MILITARY, CIVIL RULE AND NATION BUILDING IN NIGERIA SINCE INDEPENDENCE

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Abstract
The problems of nation building in a developing, multi-ethnic and multi-religious country like Nigeria is indeed a complex and challenging task, which has defied solutions since independence in 1960. The military, a supposedly puritanical and corrective institution, usurped and dominated the politics of Nigeria for the better part of the 56 years of the nation’s independence with the claim of correcting the wrongs and ills that have constituted clogs in the wheels of national development. This paper studied the years of military rule in Nigeria using history and descriptive analysis and revealed that, the low level of national integration and development in the country, in spite huge natural resources over the years has been as a result of greed, lack of patriotism, authoritarianism and inordinate ambitions of the military and the political class. The results showed that decades of military rule, rather than solve problems, created more and left Nigeria more underdeveloped, corrupt, disunited, militarized, violent and unsecured than the military met it when they came to power in 1966. Indeed, the socio-political situation in the country has continued to degenerate progressively even with the return to democracy in 1999, as the military simply bequeathed a legacy of a weak system and culture of impunity that still endures and permeates daily life in Nigeria. The conclusion of this paper, therefore, suggests that there is the dire need for urgent national reorientation, demilitarization, good governance, building of strong institutions for a meaningful and sustainable development to take place.

Key Words: military, politics, nation-building, development, corruption.

Introduction
The political history of Nigeria is indeed incomplete and incomprehensive without taking into account the role played by the military in the political evolution of the country in the last 56 years of its existence as an independent nation. This is because the military has not only ruled for 29 years out of the 56 years, but have influenced the politics of Nigeria for the better part of the 26 years of civilian or democratic governance of the country. Suffice to note that, Nigeria is not alone in allowing its politics to be led by the military. Other African countries like Ghana, Uganda, Congo DR and Libya had experienced military rule. However, the first military coup in modern Africa dates back to 1952 when Colonel Gamel Abdel Naseer overthrew King Farouk on July 23, 1958, in Egypt. This singular act ushered in an era of military intervention all over Africa. By January 15th 1966, Nigeria had its first military coup that was a watershed in the
political history of Nigeria. There were indeed lessons to derive from the phenomenon, as observed by Ojo and Adebayo (2009, cited by Onwuka, 2011:34):

The Nigeria Army until 1966 was a normal professional force. The officers and men occupied themselves with training, peacekeeping efforts in foreign land, and other sundry military activities. But that changed when Major Kaduna Chukwuma Nzeogwu and his cohorts struck in January 15, 1966. That apart from sounding the death knell of the first Republic effectively brought the men in “khaki” into the murky waters of politics.

Although the military come into power with a reputation of an institution that is free of corruption and highly disciplined, by 1999 this reputation had waned because in the first instance, their intervention in politics had exposed the military class as corrupt, greedy and grossly incompetent in managing the affairs of the country and, in the second instance, the manner of exit of the military had been less edifying (Olaniyan, 2010:166).

Indeed, the phenomenon of military involvement in politics left behind lessons and bequeathed a number of legacies that left a sour taste in the mouth. Like a double edged sword, military rule not only impacted on the political culture of Nigeria, but has impacted adversely on the military as an institution as well.

**The military coup of 1966: a precusor to decades of military take overs in nigeria**

The first military coup took place on January 15, 1966, when Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu and 5 others toppled the government of Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the first Prime Minister of Nigeria. The Prime Minister and some other prominent politicians lost their lives in the coup. This event is a watershed in the political history of Nigeria. It marked and signified a sudden end to the very first attempt at the process of enthroning democratic rule and ideals in the country and the beginning of frequent military incursions in Nigerian politics.

However, the antecedent of the January coup was characterized by a lot of political tensions and uncertainties that threatened the very cooperate existence and political stability of the nascent nation. The behaviour and conduct of the political class was far from desirable and consistent with the exigencies of the time. The situation was captured in the words of Isichei (1989, in Onwuka, 2011:31) “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 part of the country was turn into shred by tribalism, favouritism and parochialism.”

