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The ethno-regional and religious drivers of Nigeria's foreign policy

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Abstract

The stated objectives of Nigeria's foreign policy consistently retain Afrocentric, realistic, and post-colonial aspirations of the country, although their interpretations and implementations inconsistently reflect the patrimonial nature of the state, plurality and identity politics, as well as rational-choice and sentiments of its leadership. Accordingly, foreign policy decisions in Nigeria like many other countries are shaped by multiple factors, including personality, bureaucratic politics, structural issues, and value system of the country. Amidst these is the identity forces of ethnicity, regions, religion, and their interconnectivity, which are central in domestic politics and policy, but underestimated in Nigeria's foreign policy. This article, therefore, aims to examine the ethno-regional and religious drivers of foreign policy in Nigeria. Relying on secondary sources of data, the article explores these drivers of Nigeria's foreign policy processes and filters them through the lens of realism, rational-choice, pluralism and critical (Marxist, dependency and Afrocentric) theories.

Keywords: Foreign policy; Ethnicity; Ethno-regional relations; Religion; Development; Nigeria.

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Introduction

The behaviours of a state in international relations are shaped by several forces within and beyond its territorial confines. Externally, foreign policy often reflects international norms, influence of international institutions, the prevailing international order and security, and power politics (Starr 2006; Warner and Shaw 2018). Internally, state behaviour is traditionally determined by the machinery of government and national leaders (Halperin et al. 2007; Holsti 2006). However, the role of national values, belief system, ideology and identity as well as non-governmental actors, such as civil and primordial organisations in foreign policy

have become noticeable (McCormick 2018; Ogunnubi and Sheriff 2022). Amidst these, the government and leadership of a country have the primary responsibilities to articulate, interpret and implement foreign policy in cooperation, competition and sometimes in conflicts with other actors.

In Nigeria, the objectives of external relations have remained basically consistent, while the interpretation and style of implementation of the principles of its foreign policy has continued to vacillate, reflecting the contents and idiosyncratic orientation of the leadership at a particular time and context. Among other things, foreign policy actions and reactions of the Nigerian government have been shaped by a constellation of internal forces, including ethnic/clannish background, level of training, mental development and psychological stability as well as the paradigmatic orientation of leaders. Furthermore, the country's external relations, friends and allies, have been driven by various factors, including the form and structure of government, international political and economic dynamics, domestic politics, and the national economic and military prowess at a given time (Imobighe and Ali 2012; Olusanya and Akindele 1990; Boge 2017).

Since political independence in 1960, the conduct of Nigeria's external relations has been shaped and hampered by several domestic factors including its colonial history and proclivities which instituted discord among ethnic nationalities, growing a population that is characterised by low human mobilization and utilization, and a prostrate economic structure with unproductive tendencies. Others include governance deficits and poor management of diversity, a total disregard of public opinion and national values, poor appreciation and articulation of the national interest, ethnic and religious diversity that have been manipulated by the political elites to foster mutual distrust, bestial intolerance and ethnocentrism, which is also a product of a personality cult that leverages on prebendalism, ethnic and religious agenda for self-perpetuation in public offices (Isike and Olasupo 2022; Omotola and Alumona 2016; Okolie 2006; Osaghae 2011; Oyewole and Omotola 2023; Nnoli 2011). More recently, such inhibiting factors include growing poverty, inequalities, and insecurity from bandit and terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and Fulani herders (Ogunnubi et al. 2017; Ojo et al. 2024; Oriola et al. 2022). These factors combine to shape, determine, and impinge on Nigeria's foreign policy and behaviours (Amusan 2018; Asogwa 2009; Campbell 2010; Oshewolo 2021).

Despite the foregoing, many variables, such as ethno-regional and religious forces, with profound impacts on the conduct of Nigeria's foreign policy have received inadequate research attention. Considering this gap in the literature, this article seeks to explore the salience of ethnicity and religion as key factors that not only shape and undermine Nigeria's national integration and nation-building, but also drive the country's external behaviour. With secondary sources, this study uses a qualitative approach and content analysis of ethno-regional and religious variables of Nigeria's foreign policy through the lens of realism, rational choice, linkage, pluralism, identity and critical (Marxism, dependency and Afrocentric) theories. It is expected that the findings of this study will advance knowledge on the international dimension of ethno-regional and religious politics in Nigeria, as drivers of foreign policy decisions. They will also contribute to the understanding

of the forces behind conservative, ad hoc, reactive and (in)consistency in foreign policy stances in plural African and other developing countries.

Theoretical debates on ethno-regional and religious drivers of foreign policy

Foreign policy is the means by which a sovereign nation interacts with other sovereign nations and non-state actors outside its borders (Milner and Tingley 2015). It can be described as the articulated, formulated and implemented actions and inactions of a state to advance national interest in international arena. It is operationalised as the totality of state behaviours, their means and ends in relations to other (state and non-state) entities in international affairs. Hence, many assumptions, theories and perspectives have been developed to explain how states behave internationally, and why. Accordingly, there are many theories that can help explain and understand the role of ethnic, regional and religious drivers of Nigeria's foreign policy.

