

The Kuru Conference of 1986: A Critical Examination of the Role of Public Opinion in Nigeria's Foreign Policy Formulation



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Amah Maclean Williams PhD;[♦]

Abstract

As global interactions become increasingly transparent and participatory, the voice of the populace, expressed through media, civil society, and public discourse, has gained importance in foreign policy decision-making in many countries of the world. Public opinion plays a crucial role in shaping a Nation's foreign policy, promoting accountability, and informing decision-making processes. However, challenges and limitations exist, and policymakers must navigate these complexities to effectively integrate public opinion into foreign policy formulation as the formulation of foreign policy remains a critical aspect of a nation's governance, often shaped by the interplay of domestic and international dynamics. Foreign Policy formulation in Nigeria has historically been an elite-driven process, with minimal input from the general public. However, the Kuru Conference of 1986 marked a significant departure from this norm, introducing an inclusive approach to foreign policy decision-making. This article explores the interplay between public opinion and the formulation of Nigeria's foreign policy, focusing on the landmark Kuru Conference of 1986. Held during a period of significant political and economic transition, the Kuru Conference represented a deliberate effort by the Nigerian government to engage with diverse stakeholders, including academics, diplomats, civil society actors, and the general public in rethinking the nation's external relations. Through a critical analysis of historical records and conference proceedings, this study examines how public sentiment and intellectual discourse at the conference influenced policy direction, particularly in the context of Nigeria's emerging Afrocentric and economic diplomatic strategies. The analysis of the Kuru Conference highlights several key insights. Some of which include the importance of public participation in policy-making as a means of enhancing legitimacy, accountability, and alignment with national interest. The study also shows how participatory processes can lead to innovative and adaptive policy approaches, as seen in the shift towards economic diplomacy. The findings provide insights into the dynamics of public participation in Nigeria's international relations and offer implications for future policy-making processes. The study further shows that despite its limitations, the Kuru Conference remains a valuable reference point for Nigeria's foreign policy development. It illustrates the potential of participatory governance in fostering a more democratic and effective policy environment. This study concludes by advocating for the institutionalization of public processes by creating mechanisms for regular stakeholder

[♦] Amah Maclean Williams PhD, Department of History and International Studies, Akwa Ibom State University. e-mail: amahwilliams@aksu.edu.ng

engagements, as this will ensure that government foreign policy reflects the collective aspirations of its people while adapting to the complexities of a rapidly changing global landscape.

Keywords: *Kuru Conference, Public Opinion, Nigeria's Foreign Policy, Foreign Policy Formulation.*

Introduction

Foreign policy formulation has traditionally been the prerogative of political elites and specialized institutions. In many post-colonial African states, including Nigeria, foreign policy has often been shaped by a narrow circle of diplomats, military leaders, and executive authorities. However, the interplay between public opinion and foreign policy has gained attention as democratic norms evolve and the pressures of globalization blur the lines between domestic and international policy spheres.

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and a regional power in West Africa, has historically projected a dynamic and activist foreign policy (Williams *et al*, 2022). Rooted in principles such as African unity, non-alignment, and economic cooperation, Nigeria's foreign policy has reflected a blend of ideological commitment and pragmatic calculations. Nevertheless, the involvement of the Nigerian public in shaping this policy has remained limited except in rare, notable instances. As noted by Adebayo (1993), Nigeria's foreign policy has often been shaped by a small circle of political elites, diplomats, and policymakers, with limited input from the general public. This centralized approach reflected broader governance trends in post-independence Nigeria, where decision-making in key national matters was predominantly top-down (Ngonso *et al*, 2023). However, by the mid-1980s, Nigeria faced increasing internal and external challenges, including economic crises, declining global influence, and growing public dissatisfaction with governance. These pressures highlighted the need for a more inclusive and participatory approach to policy formulation (Akinyemi, 1986).

The 1986 Kuru Conference, convened under the administration of General Ibrahim Babangida and organized by the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS) in Kuru, marked a significant attempt to involve a broader spectrum of stakeholders in shaping Nigeria's foreign policy. It was unprecedented in its inclusion of a wide array of voices, including scholars, journalists, civil servants, and private sector representatives. The central aim of the conference was to re-examine Nigeria's foreign policy framework and redefine its priorities in response to evolving global dynamics and domestic realities. The conference also deliberated on Nigeria's role in international affairs, its economic diplomacy, and its commitment to African solidarity (Akinyemi, 1986).

