacha to render the domestic and international castigation impotent. The effectiveness of such policy and whom the policy was directed at are the focus of the article.*

**Keywords:** Foreign Policy; Abacha regime; Nigeria; Diversionary Politics.

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### **1. Introduction**

Diversionary politics is a psychological mechanism employs by leaders of states to control the emotion of people in relation to public opinion (Oladimeji, 2017). Such mechanism is used to ensure the survival of a government, most especially during the domestic political stalemate. The reason for such diversionary politics is to divert the attention of citizens from certain critical socio-political issue bedeviling a state and it usually involves unwarranted foreign adventure to present the regime as a saint at international level. The employment of this mechanism under Abacha regime was to

court friends and allies among African states and to ensure the survival of the regime. As the western sanction affected the economy more, Abacha regime sought friendship in Eastern world and Africa (Abacha, 1996). In addition, the regime entered into unnecessary political stalemate with Cameroon on the issue of Bakassi Peninsular to divert the attention of Nigerians from the heinous acts perpetrated by the regime (Oladimeji & Ahmad Zaki, 2015). It needs to be said that the complicated domestic political stalemate did not deter Abacha from foreign policy



execution and implementation. In some instances, the foreign policy was used to reinforce and strengthen the regime. This could be seen in the way the regime was intransigent to the plight of international community to shield itself against the so-called external interference. Thus, the article examines the Nigerian foreign policies as conceived by Abacha and the diversionary mechanism evolved to survive within the global political system. In the formulation of foreign policy, the most important consideration is the national interest of a state and how such national interests' pursuit will benefit the entire citizenry. This is because, the foreign policy of a state is formulated in reaction to the externalities and how such externalities react to those foreign policies being formulated by a state. The focus of this article therefore is to make an overall assessment of the diversionary policy of Abacha and how such policy affected Nigeria and the targeted states. Thus, the main diversionary tactic available to Abacha regime was unwarranted and uncalled foreign intervention and adventure in the West African states. He embarked on this to shift the focus of Nigerians and international actors from the regime. In addition, he intervened in most of these West African states to legitimate its regime as some states later joined Nigeria to maintain peace and order in within the trouble spots in West Africa. Abacha, in the cases of Liberia and Sierra Leone utilised the multilateral channel to intervene in both countries' internal political chaos.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **Abacha's Policy of Multilateralism**

Like all other Nigeria leaders, Abacha was keen in employing multilateral diplomacy

to advance Nigeria's interests in both regional and sub-regional politics in Africa. Although, Abacha records of participating in global multilateral institutions, by Nigerian standard, was poor. Abacha employed the use of multilateral mechanism to evade any form of castigation from global powers. Abacha realised the danger of over-reliance on the previous prescription of Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other national institutions charged with the responsibilities of directing the foreign policy of the state (Abegunrin, 2003). One of such policy prescriptions is the need for active participation in all global multilateral institutions to enhance Nigeria's prestige in the global politics. Such policy advocacy did not appeal to Abacha knowing too well that such might expose the regime to unwarranted criticism from would-be global powers. In such an instance, Abacha, decided to limit Nigeria's multilateral active participation to Africa and also sought to court the friendship of some third world leader to neutralise the western isolation and sanction (Ali, 2012).

The question that arises here is: what were Nigerian interests that Abacha sought to attain in his alignment to regional multilateral institutions? One needs to recognise that Abacha's policy of regional multilateral diplomacy was to continue from where previous administrations ended. Since 1960 all Nigerian leaders, both military and civilian, have been keen in protecting the interests of Africa in global politics and for such lofty aim to be attained multilateral diplomacy became expedient. Such might explain the sponsoring and establishment of ECOWAS by General Yakubu Gowon in 1973,



