

## **NIGERIA AND THE COMMONWEALTH, 1993-1998: RE-CENTERING THE IDEA OF SANCTION IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Modern nation-states conduct their international relations through bilateral and multilateral channels that do make isolationism impracticable. However, there are internationally recognized moral conducts, norms, values, ethical and legal principles that guide the decisions and actions of states in international relations which their negations or/and violations attract possible sanctions. Such sanctions can come from a fellow but powerful state or a collectivity of states. It is in that context that this paper examines the Nigeria-Commonwealth relations under General Sani Abacha's military regime. It does not only highlight the importance of sanctions in international relations but focuses on the cause for the Commonwealth sanctions against Nigeria in the period under review, the implementation, Nigeria's response(s) to, and the consequential outcome(s) of the sanctions. It argues that Nigeria's political and human rights behaviour under Abacha constituted grave violations of internationally recognized principles and codes of conduct hence sanctions were brought against her to restore order and ensure compliance. Though, the sanctions did close many beneficial opportunities for Nigeria in the West, it forced the country to more active foreign policy towards important countries in Asia. The paper employs the qualitative method of research, and makes use of primary and secondary sources of information.*

**Keywords:** Nigeria, the Commonwealth, Sanctions, Human Rights, and Violations.



## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, the biggest African country with the largest concentration of blacks worldwide attracted the indignation of a formidable coalition of states such as Commonwealth, European Union, United States, Canada, South Africa and a host of other nations upon itself that eventually resulted to international sanctions on her in 1995. The ugly experience of international sanction by Nigeria erupted from the fact that the past two and half decades have witnessed a surge of sanctions regime in international relations. Sanctions have become an important tool in the hands of the international community to promote international peace and security. However, not all sanctions regimes have been successful in influencing the targeted leadership to return to policies respectful of international norms (Watson, 2001). International sanctions appear to be common and reoccurring features of political interactions used by international organizations and between states. In particular, the United States is the country which has most frequently applied negative economic sanctions after World War II. In a similar way, there have been several measures imposed by multilateral organizations such as United Nations over the years. Furthermore, some sanctions have been criticized as causing excessive suffering to civilian populations or inflicting economic damages on third states, usually neighbours to the targeted state.

Consequently, the explanation of sanctions in international relations has somewhat shown elements of ambivalence and its application has brought some contentions and inconclusion. Little wonder, Adimuo Patrick Ananechi asserts that, “the successful implementation of sanctions in the global affairs over the years, from the conventional wisdom and conclusion pointed that the international sanctions are flawed foreign policy instrument” (Ananechi, 2015). Academically, the relevance of sanctions still remained a controversial debate, yet its popularity as a tool of



foreign policy continued to be on the higher tempo between policy makers and nations' government across the world.

Evidently, the emergence of Abacha's military regime in Nigeria on November 17, 1993, subsequently changed the political atmosphere of the country (Saliu, 2006). The regime pushed the country's foreign policy from its posture of a responsible nation in the international community to a reckless player, with defiant disregard and violations of internationally accepted moral principles and legal behaviour of the international system. However, it is imperative to note that the pace of diplomatic cloud which descended upon Nigeria especially from 1995, may be traced to the traumatic democratization venture in the collapse of Babangida's eight years' transitional programme in June, 1993 (Saliu, 2006). With this, Nigeria's challenge was further deteriorated by the battered image problem, economic development, and relations with African countries, among others.

The image that Nigeria projected, informed by her styles of handling international events, admittedly, have not been complementary to her avowed and professed standing in Africa and indeed the black world as well as in the world at large. Hence, Hassan A. Saliu argues that:

*The image that a country projects outside its borders is more often than not the product of how other actors in the international system perceive what is happening in that country. In this sense, ability to influence the perceptions of nation-states determines the success or otherwise of a foreign policy not necessarily the strength a state attaches to its perceived good case (Saliu, 2006).*



In furtherance, Saliu emphatically put forward that:  
*The rude termination of the march to democracy by the Babangida regime in 1993, activities of some Nigerians living abroad, pervasive level of corruption, cases of abuse of human rights, militarism, among others have worsened the image of the country* (Saliu, 2006).

The eventual postponement of the June 12 presidential election and its subsequent annulment, twelve days after it was held were vehemently condemned by the West. The West reacted angrily and on 24<sup>th</sup> June, British and the United States simultaneously released the first sanctions which they have been preparing against Nigeria. The State Department argues that “ the failure on the part of the military regime of Babangida to respect the will of the Nigerian people and transition to democracy, indeed, have serious implications for United States and Nigeria’s relations” (Uba, 1998).