This paper, therefore, explores the extent to which public opinion, as represented at the Kuru Conference, influenced the redirection of Nigeria's foreign policy in the late 1980s. Through a qualitative analysis of secondary sources, the study considers the theoretical underpinnings of public opinion in foreign policy-making and evaluates the legacy of the 1986 conference in the evolution of Nigeria's international posture.

Conceptual Framework: Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

Soroka (2003) defines public opinion as the collective attitudes, beliefs, and preferences of a population toward political issues, including foreign affairs. In democratic contexts, public opinion can serve as a check on the executive's power and guide policymakers

toward positions that reflect the electorate's values and interests. However, the influence of public opinion on foreign policy is complex and often mediated by political institutions, media, and elite discourse.

Public Opinion comes to bear on foreign policy either as an organized whole or through leaders, intermediaries, and sectional interests. Organized groups and leaders' opinions directly influence the conduct of foreign policy through various channels, while the people as a mass exercise influence through what Baum (2008) calls 'the mood', which prescribes the limits within which foreign policy can be shaped. Most people are concerned with their day-to-day problems, and for them, international issues are of low salience. Thus, the view that foreign policy is the responsibility of the government is never questioned until an international issue kindles the national mood. Once aroused, such a mood can exclude all practical choices and leave the decision makers with what amounts to prescriptions alone. Public opinion thus wields a vague but real power in foreign policy formulation (Kertzer, 2017).

Theories of democratic responsiveness suggest that governments are more likely to consider public opinion in policy formulation when there are mechanisms for civic engagement, accountability, and transparency. Conversely, in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, the role of public opinion is often symbolic or instrumental, used to legitimize decisions already taken by elites (Buam *et.al.*, 2008).

In the Nigerian context, especially under military rule, foreign policy decisions were predominantly centralized. However, with increasing awareness among the citizenry, the proliferation of civil society, and pressures from the international community, Nigerian leaders have occasionally sought to incorporate public opinion to bolster legitimacy and align foreign policy with domestic realities.

Foreign Policy

A preliminary difficulty concerns what is meant by the term 'foreign policy', and what areas of political activity it is taken as covering. For some, foreign policy implies a stable set of activities towards the international environment, an implicit or explicit plan about a country's relationship with the outside world; a conscious image of what is or ought to be the country's place in the world, or some general guiding principle or attitudes determining or influencing decisions on specific issues' (Phillips, 1964). For others, the term implies a field of related but distinct actions and issues, in which 'there neither is nor can be foreign policy in general' in which policy is formulated in a disjointed fashion, largely in response to immediate pressures and events, in many separate structures and issue areas (Kertzer, 2017). One reason why there is no generally accepted definition of foreign policy is the difficult problem of establishing the precise boundaries of the term.

However, Machridis (1985) defines Foreign Policy as the strategies and decisions a sovereign state employs to safeguard its national interests and achieve goals in its relations with other countries. It is a fundamental aspect of international relations, shaping how states interact politically, economically, militarily, and culturally on the global stage (Machridis, 1985). Soraka (2003) defines Foreign Policy as the sum of a state's official external relations, including diplomacy, economic interactions, defense strategies, and cultural exchanges, aimed at securing its national objectives. From these definitions, the primary purpose of foreign policy is to promote a country's national interests abroad, which may include security, economic prosperity, ideological goals, and prestige.

According to Alden and Arren (2016), foreign policy acts as a bridge connecting domestic conditions to the international environment. It translates internal needs into external actions, ensuring a state's survival and development in a complex, often competitive world. Foreign policy remains a dynamic and essential part of statecraft. It reflects the interplay between domestic needs, leadership vision, international opportunities, and constraints. Understanding foreign policy requires examining not only the actions of states but also the underlying motivations, historical contexts, and global structures that shape those actions.

Public Opinion as a Driver of Foreign Policy

Public opinion acts as a reflection of citizens' preferences and concerns regarding international issues. Governments, particularly in democracies, often respond to public sentiment to maintain political legitimacy and ensure re-election. Public opinion can influence foreign policy in the following ways, as highlighted by Nye (2004).