alongside Gnassingbe Eyadema of Togo (Falola, 2008; Heaton:2009). It needs to be stressed here that Nigerian before and after the attainment of independent status in 1960 had recognised its potential as the main driver of African politics but such was eclipsed by vibrant and brilliant performance of Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah in the 1960s (Fasanmi, 2006). Despite Kwame Nkrumah's energetic African leadership status, Nigeria still tried to shine and the eventual drafting of OAU charter in 1963 was done by a Nigeria, Dr Teslim Elias (Gamabari, 2008). The precedence of Nigeria's active multilateral diplomacy appealed to Abacha's interest, most especially in the West African sub-region. In this sense multilateral diplomacy within the subregion was an attempt on the part of Abacha to divert the attention of Nigerians and the world at large from the atrocities perpetrated by the regime. According to Dr. Ibrahim Yakubu Lane, a former Nigerian Senator between 1992 and 1993,

*The adoption of regional multilateral policy by General Abacha was to copy from the activities of the previous Nigerian leaders as well as ensuring that the international hostility was neutralised. I have to say clearly here that the regional responsibility of Nigeria was not abandoned during Abacha regime and what the administration did wrong was its unyielding to the policy*

*prescription from domestic foreign policy apparatuses (Ibrahim Yakubu, Personal Interview, May 12, 2015).*

While the above quote might be true to certain extent, it seems that most of the Abacha regional multilateral participation was to serve his selfish aspiration to showcase to the world the legitimacy of its regime through the acceptability of its African counterparts. Such political calculation did not at all stop the West from isolating the regime altogether. Thus, the seeming active regional policy was a policy device of diversion.

#### **Diversionsary Policy at International Level**

In the bid to divert the attention of Nigeria, Abacha regime engaged in diversionsary policy in some West African trouble spots. Ordinarily, what was expected from a regime undergoing a severe internal political turmoil was to amend its way in order to placate the citizens. He did not do that. Abacha instead ignored the ongoing political stalemate within the country and embarked on foreign intervention. Abacha's diversionsary tactic was a paradox: How would a regime, suffering from political chaos at home, engaged in peace making outside the country? In this case, the regime pretended to continue the afro-centric foreign policy of its predecessors. There are some areas of policy military governments registered a remarkable degree of consistency even generating some positive response from within the country and indeed Africa as a whole. It is possible that the size of the country again informed some concerted



effort on the part of military leaders to maintain focus and clarity in the area of foreign policy (Mogunluwa, 2013). The Foreign Service has been one area in which military representation has been limited. Aside from Ambassador Joe Garba and Brigadier Ogundipe, Nigerian High Commissioner to the UK in the 1960s, there is no evidence of military personnel serving in any capacity outside that of traditional defence attaché (Chibundi, 2003). However, the foreign policy initiatives of successive administrations have been purposeful and effective. In the Abacha years, the close connection between the Nigerian military and political life significantly damaged its public image, and more importantly, it had very negative effects on discipline and professionalism. The case of Cameroon is a prime example here.

### **The Case of Cameroon**

Since the civil war of 1967, Nigerian soldiers had scarcely played a leading role in any military operation; the army could have been tested against Cameroon in the boundary dispute over the Bakassi Peninsula. A collection of swampy islands, Bakassi was found to be surrounded by a large area of sea that was rich in oil. Former French colony Cameroon, claimed that it was part of German West Africa which was given to Britain at Versailles in 1913 and was inherited by Nigeria in the de-colonisation period (Oshuntokun, 2008). They also claimed that in 1975, Yakubu Gowon, the then military head of state, gave it back to Cameroon as a reward for president Ahidjo of Cameroon's support in the Biafra civil war (Ashafa, 2008). On the

part of Nigeria, it was claimed that in 1884 the Resident of the islands accepted British protection but not British sovereignty and that the 1913 treaty was therefore not valid (Ajayi, 2006). The Nigerian government under Abacha maintained that General Gowon had no power to cede the island to Cameroon (Ayam, 1999). Looking into the history of military decision-making process in Nigeria, one would be forced to agree with Abacha despite its foreign policy inconsistencies. How would a national leader single-handedly cede a national territory to another country when in fact the due process was not followed? The impunity on the part of Nigerian government is already a culture and that might explain the audacity of General Gowon to embark on "territorial gift" to his Cameroonian counterpart, President Ahidjo (Barika, 2014). He was not the first person to do that to his country. Russia also did the same in 1865 when Alaska was sold to the United States. The Russo-American case was an agreement sealed based on the national interest of both countries.

