



## **SPORTS AS AN INSTRUMENT OF FOREIGN POLICY UNDER THE MILITARY RULE IN NIGERIA: 1976-1996**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The importance and popularity of sports among the nations of the world is huge. Sports are among the few common denominators for all the nations of the world irrespective of their respective political ideologies and religious inclinations. Through sports, enemies in political and ideological realms can compete between and among each other in an atmosphere of peace. Over the years, world leaders have used sports as an instrument of foreign policy. They do that in both positive and negative ways. Sports are deployed positively when they are used to boost friendship or to support a noble cause and they are used negatively when they are deployed as an instrument of sanctions. This paper shows how sports were used as an instrument of foreign policy in Nigeria by three military regimes of Olusegun Obasanjo, Ibrahim Babangida and Sanni Abacha. Olusegun Obasanjo's regime pulled out Nigeria's Olympic contingents from participating in the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal, Canada. Ten years later, the regime of Ibrahim Babangida led other Anglophone countries to boycott the 1986 Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh, Scotland; and in 1996 General Sanni Abacha stopped the Super Eagles from defending the title they won in the previous edition of the African Cup of Nations. Details of these boycotts and their political implications are discussed in this paper.*

**KEYWORDS:** Foreign policy, Sports, Olympics, Commonwealth games, African Cup of Nations.



## INTRODUCTION

One of the foreign policy instruments of the military regimes of Olusegun Obasanjo, Sanni Abacha and Ibrahim Babangida was sport. The three regimes used sports in their relations with several countries. From independence in 1960, successive Nigerian administrations adopted an African-centered foreign policy. According to Abegunrin (2003), Muritala Mohammed's administration also followed the policy. The regime advocated total war on apartheid and White rule in South Africa and it adopted open-door immigration to victims of liberation movements across Africa and the same policy was carried on by Olusegun Obasanjo, who took over after Muritala was assassinated in February 1976. The regime used sport judiciously in its foreign policy by boycotting the Montreal Olympics in Canada in 1976. The African decision-makers were protesting the fact that the national Rugby team of New Zealand had toured South Africa and New Zealand was scheduled to compete in the Olympics. This action was one of many actions taken by the Nigerian and African Governments to show their resentment toward the apartheid regime in South Africa. It was an action that symbolized the unity of African countries against the scourge of apartheid and racism on the continent. The regime also boycotted the 1978 Commonwealth Games in Edmonton, Canada for the same reason it boycotted the Montreal Olympics in 1976 (Raikar, 2023). Babangida's regime that ousted the Buhari/Idiagbon regime in 1983 also committed a lot of Nigeria resources to the South African liberation struggle and in sport; the regime spearheaded the boycotts of the 13th Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh, Scotland by Anglophone African countries to show their resentment to Britain for not applying comprehensive sanction against the apartheid regime in South Africa and granting of independence to Namibia (Akinyemi, 1989). Similarly, Sanni Abacha's regime which ousted the Interim Government of Earnest Shonekan, also used sport in its foreign policy, albeit in a negative way, as shown in his long-drawn diplomatic battle with the Post-apartheid South Africa. In January 1996, he ordered the then defending champions of the African Cup of Nations, the Super Eagles of Nigeria, out of the 20th edition of the African Cup of Nations that was billed to be held in South Africa, in response to President Nelson Mandela's sharp criticism over the hanging of "Ogoni Nine" and his subsequent lobbying for sanction against Nigeria in the Commonwealth of Nations (Hughes, 1996, p. 22).

The importance of sport in contemporary foreign policy across the world cannot be over-emphasized. From the game of wrestling in the ancient Greek city of Athens to the globally accepted game of soccer, which Edson Arantes do Nascimento (popularly known as Pele) branded "the beautiful game" (Pele & Fish, 1977, p. ii), sport has undergone tremendous improvement in global acceptance, importance and economic value. Starting from the mid-twentieth century, sport which was hitherto used mainly for recreation purposes and a medium of friendship in the world, metamorphosed and became an instrument in the hands of the decision-makers around the globe, in their relations and dealings with other states, thus emerged a new form of social-cultural instrument of foreign policy. Perhaps, one major event that has contributed to the elevation of sports to this level of prominence is the Olympics.

The Olympics is the sporting event that has the highest number of participating countries in a single event in the world. At the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, a record 206 countries and 11,091 athletes participated in 41 different sports and 339 events (Reardon, 2021). The Olympics are staged once in four years and they are organized and coordinated by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The body also awards hosting rights to a country, among those that bid for a particular edition. The modern-day Olympics marked its one hundred year anniversary in



1996, when the city of Atlanta, Georgia in the United States of America hosted the centennial Olympics.