- a. **Domestic Pressure:** Citizens express their views on foreign policy through voting, protests, and petitions. For example, during the Vietnam War, widespread anti-war protests in the United States pressured the government to reassess its military strategy and eventually withdraw troops.
- b. **Accountability Mechanism:** In democratic systems, leaders must consider public preferences when making foreign policy decisions to avoid backlash. For instance, widespread public disapproval of interventionist policies has historically influenced the foreign policy strategies of countries like the United Kingdom and France (Nye, 2004).

However, public opinion can also pose challenges. It may be fragmented, uninformed, or driven by short-term emotional reactions rather than long-term strategic interests. Thus, governments must balance public preferences with expert recommendations and national objectives.

Civil Society Organizations and Advocacy Groups

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a pivotal role in shaping foreign policy by advocating for specific issues, such as human rights, environmental protection, and international development. These groups often bridge the gap between the public and policymakers by conducting research, raising awareness, and lobbying for change.

International NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch monitor and report on human rights abuses, influencing governments to adopt more ethical foreign policy stances. For instance, these organizations have played a significant role in pressuring governments to impose sanctions on regimes accused of human rights violations, such as apartheid-era South Africa. CSOs also contribute to foreign policy formulation by providing expertise and acting as watchdogs to ensure transparency and accountability. In doing so, they help align foreign policy with public interests and global ethical standards.

The Role of Academia and Think Tanks

Academics, researchers, and think tanks serve as critical actors in foreign policy development by providing evidence-based analysis, forecasting, and policy recommendations. Their role in shaping foreign policy is particularly significant in complex areas such as security, trade, and international law. Organizations such as the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), Chatham House, and the Brookings Institution regularly publish policy briefs, reports, and analyses on pressing global issues. For example, during the Cold War, think tanks in the United States provided key insights into strategies for managing relations with the Soviet Union. Universities and research institutions often conduct studies on foreign policy issues, such as conflict resolution, international trade, and regional integration. These studies inform policymakers and enrich public discourse on international affairs. By fostering dialogue between policymakers, academics, and the public, think tanks and academic institutions contribute to more informed and strategic foreign policy decisions.

The Media as a Conduit for Public Involvement

The media plays a central role in informing the public about foreign policy issues and holding governments accountable. It acts as a platform for public debate, a watchdog for government actions, and a catalyst for public mobilization (Ngonso et al, 2025). Media outlets highlight international issues, shaping public perceptions and policy priorities. For instance, media coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis mobilized global support for humanitarian interventions and influenced government responses. Investigative journalism exposes corruption, unethical practices, or failure in foreign policy, pressuring governments to act. For example, the media's role in uncovering the Iraq War intelligence failures prompted widespread criticism and reform in intelligence practices in the United States. Social Media platforms have become powerful tools for public involvement in foreign policy. Campaigns on platforms like Twitter and Facebook often amplify marginalized voices and raise awareness about global issues.

Diaspora Communities as Influencers

Diaspora communities are increasingly influential in shaping foreign policy due to their unique position as cultural and economic bridges between their home and host countries. Remittances sent by diaspora communities contribute significantly to national economies, giving them leverage in advocating for policies that protect their interests abroad. For example, the Indian diaspora has been instrumental in fostering stronger US-India relations (Chishti *et al*, 2018).

Public involvement in foreign policy formulation enhances the democratic legitimacy and accountability of governments while ensuring that international engagements reflect the values and aspirations of citizens. However, the effectiveness of public involvement depends on informed participation, institutional mechanisms for public consultation, and the ability of policymakers to balance diverse interests with strategic national goals. Governments must continue to foster transparency, encourage public dialogue, and leverage the expertise of civil society, academia, and the media to create foreign policies that align with domestic priorities and global responsibilities.

Historical Background: Public Opinion and Nigeria's Foreign Policy Before 1986

From independence in 1960, Nigeria's foreign policy was driven by a vision of Pan-Africanism, decolonization, and leadership in the African continent (Williams, 2022). The

early years saw Nigeria supporting liberation movements and advocating for non-alignment in the Cold War context. The post-civil war era reinforced these themes, with added emphasis on economic diplomacy and regional integration.

At the time of independence, Nigeria's public opinion strongly supported non-alignment, decolonization, and Pan-Africanism. There was a nationalistic sentiment among Nigerians, especially among political elites, civil society groups, and the press, that Nigeria should champion African liberation and resist neo-colonial influence (Adebayo, 1993). Hence, Nigeria adopted a foreign policy grounded in non-alignment, African solidarity, and peaceful coexistence. Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa articulated a cautious and conservative diplomatic approach, emphasizing Nigeria's responsibility to support African liberation movements and maintain friendly relations with all countries, irrespective of ideological differences (Adebajo, 2008). Although the foreign policy under Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa was cautious and pro-Western, there was considerable public expectation for a more assertive role in African affairs. Balewa's decision to send Nigerian troops to the Congo under the United Nations was popular domestically, reinforcing Nigeria's image as a responsible African power (Gambari, 1980).

