

A HISTORICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE MILITARY AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE THAT CHANGES NOTHING, 1966-1998

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Abstract

Precisely, January 2020 was exactly fifty years after the Biafra war was fought. From 1966 to 1999, except from 1979 to 1983 - the military held sway in the governance of Nigeria. The military advanced several reasons for their intervention which range from bad governance, and lack of willpower to govern by the political elites to bribery and corruption. Several promises were reeled out by the military on the assumption of power to change the narratives of Nigerian history battered by the incompetent and corrupt political class. How far did the military keep to these promises? Did they create more problems for the nation or did they solve more problems than they met? The methodology adopted in this paper is the historical analysis approach while data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The paper argues that the military caused more problems than they came to solve. The paper, therefore, concludes that the military should be perpetually kept away from the corridors of power.

Keywords: Military, Biafra, Nigeria, Military coup, Good governance

Introduction

The Nigerian state since independence has been plagued with myriads of problems ranging from Political crisis, Military coup, Civil war, Insurgency and Violence to Economic meltdown. All these happened within its sixty years of existence as a sovereign nation. Out of these sixty years, the military has ruled for 33 years. On January 15, 1966, the military in a coup swept the Civilian Government of Alhaji Tafawa Balewa and Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe as Prime Minister and President respectively. It was the first time soldiers seized power through the barrel of the gun. Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu led other majors in what was termed the bloodiest military coup to topple the Civilian government.

Since then, military rule became part and parcel of Nigeria's political system as the military took turns to overthrow both a democratically elected government and a military-led government. Thus, on April 22, 1990, after an unsuccessful coup led by Gideon Orka, Nigeria had nine visible and publicised attempts to change a Nigerian government by force. Of these nine attempts, three were unsuccessful, (Anyaele, 2003).

This military incursion which led to the death of many Nigerians led to a protracted political crisis in the country leading to the pogrom committed against the ethnic tribes of the Igbos living in the northern part of the country, in which their properties were looted and confiscated. The climax of this genocide was the thirty months Civil War which ended in January 1970. The military each time they struck claims that they have been invited to clean up the mess by the political class. For instance on assumption to duty as the first military head of state of Nigeria, Major General Aguiyi Ironsi maintained that the armed forces has been invited to form an interim national government to maintain law and order (Ojiakor, 2001)

Now without recourse to the aim of the military to maintain law and order, the military suspended the constitution, dissolved civilian governments and detained formal political leaders but failed to bring to book the coup plotters which led to the death of many Nigerians and threw the nation into chaos. This action was unhealthy to the nation as the inability of the government to enthrone equity and justice in addressing the already heated polity led to a counter-coup of July 29, 1966, in which the head of state lost his life. Had it been that he toed the path of justice, tried the coup plotters and returned the country to civilian rule as he claimed that they were only forming an interim government to maintain law and order, he would not have died in an after the coup assassination. Although as an easterner, there is still the possibility that northerners would find a way to remove him.

There were myriads of problems that faced the Nigerian nation before the military takeover such as the politicization of the army, the concentration of all military installations in the north, the quota system in recruitment, endemic political crisis, corruption, loyalty to ethnic groups and other threatening issues in the country. The paper seeks to assess the shortcomings of the military as an agent of change which in effect changes nothing. The paper shall x-ray the promises made by successive military rules and how far they addressed the challenges of the nation as they claimed, brought them to power and how their regime perpetually drained the country of its commonwealth and made the country a laughing stock before the comity of nations. The history of military rule in Nigeria will also be discussed while comparing its achievements and failures in the Nigerian state.

Historical Background to Military Rule in Nigeria

In the name of the Supreme Military Council of the Revolution of the Nigerian Armed Forces, I declare martial law over the Northern Province of Nigeria. The constitution is suspended and the regional governments and elected assemblies are hereby dissolved. All political, cultural, tribal and trade union activities together with all demonstrations and unauthorised gatherings excluding religious worship are banned until further notice.

Those were the words of Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, the leader of the first military coup in a broadcast ushering in the first military rule in the country. The coup was very bloody occasioning the killing of prominent politicians like Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the Nigerian Prime Minister, Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto and the Premier of northern Nigeria, the Premier of southern Nigeria, S. L Akintola, the Federal Finance Minister Festus Okotie Eboh and other senior army officers. The mantle of leadership later fell on General Johnson Thomas Ummakwe Aguiyi Ironsi who was the most senior army officer according to Military ranking.

