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Military Truncation of Democracy and the Prospect of Peace in Nigeria

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Abstract

This work explores the military truncation of democracy and the prospect of peace in Nigeria. The colonial system adopted by British colonialists was a composition that kindled discord among Nigerians but with the false notion of oneness. The consequence of this composition was evident in high levels of tribal sentiments and stratification, and despite the fact that these challenges existed in the pre-independent Nigeria, it had become increasingly evident since the first half-decade of post-independent Nigeria. Therefore, independence and the flagging of the republic in 1960 and 1963 respectively, greeted Nigeria with more complex puzzles to solve. Subsequently, the military forced its way into the democratic frame of Nigeria through a coup. This study, therefore, seeks to provide analysis of the military involvement in Nigerian democracy, achievements and failures of the military. It also discusses a brief history of democracy in Nigeria, military rule under Yakubu Gowon, and benefits of democracy in Nigeria. It employs secondary data sources in achieving this objective. In the work, it is observed that although the military regime recorded some successes, it was however crazed with problems of various magnitudes such as human rights abuse, economic decline, and corruption, among others. This military configuration naturally provoked international condemnation which led to its decline and final return to democracy. The study concludes that to improve the prospects for peace, it is essential to strengthen democratic governance, promote respect for human rights and the rule of law, and address the root causes of conflicts through inclusive and participatory processes. Only through a commitment to democratic principles and practices can Nigeria build a more peaceful and prosperous future for all its citizens.

Keywords: Military, democracy, peace, Nigerian

Introduction

The history of military in the Nigerian state could be trailed to the period preceding colonialism, largely characterized by relatively disunited, unplanned, and unskilled military elements in mobilization for wars, thus, influence from their efforts was also relatively insignificant; however, the narrative turned with the European arrival

into the country.¹ The formation of the Armed Forces of Nigeria was sparked when the then British navy officer commanding Lagos chose eighteen Nigerians to provide the Brits in Nigeria trade security as of 1863.² In clearer terms, the Nigerian military rather stemmed from an existing army than it was created on its own.³ In their submission, informed on the Nigerian military being an

offshoot of the British colonial army; because of the Industrial Revolution and the need for markets, Nigerians were originally mobilized to provide protection for the British industries for trade in Africa when Britain perceived the possibility of threats from Africa. A good example of this was the Royal Niger Company charged to serve Britain's interest on trade after being given more trade control in the north.⁴ Ukpabi (1987) posited that Nigerians had already been merged with the military force of this company since 1896.⁵

Early phases of mobilization were centered around the perceptive notion of the British colonialists on the different ethnic groups, most especially the north. For example, Arnold-Baker (2001) noted that the eighteen selected Nigerians in 1863 were all from the north.⁶ According to Abdulrahman and Mang (2017), more northern Nigerians were initially selected for military positions than any of the other regions, and although Britain was satisfied with this arrangement because the northerners were believed to be more conformist, it was detrimental to the emergent Nigerian military.⁷ Corroboratively, Kirk-Greene (1980) opined that although the Igbos and Yorubas were added to the military, the majority of the pioneers of the British military from Nigeria

came from the Hausa ethnicity.⁸ However, more Yorubas were picked compared to the Igbos because they were believed to be docile and influenceable.⁹ The British were skeptical about mobilizing Igbos because of their non-conformist tendencies; nevertheless, as a result of their educational savvy, owing to the development of Christian learning institutions in pre-colonial Nigeria, the Igbos were incorporated into the military to fill secretarial and other lower positions.¹⁰ Abdulrahman and Mang (2017) observed that the likeliness of the south (specifically the east) being unfavorable to overall British interest was the reason northern Nigeria was preferred over southern peoples. This selection bias caused a significant imbalance in the representativeness of the early Nigerian military by encouraging clusters of divided loyalties within the military which only favorably served the Nigerian military during the colonial times and spelt dividedness and doom for her in the independence era.¹¹ Barrett (1976) also agreed by stating that the arrangement in clusters might be considered to have assisted in fostering cooperation within the Nigerian military during the colonial season and although the stratification based on perception was to cease after the second world war, it has

already been set up and repairs were already deemed untimely – soon, Nigeria would turn against itself during independence. In brief, it can be deduced that both pre-colonial and colonial Nigerian military were infected with fundamental and inherent cancer of regionalism and ethnic strands.¹²

