

The Action Group, Ideology and Nigeria's Foreign Policy 1951-1966: A Re-assessment

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Abstract: The study examines the impact of the colonial economic realities on the emerging Nigerian middle class, Chief Obafemi Awolowo's nationalist ambition to empower them within these realities, his struggle to articulate his perception of the way to move the nation forward in ideological postulations as reflected in the Action Group's foreign policy perspectives. Motivated by political and electoral exigencies, the party's foreign policy platforms suffered from contradictions and inconsistency, opening the party to charges of political opportunism. The party's electoral debacle in the 1959 federal elections and its impatience with the Balewa administration's conservative outlook led to further radicalism by the AG. Using Chief Awolowo's own definition of socialism, albeit incongruous, as opposed to the classical definition, the study takes the position, contrary to Gordon Idang's claim, that there are enough salient determinants of AG's foreign policy within the political and economic structure of the pre- and post-colonial Nigerian state to explain the twists and turns of the party's foreign policy perspectives than dwelling on Chief Awolowo's childhood 'deprivations'.

Key words: Action Group, colonial economy and party's foreign policy, ideology, Nigeria's foreign policy, party structure

INTRODUCTION

It is important that we set out the framework for our enquiry so as to give it coherence and direction. Our purpose is to examine the foreign policy perspectives of the Action Group party (AG) from its inception in 1951 to its proscription following the first military coup that rocked the young republic in January 1966. In the process, we shall, of necessity, examine the colonial and postcolonial socio-political environment in which it operated, the nature and role of the emerging state, the colonial transnational economic institutions, the party's leadership and the emerging middle class, the ideological underpinnings of the party's foreign policy perspectives, its inconsistent and contradictory policy postures which opened it to charges of political expediency. When this is done, the thrust of the analysis will underscore the central point of this essay that there are enough cogent determinants of AG's foreign policy than its leader's childhood "deprivations." Thus, the aim of the study is to reassess Action Group political party's foreign policy between 1951 and 1966, and to show how it has discerned the traits of the practice of diplomacy in Nigeria today. It is evident that Awolowo was conscious of the ethnic differences and its impact on Nigeria's formulation and

implementation of policies. This, the present study is out to re-emphasise due to the disorientation of policy makers from considering the ethnic value and the inherent danger in the practice of international politics.

DISCUSSION

In Nigeria, as in other countries of the world, there is an inseparable link between the domestic politics and foreign policy. Indeed, it could well be said that the foreign policy of a country is an extension of that country's domestic policy, an external projection of its hopes, views, aspirations and values - economic, political and cultural. Holsti defines it as "the actions of a state toward external environment and the conditions - usually domestic - under which those actions are formulated" (Holsti, 1983). This is also Chief Obafemi Awolowo's view of foreign policy which he defines as "the projection abroad, outside the boundaries of the country, or the projection and demonstration and exhibition abroad of the ideas and aspirations for which that country stands" (Awolowo, 1953, 1968). From the inception of the Action Group to its disbandment following the coup of 1966 and military take-over of government, leading members of the party, particularly Chief Obafemi Awolowo, its leader,

were concerned about the issues that informed the party's foreign policy perspectives. The colonial economic situation, especially with respect to the economic structure and its impact on the Nigerians, troubled them and challenged their sense of justice; they were determined to put an end to the evil of economic exploitation if voted into power. This led them to hanker after independence which they hoped would not only free Nigerians from colonial exploitation and injustices but also accord them the human dignity and respect that colonialism denied them.

