

Nigeria's Faltering Leadership Role in ECOWAS: Implications for Sub-regional Cohesion and Development

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Abstract

This paper examines Nigeria's faltering role in the West African sub-region, especially in view of its population strength, military might, and economic resources. Consequently, Nigeria's strength and credentials to become a hegemon in the sub-region are never in doubt. Nigerian leaders apparently understood the unique position that Nigeria occupies and conceived a foreign policy thrust that is Afrocentric as its "manifest destiny." However, events in the Western sub-region have challenged Nigeria's unique leadership roles through the flurry of military coups that produced juntas who have openly declared interest in exiting the sub-region's supranational institution, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). This development highlights Nigeria's internal challenges and equally poses significant implication for sub-regional cohesion and development. The study adopts content analysis method and uses secondary sources in the public domain such as books, journal articles, seminar and conference papers, etc. The paper finds that Nigeria's economic missteps have deterred socioeconomic development of other states in the sub-region, and enabled the continuous destabilising activities of Western powers, who, for lack of a formidably powerful regional actor, micromanage leaders in the sub-region, and have unfettered access to its mineral resources. The paper also notes that the prevalence of coups d'état and the emergence of Russia in states where coups were successful follows decades of disillusionment, and the absence of a hegemon in the sub-region. It concludes that Nigeria's chance to retake its position is possible only if it puts its house in order and can acquire the degree of sophistication and influence at the disposal of Western powers, with which they methodologically control and exploit non-Western societies.

Keywords: Nigeria's Economy, Afrocentrism, West Africa, ECOWAS, Western Powers.

Introduction

A lot of unfortunate developments in Nigeria have limited the efforts and sacrifices made in the past, and ensured Nigeria's hold on the sub-region is faltering, leading to unprecedented outcomes that challenged the leadership role of Nigeria. Three states – Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso – have declared their withdrawal from ECOWAS, in the wake of Western apparently-induced sabre-rattling of military invasion of Niger as a response to the military coup that overthrew the democratically elected government. These states have subsequently established a tripartite alliance and invited other states in the sub-region to join, a move that directly questions Nigeria's leadership claims in the sub-region. And if allowed, would undermine the strategic leadership roles of Nigeria.

There is no denying the fact that West Africa is a sub-region under the crushing exploitation of the French government, which had forcefully secured large swathes of territory in the infamous Berlin Conference (1884-1885) and through intensive agreements with fellow imperialists like Germany and Britain. With colonialism becoming unattractive after the Second World War, Africans gained political independence in a process that firmly entrenched the designs of the imperialists and to which the influence and control of the West African sub-region would become an unending struggle between France and Nigeria. However, it is argued that Nigeria has worked to limit the influence of external powers by bringing states into economic alliances that would counteract the designs of the imperialists and seek to restore peace and security to any troubled state.⁸⁰

To stifle the viewpoint of naysayers and detractors, Nigeria spearheaded the formation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) with the great intention to inspire the sub-region to achieve significant strides in the socioeconomic and political landscape. ECOWAS's formation in 1975, five years

⁸⁰ The existence of ECOWAS continues to pose significant challenge to France's designs and interests in the sub-region. The strong attachments of Francophone states are one of the reasons why economic cooperation has suffered severe setbacks despite the efforts of Nigeria. The trio of France's monetary policies, economic ties, and military relations has alienated many states from deepening cooperation. Amandine Gnanguênon, Daouda Thiam, Emmanuel Baba Aduku, 'Fragmentation and Foreign Influence: Emerging Challenges to ECOWAS Integration,' 2025, Retrieved from: <https://afripoli.org/fragmentation-and-foreign-influence-emerging-challenges-to-ecowas-integration> 1-10.

after Nigeria emerged from a civil war that lasted between 1967 and 1970, ended with some African states recognising Biafra as a sovereign state.⁸¹ Nigeria, recognising its central leadership role in Africa, and which began even before it achieved political independence in 1960, craved to establish an independent supranational institution that would integrate western African economies and help mitigate the intrusions of the imperialists that seek to perpetually keep the sub-region dependent.⁸²

More so, Niger's recent decision to ban the sale of grains to Nigeria and restrict the supply of grains to its three allies ignores shared ethnic and historical ties with Nigeria's northern communities and further undermines whatever is left of Nigeria's leadership role in the sub-region, owing to the consequences of such a policy if allowed to be implemented. It raises questions about why Nigeria's leadership failure is sending negative signals.

