Nigeria’s Big Brother Role in the Gambian Political Crisis (2016-2017)

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The Nigerian nation, whose foreign policy is principally tailored to reflect her commitment to the well-being of all countries in the continent, mainly in the areas of peaceful coexistence, avoidance of violent conflicts - at intra-national and international levels - rebuilding of peace where necessary; and peace keeping of all over the world.

Nigeria pioneered ECOWAS to manage and “restore democracy” in The Gambia by using the threat of force, but without any use of direct physical violence. Following the disputed December 2016 presidential elections in the country, Both the African Union and the United Nations Security Council backed ECOWAS, which also gave ECOWAS legitimacy, for what was basically ECOWAS’s strategy, and indeed an African solution to African problems. Nigeria made a credible pledge to the regional interference. While the interference was a victory for pro-democratic activist regionalism, the specific West African situations make a diffusion of the model to other parts of Africa.

In this paper, we shall analysis respectively, the General Overview, The Gambian Geography and Jammeh’s Personality, ECOWAS Intervention, Nigeria’s Big Brother Role, Nigeria’s Intervention in The Gambia.

Keywords: Intervention, ECOWAS, Gambia, Nigeria, Crisis

INTRODUCTION

At midnight, 19 January 2017, the term of office of the sitting President Yahya Jammeh ended according to the Gambian constitution. At the same time, the ultimatum to transfer power to the president-elect, Adama Barrow, as set by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) elapsed without success. As a result, ECOWAS troops under the lead of Nigeria and Senegal, which were already massed at the border, intervened in The Gambia. This so-called ‘Operation Restore Democracy’ was suspended to enable final diplomatic negotiations, only hours after Barrow was inaugurated in the Gambian Embassy in
Senegal and the Security Council had issued Resolution 2337 (2017). The negotiations were successful— and led to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Jammeh relinquished power and left the country. The case of The Gambia is interesting with respect to international law as well as international relations. We highlight a subtle interaction that was apparent in the case, between a resolution of the United Nations and the classic doctrine of ‘intervention by invitation’, inspired by considerations of democratic legitimacy (Kreß & Nußberger, 2017).

The events in Gambia leaves one with a conclusion, that absolute power doesn’t just corrupt but the fear to lose power corrupt absolutely (Lord Acton, 1887). Leadership in the African perspective takes a dynamic turn because of the influence of power or authority. African leaders upon assumption of office, exults themselves to godly status by expending the state’s assets to satisfy their bidding to the detriment of the very nations survival which in the researcher’s opinion should be considered the bane of democracy in Africa. As a result, such values as Life, Liberty, Common Good, Justice, Equality, and Diversity are unattainable (Malema, 2017).

Over the past twenty-five years, Nigeria has emerged from a relatively obscured position under colonial domination to a major power in international affairs. This position as well as the commitment underpinning it, has been expressed more forcefully in the defense of Africa, which in cooperation with other countries within the continent and in the Diaspora, has helped in keeping alive the pan-African ideal (Healey & Robinson, 1994). The bid by President Muhammadu Buhari and other West African leaders to settle the political impasse in The Gambia by persuading President, Yahya Jammeh of the Gambia to hand over power to a newly elected government has once again underscored the critical role being played by Nigeria for the peace and stability of not only the West African region but the entire continent (Leadership Newspaper, January 2017).

The effort being made by the Nigerian President to restore peace in the crisis-ridden areas in Africa is undoubtedly paying off for Nigeria as a country. It is gradually restoring confidence in foreign investors to invest in Nigeria. Coupled with the defeat of the Boko Haram insurgents are suffering in Nigeria, is sending a strong message to the international community that Nigeria is stable politically, socially and economically (Leadership Newspaper, January, 2017), though Senegal has the military lead, Nigeria has been playing its traditional role as the hegemony of West Africa and the mainspring of ECOWAS. On January 18, Nigeria announced that it had sent aircraft and personnel to Senegal to bolster any military effort. Nigeria is also sending a warship off the coast, both as a show of force and also to evacuate Nigerian citizens, if necessary (Campbell, 2017). The Nigerian government also authorized generals to mobilize an 800-strong battalion to spearhead the mission and on Wednesday confirmed that a warship was heading toward Gambia for "training" as regional countries prepared to intervene (Campbell, 2017).
THE GAMBIAN GEOGRAPHY AND JAMMEH’S PERSONALITY