Military rule is not peculiar to Nigeria alone, it is a continental phenomenon in Africa. The first Military coup in Africa took place in Egypt in 1952 when Colonel Gamel Abdel Nasser overthrew King Farouk from his seat of power. Since then, till the present, Military coup has become a norm, and the rate of putsch on the continent has been alarmingly high (Anyaele, 2003). Nearly all West African countries have experienced military intervention at one time or the other. The first military coup in West Africa took place in Togo on January 1963 in which President Sylvanus Olympio was assassinated. This was followed by the Benin Republic in November 1965, the Central African Republic, Burkina Faso and Ghana in 1966.

The July 1966 coup, popularly known as the Nigerian Counter-Coup of 1966 which saw the death of Major General Aguiyi Ironsi, was succeeded by Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon. Ironsi's administration lasted from January 15 to July 29th, 1966. It was the Gowon administration that plunged the country into a 30-month Civil war from July 6, 1967, to January 13, 1970 (Dibie, 2018). On July 29, 1975, General Yakubu Gowon was ousted in a palace coup which brought the then Brigadier Ramat Murtala Muhammed to power as the third military Head of State. Gowon was attending a meeting of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in Kampala, Uganda when he was removed. Lt. Col. Murtala Muhammed held sway as the Head of State of Nigeria from July 29 to 13 February 1976, exactly six months in office before he was assassinated.

His regime was brought to an abrupt end following his assassination in an unsuccessful coup in 1976. The coup is popularly and erroneously known as the 'Dimka Coup'. Upon Lt. Col. Muhammed's death and the foiling of the coup, his second in command, then Lt.

Col. Olusegun Obasanjo became the Head of State (Dibie, 2003). General Obasanjo pledged to return the country to civilian rule. A promise that he fulfilled on October 1, 1979, after thirteen years of military interregnum.

Another Military Coup took place on December 31, 1983. It was led by a group of senior Army officers who overthrew the democratically elected government of President Shehu Shagari. Participants included Majors General Ibrahim Babangida and Muhammadu Buhari, Brigadiers Ibrahim Bako, Sani Abacha, and Tunde Idiagbon. Major General Buhari was appointed Head of State by the conspirators. On August 27, 1985, there was another palace coup led by the then Chief of Army Staff, Major General Ibrahim Babangida who overthrew the administration of Major General Muhammadu Buhari and adopted the title of President instead of the usual title of Head of State. Buhari's regime was a despotic one as many politicians were imprisoned for various corruption charges. In December 1985, hundreds of military officers were arrested; some were tried, convicted and eventually executed for conspiring to overthrow the Babangida administration. The conspirators were alleged to have been led by one Major General Mamman Jiya Vatsa. In 1990, Major Gideon Orkar staged a violent and failed attempt to overthrow the government of General Ibrahim Babangida. He was executed by the firing squad on July 27, 1990.

The 1993 coup resulted from the pressure on General Ibrahim Babangida to shift towards a democratic government. Babangida resigned and appointed Ernest Shonekan as interim president of Nigeria on 26 August 1993. Shonekan's transitional administration only lasted for three months, as a result of a palace coup led by General Sani Abacha which sacked his interim government. On September 1994, General Sani Abacha issued a decree that placed his government above the jurisdiction of the courts, effectively giving him absolute power. Abacha died on the 8th of June, 1998 and was succeeded by General Abdulsalami Abubakar. In all, Nigeria had had nine visible and publicised attempts to change the Nigerian government. Of these nine attempts, three were unsuccessful, namely, Dimka, Feb. 1976, Vasta, Dec. 1985, and Orkar, April 1990 (Anyaele, 2003).

Reasons for Military intervention in Nigerian Politics

One of the causes of military intervention in Nigerian politics is the country's historical past which is the Northern domination of the rest of the country. The British imperialists divided the country into three unequal parts with the Northern Region overwhelmingly larger than the Eastern and Western Regions put together. The population count conducted by the British in 1953 showed that the northern region has more than half of the total population of the country. Following this census, the north began to claim half of the seats in the Federal House of Representatives living the remaining to be shared by

other regions according to their relative population strength (www.wikinews.com). By this arrangement, it means that the northern region is assured of a majority seat in the parliament and thus is in the position to take it all. This also implies that any other region aspiring to be in government must either seek an alliance with the North as a junior partner or forever consigned to the opposition bench. The belief that with this strategy, the West and the South would be barred permanently from the central government except as a junior ally did not go well with the southerners.