Thus, Nigerian military government under the leadership of Abacha reiterated that Nigerians made up of Ninety-six percent of the islands' residents and they had been enjoying the security of Nigerian police since the mid-1900s (Effiong, 2012). In this way, the argument was that Nigerian government had been discharging its responsibilities accordingly to the inhabitants of the disputed territory which Cameroon was in fact found wanting in virtually all issue pertaining to the residents. The issue here is: How did Abacha government come about the ninety-six figure of Nigerians in the disputed areas? The problem is that it might be



difficult to clearly identify who are Nigerians in the territory given the plurality of the inhabitants. That argument was very weak unless a census or referendum had been conducted to that effect. As long as referendum and census were not conducted then it was a flimsy excuse and argument on the part of Abacha regime to conclude the nationality of the residents. Cameroon, being only a fraction of the size of Nigeria, it could have occurred to Nigerian military that defeating it would be a work over. Despite the seeming error of national identification of the residents, Nigeria under Abacha moved troops into the islands and the two countries exchanged artillery fire in skirmishes for about two years (Etekpe, 2013). The former Ambassador of Nigeria to Russia, Jibrin Chinade, between 1991 and 1996 lamented,

*It was a misplaced policy priority on the part of Abacha government to have waged war against its neighbour that served as the only ally during the Nigerian civil war. I can perfectly understand the personality of Abacha. He was a leader that did not want anyone to go against his order or disrespect him. So, the attack launched on Cameroon was a carryover from its domestic policy of arrogance and intransigence. The domestic foreign policy mechanisms that should have provided him with much-needed*

*policy option were not consulted and almost on the verge of extinction.... To him (Abacha) the attack was to showcase to Cameroon that Nigeria would not condone any act of betrayal and nonsense on the part of the neighbours. Such....is a gross policy miscalculation (Jibrin Chinade, Personal Interview, May 14, 2015).*

It needs to be stated here that the two years confrontations led to animosity between the two countries and such led to image crisis in Nigeria's foreign policy formulation. Besides, the confrontation between the two countries counteracted with the Nigeria's policy of Africa's as the centre-piece of its foreign policy. How could Abacha government allow such issue to degenerate to war when in fact the sole responsibility of Nigeria is to be its brothers' keepers in the continents, most especially towards its neighbours? (Fafowora, 1998). The war was a clear mess to Nigeria's policy of good neighbourliness. The war, to some keen observers of Nigerian foreign policy represented a diversionary tact on the part of government to divert the attention of Nigerians from domestic political debacle that resulted from the annulment of June 12, 1993 election (Olaniyonu, Thisday, May 29, 1998). Given the persistent clamouring from concerned state that shares border with Bakassi disputed areas, Abacha was of the view that responding to the request of Nigerians in the border with Cameroon might placate some people to befriend his regime (Omeje, 2004). Also, it was a



calculated attempt on the part of Abacha government to convince the Nigerians that the regime was all out to pursue those interests that would better the lots of the citizens (Phillips, 2013).