However, the political angle to the event Olympics was exploited in 1980 when the then United States of America President, Jimmy Carter, apparently seeing the effect the absence of African countries had on the last edition in Montreal Canada, led some United States of America's Allies to boycott the 1980 Olympic Games that was held in Moscow, the capital of the then communist Soviet Union. The action was to protest the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. On December 27, 1979, in a brutal military blitz over 100,000 Russian troops invaded the sovereign state of Afghanistan on its southern border in the first of such major action since World War II. In 1980, the United States responded in good measure by imposing several economic sanctions against the Soviet Union. These measures included: "a partial grain embargo and halting the delivery of high technology items such as oil-drilling equipment" (Rodee, 1985, p. 507). But, by far the most talked-about reaction of the United States to the invasion was the boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. Due to the United States of America's led boycott, sixty-seven countries turned down their invitations to the 1980 Olympic Games; probably 45 countries, including Germany, Japan, Canada, and Kenya did so because of the United States America's boycott. In the end, only eighty countries participated in the games, the lowest since the 1956 edition in Melbourne (International Olympic Committee, n.d).

The 1980 boycott led to the reciprocal boycott in 1984 when the Soviet Union led its communist allies to boycott the 1984 edition of the Olympics when the city of Los Angeles in the United States of America hosted the event. However, unlike the 1980 edition in Moscow, 140 countries with 6,797 athletes participated, but the 14 nations that stayed away as the result of the Soviet-led boycott accounted for 50-80 percent of the Gold medals that were won at the 1976 Games in Montreal Canada (International Olympic Committee, n.d). Both boycotts further worsened the diplomatic relations between the United States of America and the defunct Soviet Union. The boycotts remain one of the major highlights of the Cold War era. The Cold War era, according to Holsti (1988), was marked by constant struggle in many dimensions-propaganda, ideology ornaments, economic output, sports and culture, between the United States of America and the defunct Soviet Union.

Before the 1980 boycott, the United States of America had earlier used sports as an instrument of foreign policy. In 1971, when the United States was seeking better relations with the People's Republic of China, it sent over a table tennis team, a gambit that was known as 'Ping-Pong Diplomacy' (Podell 1986, 5). This signaled the dawn of an improved relationship between both countries. However, in 1996, North Korea (The Guardian, 1995) and Iran threatened to boycott the Atlanta 1996 Olympics due to what Iran regarded as the United States "hostile stance" (The Punch, 1993). Perhaps the worst diplomatic era between the United States and Iran was triggered by the event of November 27, 1979, to January 20, 1981, when 63 Americans were held hostage by the revolutionary forces of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini. 52 of them were released to the United States of America on January 20, 1981, after laborious negotiations. This was after the United States made an unsuccessful attempt to rescue the hostage in 1980, losing eight men in the process (Rodee, 1985). For North Korea, One of the high points of its sour relationship with the United States of America when the USA was practicing its containment policy was the North Korean invasion of South Korea in 1951 (Gardner, 1975). The United States America intervened in that war to defend South Korea, but the country was disgraced and had to withdraw from that war in humiliation after it had lost thousands of its men and sunk several millions of dollars into that war. This happened when the United States was



practicing a containment policy. However, despite their threats, neither Iran nor North Korea boycotted the Atlanta 1996 Olympics, as the United States of America did in the Moscow 1980 Olympics.

This paper analyzes the use of sport as an instrument of foreign policy by the military regimes of Olusegun Obasanjo, Ibrahim Babangida and Sanni Abacha. The paper looks at the circumstances around the boycotts of the Montreal Olympic Games in 1976 under the regime of Olusegun Obasanjo, the boycott of the 13th Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh, Scotland, under the regime of Ibrahim Babangida and the boycott of the African Cup of Nations by the administration of Sanni Abacha. The paper affirms that sport is an important instrument of foreign policy and it can be used in both positive and negative ways.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Foreign policy has been described and defined by many authors and scholars. But all of them seem to have areas of agreement when it comes to what constitutes foreign policy and where it could be employed. To George Modelski, "Foreign policy is the system of activities evolved by communities for changing the behavior of other States and for adjusting their activities to the international environment" (Kegley et al., 1995). The key phrases in Modelski's definitions are: "the system of activities" and the "international environment". Linking the two phrases together, one can say that, foreign policy is the system of activities that find purpose in the international arena and not the national arena, i.e. foreign policy is only relevant when the issue deals with more than one nation. This could also be seen in Snyder's (1962) definitions of foreign policy as a process of state interaction at the government level. Apart from pointing out that foreign policy is relevant only at the inter-governmental level, Snyder's definition also shows that foreign policy is not conducted by Non-governmental organizations, but the conduct of foreign policy is restricted to the inter-governmental level. Another definition of foreign policy is the one by Rodee (1985). He defines foreign policy as "the pattern of behavior that one state adopts while pursuing its interests in relations with other states" (p. 458). Every nation has an interest in the global system and this interest is what is known as national interest.