With regards to the image problem inherited by the military dictatorship of General Sani Abacha, Nigerians, however, anticipated change in the country. Consequently, the military regime of Abacha continued with the domestic unrest and for this reason, external challenges in the country grew unabated. During this period, Nigeria recorded numbers of human rights violation, restrictions for freedom to association. Liberty and civil rights were denied, numerous political figures, academia, human rights activists etc were arrested, jailed, and even executed. Apparently, the killing of the human right and environmental activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others in 1995 was the highest political plunder the Abacha military regime committed (Ananechi, 2015).

### **The Concept of Sanction**

The use of sanctions as an instrument of foreign policy in international relations by states, international organizations and



other relevant actors have generated a lot of controversies. These controversies erupted from the fact that scholars as well as practitioners often have differed on the definitional meaning, application and effectiveness of sanctions. It gets more complicated as there are various kinds of sanctions that could be imposed or applied for different purposes and scope.

Emmanuel Decaux, a professor of public law defined sanction as designating “a broad range of reactions adopted unilaterally or collectively by the states against the perpetrator of an internationally unlawful act in order to ensure respect for and performance of a right or obligation” (Decaux, 2008). The above definition of sanction connotes that sanction would be any conduct that is contrary to the interests of the state at fault, that serves the purpose of reparation punishment or perhaps prevention, and that is, set out in or simply not prohibited by international law. Differently conceived, Yoshifumi Koga sees the term ‘sanction’ to mean:

*...the purpose of a sanction is to bring about that behaviour which, according to the opinion of the social authority, is useful to society and hence is considered to be in conformity with the social order, and to prevent that behaviour which according to the opinion of the social authority, is harmful to society and hence is considered to be contrary to the social order. ‘The narrower conception of legal sanctions’...is that of coercive reaction against a violation of the law (Koga, 2005).*

Conceptually speaking, sanction is a general term that refers to politically motivated penalties imposed as a declared consequence of the target’s failure to observe international standards or international obligations by one or more international actors, that is, (the sender) against one or more actors (the targets).



Simultaneously, the political effects of sanctions in international relations, according to Peter Rudolf (Rudolf, 2007), automatically cause much economic damages in the target country. In effect, the target political actor or actors will weigh the costs of sanctions against the benefits of the policies or the behaviour being sanctioned.

However, there is no authoritative definition of sanctions in international relations. Palmer and Perkins in their discussion of sanctions in international relations argued that “we must in the international field look upon sanctions as adopted only to play a comparable role hence it cannot themselves be a primary method of avoiding violence”... They identified two weaknesses of international sanctions. Firstly, sanctions may operate as a challenge to state, “thus the dynamic nations, feeling themselves to be the likely subject of sanctions by the status quo nations are spurred on to build up their armament and attain economic self-sufficiency” (Palmer, 2005). When state reacts in this manner, the result is the notification of nationalism and the encouragement of the very policies which the sanction concept was supposed to prevent. Another weakness of this approach is that it encourages the tendency toward undeclared war. This comes about because the invocation of sanctions is contingent upon the announcement by some high authority of the existence of a state of war. John T. Rourke and Mark A. Boyer posit that economic sanctions can be and are a valuable tool for... protecting of national interest (Rourke & Boyer, 2004). They further assert that economic sanctions are a blunt instrument that attempts to economically bludgeon a target country into changing some specific behaviour.<sup>14</sup>

Joshua S. Goldstein and John C. Pevehouse are of the opinion that a State that breaks international law may also face a collective response by a group of States, such as the imposition of sanctions – agreements among other States to stop trading with the violator, or to stop some particular commodity trade (most often military



goods) as punishment for its violations (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2006). So, in as much as values such as economic, diplomatic, social etc are attached or involved with the sanction, the target state may be likely to redefine its policy or otherwise, depending on the type of regime in question. We therefore adopt Hufbauer, Schott and Elliot definition of sanction as noticed by Alastair Smith as “the deliberate government-inspired withdrawal or threat of withdrawal of “customary trade or financial relations”.<sup>16</sup> Substantially, Smith applied analogical model to explain sanction in international relations, “a sender, A, uses sanctions to force a target, Nation B, to alter its current policy. The decision of the Sender to sanction is related to the decision of the target to resist sanction. Under what condition does Nation A, apply sanctions, and if sanctions are applied which Nation prevails?