The Gambia is a small country with the borders based on the Gambia River. The country is less than 48 km wide at its greatest width. She is situated on the Atlantic coast in the westernmost part of Africa and surrounded on three sides by Senegal. It is the smallest country on the continent. Its population of 1.8 million lives within a narrow belt extending from either side of The River Gambia. The principal ethnic groups are the Wollofs and the Mandinkas the former living mainly in the capital city of Banjul, while the latter constitute the single largest tribal unit of The Gambia. The population is predominantly Muslim with more than 90% following Islam. The remaining 10% are mostly Christians of different denominations including Angolicans, Methodists, and Roman Catholics. Most of the people are strict in their Religious practices and the devout Muslims can be seen praying not only in Mosques but also in other public places at all prayer times of the day (Omotosho & Senghore, 2018).

President Yahya Jammeh took hold of power in Gambia in 1994 through a bloodless military coup. He was elected (though not fairly) as President in 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2011. He founded his political party the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and construction. He ruled as a dictator and was feared throughout the land. Coup attempts however took place in 2006 and 2014. It was reported that on the morning of December 30, 2014, an attempt was made to oust President Jammeh. Nine men attacked the presidential palace in Banjul. The coup attempt was led by Lieutenant-Colonel LaminSanneh. Sanneh once led the country's State Guard, but had been dismissed and fled Gambia. He however lost to Adama Barrow in the 2016 presidential election. He in initially conceded defeat on the 9th day of December 2016 but later refused to recognise the result. That was the genesis of the political crises in Gambia (Akwei, 2017).

Significantly, Jammeh during his 22 year reign lost friendly contact with almost all his counterparts in other countries. He considered himself a god of some kind and always wanted to be worshipped. Jammeh claimed to have had the cure for certain deadly diseases and declared the state Islamic. It became clear however, during this onslaught that Senegal, her closest neighbours were unhappy with Jammehs style of leadership. On 21 January however, after much pressure from almost all corners of the world especially ECOWAS leaders and an additional time to relieve his mandate, Jammeh announced he would step down. Later on that same day, Jammeh went to exile, first going to Guinea and then onward to Equatorial Guinea (Adegoke, 2017).

ECOWAS INTERVENTION IN THE GAMBIA

Over the years, the international institutions in Africa have been accused of it passive and almost absent role in the events and crisis rocking the continent. The present strife in Libya, Sudan and Central Africa are clear indicators to this fact. The response to the crises in The Gambia however has shocked many political analysts because of ECOWAS affirmative role in the country. For the
first time, diplomacy strengthened democracy in Africa. The question left unanswered. Is ECOWAS now a stronger body to have restored peace in The Gambia or are their other motives or personal goals to the firm response just witnessed in The Gambia? (Tomchak, 2017).

ECOWAS has achieved significantly in the area of safeguarding peace and stability in the region especially by preventing and resolving conflicts in the region (Eze, 2017). Typical examples are the cases of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Mali and the Gambia (Kabia, 2009). ECOWAS has also achieved some infrastructure developments within the sub-region. In the last two decades, road transport sector enjoyed major growth (Babani & Can, 2019).

ECOWAS decided to intervene militarily in The Gambia and set 19 January 2017 as the date troops would move into the Gambia if Jammeh continued to refuse to step down. The operation was codenamed "Operation Restore Democracy". The ECOWAS intervention force comprised of the Senegalese, Ghanaian, Malian, Togolese and Nigerian forces. Nigeria provided aircraft and naval assets. ECOWAS used the media to display how ready they were to promote democracy in Gambia. The president of ECOWAS Marcel Alain de Souza was quoted to have said, "By land, sea and air, Gambia is surrounded. A total of 7,000 men will participate in the mission to re-establish democracy in Gambia." And in contrast, the entire armed forces of the Gambia numbered only about 2,500 troops (Petesch, 2017).

