

PROLEGOMENA TO ANY FURTHER ASSESSMENT OF MILITARY INTERVENTIONS IN AFRICAN POLITICS

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Abstract:

Military intervention has been a recurrent aspect of many African nations since attainment of political independence. While the tide of coups seemed to have abated in the 2000s, the last decade has relapsed back into what some have described as a 'coup epidemic', especially in West Africa and countries around the Sahel. A keen observation reveals that many people from countries that have evaded coups have continually prayed for the military to take over governance of their countries due to the lackluster and abysmal performance of their political class. The choice between the military and elected politicians now seems like a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea. Albeit the controversies, people are divided on the opinion of the preferred leadership for various African countries. While some feel that civilian governments are better than the military in every circumstance, others opine that military regimes are more decisive, intentional and development-oriented than the civilian government. It has therefore become necessary to reassess the place of the military in African politics, especially in the face of despotic dispositions displayed by civil governments. This study employed the qualitative research approach. Data were gathered from library materials and analysed with the comparative and analytic tools. The study discovered that the coup contagion that has struck African countries in the last decade is occasioned by internal crises and weakened democracy. It also shows that there is popular civil support for the military juntas. The study therefore advocates a reassessment of the military regimes in Africa, as there seems to be more yearning for military rule in parts of Africa.

Key Words: Military, Intervention, Africa, Politics, Leadership

Introduction

Various forms and systems of government, ranging from the popular and legitimate to the unpopular and illegitimate have always existed in the various communities, states and countries of the world. However, centuries of political experiment have singled out democracy among many other systems of government as the style of governance that guarantees best hopes for the populace. By this same token, virtually all other attempted governance prototypes have found transition to democracy as a melting point for people-oriented governance. Africa has not been an exception to this transitional evolution.

The continent known today as Africa was originally a sparse land composed of various Kingdoms, Chiefdoms and Fiefdoms widely practicing the monarchical system of government. After gaining political Independence, various African countries have practiced different systems of government either in isolation or in conjunction with other systems because of their similar features. Gutteridge identified some of these

systems to include: “presidential, parliamentary or cabinet system, republican, and popularly, the federal system” (Gutteridge 79).

Interestingly and quite strangely, in all the transmissions that occurred with these various governmental systems in Africa, there was also the intervention by the military in form of *coups de tat* and this formed the military system of government where the governments were military Heads of State who assumed office through such *coups de tat*. Describing Nigeria, Harbeson corroborates this by stating that “since 1960 when Nigeria attained independence, her journey toward a stable democracy has been continually truncated by a recurring spate of military coups d'état” (Habeson 2). These incessant interventions of the military in the African political space, especially in the last ten decades, have continued to prompt mixed reactions from analysts and scholars. While some blame the military interventions for the many woes of the nations, others assert that the military regimes have brought more wins to Africa. The nagging posers that readily emerge from this situation include: how much of the 'goodies' promised by democracy have Africans savoured? What is the story of democracy now when one looks back at the military regime that was the subject of grave criticism? Have African countries fared any better in the democratic regime than in the military? Can one really say that African countries are actually practicing true democracy? The answers to these posers can better be imagined. This sensitive presentation seeks to lay bare the pros and cons of military intervention in Africa with a view to advancing a way forward from future interventions in the African political arena or advising the military to continue with their interventions if possible and necessary.