Again, the tribal nature of Nigerian politics at that time gave credence to Military intervention in politics. Since the emergence of this virus in our political scene, every national issue tends to have ethnic colouration. Political parties have a tribal and regional undertone. For instance, the north had the Northern People's Congress (NPC), the West had the Action Group (AG), while the only party that had somewhat national outlook was the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) but was eventually forced by circumstance to be an Igbo-dominated party with its base in the Eastern Region. According to Onwudufor and Ughaerumba, it was due to tribalism that the Action Group and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens could not combine to control the federal government (Onwudufor & Ughaerumba, 2017).

Another significant reason for the Military takeover of the government was Corruption and Nepotism in government. Large-scale corruption and nepotism that pervaded the first and second republics played major roles in military interventions. Corruption and nepotism took the form of looting the public treasury and parading ill-gotten wealth before the hungry and toiling masses. For instance, Azikiwe was investigated for questionable practices. In 1944, a firm belonging to Azikiwe and their family bought a bank in Lagos. The bank was procured to strengthen local control of the financial industry. Albeit, a report about transactions carried out by the bank showed though Azikiwe had resigned as chairman of the bank, the current chairman was an agent of his. The report wrote that most of the paid-up capital of the African Continental Bank was from the Eastern Regional Financial Corporation. (Onwudufor & Ughaerumba, 2017).

In Western Nigeria, Adegoke Adelabu was investigated following charges of political corruption levelled against him by the opposition. The report led to the demand for his resignation as District Council head. Corruption was also deemed pervasive during the administration of Shehu Shagari (www.washingtonpost.com). A few federal buildings mysteriously caught fire after investigators

started to probe the finances of the officials working in the buildings. (Leon Dash, 1983). In late 1985, investigations into the collapse of the defunct Johnson Mathey Bank of London shed light on some of the abuses carried out during the second republic. The

bank acted as a conduit to transfer hard currency for some party members in Nigeria. A few leading officials and politicians had amassed large amounts of money. They sought to transfer the money out of the country with the help of Asian importers by issuing import licenses (www.google .com: British Banks Linked to Import Swindles). This gave them the leverage to carry out their nefarious activities without suspicion.

Furthermore, the absence of free and fair elections has been attributed to some of the major reasons why the military struck. It is difficult to point out an election in Nigeria that can be entirely deemed free and fair. The much-vaunted landslide victory of the 1983 election that led to the gun slide victory of the army on December 31st 1983 is a case in point. The coup was a result of the irregularities inherent in the 1983 general election which saw the re-election of Alhaji Shehu Shagari for a second term.

Still in vogue now as at the time of the Military era is the issue of misappropriation and embezzlement of public funds. The rate and manner the Civilians embezzled and is still embezzling public fund in Nigeria is second to none the world over. They embezzle and divert our commonwealth into their private purses without recourse to the suffering of the masses. This as well gave the military an excuse to strike. The politicians became millionaires and billionaires overnight and some even had the effrontery to openly celebrate their first billions here in Nigeria.

Assessment of the Military as an Agent of Change that Changes Nothing

Having seen some of the reasons that dragged the khaki boys into politics, the question now is, what did the military do differently as against what the politicians were doing before they were removed? Did they restore the confidence of the people? Did they stop or reduce corruption? Did they fix the economy as they promised? These and many more shall be assessed in this very session.

The first step taken by the military upon the assumption of power was to suspend the constitution, dissolve the civilian government, disband existing political parties, and detain or kill political leaders of the former regime (Tordoff, 1984). In his capacity as the new head of state, Major General Aguiyi Ironsi in his first broadcast informed Nigerians that the armed forces have been invited to form an interim government to maintain law and order (Ojiakor, 2001). First, the government which claimed to have come to maintain law and order had already suspended the constitution which is the embodiment of law and order, disbanded the civilian government and imprisoned former civilian leaders. How does he hope to achieve that without infringing on the citizen's fundamental human rights?

Again, his claim of forming an interim national government for maintaining law and order did not match his actions thereafter as he did not address the issue of the fate of the coup plotters or did anything to douse tension since it was generally believed that the coup was an Igbo coup. Instead, he proceeded to introduce controversial decree No. 34 which tries to abolish regionalism and enthrone a unitary system of government in Nigeria. Had the new Military government performed its roles properly, the coup would have served as a basis for moving towards stabilizing the situation in the country (Falola et al, 2003). Thus his inability to find or proffer a solution to the problem of Nigeria is what culminated in a counter-coup which eventually claimed his life. This is a clear indication that the test of a pudding is never in the sound. The military thought that they would be able to solve Nigeria's problems with mere decrees and an iron hand, thus thinking that it was a lack of willpower to govern that made the civilians fail.

