
MILITARY IN POLITICS IN NIGERIA: AN ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

The coming of the military into the political scene in Nigeria marked a watershed in the political development of Nigeria. The military came in to correct the ills in the society amidst jubilation by civilians and though contributed to the nation's development in various ways, it is however the contention of this paper that the military rather than solve the problems in the Nigerian nation have compounded it. The military through the abuse of power, corruption, and blatant abuse of the fundamental human rights of the citizens created political instability. The paper submits that the only thing that can remove the military from politics is the enthronement of a genuine democracy in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Military, intervention, democracy, instability, protests*

INTRODUCTION

Military intervention according to Fawole (1994) is defined as the conscious act of displacing and supplanting an existing political order, a government, by soldiers with the objective either of governing or influencing the political affairs of the country in particular direction determined largely by the interventionists themselves. It is directed at the political system of the state or its agents involving the threat or actual use of force to accomplish certain predetermined objectives which may be political, economic, social or even military. Military intervention in African politics dates back to 1952 when Colonel Gamel Abdel Nasser overthrew King Farouk on July 23, 1952. In 1958 the second military coup took place in Africa. This time it was in Sudan when General Ibrahim Abboud overthrew the civilian government. The wave of military intervention blew over the West African coast when in 1963, a military coup was staged against the government of Silvanus Olympio of Togo and he lost his life in that process. Togo that attained independence on 27th April, 1960, became the first country in West Africa to experience military coup. That same year Colonel Christopher Soglo overthrew the government of Herbert Maga the premier of Dahomey (Republic of Benin) on October 28, 1963 for endless political bickering. Today only few African states have not experienced military intervention in their politics.

In Nigeria the first military intervention took place on January 15, 1966 when Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu and other six majors organized military coup against the government of Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa the first prime minister of Nigeria. Alhaji Tafawa Balewa and some other prominent Nigerians lost their lives in that coup. That date is very significant in the political history of Nigeria. It marked an end to the first attempt at enthroning democratic rule in Nigeria and the beginning of military incursion in Nigerian politics. That day robbed Nigerians of the joy that heralded independence in 1960 and brought shock and pains on the entire population. The advent of the military in January 1966

was not surprising to many Nigerians because before this event there was a reign of terror in parts of old western region, political bickering among politicians and mass suffering among the people of Nigeria. Those to whom power was entrusted misused it. They suppressed opposition, rigged elections, pursued personal vendettas against real and imagined enemies and within no time almost all parts of the country were turn into shreds by tribalism, favoritism and parochialism. (Isichei 1989). According to Ikime (2008), news of the coup was received with joy in parts of the country, especially the west. It was felt that the politicians had let the nation down, and it was hoped that the military would set things right. However, Nigerian experience in the many years of military rule has shown that the military's role as an impartial umpire in Nigerian political game has failed. This further strengthens the views of some scholars who see military intervention as an aberration. It would be recalled that as Ojo E.O and Adebayo P.F .stated

The Nigeria Army until 1966 was a normal professional force. The officers and men occupied themselves with training, peacekeeping efforts in foreign lands, and other sundry military activities. But that changed when Major Kaduna Chukwuma Nzeogwu and his cohorts struck in January 15, 1966. That coup apart from sounding the death knell of the First Republic effectively brought the men in "khaki" into the murky waters of Nigerian politics. The question now is what prompts the military into intervention in politics? This we shall examine in the next few pages.

CAUSES OF MILITARY INTERVENTION

Corrupt practices by the politicians: Corrupt practices by politicians and government officials to whom the resources of the nation are entrusted to manage led to military intervention. In Nigerian society political power is seen as an access to key levels of the economy. The leaders use their positions to manipulate jobs and award contracts to their family members, friends and in-laws. Contract awarding officials use their positions to demand certain percentage of the contract fees as Kick-backs. Worse still those who have embezzled government funds display their newly acquired wealth without caution. They build industries and invest in businesses in foreign countries with Nigerian tax payers' money while they leave the society underdeveloped. Necessary amenities like electricity remain epileptic, good roads, hospitals and good sources of water supply are not provided. This often led to protests and insecurity by the down trodden masses.

