

## NIGERIA'S PERSPECTIVE ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND ITS ROLE IN MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY

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### **Abstract**

Nigeria occupies a complex and often contradictory position within the global human rights architecture. As Africa's most populous country and an influential regional power, it frequently portrays a commitment to international norms, multilateralism, and global cooperation. Yet the domestic human rights environment shaped by political instability, security crises, institutional weaknesses, and socio-cultural tensions often reveals gaps between formal obligations and practical implementation. This article interrogates Nigeria's role in the international human rights system by exploring the nature of its treaty commitments, diplomatic behaviour within international organizations, and the extent to which domestic governance aligns with global human rights expectations. Drawing on historical developments, legal frameworks, and foreign policy shifts, it argues that Nigeria's human rights diplomacy is largely characterized by dualism: outward commitments shaped by strategic interests and normative pressures, and inward struggles driven by political realities and structural constraints. The analysis highlights both the progress and persistent challenges that define Nigeria's engagement with international norms.

**Keywords:** Africa, International Norms, Multilateralism, Domestic, Human Rights, Environment

### **Introduction**

The relationship between human rights and diplomacy is a critical lens through which the global order is increasingly examined. States are expected not only to uphold human rights within their jurisdictions but also to demonstrate a commitment to these norms in their international behaviour. Nigeria, since gaining independence in 1960, has sought to project itself as a responsible member of the international community advocating anti-colonial solidarity,

supporting peacekeeping missions, and ratifying major human rights instruments. Its regional leadership ambitions, particularly within West Africa, have further shaped its diplomatic posture. However, Nigeria's domestic human rights record has often been marred by military interventions, ethno-religious conflicts, security sector abuses, gender-based discrimination, environmental injustices in the Niger Delta, and persistent governance deficits. These contradictions raise fundamental questions: How has Nigeria positioned itself in relation to global human rights norms? To what extent does its diplomacy reflect genuine commitment or strategic calculation? And how do domestic realities influence its international standing? This article critically examines these issues, offering a nuanced understanding of Nigeria's interactions with the international human rights regime.

### **Human Rights**

Human rights are the inalienable rights to which all human beings are equally entitled, irrespective of creed, nationality, race, political opinions, colour, social affinity or sex. The enjoyment of these rights is, however, subject to respecting the rights and freedoms of others (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The government of a state has a duty to protect and guarantee the rights of its citizens. The constitutions of the different sovereign nations of the world contain the elements of this definition. Eso (1985:211) states that human right is a right which stands above the ordinary law of the land and which is antecedent to the political society. Human rights are a primary condition for a civilised existence.

## **Diplomacy**

Diplomacy, in its classical sense, is the art and practice of conducting negotiations between states, aimed at managing relations, advancing interests, and resolving conflicts. Modern scholarship, however, emphasizes that diplomacy is not only state-centric but also encompasses multilateral interactions through international organizations, treaty mechanisms, and non-state actors (Berridge, 2015). In this light, human rights diplomacy refers to a subset of diplomatic practice where the promotion, negotiation, and enforcement of human rights norms constitute primary objectives (Clapham, 2007).

## **Multilateral**

Multilateral engagement refers to the involvement of states in international and regional organizations to address common concerns, including human rights. Nigeria, as a member of the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and other regional bodies, participates in the negotiation of human rights treaties, the adoption of resolutions, and peer review mechanisms. Multilateral platforms allow Nigeria not only to project its normative stance but also to shape the evolution of global human rights norms, balancing domestic priorities with international expectations (Fitzmaurice, 2010).

The interaction between these concepts is critical to understanding Nigeria's human rights diplomacy. The promotion of human rights abroad is simultaneously an extension of domestic policy considerations and an instrument of foreign policy strategy. Scholars argue that Nigeria's engagement in human rights diplomacy is influenced by a combination of normative commitment to universal principles, regional leadership ambitions, and domestic political

imperatives (Okafor, 2011). This dual character reflects the tension between normative ideals and political pragmatism, a common feature in the human rights diplomacy of Global South states.

