

NIGERIA'S ROLE IN THE EXPULSION/ WITHDRAWAL OF SOUTH AFRICA FROM THE COMMONWEALTH OF NATIONS

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Introduction

Racial segregation in South Africa began in colonial times. The inhabitants were classified into four racial groups (“native”, “white”, “coloured” and “Asian”) and residential areas were also segregated, sometimes by means of forced removals. From 1970, black people were deprived of their citizenship, legally becoming citizens of one of ten tribally based self-governing homelands, unofficially called *bantustans* or Bantu homelands, established by the Apartheid Government as pseudo-national homelands, and areas where the majority of the Black population was moved to prevent them from living in the urban areas of South Africa, four of which became nominally independent states (Baldwin-Ragaven 1999). The government segregated education, medical care, beaches, and other public services, and provided black people with services inferior to those of white people. Apartheid sparked significant internal resistance and violence led by the African National Congress (ANC), as well as a long trade embargo against South Africa by some of the Commonwealth members. Since the 1950s, a series of popular uprisings and protests were met with the banning of opposition and imprisoning of anti-apartheid leaders who were mostly ANC members.

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So, for more than four decades, apartheid served as the institutional centerpiece of South Africa's internal and external policies, especially that discrimination and other forms of violation against black South Africans. Nigeria's anti-apartheid policy did not evolve, however, until October 1960, when the country attained political independence. Nigeria then viewed its independent entrance into the world stage as a profoundly significant event, that provided a unique opportunity to craft a coherent foreign policy towards the international community in general and in Africa in particular; Africa therefore became the centerpiece of the country's foreign policy. One of the cardinal objectives of Nigeria's foreign policy as enunciated by Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa was the promotion of African solidarity and working towards the decolonization of all African states (Akinboye 2005). Nigeria's commitment to the anti-apartheid struggle had been made absolutely clear even before it attained its independence on October 1st 1960 and her role in the struggle, particularly in the United Nations' Anti-Apartheid Committee, which Nigeria headed until 1994, is commendable.

Consequently, Nigeria led other African states to many international fora with the call for an end to all forms of racial discrimination, apartheid and colonialism. In the process, Nigeria was subjected to a form of economic blackmail by the West for her role in the decolonization and liberation of the African continent. In spite of this, Nigeria remained undaunted in her commitment to see the apartheid eradicated. It was precisely for this commitment that Nigeria was considered a member of the Frontline States. As a matter of fact, Nigeria's foreign policy has, since independence, been anchored on the anti-apartheid struggle (Ajala 1992), which was consistently maintained by different regimes in the country until apartheid was completely dismantled in South Africa (Akinboye 2005).

The Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 and the Events that Followed

Sharpeville Massacre, incident in 1960, when South African police opened fire on a crowd of black protesters was a turning point in the fight against apartheid. The confrontation occurred in the township of Sharpeville, in what is now Gauteng province, in northeastern South Africa. Just as earlier mentioned, following the election of the National Party to office in South Africa in 1948, a policy of racial segregation known as apartheid was introduced. Apartheid was designed to regulate the lives of the black major-

ity and to maintain white minority rule. Legislation was passed governing where blacks could live and work, and massive restrictions were placed on the exercise of civil liberties.

During the 1950s, black protest against apartheid mounted. This was organized by the African National Congress (ANC, founded in 1912) and by its rival, the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC, founded in 1959). The PAC called for a nationwide demonstration on March 21, 1960, against South Africa's *pass laws*, which controlled the movement and employment of blacks and forced them to carry "reference books" of identity papers. As part of this mass demonstration, a large crowd gathered outside a police station in Sharpeville, some people burning their reference books. The police, fearing the crowd was becoming hostile, panicked and opened fire. They continued to shoot as the protesters tried to run away, and about 72 blacks were killed, including women and children. More than 184 people were also injured.