Ethnicity / Tribalism: The formation of political parties such as the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) for the Hausa/Fulani and Action Group (AG) for the Yoruba laid the foundation for tribal politics in Nigeria before the attainment of independence. The attainment of independence on this platform led to inter-ethnic rivalry in allocation of resources appointments and location of projects. By the time the military came in January 1966 to correct the wrongs of the politicians it succeeded in deepening the division which had already existed in the Army. The pattern of killings in the January 1966 coup led to various interpretations which suggested that it was aimed at eliminating people from a particular ethnic group and this led to another coup in July 1966 that led to the death of the first military Head of state, Major General J.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi .According to (Agbo ,2001), it

was opined that Major Nzeogwu toppled the Balawa regime to replace him with his tribesman, Major General J.T.U.Ironsi . Subsequent coup led by the Hausa/Fulani led to the replacement of Ironsi by General Gowon (rtd), an Hausa person.

Lack of efficient change of leadership: The accepted means of change of leadership in a democratic system is through elections. In Nigeria elections are rigged. Attempts are made by party opponents to disenfranchise each other. In western region before the January 1966 coup massive fraud, riggings and corruption were prominent during this election. The AG had no chance with the NNDP which was Akintola's party. The electoral officers went into hiding as they were subjected to beating and intimidation. The attempts by the AG to use the law court to stop the rape on democracy failed (Ojiakor 2001). During the 1964 federal elections, before the day of the elections, the NPC using all sorts of tactics, including refusal to supply registration papers, detention of candidates, etc prevented the candidates of UPGA in the north from filing their nomination. As a result of this 67 NPC candidates were declared elected imposed (Falola T. Uhomoibhi M. Mahadi A, Anyanwu U.2007). The development above made the eastern region to boycott the elections. The result of the election was rejected by UPGA coalition while NNA coalition accepted it. There was political stalemate at the federal level for some days before the Prime Minister, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa and the president Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe reached a compromise that resolved the political impasse.

During the general elections of 1983, there was increase in political violence. Otoghagua (2007) noted that each party had its own home-groomed army of criminals and thugs whose names were in their payrolls, fully armed and deployed against political opponents. There were the Shagari Movement, Okpara Brigade, Jims Vanguard, Ikemba Front. In the west the act of thuggery and destruction of lives and properties was more or less every youth's hobby. After the election, Alhaji Shehu Shagari was sworn in for the second term on October 1, 1983 but was overthrown on December 31, 1983 by the military.

Inordinate ambition of some military men to rule: Some military coups are organized by military officers because of their selfish personal ambition to rule. They see political power as a means of amassing wealth and elevating their social status in the society .The coup of Lieutenant Colonel Dimka and some military men who assassinated General Murtala Mohammed at a time when the government was doing well and receiving praises from the masses is a very good example of this.

Breakdown of law and order: When the civilian government is not capable of managing the religious, political or communal crisis the army may come in to rescue the situation. In 1965, during the first republic, the AG intra party crisis led to a breakdown of law and order in the Western region. In 1964, soldiers were deployed to the Tiv land to suppress the riot during the period of Tiv crisis that led to the death of hundreds of people.

Lack of independence of the judiciary: A situation where the judge of the Supreme Court is appointed by the Head of state it is likely that there would be the suppression of

legal opposition through the abuse of office by the Head of state. The inability of the judiciary to pass fair judgment on matters arising from electoral fraud and other criminal or civil cases may lead to military incursion because judiciary is the final arbiter of law and the last hope of the common man. When the law courts undermine the constitution, pervert justice carry on with perjury, there would be a public outcry which may lead to military intervention. Some military coups are sponsored by some influential and wealthy politicians within, who want to dethrone a regime for their selfish gains. At other times foreign governments and bodies may influence military coups in a particular country and impose a leader that would favour the policies of their home government.

ASSESSMENT OF THE MILITARY IN POLITICS

It is not possible to give a total assessment of all the military did in over twenty- eight years of military rule in Nigeria in one write up such as this. Suffice to say that the military contributed to the nation's development in many ways when they ruled. In the area of state creation, the military was the only government that created states in Nigeria till date. Before 1966, there were four regions in Nigeria. This was brought to an end in 1967 when General Gowon created twelve states out of the four regions. Since then the military has created more states and local governments thereby increasing the centres of economic and political growth and developments in the country. The military continued to increase the number of states to 19 in 1976, 21 in 1987, 30 in 1991 and 36 in 1996. This has to some extent reduced the cries of political domination and marginalization in the country. Though Nigeria at present has 36 states there are still agitations for the creation of more states. The creation of states has in a way brought about greater unity because no one state in Nigeria today is strong enough to threaten secession.

