

CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS AS A STRATEGY FOR DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA: 1999 - 2007.

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Abstract

There is no gainsaying that Nigeria has experienced a lot of hurdles on her march to democratic transition. The focus of this paper therefore, is to examine critically how the military has monopolized the democratic political structure from the hands of the civilians for the greater part of Nigeria's existence. The resultant effect is that during the several decades of military rule in Nigeria, the Nigerian armed forces became thoroughly corrupt and lost almost every semblance of a professional force whose customary and constitutional role is to defend the territorial integrity of Nigeria. The paper however, provided some suggestions on how the civil and the military could co-exist for the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria.

Introduction

The Nigeria's experience with democracy has been paradoxical and ambitious. "The military has been like a clog on the wheel of the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria" (Braimah, 2006:37). Nigeria civil-military relations cannot be over-emphasized as the relationship between civil society and the armed forces is an essential part of any polity, democratic or otherwise. As rightly postulated by Plato in his work, *the Republic*, soldiers constitute a vital element of the ideal structure of the society. It is indeed to Plato that we owe the first systematic idea of a professional army (Ojo, 2006). All societies require a body of men and women whose sole occupation is that of protecting them from the dangers of external invasion, internal subversion or irredentist claims that may tear a society into shares (Ojo, 2000: 7).

Military rule in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized by different and numerous attributes. In naked quest for political power, army officers had decimated the ranks of the military. Coups, coup attempts and even rumours of coups have led to many officers being executed. At the last count, over one hundred and seventeen (117) persons, both military and civilians have been executed over coup charges. The death roll in 1976 was 39, 10 in 1986 while the aborted coup in 1990 recorded the highest casualties of 60 (Ojo, 2000:14).

In the final analysis, this practice did not only damage the chain of command, it created a climate of mutual suspicion and recrimination detrimental to military discipline and consolidation of democracy.

Historical Antecedents

Civilian /military in politics

Nigeria's march to democratic consolidation has been a chequered one marked by anti-colonial struggles, crises, coups, counter-coups and a thirty-month agonizing civil strife (Braimah, 2006). This has always been ascribed to the military which consists of the Nigerian army (the land soldier), the Nigerian airforce (for the air) and the Nigerian Navy (for the sea) (Musa, 1996:30).

In fact, the military has ruled this country for a period of eight times more than their civilian counterpart. Nigeria has passed through five different phases viz: (a) era of colonial autocracy and absolutism, that is period of formal colonialism till October 1, 1960 when the country gained "flag

independence”, (b) emergence of constitutional democracy (1960-1966) (c) the return of military and absolutism (1966-1979), (d) restoration of constitutional democracy (1979-1983) and (e) the second coming of military autocracy and absolutism (1983-1989). Since 1989, when Nwabueze, cited in Ojo(2000) made that observation, the polity has added three more phases to her democratization bid. With the inglorious “stepping aside” of General Ibrahim Babangida’s administration in 1993 (Ojo, 2000:2), an Interim National Government (ING) was put in a place headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan, handpicked by an unelected military president. The interim contraption collapsed after 82 days. General Sanni Abacha staged a palace *coup d’etat*, dissolved all the extant democratic structures retained by the ING and once again, reverted the country to a full blown military dictatorship. Abacha’s military autocracy and dictatorship was characterized by “horrendous human rights violations, hostage taking and forced exile (Ojo,2000). It was in this state of confusion that General Abacha died in June 8, 1998 in a mysterious circumstance.

General Abdulsalam Abubakar, who took over after the demise of General Abacha, seemed to have learnt enormous lessons from the legitimacy crises suffered by his predecessors in office, coupled with the desire of Nigerians to return and consolidate democracy, making the military junta no more fashionable. He made it clear that he was ready to hand over power in pronto to civilians.

However, the military did not interfere in Nigerian government and politics without the invitation by the civilians. As a young nation, Nigeria did not know peace in its five years after independence. The Western Region crisis developed from a personality clash between Chief Awolowo, the leader of the Action Group (AG) and his lieutenant, Chief S.L. Akintola who also succeeded him as the Premier of the Western Region (Nwosu, Olaniyi & Oyedele 2000). The atmosphere in the region remained tense and became a matter of public concern. The Federal government had to intervene in the *impasse* and on 29th May, 1962, a state of emergency was declared in the Western Region. On September 11, 1963, Chief Awolowo and others were charged for treasonable wrong and sentenced to imprisonment. Also, there were the census crises of 1962 and 1963 as well as the Federal Election crisis of 1964.

Furthermore, the controversy surrounding the western region election which was held on October 11, 1965 was the last straw that broke the camel’s back. The election was contested by the NNDP western controlled government and the UPGA which had become the opposition party in the western region. There was a lot of problems as regards the election in which the UPGA was rigged out. The situation degenerated into anarchy in that part of the country and the federal government seemed unable to put the situation in the west under control. As a result, a group of young army officers led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, struck in the early hours of January 15, 1966 and toppled the regime of Sir. Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. A number of politicians and senior army officers including the country’s Prime Minister, the Premier of the Northern region. Sir Ahmadu Bello and a host of others lost their lives during the coup. The coup plotters justified their action by claiming that they had intervened to bring to an end gangsterism, disorder, corruption and nepotism .