The uproar among South African blacks was immediate, and the following week saw demonstrations, protest marches, strikes, and riots around the country that led to the death of many other blacks. On March 30, 1960, the government declared a state of emergency, detaining more than 18,000 people. The ANC and the PAC were banned and forced to go underground or into exile. Thereafter, both movements abandoned the traditional strategy of nonviolent protest and turned increasingly to armed struggle. A storm of international protest followed the Sharpeville shootings, including condemnation by the United Nations (UN). Sharpeville marked a turning point in South Africa's history; the country found itself increasingly isolated in the international community for the next 30 years (Lemon 2008).

In 1961 South Africa broke her 155-year-old British connection and became a republic outside the Commonwealth of Nations. It was a step whose international and economic results, though not yet fully felt, were foreshadowed during the year. Rapidly mounting criticism of South Africa at the UN, stringent financial measures to save the country's reserves, and the start of an intensified military build-up were the most obvious signs of the country's growing isolation. Although, the non-white political activities were less spectacular than in the previous year, deep racial uneasiness continued to express itself among the Africans and the Colored people (a mixed population), and further legislation to suppress political demonstrations among them was passed. However, elections toward the year's end showed that support for the government was growing among the Afrikaners in spite of moral and political restiveness among the church and university groups, and the appearance of a new liberal trend in the opposition (Lemon 2009).

The Soweto Student Uprising of 1976

Another watershed in the struggle against apartheid was the Soweto Uprising by the students, which Nigeria and many other African countries used in fighting the Apartheid government in South Africa, especially on the platform of the Commonwealth of Nations. This uprising was another major struggle since the Sharpeville Massacre. On the morning of June 16, 1976, thousands of students from the African township of Soweto, outside Johannesburg, gathered at their schools to participate in a student-organized protest demonstration.

Many of them carried signs that read, 'Down with Afrikaans' and 'Bantu Education – to Hell with it;' others sang freedom songs as the unarmed crowd of schoolchildren marched towards Orlando soccer stadium, where a peaceful rally had been planned. The crowd swelled to more than 10,000 students (Bonner 1976). En route to the stadium, approximately fifty policemen stopped the students and tried to turn them back. At first, the security forces tried unsuccessfully to disperse the students with tear gas and warning shots. Then, policemen fired directly into the crowd of demonstrators. Many students responded by running for shelter, while others retaliated by pelting the police with stones.

That day, two students, Hastings Ndlovu and Hector Pieterse, died from police gunfire; hundreds more sustained injuries during the subsequent chaos that engulfed Soweto. The shootings in Soweto sparked a massive uprising that soon spread to more than 100 urban and rural areas throughout South Africa.

The immediate cause for the June 16, 1976 march was student opposition to a decree issued by the Bantu Education Department that imposed Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in half the subjects in higher primary (middle school) and secondary school (high school). Since members of the ruling National Party spoke Afrikaans, black students viewed it as the "language of the oppressor". Moreover, lacking fluency in Afrikaans, African teachers and pupils experienced first-hand the negative impact of the new policy in the classroom.

The Soweto uprising came after a decade of relative calm in the resistance movement in the wake of massive government repression in the 1960s. Yet, during this "silent decade", a new sense of resistance had been brewing. In 1969, black students, led by Steve Biko (among others), formed the South African Student's Organization (SASO). Stressing black pride, self-reliance, and psychological liberation, the Black Consciousness Move-

ment in the 1970s became an influential force in the townships, including Soweto. The political context of the 1976 uprisings must also take into account the effects of workers' strikes in Durban in 1973; the liberation of neighboring Angola and Mozambique in 1975; and increases in student enrollment in black schools, which led to the emergence of a new collective youth identity forged by common experiences and grievances (Bonner 1976).