On the 19th day of January 2017, Adama Barrow, who had been staying in Senegal due to fear for his safety in the Gambia, was sworn in as President in the Gambian embassy in Dakar, Senegal. Just after Barrow was sworn in, The Gambia was placed under a naval blockade. In the early hours of the offensive, clashes took place near the border village of Kanilai, the home town of Yahya Jammeh, between Senegalese and pro-Jammeh MFDC forces, and Senegal reportedly took control of the village. Senegal halted its offensive in order to provide a final chance to mediate the crisis, with the invasion planned to proceed at noon on 20 January if Jammeh still refused to relinquish power. Jammeh, however, refused to step down even after the deadline passed. The deadline was extended to 16:00 GMT which too he missed. Mauritania's President Mohamed Abdul Aziz, President of Guinea Alpha Condé and United Nations' regional chief Mohammed Ibn Chambas tried to persuade him to step down. After setting up new agreement Jammeh decided to step down and hand over power to Barrow who won the election in December. Senegalese troops however remained in Gambia until the elected president’s return (BBC, 2017).

NIGERIA’S BIG BROTHER ROLE IN AFRICA

If there were doubts as to Nigeria’s commitment to democracy and democratic values, the success of the 2015 election would have certainly created certainty. Depending not on strong institutions but firm personalities, she was able to display to the sub region her determination in
the pursuit of democracy. Consequently, there is no gain denying that a country’s capabilities inform its role in international politics because its ability to achieve its foreign objectives flows from how it assembles its various capabilities (Kelechukwu, 2018). Since independence, the Nigerian foreign policy has been characterised by a focus on Africa as a regional power and by attachment to several fundamental principles such as, African unity and independence; capability to exercise hegemonic influence in the region; peaceful settlement of disputes both internal and external and regional economic cooperation and development (King, 1996). To this effect, Nigeria blessed with both natural and human resources, has carried out the boldest and most celebrated diplomatic initiatives in Africa and has since been applauded for its big brother role in all parts of Africa.

The establishment of ECOWAS in 1975 and subsequently ECOMOG proves this point without a fault. Nigeria has been actively playing predominant and exceptional roles by assisting countries within the sub-region in various regards and thus assumed a “Big brother” status in the African continent. The composition of the ECOMOG peace keeping force, its funding and timing revealed Nigeria’s determination to play a crucial role in a crisis within its sphere of diplomatic concentration. The Liberian peace process was a Nigerian initiative through ECOWAS (Babani & Can, 2019). It emerged as result of Nigeria’s diplomatic zeal vis-à-vis- her conception of leadership role which she had continued to play, both in terms of military and financial assistance put in place for the realization of the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group objectives. Asides Liberia, Nigeria impact has been felt in many African countries such as Sao Tome and Principe, Serial lone, Chad just to mention but a few. In the pursuit of this, Nigeria resolved to promote democracy and therefore cannot afford to be a spectator when events affecting national security are taking place in the sub-region considering her influential status in the sub-region (Dennis, 2017).

NIGERIAN INTERVENTION IN THE GAMBIA

After Nigeria got her political independence from the British colonial rulers in 1960, notable about her diplomatic attitude has been Afro centric, especially in the areas of decolonialization, enthronement of democracy and peace (Issa & David, 2012).

This philosophy is consequential from the fact of an African saying, which says that when tears fall from the eyes, the nose responds by sneezing. Literally speaking, apart from the philosophy of the “brother’s keeper” which Nigeria has created for herself, it should also be noted that when any of her neighboring countries, especially in the West African sub-region, has crisis, the Nigerian economy and political landscape are equally affected. Instances of this can be found in the era of Ghana’s economic down-turn in 1980’s and within 10 years, the civil conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone; which resulted in the influx of a large number of refugees into Nigeria. These, therefore, induced Nigeria’s foreign policy formulators to see the need, not only to be
steadfastly involved in policies aimed at maintaining peace and tranquility on the African continent in general, but in the West African sub-region in particular (Nweke, 2010). Every watching eye would immediately notice that Nigeria is taking a lead with the resolution of the political impasse generated by the refusal of the Gambian long time ruler, Yahya Jammeh, to respect the result of that country’s presidential election in which he allegedly lost to his opponent, Mr Adama Barrow in December of 2016.