For the purpose of this study, sanction is successful if the target Nation B, makes the policy concessions that the sender Nation A, demands. We assume, both A and B care about the policies that Nation B, pursues. However, Nation B, unilaterally chooses its policy. Although, Nation A, cares about Nation B policy but it is unable to directly influence it unless it conquers B, militarily. Instead of considering military option, Nation A applies the use of sanctions or threat of sanctions, to encourage Nation B, to adopt a different policy. This is because there are costs associated with sanctions. Whatever form sanctions take, there is an economic cost associated with them. Sanctions prevent trade and investment between countries in international relations.

Considering the conceptual and definitional meaning of sanction given in above, the purpose of sanctions varied but generally, it can be said to pressurize the target to comply with the sanction's demands. Apparently, this definition focuses on economic measures and excludes punitive diplomatic and political aspects as well as military measures on the other hand. It also excludes boycotts and, other such actions, for example, cultural measures. Often times,



international organizations and powerful states especially United Nations, Commonwealth, European Union etc and United States tend to impose economic sanctions, and these were usually coordinated. The United States and the European Union also try to seek UN Security Council approval for their sanctions. Under the international law, the prescriptive regime applicable for sanction differs depending on whether the sanction is ordered by the UN Security Council. Therefore, the withdrawal of customary economic relations..., covers a spectrum of activities, from a general halting of trade (embargo), to different types of measures directed against a particular sector of a state.

Certainly, sanctions are game of “issue linkage” where the different actors may not be wholly cognizant of the others interests, goals and desired outcome. Sanctions can be viewed as restraints on activities that would otherwise be legal. For example, they may be used to bring state back into compliance with international law, punish states, individuals or organizations for transgression, compel policy change or deny states or other entities certain capabilities. Sanctions are also popular because they are virtually the possible option for exerting influence on non-cooperative states between merely declaratory responses and military action, or threat of action.

However, international organizations like United Nations, Africa Union, Commonwealth of Nations, European Union, ECOWAS, etc. are platforms through which the objective of sanctions can be achieved. These organizations are basically governed by certain principles and objectives around which their operations revolve. For example, the UN through the Security Council has the authorization to impose sanctions as granted by the members in the United Nations Charter. Chapter VII made mention of “respect to threat to the peace, breaches of the peace and acts of aggression (UNO, [www.un.org](http://www.un.org)). Articles 39, 40, 41 and 42 of the above chapter mandates the Security Council to “decide what non-military and





military measures to be taken to restore international peace and security” (www.thecommonwealth).

### **Overview of Nigeria-Commonwealth Relations**

Historically, the modern Commonwealth began in 1949 with the London Declaration which its origin took root in the British Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Faseke, 2008). The evolutionary processes of the Commonwealth can be traced by the Lord Durham’s famous report of the 1840s which led to the introduction of self-government in Canada and so laid the basis for the coming of the First Dominion in 1867. This brought in place dominion status to Australia (1902), New Zealand (1907), and South Africa (1910) which were formerly under all other British Empire. The post-World War I encouraged and assisted further the dominion desire for full international recognition. The Balfour Declaration of 1926 accorded the dominions an “autonomous communities’ status” with the British Empire to be freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations (Faseke, 2008). Further steps were taken in the Imperial Conference of 1930 by which legal moves were considered to remove certain obstacles to its operations in the Statute of Westminster in 1931. Article 1 of the Statute of Westminster used the designation “British Commonwealth to denote within that wider whole (British Empire) the smaller group of fully self-government communities”. This came to include the United Kingdom, the dominion of Canada, the Commonwealth of Australia, and the dominion of New Zealand, the Union of South Africa, the Irish Free State and Newfoundland.

A remarkable event in the evolution of the Commonwealth began in 1947, when India became independent and at the same time opted for a republican constitution yet retained link with the Commonwealth. It was agreed that the British Monarch would continue to be the symbol of the free Association and the Head of the Commonwealth at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers Meeting (PMM). However, in 1949, India dropped the idea of a



common allegiance to the British Crown as a requirement for membership which makes way for the newly independent nations to join ([www.commonwelath](http://www.commonwelath)). India's decision not to accept the allegiance to the Crown thus created a new dimension to the association. Prior to India's membership, the British Commonwealth was made up of white Dominions. The acceptance of India signaled the process of transmitting an erstwhile white Commonwealth into a multinational association, embracing various races, system of government and so on. India's membership to the Commonwealth opened the way for British colonies to remain in association with their former colonizer (British) after their independence.