These are some of the inordinate attitudes and behaviors of the politicians that stretched the socio-political stability of the country to it breaking point, such that, when the coup took place, it was welcomed with jubilation. According to Ikime (2008 in Owunka 2011:31), “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.”

Until recently, the perception generally was that the military possesses some attributes which makes it a potential integrative force. This is not without some rational basis. A quite impressive body of literature on the military in the 1960s and 1970s portrayed the organization as nationalistic and its personnel as puritanical, patriotic, detribalized and dedicated modernizers (Janowitz, 1964, 1977; Huntington, 1968; Johnson, 1962; Shils, 1962; Luttwak, 1969; Dorn, 1968). These assumed attributes were usually capitalized upon by Developing Nations’ armies to launch themselves into politics. However, experience has shown that these attributes were either exaggerated or over generalized when considering the situation in Africa (Ajayi, 2013:140).Particularly in the case of Nigeria, the military proved to be “corrupt, permeated by
secret societies and protection rackets” (Dent, 1978). It involvement in politics over time has made it an instrument of sub-nationalism, especially in its handling of ethno-religious matters and allocation of national resources. Some negative traits that were to manifest only later in the life of military regimes in Nigeria.

Meanwhile, the jubilations that greeted the coup of 15th January, 1966 quickly waned due to a sudden realization of the sectional and imbalanced nature of the assassination and killings of the prominent northern politicians of the time as a result of the coup. The poor handling of the post-coup situation by Major General Jonhson Aguyi Ironsi’s regime who felt that regionalism was the bane of the nation made it proceed to abolish the regions and put in place a unitary government through Decree No. 34 of 24th May, 1966. Decree No. 33 promulgated on the same day also abolished the political, ethnic and cultural associations that had served as the platform for the aggregation of popular opinions.

An observer was of the opinion that, ‘it doesn’t matter the good intentions behind the enactment of these decrees, the timing was most inauspicious’ (Ajayi, ibid 2013). This is considering the fact that the coup that brought Ironsi to power was staged by mainly army officers of Igbo extraction while the prominent politicians killed in the course of the coup were in the majority of Hausa origin. This naturally triggered the fear of Igbo domination among the Northern people of the country. Gen. Ironsi (an Igbo) who became the residuary legatee of the coup, not only refrained from punishing the coup plotters, but also went ahead to surround himself with Igbo technocrats as advisers. He also initiated moves to unify the civil service—a development that would have put the Northerners in a position of serious disadvantage vis-à-vis their Southern (especially Igbo) counterparts, who had more personnel in the service. With this kind of background, the promulgation of Decrees 33 and 34 merely served to further inflame ethnic passions that led to the second coup just seven months after the first. The retaliatory-coup of July 29th, 1966 masterminded by officers of Northern extraction restored the political balance somewhat in favour of the North,( Ajayi, ibid, 2013).

However, the violence that characterized this (the second coup) lingered on longer than necessary, resulting in the massive exodus of the easterners who were this time mostly the victims. (Ajayi, ibid, 2013) posited that, Lt. Col (later, General) Yakubu Gowon – Head of State and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, was unable (or unwilling?) to stem the tide of the pogrom directed against the Igbo in the North, Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Military Governor of the Eastern Region, who had also assumed the position of the Igbo leader, therefore, directed the Igbo elements resident in the North, to return home. This was precursory to the declaration of a sovereign Republic of Biafra by Ojukwu in May 1967. This development inexorably led to a civil war that lasted for thirty months.

The war was conceived as that of national unity by the Federal Military Government. This posture enabled it to enlist the support and assistance of other ethnic groups in the successful prosecution of the war. In the course of the war, the existing four regions were broken into twelve states as a strategy to erode the power base of Biafra and satisfy the yearnings of the minority elements to some extent. Furthermore, the ‘centrist federalism’ of the military in which virtually all powers and resources were appropriated for the centre where the military’s influence and authority were most profound and in tandem with the military’s command structure ensured a strong grip on the polity. Thus, the Nigeria that emerged from the civil war in 1970 was more united than previously but it was a unity that was based on authoritarian guidance and control.