Conceptual Clarifications

- i. **Military Rule:** The military is “one of the institutions of the state assigned with the responsibility of defending the territorial integrity of the state to ward off aggression from other independent states” (Ohazuruike 100). Military Rule, therefore, is Governance by the armed forces and the consequent reversal from civil to military superordinancy, usually through an unconstitutional takeover of power in a coup d'état that ousts the legitimate civil authority and sometimes other military in power, with the pretext of either restoring law and order, reinstating legality within the system or eradicating any other social ills affecting the state (Igwe 268).
- ii. **Military Regime/Government:** Most scholars differentiate between military regime and military government. Other scholars, however, consider them as synonymous. Within the context of this work, the two concepts will be used interchangeably. Politically, a regime is a structure of social organization based on rules which are designed to regulate the operation of government and its interactions with the rest of the societies. From this ambience, a military regime is a coercive framework of social organization that is based on regimented rules designed to compel obedience from the rest of the civil societies basically through the promulgation of Decrees. This means that military regimes rule by means of these Decrees. There are certain features which have characterized Military regimes in Nigeria. Muhammad and Liman identify some of these features to include: “Suspension of the constitution, absence of elections to usher them to power, use of decrees and edicts, lack of respect for fundamental human rights, no

checks and balances, centralized form of government, respect for hierarchy and seniority, zero tolerance for any form of opposition and no respect for the rule of law” (Muhammed 42).

iii. Military Intervention: Military Intervention as a concept does not have a univocal meaning. But for the purpose of this work, Military Intervention could be understood 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” (Edeh and Ugweze 2048). It is directed at the political system of a state so as to accomplish certain predetermined objectives which may be political, economic, social or even military. It entails an unconstitutional takeover of political power from the civilians by the armed forces by brute force. Its unconstitutionality stems from the fact that there are no defined rules of engagement stated anywhere as the established mechanisms on how the people can change their government when need be. It must be mentioned here that many of the former British colonies in Africa had gone through what can be referred to as military intervention shortly after the British left. From Ghana to Nigeria to Sierra Leone to Zimbabwe to Uganda, to the Fiji islands - the list is endless.

Theoretical Framework

Theories are basically a set of assumed principles which attempt to provide rational cause and effect relationship of different phenomena. Many scholars have presented their views in the form of theories to describe the role of military in politics.

- i. Socio-Economic Development Theory:** The promoters of this theory believe on the assumption that socio-economic development decreases the chances of military intervention. For instance, Finer contends that the “propensity for military intervention decreases with increased social mobility” (Finer 87). Although the term social mobility itself was not used by Finer, he used the term public involvement which possesses the close meaning with the term social mobility. Social mobility here refers to “the process in which major clusters of old social, economic and psychological commitments are eroded or broken and people become available for new patterns of socialization and behaviour” (89). The indicators of social mobility include urbanization, literacy rate, newspaper circulation, higher education and the distribution of radio sets. Generally, this hypothesis proposes that military intervention is inhibited by the rise of middle strata in the Theoretical Preliminaries of Military Intervention in Politics.
- ii. Political Development Theory:** Scholars who profess this theory believe on the assumption that the political development of a society decreases the chances of military intervention. According to Rizvi, political development “refers to the process of politicization: increasing participation or involvement of the citizen in state activities, in power calculations and consequences” (Rizvi 27). The main indicators of political development include strong civil institutions, strong political institutions and strong democratic values. If these indicators lack in any society then government may face the legitimacy crisis. Legitimacy crisis can open the door for military intervention.