The Military Involvement in Nigerian Democracy

The military was charged with the responsibility of protecting Nigeria from foreign threats, ensuring safety in its territory, and assuring border security.¹³ In the words of Toyin (2015), in terms of original configuration, the military is not disposed to govern but to protect.¹⁴ However, the colonial system adopted by British colonialists was one that kindled discord among Nigerians, but with the false notion of oneness.¹⁵ Abubakar (2008) relayed that Nigeria during independence was fraught with many challenges originating from the colonialists – these challenges were hinged along regional and ethnic lines combined with a fragile political composition.¹⁶ The consequence of this composition was evident in high levels of tribal sentiments and stratification, and despite the fact that these challenges existed in the pre-independent Nigeria, it had become increasingly evident since the first half-decade of post-

independent Nigeria.¹⁷ Therefore, independence and the flagging of the republic in 1960 and 1963 respectively, greeted Nigeria with more complex puzzles to solve. The representing political parties of the 3 main regions were a reflex of divisive Nigeria: the National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroun (NCNC) was for the east, Action Group (AG) was for the west, and the Northern People Congress (NPC) for the northern region. There was an existence of fierce conflicts within and without those parties.¹⁸ For example, Hariman (2006) stated that events like the Action Group Awolowo-Akintola conflict concerning voting snowballed into the popular western regional crisis of 1962 and the ripple effect spelt chaos for the country – Obafemi Awolowo, together with few other chiefs in the party, were imprisoned. He added that problems like false nationalism among the political parties and inaccurate headcount result of northern Nigerians in 1963 were major issues.¹⁹ Ultimately, the 1964 election rigging distorted the election process and heightened hostility.²⁰ The failure of the civilian government to instill peace and security to Nigerians, and the absence of true constitutionalism, destabilized the political structure and resulted to the end of the republic in 1966.²¹ The civilian government

was incapable and unjust in matters concerning the nation.²² This invariably resulted in the intervention of the military on the fifteenth day of January in 1966 by a military coup.²³

Achievements of the Military

The creation of states under the Gowon, Murtala/Obasanjo, Babangida, and Abacha administrations in 1967, 1976, 1987/1991, and 1996, respectively, was a major feat of the military. For example, state creation under Gowon's administration helped to foster unity by dividing the four regions into six northern and six southern states; in spite of the fact that the creation of twelve states did little in stopping the civil war, it however was instrumental in both impeding Igbos from seceding (by decentralizing conflict among others) and ensuring relative unity after the war.²⁴ In addition, it allowed representation of the interest of ethnic minorities. Furthermore, certain policies made room for integration, i.e., the Yakubu Gowon's military administration united Nigeria on the tripartite principle of reconciliation, reconstruction, and rehabilitation. As part of the efforts in promoting peace, the promoters of the civil war were granted amnesty.

The military has arguably been pivotal to infrastructural developments of various

magnitudes. Bello (2011) highlighted the impact of the military after the civil war, which included construction projects (like construction of ports in Lagos, Kano, Sokoto, among others) to aid free transportation as well as the procurement of airplanes to encourage productive international trade. Bello also mentioned that the centralization of military power hastened the decision-making process, which invariably led to faster infrastructural developments and resultantly, improved employment. More so, the military contributed greatly in erecting oil-refining structures in Port Harcourt, Warri and Kaduna, which relatively discouraged dependence on oil importation.