### **The Historical Foundation of Nigeria's Human Rights Diplomacy**

Nigeria's human rights diplomacy has deep historical roots that trace back to the political, constitutional, and ideological developments that shaped the country from the late colonial era through independence and subsequent political transitions (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The foundations of this diplomatic posture were laid during the nationalist struggle, when early political leaders framed the demand for self-rule in terms of freedom, equality, and the dignity of Africans under colonial domination. This created a moral and political vocabulary that later informed the country's international engagements. At independence in 1960, Nigeria adopted a foreign policy that emphasized anti-colonialism, racial equality, and support for liberation movements across Africa (Human Rights Watch, 2023). These priorities, though external in orientation, represented an early form of human rights diplomacy rooted in solidarity with oppressed peoples, particularly in contexts such as apartheid South Africa and Portuguese-ruled territories. Nigeria's strong opposition to racial discrimination and its vocal advocacy within the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity established a tradition of aligning foreign policy with broader normative principles.

The evolution of Nigeria's human rights diplomacy was also shaped by constitutional developments. The 1960 and 1963 constitutions contained fundamental rights provisions influenced by the European and American constitutional models transmitted through British rule.

Although these rights were limited in practice, their inclusion signalled an early awareness of global norms. The civil war period (1967–1970) introduced profound contradictions, as the imperative of national unity overshadowed rights considerations. Nevertheless, Nigeria continued to project itself internationally as a defender of African unity and self-determination. The post-war years reinforced Nigeria’s commitment to multilateralism, particularly through peacekeeping in Congo and later in Liberia and Sierra Leone, where the protection of civilians and restoration of legitimate governance were framed as human rights imperatives.

During the long years of military rule, Nigeria’s international human rights posture became increasingly complex. Military governments retained formal commitments to human rights treaties but governed in ways that undermined those principles. Yet even in this period, Nigeria ratified several key human rights instruments, including the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The gap between treaty ratification and domestic practice widened dramatically, especially during the regime that executed Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni activists in 1995. This event marked a turning point in Nigeria’s human rights diplomacy, drawing intense international criticism and leading to suspension from the Commonwealth. The diplomatic backlash demonstrated that human rights had become inseparable from Nigeria’s global reputation, forcing a re-evaluation of its international commitments.

With the transition to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria sought to rebuild credibility and re-establish itself as a responsible actor in the international system. The return to democracy revived earlier normative traditions and provided a platform for renewed engagement with human rights

institutions at the global, regional, and sub-regional levels. The government strengthened domestic institutions such as the National Human Rights Commission and undertook legislative and policy reforms that enabled deeper participation in international human rights mechanisms. Nigeria also became more responsive to reviews by bodies such as the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the United Nations Human Rights Council. This phase reinforced the link between domestic democratic consolidation and foreign policy identity, situating human rights as a core though contested pillar of Nigeria's diplomatic orientation.

Overall, the historical foundations of Nigeria's human rights diplomacy are defined by a blend of anti-colonial normative commitments, constitutional rights traditions, pan-African solidarity, multilateral participation, and the pressures of international scrutiny. From early advocacy against racial oppression to modern engagements with complex treaty regimes, Nigeria's external behaviour has been shaped by both principled aspirations and political contradictions. This history explains the dual character of Nigeria's current human rights diplomacy: outwardly supportive of global norms while internally grappling with governance challenges that continue to influence its international engagements. Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (although domestic implementation remains contested). Ratifying treaties allows Nigeria to present itself as a rights-respecting nation, but the dualist nature of its legal system means that treaties require domestication through national legislation before they can take effect.