Politically, all was not well; the domestic political environment was disunited. Nigeria being a plural society, could not speak with one voice. In a situation of socio-cultural pluralism in which there exist divergent views and voices, there is bound to be conflicts of opinion in both domestic and foreign affairs. It was in recognition of this source of conflict that a federal structure with three Regions was put in place in 1954. Even that did not obliterate all the challenges of ethnic particularity, regional competition and rivalry; it further added the minority fears as another factor in the plurality of aspirations. The Action Group believed that a federal constitution was the only political arrangement that could promote the unity of the country. As the party leaders viewed it, the advantages of a united heterogeneous state with the various ethnic nationalities co-existing peacefully with one another within a federation, were more than those of a balkanized Nigeria in a fiercely competitive international system. Nigeria emerged as a sovereign nation in October 1960 after half a century of British over-rule. The Cold War which had polarized the world into capitalist and communist ideological blocs was raging. Non-Alignment had defined the foreign policies of most of the newly emerging Third World countries. Their economies were essentially based on exportation of raw materials to feed the industries of Europe and the United States, and consequently their external relations were still dominated by an understandable predisposition towards the same centres.

By 1951 when he and others founded the Action Group, Chief Awolowo had gained a lot of political experience from active roles in several causes: as a nationalist and mobiliser of anti-colonial sentiments as a member of the Nigerian Youth Movement in the 1930s; as a founding father of the *Egbe Omo Oduduwa* in Nigeria in 1948; as a businessman, transporter, journalist, money-lender and cocoa buyer, and as one who had personally experienced a harsh economic reversal caused by the slump in cocoa trade in 1938 - all these in the colonial environment of the pre-and post-Second World War. The exploitative colonial economy which advanced the interests of the foreign entrepreneurs at the glaring expense of the indigenous traders and businessmen, the marginalization of Nigerian workers, and the

constitutional advances in the era of decolonization, created challenges and opportunities for the growing cadre of nationalists and Nigerian educated elite on whom would devolve the leadership of the country in the decade before independence and after.

The point has to be specially emphasized that Chief Awolowo was the centre around which the party and the leadership hierarchy revolved because of the high degree of concentration of authority and control. As one keen observer maintains, Awolowo "had tremendous influence on the party organizational structure, its programmes, strategies, and its electoral and other performance" (Ikelegbe, 1988). This fact was also recognized by an earlier commentator who observed that it was virtually impossible to determine the real author of the policy position papers of the Action Group in that even though the party adopted democratic procedures in its deliberations, the person of the leader remained dominant. Although he saw himself at every meeting as the first among equals, he was rightly considered as the "master builder of the Action Group". Consequently, all documents emanating from the party "especially key submissions" were Chief Awolowo's (Adebayo, 1988). Another scholar also observes that in both the Action Group and its successor, the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), "Chief Awolowo was the main personality and builder" (Ikelegbe, 1988). It is also important to realize that because of regional and ethnic interests which dominated foreign policy considerations in the Nigerian parliament, it was difficult to fashion a national outlook. Consequently, "regional headquarters (and) party caucuses" played decisive roles (Idang, 1973).

It is now clear to us that Chief Awolowo's personality and views remained dominant factors in the formulation of the policies of the Action Group. Indeed, his position often prevailed in most cases. Part of his charisma was the fact that he was known to be a diligent, painstaking, meticulous and highly disciplined and intelligent politician, an intellectual and leader of men, who would leave no stone unturned to master any issue at hand. In this, he was shoulder higher than many of his colleagues and contemporaries. A democrat to be sure, rarely was his leadership questioned. What this meant was that it was difficult to clinically separate his point of view from the official party position on any issue. This then is the perspective taken in this study: Chief Awolowo spoke for his party, the Action Group.

The colonial economy and administration in Nigeria allowed the foreign commercial houses to play the role of an imperial vanguard as their representatives engaged in territorial acquisitions through the signing of treaties with local leaders, thus extending colonial frontiers. In turn the colonial authorities protected the exploitative interests of the commercial houses at the expense of the indigenous traders. The imposition of a regime of taxes by the