In realism, foreign policy is a collection of rational decisions made by a state based on an enduring desire for survival, competition for power and anarchical structure or arrangement of power in the international system (Starr 2006; Booth 2011; Hudson 2014). Accordingly, rational-choice theory considers foreign policy as carefully examined decisions made by the leadership of a country with the goal of maximising accruable benefits at minimum cost (Holsti 2006; Brown 2015). In this manner, both realism and rational-choice theory ignore the importance of domestic factors in shaping, determining, formulating and implementing a state's foreign policy. A state and its leadership are erroneously considered to be autonomous decision-making machines, which are hardly influenced by sub-national, less/irrational issues, such as ethno-religious forces in making foreign policy decisions and conducting international affairs. Thus, these Eurocentric theories ignore the realities of post-colonial states, where the legitimacy and effectiveness of the state and leadership rationality are in question.

In contrast, many critical theories of foreign policy have emerged. For instance, Marxism sees the state as a mere committee of the bourgeoisie and the oppressive tool against the proletarians, making foreign policy the international advancement of capitalist interests (Marx 1976; Barrow 1993). The dependency theory emphasises the colonial imposition of Western state systems in non-western societies, and how continuous exploitation of such periphery system by the core creates a subservient foreign policy in post-colonial states (Amin 1976; Nkrumah 1965). As such, Marxism encourages international class consciousness for proletarian unity across nations in revolution against capitalism; while moderate dependency scholars advocated for cooperation and collective bargaining of the developing countries, their radical peers recommended delinkage from the exploitative colonial international order (Amin 1976; Frank 1978; Wallerstein 1979). Amidst these, Afrocentrism has questioned the indiscriminate partitioning and imposition of Western state systems in Africa, and call for pan-Africanist foreign policy based on unifying regional identity and destiny, and the spirit of brotherhood, cooperation, consensus, collectivism,

integration, and diaspora engagements (Adebajo 2010; Amusan and Oyewole 2017; Falola and Esseien 2014; Isike and Schoeman 2023; Madise and Isike 2020).

These critical theories provide unique perspectives on the nature and complexity of African post-colonial states and the forces behind their foreign policy, revealing the class, metropolis, and Africanist interests. However, these perspectives are inadequate in understanding the place of ethno-regional and religious identities in foreign policy. Marxism reduced identity to class, ethnicity to a political tool, and religion to opium of the people, as it underestimates ethno-religious forces in foreign policy. Equally, dependency theorists are too preoccupied with the exploitative dictates of the external forces and their collaborating internal petty-bourgeoisie, ignoring identity politics in foreign policy. Afrocentric perspective tends to overemphasise the place of regional identity, cooperation, brotherhood, unity, and integration in the foreign policy of African states at the expense of ethno-religious forces and the realities of their diversity at subnational, national, and transnational levels and the associated competition and conflicts. Beyond the critical reductionism, however, some of these gaps are considerably addressed by the emerging African realism perspectives, which acknowledged the patrimonial nature of African state and the multiplicity of actors that are involved in Africa's international relations and their diverse characters and interests (Mazrui 2019; Henderson 2015; Oyewole 2024).

Pluralism and identity theories are equally relevant to the understanding of foreign policy. Pluralism views foreign policy as a product of complex domestic politics, which involves multiple actors and interests within and outside the government (Milner and Tingley 2015; Cantir and Kaarbo 2016). While the bureaucratic school is government restrictive (Halperin, 2007), most liberal pluralists have considered the role of non-government actors such as civil society groups and private individuals and organisations in foreign policy, with evidence drawn mostly from the Western democracies (Brighi 2013; McCormick 2018; Milner and Tingley 2015). Identity theory has refined this perspective to accommodate the relevance of primordial groups in foreign policy, drawing from the experiences of racial groups in the USA and ethno-religious publics in many developing countries (Heywood et al. 2015; Ogunnubi and Sheriff 2022). These theories assume that foreign policy is born out of prevailing interests among competing actors (formal or informal) in the domestic public of a state. This allows us to see through the lens of the influence of ethnic, regional, and religious motivated actors and interests in foreign policy processes. Beyond the domestic realm, identity politics has been internationalised with the assumption that peoples and nations are bound to align, cooperate, compete and conflict based on common or differences in identity (Huntington 1996).