Though the schoolchildren may have been influenced by the Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s, many former pupils from Soweto do not remember any involvement of outside organizations or liberation movements in their decision to protest the use of Afrikaans at their schools. In his memoir, Sifiso Ndlovu, a former student at Phefeni Junior Secondary School in Soweto, recalls how in January 1976 he and his classmates had looked forward to performing well in their studies but noted how the use of Afrikaans in the classroom significantly lowered their grades (Hirson 1979); this was buttressed by Brooks *et al.* in their account on the uprising in Soweto (Brooks 1980). Echoing Ndlovu, current Member of Parliament Obed Baphela recalled: "It was quite difficult now to switch from English to Afrikaans at that particular point and time." [Watch Bapela video segment]. The firing of teachers who refused to implement the Afrikaans language policy in Soweto exacerbated the frustration of middle school students, who then organized small demonstrations and class boycotts as early as March, April and May (Ndlovu 1998).

To sustain resistance, leaders of the Soweto Students Representative Council (SSRC, founded in August 1976) decided to involve adults in the protests in order to build inter-generational unity and to strike an economic blow against the apartheid regime. From August through December 1976, SSRC leaders organized a number of campaigns, including stay-at-homes (short strikes) for adult workers, marches to Johannesburg, anti-drinking campaigns, mass funerals (which became politically charged and often turned into protest rallies), and a Christmas consumer boycott (SSRC 1976). In preparation for the stay-at-homes, the SSRC printed flyers urging adults to participate. One read "[...] the scrapping of BANTU EDUCATION, the RELEASE of Prisoners detained during the demos [demonstrations], and the overthrow of oppression, we the students call on our parents to stay at home and not go to work from Monday" (Carris 1972). Sporadic clashes between students and police continued into 1977; by the end of the year, the government acknowledged that nearly 600 people had been killed, although recent research showed that at least 3,000 people died. Thousands more were imprisoned and many black South Africans fled into exile or joined the armed struggle.

The politicization and activism of young South Africans in Soweto and beyond galvanized the liberation movements and set in motion a series of transformations that ultimately led to the demise of apartheid (Carris 1972). It is on record that many of the students who fled South Africa were helped by the Federal Government of Nigeria as they were all given scholarships. Many of the African National Congress (ANC) leaders were all issued Nigerian Passports to move around the world among other things.

Expulsion/Withdrawal of South Africa from the Commonwealth

Nigeria's commitment to the anti-apartheid struggle had been made absolutely clear even before it attained its independence on October 1st, 1960 (Ajala 1992). Following the Sharpeville massacres of March 21st, 1960, when South African police shot and killed 72 blacks and wounded 184 (as earlier mentioned), there was a general consensus among all the Nigerian political parties, as well as the regional and federal governments, that decisive actions should be taken against the Pretoria regime in order to force that regime to change its abominable apartheid policy. This event marked the beginning of Nigeria's confrontation against white South Africa. Nigeria banned the importation of South African goods into the country and was instrumental to the political and economic sanctions passed against the racist regime.

In 1961 also, Nigeria demanded and spearheaded the forceful expulsion/withdrawal of South Africa from the Commonwealth at the 11th Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference which was held in March 1961 in London. In fact, Nigeria mobilizing other black African countries succeeded in isolating South Africa in such a way that it would realize the absurdity of its racist policies (Agbu 2010). In continuation of this posture, Nigeria terminated all the privileges of Commonwealth membership that South Africa enjoyed in Nigeria before her forced withdrawal from the Commonwealth. Henceforth, all South African whites were treated as foreigners in Nigeria.

Nigeria, achieved her independence, at a period when the international community was already up in arms against colonialism, racial discrimination and apartheid. Yearnings for independence in the remaining dependent territories of Asia and Africa had gathered such momentum that the General Assembly of the United Nations had no problem in adopting the memorable resolution 1514 (XV) on "The Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples" on 14 December 1960 – not long after

Nigeria's independence. Just as Nigeria had taken a stand against the Pretoria regime shortly after the Sharpeville Massacres (already mentioned), it also joined the other freedom-loving nations in adopting this special resolution on decolonization.