colonial administration provoked loud protests which were met with decisive police action. Through experience and wide reading in world politics, Chief Awolowo had come to the conclusion that the colonial administrative structure which divided Nigeria into two provinces (Northern and Southern), and then by 1939, three, with the South split into Eastern and Western provinces, was unrealistic in that it failed to recognize the vast cultural diversity of the country. He therefore proposed a further division into ten regions based principally on ethnic considerations. As pointed out earlier, he believed that considering the heterogeneity of the ethnic make-up of Nigeria, only a federal system would address its political and constitutional needs (Awolowo, 1947). The amalgamation of 1914 had only amalgamated the administrations of North and South for economic advantages of the British overlords, and not the peoples of the two provinces. Indeed, until 1947, the two provinces were administered separately and interaction was not promoted between them. This element of colonial divide-and-rule policy which divided only the South into East and West in 1939 leaving the North a massive landmass, irked many concerned leaders in the South. Chief Awolowo saw and experienced it all as a member of the growing educated elite and as a businessman and transporter. He saw and experienced the exclusion of and discrimination against the educated elite in the economic and political administration of the country and in the professions by the colonial agents. Again, he and his fellow nationalists observed with quiet displeasure the encouragement and erection of British commercial monopolies. The colonial state also embarked on the empowerment of the traditional rulers and their incorporation into the colonial administration and Native Authorities at the glaring exclusion of the educated *elites*. The reaction of this class was virtually predictable: this affront incited them against the colonial administration and the seed of resentment caused the intensification of nationalist agitation against the colonial state. The role of the police as the repressive and oppressive arm of colonial administration only went to exacerbate the feeling of resentment which erupted into occasional protests and even riots. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that one needs not be a genius to appreciate the elementary lessons of the features of the capitalist economy.

British and European firms such as the UAC, UTC, CFAO, John Holt and PZ dominated the export and import trade in colonial West Africa. Their sharp business practices and the colonial government denied the Nigerian merchants the opportunity to participate in the profitable trade, and reduced the indigenous businessmen to acting as retailers between the producers of agricultural cash crops meant for export and the foreign firms. The discrimination extended to the financial institutions, and even the motor transportation sector. The total impact in

a nutshell is that the colonial economy operated to exploit the human and material resources for the benefit of the colonizing power and its agents. In order to prevent the indigenous businessmen from participation in the thriving trade, the foreign companies formed the Association of West African Merchants (AWAM). It was this cartel that organized in 1937 the "Cocoa Pool", which was used for sustaining the foreigners' monopoly of cocoa buying and export business in Nigeria and Ghana (Ekundare, 1973; Hopkins, 1973). The Nigerian entrepreneurs found themselves frustrated in the face of the intimidating foreign monopolies and could not stop them from dominating the economy.

In response to this unequal economic situation, Chief Awolowo canvassed the crucial importance of Nigerians coming together in a cooperative arrangement which would tremendously enhance their collective competitive power. As early as 1940, Chief Awolowo had begun to develop ideas, perspectives and strategies which would run through his economic and foreign policy positions in later years. In his memorandum submitted to the Nigerian Youth Movement, Ibadan branch, in 1940, for example, he recommended:

- That the Movement establish a Cooperative Thrift and Consumer Society for Nigerian consumers
- That the Union, the Nigerian Motor Transport Union, embrace co-operative principles to strengthen their competitive power vis-à-vis foreign companies
- That the Transport Union, the Produce Traders Association and other interested Unions should affiliate with NYM to constitute a veritable bulwark against competitors
- That the feud between farmers and produce traders should be brought under the aegis of the NYM as the nationalist champion against the foreigners (Awolowo, 1940; Ogunmodede, 1986).

We must also take into consideration British decolonization agenda especially following the introduction of the Richards constitution in 1946. Britain fashioned the decolonization process with an eye on a neo-colonial relationship after granting political self-rule. The nationalist elite went along because they did not want to rock the boat; they did not want the march towards independence to be impeded by any ideological posturing. Chief Awolowo shared this view. The British exploited the opportunity to put in place economic, fiscal, political and diplomatic devices and measures to ensure that neo-colonialism had a firm footing after independence. These measures included competitive regionalism, shipping, petroleum, air transportation, security agreements, and administrative structures. The end result of these neo-colonial orientations was to establish a patron-client relationship even after independence (Osoba, 1972).