Although pluralism allows us to x-ray ethnic, regional, and religious forces in foreign policy and international relations, it has been criticised for its tendency to assume that a specific actor or interest determine or influence policy decision based on an alignment of objectives and not necessarily based on hard evidence of such connection. However, this makes the theory more suitable to explore un/under-stated interests and shadow actors in foreign policy processes. Similarly, identity theory has been criticised for overemphasising the role of identity in foreign

affairs, complexity and sometimes arbitrariness in definition and demarcation of identities, and conflict-predictive orientation. Yet, it allows us to appreciate the rising importance of identity in post-Cold War international relations.

Linkage theory offers a broader and complimentary perspective on the subject matter. Building on the notion of two levels of international relations, it assumes that internal and external environments and affairs are connected (Brighi 2013; Mintz and De Rouen 2010). It explores the influence of domestic public and forces on foreign affairs, and the vice versa. Although linkage theory does not specify forces, issues, actors, and interests to prioritise in any assessment of the interphase of domestic and external affairs, it's combination with the realism, rational-choice, critical, plural, and identity theories is relevant to streamline the subject matter.

Against this background, a combination of theoretical perspectives may be the best option to adequately understand the place of ethno-regional and religious forces in foreign policy. A combination of linkage theory, pluralism and identity allows us to assess the influence or impact of domestic forces such as ethnic, religious and regional actors on foreign policy and international affairs (Brighi 2013; Hudson 2014; Isike and Isike 2022; Mintz and De Rouen 2010; Starr 2006). Yet, realism and rational-choice theory provide relevant bases to question and interrogate the strength of ethno-regional and religious forces in foreign policy decisions. Moreover, the critical theories help to understand the nature of the Nigerian state and the general framework that produce foreign policy in Nigeria. Accordingly, analysis of cases in this study explores possible rationales for foreign policy decisions and their alignment with plural and identity theories or alternative perspectives. It is against this background that this article proceeds to understand identities and related politics in Nigeria, and their implication on the foreign policy of the country.

Ethno-regional and religious Profile of Nigeria

Nigeria is the most populous African country, with over 200 million people, and one of the largest economies on the continent. It is a plural state with diverse cultures, ethnic groups, languages, religions, and institutional structures. Although Osaghae and Suberu (2005) observed that the total number of ethnic groups in Nigeria is unknown, studies show a range between 250 and 500 ethnic groupings (Otite 1990; Okpanachi 2012; Adenuga et al. 2023). The seven largest ethnic groups in Nigeria collectively accounted for 88% of the population: Hausa-Fulani 29%, Yoruba 21%, Igbo 18%, Ijaw 10%, Kanuri 4%, Ibibio 3.5%, and Tiv 2.5%¹. With demographic and geographical advantages, the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo emerged as the dominant ethnic groups in national politics. Nigeria is also a home to numerous faiths, with different denominations of Christianity, Islam and Traditional African Religions.

¹ "The effect of Ethno-Religious Conflict as Catalyst for Terrorism among the Hausa Fulani people in Adamawa State of Northeast, Nigeria." *Course Hero*, March 11, 2023. Accessed: March 20, 2024. <https://www.coursehero.com/file/217458857/The-effect-of-Ethno-Religious-Conflict-as-Catalyst-for-Terrorism-among-the-Hausa-Fulani-people-in-Ad/>

Prior to the colonial order that established modern day Nigeria, different ethnic and religious groups lived in various pre-colonial state systems, which were in different stages of political and economic development, with complex interactions that were marked by cooperation, competition, and conflicts. Following the annexation of Lagos in 1861 and the subsequent conquest of the precolonial states, Britain unified its Southern and Northern protectorates and named it Nigeria (Ikime 1980; Falola and Heaton 2018). For administrative convenience of the colonial government, however, the Richard Constitution of 1946 recognised the diversity of Nigeria and introduced a regional system, which was inextricably tied to the three major ethnic groups, namely Hausa-Fulani dominated Northern region, Yoruba-dominated Western region, and Igbo-dominated Eastern region. Moreover, the North was allowed to preserve its religion and tradition, while the South was compelled to embrace Christianity and Western education. These and other divisive colonial policies frustrated the idea of a united national identity and Nigerian nationalism, as regional boundaries strengthened primordial divisions and converted identities into instruments of political power in ways that reinforced stress ethnic nationalism and regional politics (Nnoli 2008; 2011; Isike and Olasupo 2022).