- iii. **The Centrality of Military Theory:** The advocates of this theory believe that the greater there are military resources and cohesion the higher the chances of military intervention. For them, if military's economic resources increase over civilian resources or military enjoy a big share in national economy, then it emerges as a very strong institution in the state. In the present era of insecurity and terrorism, states like to maintain large professional armies. These large armies demand higher resources. This situation leads toward more chances of military intervention. According to Smith, "a centralized chain of command, military discipline and extensive communication increases the cohesion (feeling of that group's solidarity) of military" (Smith 162). These factors make the military a cohesive group. This group becomes a threat of intervention for civilian setup.
- iv. **Organizational Format Theory:** The founders of this theory maintain that the military is an organized institution and hierarchical in nature. In the military, commands are obeyed without debates. A strong chain of command can be seen in the institution of military only. These characteristics give military a distinctive status as compared to other institutions. According to Finer, "the armed forces enjoy three massive political advantages over civilian organizations: a marked superiority in organization, a highly emotionalized symbolic status and a monopoly of arms" (Finer 6). These factors make the military prone to interventions.
- v. **Conflict and Regional Differences Theory:** The proposers of this theory focus on the view that internally weak and divided societies are more prone to military intervention. According to Kposowa "this theory works on ethnic resentment which includes cultural diversity of groups, ethnic supremacy, ethnic competition and rivalry as causes of military intervention in mostly heterogeneous societies" (Kposowa 276). Thus, the greater the number and cultural diversity of the groups, the greater the elite instability is. The larger the number of groups and potential cleavages, the less stable coalitions which creates the greater likelihood of intervention. This theoretical notion can be observed practically in separation of Northern and Southern Nigeria. When regional differences and internal conflicts become so tense, it creates room for military intervention
- vi. **Custodian Theory:** The presenters of this theory state that the institution of military is the custodian of a state's constitution. When the constitution is being violated by civilian authority, then the military see it as a responsibility to intervene and save the country from constitutional crisis. Huntington argued that military intervenes in politics when a civilian government loses its legitimacy and remains unable to deliver according to the wishes of people (Huntington 51). The armed forces cannot remain idle spectators of a state of near anarchy. They have to do their duty and save the country from utter disaster.

This study proposes that there is an admixture of all the theories identified above in the prolonged Nigerian military interventions that took place between 1966 and 1999.

The Constitutional Functions of the Military

Riffat Mahmood informs that the word military was first used in English in 1585. Etymologically, it comes from the Latin '*militaris*' and French '*militaire*' which mean

soldier. But now this word according to the *Oxford Dictionary* means someone skilled in use of weapons, engaged in warfare or military service. The conventional functions of military include:

- i. Defense of the state from foreign threat and safeguard of territorial boundaries.
- ii. Defense of the state against internal challenges (political and public unrest)
- iii. To provide services in natural calamities (Mahmood 91).

In Nigeria, there are functions that are spelt out by the constitution for the military. These roles are clearly stated in Section 197(1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. That section specifies the functions of the Army to include:

- (a) Defending Nigeria from external aggression;
- (b) Maintaining its territorial and security borders from violation,
- (c) Suppressing insurrection and acting in aid of civil authorities to restore order when called upon to do so by the President, and
- (d) Perfecting such other functions as may be prescribed by an Act of the National Assembly.

Olorungbemi corroborates this by stating that the military has been instituted for defence needs to perfect and defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of a state. To him,

Nations build and invest in their men, technology, and resources to equip the military to defend the state against the ambitions, interventions and aggressions of other states. The military is to protect, project and be instrumental to the pursuance of the interests of the state. Military organization is the chief instrument in interstate relations in furtherance of state interests. States from time to time, deploy the military strategy to cow, over-awe, threaten, and coerce other states to submission in defence or projection of their interests (196).

This is the role the military has been deployed for by societies from the early periods of the evolution of the state. The organization of the military has been the internal last resort, to maintain law, peace and order in the state. It is only in serious cases of breakdown of law and order, intense riots, internal insurrection, civil rebellion and secession that the Army could be deployed by governmental authorities. This means that the Army also plays a role in the protection of the state from within or maintenance of internal stability. Olorugbemi surmises that in all these, the military are not trained to rule but to defend the territorial integrity of a nation (197). In essence, when they take over the reins of government by coercive means through coup d'état, it becomes an anomaly. That is why up till January 1966, the Armed Forces of Nigeria were seen in the public only on ceremonial occasions usually on 1st October, the national Independence Day anniversary, when Nigeria got independence from Britain. During this time, they often performed ceremonial parade and the Air Force officers engaged in the usual colourful air display.