Following the attainment of independence, it was considered inadvisable to be outside the British orbit for fear of destabilizing sanctions, more so that Nigeria elected to join the British Commonwealth which prompted acquiescence on the part of the Nigerian leaders; it was a question of the devil you know. Their experience, their political education and their world view had all been molded by their long association with the Western way of life, particularly, the British; they had to grapple with the burden of their history.

For much of his adult life, Chief Awolowo was preoccupied with three broad concerns namely: liberating Nigeria from foreign domination; creating avenues for Nigerians individually and collectively to eat the fruit of their land as it were; and improving the lot of the Nigerian masses (Zachernuk, 1988). In order to appreciate how these were played out in his life, it is necessary to examine the circumstances at every stage, the forces he had to contend with, the leadership he provided along with others, the strategies he adopted to realize his objectives, and finally, the consequences of his heroic efforts.

Chief Awolowo had in his 1940 memorandum to the NYM expressed serious reservations about embracing capitalism as an economic policy for Nigeria at that stage of her development (Awolowo, 1940). His colonial experience had greatly influenced his perception of what might be beneficial to the Nigerian entrepreneurs. For him, capitalism was too anti-socialistic; whereas the cooperative option he recommended would enhance the capability of Nigerians to compete effectively with the foreign firms because it would improve their capital base. This emphasis on cooperation would, years later, translate into socialism. At this stage, ideological purity was secondary; somehow, his socialism welcomed private enterprise, and pooling of resources as a formidable weapon of development. Foreign economic domination was the target of his displeasure and condemnation, even though he appreciated the value of foreign expertise and foreign investors as necessary agents of development (Osoba, 1972; Awolowo, 1970, 1968). The Action Group advocated socialism as a strategy for advancing the cause of education as well as social justice, social well-being and equitable distribution of wealth. Its leader believed that socialism would create the environment where people would have equal chance to make contributions to society according to their talents and ability (Awolowo, 1940; Zachernuk, 1988). He was not rejecting capitalist economics; he only wanted “to direct more wealth into Nigerian hands” (Awolowo, 1940).

As he was worrying about economic opportunities for Nigerians, his other instincts were appropriately tuned to the political dimensions of the colonial economy. Chief Awolowo agreed essentially with the prevailing colonial idea about development and welfare plans; and he insisted

that Nigerians ought to be given the opportunity to have an input into the policies that affected their lives. What he and his generation of nationalists wanted was a piece of the action in the colonial administration and increased opportunities for participation in the colonial economic activities (Awolowo, 1960a; Ekundare, 1973). They wanted state ownership in order to curtail domination by foreign companies, and promotion of private enterprise by Nigerian entrepreneurs. What may look like a contradiction ideologically was their own idea of socialism, a popular ideology meant to advance the economic interests of Nigerians. It meant as Blunt puts it, “nationalization if one was talking of expatriate enterprise, but meant private enterprise if one was referring to Nigerian-owned business” (Blunt, 1977). Thus, nationalism not socialism dominated the discourse among the elite; the latter however became the handmaiden of the former.

In 1945, while studying law in England, Chief Awolowo published his first book, *Path to Nigerian Freedom*, reflecting his views about local government reform. He returned to Nigeria after his legal studies and with others founded the Action Group party in 1951. Chief Awolowo’s socialism can be better appreciated if we bear in mind that it was an extension of his earlier experience as a nationalist committed to advancing the cause of Nigerian entrepreneurs and the professionals who in the main constituted the bulk of the middle class. Furthermore, the leader of the Action Group was first and foremost a politician who, naturally, wanted his party to gain popular acceptance by the electorate so as to achieve electoral victory. He therefore had to address issues that affected the growing middle class and express his endorsement of using the powers of the state to assure their welfare; hence ideas such as social justice, fair wages, equality of opportunity, planned development and nationalization, became essential features of his ideological preference.