Indeed, as Isike and Olasupo (2022) argue, the state in Africa is an alien imposition, not only in terms of its origin but also in terms of its essence which was to further the colonial exploitation of Africa and its people. This colonial interruption of state formation processes in Africa negatively affected organic state formation in the continent, with consequences for good governance, belonging, and nation-building. In the Nigerian case as with others, apart from the absence of a social contract forged between state and citizens, the state that was imposed through colonialism was patrimonial and prebendal in nature. They were weak in institutional capacity to transcend the private realm and primordial public of those in power to project collective development and security aspirations of the peoples (Ekeh 1975; Mamdani 1996). Quite logically, diverse groups in colonial and postcolonial Nigeria have interacted, including in competition for power and wealth of the nation, based on ethnic, religious, and regional identities (Nnoli 2008; Osaghae and Suberu 2005; Salawu and Hassan 2011). Political parties and their contestation for power during the first and second republics were modelled along ethno-regional and religious lines. The desire for radical change in the polity encouraged a culture of military interventions and the militarisation of politics. The efforts to deemphasise regional politics through state creation further created multiple minority questions and unending ethno-centric demand for autonomy. Despite numerous efforts to address the ethno-centric nature of the politics, which have undermined democracy and development in the country, the patrimonial nature of the state and prebendal dimension of the politics have frustrated them (Okolie 2006; Osaghae 2011; Omotola and Alumona 2016; Nnoli 2011).

As postcolonial power and resistance bear the hallmark of identity politics, ethnicity and other identities have become a major driver of conflicts across Nigeria. In the first three decade of independence, the Tiv conflict, the aborted secessionist riots in Northern region and Niger Delta, and the civil war with the Eastern Region (Biafra), and a series of Islamist uprisings are some

of the earliest indicators of ethno-regional and religious armed conflicts in postcolonial Nigeria (Osaghae 2011; Osaghae and Suberu 2005; Nnoli 2008; 2011). More alarming, the three years' civil war claimed the lives of over two million in the country. Recently, therefore, Nigeria was reported to have recorded no fewer than 2811 incidences of ethnic conflict with 18,132 fatalities, 3703 incidences of religious conflict with 29,957 fatalities, and 117 incidences of ethno-religious conflict with 2420 fatalities between 1999 and 2021 (Adenuga et al. 2023). In addition, the Niger Delta militant groups, Boko Haram and its numerous affiliates, and armed bandits have exploited ethnic, religious, and regional identities in development of their mobilisation capacities for terror campaign in Nigeria and beyond (Campbell 2010; Ojo et al. 2024; Omotola and Alumona 2016; Oriola et al. 2021). These among others necessitate the effort to reexamine the Nigeria's foreign policy and its ethno-regional and religious drivers.

Nigeria's foreign policy and its determinants

At independence, the Nigerian state inherited and subsequently sustained a colonial state structure bequeathed to it by Britain. This development was to shape the socio-political cum economic dynamics and realities in Nigeria including the determinants and contents of its external relations. The capacity and capability of the nascent Nigerian government under Tafawa Balewa (1960-1966) in foreign policy responsibilities were restricted from inception by inexperience, lack of precedent, institutional problems, a weak operating environment, and a scarcity of foreign policy professionals (Olusanyan and Akindele 1986; Shaw and Aluko 1983). Despite the challenges, the Balewa administration in 1960 articulated the following "broad concepts" of Nigerian foreign policy: (1) Promotion of Nigeria's national interest and world peace, (2) Adherence to the policy of neutrality and non-alignment, (3) Respect for all nations' sovereign equality, (4) Promotion of international friendship and cooperation, (5) Adherence to the principles of non-interference and non-aggression in other countries, (6) Promotion of Africa's rapid decolonisation, (7) Adherence to the policy of neutrality and non-alignment, (8) Support for a free and democratic world, (9) Promotion and support of cooperation and integration among African states (Asogwa 2009). These objectives reflect elements of realism, liberalism, critical post-colonialism, and Afrocentrism on foreign policy.

Since independence, Nigeria's foreign policy has been defined by a focus on Africa and adherence to many other core ideals, such as African unity and independence; peaceful resolution of conflicts; non-alignment and non-interference in other countries' internal affairs and regional economic cooperation and growth (Amusan 2018; Asogwa 2009; Okolie 2009). Section 19 of the Nigerian 1999 Constitution summed up the foreign policy objectives of the country as "(a) promotion and protection of the national interest; (b) promotion of African integration and support for African unity; (c) promotion of international co-operation for the consolidation of universal peace and mutual respect among all nations and elimination of discrimination in all

its manifestations; (d) respect for international law and treaty obligations as well as the seeking of settlement of international disputes by negotiation, mediation, conciliation, arbitration and adjudication; and (e) promotion of a just world economic order” (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999). These show that Nigeria has retained some levels of consistency in foreign policy objectives, which reflect elements of realism, liberalism, post-colonialism, and Afrocentrism. Notably, however, these objectives entail some ambiguities, such as what constitute national interest, which the leadership has the responsibility to define at any given time and determine compatible nature, conception or levels of African integration and unity, international law, cooperation, peace and respect, and just world economic order.