National interest is the linkage between the activities of the decision-makers and the people. National interests are the interest that promotes the general welfare of average citizens. What constitutes national interest is that which is fundamental to the economics, political socio-cultural welfare of the majority of the people within the state, and not just the interest of the ruling class or the decision makers. But in some polity what constitutes national interest is the interest of the decision makers which is then presented as the interest of the citizen. This could be seen especially in an authoritarian system, where the interest of a dictator may constitute foreign policy decisions (Keyley et al., 1995).

The execution of foreign policy according to Rodee (1985, p. 507) involves the "skillful utilization of the tactical instruments" Oxford University dictionary defines "instrument" as implements, apparatus, used in acting". Foreign policy instruments can therefore be taken to mean implements used in performing foreign policy actions. But Rodee (1985, p. 480) defines foreign policy instrument as "any legal or extralegal agency or device used to attain policy goals".



Just as screwdrivers and spanners are instruments in the hands of mechanical engineers, so also are foreign policy instruments fundamental tools in the hands of decision-makers. Whenever they want to speak in the international arena, they use these instruments to drive home their point.

Sports on the other hand, according to the World Book Encyclopedia (1984, p. 98) are “organized athletics activities, played individually or in teams.” Most sports can be played by men and women and boys and girls. Many people are involved in sports all over the world either as amateur or as professional. According to Jeffrey (1979), all sports have rules and behaviors that are established formally and traditionally and the participants can either be categorized as amateur or professional. All sports according to Jeffrey have rules and behaviors which are established formally and traditionally

Since the Second World War, sport has become a mammoth industry that generates billions of dollars annually and interest in sport is nearly universal. According to Podell (1985), 96.3 percent of all Americans engage in some kind of sport daily, but more people participate as spectators. And far more people watch sports in the United States than vote in a national election. The same thing applies to Nigeria, where sports, especially, football is followed religiously and it cuts across ethnic and religious boundaries. On the use of sport as an instrument of foreign policy, Podell (1985, p. 5) noted that “organised sport has been co-opted by government officials who use it to advance political goals.” For instance when the United States was seeking better relations with the People's Republic of China 1971, it sent over a table-tennis team a gambit known as “Ping-Pong diplomacy”. The communist and Western countries have for years used sports to further their rivalry, culminating in the boycotts of the 1980 and 1984 Olympic Games. The world leaders, having explored all known instrument-like economic, military, and diplomacy, capitalized on the universality of sport and its growing prominence, and drew sport into global politics.

The above scenario was explicitly captured by Dick Jeeps. The former Chairman of the Birth Sports Council, in the introduction he wrote to the British Sports Council annual report (1979-1980), described the year under review as the period “when the governments of the Western democracies became involved in the government of sport”, He stated further that “Never again can it be said (that) sport can have a separate existence, independence of politics. It must now be universally recognized that sports and politics are linked, not only as a component of leisure but sometimes, sadly as an instrument of foreign policy (British Sport Council, 1980, 11). Dick Jeeps' contribution was in reaction to the politics behind the Moscow 1980 Olympics boycott. The 1984 revenge boycott later served as a rubber stamp of his assertion. By 1984 when the Soviet Union led its communist allies to boycott the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles in retaliation to the United States-led boycott of the Moscow '80 Olympics, the diplomatic world consciousness was then fully drawn to the instrumentality of sport in the conduct of foreign policy among Nations.

Therefore Sport as an instrument of foreign policy can be used in both negative and positive ways. It is positive when it is used as an instrument for improving relations among states. An example is when the United States sent a Table-tennis team to China in 1971, an action which was later tagged “Ping-Pong diplomacy”. On the other hand, sports can be used negatively, when a state wants to show its unfriendliness to another state, We have diverse examples of this. They include the United States-led Olympic boycott of 1980 in Moscow and the communists' reciprocal boycott of Los Angeles '84 Olympics. It also includes Nigeria's



boycott of South Africa '96 and South Africa's decision to withdraw the invitation it earlier extended to Nigeria for a Four-Nation Tournament, shortly after the hanging of the "Ogoni-Nine" by the late Nigerian dictator, General Sanni Abacha.