Much as private ownership of property and socialism may appear to be ideologically incongruous, Chief Awolowo in the circumstances of a colonial economy, in his striving to empower the enterprising Nigerian entrepreneurs, and appeal to different classes for electoral support, could afford to ignore the ideological ambiguity to get his message across. This then is the justification for his oscillation between capitalism and socialism (Awolowo, 1968); and much later, his espousal of capitalist welfarism. What remained constant was his commitment to the economic interests of the middle classes and the professional groups. Indeed, his definition of democratic socialism reveals his penchant for the right of private enterprise and his concern for the welfare of the people in general. For him, democratic socialism is an economic system, which recognizes, as a matter of fundamental principle, the liberty and dignity of the

individual and the economic well-being and brotherhood among all mankind. It is a system in which a person's self-interest is allowed to operate, under the law, for the common good of all. Under this system, private enterprise exists side by side with public enterprise (Awolowo, 1988, 1977).

One thing must be made clear, and this should be obvious by now, that Chief Awolowo's brand of socialism is different from the orthodox or Marxian socialism or communism. According to him, nationalization would bring basic industrial and commercial enterprises under state control and ultimately incorporate foreign business into public system after fair compensation had been paid (Awolowo, 1977; Omoboriwo, 1982). There is justifiable reason to say that these are strange ideological bedfellows: mixed economy and socialism. "Private enterprise...side by side with public enterprise" (Awolowo, 1988). It may well mean that the author of this amalgam was more of a calculating realist than idealistic ideologue, who chose to use socialism to address the prevailing economic and political circumstances and imperatives of his time.

An ideology according to Drucker is a "systematic doctrine capable of guiding the process of human transformation, and of describing the forms and social action and organization necessary for their achievement" (Drucker, 1977; Armstrong, 1978). Socialism is a positive economic doctrine which stresses public ownership of the means of production and distribution with the aim of eliminating or abolishing private property considered the basis of privilege and exploitation of the working class. Democratic socialism is an ideology which believes in private ownership of the means of production and distribution, and thus sanctions exploitation of the masses of workers. It can therefore not qualify to be called socialism; at best, it is a liberal-reformist capitalism. This was the position adopted at the historic AG party congress in Jos in February 1962. According to the party platform: "a political party of the common people must strongly project and protect the best interests of the first two classes, the wage earner and self-employed of our community and reflect their true aspirations... At the same time, adequate provision must be made to allow certain indigenous elements of the third grouping - employer class to expand their economic activities in a way to contribute to the welfare of the society ... we believe in a planned economy under which the public sector is run by the state and the private sector is open to free enterprise" (Democratic Socialism, 1960).

This emanated from Chief Awolowo's presidential address. The motive appears to be clear: it was to appeal both to the classes of the employer and the employed, the rich and the poor, the exploiter and the exploited, for the purpose of electoral advantage. The fear of losing either of the two critical constituencies informed this ideological

marriage in the form of a middle of the road approach. The party believed that the two classes were reconcilable. There is no point belabouring the question of contradictions in the Action Group's brand of socialism, Chief Awolowo himself admits this much when he said: "Our own concept of socialism is entirely different from Communism and Marxian concept of socialism". He rejected such ingredients of classical socialism as class struggle, violent revolution and dictatorship of the proletariat; he preferred instead the democratic, evolutionary, gradualist and reformist approach (Awolowo, 1960a).

We must now turn to the party's perspectives on foreign policy and see how these domestic economic and social realities and ideological moorings defined their orientation and thrusts. Chief Awolowo's definition of foreign policy is a good starting point. He defined it as "the projection abroad, outside the boundaries of the country concerned, of the ideals and aspirations of that country or the projection and demonstration and exhibition abroad of the ideals and aspirations for which the country stands" (Awolowo, 1960a). His perceptions and prescriptions are clearly articulated in his book, *The People's Republic*. We assume that these ideas represent his mature perception of the complexities of Nigeria's foreign policy (Awolowo, 1968). Chief Awolowo's concentric perception of Nigeria's foreign policy puts the national interests of Nigeria first, then those of Africa, followed by the interest of the world. According to him, Nigeria has "the primary obligation of catering for and promoting the welfare of its peoples to the end that they may live a full and happy life" (Awolowo, 1968). Security of the nation and its citizens is thus of primary importance in the list of the country's aspirations. This can be achieved through diplomacy, constructive propaganda, mutually beneficial commerce, peaceful co-existence with neighbours, and a defensive military capability to repel aggression by its neighbours. Nigeria must subscribe to the principle of respect for the sovereignty and integrity of each state.