Overall, Nigeria’s foreign policy has been influenced by the interplay of the domestic and external variables (Adeniji 2000; Imobighe and Ali 2012). Locally, the machinery of the state is central to foreign policy, as the executive arm of government defines the foreign policy, while the legislature performs oversight function, and the judiciary is most visible in matters of international law and obligations. Amidst these, the presidency dominates foreign policy matters with varying degrees of visibility for bureaucrats in Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as their counterparts in Defence, Finance, Petroleum Resources, Agriculture, Science and Technologies, Transportations, among others, across administrations (Olusanya and Akindele 1990; Imobighe and Ali 2012). For instance, the Ministry of Finance together with Foreign Affairs played major role in Nigeria’s economic diplomacy and negotiation of debt forgiveness and repayment between 1999 and 2007. Similarly, the Ministry of Defence was at the forefront of Nigeria’s foreign policy in soliciting military aid during the civil war (1967-1970) and at the peak of the war against Boko Haram (2013-2018). These have produced bureaucratic politics, where different departments compete to shape what turn out to be the country’s foreign policy positions on matters that affect their interests. Recently, while Ministry of Foreign Affairs was still working on diplomatic solutions, the Ministry of Defence was already drawing a war plan to enforce Nigeria-led ECOWAS desire to restore democracy back to Niger Republic after the 2023 military coup (Oyewole 2023). Similar bureaucratic politics can be observed in the earlier decisions of Nigeria to deploy troops to Liberia in the 1990s and the Gambia in 2016. In cases where the President is active in foreign affairs, such as during Obasanjo (1999-2007), or interested in specific matter, the role of technocrats is often relegated to the background.

Beyond governmental institutions, civil society groups, private corporations and individuals have also shaped the Nigeria’s foreign policy. Several pressure groups were involved in the campaign against the planned Nigeria-led ECOWAS military operation against Niger junta in 2023. Multinational Oil Companies in Nigeria have equally shaped the country’s foreign policy toward their home state, given the decades of overreliance on oil and gas rent for the economic survival of the nation. Recently, the entertainment industry, mega churches, and the academics have also become a subject of Nigeria’s foreign policy with their contributions to the country’s soft power credentials (Tella 2021; Ogunnubi and Oyewole 2020). Generally, public opinion and public diplomacy are also notable in Nigeria’s foreign policy (Oshewolo 2021). Nigeria-South African

relations, and particularly response to xenophobia attacks against foreigners in the latter have been largely shaped by public opinion and mood of Nigerian at home and in the diaspora (Isike and Isike 2022). These among other variables shape pluralist perspective of the domestic environment, where Nigeria's foreign policy decisions and positions are determined.

From identity and critical perspectives, Nigeria's foreign policy is shaped by national identity and values, and nature of the international system. Hence, Nigeria's geo-political, cultural, and economic identities explain the Afrocentric posture of the country, and its alignment with the Global-South in respect for international law and demand for just world economic order. From a critical point, however, it also explains Nigeria's colonial heritage and its influences on external relations. Despite its non-alignment stance immediately after independence, Nigeria's foreign policy was largely pro-British/western during the Cold War (Ogunbadejo 1980). Balewa's government constantly voted in favour of the West in the United Nations and was reluctant to extend formal diplomatic relations with the Eastern bloc, as Moscow's role in Africa and supporters like Nkrumah in Ghana were viewed with great suspicion (Stremlau 1981). Most importantly, Balewa government formed Anglo-Nigerian Defence Pact of 1961, which was only aborted due to public pressure. This foreign policy posture and orientation prevailed until after the Nigerian civil war, when the Soviet Union's assistance offered a basis to strengthen relationship with the Eastern bloc. With some exceptions in 1970s and 1990s, however, Nigeria's foreign policy remains largely pro-West orientated. This is recently evident in the pro-Western democratic position of Nigeria and the ECOWAS for regime change amidst a wave of military coup in the Sahel states, which have become more pro-Russian.

From realism and critical perspectives, foreign policy is a product of power in international relations. The manners that Nigeria's power capabilities, especially population, military and economic strengths have shaped her foreign policy reflect realism (Adeniji 2000; Imobighe and Ali 2012; Ogunnubi and Oyewole 2020). However, the colonial integration of Nigeria into global capitalist system, where she produced primary goods for the metropolis is responsible for what the critical school refers to as dependent and subservient foreign policy (Amin 1976; Mazrui 2019; Henderson 2015; Wallerstein 1979). Nigeria inherited a neo-colonial commodity structured economy that thrives solely on export of primary goods, which has tied its foreign policy position to fluctuation in global price determined in the metropolis. Era of assertiveness and radicalism (independence from Western influence) in Nigeria's foreign policy, when it spearheaded the decolonialization of most African states including Angola, Zimbabwe and South Africa was tied to the oil boom of 1970s. The sharp decline in oil price in the 1980s and the subsequent fluctuation in price, even in the last two decades, have plunged the country in debt crisis and crippled her power base for sustainability of assertive foreign policy position (Babarinde and Wright 2013; Onyeke et al. 2020; Osaghae 2011).