In spite of this momentous resolution the international environment was tense. The Cold War was very much evident as both the East and West were engaged in vile and hostile propaganda against each other; both NATO and the Warsaw military blocs had been solidified with bases in their respective spheres of influence; each bloc had imposed restrictions on trade between it and its friends on the one hand and its opponents on the other. Each bloc had embarked on the development of nuclear weapons, as well as indulged extensively in spying against the other. Besides, the ideological warfare between the capitalist liberal democracy of the West and the communist proletarian democracy of the East was at its height as the Cuban crisis ably demonstrated.

The Congo crisis brought the stark realities of the situation much nearer home to all the newly independent African states. The little knowledge of these new nations, which has had long association with the West as against the East, had come through the prejudiced and biased channels of the West. Their perception of the Eastern bloc was, therefore, a distorted one.

In Nigeria's case, it was precisely for this and other reasons that Nigeria banned Soviet and Communist literature and turned down scholarships from the Eastern bloc. Nigerians were discouraged from traveling to the Eastern bloc while Nigerians, who had found their way there, were on their return looked upon in government circles as "communist agents." It was also because of this suspicion that Nigeria delayed the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Eastern bloc countries, and when it finally established these relations, it initially restricted the size of the Soviet Mission in Lagos. The prevailing international environment also made it impossible for Nigeria to practice the policy of non-alignment that professed. Instead, it was, to all intents and purposes, allied to the West.

Another major factor, which forced Nigeria into this position, was the expectation that it was only the West that could provide the necessary financial and material assistance that would be needed for Nigeria's economic development. To make matters worse, the report of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development mission, which was in Nigeria in the 1950s, had recommended that "without foreign investment neither public nor private endeavour can achieve the rate of economic growth and development that the Nigerian people desire" (Ajala 1992).

With all these factors at the back of their minds, Nigerian leaders approached foreign affairs with caution. They did not want to take any action that could jeopardize their chances of securing aid and other forms of assistance from the West. Policies adopted by the Balewa government were manifestations of this approach. Nigeria, however, soon found out that it needed to be categorical and not affected by the prevailing international environment on matters of vital interest to the African continent. This realization is born out of the fact that, by virtue of the size of the country and its human and material resources, Nigeria could not sit idly by and allow Ghana to continue to play the leadership role in African affairs. As independence approached, therefore, Nigerian leaders resolved never to continue finding excuses for British duplicity on the South African situation “but took a firmer line not only on the apartheid issue but also on the decolonization of the remaining dependent territories in Africa” (Ajala 1986).

In consonance with this stance, the Prime Minister went to the March 1961 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in London “determined to oppose South Africa's apartheid policy” (Ajala 1986). Consequently, “Nigeria spearheaded the move that led to the withdrawal of South Africa from the Commonwealth” (Adebisi 1980) at the meeting. In continuation of this changed posture, as mentioned earlier, Nigeria terminated all the privileges of Commonwealth membership that South Africa enjoyed in Nigeria before its forced withdrawal from the Commonwealth. Henceforth, all South Africa whites would be treated as foreigners in Nigeria while a trade ban was also immediately imposed upon South Africa. A few months later Nigeria moved a resolution at the International Labour Organization calling on the organization to expel South Africa on the ground that apartheid was a flagrant violation of both the letter and spirit of the ILO Constitution.

On March 16, 1961 Dr. Verwoerd, the Prime Minister, withdrew South Africa's request to continue as a member of the Commonwealth after it had become a republic. This was done at a meeting of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers in London which Dr. Verwoerd attended to carry out his promise to retain South Africa's membership if he could. Considerable criticism of South Africa's policy of racial separation or *apartheid* was expressed by other Commonwealth members, particularly Canada and the Afro-Asian dominions led by Nigeria. In the face of this criticism, Dr. Verwoerd withdrew his request ‘so as not to place our friends, particularly the United Kingdom, in the invidious position of having to choose between us and the Afro-Asian states of the Commonwealth’. The news of the withdrawal was received with shock by the opposition and with jubilation by the great majority of the larger white group, the Dutch-descended Afrikaners.