In the second place, Chief Awolowo argues that "Nigeria owes an obligation to Africa to help in securing for all the African states political and economic freedom, justice, dignity, and equality of treatment in the comity of nations" (Awolowo, 1968). He noted that Africa suffers from three major disabilities namely, the challenge of being politically independent but economically subservient to neo-colonialists; inhuman degradation as a result of apartheid in South Africa, racial domination in Rhodesia and in the Portuguese colonies; and lastly, lack of dedicated African leadership. For these reasons, Chief Awolowo underscored the desirability of Africa's economic and political unity. While not underestimating or discounting the challenge that racial, cultural and linguistic heterogeneity poses, and Africa's "peculiar

internal stresses and strains, divisions and conflicts, inherent in its political, economic, and cultural evolution”, the AG leader strongly believed that the economic unity of the continent should be pursued vigorously. Indeed, it is the bounding duty of Nigeria “to work for the quick advent of (Africa’s) unity and thereby hasten the attainment of economic freedom and material prosperity for all the peoples of the continent” (Awolowo, 1968). Economic freedom and prosperity thus becomes the condition *sine qua non* for Africa’s salvation, and the fulcrum of Nigeria’s foreign policy.

The third of the foreign policy obligations Nigeria owes according to Chief Awolowo is to the world. It is to promote global peace. This could be achieved through several means. It could be through co-operation, respect for each other’s sovereignty and integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of others; through peaceful settlement of international disputes and instrumentality of socialism as the “only economic and social concept which can eliminate greed and self-interest, and foster mutual love and altruism among all mankind” (Awolowo, 1968). We may summarise Chief Awolowo’s foreign policy perspectives as including: spread of socialism to all parts of the globe; engendering international co-operation; non-interference in domestic affairs of other countries; respect for the independence and sovereignty of all states; peaceful settlement of disputes; non-aggression; promotion of mutually beneficial economic relations; cultural and scientific exchange; observance of United Nations (UN) and Organization of African Unity (OAU); and extermination of apartheid and all forms of colonialism in Africa (Awolowo, 1968).

We must observe that reference to the impact of colonialism is conspicuously absent in Chief Awolowo’s foreign policy perspectives. This is rather strange because his nationalist activities in the colonial period were essentially responses and reactions to British colonial economic structure. It would appear that the promise of political independence and the prospect of electoral victory influenced the Action Group to bury the hatchet and preach the policy of accommodation of the evils of colonialism, at least for a season. A bellicose and critical foreign policy position, it was feared, would not augur well for relations with a powerful and influential colonial master about to lower the Union Jack. The eve of independence was not an appropriate season for radicalism and militancy in foreign policy matters. This explains why Chief Awolowo emphasized for Nigeria a pro-Western foreign policy and a close association with Britain upon gaining independence (Awolowo, 1968, 1960a). His endorsement of closer ties with the West was a result of the perception of the Western countries as being promoters of liberal democracy and respect for fundamental human rights. He was not unaware of the

competing ideological blocs of the capitalist and communist countries. He however opted for the Western democracies which in spite of their record of racial discrimination, maintain an open society and respect for the basic rights of speech; features that were absent in the communist countries (Awolowo, 1960b). He abhorred Nigeria’s policy of non-alignment and neutrality which he regarded as “fraudulent”. He believed that countries, like individuals, must have the courage of their conviction. Nigeria should pitch her tent with the West and abandon all prejudices.