Reasons Advanced for Military intervention in African Politics

Some analysts maintain that there cannot be any justifiable reason for military intervention in the politics of any nation. However, the military have always advanced

reasons for interfering in African politics. The following are the most mentioned reasons:

- i. **Large Scale Tribalism and Ethnicity:** Whenever there is unhealthy rivalry among the major tribes, the military comes in for the sake of the unity of the country. The military promotes social cohesion in Africa in many ways. For instance, its barracks system comprises army officers from different cultures, religions, regions, etc., and their families. Jemibewon asserts that “the military's commitment to restoring unity, law and order, peace, and security in the country is exemplary” (Jemibewon 72).
- ii. **Regular Allegations of Corruption:** Corrupt leadership is a major cause of military intervention in politics in Africa. The military defends people's interests and can intercede if civilians elect corrupt people into government. Since Africa has many countries in the globe today, the world might not be surprised if they surrender to military rule to prevent a coup and maintain political stability.
- iii. **Regional Political Differences:** Regional political differences and regionalized parties are also some of the causes of military intervention in Africa politics. The government prevents civil war and coups by using the military to reinforce peace countrywide. In extreme cases, the military locks down some states shortly before, during, and immediately after elections.
- iv. **Authoritarianism:** Sometimes when the civilian governments become too authoritarian, the military is left no choice than to channel its massive resources and power to protecting the citizens from such dictators and authoritarianism. They ensure politicians respect the country's democratic constitution and leadership hinged on their understanding of importance of promoting the rule of law, human rights, and democracy (Kalu 66).
- v. **Nepotism by Civil Leaders:** One of the reasons given by successive military governments in Nigeria is nepotism. In such instances, it was purported that the Nigerian Civil Service allowed recruitment, appointments, and promotions based on tribal and family connections rather than merit. This forced the military to intervene to save the situation.
- vi. **Absence of Peaceful Change of Government:** When there are post election agitations by aggrieved political parties, which may lead to destabilization of a smooth handover process, the military may step in to calm the situation.
- vii. **Personal Ambition on the Part of Military Officers:** Some coups have been carried out based on the personal ambition of the officers involved. Related to this is the tendency on the part of army officers to emulate their colleagues who had staged coups in other countries (Kegley and Herman 14).

Other reasons are:

- To restore sanity and development of the economy.
- Inability or failure of previous governments to completely and comprehensively oversee the affairs of the country.
- Underdevelopment of the country caused by the failure of the political class.

Some Gains of Military Intervention in African Politics

If one considers popular opinion, a military government is not a legitimate government because it is usually self imposed and not optional or put in place by the people and therefore, it would generally not have any advantages. However, a keen and critical assessment leaves one with no doubt that there are advantages as far as military rule in Africa is concerned. Some of the advantages of a military government are:

- i. There is Absence of Bureaucracy:** Bureaucracy in administration is a concept in the civil service which usually refers to frustration of projects and assignments due to excessive bottle necks. In a democracy or other systems of government where there is separation of powers which is accompanied by checks and balances, there are usually a lot of processes to go through to successfully carry out a project as there is need for approval from the various units, but in a military system where the powers are mostly centralized, decision on projects and policies are made faster thereby saving time. This has characterized most military regimes in Africa.
- ii. Military Government is Cost Effective:** Due to the absence of bureaucracy in a military dispensation as seen above, there is the absence of duplication of offices which is prevalent in a democracy and this effectively saves the administration money which could be used for other developmental purposes. This point is relevant especially in a country like Nigeria where the salaries and allowances of the various arms of government are on the high side.
- iii. Infrastructural development:** Under the military in Nigeria, there were several infrastructural developments such as construction of roads, airports, bridges, establishment of institutions, etc.
- iv. Social Integration:** The military prevented various countries from breaking into units during the many Civil Wars and related crises. The National Youth Service Corp (NYSC), Federal Government schools, etc were established in Nigeria by the military to promote national integration.
- v. States and Local Governments Creation:** The military succeeded in the creation of States and Local Government Councils. Local government reforms were equally undertaken in some African countries making it a one-tier local government structure.