The Commonwealth of Nations which at its nascent formation was known as the British Commonwealth today as an international organization consists of 54-member nations scattered all over the globe with a combined population of around 1.8 billion people (kwesilinkumsah, 2013). The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of countries that cooperate in the common interests of the people and work together in promoting international understanding and world peace. The head of the Commonwealth is the British Crown (now King Charles). Commonwealth members share many customs, traditions, historical past, values and ethical standard in common as a result of their association with Britain (Rodger, 2001). In other words, the 54-member nations, all of whom are connected by the fact that they have all, at some time, came under some kind of direct or indirect form of British influence. Although, recently some countries without British influence in any form had joined the organisation. Therefore, since Commonwealth is regarded as an international organization, the fundamental question one has to ask is whether the organisation has lived up to its promises of being an adaptable institution as to the maintenance of its principles and objectives.



We can say that Commonwealth is an organization of government with administrative structure. Regrettably, Jessica Rodger has pointed that “the Commonwealth has no official constitution hence an actual definition for the organization can prove elusive” (Saliu & Lipede, 1980). However, the organisation has over the years developed its purposes, procedures and fundamental principles by which its activities are carried out and governed. Hassan Saliu and Abiola Lipede identified the principles as follow:

*The unwritten principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of the member states; the convention of the non-discussion of a member’s internal affairs without the consent of the member; conditions under which members could remain a member of the commonwealth after it has changed its status, and the 1971 Singapore Declaration; 1977 Kingston Accord and the Gleneagles Agreement on sports of the same year; the 1979 Lusaka Declaration; the 1981 Melbourne Declaration; the 1985 Nassau Declaration on the World Order; the 1987 Vancouver Declaration on the World Trade; the Okanagan Statement of 1987 and the 1991 famous Harare Declaration...(www.commonwealth).*

Among all the declarations aforementioned, the Singapore and Harare Declarations are of much important to this study. The Singapore Declaration set out such aims as the security and prosperity of mankind, equal rights for all citizens and the freest possible flow of international trade on terms fair and equitable to all. It further captures the role of cooperation, consultation and the exchange of knowledge as key aspects to the workability of the Commonwealth. Harare Declaration in other hand, pledged to work for the protection and promotion of the fundamental, political values of the association, namely democracy, democratic processes and institutions which reflect national conditions, fundamental



human rights, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, and the just and honest government (Faseke, 2008).

Nigeria as an important member-nation of the Commonwealth has demonstrated its attachment to the organization. Faseke observes that “Nigeria like many other countries joined the Commonwealth for economic, political and diplomatic reasons. The political and diplomatic aspirations of Nigeria were expressed in terms of using the institution as a forum for the independence and emancipation of Africa” (Obasanjo, 2005). Former President Olusegun Obasanjo in his lecture titled; *The Commonwealth in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Prospects and Challenges*, acknowledged that, “on the occasion of Nigeria’s admission as the 99<sup>th</sup> member of the United Nations, the first Prime Minister, Abubaka Tafawa Balewa, remarked that Nigeria is proud of its membership of the Commonwealth” (Ayah, 1998). With this, Nigeria’s post-independence history reveals the importance of its membership of the Commonwealth of Nations.

During the Nigerian crisis of 1960s which eventually culminated to the outbreak of civil war in 1967, the Commonwealth was the first international organization that offered a solution to the crisis through the Secretary-General, Arnold Smith between the opposing groups in Kampala, Uganda, in 1966. (Ayah, 1998). The Commonwealth’s position after Kampala Talk influenced the attitude of the other international organizations and leading powers of the world for the respect and preservation of Nigeria’s territorial integrity. It has, also, all along been an important partner in the pursuit of Nigeria’s foreign policy objective.

Nigeria has in turn, played a crucial role in international relations, using the platform of the Commonwealth. It is interesting to note that a Nigerian, Hon. Emeka Anyaoku, once a minister of foreign affair in Nigeria was the first African to assume the prestigious post of Secretary-General of the Commonwealth (Saliu & Lipede,



1980). Since the Commonwealth attained an international relevance and aims to forestall crime against human right, reduce poverty, encourage democracy its values, reduce ignorance and diseases among people, smoothing trade relations, maintain peace and security to mention but few, Nigeria as one of the most populous and naturally endowed black nations lost no sight of its role in the organization.