### **Methodology**

The study relied on secondary data from various textbooks, journals, pamphlets, government documents, the internet and newspapers. The data gathered were subjected to descriptive analysis and a deducing conclusion from the results.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Theory of Constructivism**

Constructivism provides a compelling theoretical explanation for Nigeria's human rights diplomacy because it emphasizes the influence of ideas, norms, identities, and social expectations on state behaviour. Unlike realism, which prioritizes power and material interests, or liberal institutionalism, which stresses formal cooperation, constructivism argues that states act based on shared values and accepted standards of appropriate behaviour within the international system (Wendt, 1999). Nigeria's engagement with human rights norms, despite domestic inconsistencies, aligns strongly with this perspective.

From independence, Nigeria sought to construct an identity as a responsible African leader committed to justice, equality, and anti-colonial solidarity. Its vocal opposition to apartheid and racial discrimination was grounded in shared historical experiences and collective African identity rather than immediate material benefits (Adebajo, 2010). Constructivism explains these actions as a reflection of Nigeria internalizing and projecting norms valued by the African and global community.

The theory is also helpful in understanding Nigeria's persistent ratification of major human rights treaties, including the ICCPR, ICESCR, CEDAW, and the CRC. Even when domestic institutions struggle to implement these obligations, Nigeria continues to align itself with global human rights frameworks because such behaviour is considered appropriate and contributes to international legitimacy (Risse, Ropp & Sikkink, 2013). Nigeria's participation in UN Human Rights Council sessions, Universal Periodic Review processes, and AU human rights mechanisms further shows how global socialization shapes its diplomatic conduct.

Constructivism also clarifies Nigeria's post-1999 resurgence in human rights diplomacy. After years of military rule and international isolation, particularly following the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995, Nigeria sought to reconstruct its identity as a democratic and rights-respecting state. This led to reforms such as the strengthening of the National Human Rights Commission and greater openness to ECOWAS Court judgments. These steps reflected Nigeria's effort to realign with global expectations and reclaim its normative standing in international society (Akinboye, 2013).

In essence, constructivism shows that Nigeria's human rights diplomacy is shaped less by material calculation and more by the desire to conform to international norms, maintain legitimacy, and uphold an identity consistent with global human rights expectations. Even when domestic practices fall short, Nigeria's continued engagement with rights discourse demonstrates the power of norms and international socialization in driving its external behaviour.

### **Human Rights and Nigeria's Multilateral Diplomacy**

Nigeria's multilateral diplomacy has long been shaped by its ambition to project itself as a responsible regional power and a defender of global norms (Amnesty International, 2022). Central to this self-image is the country's engagement with international human rights frameworks. Although its domestic rights record remains uneven, Nigeria continues to utilize multilateral platforms especially the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), and ECOWAS to demonstrate commitment to human rights protection and to influence global governance. This discussion examines Nigeria's participation in these institutions, focusing on how its diplomatic behaviour aligns with or diverges from international human rights norms.

## **Nigeria at the United Nations**

Nigeria's engagement with the United Nations represents the most visible dimension of its multilateral diplomacy. The country has ratified major UN human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (UN Treaty Collection, 2023). These commitments provide the normative foundation for its diplomacy at the Human Rights Council (HRC).

Nigeria has served multiple terms on the HRC, often aligning with broader African and Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) positions. Scholars argue that Nigeria's voting patterns traditionally reflect a balancing act between Western liberal norms and Global South concerns about sovereignty and non-interference (Adebajo, 2010). For example, Nigeria often supports resolutions addressing racism, development, and collective rights, while adopting more cautious positions on issues perceived as culturally sensitive, such as LGBTQ+ protections (Ikejiani-Clark & Ezirim, 2018).

Nigeria's leadership in UN peacekeeping further reinforces its human rights diplomacy. Through missions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Darfur, Nigeria has promoted regional stability and civilian protection, which are recognized as components of human security (Bujra, 2002). These operations enhance Nigeria's profile as a promoter of rights and peace, even as domestic shortcomings persist.

## **Engagement within the African Union (AU)**

Nigeria has played a central role in shaping continental human rights institutions. It was a key supporter of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981), one of the most

progressive regional human rights instruments (Murray, 2004). Nigerian diplomats and jurists such as Justice Ibrahim Tanko Muhammad and others, have contributed significantly to the African Commission and the African Court's jurisprudence.