Thus, this paper raises the question of a lack of visionary and purposeful leadership in the face of Nigeria's natural claim to lead the sub-region based on the availability of human and natural resources, and the ability of its leaders to promote West Africa as Nigeria's extended territory, despite the menacing presence of external powers. More so, it also shows why Nigeria's faltering remains an albatross to a sub-region in search of a hegemon to lead through displaying uncommon examples, and why Nigeria's failure to blaze the trail carries with it grim socioeconomic and security consequences.

Nigeria as a Sub-regional Leader in West Africa

Nigeria's leadership role in the sub-region has never been questioned in the manner it has been challenged by events occurring in West Africa, especially after the coup that brought the Nigerien junta to power. At independence, Nigerian leaders publicly declared their intention to assume the mantle of leadership in the sub-region through foisting on its shoulders the plights and challenges of the continent or the sub-region of West Africa, in what would later be conceptualised as

⁸¹ Oyewale Peter Oluwaseun and Adebisi Adeola, 'Externalization of Nigeria Civil War: Interrogating the Role of Côte d'Ivoire in the Recognition of Biafra; 1968-1970,' GSI: Volume 8, Issue 4, April (2020): 1693-1705.

⁸²Friday Aworawo, 'Nigeria and ECOWAS since 1999: Continuity and Change in Multilateralism and Conflict Resolution,' *Ihafa: A Journal of African Studies* 8, no. 2 December (2016): 1-16.

Afrocentrism.⁸³ At any given opportunity, these leaders reminded the world of their resolve to combat any power or forces that would counteract the progress of this part of the world. For instance, President Shehu Shagari, in one of his Presidential addresses, declared that:

The size, the population and the economic potential of this country have imposed on us a special duty to respond responsibly to international issues and problems. When it is realised that Nigeria's population makes every fifth African, as well as every sixth black person in the world a Nigerian, it becomes doubly incumbent upon us in formulating our policies, to bear in mind our historical responsibilities to Africa and the black diaspora.⁸⁴

The founding of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975 was perhaps the most convincing way Nigeria solidified its leadership credentials in the sub-region. To bring states that crave to maintain ties with France and Portugal, former colonial imperialists, into a supranational institution whose positions and decisions might sometimes contradict with those European imperialists, depicts the influence wielded by Nigeria, and which was used to establish the institution, as a way to deepen solidarity and maintain close economic cooperation,⁸⁵ all to the chagrin of some European powers.

According to Van da Boom's analysis, the main reason Niger and the rest of the Francophone countries gave in to the formation of ECOWAS is; firstly, Niger and

⁸³ Nigeria's foreign policy thrust has always placed African's plights and interests above its national interests. This is evident with the position of the nationalists, who believed that Nigeria possessed every resource needed to intervene and bring solutions to problems affecting any African state. The snag is, to operate freely and strongly, Nigeria needs to increase its economic and military strengths to counteract the vested interests of the Western hegemonies. Ukaogo Victor. Okoro, Okonkwo, Uche Uwaezuoke, Folerance, Orabueze, Virginia Eze, & Stella Ugwu-Okoye, Afro-centrism as the Centerpiece of Nigeria's Foreign Policy: A Historical Misnomer in the Aftermath of Xenophobic Attacks in South Africa', *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 7(1), (2020): 1-14.

⁸⁴ Shehu Shagari, 'Nigeria's Foreign Policy' (Nigerian Forum, Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA), December, 1982) 10.

⁸⁵ Manasseh Bassey and Monday Nyonge, 'Nigeria and ECOWAS in the 21st Century: Challenges and Prospects of Meaningful Sub-regional Integration,' In *Perspective on Nigeria's National politics and external relations*, T. A. Imobighe and W. O. Alli (eds.) (Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press, 2012), 271-290.