Some Pains of Military Intervention in Africa

The popular opinion is that there have been more disadvantages of a military intervention in Africa's political history than there are advantages. The major drawbacks include:

- i. Disregard for Fundamental Human Rights:** Fundamental Human Rights are those rights which a person is entitled to because of the fact that he is a human being. These various rights of the citizens of a country are usually enshrined in and protected by the constitution of that state. However, as it is known, every Military Government has always started their regime with a suspension of the Constitution. This leaves the citizens open and unprotected from any inhuman treatment that the government may mete out to them. Thus, military regimes have witnessed the most heinous crimes against the dignity of the human person in Africa (Olufemi 79).

- ii. Gross Disrespect for the Rule of Law:** the rule of law entails the supremacy of the law over and above any government machinery, group or person. This essential ingredient of any democratic government in existence is totally absent in any military government. Starting from the way in which the Head of State takes over power, it is evident that he considers himself above the law. During the various military juntas in Nigeria, there has been no adherence to the rule of law. The military Lords saw themselves as above the law and did whatever pleased them. The law was meant only for the weak – the bloody civilians. Related to this, all military governments are a dictatorship as there is usually no room for any form of opinion, suggestion or opposition from the people. In the words of Osaghae, “in the military rule, everyone loses all the kinds of freedoms, namely, freedom to be alive, freedom of speech, association, belief, self-expression, press and others. The civilians have no place or authority to run to in trouble as officers have an unlimited power and are allowed even to kill a person without any reason” (228).
- iii. There are No Checks and Balances:** There is usually no separation of power in a military dictatorship. Unlike the democratic dispensation where power is separated into the Executive, Judiciary and Legislature, all powers in a military regime are centralized at the apex as the highest authority; and his appointees in the various states. He can do whatever he pleases with no opposition or checks whatsoever. And because power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, the military leaders become dictators.
- iv. A Ruined Economy:** Ojo describes the Nigerian situation: “During the military rule, from 1966 until 1999, Nigeria's economy was ruined, Nigerian Civil Service which was the best in Africa was destroyed” (21). Economic depression is usually one of the orchestrated reasons for military coup d'état in most African countries. In this context, they often present economic blueprints for development. The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of the Babangida regime in Nigeria is a case study. Oluleye maintains that “as a result of the corrupt nature of some military rulers, such economic policies usually leave the people worse than they were before the military intervention” (52). Coupled with that, military regimes led to increased expenditure on military related projects to the detriment of development of other economic indicators. In fact, corruption became institutionalized during military regimes.
- v. Lack of Political Participation:** Military rule is devoid of the legitimizing role of popular participation in government and politics. Voting at elections (even when the elections are rigged), election campaigns, political rallies, public debates on issues and other forms of popular participation are all part of the process of trying to legitimize a government. With all these absent under a military regime, the country reverts again to its authoritarianism and the rule of force – sometimes brute force. Military rule reincarnates and aggravates “the problem of an absolute”. It derives neither its existence nor its powers from the Constitution. No question therefore arises from any constitutional limitations upon its power (Odetola 103).
- vi. Lack of Emphasis on Merit:** One of the reasons why the military governments came into the political scene in Africa was the level of tribalism and nepotism in the different countries which caused a serious lack of productivity to the governments at the centre. But in the advent of the military dictatorship, the

problem of tribalism and nepotism were deepened to such an extent that various appointments were given out to people without consideration of merit (Ihonvbere 202). Thus, there was a gradual dwindling of institutions and structures. An educational system that competed with the world's most effective schools was killed as lecturers and teachers languished at home for years on strike.