Nigeria's active engagement in AU human rights processes demonstrates its desire to construct a continental leadership identity. As Akinboye (2013) observes, Nigeria tends to frame human rights issues within broader concerns about African solidarity and the legacy of colonialism, often advocating for the principle of "African solutions to African problems." This positions Nigeria as a reformist actor within AU institutions.

However, Nigeria's domestic rights challenges often undermine its credibility at the AU level. Cases relating to extrajudicial killings, police abuses, and violations in the Niger Delta regularly attract attention from AU bodies, placing Nigeria in a defensive diplomatic posture (ACHPR, 2018).

### **Nigeria and the ECOWAS Human Rights System**

The ECOWAS Court of Justice has become a critical forum for human rights enforcement in West Africa. Nigeria, due to its size and political significance, is both a leading supporter of ECOWAS legal frameworks and one of the most frequent respondents before the Court (Ebobrah, 2012).

### **Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Diplomacy**

Nigeria's participation in peacekeeping remains a cornerstone of its multilateral strategy. Its leadership in ECOMOG operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone demonstrates a commitment to protecting civilians and restoring democratic governance principles consistent with international human rights norms (Adebajo, 2002).

Additionally, Nigeria frequently supports UN resolutions on humanitarian access, refugee protection, and conflict prevention. These positions reflect the country's historical posture as a stabilizing force in West Africa, even though domestic displacements caused by Boko Haram raise concerns about internal humanitarian obligations (Omilusi, 2018).

### **The Effects of Human Rights on Nigeria's Multilateral Diplomacy**

Human rights considerations have significantly shaped Nigeria's multilateral diplomacy, influencing the country's foreign policy posture, its engagements within international organizations, and its global identity. As a state that has historically positioned itself as a key African actor, the integration of human rights norms into diplomatic practice has produced a wide range of effects, normative, political, institutional, and reputational that continue to inform how Nigeria navigates the multilateral system (Murray, 2004).

One major effect is the transformation of Nigeria's international identity. Since the end of military rule in 1999, human rights have become central to Nigeria's attempt to portray itself as a democratic, responsible, and norm-abiding member of the international community (Amnesty International, 2022). Participation in multilateral human rights forums such as the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Universal Periodic Review process, and the African Union's human rights bodies has enabled Nigeria to signal its commitment to global standards. This diplomatic behaviour helps counter the legacy of previous authoritarian regimes and supports Nigeria's image-building efforts in global politics.

Human rights have also shaped Nigeria's regional leadership ambitions, especially within ECOWAS and the African Union. By adopting strong positions on democracy, civilian protection, and constitutional order, Nigeria has used rights-based arguments to legitimize its

leadership role across West Africa. For example, its peacekeeping and mediation efforts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, and The Gambia were justified in part by appeals to human rights, rule of law, and democratic principles. Thus, human rights norms have provided Nigeria with a diplomatic vocabulary for intervention, influence, and regional norm entrepreneurship.

A further effect relates to Nigeria's increasing engagement with treaty obligations and international monitoring mechanisms. As a signatory to major international human rights treaties, including ICCPR, ICESCR, CEDAW, and the CRC, Nigeria is required to submit periodic reports and engage in structured dialogue with international committees (Uzoigwe, 2019). This process has influenced the country's bureaucratic and diplomatic machinery, requiring the development of specialized units within ministries, technical expertise in human rights law, and regular coordination between domestic institutions and multilateral bodies. Consequently, human rights diplomacy has contributed to institutional capacity-building within Nigeria's foreign policy architecture.

Human rights norms have also shaped Nigeria's relations with powerful international partners. Western countries, international organizations, and donor agencies frequently assess Nigeria's commitment to democracy and rights when determining development aid, security partnerships, and trade cooperation (Amnesty International, 2022). Nigeria's performance in multilateral human rights settings therefore affects its access to international assistance and its credibility as a security partner. Human rights diplomacy, in this regard, acts as a mechanism through which Nigeria either strengthens or weakens its strategic relationships.