Sport as an instrument of foreign policy is available and accessible to any country irrespective of their level of development and ideology because sport is a universal language. All it takes for a country to use sport as an instrument of foreign policy is to be fortunate to have world-class athletes who can rule the world in their specialized sport. Just as happened during the Abacha regime, when some talented Nigerian soccer players won the Olympic gold medals in the face of nearly global sanctions against the Abacha regime in nearly all sectors of life, including sport. Hughes (1996, 22) called these players "the pawns" in the games of General Abacha.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The actions of the three different Nigerian military heads of State to boycott three major events that are highlighted in this paper can be explained with the rational actor approach of foreign policy. The rational actor approach is a major approach in foreign policy. The approach explains how the actors relate with other actors in the international arena and helps to explain the goals and rationale for their actions. The approach emphasizes the roles of individuals in the determination of the affairs of the States. The approach assumes that the decision-makers are rational and that there are connections between the goals of the actors and the decisions they make. According to Slantchev (2005), it is not the States that act in the international arena, but the people, and to discuss any issue in the international arena, we have to look at the decision-makers and not the States. This explains why heads of State sometimes make decisions that are unpopular with their citizens and unhelpful to their state in the international arena.

One can say that the decisions of the Nigerian Military Head of State, Olusegun Obasanjo and Ibrahim Babangida to boycott the Montreal 1976 Olympic in Canada and the 1986 Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh, Scotland respectively are rational decisions by the two rulers towards the goal of liberating South Africa from the apartheid regime. One can also say that General Sanni Abacha's goal for making Nigeria boycott the African Cup of Nations that was held in South Africa in 1996 was to 'sanction' South Africa for the major role that President Nelson Mandela played in the excommunication of Nigeria from the Commonwealth in 2005. Abacha intended to disrupt a continental event that South Africa was hosting in the following year by withdrawing the Super Eagles, who were the defending champions from participating in that event. It is important to note that the three Dictators made those decisions without considering the opinions of sport-loving Nigerians and the athletes who were billed to participate in those events. The boycott of the African Cup of Nations in 1996 was the most unpopular of the three. Many sports-loving Nigerians were disappointed that Nigeria would not participate in a tournament that it was likely to win based on the ranking and pedigree of the Super Eagles at that particular time.



## **ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POLITICAL MOTIVATED SPORTS BOYCOTTS**

### **1. 1976 African Boycott Of Montreal Olympics In Canada**

The boycott of the 1976 Olympics in Montreal Canada by Nigeria and other independent African countries marked the first time any African country would use sport as a foreign policy instrument in the international arena. It is also the first time many countries would come together and use sport to speak in the international system. Through this boycott, African countries were able to show their counterparts across the world that they could unite if the occasion demanded it. According to the International Olympics Committee (n.d, p. 1), the African countries boycotted the 1976 Olympics "to protest the fact that the National rugby team of New Zealand had toured South Africa and New Zealand was scheduled to compete in the Olympics" As at the time the New Zealand Rugby team visited South Africa, the Africa countries had severed links with the apartheid regime in South Africa in all sector, including sport, and they desired that other countries in the world will do the same so that apartheid could be terminated in South Africa. Nigeria on its own had made it clear from its independence that it would not support the continuation of racism and apartheid in South Africa, and this could be seen in one of the guiding principles of its foreign policy at independence which stated t its "commitment to total eradication of racism aid colonialism from the African continent" (Ajala, 1989, 177). The intensity of implementing this principle varied from regime to regime, the principle however featured prominently in Nigeria's foreign policy until colonialism, racism and apartheid were terminated in Africa. For instance, under Tafawa Balewa's Administration Nigeria spearheaded the move that led to the withdrawal of South Africa from the Commonwealth of Nations (Ajala, 1989). As a result of this Nigeria terminated all the privileges' of Commonwealth membership that South African Whites had previously enjoyed in Nigeria.

The above gesture was continued by the Gowon Administration after the war when Nigeria became much more financially buoyant as her oil resources continued to contribute more petrodollars as her coffer, and therefore more able to launch impactful foreign policy. The Muritala administration, on its part, sponsored the South Africa Youth Revolutionary Council whose members took part in the Soweto uprising in June 1976. Nigeria gave military training to the members and also gave scholarships to some of them. General Obasanjo who took over from Muritala after the latter was killed in an abortive Coup D'état, also took a special interest in the elimination of racism and apartheid in Africa, His administration also withdrew Nigeria's money from Barclay Bank because the bank had expressed its intention to continue to do business in South Africa. Nigeria became a leading speaker against apartheid in Africa and as a result of this, she was made chair of the United Nations committee against apartheid ( Ajala, 1989).