During the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), public opinion largely rallied around the principle of national unity and sovereignty. The Federal Government's foreign policy aimed at preventing international recognition of Biafra reflected widespread domestic support for maintaining the territorial integrity of Nigeria (Aluko, 1981). Public attitudes were especially sensitive to countries perceived as supporting Biafra, such as France and Portugal, resulting in strained diplomatic ties. Nigerian citizens often expressed anger through media outlets and public demonstrations, reinforcing the government's hardline diplomatic posture during the war (Williams, 2017). During the conflict, Nigeria faced challenges securing diplomatic support against the secessionist state of Biafra. Countries like France, Portugal, and some African states tacitly supported Biafra, while Nigeria leaned on Britain and the Soviet Union for support. The war underscored the importance of territorial integrity in Nigeria's foreign policy. Consequently, post-war Nigerian diplomacy became more assertive in opposing secessionist movements elsewhere in Africa.

Under General Yakubu Gowon, Nigeria's growing oil wealth and public confidence fostered stronger expectations that Nigeria would lead efforts in African decolonization. Nigerians, through the press and political movements, supported aggressive stances against apartheid South Africa, Portuguese colonialism, and racial discrimination worldwide (Ajala, 1985). Public sentiment favoured Nigeria's activism in the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and initiatives like financial support for liberation movements aligned with nationalistic public opinion. The government's policies reflected these popular aspirations, even though foreign policy decisions remained highly centralized. Nigeria took a leading role in the formation of the Organization of African Unity's (OAU) Committee of Nine on Southern Africa, supporting the decolonization of Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe (Akinyemi, 1989). Nigeria's increased oil revenues in the early 1970s allowed it to extend financial and material aid to liberation movements, such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) (Osuntokun, 1998).

The 1975 military coup brought General Murtala Mohammed to power, marking a significant shift toward a more radical and interventionist foreign policy. The regime

marked a pivotal moment where public opinion had a more visible impact on foreign policy. Murtala's aggressive stance on Angola recognizing the MPLA was highly popular among Nigerians, who saw it as a bold move to end imperialist manipulation in Africa (Garba, 1987). Public applause for Murtala's speech at the OAU Summit in 1976, where he declared that "Africa has come of age," demonstrated the extent to which Nigerians embraced a radical, Afrocentric foreign policy direction (Akinyemi, 1989). Civil society groups, trade unions, and student movements became vocal supporters of Nigeria's more assertive global posture. One of the most prominent actions was Nigeria's recognition of the MPLA government in Angola in 1975, opposing the United States and South African-backed FNLA and UNITA factions. This move asserted Nigeria's leadership in Africa and earned it significant influence within the OAU (Adebayo, 1993). Following Murtala's assassination, General Olusegun Obasanjo continued his predecessor's foreign policy, culminating in Nigeria playing a leading role in the creation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975, aimed at fostering regional economic integration and cooperation.

During President Shehu Shagari's administration, economic downturns and growing dissatisfaction with governance affected public perceptions of foreign policy. While the public continued to support anti-apartheid policies and regional leadership through ECOWAS, there was criticism of what was perceived as wasteful spending abroad at the expense of domestic welfare (Aluko, 1981). The 1983 mass expulsion of West African migrants (mostly Ghanaians) from Nigeria was partially a response to public discontent over economic hardship and rising unemployment. Though condemned internationally, the move received significant popular support within Nigeria (Ajala, 1985). Shagari's government maintained support for anti-apartheid movements and continued engagement with ECOWAS. However, domestic economic difficulties, particularly the crash in oil prices, limited Nigeria's capacity for international influence. The expulsion of illegal immigrants in 1983 also damaged Nigeria's image and strained relations with neighbouring countries (Williams, 2024).