The post-civil war times once again offered new opportunity for building a new and better Nigeria. The expectations of the citizens were that poverty, unemployment and lack of basic
infrastructure will be addressed through careful planning and prudent use of the resources of the country. Although attempt was made in this direction, through the Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Resettlement programme (the 3Rs), and the National Rolling Plans, the failure of Gowon’s regime to follow through with his transition programme was the bane of his regime.

General Murtala Mohammed toppled Gowon on 29th of July, 1975 in a bloodless coup. He (General Mohammed) in a quick succession was assassinated on 13th February, 1976 in an aborted coup and his Chief of Staff, General Olusegun Obasanjo, was installed as the new Head of State. General Olusegun Obasanjo successfully handed over power to the civilian government of Alhaji Shehu Shagari on 1st October, 1979. Shagari became the second civilian president Nigeria, had by that time, 23 years after independence. Although the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) did well in the elections, with 12 states out of 19 under its control and, majority seats in the national assembly, it victory was challenged in the court by the United Party of Nigeria (UPN),the opposition party lead by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, on the grounds of irregularities and mass rigging. The country was once again gripped by political instability and economic woes such that when in 1984, the military struck again and General Mohammed Buhari came into power in midst of the mirage of challenges in the country, the coup was welcomed with jubilations among the ordinary Nigerians. who hoped that some respite was in the offer as the regime promised to headlong deal with issues of corruption and indiscipline among the public officers of the Second Republic.

The Buhari/Idiagbon’s regime lasted for 20 months and gained a reputation of “a regime that was brutal and harsh” (Osoba, 1996:371) on the account of his anti-corruption and war against indiscipline programmes.

General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida toppled Buhari’s government in August 1985 and accused the ousted government of abuse of power, violation of human rights and the failure to turn-round the dwindling economic fortunes of the country on time among other things (Mai-Lafia, 2015:226).Babangida was the first military Head of State to style himself a “President” and the second longest serving military leader next to General Gowon. He ruled the country for 8 years and his reign was similar to Gowan’s in two basic ways: First, he failed to actualize his transitional programme as quickly as promised, and secondly the country made a lot of fortune from global oil sales, unfortunately with little to show for the boom in terms of infrastructure and developments that would have lasting impacts on the lives of ordinary Nigerians.

His regime was not free of the corruption and human right abuses the previous governments were accused of. Babangida’s regime is remembered for deceit and deception, which earned him the names such as “Maradona” and “the Evil Genius”. For example, in introducing his Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and the IMF loan, he pretended to be democratic by bringing the issue to public domain to seek the opinion of the Nigerian public. He, however, went contrary to the majority’s view and took the IMF loan. Similarly, he annulled the famous June 12 elections of 1993, which was globally acclaimed to be the freest and the fairest in the annals of elections in Nigeria’s elections.

In fact, that election was very symbolic as an opportunity lost to put religion and ethnic sentiments to rest in Nigerian politics. For the first time Nigerians unanimously voted and elected two Muslim candidates of Social Democratic Party (SDP) as against a Muslim/Christian ticket of the National Republican Convention (NRC). The devastating effects of this unpatriotic act almost set the country on the course of destruction and disintegration. Ajayi (2013:141) capture this unfortunate scenario thus, “The sit tight disposition of some of the military juntas and the subnational disposition of others resulted in manipulated transfer of power or annulment
of popular election in the case (that is the June 12, 1993 presidential election)”. He further pointed out that “This generated bitterness and loss of faith in the Nigerian nation by a cross-section of people in the Southern part of the country especially…”