One of the actions taken by Obasanjo and other African leaders on the apartheid situation in South Africa was the boycott of the 1976 Olympics in Montreal Canada. The then 22 independent African leaders decided to boycott the 1976 Olympics to show their resentment to the tour made by the National Rugby team of New Zealand to apartheid South Africa, just before the 1976 Olympics. The African leaders capitalized on the unusual publicity that they were going to get by boycotting such a global event like the Olympics and therefore decided not to go to the Olympics' because of New Zealand's visit.



The boycotts had both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, the boycott demonstrated a rare sense of unity among African countries at a time when Africans needed the spirit of togetherness, to fight the scourge of colonialism and apartheid on the continent. Though the boycott did not end apartheid in South Africa, it showed that African countries were determined to see to the end of minority rule in South Africa. Also, by successfully utilizing sport as an instrument of foreign policy, the international system welcomed a new system of dealings among nations. This approach was quickly adopted by the developed world. For instance, four years after the 1976 boycott the United States of America, apparently impressed by the success that was achieved by Africans through the 1976 Olympics boycott, used the same method to show its dissatisfaction with the invasion of Afghanistan by Russia, by boycotting the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. The Soviet Union used the same instrument to avenge the United States boycott of the 1980 Olympics, by boycotting the 1984 Olympics, hosted by Los Angeles, in the United States of America (Ajala 1989, 179). It should however be noted, that both 1980 and 1984 boycotts were ideologically motivated, but the African boycott was brought about by a common desire of all independent African countries to see to the total eradication of apartheid from the continent. It was so effective to the extent that the International Olympic Committee believed that the boycott marred the 1976 Olympic Games. The boycott helped direct the world's attention to the apartheid scourge in South Africa and served as one of the measures that cumulatively led to the demise of racism on the continent.

On the negative side, it should be mentioned that the 1976 Olympics boycott did more harm than good for the development of sport in Africa. African athletes who were supposed to showcase their talents and win laurels were not able to do so due to the decision taken by the respective governments, as they had to wait till the next edition, four years later in Moscow, in 1980. The fact that African countries like Kenya did not attend the 1980 games (due to the United States-led boycott) made the matter worse for the athletes from those countries.

For the Nigerian athletes, the boycott denied many athletes who were at the peak of their games, the opportunity to win medals at the 1976 Olympics. For athletes like Obisia Nwapa who was at the peak of his boxing career and had been tipped as a potential medalist at the 1976 Olympics, he never had the chance to go to another Olympic. There is also Charlton Ehisuele, who was among the best long jumpers in the world then, and it was assumed that he would win a medal, but the boycott denied him the chance to do so (Odegbami, 2002).

The case of the Nigerian football team that was supposed to go to the Olympics was quite pathetic. The team was already in Canada, to acclimatize before the Olympics, and they defeated one of the eventual semi-finalists at the 1976 games (Canada) by three goals to nothing in one of the pre-Olympics training matches. But the team was called back home and they were not allowed to show the world the stuff they were made of. Many of the football players never recovered and some of them like Baba-Out Mohammed and Andrew Atuegbu, had to leave the scene without realizing their dream of winning an Olympic medal. It was assumed at the time that if Canada, which was defeated by Nigeria, could get to the semi-final stage of the games, Nigeria would have gone beyond the semi-finals (Odegbami, 2002).

Despite the above negative implication of the boycott (which was quite negligible vis-à-vis the importance of the boycott), the boycott was quite successful and effectual, for the fact that it helped to bring apartheid in South Africa to the world's attention.