Given the incapacity of Cameroon to respond adequately to the onslaught of Nigerian military, the French government was forced to provide assistance on behalf of the Cameroonian government (Omeje, 2004). French government naval vessels conducted manoeuvres in the area in 1993 and in 1994, French paratroopers arrived in Cameroon (Fawole, 2004). Baba Gana Kingibe, the then Nigerian Foreign Minister, organised a series of negotiations between the two countries (James, 2011). The French government sent an envoy, Earlier Delaye, to General Abacha, who proclaimed that his government had a defence pact with Cameroon but was interested in seeing the two countries resolve their differences amicably (James, 2011). Eventually in May 1996, the war came to an end when the UN and ICJ intervene in the conflict mediation (Omeje, 2004). It needs to be stressed here that Abacha seemed to exhibit a sense of poverty of history when he decided to invade Cameroon. The singular fear of Nigeria since independence has always been the presence of France in virtually all the francophone territories in West Africa (Jaye, 2008). Out of sixteen countries that made the West African countries only five namely Gambia, Nigeria, Liberia, Ghana and Sierra Leone are Anglophone. The region is dominated by francophone countries and most of them as defence pacts with France as seen in the case of Cameroon. In that wise, how could it possible for Abacha to defeat Cameroon to

surrender the territory? In fact, France was said to be in support of Cameroonian cause in the ICJ (Etekpe, 2013). Abacha regime seemed to have forgotten that it was the fear of France that deterred Nigeria from annexing the small Equatorial Guinea and Sao Tome and Principe (Akinboye, 2005).

It also needs to be stressed further that the problem with Cameroon began with the invasion by Cameroonian gendarmes in early 1994. The regime, even though it claimed to have sent troops to protect the civilian population in the area, it could not respond very vigorously to the Cameroonian aggression because it lacked the requisite international credibility for bold action. Its pariah status was a hindrance to getting the badly required international support. The regime therefore followed Cameroon to the World Court as an alternative (Akinterinwa, 2004). The bad blood between the two neighbours forced General Abacha to boycott the 32<sup>nd</sup> OAU summit hosted by Cameroon in Yaoundé in July 1996 (The Guardian, December 21, 1996). The diversionary foreign adventure did not limit to Cameroon alone, other countries also benefitted from Abacha's regime policy of diversion.

#### **The Liberian Case**

The conflict situation in Liberia did involve the Nigerian military in lengthy operations and campaigns putting them again in the spotlight. The Abacha administration continued with the commitment of Nigerian troops to the ECOWAS peace programme which commenced in 1990 with the deployment of ECOMOG, the Nigerian-led regional peace-keeping force, to war-torn Liberia (Ali, 2012). The war started when rebels of the national patriotic front of



Liberia led by Charles Taylor entered Liberia from the north and successfully made their southwards to Monrovia where they confronted government troops (Bobboyi, 2010). The conflict took on various dimension involving factions led by Alhaji Kromah of the United Liberation Movement (ULIMO); George Boley of the Liberian Peace Council (LPC); Government Forces and NPFL (Mailafia, 2010). The brutal war which claimed the lives of over 150,000 Liberians was frequently halted by various attempts on the part of the ECOWAS leaders to broker peace (Oshgae, 2010).

General Abacha seizing the opportunity to boost legitimacy and popularity at home, hosted the Eleventh Round of the Peace Summit in Nigeria capital, Abuja on 17 August 1995, which marked a change of his hard-line posture towards Charles Taylor (Adebajo, 2000). In the sequel, a fresh peace agreement was signed by the military factions at Abuja, and ECOWAS leaders approved the deployment of 8500 ECOMOG troops to serve as a cease-fire monitoring group to Liberia (Adebajo, 2000). ECOMOG Troops performed well, maintained law and order in most parts of the country and earned credit for presiding over the process of disarming the factions in 1997 after democratic elections had been conducted in Liberia. Although, Abacha regime acted in unison with other members of ECOWAS and spent heavily more than any other ECOWAS members but the leaders that was so enmeshed in domestic political and social turmoil would be expected to settle home before launching foreign adventurism. It is based on this conviction that most scholars observed and concluded that the Abacha's gross

involvement in the Liberian conflict was to scuttle external estrangement as well as to divert domestic attention from the real issues that supposed to settled by the regime. Such foreign policy tactic was replicated in Sierra Leone.