- vii. Endemic Corruption:** The military regimes ranked very high in terms of cleavage to the vice of corruption. It was part of the reasons advanced by the military for their take-over of government. But in the long run, they themselves became incubators and layers of gross corruption. Statistics makes it abundantly clear that there was gross misappropriation of the financial wealth of the nation by military officers who sought their personal aggrandizement. They were top customers in foreign financial institutions and their personal wealth in most cases surpassed that of the nation. The Transparency International reports confirm this. Among the many countries in the world, Nigeria was floating at the top position in terms of corruption. The media were replete with reports about billions of naira that got missing from the Nigerian coffers (Fadakinte 61). It was a period when anything except good was done.

Keeping the Military in the Barracks: The Way Forward

Many keen observers contend that the appalling situation in African democratic space today was incubated by the spate of military interventions in politics. Even though this cannot be ascertained, in order to clear the Augean stables, it has become necessary and urgent to take steps that would safeguard the future of Africa democracy from further military interventions. The following steps are therefore recommended:

- i.** There is need to develop professional ethos among the military in a way that strengthens their faith and confidence in democracy. This could be achieved by establishing institutional mechanisms which have the capacity to address the genuine fears and concerns of the military.
- ii.** Relevant authorities must encourage a culture of constitutionalism, rule of law and dialogue, which makes for rational democratic politics of accommodation, inclusion and tolerance.
- iii.** There should be adequate welfare for the military. The military should be properly paid and cared for. They should be paid reasonably due to the risks involved in their job. There should also be a compulsory annual in-service training for every military personnel. This training should be geared towards educating and socializing them on their expected roles and responsibilities. The government should also invest in army intelligence technologies and skilled people who can detect and report coup attempts.
- iv.** In order to sustain a true democratic process, the constitution should frown at corrupt practices at all levels. People should be made to pay for the crimes they commit not minding their socio political status, tribe, religion or political affiliation. There should be a deliberate process of implementing policies that punish corrupt leaders. This can be enhanced through enacting and implementing laws that promote a high level of commitment and accountability from politicians.

- v. Concerned bodies must take urgent steps to educate the people about the consequences of unbridled tribal politics through mass sensitization programmes.

Conclusion

The political history of Africa can never be complete without the various military regimes that carted away democratic principles and replaced them with dictatorial tendencies at different points of the political history. No doubt, it is observable that the military leaders have left their footprints on the social, economic and political spheres of Africa in many ways. They contributed immensely to the continued unity of the countries as well as to the constitutional and structural development of Africa. However, the perception of most Africans, and truly so, is that the military in Africa does not have what it takes to manage the various countries. This is because the military is usually politically untrained and naive and its personnel therefore unable to undertake long term political management.

Each military regime claimed to have intervened to cure some imminent evils. Incidentally and funnily, the 'military doctors' quickly became infected by the ills they came to cure. Soldiers were corrupted by politics as quickly and absolutely as civilians had been. Although the military claimed to bring law and order, communal, criminal and religious violence increased under their watch. They continually promised to eradicate corruption, yet military officers became more engrossed in corruption than their civilian counterparts. By the time they tackled one issue, several more had arisen. As the military became more politicised, ethnic and religious cleavages in civil society replicated in the officer corps.

It has become clearer today that the values of the military rule are indeed antithetical to those of democracy. According to Odetola, "the military is commandist in structure and paternalistic in orientation" (90). This means that the basic norms and values of the military run counter to the objectives of a democratic (and developing) polity like Africa. It is therefore unrealistic to expect the military class with its coercive mentality to effectively oversee a worthwhile democratic government requiring wide consultation and popular participation. It has therefore become pertinent to permanently keep the military out of the political sphere of Nigeria. Wobbling between military regimes has been reminiscent of moving one step forward and two or three steps backward. The military must subordinate itself to civilian authority. As the traditional custodians of national defence, it is best they stick to their traditional and constitutional roles. In the present dispensation, everything must be done to professionalize the military so that rather than subvert democracy, they become its protectors. In all these, one continues to wonder whether the democratic governments in many African countries since independence have been better. The common question remains: which way Africa?

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