## 2. **Edinburgh 1986 Commonwealth Games' Boycott**

By the early 1980s, many countries in Africa that were previously under colonial rule were now independent thanks to the effort of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) for their resolve to get rid of foreign domination on the continent of Africa. However, up till 1990, Namibia was still under colonialism, South Africa was still under minority rule, and racism and colonialism were going on unabated despite the criticism that the system was receiving from African countries. In Nigeria, the Babangida's administration like its predecessors was concerned about the liberation of South Africa from white domination and discrimination. The regime gave financial assistance to liberation movements like the African National Congress (ANC) and the Namibia Solidarity Movement. Nigeria continued to chair the United Nations Committee on Apartheid and it continued to press for the release of Blacks that were put into jail by the apartheid regime in South Africa. Another major decision taken by Nigeria on the apartheid regime in South Africa was the decision of Nigeria to boycott the 13<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1986. General Babangida influenced other Commonwealth countries in Africa to turn down their invitations to the Edinburgh Games as an instrument of pressure against Britain to impose comprehensive and mandatory sanctions against South Africa (Akinyemi, 1989, 23). The African leaders were aware of the support that the apartheid regime in South Africa was receiving from Britain and they knew that if Britain could apply mandatory and comprehensive sanctions against South Africa, the regime would be more inclined to consider the world's opinion on its racist and apartheid system. According to Barkindo (1994), there are historical, political and economic reasons behind Britain's support for the regime in South Africa almost throughout its existence. Britain was South Africa's principal supporter, having been until 1931 South Africa's colonial master and people of Britain descent formed a substantial part of the minority White settlers community in South Africa. Britain has been a major trade partner of South Africa and it also had huge investments in that country. British investments in South Africa include the mining industry, such as the consolidated Goldfield, Langhill Steel Company and, Uranium and Bauxite Miners and Company. This was one of the reasons why Britain always objected to any sanction against South Africa. For instance, on August 7, 1968, the Security Council met and urged all states to immediately stop the sales and shipment of all types of military equipment to South Africa. Britain and France abstained from voting (Akinyemi, 1989).

The boycott of the 13<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh was not the first time Nigeria would use the Commonwealth Forum to pursue its foreign policy objectives Nigeria had earlier used the forum to seek the expulsion of South Africa from the Commonwealth of Nations in 1961 during the Balewa administration (Akinyemi, 1989, 175). However, the boycott received wide publicity from the global media just like the African Olympics boycott of 1976 and this was partly because Commonwealth Games is the world's second-largest sporting meets after the Olympic Games.

On the positive side, it should be noted that the 1986 boycott was one of the last straws that broke the back of apartheid on the African continent, as the White minority, apartheid rule gave way eight years later. A new wind of change began to blow in South Africa that led to the exit of Botha and ushered in De Klerk as the leader of the National Party, who adopted a reconciliatory approach. In October 1989, eight of the most prominent political prisoners in South Africa were released including Nelson Mandela. He later opened negotiations with Mandela and other black nationalists on the shape that the next government in South Africa



would take. Apartheid was formally laid to rest in 1994 when Nelson Mandela won South Africa's first multi-racial general election.

While one can say that the boycott of the 1986 Commonwealth Games was not solely responsible for the pressure on Britain to back down in continuing to support the apartheid regime in South Africa, the boycott option greatly helped to focus the global attention on the apartheid in South Africa. Perhaps, the only negative effect of this boycott was in the realm of sport development in Africa. Due to this boycott, many of the athletes who won gold medals at the preceding games were not able to defend their titles at the Edinburgh games. And the sporting careers of some of them had already eclipsed before the next games. But outside the above apparent negative effect, which was quite insignificant in comparison to the reason behind the boycott, one can say that the boycott was well-directed and it achieved its desired aim.

### **3. African Cup of Nations, South African 1996 Boycott**

By far, the South Africa '96 African Cup of Nations boycott by Nigeria was the least supported boycott, domestically and internationally. The two previous boycotts of 1976 and 1986 which were staged to fight against racism and apartheid in South Africa were popular and received wide support from Nigerians, Africans and many other freedom-loving people across the globe. Also, unlike the previous boycotts, the 1996 African Cup of Nations boycott involved only Nigeria and the host South Africa. The 1976 Olympic boycotts were staged by the then twenty-two independent African countries and the 1986 boycott of the Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh was staged by all the Anglophone African countries. Nigerian Head of State, Sanni Abacha single-handedly ordered the Super Eagles of Nigeria out of that tournament in South Africa due to his face-off with President Nelson Mandela on the issue of 'Ogoni 9' hanging.

Following the annulment of the June 12, 1993, presidential election by General Ibrahim Babangida, Nigeria was thrown into chaos as demonstrations, riots, and lootings became the order of the day in Nigeria. Babangida later resigned under pressure and handed over power to an Interim Government led by Ernest Shonekan, who in turn ceded power to General Sani Abacha in a Palace coup. General Sani Abacha was regarded by many as the one that has the worst humanitarian record of all Nigeria administrations from independence till date. Many of his critics and opponents, including political activists, journalists and Labour leaders were arrested and imprisoned. However, the regime incurred unprecedented international and domestic opprobrium when it executed nine people including Ken Saro Wiwa, a champion of the Ogoni people of the Niger Delta, where oil production has turned into a misery for them. This killing was the root cause of the 1996 African Cup of Nations boycotts and it was this action that ostracized Nigeria from the Commonwealth of Nations's activities including Commonwealth Games.