Beyond structural and value system, the leadership still play a major role in foreign policy of Nigeria like elsewhere. Considering the nature of the state in Africa, foreign policy has become patrimonial, as personality cult overshadow institutionalism (Henderson 2015). One

major area where the vestiges of colonialism are still exerting immeasurable impacts is on the personality, character and orientation of the political leaders. The colonial formation along with other administrative decisions emphasized ethnic nationalism and religious politics (Ekeh 1975; Mamdani 1996). As such, the emergent ruling class displayed primordial loyalty to their ethnicity and religion, instead of to the entire federation (Nnoli 2008; 2011). Because they are immersed in ethno-religious sentiments, the character and personality of the leaders reflect this reality. Like the wider public policy, foreign policy decisions are usually conditioned by the ideological inclinations and orientations of the leaders (Imobighe and Ali 2012; Okolie 2009; Osaghae 2011). In foreign policy formulation, decision makers often allow their personal backgrounds, experiences, motivations, learning, values, prejudices, positions, privileges, interpersonal relations, and perceptions to influence the making and conduct of foreign policy (Okoro 2002, 25). The ideology of these leaders has tremendous influence on the foreign policies of their states. Hence, the foreign policy of Nigeria since independence has reflected to a varying degree the characters of her leaders and their primordial among other orientations.

Ethno-regional and religious drivers of Nigeria's foreign policymaking and implementation

Although Nigeria is a secular "democratic" country and should not have ethno-regional and religious policies that tend to alienate other ethnicities and their faiths, it has in the past taken decisions which have attracted criticism and placed the stability of the nation on the brink (Campbell 2010; Ojo et al. 2014). The behaviour of the state in foreign policy making and implementation without internal consultation has always been a sore point. Very often, these policies conflict with the local customs of Nigerian nationalities not consulted before "Nigeria" entered into many agreements, such as on "human rights", gender, and children. However, it is often those agreements with ethnic and religious dimensions that usually degenerate into serious national issues. This article further discusses two key factors of religion and ethnicity to underscore how they impact Nigeria's foreign policy making and implementation.

Religion

At the point of independence in October 1960, Nigeria was divided into three regions: north, south, and west, with significant autonomy, including in foreign policy. With a Muslim majority, the northern region under Ahmadu Bello, whose party gained control of the federal government, launched an Islamic mission Southward without consideration for the Christians in this and other regions (Omotoso 1988). According to Okeke (2020), this was not surprising given that he was the great-grandson of Dandofodio, a pioneer of Islamic propagation by Jihad in 1804. As a result, religion became a powerful tool in shaping Ahmadu Bello's foreign policy agenda.

In 1962, he was the Vice-President to the Organization of World Muslim Leaders (OWML), which was headed by Saudi Arabia's king. He later became the Vice President of the Muslim League when OWML was renamed in 1964 at Madina, and he proclaimed his religious foreign policy by swearing to devote himself to the propagation of Islam (see Omotoso 1988, Okeke 2020).

Due to his pledge, Islamic countries such as Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Libya contributed books, money, and other gifts to the mission to spread Islam in Nigeria. To demonstrate his dedication, Ahmadu Bello turned down any aid from Israel in 1962, arguing that such aid was a ruse to subdue and conquer northern Nigeria (Okeke 2020). In his view, "it is preferable that the northern region remains poor than to receive any form of support from Yahud of Israel" (Okeke 2020: 112). As a result, religion had a detrimental effect on the country's overall foreign policy, as the northern region's connections with the rest of the world were skewed or imbalanced in favour of Islamic countries, at the expense of whatever gains may be garnered from the rest of the world, while the South was pro-Israel and West (Awosusi and Ekpo 2022).

Nigeria's decision during the military administration of General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida in 1986 to join the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the opposition the Christian South reflect the religious drivers of the foreign policy. The intention to join the OIC was not just for religious purpose but for economic reason as well. The membership was intentionally acquired to enable and ease borrowing from the Islamic Development Bank (IDB). This ostensibly patriotic action was misinterpreted by Christians because of ethno-regional and religion distrust and intolerance that has permeated in Nigeria's polity. Also, the growing disaffection by the Muslim population that the Federal Government of Nigeria approved the sponsorship of delegates to the Christian Pilgrimage to Jerusalem made them to pressurize the government to sponsor Muslim delegates to the annual Islamic Pilgrimage (the Hajj) as well (Bianchi 2004). The inability of the Nigerian government to remain consistent with the nature of the secular state by separating the state from church and mosque as is the case in many advanced democracies has been a source of internal friction, with significant implications on the country's relations with other nations.