Benin both got power via their new regimes, they both disposed positively to Nigeria and they succeeded in distancing themselves from France through the positive commitments to Nigeria. Secondly, Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire induced so many reasons to cooperate with Nigeria than to stand against it.⁸⁶ Indeed, the claim that Nigeria's resources and the willingness to share these resources with its neighbours convinced them to form an institution that Nigeria would use its influence to devise its path, fails to account for the altruistic disposition of Nigeria as a 'big brother' – an attribute that places Nigeria against the well-founded principles of offering no free lunch in international politics.

For instance, despite huge advantages Nigeria possesses in terms of population and financial resources, which had already been publicly acknowledged by President Shagari, Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa used every speech to clarify Nigeria's stance and obsession on Africa's issues. However, he stated that Nigeria is still a committed member of the globe and that prioritising Africa does not translate to abandonment of its commitment to global engagements. To wit, he declared thus:

So far, I have concentrated on the problems of Africa. Please do not think we are not interested in the problems of the world, we are interested in them and hope to be allowed to assist in finding solutions to this organisation, but being human, we are naturally concerned first with what affects our immediate neighbour.⁸⁷

Balewa's speech and those made by what is known as First and Second Republic leaders in Nigeria spawned numerous daring and successful exploits like the intervention in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s, respectively, showing what great achievements Nigeria could galvanise in collaborating with sister states in the sub-region, although disproportionately exerting its resources and influence. However, Nigeria's deployment of troops, which had all the trappings of altruism, was nonetheless misconstrued by the West.

Today, a lot has changed, and the once formidable player in the sub-region has been boxed into a corner it is trying to extricate itself from. The ambitious and ebullient

⁸⁶ Ibrahim, Yusuf Kamaldeen., Abdullahi Ayoade Ahmad, Nasa'l Gwadabe, 'The Nigerian Influence on ECOWAS and its Reiterates towards the Single Proposed Currency ECO,' *Artech J. Art Social Sci.* 2 (2020): 115-121.

⁸⁷ Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, *Nigeria Speak* (Lagos: Longman, 1964), 1-178.
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postures of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s have given way to a moderate and subdued Nigeria, which is more interested in managing its festering socioeconomic and political crises than in financing exorbitant campaigns that would bring zilch economic benefits to the country.

Decades of Missteps in Nigeria's Leadership Role

Ugoani argues that Nigeria's missteps in managing the economy began in 1981⁸⁸, ironically, after the period Nigeria earned a seismic windfall from the sale of oil as a result of the Yom Kippur War in the Middle East in 1973. The seemingly intractable conflict between the State of Israel and Palestine had opened a window of opportunity for Nigeria to earn an enormous unexpected amount of money from Arab states' decision to halt oil sales to the West for its support to Israel.⁸⁹

The influx of petrodollar led to the abandonment of non-oil sectors of the economy, like agriculture, and the diversification of the economy,⁹⁰ which led to the erosion of values that are crucial in managing the gigantic revenues that poured in from the sales of crude oil. The availability of funds enabled the Nigerian government to embark on expensive campaigns abroad, to which it offset without resorting to making extra-budgetary provisions – just like the Iranian government's decision to use funds derived from the sale of oil to finance violent acts abroad, it christened “resistance movement.”

More so, Nigeria's political system poses a great deal of strain on revenues generated, since the majority of it goes into serving administrative personnel rather than being funnelled into critical sectors of the economy that have the potential to stimulate economic growth and development.⁹¹ The bureaucratic bottlenecks that

⁸⁸ John Ugoani, 'Mismanagement and Reform Failures in Nigeria: Historical Perspective,' *Independent Journal of Management and Production* Vol. 8, no. 2 (2017): 498-503.

⁸⁹ Innocent Ocholi and Nnamdi Okonkwo, 'Oil and the Nigerian Foreign Policy 1970 – 1999,' *Journal of Political Discourse* 2, no. 1 (2024): 58-66.

⁹⁰ Ademola Bosede Sekumade, 'The Effects of Petroleum Dependency on Agricultural Trade in Nigeria: An Error Correlation Modeling (ECM) Approach,' *Scientific Research and Essay* 4, no. 11 (2009): 1385-1391.