Almost immediately South Africa's race policies came under heavy attack in both the UN Political Committee and the General Assembly. Within twenty-four hours of withdrawal from the Commonwealth, South African administration of South-West Africa was condemned by a 74-0 vote in the General Assembly. The heaviest vote ever recorded in the UN General Assembly condemned *apartheid*, and even Portugal voted in the 94-0 division. The South African delegate maintained that this was 'domestic interference.' The Security Council also ordered its Committee on South-West Africa to enter the territory and investigate charges concerning the application of *apartheid* within this area controlled by South Africa under a post-World War I mandate. The South African government refused to grant the committee visas to enter although it offered to allow some person of international standing to enter. In late October, soon after the resumption of UN sittings, there was a call for sanctions against South Africa by Afro-Asian states in a debate lasting over a fortnight. South Africa's foreign minister, E. H. Louw, defended his government's policies as being in the best interests of everybody in the country (Lenon 2008).

On May 31, 1961 South Africa became a republic. In effect this was a restoration of the republican form of government, which had been ended in the Transvaal and Orange Free State, the then two Northern Provinces of South Africa, at the close of the Boer War of 1899-1902. The new State-President, previously the Governor-General, Mr. C. R. Swart, took the oath of office and swore in the cabinet. The constitution remained the same parliamentary one based on a white electorate, with four communal seats for the Colored (mulatto) people, and no representation whatsoever for the 11,000,000 Africans and 500,000 Asians. The event was celebrated by the Afrikaners and largely ignored by the English white minority and the non-whites. A three-day strike planned by the non-whites as a protest to coincide with the establishment of the republic failed to come up to expectations, though it was about 50 per cent effective in some areas. This failure was partly due to the display of force by the government, which included calling up the citizen forces and deploying armored units at key points, as well as heavily policing the non-white townships. The government also passed a law by which any person might be detained for up to fourteen days without a court hearing. This power was used to harass and arrest many of the main strike leaders. Towards the end of May, about 10,000 people were seized in pre-dawn raids.

Immediately after the establishment of the republic, the fall in the South African gold reserves accelerated. It was part of a process which had been going on since the Sharpeville emergency in March 1960 and had caused the reserves to slump from about \$450,000,000 to \$220,000,000 by mid-

June 1961. This was largely due to a capital outflow of nearly \$300,000,000 in what was called a 'crisis of confidence' in the stability of the country. Dr. Donges, minister of finance, immediately ordered all South Africans to recall all funds placed abroad and blocked the further removal of capital from the country. This broke the 70-year-old link between the Johannesburg and London Stock Exchanges. After this development, these government measures appeared to have been effective and the reserves have now risen to \$330,000,000, or \$105,000,000, above what is considered the danger level. During the year the country switched from sterling (£s.d.) currency to a decimal one. The unit is now a rand (R1.00) which is equal to half of the former pound (£1.00). The rand is equal to 100 South African cents (Lemon et al. 2009).

Conclusion

From the above, it is clear that Nigeria has been declared to be a great promoter of African affairs and has historically been attaching great importance to Africa (Saliu 2005). Nigeria made major contributions to the emancipation of African countries from colonial rules and settler racist domination (Ezc 2011). This is because it has always committed itself to defending the interests of the black race in the world and the largest for that matter and more importantly; ever before her independence in 1960, the country's political leaders had developed an idea on the possibility of Nigeria leading Africa upon the attainment of independence (Saliu 2005). That Nigeria's support and contributions to the anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa were recognized and acknowledged by the international community especially by the Organization of African Unity now the African Union (OAU/AU) and also the United Nations (UN), where Nigeria provided effective leadership in the struggles against colonialism, racism and apartheid rule in South Africa.