On November 10, 1995, the Biennial Summit of Commonwealth was held in Auckland, Australia and simultaneously, the Abacha-led Provisional Ruling Council's meeting was being held in Abuja, Nigeria. In that meeting, Abacha's regime-led military junta ratified the death sentence passed on the "Ogonis 9" and the judgment was executed almost immediately after it was approved. The "Ogonis 9", including Ken Saro-Wiwa, a champion of the Ogoni people of the Niger Delta where oil production has resulted in severe environmental degradation were alleged to have caused the death of four Ogoni Chiefs who were political opponents (Skier, 1996, 266). In defiance of appeals for clemency from many Governments across the world, the



Abacha regime executed these prisoners on November 10 about the same time that commonwealth leaders were assembling in Auckland New Zealand for the biennial summit of the commonwealth. After the execution, Commonwealth leaders, with only one dissenting vote (that of the military government of the Gambia) decided to suspend Nigeria from the origination for two years “pending its return to compliance with the principle of the Harare declaration of 1991 in which all numbers states pledges to foster democracy, human right and judicial independence” (Skier, 1996, p. 266). This punitive response was promoted strongly by the Presidents of South Africa and Zimbabwe and Britain's Prime Minister.

After the ‘Ogoni Nine’ execution, the European Union (EU) and the United States who had earlier imposed several sanctions on Nigeria due to the annulment of the June 12 1993 Presidential election also reviewed the sanctions and the sanctions were further extended to cover sporting and cultural links. The European Union did not allow the Nigerian Senior Football team, the Super Eagles of Nigeria to use any European states as training sites towards the 1996 Africa Cup of Nations tournament. However, some African countries like Kenya offered their country to Nigeria to be used as a training site. President Nelson Mandela’s role in the sanction imposed on Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized. Before the execution of “Ogoni 9”, President Mandela had sought to influence General Abacha and his associates by means of quiet diplomacy”(Skier, 1996, 272). He also tried without success to persuade Abacha to attend the Commonwealth Summit and was appalled by the undue haste and blatant disregard for Africa.

It was therefore not a surprise that it was Mandela that took the lead in urging the Western powers, particularly Britain, France and the United States to impose oil sanctions against Nigeria to hasten the end of military rule. However, Mandela had to back away from his hard-line posture reluctantly, due to the inaction on the part of the Western Powers and the Nigeria West African neighbors’ who were strongly opposed to sanctions that would harm the entire region (Skier, 1996, 272).

But Mandela in his capacity did everything to show his resentment for the regime of Sanni Abacha: He called home South Africa’s Ambassador to Nigeria and severed links with Nigeria in all areas including sports and culture. In November 1995 ‘Miss Nigeria’ was not allowed to participate in the “Miss World “contests that was hosted by South Africa. Also, before the November 10 hanging of “Ogoni 9”, the South African Football Association (SAFA) had invited the Super-Eagles of Nigeria to A Four –Nation Tournament, in preparation for the African Cup of Nations that was slated for South Africa in January 1996 and also to test run some of the facilities that it had put in place for the said tournament. But after the November 10 hanging of “Ogoni 9”, the South Africa Football Authority decided to withdraw the invitation it earlier extended to Nigeria on political grounds in defiance to the stands of the Federation of International Football Association (FIFA) on the issue of mixing sports with politics. The football authority in Nigeria protested to FIFA, but the South Africa Football Association (SAFA) President Solomon Murewa succeeded in persuading the FIFA Lords to limit to a mere “warning” South Africa’s punishment for admittedly discriminating against Nigeria on political grounds (Complete Football, 1996, p. 1).