Another example is the 1967 Arab-Israel war, which affected Nigeria's foreign policy religiously, as the Nigerian Muslims called for support of the Arab and the severance of all foreign relations with Israel. Nigerian Christians, as anticipated, opposed such initiatives, causing severe internal tensions in the country. This is the pattern of Nigeria's foreign policy towards the Middle East. One may easily say that Nigeria's foreign policy with Israel and Arab countries is designed to satisfy the region's contradictory interests. Adeyemo (2012, 318) backed up this claim by saying, "The North was left to support and sympathise with the Arabs and Palestine and had nothing to do with Israel." The Israelis, their business companies, and industrial manufacturers, on the other hand, were welcomed with open arms in the South.

The Biafran/Nigerian war, the thirty-month battle, which lasted from July 6, 1966, to January 15, 1970, had an overt religious undertone. The Christian-controlled Eastern region, Biafra, that wanted to secede from the rest of Nigeria, was supported by Israel and some Western nations militarily and financially. Accordingly, the Israeli Foreign Affairs Minister Abba Eban lamented

that “Israel supplied strong backing to Biafra, and if other states had done the same, the state of Biafra would have been realised” (Levey 2014). Nigeria sought help from Middle East Muslim countries and the communist bloc in response to Israel and Western complicity with Biafra. Despite the normalisation of relations with Israel by Egypt and some other hostile Arab countries from late 1970s, the Nigerian-Israeli relations remained hostile until 1992, when Nigerian Christians alleged that their pilgrimage was being hampered because of the country’s antagonistic relations with Israel. The Nigerian government was forced to restart its foreign relations with Israel because of this move and related international dynamics.

Equally, on December 30, 2014, Nigeria under the administration of Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the South, abstained from voting in a crucial resolution at the United Nations Security Council, calling for an end to Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories by 2017 (Beaumont 2014). However, in 2016, the Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim from the North, declared support for a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict as against the position of the United States and Britain. Most importantly, the Buhari’s administration deepened bilateral and multilateral ties with the Islamic states. Furthermore, Nigeria identified with the Saudi Arabia-led military coalition against terrorism, it also supported Afghanistan with the sum of \$1 million, even when the country was also threatened by Islamist Boko Haram.² Again, in October 2023, Nigeria under President Tinubu, a Muslim from the South, was part of the 120 countries that voted in favour of a draft resolution for the immediate ceasefire in Israel-Hamas war at the United Nations General Assembly, as against the US, Israel and 12 others that voted against it.³ These show the inconsistency in Nigeria’s external position, interpretation of foreign policy objectives and definition of national interest, despite the consistency in letter of international mandate and obligations of the country as stated in the constitution. These are indications of identity politics perspective as well as patrimonial state and the primordial foreign policy as identified by African realism (Henderson 2015).

The September 11 (9/11) terrorist attacks in the USA and the resultant global war against terrorism also shows the religious division of Nigerian domestic public and its implication on foreign policy. The attack turned Al Qaeda and its founding leader, Osama Bin Laden to heroes, as they were celebrated by some radical Islamist groups, which in turn killed many innocent Christians in their riots in Nigeria. In response to the supportive role of Taliban in the 9/11 attacks and resultant retributive invasion of Afghanistan by the US and its allies, a radical Islamist group emerged in 2003 in the north-eastern part of the country, named the Nigerian Taliban (Oyewole 2013). This group later became Boko Haram, as it was further radicalised in its engagements with the Nigerian state, and with its contacts with Al Qaeda’s network in the Sahel, East and North

² See Lalzoy, N. “Nigeria donates \$1 million to Afghanistan’s Humanitarian Trust Fund.” *Khaama Press*, March 5, 2022. Accessed: March 28, 2024. <https://www.khaama.com/nigeria-donates-1-million-to-afghanistans-humanitarian-trust-fund-765675678/>

³ Okafor, C. “Israel-Gaza War: Nigeria, others vote in favour of immediate ceasefire” *Premium Times*, October 28, 2023. Accessed February 12, 2024. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/637845-israel-gaza-war-nigeria-others-vote-in-favour-of-immediate-ceasefire.html>

Africa, and the Middle East, which transformed in organisation, militant strategy and operational sophistication (Oriola et al. 2021). Even in the face of deadly campaign of terror by the group, many Muslims in the North believed that it was fighting a just course. This denied the federal government under President Jonathan (2010-2015), a Christian from the South, the required consensus and broad-based support that is required to prosecute necessary and adequate counter terrorism measures against Boko Haram (Oyewole 2013; Oriola et al. 2021).

Ethnicity

Apart from religion, ethnicity which also overlaps with religion and regional politics in Nigeria is another important variable in the country's foreign policy. The mutual mistrust among the majority ethnic groups (Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa-Fulani) in the country, and between them and the minority groups within their respective regions flows from national politics into foreign policy. A few examples will suffice. Despite the official claims that foreigners from Niger are deeply involved in armed banditry, terrorism, and insurgency in the country, President Buhari publicly identified the immigrants as his kinsmen, failed to contain illegal migration across the North, but encouraged it with the construction of transborder train and emboldened them with nationalisation of many Fulani (Ojo et al. 2024). Meanwhile, the same president closed many boarder-posts in the South, as a measure to counter smuggling, despite the appeal from business communities and governments of the affected federating states and neighbouring countries.