The military coup that brought Major General Muhammadu Buhari to power in 1983 resulted in a more nationalistic and austere foreign policy. Under this regime, public influence on foreign policy formulation declined as the regime emphasized authoritarian governance and national discipline. However, Buhari's foreign policy of self-reliance resonated with a segment of the public frustrated with perceived exploitation by foreign interests (Olusanya & Akindele, 1986). Buhari's government emphasized self-reliance and disciplined diplomacy, focusing on correcting Nigeria's negative international image and curbing perceived exploitation by foreign nations (Olusanya and Akindele, 1986). Under Buhari, Nigeria withdrew somewhat from high-profile leadership roles in Africa to prioritize internal economic restructuring and political stability.

When General Ibrahim Babangida seized power in 1985, he sought to reintegrate Nigeria into the global economy through "economic diplomacy." Public opinion, while still important, was largely managed through state-controlled media and selective consultations, as foreign policy formulation remained the prerogative of the ruling elite (Adebayo, 1993). Babangida's government re-engaged actively with international financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank, signaling a pragmatic shift in foreign policy to prioritize economic recovery over ideological commitments.

Between 1960 and 1986, public opinion in Nigeria influenced foreign policy formulation, albeit indirectly. While elite preferences dominated policy decisions,

popular sentiments, particularly regarding African solidarity, national sovereignty, and anti-imperialism, provided a broad framework within which foreign policies were shaped. Governments that aligned their external actions with nationalistic and pan-African aspirations generally found strong public support, while those that ignored public sentiments faced domestic criticism. However, this period also exposed contradictions in policy implementation, elite-driven diplomacy, and a growing disconnect between state actions and citizen welfare. By the early 1980s, with declining oil revenues and economic mismanagement, Nigeria faced a crisis of legitimacy and growing internal discontent. The need for a reassessment of foreign policy, in light of economic austerity and changing global dynamics, became apparent, and this set the stage for the Kuru Conference.

The Kuru Conference of 1986: An Overview

By the mid-1980s, Nigeria was grappling with severe economic challenges stemming from declining oil revenues, increasing debt burdens, and social unrest. The earlier Afrocentric and ideological thrusts of Nigerian foreign policy, emphasizing Africa's liberation and opposition to apartheid, needed reassessment in light of these new domestic pressures (Gambari, 1989). Recognizing these challenges, General Ibrahim Babangida's government initiated efforts to redefine Nigeria's international engagement. The Kuru Conference was part of these broader attempts to realign foreign policy with national economic priorities and the changing global environment (Olusanya and Akindele, 1986). The Kuru Conference brought together a wide cross-section of Nigerian society to critically evaluate the goals, tools, and assumptions of Nigeria's foreign policy. Unlike previous policy consultations, the Kuru Conference emphasized inclusiveness, dialogue, and realism.

The announcement of an All-Nigeria Conference on Foreign Policy by the Federal Ministry of Government in late 1985 was received with mixed feelings. Some Nigerians felt that the military wanted to give 'popular' legitimization to its actions and policies in external affairs. Others did not share such cynicism, claiming that the conference was well-timed to 'take on the teething disillusionment which has overtaken the foreign policy elite in the country in the face of the meager successes that dogged twenty-six years of foreign policymaking at the time. In a bid to disabuse the minds of cynics, the Federal Military Government appointed a well-respected Nigerian, Mallam Haroun Adamu as Chairman of the Organizing Committee for the conference. Other members included representatives of the Chambers of Commerce, the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN), intellectuals, labour unionists, students, and numerous members of many organizations.

Olusanya and Akindele (1986) document that the skepticism of Nigerians was manifested in the amount of defense the Chairman of the Organizing Committee, Mallam Haroun Adamu, had to put up against the expected allegations that the conference would be tele-guided by the Babangida government. The organizing committee chairman was quoted to have saying that, 'the role of government in this conference must be clearly understood. No doubt the government facilitated the conference, but beyond that, the government has remained very distant. What will come out is a people's position on what foreign policy the Nigerian government should adopt between now and the year 2000 (Olusanya and Akindele, 1986).

The then Minister of External Affairs, Bolaji Akinyemi, also made a serious effort to convince the cynics about the intention and hope of the Government. According to Olusanya and Akindele (1986), Akinyemi in his welcome address to the conference held at the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, Kuru, between 7 and 13 April 1986, enumerated the two considerations behind the government's intention to hold such a conference. First is the need for a military government to attract and cultivate a stamp of popular approval for its policies; second is the advantage of 'an open consultative process' in shaping foreign policy. To allay the fears of many Nigerians, Akinyemi declared that there was 'no hidden agenda' and that the Federal Military Government was prepared 'to be engaged in dialogue with all Nigerians in the area of foreign policy'.