A few days before the commencement of the 1996 African Cup of Nations in South Africa, Sanni Abacha decided that the Super Eagles of Nigeria, who were the defending champions, having won the last edition in Tunisia in 1994, would not defend their title in South Africa. He decided to reciprocate the politically motivated cancellation of the invitation extended to the



Eagles before the "Ogoni 9" hanging of November 10, 1993. He single-handedly ordered the Nigerian team out of South Africa's tournament, citing security risk or rather lack of it in South Africa. But, according to the ace sports analyst Mumini Alao, Nigeria boycotted South Africa '96" partly in retaliation for South Africa's unjust cancellation of the Super Eagles' invitation to the Four Nation Tournament in November 1995, following the killing of the "Ogoni 9" (Complete Football, 1996). Despite intense pressure from the players and lobbying by the sports officials in Nigeria, Abacha refused to rescind the decision. The Confederation of Africa Football (CAF), the umbrella body of football associations in Africa, also threatened Nigeria with sanctions. The minimum sanctions for such an offense were: forfeiture of the registration fee, suspension from the next two competitions, and a fine of \$15,000 minimum and \$30,000 maximum (Complete Football, 1996, 15). When Abacha refused to yield, CAF invited Guinea to replace Nigeria, but due to his ECOWAS solidarity, the country turned down the offer, claiming the time was too short to prepare a team, despite the willingness of Guinean football players to participate. At that time Abacha's influence in ECOWAS was very influential. He was made the chairman of the 16-member Economic Community of West Africa states at the organization's Abuja summit. According to Sker (1996, p. 273), "several presidents with democratic credentials were among the Heads of States in attendance yet no objection was voiced to the installation of a military ruler as the chairman of the organization".

Aware that other countries might tow Guinea's line due to political alliance, the Confederation of African Football (CAF) decided to leave the Nigerian space open and the tournament had to get underway with one team less. And for the first time in the history of the African Cup of Nations, the defending champions were not on the ground to defend the trophy they won two years earlier. Expectedly, the tournament was given a complete blackout by state-owned televisions and radio stations in Nigeria, as millions of soccer-loving Nigerians were denied the opportunity to watch the 20<sup>th</sup> edition of the Africa Cup of Nations live on Television.

The boycott of South Africa in 1996 by Nigeria generated more negative effects than positive ones in the international arena, as well as in the sporting world. The boycott of South Africa '96, further ostracized Nigeria from the international community, as Nigeria also became an outcast in African football – following the CAF's sanctions. On the political angle, the boycott, which was a result of the face-off between President Mandela and General Sani Abacha due to the hanging of the "Ogoni 9", was the highlight of the worst period of diplomatic relations between South Africa and Nigeria. One could recall the role that Nigerian Governments played, right from Nigeria's independence, in the eradication of apartheid in South Africa. Nigeria had also at one time or the other given financial and material support to Liberation movements in South Africa. It gave scholarships to South African students and chaired the United Nations Committee on apartheid for many years. Several summits and conferences were held in Nigeria to discuss the way out for Black freedom in South Africa.

On the sporting ground, the effect of South Africa's '96 boycott on Nigeria football cannot be quantified. It should be recalled that before the African Cup of Nations in 1996, Nigeria failed to attend. Nigeria was a force to be reckoned with not only in Africa but also in the world. Two years earlier, in 1994, Nigeria won the African Cup of Nations in Tunisia and performed well in that year's World Cup in the United States of America, defeating highly rated teams like Bulgaria and Greece convincingly and nearly recorded an upset against Italy in the second round of the said competition. In that same year, Nigeria was ranked as the fifth-best footballing nation in the world by FIFA. As Nigeria was climbing higher and higher into football greatness, many football analysts began to see Nigeria as the first African country that would win the



FIFA Senior World Cup. But the decision of Nigeria not to defend the trophy it won in Tunisia in 1994 at South Africa in 1996 and the subsequent suspension by CAF for the next two editions, spelled doom for the development of football in Nigeria, the boycott ignited the eclipse of Nigeria football prowess and reversed the gain of the previous years. From the economic angle, Nigeria's participation at South Africa's '96 Africa Cup of Nations could have generated more income for some of Nigeria's players, as their market value would have increased at the end of the tournament. And those of them who were not yet popular might have been discovered in such a competition. One would recall that at the end of the 2002 African Cup of Nations, Shakhtar Donetsk of Ukraine the club of Nigeria Julius Aghaowa, splashed a staggering £10 million on the talented Nigerian player (Complete Football, 2002).

## CONCLUSION

Beyond the cases mentioned above, successive Nigerian administrations have continued to use sport as an instrument of foreign policy in their dealings with other nations. For instance, in 2002, during Queen Elizabeth's 50th anniversary on the throne, Nigeria sent its female football team, the Super Falcons to play against the England female team to commemorate the occasion. In the global arena, the world superpowers have perfected the use of sport as an instrument of foreign policy. For instance, the West influenced the decision of FIFA and UEFA to sanction Russia from participating in the World Cup 2022 in Qatar and the European Cup in England after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Sport as an instrument of foreign policy has come to stay and the foreign policy experts should see sport, the same way they see other instruments of foreign policy.

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