It is, however, not wrong to say that Babangida’s military government became a victim of its own machination. This is because the agitations and out cries that followed from Nigerians and social democratic groups all over the country sent him out of power unceremoniously. Babangida handed over power to Chief Ernest Shonekan as an interim Head of State. Shoneka’s government merely lasted for 6 months before he handed over power to General Sani Abacha in what can best be described as a palace coup on 17th November. 1993 (Mai-Lafia, op cit, 2015). With Abacha in power, it was like a return or the continuation of Babangida’s government. Abacha himself a part of the previous government from inception and perhaps it was not without a purpose that he was left behind as Babangida left with all the senior military officers, who served in his government retired except Abacha. The next five years from 1993 was an era of endless confusion, fear, poverty and uncertainty. Nigeria almost became a pariah nation in a committee of nations. Political parties were established in preparation for a much anticipated return to democratic rule. But in no time all the political parties were competing with each other in adopting Abacha as their sole presidential candidate, this obviously, potent doom for the future and growth of democracy in Nigeria.

As providence will have it, the sudden death of General Sani Abacha on June 8, 1998, once more ushered in a great relief and doused the tension, fear and hopelessness that gripped the entire nation under his rein.

Perhaps, learning from the mistakes of the previous regimes and his predecessors, General Abdulsalam Abubakar, who succeeded Abacha, wasted no time in setting on the much anticipated transition programme that returned the country to democracy. Indeed he broke the jinx of military rule in Nigeria between 1998 and 1999, when he successfully handed over power to a democratically elected president in person of Olusegun Obasanjo, a retired army general too. But one cannot ignore the fact that where many of the previous military heads failed, Gen. Abdulsalam succeeded in getting through with the transitional programme without undue delay.

**Military rule in Nigeria: lessons and legacies**

29th May, 1999 indeed marked another watershed and epochal in the political history of Nigeria for so many reasons. In a way, it is like a second Independence Day for us as a people, because it marked the end of the cancerous frequent military take-overs and direct military involvement in the politics of Nigeria, an unacceptable aberration of the 21st century.

It further afforded us an opportunity to take stuck of our socio-political experiences 56 years down the line, by way of asking some reflective questions:

- To what extent have the military solved those problems that hitherto necessitated their interventions in the first place?
- How much a victim of the same problems they claimed to come to solve have they become (for example corruption)?
- Is the country better under the military, in terms of critical developmental indices like poverty level, employment rate, infrastructural development, and in the areas of peace, unity and political stability?

It is a known fact that, over the years, the military have always advanced reasons for intruding into the politics of the country. They have blamed the civilians and the political class of corruption, indiscipline, abuse of office, failure to provide the much needed
developmental variables to Nigerians masses, such as jobs, roads, hospital, education, security, unity, peace and political stability and so on. These were the bases and justification for military interventions in Nigeria over the years. It is the desire of this paper to determine the extent to which the military have addressed or even solved these and other problems throughout their sojourn in the corridors of power and political arena of Nigeria.

Basically, the main implication of long years of military usurpation of political power is that, in the spate of 56 years (1960-2016), the military had been in power for 27 years representing about 49% of the period. These years of political intrusions have a lot of consequences. It was observed that “the military had treated the Nigerian state like a captured territory, where offices and portfolio were shared as “war booties,” resulting in Primitive accumulation of private fortune thereby making the military officers a formidable group to reckoned with in its dictates(Olaniyan, 2010:165).

In a similar vein, (Gofwen, 1997:45) has it that:

The control of state power by the military over the years, has equipped them more than any other social category in society, to an infinitum dictate the nature and direction of affairs in this country. This has exposed them to the best opportunities and avenues to establish themselves economically have a further grip on the nation’s “body polity”.

This observer further contended that “the military has in recent times produced more millionaires than the civil society”.

In a clearer illustration it was said that, between 1985 and 1993, the administration of Babangida used about one hundred and forty three officers as state governors. Abacha’s regime used almost sixty officers in that capacity, including ministerial and other sensitive political appointments …The result of this juicy political appointment is that “most of them vacated the offices as millionaires as evident from their lifestyles, chain of businesses, land and other possessions”(Mai-Lafia, 2015:233).