On assumption to power on 29th July 1966, Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon said, "we consider it our responsibility to lay the foundation of a self-sustaining political system which will stand the test of time". Gowon never laid any foundation as he had no political programme in mind. First, he was not the one who masterminded the coup and so did not plan for governance. He was there because he enjoyed the support of his fellow northerners and his major drive was ethnic revenge. He was not happy that the coup plotters were of Igbo extraction and the person who took over after the coup was also of Igbo extraction. He could not address the Nigerian problem that threw the country into a "Thirty Months Civil War" (Johnson, 2003). His inability to abide by the 'Aburi Accord' or use diplomacy and instrument of the law which he suspended culminated in the Civil War. Instead, he created twelve states which laid the foundation of what we are suffering today because the regions he abolished were far better than what we have today as states which he championed.

It should be noted that before the creation of the twelve states, Late in May 1967, Gowon issued a decree abolishing the four regions that Nigeria was divided into. It is this region that we are clamouring for today. Gowon continued in power while renegeing on his earlier promise to hand the government over to a democratically elected government. Thus, it took another coup to remove his government from power after perpetuating himself in office for nine years.

To General Murtala Mohammed, "Nigeria has been left to drift. This situation if not arrested would have inevitably resulted in chaos and bloodshed". As if he was a political prophet, it took another coup to get him assassinated. Although Murtala had good intentions for the country, the greed and avarice among the military rank and files could not allow him to make necessary changes in his new government.

Major Muhammadu Buhari seems to be the worst among them. To him, “we have dutifully intervened to save this country from imminent collapse”. His government introduced a comprehensive package of austerity measures. It closed the country's land borders for a period to identify and expel illegal alien workers and placed severe restrictions on imports and heavy penalties on smuggling and foreign exchange offences. The austerity measures made it difficult for local industries to procure essential imported raw materials, leading many of them to close or to operate at greatly reduced capacity. Many workers were laid off, and the government itself retrenched many workers to increase its "cost-effectiveness." All of these actions were accompanied by high inflation. The price of basic food items rose, and life became increasingly difficult, even for the affluent. This is an irony that a government which came to save the economy from total collapse practically drifted the economy into a total mess. Ojiakor corroborated this when she maintained that ironically, the Nigerian economy started collapsing right under his regime (Ojiakor, 2003), thus the doctor himself has become ill.

General Ibrahim Babangida told the nation in his maiden broadcast that;

“This country had since independence a history mixed with turbulence and fortune. We have witnessed our rise to greatness, followed by a decline to the state of a bewildered nation. Our human potential has been neglected and our natural resources put to waste. A phenomenon of constant insecurity and overbearing uncertainty has become characteristics of our national existence” (Ojiakor, 2003).

Unfortunately, corruption reached its greatest height during his regime while our human potential all migrated abroad for greener pastures. There was constant fear and insecurity as human rights were thrown overboard. He claimed that his government enjoys the backing of the people and the loyalty of the preponderance of the military. But that same year Babangida had thirteen officers executed for plotting his overthrow, and in 1990 he successfully foiled a coup attempt by an ethnically dissatisfied army major who declared that he had “excised” five Muslim states in the north from the rest of Nigeria, raising fears of a partitioned nation. Thus, the military had one thing in common-“soaking in social conflict” as pointed out by Ruth First (1970), “once in power the military leadership tends to soak up social conflict like a sponge”.

From the above analysis, it would be averred that the military had done nothing different from what they claimed they have come to do, rather they escalated the problems they came to solve.

Contributions of the Military to National Development

In as much as we have extensively referred to and discussed military rule as an agent of change that changes nothing, it will be unfair if we fail to give credit to the military where appropriate. Thus we examine some of the contributions of the military to Nigeria's national development. One of the contributions of the military government is the creation of states. As of 1999 when the military handed over the reins of power to a democratically elected government, the number of states in Nigeria is 36. All 36 states were created by the military government. The states so created by the military have contributed immensely to bringing the government nearer to the people (Dibie, 2018).

To lend credence to the creation of states as a major achievement of the military in nation-building, the clamour for the creation of the state in Nigeria since 1999 in some regions to bring it at par with other regions has been a mirage. It appears the civilian governments lack the willpower to create new states or are simply ignorant of the importance of the new states to the development of the country, yet they enjoy the goodwill of the military while condemning the military as a bane to national development.

