

From CFA to ECO: What's in a Name?

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In international politics, there are no permanent friends (at least not one that colonized you), but permanent interests. The CFA is a neo-colonial relation between 8 former colonies of France except Guinea-Bissau which was colonized by Portugal. It is in the interest of France to maintain the relations with its former colonies in spite of hushed tones of dissatisfaction from those pretending to be African leaders. Countries collaborate if it's in their respective interests. Many a time, countries operate on how to better their selfish interest. So, France or Britain, (in the case of Nigeria), must not be blamed for always trying to protect their respective interests over and above those of their respective former colonies. It is for Africans to wake-up, use their brains and brawn for change instead of stupidly praying to God/gods of others and expecting freedom through miracles!

The Europeans wanting a single monetary union took about 30 years to build the Eurozone. It is important to note that only 19 of the 28 current members of the European Union are in the Eurozone. Norway and Britain kept their respective currencies, hence their respective monetary sovereignty.

There is a vibrant debate on the usefulness of a single currency for economic integration purposes. Some emphasize the ease of sub-regional trade etc. The loss of monetary sovereignty and costs of running necessary institutional arrangements are of concern on the other side of argument. It means you cannot just have your central bank print money as you like.

The CFA is tied to the Euro. This means the value of the currency is determined by the lie of 'market forces'. Maybe there's no invisible hand as in market forces and Christine Lagarde's decisions with other Europeans at the European Central

Bank decides what the CFA/ECO exchanges for.

The copy-copy West Africans decided in Togo in 1999 that they needed a monetary union. In 2000, the 4 English speaking West African countries met to agree a common currency towards a single currency for West Africa. This stated desire had been postponed many times.

For a different purpose, I attended the ECOWAS Summit that postponed ECO starting point away from 2014. None of the countries was about to meet the criteria for convergence. I remember Aganga Williams leading the Nigerian team at the Ministerial in making it clear Nigeria would not accept 2014 commencement. In private discourse, he was unequivocal that strong private Nigerian interests (he mentioned a name) were heavily on Jonathan's case that he must not agree. For them, Nigeria would carry the brunt of stabilizing the currency.

Well, January 2020 was next fixed. It commences today. But the Nigerian Finance Minister, at a meeting with her counterparts made it clear that only Togo is on the way to meet the 3 primary criteria of deficit not exceeding 3% of GDP, inflation in single digit and towards 5% and gross reserves available for 3 months import. There are secondary ones also.

It is within this context that CFA becoming ECO should be examined. For me, it is no big deal that CFA has been rechristened ECO, the name earlier chosen by ECOWAS. This is a non-issue. The fact is that ECO of today is equally tied to the Euro. Whether CFA or ECO, it is same except for the claim that the 8 countries will no longer keep 50% of GDP with France and with French nationals at every institution/point

supervising the West Africans. If Nigeria wants to join it is for Nigeria to demonstrate it has the diplomatic capacity to negotiate a good deal for itself or please let it continue with its naira. That France will seek to prevent Nigeria having it easy should be expected. Nigeria should do its homework if it has a leadership that is worth being tagged leaders.

Nigeria normally leads from behind and that's why the Spokesperson for the Ministry of Finance is still talking about studying what ECO is about. What study on what we have been on since 1999, if we are not ready to learn from Europeans. Ghana has clearly indicated interest in working with the Francophone 7+1 countries on the ECO. So did Ghana successfully push Nigeria aside on the hosting of the Secretariat of AfCFTA as we dilly-dallied and pretended to be consulting and became the 3rd from behind to sign AfCFTA. As the Liberians say: "kuku jumuku" meaning 'you no inside, you no know', i.e., if you stay outside the fray, you sacrifice your interest. As our leadership flew from London to Dubai in their jets setting up committees, Ghana resolutely entered the fray knowing fully well that much negotiation is ahead. I hear some of my friends claiming many of those who signed did not know what they were signing. So what? We that went on Committee researching style still came to sign the same thing that our own late Ambassador Chiedu Osakwe had led negotiations to achieve.

I should not be misunderstood, carrying the private sector along from the very beginning is good. We did not. We could have signed and still educate ourselves, learn from the private sector and prepare very well for the second phase as well as implementation of the first. Our dilly-dallying did not change either a comma or a full stop on the first phase Agreement.

Meanwhile, Ghana got the Secretariat easily. Some friends of mine argue against the idea of Secretariat. But the fact is that we subtly sought it and lost. I believe it is positive Ghana got it, more so because I know they would make the best use of the opportunity.

It is important that Nigeria stops being reactive on issues like it did on AfCFTA and doing now on ECO. Before, major powers used to seek to carry Nigeria along on major issues concerning Africa. That's no longer the case. Our various think-tank institutions are now a caricature of their past when we were a serious people.

The tendency is that Nigeria is reticent when it comes to leading in Africa. Few exceptions were under Obasanjo. If that's the case, Nigerians should stop complaining about France or Ghana clearly wanting to lead in Africa. Nature abhors a vacuum. Power relations are not based on emotions.