In the conference, all shades of opinion were allowed. However, the final reports of the committee were far from giving a stamp of approval to government policies. Reports from the Political, Economic, Defense and Security, and Social and Cultural Committees were very critical of the government's stance on some issues and recommended alternatives that seemed almost impossible for the Babangida administration to accept. It is worthwhile to consider some of the participants' disagreements with the conduct and management of the country's external relations (Akindele, 1986).

The Political Committee noted that Nigeria's governing class has been so important in transforming the political and economic structures met at independence from a colonial-oriented position to a self-reliant one. This fact underlies most of Nigeria's actions in responding to issues in external affairs. For instance, in the sub-region of West Africa, Nigeria, after twenty-five years, has not been able to get rid of Anglo-French imperialism, which is detrimental to Nigeria's interests. The same situation presents itself in the whole of Africa, where Nigeria's leadership has largely been on paper. Given Nigeria's inept management of its resources, it has not been able to seriously undermine the apartheid regime in South Africa. In the defunct OAU, Nigeria has been unable to provide the leadership that the resources available at its disposal for such a role would seem to justify and dictate. Nigeria's relations with other countries of the world had not been viewed with the former's national interests taken into consideration (Akinterinwa, 1990).

It was also agreed that in international institutions, the best talents had not always represented Nigeria in international forums. In the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Nigeria's asymmetrical economic dependence on the Western economy had made it impossible for her to be truly non-aligned. Based on all these, the Political Committee then recommended that 'the only viable, alternative open to Nigeria for ensuring the continued survival of tens of millions of Nigerians and of Nigeria itself is to work towards the building of an independent, socialist Nigeria in the years between 1986 and the year 2000AD' (Akinyemi, 1989). The Committee concluded by recommending, among others, to guarantee its security and independence. It is noteworthy that the government has given a negative response to the recommendation of a socialist transformation. While saying that it will not prescribe any specific ideology for Nigeria, it has consistently intensified its privatization policy in the economic sector of the national life, which suggests a definite preference for a mixed economy, a euphemism for capitalism (Gambari, 1989).

According to Gambari (1989), the Economic Committee, after a thorough consideration of the dependent nature of the Nigerian economy, strongly recommended that the country should pay particular attention to (i) the fundamentality of economic

policy for effective foreign policy; and (ii) the interaction between domestic and foreign policy; and (iii) reduction in foreign dependence and hence a movement towards a self-reliant economy that will help sustain a dynamic foreign policy up to the year 2004.

However, these lofty recommendations were not implemented by the Babangida regime. It thus seems that the justification and achievement of such conferences will be very little if recommendations are contemptuously neglected by the government of the day. In the 1961 conference on Nigerian foreign policy held in Lagos, a policy idea that could not be implemented would have been removed from the agreed resolution of the conference. In 1986, such policy ideas were not removed but ignored by the government of the day. Both strategies lead to the same end. The various shades of opinion brought together with huge financial resources have been rendered useless by the attitude of the government, which refuses to implement recommendations coming out of the 'people's conference convened to shape the content and direction of foreign policy.

Government officials did not share this opinion. Bolaji Akinyemi, at the conference's closing ceremony, felt that the conference witnessed 'lively and stimulating' debates which would be of benefit to the nation in charting a foreign policy till 2000 AD and even beyond. Later in the year, he referred to a major achievement of the conference as the serious attempt it made in identifying and defining Nigeria's national interest in political, economic, social, and security terms. Dr. K. O. Mbadiwe, the convener of the 1961 conference, saw the success of the conference from the point of view that it allowed the citizens to air their views. According to him, 'even if we met and said nothing, we have achieved something' (Akinyemi, 1986).

Policy Outcomes and Legacy of the Kuru Conference of 1986

Many scholars have taken different positions as to the legacy and outcome of the Kuru Conference. Akinyemi (1986) acknowledged the limited role that the Nigerian public historically played in foreign policy formulation. He describes the Kuru Conference as a bold attempt to democratize the process by involving stakeholders from academia, civil society, and the private sector. However, he also notes that true public participation remained constrained by the centralized nature of Nigeria's political system. Gambari (1989) supported Akinyemi's emphasis on economic diplomacy but criticized the implementation of policies derived from the Kuru Conference. He argues that while the conference produced well-conceived recommendations, bureaucratic inefficiencies and political constraints limited their impact. He further notes: "Public participation in foreign policy-making was a welcome innovation, but the Kuru Conference primarily engaged elites, leaving grassroots voices largely unheard".