The introduction of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) is yet another great milestone by the Military to ensure national unity, cohesion and development. Chukwuemeka (1998) contends that the National Youth Service Corps was introduced to inculcate discipline in Nigerian youths, develop common ties among them, and help them acquire the spirit of accommodation and appreciation of the various cultures of the Nigerian people. The National Youth Service Corps has served as a unifying factor among the different ethnic groups in Nigeria after the unfortunate incidence of the civil war in 1970. The scheme was created in 1973 to encourage the youths, especially graduates to move, live and work in places, regions, states, communities and local governments other than their own. This was done to allay the fears of ethnic hatred, rancour and acrimony bred by the civil war.

Thus, an attempt by the military in governance to adopt the federal character principle and the establishment of the Federal Character Commission embodies an effective mechanism for solving the national question tailored towards accommodating the interest of minorities. Other variants of federal character include the zoning arrangement and the quota system. The zoning system if strictly applied as propounded by the military proponents will go a long way in solving the most demanding national questions in Nigeria.

In an attempt to invest in human capital development as an instrument for national development, the Federal Military Government under General Olusegun Obasanjo implemented the Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy which aims at providing

primary school education for the first six years free of tuition and non-tuition charges. The program stipulated 6 years as the official minimum school entry age. The programme implies that people who could not afford the cost of education at the time were privileged to attend school, thereby reducing the rate of illiteracy. However, this kind gesture by the Military has shoved aside with the emergence of the civilian government in 1979.

The development of infrastructure is another contribution of the military to nation-building. Massive infrastructure is an indication that an economy is developing, thus the Military was able to put such infrastructures as roads, electricity, schools, hospitals, water supply as well as transport. For instance, major flyovers and seaports in Lagos and the Enugu-Onitsha express road were constructed by Gowon and Obasanjo administrations respectively. These infrastructures have contributed to the development of Nigeria. Good road networks helped in the mobility of man and goods as well as services.

Conclusion

Nigeria witnessed several military regimes starting in 1966 and ending in 1999. The way and manner in which the officers overthrow their colleagues leave much to be desired. Sometimes who mastermind the coups are not the ones who will eventually govern the country, yet they keep hacking each other in that manner. For instance, in the case of Gowon's regime, it was Murtala Muhammed that masterminded the coup while that of Major General Muhammadu Buhari was carried out by General Ibrahim Babangida. Thus the incessant coup and counter-coup did not allow them to work for the country if at all they have anything to offer.

As noted earlier, their maiden broadcasts were full of hope for the citizens who usually get disappointed as soon as they get back to business. For instance, General Ironsi said that they came to maintain law and order while Gowon said that they want to lay a foundation for a self-sustaining political system. All of these promises were far from being met because they do not have the experience and expertise to manage a civilian populace. The military rank and file is a highly disciplined one with a hierarchy of command and obedience. Thus they thought the civilian populace is such disciplined as to obey everything the military orders. This led to the killing of many who did not adhere to military instructions.

The military claimed that there was corruption in the country and that the politicians has no willpower to checkmate it. Unfortunately, it was the military administration that recorded the highest cases of corruption in the Nigerian government since independence. The economy became worse during the military regime especially that of Major General

Buhari which was occasioned by his austerity measures more like what is happening now.

Another issue of concern about the military was the conduct of the 1992 general election in which the most credible election was annulled. The crisis that preceded that election caused economic cum political crisis in which many people lost their lives, many properties were looted and many were also jailed. The suspension of the constitution, the abuse of human rights and the exercise of brutal force against unarmed Civilians were the high points of the atrocities committed by the military which changed the democratically elected civilian government to make it better.

To bar the military from politics, the civilian government should ensure that the military is confined to the barracks and the country's borders where they are meant to be. They should not be used to monitor elections or to settle scores between politicians. Their entitlements should be given to them to keep them from having an interest in politics. This is because they began to have an interest in politics after they were used by politicians to deal with their political opponents while the army used their relationship with the politicians to secure the promotion of the highest ranks in their careers. Above all, civilian politicians should eschew corruption, hatred, tribalism and ethnicism and embrace peaceful co-existence and make good governance their watchword. By this, they would have defeated whatever reasons that may bring back the military to power.

Finally, this paper is of the view that the military despite the achievements credited to them, created more problems which are still threatening the corporate existence of Nigeria. They led the country into a protracted civil war which claimed the lives of many Nigerians. This was after many lives were lost through their coup and counter-coups. The four regions that Nigeria had then which were perfect for a country with multi-ethnic groups were truncated by the military when they created thirty states from the four regions. In the area of corruption, the military government was to become the headquarters of corruption with Abacha as the Director General. Thus this paper concludes that the assertion that the military is an agent of change that changes nothing was a valid one.

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