As examined by Saliu and Lipede, Nigeria was among the Group Secretary to the body that supervised the 1967 election in Gibraltar, Chairmanship of the Commonwealth foundation for the period 1982-1983 and joint Chairman of the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) that went on a fact-finding mission to South Africa after 1985 Nassau Commonwealth Head of Government Meeting (CWHGM). Tafawa Balewa, Nigeria's Prime Minister was also a member of the mission that explored the possibility of a conference to contain the Vietnamese (Ananechi, 2015). Nigeria has used her economic muscle to influence the policies of member countries in line with the prescribed principles and declarations of the organization. Nigeria condemned the deplorable violation of human rights especially in their racial guise in Southern Rhodesia and South Africa. From Balewa to Babangida's regime, Nigerian leaders adopted what they termed 'corrective measures of sanction' as approved by the Commonwealth, United Nations and O.A.U. to ensure change of policy in Sothorn Rhodesia and South Africa. The Universal Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1965 and South Africa policy of apartheid which violated Singapore Declaration of 1971 and Harare Declaration of 1991 attracted Murtala and Obasanjo in this part of Africa.<sup>33</sup>

Considering 1977 Kingston Accord and the Gleneagles Agreement on sports, Nigeria unequivocally withdrew her athlete from the Commonwealth Games in Edmonton in 1978, following New Zealand's sporting link with South Africa and demonstrated her protest as well against Israel's continuing sporting association with



South Africa during Davis Cup Competition. In Commonwealth Games in Edinburg, Nigeria led the boycott of thirty member-states in line with protest against Thatcher's opposition to sanction South Africa. Nigeria's role in the Commonwealth has engendered her to the rank of Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand as one of the largest contributors in the organization's budget, thus Commonwealth needs Nigeria as well as Nigeria needs it as both influences are enormously considered in the association (Alabi, 2014).

### **Nigeria and the Commonwealth during the Abacha Military Regime, 1993-1998**

The Commonwealth relations with Nigeria that was once cordial got soured and mired towards the last two months of 1995. What one may ask at this point is what must have caused this strain in the relationship. Nigeria was suspended and sanctions were imposed on her. The question is why was Nigeria sanctioned? The sanctions against Nigeria could be traced to the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida. As the most controversial transition to civil rule programme in the country failed, the Babangida-led democratic process created suspicion of sort that many Nigerians, political analysts, academicians, civil society groups, etc. became disgruntled and disgusted about it. The last straw that broke the camel's back, according to Alabi, was the annulment of the June 12, 1993, presidential election, widely adjudged and accepted by Nigerians as free and fair election (Alabi, 2014). The immediate response by the West to the development was the imposition of selected sanctions on Nigeria, especially on its military. The situation created by Babangida, at its height could not allow him to continue in office; he was forced to 'step aside'. Incidentally, the Interim National Government (ING), headed by Ernest Shonekan was brought in place to chart a way forward for Nigerians.

Furthermore, while Nigeria was yet to recover from the problem instigated by the annulment of the June 12 presidential election



claimed to have been won by Chief Moshood Abiola, General Sani Abacha on November 17, 1993 staged another military coup and flushed out the ING led by Shonekan. Thus, by 1994, Nigeria almost became ungovernable, protests and strike took over the country for weeks (Saliu, 2006). Nigeria therefore was plunged into disarray by the ambitious tendencies of General Abacha. All the democratic processes and structures put in place by the previous regime were dismantled. The regime's action now prompted this question, would Nigeria during this period still recognized as good protector of democracy, democratic principles and human rights? An ardent observer of international events would easily conclude that Nigeria was neither a respecter of democracy, nor supporter of the rule of law and human rights.

The development in Nigeria became obvious as the issue of human rights and democracy are two important items in the aggregation of values for the New World Order.<sup>69</sup> The military regime of Abacha continued with human rights violation record, intimidation and arrest of the political oppositions, including the winner of June 12, 1993 election, M. K. O. Abiola. It was while all these were still going on that some forty-three Nigerians, including some serving military personnel, General Olusegun Obasanjo, Major General Shehu Yar'dua were accused of attempting to overthrow the military government of General Abacha. Journalists such as Mrs. Chris Anyanwu, Kunle Ajibade and Ben Charles Obi, and senior members of the Human Rights Community like Dr. Beko Ransom Kuti were arrested and subsequently tried in a secret by the Major General Patrick Azizi Military Tribunal. Some of them were convicted and sentenced to death, excluding Obasanjo who was given a long jail term of twenty-five years (Anthony, 2006).