Therefore, when some African countries attained independence in 1960, the decolonization of the remaining territories under colonialism became a common project and a rallying point. Nigeria became the undisputed leader (even working with other countries in establishing the ECOWAS in 1975, Nigeria led the prevention and resolution of the conflict in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Nigeria was the Chair of the UN Anti-apartheid Committee until 1994 and above all, the thrust of Nigeria's foreign policy is African centered) in the struggle against colonialism and especially apartheid by the OAU. Nigeria expended enormous amounts of resources: political, diplomatic and material in prosecuting this struggle (Zabadi et al. 2012) In doing this,

she has been condemned, at times commended and, in most cases as it were, unsung. Nevertheless, since its independence, Nigeria has remained committed to its afro-centric policy which comes in different forms and magnitude.

Nigeria has made immense contributions to international development, peace and security, especially in Africa. Unfortunately, Nigeria's contributions, including those made towards the decolonization of Southern Africa and anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, were not properly documented and disseminated within and outside Nigeria. Consequently, information about Nigeria's heroic role and contributions is not transmitted accurately to succeeding generations of Nigerians and citizens of countries that benefited from Nigeria's kind gestures. Indeed, there are today evidence to suggest distortion³ of historical facts about Nigeria's role and contributions by some of the countries that benefited from Nigeria's support and assistance.

It is also surprising and unfortunate that Nigeria's African policy does not send a clear message to these African countries on her mission and this has affected how they should reciprocate Nigeria's gestures and show some gratitude (Saliu 2005) (as in the case of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Angola etc). Therefore, in Nigeria's future engagements there is an uncompromising need for a special review of her foreign policy to reflect the changing times of global politics and events. Nigeria's gestures and hands of fellowship to other nations especially in Africa, should also be tied to or reflect her national interests and in fact, apply the principle of reciprocity in whatever it does in the international arena.

In line with the conclusion, the following recommendations are suggested:

- I. The Federal Government should always support the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs to acquire appropriate technical capacity for effective documentation and dissemination of information about Nigeria's contribution to international peace, security and development. For example, Nigeria's roles and contributions can be memorialized in plays and films by Nollywood art workers for people within and outside Nigeria to know what Nigeria contributed to the liberation and decolonization of Southern Africa;

³ Authors' personal experiences as part of Nigerian delegation to the African Union as observers during the AU Commission election, when the leader of South African delegation to the African Union (AU) in Addis Ababa said, Nigeria's support for the ANC and the fight against apartheid regime was for economic gain. This was an attempt to distort historical fact, because Nigeria has been against apartheid even before her independence.

2. Furthermore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Information and other relevant official agencies such as the National Orientation Agency (NOA) should step up the use of the media and other cultural resources to disseminate information about Nigeria's role and contributions within and outside Nigeria, especially at the African Union, the United Nations and particularly, the Commonwealth of Nations;
3. In fact, the Ministry of Education should ensure that educational and learning processes include information about Nigeria's role and contributions to international development, peace and security. In this regard information about Nigeria's contribution to the liberation and anti-apartheid struggles can be integrated into the curricula for formal and informal education programmes.

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria's commitment to the anti-apartheid struggle had been made absolutely clear even before it attained its independence on October 1st, 1960. Following the Sharpeville massacres of March 21st, 1960, when South African police shot and killed 72 blacks and wounded 184, there was a general consensus among all Nigerian political parties, as well as the regional and federal governments, that decisive actions should be taken against the Pretoria regime in order to force that regime to change its abominable apartheid policy. This event marked the beginning of Nigeria's confrontation against white South Africa. Nigeria demanded and spearheaded the forceful expulsion/withdrawal of South Africa from the Commonwealth by mobilizing other black African countries in isolating South Africa in such a way that it would realize the absurdity of its racist policies. It is against this background that this paper assesses Nigeria's role in the expulsion or forceful withdrawal of South Africa from the Commonwealth of Nations.

KEYWORDS:

Nigeria. Apartheid. Expulsion/Withdrawal. Commonwealth of Nations.

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