Again the military succeeded in the preservation of the sovereignty of Nigeria by fighting the secessionist Biafra in a civil war. The military embarked on the policy of reconstruction, rehabilitation and reconciliation after the war. This was aimed at healing the wounds inflicted during the war. The military also drafted constitution for the nation. Though military regime rule by Decrees and Edicts, they wrote new constitutions before handing over power to civilians in 1979 and 1999. The military took a bold step in siting a new federal capital at Abuja. This was the hand work of the regime of Late Major General Murtala Mohammed. Furthermore the military is instrumental in the establishment of oil refineries in Nigeria. The regime of General Yakubu Gowon established the Nigerian National Oil Corporation (NNOC) in 1971 and this was changed to Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) in 1973. The military is also credited for the establishment of oil refineries at Warri and Kaduna. Other achievements of the military include the establishment of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in 1973, the change of currency from the British pounds shillings and pence in 1975 to Naira and Kobo as the official currency in Nigeria. In 1984 the military Launched War Against Indiscipline (WAI). The military also established some secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria. In spite of these seemingly impressive achievements of the military Nigerian experience of military rule has shown that the military has been incapable of resolving the crisis under which civilian regimes crumbled, rather they have compounded the

problems they claimed they came in to resolve. As Ruth First (1970) noted, once in power the military leadership tends to soak up social conflicts like a sponge. It is instructive to note that since the military rule by decrees, it is repressive, the rights of the people are trampled upon, innocent citizens are brutalized and dehumanized, freedom of speech is impaired and the press censored.

In 1993 after the annulment of the June 12 presidential election there were protests especially in the southern states and the nation was in total crisis. Pressure groups, social critics, newspaper houses mounted pressure on the federal military government. Each day witnessed an upsurge of civil crisis and demonstrations and to many Nigerians war seemed inevitable. There was a break down of law and order. The rate of insecurity was so high that people started returning to their states of origin. Even the president, General Ibrahim Babangida told the nation that a phenomenon of constant insecurity and over bearing uncertainty has become characteristics of our national existence (Ojiakor 2001). The Babangida led administration then proscribed some newspapers which included punch, Sketch, the Concord and the Nigerian Observer; the masses ignored the threats by the military government. Things degenerated and it was like the nation was tearing apart. Even the Head of State became destabilized and confused that he decided to step aside and appointed an interim National Government to take over from him. The exit of president Babangida from the political scene generated tension that almost dragged the nation into anarchy. Insecurity during military rule got to a detestable heights during the reign of General Sani Abacha who according to Anifowose (2002) eliminated some prominent opposition leaders. He incarcerated many human rights and pro-democracy activists, notably leader of the National Democracy Coalition (NADECO), closed down vocal media houses, hanged the human right activist Ken Saro Wiwa and eight others, convicted influential Nigerians including General Olusegun Obasanjo amongst others. The country no doubt was leading for a dangerous precipice for which the implications and scope of ensuing crisis was unpredictable. Erhagbe (2002) added that it was obvious that Abacha would not have bowed to these pressures. In the final analysis it was nature that eventually stooped Abacha for he suddenly died in mysterious circumstances on June 8, 1998. Infact a major problem that affected the peace during military regimes in Nigeria was the incessant military coups Nigeria had since January 15, 1966. As Babatope (2008) pointed out: Nigeria has recorded the following successful and failed military coups:

July 29, 1966 counter coup of military officers from the North, July 29 1975 coup of the seven Colonels. The February 13, 1976 abortive coup led by late colonel Bukar Sukar Dimka, December 31, 1983 coup of the Beret Generals, August 17, 1985 coup led by General Ibrahim Babagida (rtd) The announced failed coup of November 1986 which has led to the execution of General Mamman Vatsa and some military officers. The failed coup attempt of April 22, 1990 led by the late Major Gideon Gwarzo Orkar, Major Sahima Daddy Mukoro and Col Anthony Nyiam. The palace coup of November 1993 by the late Sani Abacha (rtd) and General Oladipo Diya. The announcement of a coup plot in 1995 by the Abacha regime which had led to arrest and trial of former president Olusegun Obasanjo The December 1997

announcement of a coup plot by General Oladipo Diya and the late Adisai, the soldiers arrested were all tried by General Victor Malu (rtd).