For all intents and purposes, the Action Group did not endorse the moves for a political union of African countries, and could not see anything of value in the attempt to forge a continental economic cooperation, similar to what was obtaining in Europe. Chief Awolowo’s words of caution would seem to be informed by his appreciation of Africa’s immense political, cultural and religious diversity which would make such a move unattainable. Instead, he canvassed the need for closer economic and cultural cooperation among the West African states. Nigeria was also urged to champion the cause of the oppressed peoples everywhere. The admission into the Action Group in 1954 of such Marxist socialists as S.G. Ikoku, O. Agunbiade-Bamishe, Victor Oyenuga, Ayo Ogunseye and Ayo Okusaga helped to increase the national and socialist profile of the party (Sklar, 1963). But this was not enough to gain electoral victory in the Federal Elections of 1959 which ushered in independence. Although the Action Group worked tirelessly using modern and innovative campaign strategies, the party did not win enough seats to form the government and its leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, therefore became the Leader of the Opposition in the Federal House of Representatives in Lagos.

The electoral failure led to ideological re-orientation and repositioning; the party swung to the left. This became necessary for two possible reasons: political opportunism on the one hand, and a realistic assessment of the Nigerian situation on the other. The first reason was a reaction to the urgent need to cater for the interest of the radical and liberal elements who were becoming disenchanted with the politics of conservatism of the ruling Northern Peoples Congress (NPC). The second reason grew out of the party’s recognition of the fact that it could not on its own in the prevailing circumstances gain overall electoral victory at the federal level (Philips, 1964).

The option open to the Action Group was either to join forces with the Northern Peoples Congress at the federal level, or change course ideologically. The latter was the preferred choice. Consequently, four discernible steps were taken to demonstrate the ideological shift of position by the party in both domestic and foreign policy areas: the party canvassed government adoption in

principle of nationalization which it had hitherto opposed; it castigated the Balewa government for being too pro-West; it called on government to adopt political Pan-Africanism by joining the Union of African States; and finally the party adopted “Democratic Socialism” as its ideology at its 7th Congress on 23 September 1960. According to the party, the seemingly contradictory ideological nomenclature was adopted because it was socialism to be practiced within a parliamentary democratic system; and as noted earlier, this brand of socialism allowed both private and public enterprises to co-exist within the context of a national economic agenda. The following year, Chief Awolowo followed up with a spirited regime of speaking engagements in Nigeria and abroad espousing tenets of the new ideology and criticizing the government for running a neo-colonial economy controlled by foreign and Nigerian capitalists (Alade, 1988).

It is perhaps saying the obvious to say that this brand of socialism cannot, by any stretch of the imagination or by elastic definition, satisfy the definition of socialism as it is commonly understood. The Action Group’s democratic socialism can only be correctly taken as what Alade calls “liberal-reformist capitalism” (Alade, 1988). The party also adopted what came to be referred to as positive non-alignment. In this respect Chief Awolowo declared against the clearly pro-West government policy and maintained that Nigeria should do nothing “at anytime which would make us seem the docile satellite of the British or any government” (Awolowo, 1960). This certainly was unlike the party’s pre-independence position. And even though he was party to the discussions that culminated in the signing of the Anglo-Nigerian Defence Pact of 1960, Chief Awolowo became its bitter critic after independence. He also criticized the federal government for allowing the US and Britain to have greatly influenced the formulation of Nigeria’s Development Plan. His stand on positive non-alignment made him to question the propriety of prohibiting circulation of communist literature in the country and for being hostile to the Soviet Union (Awolowo, 1981).

This ideological volte-face has been interpreted variously as political opportunism, as reaction to the electoral disappointment at the 1959 Federal Elections in which the Action Group failed woefully to obtain the anticipated majority to form a government, and as a deliberate attempt to woo and win the radical and articulate constituency which was fast becoming vociferously critical of Balewa’s government’s domestic and foreign policies (Idang, 1973; Cowan, 1966; Schwarz, 1965). It is important to bear in mind that Chief Awolowo was a politician, first and foremost, who must constantly be alive to the political weathercock. It is in this context and Nigerian political structure that one can appreciate the burden of political processes and