Another notable effect is the role of human rights in driving domestic policy reforms through multilateral pressure. Multilateral engagement often generates recommendations, peer reviews,

and observations that place normative pressure on Nigeria to undertake legal and institutional reforms (Murray, 2004). Examples include reforms related to child rights, women's rights, counterterrorism practices, and criminal justice procedures. Although implementation is inconsistent, multilateral human rights diplomacy has contributed to domestic conversations on governance, accountability, and social justice (Adebajo, 2010).

At the same time, human rights considerations have created diplomatic tensions and contradictions for Nigeria. While the country promotes democratic norms regionally, its domestic human rights challenges, ranging from police brutality to restrictions on civic space, gender inequality, and conflict-related abuses, undermine its credibility. This discrepancy between external commitments and internal realities often leads to criticism from multilateral organizations, civil society actors, and international observers. As a result, Nigeria's diplomatic efforts sometimes focus on defending its sovereignty, contextualising its human rights record, or negotiating more favourable interpretations of international obligations (Bujra, 2002).

Human rights also influence Nigeria's multilateral diplomacy through the rise of non-state actors, including civil society organizations and international NGOs, which increasingly participate in global human rights governance. Their engagement strengthens international scrutiny but also supports Nigeria's reporting processes and advocacy efforts. The involvement of these actors adds a multilayered complexity to Nigeria's diplomatic environment, where state and non-state interests intersect (Donnelly, 2013).

Lastly, human rights have contributed to Nigeria's norm diffusion role, enabling the country to champion issues such as anti-apartheid, decolonization, peacekeeping, and democratic transitions. Even when domestic enforcement is imperfect, Nigeria's diplomatic advocacy has

influenced wider African and international discourse on collective rights, socio-economic rights, and continental human rights standards (Uzoigwe, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

Nigeria's engagement in human rights diplomacy reflects a complex interplay between international norms, domestic imperatives, and regional leadership ambitions. Historically, Nigeria has sought to project itself as a normative actor in Africa, championing human rights through multilateral frameworks such as the United Nations, African Union, and ECOWAS. The literature and conceptual analysis indicate that Nigeria's approach is shaped not only by a commitment to universal human rights principles but also by domestic political, socio-cultural, and economic realities (Adebajo, 2010). The process of norm internalization and localization demonstrates that while Nigeria supports global human rights norms, it selectively adapts them to fit national priorities and cultural contexts.

Furthermore, the interplay between multilateral diplomacy and domestic implementation underscores the challenges Nigeria faces in translating international commitments into effective policy and practice (Bujra, 2002). Structural constraints, including constitutional limitations, political will, and resource capacity, as well as the tension between Universalist and culturally relativist interpretations of rights, affect the country's human rights record. Nevertheless, Nigeria's active participation in regional and global human rights mechanisms positions it as a significant actor in shaping normative discourses in Africa and beyond.

## Recommendations

- ❖ Nigeria should prioritize the domestication of international human rights treaties into national legislation to bridge the gap between international obligations and local practice. This includes harmonizing domestic laws with treaty provisions and ensuring effective enforcement mechanisms.
- ❖ The Nigerian Foreign Service and relevant ministries should receive continuous training in international human rights law and diplomacy to enhance negotiation, advocacy, and representation in multilateral forums.
- ❖ Civil society organizations play a critical role in monitoring, advocacy, and normative socialization. Strengthening partnerships between the government and civil society can enhance transparency, accountability, and public ownership of human rights norms.
- ❖ Nigeria should continue to use its influence in ECOWAS and the African Union to shape human rights agendas, promote best practices, and facilitate peer review mechanisms, thereby enhancing regional human rights standards.
- ❖ Nationwide campaigns and educational programs can sensitize citizens to human rights, fostering a culture of respect and compliance from the grassroots level.

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