This view is further supported by the simple fact that a good number of these ex-military administrators have come to play a dominant role in the democratization process that kicked off from 1999 to date, either as politicians, who contested and won elections or senior party members or sponsors. This is besides a significant number of ex generals who are now emirs, obas and traditional heads in their localities.

The scenario above cast a lot of doubts water down the enigmatic image of the military as an epitome of discipline and a bicorn of hope in terms of fighting corruption and abuse of public trust which has been a major challenge to the development of the country. The military over the years have claimed to have come to power to rid the country of corruption however, it is evident that the military itself is either as corrupt or more corrupt than the civilian class they claimed to have come to correct. Olaniyan (2010:168) quoted the Oputa Panel report that “The military had exposed itself to the Nigerian populace as corrupt and grossly incompetent and as clueless about the solution to the Nigerian afflictions as the civilian they vilify”.

It is an indisputable fact that by 1999 when military rule ended, the level of corruption in the country was still very high if not worse than what it used to be before their usurpation. Indeed, not only that the military left Nigeria a society where corruption was not only further institutionalized, but one where corruption was celebrated and seen as a way of life.

Aside from corruption, human right abuse and disrespect for constitution is another unfortunate tendency that the military rule or involvement in politics bequeathed us over the years. It is a known tradition that the military often suspend the constitution of the country and enact a decree
in its place as the law of the land. Lack of respect for constitution, rule of law and other civic principles, freedom of speech and other liberties that are sacred to a civilized society are truncated and relegated to the background. 

A major pastime of the military officers during their stay in the corridors of power was dictatorial tendencies, oppression, suppression, intimidation of people and wanton trampling on the people’s rights with little or no regards to the rule of law. In fact, it will not be wrong to conclude that the era of military rule represent the darkest chapter in Nigerian history. Even with civilian rule in place, which is about seventeen years old, the hangover of impunity still persist. Though significantly reduced, instances abound to remind us of the dark past of the military mentality where soldiers acted with scant regards to the rule of law or the civil liberty: The Zaki Biam and Odi incidence (Albert, 2003), the Nigerian army and the Shiite youths face up in Zaria (Sunday Trust, December, 13, 2015.p.1-4), the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Nigerian Army in Anambra, and Human Right Watch reports on human right abuse against the Nigerian army in the war against the Boko Haram insurgents in the northeast Nigeria. (Sunday Trust, February 13, 2016:26).

Closely related to this is the fact that prolonged military intervention in politics has militarized the society. “The culture of militarism that has been part of African politics results from prolonged military dictatorship and has contributed immensely to various forms of instability and recourse to violence as a means of resolving political issues” Boafor-Authur(2008), (cited by Adeyinka, 2010). Certainly, this long military intervention in politics with the attendant brutalization of the civil society, tended to have encouraged and legitimize the use of force and violence as instruments of social change and attainment of set goals. According to Salawu, (2010:348),

The use of coercion and force in settling conflicts has become a tradition in the Nigerian body polity. Strongly related to this is the uncontrolled arms supply, which has quickened the outbreak of conflict. The availability of arm has given impetus to fighting between conflicting parties rather than going for peaceful settlement of disputes.

Clearly, the rate and spate of ethno religious conflicts and instability that characterised the post military era suggest that the military did not succeed in forging an enduring unity based on consent and mutual respect among the different ethnic and religious groups in the country while in power. In fact, the conduct of a good number of them further created disunity and generated ethno religious tension rather than forging national unity in the country. Olaniyan (2010:166), quoting Justice Oputa, observed that:

As time passed the country’s military ruler and military as an institution by and large lost their direction. The greed of the military dragged the nation further away from the project of nationhood. The result is that by the end of almost thirty years of military rule, Nigeria is far more fragmented than it was in January 1966, when the military first seized power (The punch, January 4, 2005:4).