democratic imperatives in an emerging plural society. It is only fair to give him the benefit of the doubt that the need to change course came about as a result of his realistic assessment of the popular mood following the electoral debacle of December 1959. After all, he was not alone in thinking that it was time to review the past policies in order to be prepared for the future. He had mandated the Ideological Committee of the party made up of prominent politicians and intellectuals to review the party’s policy and make recommendations. The party’s foreign policy plank on democratic socialism was the product of the Committee’s deliberations. Rather than focusing on or belabouring Chief Awolowo’s (1973) childhood “deprivations” as Idang suggests, it appears that the weight of evidence would seem to support Gray Cowan’s (1966) conclusion that “the Action Group leader’s new stance represents in all probability a genuine shift in his personal viewpoints combined with an element of political expediency”. There are enough political, economic, organizational and strategic, even cultural reasons, to explain, not necessarily to justify, the inconsistency and contradictions in the Action Group’s ideological positions and foreign policy perspectives during the one decade and a half years of its existence.

CONCLUSION

In explaining Action Group’s foreign policy perspectives, one has to be mindful of the various forces at play—the burden of the colonial realities and experiences, socio-economic structure, and constitutional constraints, the lopsided political structure that made one region enjoy numerically advantageous position in the House of Representatives, and Chief Awolowo’s commitment to improving the lot of the masses, especially the middle class, and empowering them through the use of state power. This commitment explains his lifelong struggle for the highest political office in the nation.

Even though the Action Group was not the government of the country but was in government (as the Opposition in the House of Representatives), the formulation of its foreign policy for Nigeria no doubt responded to the variables (Holsti, 1983) usually identified as capable of influencing foreign policy orientations of a country. First, the party was quite aware of the structure of the international system and did not underestimate or play down the overwhelming presence of the capitalist economic tradition and culture which colonialism represented in a fiercely competitive bipolar world. The inherited colonial legacy provided the political, economic and intellectual context. It constituted the burden of history from which, hard as it did, it could not run away. It had to address the issues connected with it and use ideological tunnel diplomacy, as the party discovered, to enhance its popularity, acceptability and electoral fortunes.

Secondly, the party and its leaders tried to confront the nature of the domestic attitudes as well as social and economic needs and aspirations. This was a major concern in the foreign policy plank of the party as it struggled to remove the economic barriers in order to create “life more abundant” for the struggling masses through education, access to health facilities and provision of employment opportunities. The vision to realize these at the federal level was made difficult by constitutional and electoral constraints in an environment of crippling ethnic diversity and colonial socio-economic structure.

Thirdly, the conservative outlook of the policy makers in the Balewa government felt threatened and remained unfriendly to ideological sloganeering or any form of political radicalism. This may account for AG’s seeming desperation to fashion out socialist economic development approaches meant to appeal to different groups and classes at different times. It is important to bear in mind that the party’s brand of socialism was different from the classical socialism as its leader admitted. Chief Awolowo’s socialism was an outgrowth of his nationalist concerns to take control of Nigerian affairs from the imperialists and empower the Nigerians to run their own affairs. His vision of society that he wanted Nigeria to be was the driving force; ideology was to be used as a tool to rationalize, and explain that vision.

Finally, no one could deny that Nigeria’s geographic location and rich endowments in natural resources were reliable indicators of the potential for a leadership role in the West Africa sub-region, in Africa and in the world. This fact was reflected in the party’s discussion of how Nigeria could maximize the exploitation or utilization of these resources to satisfy the development goals of the country and be an active player in the international arena. Nothing would appear to suggest that the changes of policies or the apparent ideological contradictions were due to any other factors, certainly not to any childhood “deprivations,” than to attempts to read the mood of the electorate (which may turn out to be either rightly or wrongly) and attempt to act as deemed appropriate for political gains. What, after all, is political sagacity if not the prepared mind, the equipped mind, of a politician seeking elective office to toil resourcefully (not fraudulently) to maximize his chances for acceptability and electoral success? Ideological purity and consistency have rarely been hallmarks of great pragmatic leaders in the world’s leading democracies.

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