This record has indeed made the Nigerian military a major source of political instability in Nigeria. In the area of fighting corruption which was often one of the reasons for military intervention, the military has not succeeded. The military is as corrupt if not more corrupt than their civilian predecessors they overthrew. General Obasanjo was accused of embezzling ₦ 2.8 billion Naira during his tenor as military Head of state when Buhari was the minister of Petroleum Resources. The allegation was refuted with great difficulties. It has not been proved beyond reasonable doubt that he was innocent. General Babangida was alleged to have carted away the oil money accrued to the nation during the Gulf war, while Late General Abacha deposited billions of Naira in foreign banks before his untimely death. These are just few cases of corrupt practices among military leaders that have not been successfully denied. Successive military regimes in this country abused power. When General Gowon was in office as Head of state, he focused his attention on tackling the abuse of power by public officers. When late General Murtala Mohammed took war, he emphasized his government will not condone abuse of power, yet experiences Nigerians had during military regimes showed they were dictatorial. Buhari/ Idiagbon regime was accused of misuse of power to the detriment of the national aspirations interests. They ruled the nation with high handedness and Nigerians cried out.

Babangida administration over threw General Buhari / Idiagbon regime for its blatant abuse of its human rights. But it is on record that Babangida's administration has never seem eye-to-eye with the Human Rights activists like .Gani Fawehinimi, Omojola, Falana and Ran some Kuti --- Babagida promised to deal with the nation's malaise with an iron fist and troubled Nigerians shiver' (Tell June 8, 1992). In his "maradonic style", he dribbled Nigerians around until he stepped aside. Otoghagua (2007) lamented that the crisis generated by the annulment of June 12, 1993 elections were so thick that Nigerians of Northern, Eastern and Western origins began to return to their various homes ---- on July 16, 1993 tanks were rolled out to root out every opposition. What followed were heaps of dead bodies all over major roads in Lagos. From this review of military rule in Nigeria, it is clear that military regimes are not the best for any nation. It is only a genuine enthronement of democratic rule that can ensure the military do not come back to the political scene of the Nigerian state. Free and fair elections should be conducted. Nigerians should always come out emeses to vote and be ready to protect their votes. Only credible persons with a genuine desire to serve the electorates should be elected into public office irrespective of their ethnic background and political affiliation.

CONCLUSION

We have in this paper tried to explain how the military entered into the mainstream of the politics in the Nigerian state. The military during their regime which span for over twenty-eight out of Nigeria's fifty years of independence though made some marks in terms of contributing to the growth of the nation, it stunted the development of enduring political

order. The emergence of the military in Nigeria's political scene brought fear and insecurity. Nzeogwu's coup and the events that followed generated so much distrust and insecurity in the country. General Ironsi's Decree No. 34 which turned the nation into a unitary system stirred up suspicion and this made the northerners in the Army to terminate his life and government. The events that followed led the nation into thirty months of civil war which was created and prosecuted by the military. Ojiakor(2001) noted that Babangida's inefficiency to hand over to a democratically elected government on June 12, 1993 threw the country into strife and riot in which many people lost their lives. The army responded by opening fire on the bloody civilians they were supposed to defend. General Abacha on his own part mounted a reign of terror on Nigerians and the innocent Nigerians watched helplessly as he planned his self succession before his demise. Experience from military rule in Nigeria has shown that the military accelerated disunity, disintegration, internal strife and discontent among the citizens. Nigerians should prevent the military from coming 'back to politics by encouraging the enthronement of a nascent democracy. Our politicians should be ready to render a selfless service to the nation. The idea of seeking political office for selfish personal gain is not doing the nation any good. Nigerian electorates should vote in only credible candidates during elections and be ready to defend their votes.

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