Educationally, prior to the advent of military rule in Nigeria, there were only five tertiary institutions; however, the proliferation of these and other educational institutions by 1999 owe to the military.²⁵ Abdulrahman (2014) penned that the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), instituted in 1973 by the Gowon administration, was a quantum leap towards educating Nigerians for integration via the promotion of interactions among several Nigerian ethnicities. Worthy of note is the fact that the military administration of Buhari in 1984 took definite steps at resuscitating the dying culture of discipline through the War Against

Indiscipline (WAI), and this affected basic aspects of social life.²⁶ The military equally frowned at criminal engagements and unlawful acts, including trade in drugs and other international criminal acts that could mar the country's integrity internationally. The feat was achieved under the Murtala administration in maintenance of order.²⁷ As part of the steps to building good international perception, opined Bello (2011), Nigeria embraced an Afrocentric outlook in the administration of Murtala/Obasanjo, freeing other African countries from colonial shackles, including fighting the South African apartheid. Furthermore, the creation of the Technical Aid Corps (TAC) program under the Babangida administration was a viable step towards achieving Afrocentrism and helping other countries within the continent.²⁸

Failures of the Military

The military juntas that emerged to replace civil rule did so with the idea of averting the disorder and misadministration caused by past civil rulers. However, scholars have argued that the military itself possessed the same ailment that they attempted to avert from the civil government because there existed juntas against military administrations.²⁹ Among the disadvantages

of the military is corruption. Oluleye (1985) opined that the level of corruption that had eaten into the military was alarming. He continued by stating examples of the 1975 Murtala investigation of the rulers during Gowon's era that exposed many of their crooked sources of wealth; the disappearance of close to 3 billion dollars from oil revenue in the Obasanjo era as well as the renowned corruption of the Abacha regime which was investigated under the Obasanjo democratic rule that revealed siphoned billions of dollars, stored in foreign banks.³⁰ Also, Toyin (2015) submitted that the SAP (structural adjustments programme) under the Babangida administration exploited Nigerians as a result of corruption inherent in the military. Toyin again, revealed that military coups caused astronomical backdrops on the Nigerian economic state as more focus was placed on military welfare than other sectors of the economy.³¹

The fact that military governments' policies hardly succeeded each other due to unexpected coups after them, which changed the policies or (at least) names of policies reduced the pace of economic growth. For instance, Babangida introduced the Mass Mobilisation for Economic Recovery and Social Justice after a coup in 1985, interrupting the War Against Indiscipline

policy of the Buhari regime instituted the year before.³² This was perhaps one of the lacunas that made Bamgboye (2014) submit that there was still poor economic state (evidenced by low production levels and coated with job scarcity) despite several military policies put in place for economic growth and overall effectiveness.³³

Failed promises of the military government – some of which include the Babangida and Abacha administrations – for democratic transition and return of power to civilian government exemplify military dictatorship and the sit-tight nature of most military rulers. According to George, Amujo and Cornelius (2012), virtually all the military rulers recognized their unconstitutional acts, which made them embrace giving commitments to ensure the timely transition of government to civilian rule. However, the majority of those commitments were stratagems employed to endear the polity and garner support or to lengthen their stay in office.³⁴ This is evidenced in the failed transition of all the military rulers except for the 1979 Obasanjo-Shagari and the 1999 Abubakar-Obasanjo transitions. These military rulers, according to Dudley (1982), disregarded their commitments with the view of amassing the financial benefits of their

offices. Consequently, this power structure made democratic transition difficult.³⁵

The issue of military truncation of democracy and its impact on the prospect of peace in Nigeria is a complex and multifaceted one. Nigeria has a history of military coups and interventions that have disrupted democratic governance and hindered the country's progress. When the military takes power through coups or other means, it often leads to a deterioration of democratic institutions, the rule of law, and human rights. This can result in increased repression, lack of political freedoms, and a culture of impunity where those in power are not held accountable for their actions.

Furthermore, military rule can exacerbate existing social, economic, and political tensions within the country, as the military may not have the expertise or legitimacy to address the root causes of conflicts. This can lead to further instability, violence, and unrest, undermining the prospects for peace and development.