### **The Case of Sierra Leone**

The case of Sierra Leone was similar to Liberia's. In Sierra Leone, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 1997, the democratically-elected government of President Tejan Kabbah was overthrown by Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) led by Lieutenant Colonel Paul Johnny Koromah and his rebel allies, the revolutionary united front (RUF) (Eugene, 2014). The coup was a major set-back for diamond-rich state which was still receiving refugees returning after the five-year civil war waged up to the peace accord and elections held in 1996 that subsequently brought Kabbah into power (Eugene, 2014). The Koromah-led junta was notorious for its high-level corruption. When diplomatic efforts failed the Nigerian-led ECOMOG soldiers in association with local militias, Kamajors, rounded up the AFRC/RUF coalition forces in what was known as Operation Sandstorm of February 13 1998 (Hamman and Omojuwa, 2013). The Nigerian initiative received international commendation and it was used to suggest to many observers that overthrowing legitimately elected governments in West Africa sub-region would no longer be tolerated by members states. Although General Abacha arrived thereafter to greet Kabbah on his return to power, the world held his breath for the episode in which, the highly unpopular and undemocratic Nigerian regime was involved in spearheading the installation of



a democratic government in another country (Jackson, 2007). Professor Auwalu, legal adviser to Abacha and Faculty of Law lecturer, Bayero University, noted that,

*What seems to surprise the world was the issue of legitimacy and acceptance on the part of ECOWAS to allow Abacha to champion the cause of restoring democracy in Sierra Leone. How could that happen: to offer what you do not have. That represented a policy mystery to some global political observers...most do not understand the simple fact that Nigeria is a great country.... any attempt on our part to abandon our responsibility in Africa will be disastrous for the world (Auwalu Yadudu, Personal Interview, June 8, 2015).*

It needs to be noted, however, that the Nigerian-led ECOMOG operations in both Liberia and Sierra Leone had its shortcomings. The erosion of discipline, which is the Achilles heel of several African armies on the move, bedevilled the Nigerian ECOMOG contingents who were constantly accused of incessant human rights abuses, notably, raping and looting, in both Sierra Leone and Liberia. British Journalist Alec Russell wrote:

*After their deployment the ECOMOG was far from keeping the peace...they actively fomented the conflict, arming several of the factions to fight as their proxies. They also shamelessly upheld their countries reputation for corruption and greed by pillaging Sierra Leone as enthusiastically as any of the warlords. So comprehensive was their looting that they stripped one of Freetown's harbours of its dockyard fittings, shipped away and sold them for scrap-metal (Russel, 1997).*

Abacha regime intervened in good faith but the behaviour of Nigerian and other ECOMOG armies suggested otherwise. Liberia and Sierra Leone after the war faced the daunting task of fatherless children was said to be over 100, 000. Such inhuman treatment of fellow Africans greatly nullified the purpose of responsible intervention. Again, Nigeria's intervention in Sierra Leone in the heydays of Nigerian domestic turbulence was a gimmick to sell the good image of the regime to global partners.

### **Conclusion**

Foreign policy is a choice that a state adopts towards external environment, and as long as such choice rests on the political intricacies of external environment the principle of rationality has to take precedence. This is not the case under





Abacha regime. The regime seemed to be of conviction that personal aggrandisement and intransigence could lead to policy prudence. Such mistake can only be made in a state where foreign policy institutions and apparatus have been compromised. Abacha took over the mantle of power with the sole idea that external milieu played little role in determining the courses of event. He did not really understand that the external environment is beyond his control and the way he continually manoeuvred the domestic politics could be replicated at endogenous milieu. Although, Abacha court the friendship of some countries, most especially the West African neighbours, he did so neutralize the extent of sanction placed on it by the West and its allies. Such might explain the role of South Africa under Nelson Mandela towards Nigeria. Overall, Abacha's foreign policy, taking into consideration the domestic stress suffered by the citizens, marked a disastrous turning point in the history of Nigeria's external relations.

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