The Commonwealth relations with Nigeria among every other thing became antagonistic with the tyrannical decision of Abacha's military regime to hang Ken Saro-Wiwa and Ogoni Eight. The hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa, a writer and environmentalist, who led



the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) and his kinsmen, for allegedly killing four prominent Ogoni indigenes, namely; A. T. Badey, Edward Kobani, S.N. Orage, and Theophilus Orage on November 10, 1995 shook the international community (Modupe Fadope.orgnigeria). They were tried by the tribunal, convicted and their sentences confirmed and approved by the Provisional Ruling Council on November 8, 1995, and hanged on November 10 within 48 hours later (Anthony, 2006). Irrespective of the pleas for clemency across the world, Abacha proved hell-bent to avert the decision. Incidentally, the Commonwealth Summit was holding simultaneously in Auckland, New Zealand, and Nigeria's foreign minister Tom Ikimi was present. Ikimi was embarrassed out of the Summit. Nigeria's action provoked an unprecedented decision with only one dissenting vote (that of the military government of the Gambia) to suspend the country from the organization for two years, pending its 'return to compliance' to the principles of Harare Declaration of 1991, in which all member-states pledged to foster democracy, human rights and judicial independence (Sklar.openedition.org).

On April 23, 1996, following the second Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) meeting, it was recommended that Commonwealth members implement the various measures as regard to 'Millbrook Action Plan' against Nigeria including visa restrictions on and denial of education facilities to members of the country's ruling regime and their families, withdrawal of military attachés and cessation of military training, an embargo on the export of arms, a visa-based ban on sport contacts, and severance of diplomatic and cultural links. It was recommended that the Commonwealth consider, in consultation with the European Union, United States and other members of the international community, a ban on air links and additional economic measures, including freezing the financial assets and bank accounts in foreign countries of members of the regime and their family. (www.hrw.Nigeria).





The United Nations, EU, US, and other individual states and other organizations consequently imposed more sanctions on Nigeria, closed various international opportunities for Nigeria, including restrictions on diplomatic privileges and military cooperation, international travel ban against members (including civilians) of the Federal Executive Council, and their families as well as the military officers who might have in one way or the other participated in the autocratic regime of Abacha and its unbridled nature of human rights violation ([www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org).Nigeria). Despite the sanctions against Nigeria, the military regime of Abacha continued its dictatorship and autocracy which undoubtedly re-echoed Oliver Borszik argument on sanctions that:

*Sanctions placed on non-democratic and authoritarian regimes consolidate regime type persistence through the combined effect or forces of the external and internal circumstances as a strategy to stabilize, legitimize and actualize unlawful behavior (Borsezik, 2014).*

Therefore, Nigeria under Abacha's military regime, 1993-1998 was internationally disassociated.

### **Assessing the Commonwealth Sanctions against Nigeria**

Unarguably, Abacha's regime more than any other regimes before it in Nigeria experienced a high level of opprobrium a reality created by its poor human rights record. The execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight of his fellow Ogoni activists while the Commonwealth leaders were assembling in Auckland, New Zealand, prompted the Commonwealth to suspend Nigeria and afterward imposed sanctions on her to demonstrate commitment to maintenance of political values, human rights, peace and security in international relations. Commonwealth as one of the oldest and important international organisations mobilized its member-states



across the world to cooperate in implementing sanctions against Nigeria.

Before the Commonwealth imposed sanctions on Nigeria, we recall that Britain and Canada as a member of the Commonwealth, initially, imposed limited sanction on Nigeria over the June 12 election annulment (Saliu, 2006). The coalition involving the European Union, South Africa, Canada and United States against Nigeria showed the relevance of the systemic interactions that exist in international relations. The sanctions they brought against Nigeria negatively impacted on the country's international reputation and status in the light of preservation of the internationally acceptable moral principles, international law, and conventions. The Western world, at the time, was not disposed to tolerate Abacha's military government. The sanctions against Nigeria isolated the country from her major international partners in many ways. However, there was no international embargo on Nigeria's oil.