Another example which speaks to the differential treatment Nigerian citizens abroad get from their government is the case of Nigerians from the South who were convicted of drug peddling and sentenced to death in Indonesia. During an interview with *The Cable*, Abike Dabiri-Erewa, Chairman of Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NIDCOM) profiled the prisoners by stating that out of the 21 Nigerian drug peddlers on death roll in Indonesian prison, 20 of them were from Anambra state while the remaining one was from Edo state going to the extent of mentioning their names to buttress her point (Dabiri-Erewa 2019). This was widely condemned by stakeholders from the South who interpreted it as ethnic profiling of Igbo people in Nigeria as criminals abroad. Now, those affected are first Nigerians and should be regarded as such instead of linking them to their ethnic groupings. Months later another group of Nigerians, from different ethnic extraction, including Yorubas like Abike Dabiri-Erewa, were convicted and sentenced to death also for drug dealing in Thailand and in their case, she refrained from listing their names or states of origin as she had done previously with the Igbos. While this is interpreted as ethnocentric motivated double standard by many, some considered it as a cautious move by Abike after the blowback of her earlier insensitivity on such matter.⁴

⁴ "More knocks for diaspora commission boss, Dabiri-Erewa for profiling nigerians living in Indonesia as 'drug addicts, cultists'." *Sahara Reporters*, October 19, 2022. <https://saharareporters.com/2022/10/19/more-knocks-diaspora-commission-boss-dabiri-ere-wa-profiling-nigerians-living-indonesia>

The recent (2023) aborted foreign policy position of Nigeria-led ECOWAS bloc on the use of military means to restore civil rule to Niger Republic under the chairmanship of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu has also received ethnocentric interpretation and reactions. Beside the general shortage of public support and the effort of the legislature to caution the President, the hardline foreign policy position of Nigeria came under the attacks of many Northern elites, who consider such as an invasion on their brothers and sisters in Niger Republic.⁵ Notably, the 26.3 million population of Niger are made up of Hausa (53.1%), Fulani (6.5%) and Kanuri (5.9%), which double as the dominant ethnic groups in Northern Nigeria. As expected by the pluralist and identity perspectives, interest groups from this ethno-regional background played major role in soften the hardline foreign policy position of the Tinubu's government against the Niger's Junta. Nigeria has a rich record of external military deployments and operations for peace-keeping, enforcement and promotion of democracy across Africa (Ogunnubi and Oyewole 2020). Although the government of Buhari (2015-2023), a Fulani from the North, supported ECOWAS mission and deployed the Nigerian military to enforce democratic transition in the Gambia in 2016, he approached the military coups in Mali (2020 and 2021) and Burkina Faso (January and September 2022) with silence. While this foreign policy decisions can be justified with Afrocentric and post-colonial non-interference principles and rational-choice around the national security interest, identity theory cannot ignored the significance of Fulani population in Mali (13.3%) and Burkina Faso (6.8%) and the possible implication on the government.⁶

Conclusion

In conclusion, the significance of ethno-regionalism and religion in Nigeria's foreign policy is extremely complicated, as it is entwined with political, environmental, and economic concerns. The twin plaques of ethnicity and religion have long tried to outplay each other in the struggle for control of key political positions and influencing policy decisions. These tussles have continuously shaped and unshaped Nigeria's domestic politics and foreign policy orientation. Generally, ethno-regional and religious forces have had both positive and negative effects on Nigeria's foreign policy. The products of these identity forces in Nigeria's foreign policy sometimes align with rational-choice and realism, while patrimonialism becomes too obvious in some cases. Accordingly, ethno-regional and religiously motivated actions are sometimes taken at the expense of the common good, as broadly conceived national interests are replaced with narrow and primordial considerations.

⁵ Orjinmo, N. "Nigeria's President Tinubu faces backlash over military intervention in Niger." *BBC*, August 07, 2023. Accessed: July 12, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66430113>

⁶ For population distribution of Mali and Burkina Faso, see "Explore all countries: Mali." *The World Factbook*. Accessed July 12, 2024. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/mali/>; "Explore all countries: Burkina Faso" *The World Factbook*. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/burkina-faso/>

Against this background, establishing a sense of national identity, working for common goods and broadly conceived and inclusive policies can bridge Nigeria's multiple religious, ethnic, and linguistic identities in critical and essential policymaking. A typical Nigerian currently associates with his/her family, community, religious and ethnic groups before the country. As a result, practically every Nigerian has a strong sectarian impulse based on ethnicity and religion that does not bode well for patriotism, nation-building, and broad-based governance. This has implications for foreign policy making and implementation, which not only compromises Nigeria's national interests, but also indicate the nexus between domestic and foreign policies.

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