Sit tight tendencies of Nigerian politicians, as exhibited by President Obasanjo, in his failed third term bid, is perhaps another legacy of military rule in Nigeria. Nigerian leaders do not want to quit power even when it is clear that they have over stayed their welcome, on the account of their poor performance in office. The regimes of Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha stood out in this regard as they did not willingly relinquish power despite their unpopularity and loss of direction.
Furthermore, the long sojourn of the Nigerian military in politic greatly impacted negatively on the institution of the Nigerian army in the area of professionalism. In the analysis of Lai Olurode (2001:73), “The military in the course of political incursion was badly hit in the area the area of equipment, training, and logistic whereby, battle tanks are rendered obsolete, and about 78% of Army’s equipment is non-operational ...” Similarly General Alexander Ogbomudia underscored the extent of loss of professionalism in the military when he argued that “Officers lived in fear and unable to gather for any serious military exercise, less coup plotting will be read into it. In the course of preventing military coup, military alertness was sacrificed” (Tell, August, 2002).

Perhaps the account of General Christ Ali, the former Chief of Army Staff, is more revealing when he said:

Professionalism has waned into a daily hassle for position, lobby and witch-hunting. The inordinate drive for material acquisition and personal aggrandizement has replaced trust, honesty individual and collective dignity and esteem. Military responses and wellbeing of the institution have been non-charlatan...soldiers are sent on operations without proper kitting, logistics and administrative back up and organization (Ali, 2001; 238).

The Nigerian Army, at the end of its foray and persistent usurpation of power, became grossly incapable of discharging its constitutional responsibilities of safe-guarding the territorial integrity of the country. The abysmal performance of the Nigerian Army in the fight against insurgents in the northeast made it clear in a way that the Nigerian Army has become a toothless bulldog that can extort and harassed the innocent civilian on the street, but chased away by a rag-tag insurgent like Boko Haram. More recent revelations have further demonstrated that the Nigerian Army is a victim of ill rule and corruption from within it, which permeated the decades of military usurpation of power and domination of the politics of Nigeria with very little positive or tangible success to show for it besides national decay and rot.

Conclusion
It has been established that, the impact and the legacies of prolong military rule, and domination of Nigerian politics by the military, has continued to manifest and shape our politics for decades until finally, the termination of direct military rule in 1999. However, tendencies like militarism, injustice, lack of fair play, disrespect for fundamental human rights, poverty low-level of national integration, corruption and insecurity, weak institutions and bad governance endured to date. Although these are the issues and challenges the military claimed to have come to address, however, the lessons learned and the reality on the ground showed that, instead of being corrective and integrative, the military ended up causing damage and disaffection. They bequeathed a fragile political entity on the brink of disintegration. The hangover effects of prolonged military rule could be seen in the violent conducts, crimes, intolerance and a highly militarized social polity where violence, bad governance and dastard actions like kidnapping, terrorism, communal clashes, vandalism of critical social facilities featured frequently. Rather than advance the nation building in a fundamental and sustainable manner, the military, perhaps, only came up with self-serving, expedient cosmetic programmes that ended up fracturing and engendering more divisions.

The dire socio-political situation of the country has continued to grow worse progressively since the military handed over power to civilians in 1999. The politicians have not been too different
as they have also been aping the military predecessors in terms of their greed, corruption, authoritarian, selfish, unpatriotic and parochial dispositions. Obviously, the military did not set a solid and enduring foundation for the country to experience real and tangible growth and national development despite the potential of the nation. Patriotism was sacrificed on the altar of self-seeking, selfishness and parochial considerations.

State creation, in most cases, was based on other considerations rather critical ones like economic viability and sustainability of such states. So we ended up with very bogus and parasitic states that depend on the petroleum revenue produced from just about six states. Even with the oil booms, the greed and lack of vision of our leaders, (military and civilians) have prevented them from prudently deploying the nation’s resources toward setting the country on the path of sustainable development and industrialization, as the case with countries like India, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Agriculture was neglected and we over the time developed appetite and taste for foreign goods and services. Our domestic industries were deliberately neglected, moribund and dubiously privatized in some cases. In fact, instead of reducing poverty, our elite; military and civilian alike, among other things, pursued primitive accumulation of wealth. They stole the country dry and stash billions in foreign accounts abroad at the detriment of the populace and country.

References