Democratic Consolidation

Originally, the term “democratic consolidation was meant to describe the challenges of making new democracies secure by extending their life expectancy beyond the short-term and making them immune against the threat of authoritarian repression of building dams against eventual reverse waves (Beetham 1994;157). The list of conditions for democratic consolation has also included such divergent items as popular legitimization, the diffusion of democratic values, the routinization of anti-system actors, civilian-military relations, party building, the organization of functional interest, the stabilization of electoral rules, judicial reforms, alleviation of poverty and economic stabilization.

Azeez (1991:47) is of the view that democracy is consolidated when the major political players recognize sufficient common interest in establishing electoral procedures and subsequently, see that their interest in keeping to the rules of the game, outweighs the cost of their being underpinned, rather than out of any principal commitment to democratic norms and canons.

Furthermore, democratic consolidation according to Diamond (1995:3) is the process by which democracy becomes so broadly and profoundly legitimate amongst its citizens that is unlikely to breakdown. He went further to say that it involves "behaviour and institutional changes that normalize democratic politics and narrows its uncertainty". This normalization requires the expansion of citizens' access to development of democratic citizenship and culture, broadening of leadership recruitment and training and other functions that civil society performs. But above all and most urgently, it requires political institutionalization.

The foregoing has demonstrated that the consolidation of democracy is a product of many factors or conditions operating together. No one condition on its own will be either necessary or sufficient but an accumulation of facilitating conditions can be expected to enhance the prospects for the survival of electoral democracy.

The project of democratic consolidation is more difficult in some circumstances than others. It is a task in the social sciences to identify some circumstances and subject them to comparative analysis. These circumstances identified here, is civil military but how can these see to democratic consolidation?

Civil-Military Relations

Civil-Military relation is the relationship between the civil society and the armed forces. It is an essential part of a polity, democratic or otherwise, since military force is almost a universal feature of social systems.

To Fayemi (2006:1), civil-military relations can be seen as part of complex political process which must address the root causes of militarism in society beyond the formal removal of the military from political power. While formal mechanisms of control are not in themselves wrong, the realities underpinning the crisis of governance in Nigeria is how the subordination of the armed forces to civil control can be achieved. When civil control is seen as part of a democratic struggle that goes beyond obeying presidential orders, it will ensure accountability to the rest of the society.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this, is that what we need is not just civilian control but also democratization of the security sector (including the military). This can only be achieved through a range of measures ensuring comprehensive constitutional dimensions of democratic oversight of security sector expertise, ensuring professional autonomy over military matters and recognizing the holistic nature of human security in terms of ensuring freedom from fear and want and not just absence of war and societal violence (Braithwaite, 2006:7).

According to Nwolise(2005:108), civil-military relations mean the total game of interaction between soldiers and civilians as individuals or groups. It assumes the interdependence of civil and military sectors but based on the principle of civil control of the military organization as a fundamental requirement for a lawful, free and democratic society.

Theoretical Framework

The theory used in this work is the group theory. Politics is the process by which social values are authoritatively allocated. This is done by decisions. Decisions are produced by activities, but each activity is not something separate from every other. However, masses of activity have common tendencies with regard to decisions. These masses of activity are groups. So, the struggle

between groups or interests determine what decisions are made. To the group theorists, the interaction among groups is the central fact of politics and an important element of the government process. A given policy therefore, at any time is the equilibrium or the compromises reached in the group struggle, (Ikelegbe 1996:34). Thus, the group struggle is between the civil group and the military to see that decisions reached would be favourable to democratic consolidation.

Military Reforms as a prelude to consolidation of Democracy in Nigeria.

There is no doubt that since the advent of the present democratic dispensation in 1999, Nigerian military has been making courageous efforts to redeem its image which was badly damaged over the years as a result of the military involvement in the politics of this country. It is also true that past and present military leadership has been working tirelessly to improve the general welfare and competence of its personnel through the provision of modern weapons/equipment, continuous training, both within and outside the country and above all, the general re-orientation of the entire military so that its personnel can discharge their duties with zeal, pride and confidence as professional soldiers.

Onwuamaegbu (2005:43), has argued that today, it is quite reassuring to state that the Nigerian military has started reaping the fruit of these courageous efforts. There is a tremendous change of attitude and perception from the general public towards the Nigerian military. They have accepted that they are part of the society with equal stake in the overall development of the society and the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. There is a popular proverb, which says: "respect from outside is a clear reflection of success within". This is exactly what the Nigerian military is enjoying now. Agwai(2004:53) has urged officers to cultivate trust in comments, statements and everything they do in order to protect ourselves and show to the people that we are that army that Nigerians should be proud of.

