

# History: Implacable Foes of Southern African Apartheid and Colonialism

Murtala Muhammed and Olusegun Obasanjo

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Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

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*Nigeria's military government headed by Murtala Muhammed (1938-1976) and Olusegun Obasanjo (b. 1937) from July 1975 to October 1979 was one that was marked by its implacable opposition to Apartheid and colonialism in southern Africa.*

*The hardline stance it took was predicted by U.S. embassy dispatches which considered both men to be fundamentally anti-West in attitude. Prior to coming to power, Obasanjo had, with the backing of troops, sought to evict US embassy agencies from annex premises by staging a 24-hour occupation. It was a portent of the radical attitude both men would take when they held the reins of power.*

Brigadier Murtala Muhammed, an army signals officer, and Brigadier Olusegun Obasanjo, an army engineer were on the radar of the American embassy in Lagos, Nigeria long before they seized power in a military coup. And as a result of the observations and analysis provided by the ambassador and other staff, the United States came to consider each to be dangerous firebrands when it came to their dealings with the West and their attitude to the Apartheid regime of South Africa.

Appraisals of the character of both men are contained in declassified State Department cables dispatched from the US embassy before and after the coup which overthrew General Yakubu Gowon on July 29th 1975. One accurately described Muhammed as an "impetuous, ruthless man", while another considered Obasanjo to be -again correctly- a "strong-willed egocentric" young man. And with their coming to power in the aftermath of the anti-Gowon putsch, it was correctly predicted that a Muhammed and Obasanjo-led junta (including M.D. Yusuf, the Inspector-General of Police) would formulate an even harder line policy in relation to southern Africa, which would lead to friction with the United States government, which at the time was pro-dialogue and anti-sanctions. Both men were seen as being particularly sensitive to issues which raised the question of anti-black racism and the liberation struggles in southern Africa which centred on Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia-Zimbabwe and South Africa.

A communication titled "Nigeria's New Leaders: A Preliminary Estimate" which was dispatched to Washington on Wednesday, July 30th 1975, noted that three years earlier at a conference on foreign policy, both Muhammed and Obasanjo had entered into what they felt was an "extraordinary" exchange on southern Africa, with the impulsive Muhammed insisting that Nigeria should send combatant troops "to South Africa", and Obasanjo retorting to his hot-headed colleague: "O.K. you can go to South Africa, but I'm staying

here.”

Despite his caution on that issue, Obasanjo was also, nonetheless, seen to be hardline. A cable dated July 14th 1975 which ruminated on US-Nigerian relationships in the wake of Obasanjo’s invasion of Embassy property, noted the following:

Notwithstanding his usual reputation as jovial and openly pro-American, Obasanjo has in the past expressed strong feelings on American policies in Africa. He is reportedly deeply committed to the African liberation struggle; he has discounted the prospects of cooperation with the “white-controlled” world and prior to April 1974 had accused NATO of encouraging, arming and financing Portugal to carry suppression and genocide. He is said to believe that in a showdown, the US and NATO would be allies of South Africa and Rhodesia.

The forecast of hardline policies would be borne out.

At an appearance at a special Organisation of African Unity (OAU) summit in January 1976 during which the majority of member nations formally recognised the MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertacao de Angola) as the legitimate representative of Angolan self-determination, Muhammed’s “Africa Has Come of Age” speech captured attention. The speech itself was a rebuttal of the sentiments expressed to Muhammed by US President Gerald Ford in a [letter](#) the Federal Military Government made public in January 1976. Muhammed was offended by what he perceived as the lecturing tone of Ford about the decision of Muhammed’s government to give official recognition to the MPLA. Muhammed considered Ford’s objection to the Soviet and Cuban-backed organisation as evidence of Washington’s implicit support for Apartheid South Africa and lack of commitment to Black African self-determination.

The concluding portion of his speech went:

Mr. Chairman, when I contemplate the evils of apartheid, my heart bleeds and I am sure the heart of every true-blooded African bleeds ... Rather than join hands with the forces fighting for self-determination and against racism and apartheid, the United States policy-makers clearly decided that it was in the best interests of their country to maintain white supremacy and minority regimes in Africa.

Africa has come of age. It is no longer under the orbit of any extra-continental power. It should no longer take orders from any country, however powerful. The fortunes of Africa are in our hands to make or mar. For too long we have been kicked around. For too long we have been treated like adolescents who cannot discern their interests and act accordingly. For too long it has been presumed that the African needs outside ‘experts’ to tell him who are his friends and who are his enemies.

The time has come when we should make it clear that we can decide for ourselves; that we know our interests; that we are capable of resolving African problems without presumptuous lessons in ideological dangers which more often than not, have no relevance for us; not for the problem at hand.

Muhammed was assassinated one month later in an abortive coup. But as Head of State, Obasanjo stepped up [financial aid](#) and logistical support for the liberation movements in southern Africa, as well as giving moral support to the so-called Frontline States. He [hosted](#)

Tanzania's Julius Nyerere on a state visit in 1976 and visited Kenneth Kaunda and Samora Machel respectively of Zambia and Mozambique in 1977. His government hosted a major anti-Apartheid conference in Lagos in August 1977 (the World Conference for Action against Apartheid), and in the previous year, his government withdrew the Nigerian contingent to the Montreal Olympics; a measure taken in relation to the 1978 Commonwealth Games in New Zealand. Both actions in relation to sporting events were predicated on the disapproval of continuing sporting links by Western nations with South Africa. In 1979, the Obasanjo government also took the draconian measure of nationalising British Petroleum (BP) in Nigeria because it alleged that the British government had allowed BP to sell crude oil to South Africa.

These actions justified the assessment given by the American embassy about his debate with Muhammed several years before they came to power, that it "revealed an intense, emotional commitment to more militant measures in southern Africa."

Obasanjo's words were as frank and pointed as his actions. When marking the end of Nyerere's [visit](#) in 1976, he praised Nyerere's role in what he described as "the march towards the total liberation of Africa from foreign rule, colonial oppression, economic exploitation and the heretical bigotry of white minority supremacy on our African soil". And in his speech at the World Conference for Action against Apartheid, he sounded the following warning:

It will no longer help for our so-called friends to adopt pious postures and preach non-violence when our enemies are inflicting mental and physical violence on us. We shall no longer watch the racists of Pretoria devise improvements to their machinery of terror and repression. We should no longer be just outraged, we must act.

That tenor of the 'Murtala-Obasanjo' government was consistently reflected through the role of Brigadier Joseph Garba, the soldier who served as Nigeria's Minister for External Affairs from 1975 to 1978. Muhammed took a mischievous delight in a photograph of the tall Garba shaking hands with the diminutive Henry Kissinger, on the grounds that it showed someone "looking down" on the imperious US Secretary of State. It was through Garba that the government led by Muhammed and Obasanjo made crucial decisions in relation to southern Africa, one of the most critical having been the recognition granted to the MPLA. Many analysts have argued that while it wrecked the chances of reconciliation between the three movements contending for power, it nonetheless prevented a South African takeover of Luanda.

While both Muhammed and Obasanjo have controversial, and even highly divisive aspects to their legacies, each man's contribution to the struggle for Black African liberation must be noted and remembered for general posterity, as well as serving as a reminder to those elites in South Africa who stir the pot of anti-Nigerian sentiment and xenophobia against African migrants residing in that country.

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