On the other hand, a stable and functioning democracy can contribute to peace and stability in a country like Nigeria. A democratic system allows for the peaceful transfer of power, provides mechanisms for resolving conflicts through dialogue and negotiation, and ensures that the rights and

interests of all citizens are protected. Democracy also promotes accountability, transparency, and inclusivity, which are essential for building trust among different groups in society and addressing grievances in a peaceful manner. By strengthening democratic institutions and practices, Nigeria can create a more conducive environment for peacebuilding, reconciliation, and sustainable development. Nigeria's democracy also has a long and troubled relationship with its military. For almost half of its existence as an independent state, Nigeria has been under military rule instead of civilian administration. Three republics have been overthrown by military coups since independence in 1960, and two of the four democratically-elected presidents of Nigeria's fourth republic headed those military dictatorships.

Is Nigeria a democracy?

Nigeria has a democratic constitution with a federal system modelled on the US. The executive is headed by the president, the legislature is formed by the National Assembly or Senate and House of Representatives, and the judiciary is headed by a supreme court.

But some commentators say Nigeria is not currently a true democracy due to its

entrenched corrupt political class, its dwindling electoral participation, popular suspicion of the ruling class, shrinking civil liberties, and weak democratic institutions.

A Brief History of Democracy in Nigeria

Nigeria officially became a democracy on its independence from Britain in October 1960. But the history of Nigerian demands for greater representation go back to the 1920s. A new constitution was created in 1922 under British colonial rule, largely due to Nigerian calls for reform. The country's first general election - to a colonial legislative council - was held the following year. The colonial administration hoped to contain demands for full independence but the elections failed to suppress Nigerians' desire for control of their own affairs. He was replaced by Yakubu Gowon, beginning almost a decade of rule by a 'supreme military council'.³⁶

Military rule under Yakubu Gowon

Gowon's administration was rejected by Lt. Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, the military head of Nigeria's eastern administrative region. In 1967, Ojukwu led the region's secession, declaring himself president of the Republic of Biafra in protest against the Gowon regime and the pogroms of the Igbo in the north.

A brutal civil war followed, unleashing famine, death, and destruction in the south-east. Both sides were armed and supported by foreign actors interested in the future of the oil-rich country with Britain arming the Nigerian military government.

The civil war had an enormous impact both in Nigeria and internationally. In 1967, Nigeria was divided from three regions into 12 states in an effort to strengthen the central power in Lagos and undermine future secession attempts. A severely damaged Biafra surrendered in 1970. Challenges of democracy in Nigeria

Nigeria's democracy was severely weakened by the civil war and centralization of power during the military era. The conflict helped concentrate oil revenues in the hands of army officials and seeded a powerful, wealthy, and often corrupt military elite. The dictatorships militarized Nigeria's political space and disrupted the flourishing of democratic institutions and culture, and assembly and protects them from discrimination based on sex, religion, origin, or political opinions. Yet basic rights are continually challenged in a failing justice environment.

Nigeria's police have a reputation for brutality which led directly to the #ENDSARS protests of 2020, demanding the

dismantling of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, a unit accused of kidnapping, murder, theft, rape, and torture. Sharia criminal law, which was previously limited to civil matters, was reintroduced in 12 northern states, directly challenging the constitution and civil liberties of non-Muslim residents. In April 2022 a man was sentenced to 24 years in jail by a Sharia court in Kano on a charge of blasphemy for declaring himself an atheist. The judicial system is too weak and compromised to step in and enforce civil liberties. This reflects the state of the political class in northern Nigeria and the absence of mechanisms to defend constitutional democracy. Religious legitimacy shapes political power in the north in a way that challenges national cohesion and a common citizenship. Parallel legal systems undermine the main pillars of the constitution.