Akinyemi (1986) further emphasizes Nigeria's leadership role in Africa, arguing that the country's foreign policy during this period sought to reaffirm its influence, particularly in West Africa. He points to ECOWAS initiatives and Nigeria's role in regional conflict resolution as evidence of this focus. His emphasis on the strategic shift towards economic diplomacy reflects the conference's significant theoretical contribution to Nigeria's foreign policy. Indeed, the Kuru Conference of 1986 was a landmark initiative in Nigeria's foreign policy history, introducing innovative ideas such as economic diplomacy and public involvement. Scholars like Akinyemi (1986) and Ogwu (2005) highlight its strategic importance in redefining Nigeria's foreign policy priorities during a time of economic and political crises. However, critical assessment by Gambari

(1989) reveals significant limitations, including the symbolic nature of public involvement, elite dominance, and weak implementation mechanisms.

While the conference succeeded in reshaping the discourse around Nigeria's foreign policy, its legacy is mixed. The theoretical contributions of the Kuru Conference remain significant, but its practical impact was constrained by systemic governance issues and the absence of sustained political commitment. This duality underscores the broader challenges of reforming policy-making processes in centralized and elite-driven political systems like Nigeria's. Ultimately, the Kuru Conference highlights both the possibilities and the limitations of reforming Nigeria's foreign policy-making processes. It remains a case study of the tensions between ambition and execution in governance, offering lessons for future efforts to democratize policy-making in Nigeria.

More broadly, the conference legitimized the notion that foreign policy must serve the interests of the people. While subsequent governments did not always adhere to the spirit of Kuru, the conference remains a reference point in discussions about democratizing foreign policy processes in Nigeria. Following the Kuru Conference, several changes were evident in Nigeria's foreign policy: A pivot toward economic diplomacy and partnerships that promised tangible development benefits, greater engagement with multilateral institutions, albeit cautiously, reprioritization of regional stability, and conflict resolution with clearer cost-benefit analyses.

One of the most significant outcomes of the conference was the recommendation for a "citizen-focused" foreign policy, which emphasized public accountability, national interest, and economic diplomacy. The principle of "concentric circles" was rearticulated, placing Nigerian citizens at the center of foreign policy priorities. Although the military government maintained control over final policy decisions, the incorporation of these perspectives signaled a shift toward participatory foreign policy-making, even if limited in scope.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

One key limitation of this study is its reliance on historical documents and secondary sources, which may not fully capture the nuances of public sentiment or behind-the-scenes government deliberations at the time of the Kuru Conference. Additionally, the scope of the study is restricted to a single event, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader patterns in Nigeria's foreign policy formulation across different administrations or historical periods. The absence of direct interviews with key participants or policymakers involved in the 1986 conference also restricts the depth of firsthand insight into the decision-making processes.

For future research, it is recommended that comparative studies be conducted to examine other instances where public opinion has influenced Nigeria's foreign policy, both before and after the Kuru Conference. Incorporating oral histories or interviews with former diplomats, government officials, and civil society actors could enrich an understanding of the dynamics between public discourse and policy outcomes. Moreover, a longitudinal study assessing the lasting impact of the Kuru Conference on Nigeria's foreign policy framework could provide a more comprehensive view of its significance in shaping contemporary policy practices.

Conclusion

The Kuru Conference of 1986 stands out as a unique moment in Nigerian history when public opinion, albeit mediated through elite channels, was actively solicited in the redefinition of foreign policy. Though convened under a military regime, the conference signaled a shift toward more pragmatic, people-oriented diplomacy. This case study underscores the importance of institutional mechanisms that allow for public input in foreign policy, especially in emerging democracies. While challenges remain in fully integrating citizen perspectives into foreign decision-making, the Kuru Conference illustrates the potential for meaningful engagement between the state and society in shaping a responsive foreign policy.

The Kuru Conference of 1986 was a watershed in the history of Nigerian foreign policy. It marked the transition from an ideologically driven foreign policy to one that prioritized national economic recovery and pragmatic international relations. Its influence persisted well into the 1990s, shaping the principles and strategies that guided Nigeria's diplomacy in a rapidly changing global order.

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