Several efforts have been made in this regard. We can cite the examples of such initiatives by the federal government in conjunction with other well-meaning western countries. The Nigerian military itself has done a lot to remain relevant in the present dispensation to consolidate democracy. However, there has been no comprehensive effort at self-examination, aimed at totally reforming the system. Such efforts should be seen by all as part of Nigerian military corporate responsibilities toward national goals and aspirations as well as its interpretation of how best to perform to meet these aspirations, which is the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria.

Consequently, the Chief of Army staff (COAS) held a retreat at Obudu Ranch Resort from 2nd - 7th May 2004. At the retreat, he talked on the plans to re-evaluate the challenges that confront the military in Nigeria in sustaining democracy, meeting the aspirations of Nigerians and responding decisively to global challenges. To him, the reform effort has no terminal point in mind. It is rather a continuous process designed to achieve a higher, sustainable and more rapidly deployable and responsive force, better able to meet the diverse challenges now and of the future(Agwai 2004:54). To this end, the chief of Army staff set up a committee to:

- (a) Determine the terminal objectives of the change process
- (b) Determine the training needs of the Nigerian army to meet the trends and challenges confronting it
- (c) Determining how to evolve a professional and value-centred military
- (d) Develop a change agenda, and,
- (e) determine in broad terms, the force structure and equipment needed to meet these trend and challenges

At its inaugural meeting, the committee noted that if the Nigerian military was to continue to be relevant under the current dispensation, there is need for critical self-examination that would lead to reforms in the way the Nigerian army currently does its business. It was also recognized that while the government seeks reforms in the security sector, it has fundamental responsibilities in the areas of policy direction and allocating resources. They would, therefore, need to carry the executive and the legislature along in this reform process, and every effort should be made to achieve our goals and aspirations (Agwai,2004). To Agwai, the vision is:

To mould Nigerian army into a compact mobile, highly professional force that would be respected by allies, feared by its enemies and highly regarded by the Nigerian people (Agwai, 2005).

Efforts at Reforming the Military in the Fourth Republic

When Obasanjo took over from the military in 1999, he was never unmindful of the potential danger the military could pose to the nurturing, sustainability and eventual consolidation of the nascent democracy (Ojo, 2000:16). Thus, the federal government carried out sweeping retirement exercise when it pulled out from the military, personnel well over 100 soldiers including generals and other senior military officers who were suspected to be political. Worthy of note, are those of them that have held one form of political appointment or the other between 1985 to 1999. In May 2001, just as the country was preparing for the second anniversary of democracy, General Victor Malu, the Chief of Army staff, and his counterparts of Navy and Air force, Victor Ombu and Ibrahim Muhmud Alfa, were relieved of their positions and were replaced immediately.

Since, the first spate of retirements, reorganization of the armed forces continued to be a recurring occurrence. According to Agbese(2009:9), several measures have been taken by Obasanjo government in repositioning the military. More training programmes for the military were announced and such training programmes were to emphasise the need for the military to subordinate themselves to civil authority. However, the big challenge for the military is how to address itself to its customary and constitutional role of defending Nigeria's territorial integrity and subordinating themselves to civil authority.

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying that Nigeria has experienced a lot of obstacles in a bid to implement democratic transition. But this trend is far from irreversible. Nigerian civil-military relations must be strengthened to achieve this. Planners and policy-makers must have a clear historical background understanding of the dominant pattern of Nigerian civil-military relations. Few African nations have more potential than Nigeria, but few have experienced greater trauma in attempts to build democracy. Nigeria's strategic and symbolic importance makes it a better environment for democratization than the rest of Africa.

Furthermore, during the several decades of military rule in Nigeria, the Nigerian armed forces lost nearly all semblance of a professional force and became thoroughly corrupt. As a result, the military is incapable of promoting self-reforms and this cannot lead to democratization. Only a radical transformation of the military and the whole replacement of the officer corps could open the way to the consolidation of democracy. Youth enroll in the military not to pursue noble career but with the sole intention of taking part in coups in order to be taken as military administrators and chairmen of task forces.

Conclusively, having raised academic and intellectual alarm as regards the existing poor strained state of civil-military relations, which is often subsumed in widespread ignorance, mutual suspicion and misunderstanding in Nigeria, we must bear in mind that it is a collective responsibility to contribute our own quota in enhancing cordial and productive civil-military co-operation and collaboration in Nigeria. Above all, there is need for all and sundry to press for the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. There is need for effective and exemplary political leadership in the country in order to consolidate democracy. This requires credible elections that can throw up credible leaders.
2. There is also the need for the establishment of parliamentary supervision of the democratic structures in order to prevent the drift of democracy in Nigeria.
3. Citizenship and democratic education is equally needed to re-orientate the Nigerian populace to enable them appreciate the need to sustain democracy in Nigeria.

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