Benefits of Democracy in Nigeria

To many Nigerians democracy seems to have few benefits. Between 2015 and 2022, the democratically-elected government of Buhari presided over worsening security, continuing corruption, and two recessions Nigeria became the poverty capital of the world, consistently ranked as one of the world's most corrupt nations. But the #ENDSARS movement showed the democratic dynamism of young Nigerians. And technology has

helped demands for better government to transcend old ethnic, religious, and linguistic divides.

ENDSARS did not produce a political party and in many ways its separation from traditional politics was its power. But it showed a hunger for more democracy, not less, among Nigerians and a solidarity among Nigeria's enormous population of young people.

Nigeria needs more young people to engage with politics, offer new ideas and run for office on issues which affect all Nigerians, from employment and security to climate and energy policy. Nigeria also needs its youth committed to the kind of long-term civic activism and community organizing which expands the narrow focus on electoral cycles, strengthens democratic institutions, and delivers long-term change.

The main challenge for these young democrats and future politicians is Nigeria's clientelist party politics, which is mostly a contest for power to distribute patronage. Nigeria's democracy can only be strengthened through a revolutionized political system, better quality political parties, more independent and diversified media, a stronger electoral management body and well-resourced judiciary.

Law enforcement and security forces must be devoted to constitutional democracy rather than regime security and protecting elites. And entrenched networks of patronage and privilege need to be weakened. The importance of democracy in Nigeria Given its history and its current trajectory, democracy is essential to the survival of the Nigerian nation. Military government was not more just, accountable, or efficient than democracy, nor was it less corrupt. Democracy has not yet delivered a considerable uplift in living standards for most Nigerians. But it remains the only system of government which can offer the hope of reconciling the extraordinary plurality of religions, ethnicities, and political traditions of its large population. It is the only system of government which can create a fair society without resorting to oppression or the exclusion of considerable parts of the population.

It is also essential for the rest of Africa that democracy survives in Nigeria. Half of West Africans are Nigerians and if democracy were to fail there it would have enormous implications for the rest of the continent and for the world. Nigeria's democracy needs to serve the rights, aspirations, and potential of its citizens for a good, dignified and fulfilled life.

Nigeria's democracy has been fragile and fluctuating since independence. Successive governments have struggled to create a sense of national unity in a complex country whose borders were drawn by British colonialists, incorporating more than 200 ethnic groups. Democratization and development have progressed at different speeds in the country's disparate regions. The less-developed north is more religiously conservative, with the Hausa and Fulani people forming a majority in far north-western states, and the Kanuri being the largest group in the north-east. Women in Nigeria's northern states gained the vote decades later than women in the south, with universal suffrage not achieved until 1979.

The mostly Christian Igbo people are the largest ethnic grouping in the south-east, where there are less centralized and more egalitarian traditions, as well as a tense history of separatism from Nigeria. The more religiously-diverse Yoruba people are the largest group concentrated in the south-west where identity is more influenced by regional culture and values.

Summary and Conclusion

This fragility bedeviled Nigeria at independence and posed a fundamental challenge to civilian governance in Nigeria. This led to military involvement in the

democracy/politics of Nigeria through a coup as they considered themselves the 'saviors' of the country. However, the seed of ethnic discord had already been sown in the military, which ruled non-continuously for nearly three decades. The ripple effects were coups upon coups, disbalanced civilian administrations, and even a civil war that lasted for 30 months. Although military regime recorded some successes, it was crazed with various magnitudes such as abuse of human rights, economic decline, and corruption, among others. In brief, since the nature of the military was antithetical to the values of democracy, which had gained increasing international currency, there was a resultant decline and replacement (among other factors,) of military regimes with democratic rule, which is still practiced today.

In conclusion, the military truncation of democracy in Nigeria has had negative consequences for the country's peace and stability. To improve the prospects for peace, it is essential to strengthen democratic governance, promote respect for human rights and the rule of law, and address the root causes of conflicts through inclusive and participatory processes. Only through a commitment to democratic principles and

practices can Nigeria build a more peaceful and prosperous future for all its citizens.

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