⁹¹ Bitrus Nakah Bature, 'The Dutch Disease and the Diversification of an Economy: Some Case Studies,' *IOSR Journal of Humanity and Social Science (IOSR JHSS)* 15, Issue 5 (2023): 6-14.

⁷² *The Journal of Zaria Historical Research (ZAHIR)* Vol. 6, No. 3, December 2024, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria

accompany the over-bloated wage bill of the government ensured that policies and programmes of the government ground to a slow pace that retarded progress and development. Corrupt practices and stealing of funds through diverse means, which are some of the inevitable downsides of bureaucracy, have stunted the diversification of the economy and created a clique of Nigerians who claim to be richer than their country.⁹² These challenges contributed significantly to frustrating Nigeria's efforts to build a modern, functional, and productive economy that would withstand the firepower of the capitalist orbit.

The deluge of economic challenges that started affecting Nigeria in the early 1980s has reduced Nigeria's ability to demonstrate its commitment to Africa and West Africa as a formidable influence capable of shouldering the deleterious designs of the Western world. Even in Africa, Nigeria's prestige has significantly watered down to the extent that many African states and their nationals have displayed deep aversion and ingratitude to Nigeria and its people. For instance, the occasional outbursts of Afrophobia, whereby Africans are routinely injured and killed and their properties destroyed, while Europeans and Americans classified as tourists, are left untouched by South African citizens is partly a reflection of Nigeria's failure to use its diplomatic influence to compel South African government to rein disillusioned youths in search of scapegoats for their deteriorating socioeconomic status.⁹³ These incidences whereby Africans are forced to accept conditions that are vehemently abhorred in other parts of the world, points to an apparent lack of a formidable hegemon capable of defending Africa's interests with its economic, military, and technological might.

Nigeria, Afrocentrism, and Wobbling Leadership

The adoption of Afrocentrism as Nigeria's foreign thrust was altruistically conceived by leaders of the First Republic and boastfully implemented by leaders

⁹² Baba David Danjuma and A. Amana Philip, 'Bureaucracy and Development in Nigeria: Issues and Perspectives,' *Journal of Developing Country Studies* 1, no.1 (2016): 1-11.

⁹³ Anayo Uche Abarigwe, 'Afrophobia not Xenophobia: Why the Carnage Continues,' *Adeboye Institute for Peace and Good Governance (AIPGG) Journal of Humanities and Peace Studies*, Redeemer's University 2, no. (2021): 1-11.

of the Second Republic. These periods – that is, First and Second Republics – were times when Africa was under the crushing yoke of European colonialism, and the feelings worldwide were that colonialism is inhuman and has to end. Nigeria leveraged on this notion and committed its resources to help fight any form of oppression against African states and their people.

Indeed, Nigeria's Afrocentrism policy puts it in direct and permanent confrontation with the traditional vultures that masquerade as development partners. Africa has been criminally designed to be the perpetual provider of mineral resources to the capitalist world, and even political independence will not change this decision, agreed by the capitalists. So, Africa's independence would be real and meaningful in changing this ugly tag by truly asserting its sovereignty and independently developing its resources. The concept of neo-colonialism would not have emerged if colonialism truly ended via political independence, and if Europeans were content with restricting their urge for raw materials, which they had stolen during colonialism. The shallowness of political independence means that Nigeria must strenuously work to make African states viable and strong to ward off external antics that aim to erode the ability of states to assert their sovereignty and act independently to defend their national interests.

It appears that Nigeria did not recognise what it really means to place Africa as the totem pole of its foreign thrust, and the challenges that lie ahead. Nigeria must first acquire what is required to fight off imperialists and their internal collaborators, and what Nigeria must become to effectively ready itself for this onerous task. Nigeria must borrow a leaf from China since the Chinese example has shown that the West is only defeated when its prey acquires the ability to courageously fight them off. The ignominies suffered by the Chinese people from the 1930s to the time the People's Republic of China was declared in 1949,⁹⁴ and what China has become today, show that, had Nigeria taken a similar path to economic growth and development, Africa's story would not be as deplorable as it is today. China, together with what is called the Asian Tigers, has shown every genuine state and

⁹⁴ Joyce Kallgren, Editor, 'The People's Republic of China after Thirty Years: An Overview' (A Publication of the Center for Chinese Studies, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, California, 1979), 1-122.

people what is needed to become developed and the benefits therein, especially as it relates to interacting with the West.