Many believe that Nigeria has already showed exemplary leadership roles with her various onslaughts in different African countries (Folarin, 2013) and just recently her example of accepting defeat after a presidential election all in an attempt to sustain democracy which many assume to be a reason for Ghana following suit by accepting defeat after a presidential election. The Nigerian army therefore raised an army battalion that would be deployed in troubled Gambia to forcefully remove President Yahya Jammeh from power if he fails to step down on January 19, 2017 at the end of his mandate. The battalion, was tagged ECOMOG NIBATT 1, was drawn from the Army’s 19th Battalion based in Okitipupa, Ondo state and other Personnel were also drawn from other formations and units across the country due to shortage of men at 19 Battalion which has a significant chunk of its troops deployed for internal security task force, Operation Delta Safe. It was reported that the Army Headquarters instructed the nominated officers and men, about 800, to immediately report at the Nigerian Army School of Infantry, Jaji, for a crashed course on counter terrorism and counter insurgency. It also said that the Army directorates of policy and plans; finance; and logistics to ready funds, arms, ammunition and other logistics for the operation as well as the Armoured Corps that was already working hard, in addition to armoured vehicles needed for the task. The Nigerian Air Force and the Navy were not left out as men were deployed for the operation as well (Abiodun, et al, 2019).

Top military officers said the Nigerian Battalion would be deployed in The Gambia any time after January 19 if President Jammeh makes real his threat not to step down after the expiration of his tenure. Such comments were made as they marched to take over The Gambia state from Jammeh’s hands:

“This is an emergency operation, but we are ready,” one officer said. “The Nigerian Army is a strong, professional fighting force battle ready at any time. We are so well structured that we can deploy at the touch of a button”.

“We did it in Liberian, Sierra Leone and elsewhere. And Jammeh should know that we are not a joking force. Once we get the all clear from ECOWAS, the AU and the UN to move in, we can pick him up.”(Lawal, 2017)

CONCLUSION
The continent (Africa), in any case, the struggle has not ceased for promoting democratic ideals which not long ago entered the texts underlying the regional security setting. If it is not against by too powerful interests, the democratic push originating in African states can be taken up by the ECOWAS as a guiding framework. However, the case of The Gambia does not lay the basis for the general acceptability of pro-democratic involvement. Due to the unclear boundaries of the concept of democracy, the diversity of existing state constitutions and the resulting risks of pro-democratic interventions, the current state of international law is to be welcomed. The Gambia case confirms the current reluctance of the ECOWAS to consider an internal threat to democracy on its own to be sufficient to constitute a threat to regional peace and to activate the collective security system. Where such restraint retains the upper hand, the legal justification of intervention by invitation comes to the fore. In its classical form, such a use of force is anything but democratically inspired.

Nigeria inconsistent domestic setting has battered the country’s pursuit for prestige and honor. In as much as Nigeria achieves poorly in the socioeconomic index, and the country continues to have unresolved governance problems, it follows that the quest for continental leadership in Africa will remain a precious dream. Nigeria’s leadership role quest from this context is to say the least, the race of the crippled. Consequently, what Nigeria should do is this: while pursuing peace and reconciliation in Banjul, it should as well take care of issues at home. Nigeria can expend equivalent energy it has invested with resolving the Gambian mess with revamping the North-East, build alternative energy sources, build capacity and create employment. If it can create employment for her people, and rebuild our economy, stop mismanagement that will be a clear signal that Nigeria means what she says and says what she means with an issue like The Gambia imbroglio may occur anywhere on the continent.

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