The isolationism caused by the Commonwealth sanctions against Nigeria availed South Africa the opportunity to occupy Nigeria's position in the Commonwealth, Africa and the world at large during the period under study. South Africa's pre-eminence was encapsulated by the two major things: democracy and human rights. Nigeria therefore got it hard albeit diplomatic, economic and military sanctions. Yet, the military regime of Abacha was very reluctant to yield to the international demands. Although, Nigeria was not expelled from the Commonwealth neither did Nigeria withdraw its membership throughout the frosty relations, however, the embarrassment and frustration resulting from her suspension and subsequent sanction must have served as a big lesson.

Incidentally, there exists, according to Saliu and Lipede, two perspectives of argument on the reaction of the Commonwealth to



the events in Nigeria, arising from the fact that Nigeria had since protested against her suspension and sanctions against her afterward. The first school argues that the Commonwealth's sanction was unconstitutional, unprecedented and a violation of the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of the member states which the organization traditionally adheres to. On the other hand, the second school argues that the Harare Declaration, among others, empowers the organization to monitor the progress of member states on the issue of political values such as democracy and human rights (Odion-Akhaine, 2008).

Quite correct, the suspension of Nigeria has no legitimacy in the unwritten charter or conventions that guide the Commonwealth. Nigeria protested not only on the grounds of constitutionality but as well on the credentials she had earned in the organization through her significant role in South Africa, Haiti, and Rhodesia for human rights and democracy (Saliu & Lipede, 1980). Nigeria's foreign policy in the cause of the sanctions shifted to Asia and Middle East. Nigeria began to develop closer ties with new friends such as Iraq, Indonesia, North Korea, Malaysia, Libya, Sudan, Gambia, China and even Turkey. Nigeria also extended its links to other radical regimes in Libya, Iraq, North Korea, Iran, and a host of others as a strategy to counteract the Commonwealth and other pro-West sanctions (Saliu, 2006). Nevertheless, Nigeria under Abacha fared well in its peacekeeping efforts in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The ECOWAS Peace Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) got Nigeria's maximum support for its engagement in those countries. Nigeria was able to use ECOMOG to end the civil war in Liberia and supervise an election in which Charles Taylor, former rebel leader, emerged as Liberia's President (Boge, 2017).

It must be noted that General Sani Abacha himself stated thus, "the policy shift from the traditional allies to new friends was a move towards developing closer relations with nations across the world" (Falode, 2018). The characteristic feature of this 'paradigm shift'



was the economic and political relations with China which began to be more consolidated during the period under study. At multilateral level, Nigeria's membership at the 'Developing-8 (D-8)' which was formed to foster economic relations among member-states was not in doubt. The formation of D-8 which its members included Turkey, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Iran, Egypt and Nigeria however was meant to counteract the activities of the G-8 countries (Folarin, 2013). Therefore, Nigeria's foreign policy under Abacha responded to pressures from abroad, became anti-imperialist abroad and tyrant at home.

### **Conclusion**

Sanctions in international relations have been used to avert unlawful act adopted by the targeted state and to restore, encourage and assert the generally acceptable principles and behaviours in international system. The Nigeria-Commonwealth relations as we observed was formerly cordial as Nigeria had used the platform to actualize some of her foreign policy objectives. Although, various issues came up and marred Nigeria's continuous participation in the Commonwealth during the period under review, the organisation attracted some benefits such as economic, social, cultural, technical and political to the country.

To be sure, what the foregoing analysis has shown is that Nigeria needs Commonwealth more than the organisation needs Nigeria because throughout the hostile relationship between the two, Nigeria did not terminate her membership to the organization. This erupted from the fact that the organisation has indeed proven to be a platform where Nigeria's foreign policy dynamism has found much expression than other fora in the world.

Commonwealth sanctions on Nigeria may be well understood by the theoretical perspective of the system theorists. It is quite undeniable that Nigeria under the military regime of Abacha was mainly sanctioned due to its experiences of gross violation of



human rights, refusal of democracy and democratic principles as well as criticism both at home and abroad, This trend of Nigeria's character and image came to reveal the fact observed by Saliu that, Nigeria sowed the seeds of negative image in the country, whatever the Commonwealth, West, EU, UN, individual states etc did in this regard was only complimenting the process initiated by Nigeria's leadership within the time under review.

However, the Commonwealth sanctions against Nigeria and Nigeria's foreign policy thrust under the period demonstrated to the world that Nigeria has been once colonized and can never be recolonize again by whatever measure or measures. Thus, if nationalism means movement towards self-determination, therefore, Abacha was a nationalist.



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