Nigerian leaders have practically failed in their self-imposed task of protecting Africa's interests, and the numerous well-written speeches the leaders made on Africa in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. From the period of the oil boom, Nigeria has relied on the funds and advice of Western financial institutions to extricate itself from the economic doldrums it placed itself in through mismanagement and lack of foresight. Since Nigeria began accepting loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank,⁹⁵ its economic woes have deepened; it has relinquished its sovereignty and relied on the West for direction, even though hindsight has shown that no state has developed with the deathly pills routinely offered as economic advice from the Bretton Woods institutions.

Nigeria's age-long wobbling is the reason it seeks Western approval and support before it carries out any action that may harm the interests of the West. Recall the famous speech of "Africa has come of age,"⁹⁶ made in 1975 by Gen. Murtala Mohammad that principally challenged the position of the United States on the issue of Angola's decolonisation, the nationalisation of Barclay Bank and British Petroleum, and see how Nigeria has failed to follow up that bold posture that would cement it as a virile, strong, and formidable African power. Unfortunately, Gen. Murtala was viciously killed in a 1976 orchestrated coup d'état that bore the hallmarks of Western imprimatur, and Nigeria descended into a period of leadership inertia that escalated socioeconomic crises that pushed it deeper into the apron-string of the West, losing its cherished stance to defend Africa's plights and challenges.

⁹⁵Zekeri Momoh, 'The Bretton Woods Institutions and the Quest for Development in Africa,' *Otoritas: Jurnal Ilmu Pemerintahan* 13, no. 2 (2023): 352-363.

⁹⁶Waisu Iliyasu, 'Africa Has Come of Age': A Fleeting Glimpse of General Murtala's Addis Ababa Speech and Foreign Policy Thrust' (Being a Seminar Paper Presented at the Departmental Seminar Series, Department of History and Security Studies, UMYU, Katsina, 2011), 1-12.

Nigeria as an Albatross to Development in the West African Sub-region

The failure of Afrocentrism denotes that Nigeria might become a problem to be solved, even though scholars in Nigeria are clamouring for the jettisoning of that philosophical mantra, as it has become obviously anachronistic. The argument claims that Nigeria's obsession with Africa's plights has not translated into any concrete benefits to its citizens. More so, recipients of Nigeria's unstinting generosity have largely remained ungrateful and take delight in harming the interests of Nigeria in any way possible. Plus, Nigeria has a policy of abandoning its citizens in need of assistance abroad.

Nigeria's unfortunate faltering trajectory has discouraged and limited the emergence of prosperous economies in the sub-region that would counteract, stifle, or limit inimical external designs that weaken Africa and prevent it from implementing self-asserted foreign policy. Indeed, the lack of good examples from Nigeria, as a state comparably blessed with human and natural resources, have encouraged leaders to be incompetent and unpatriotic, since the hordes of leaders produced by Nigeria neither understood what it means to be a leader, nor had any trace of patriotism in them, let alone having the nerve to provide good leadership on the continent.

Using ECOWAS to espouse democratic ideals that inspire good governance has proven futile because it is a virtue the Nigerian government holds dearly but has never put into practice. The institution has become like its sister institution, the African Union (AU), legitimately criticised as a mere talking shop or a dictator's club.⁹⁷ These institutions have no clout to influence their objectives in international politics because they comprise states with weak diplomatic capital and influence, and as a result, rely on the West – the very demography that is responsible for more than half of its problems – to have some of their objectives partly achieved. For instance, South Africa's decision to ally with BRICS looks promising; however, such an alliance would not solve its well-known metastasising socioeconomic and political problems that have eluded the ruling African National Congress (ANC) for decades.

⁹⁷Olatunbosun Adeniyi et al, 'African Union and the Challenges of Development,' *Journal of African Union Studies* 5, no. 2/3 (2016): 67-89.

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The outbreak of coup d'état in West Africa has been attributed as consequences of the spiralling, debilitating socioeconomic conditions, festering insecurity, and the disruptive influence of the external powers.⁹⁸ Some of these factors have been noted by works of scholars as reasons why coups occur, but the majority of coups in the sub-regions are diametrically different from the coups of the 1960s and 1970s. The planners of these coups express deep-seated animosity for the unchallenged exploitations of African resources and control of its leaders by Western powers that had military bases in parts of Africa, established purportedly for fighting terrorism. Therefore, the coups were staged to eliminate Western control of Africa's natural resources since hindsight has proven it is the sole reason for which they are found in Africa.

Due to Nigeria's inability to uphold Afrocentrism and make it acceptable to other states in the sub-region, disgruntled leaders and military officers in search of a hegemon to counterbalance the well-structured and overwhelmingly networks Western economic and technological power, decided to partner with Russia, a state brutally designated as an illiberal democracy by Western media and governments. Russia is nonetheless becoming popular to many Africans as a substitute to counteract Western excesses.

The body language of successful coup plotters indicates it is reasonable to assert that coups are regularly planned with Russia's staunch approval. Russia might have provided the intelligence needed to make coups successfully and immediately assume a position similar to that of the Westerners in the 1960s and 1970s. However, it is left to be seen if these coups would usher socioeconomic progress since Western control and influence have been substantially reduced, and Russia's influence has witnessed remarkable ascendancy that has outraged the West and its allies.

Furthermore, should states in the sub-region decide to honour the invitation of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to leave ECOWAS and join their newly-formed alliance supported by Russia, it may well sound the death knell for Nigeria's leadership role on the continent. However, even if a new supranational institution is formed against the backdrop of the successful coups in the sub-region, a reinvigorated Nigeria may

⁹⁸ Mannjong Callistus Acho and Follah Placate Tacham, 'Examining the Reasons for and Effects of Military Coups in West Africa since 1990: The Obstacles to Democracy and Progress,' *International Journal of Humanity and Social Sciences* 1, no. 2 (2023): 20–33.

benefit from its existence and use it to its advantage, if it can build a strong and virile economy, and seek to reform Afrocentrism and work to spread its principles across the black world.

Indeed, the failure of Nigeria is the failure of West Africa, just like its success would greatly benefit the sub-region as well. Although Nigeria's situation is not unsalvageable, a lot of work is needed to reposition it, especially in providing leadership and guidance to sister states. Until Nigeria gets its house in order, the deluge of military coups and the arrival of Russia as a replacement of the West might prove insufficient to provide the homegrown socioeconomic and cultural development the people of the sub-region yearn for.

Conclusion

This paper has examined Nigeria's faltering leadership trajectory that opposes the fantastic philosophical precept that was conceived to elevate the sub-region and subsequently robbing off on the entire black race. Given the exploitative relationship between Africa and Europe, and the desire of the latter to maintain the status quo using subtle means, Afrocentrism, when polished and propagated by sweat and blood, would have become the philosophical bulwark of the black race against Western desire to make Africa a perpetual producer of natural resources.

Nigerian leaders tottered along the way, and the tottering continued even when some notable achievements were made, though inadequate, but a signal that great things would have happened if Nigeria had maintained its position, building its economy and developing its military and technological architectures to be capable of combating the pernicious schemes of the West. Unfortunately, today, Nigeria is inundated with challenges that are common in the sub-region and which depict a common provenance.

The paper argues that due to Nigeria's missteps, real and sustainable development has eluded the sub-region, giving way to numerous social ill that exposes the porosity of leadership. Terrorism has developed, thrived in unprecedented destruction, and has taken what seems like a permanent abode in the sub-region, even with the presence of highly sophisticated Western military bases, and their well-reported but spurious claims of fighting terrorists. Coup d'état has returned with a new "patron saint" in a surprising way that threatens and harms the interests of the West, and seeks to supplant Western powers with Russia, a resurgent power

that is fiercely challenging the Western hegemonic structure that has caused grave harm to the economies and peoples of the sub-region. It is instructive to note that Nigeria's ordained leadership position, although stymied by decades of groping in the dark and by contrived Western designs to perpetuate a status quo of dependency, is possible for Nigeria to reclaim its leadership role by drastically improving and freeing its economy from the shackles of Western domination and control.

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