

THE MILITARY AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

Dr. M.E, Okpala

Abstract

In the process of Nigeria's political development, the role of the military cannot be ignored. Of the forty-three (43) years of existence as a sovereign state, the military ruled for thirty (30) years. It has glued itself to power so long that Nigerians who are sixteen years old as at the enthronement of the 3rd Republic by 1999 have come to regard the khaki as a staff of office. It is in the light of the above that this paper has examined the incursion of the military in the governance of the Nigerian state, highlighting in this regard reasons for such incursion, aggregate acceptance and performance level. And these formed the basis for appraisal of the supposed and expected roles in a democratic sovereign state like ours.

Introduction

With a pebble's throw into next millennium, the theme of the conference "Technological Education in a Democratic Dispensation" is not only timely but also necessary. This is because for a way forward all the democratic forces in the country must team up together. Without a clear definition of their various roles, technological education cannot progress, as the atmosphere will not be conducive. The belief is that through this, democracy will get rooted in the society. Based on this, the focus here is on the military who has been a brake in the wheels of national development by perpetuating itself in power against all odds. This in no doubt leads to the need for the theme of this paper. "The Military and Democratic Governance in Nigeria" aimed at clearly analyzing the role of the military.

It would therefore be falsehood to expect to operate a democratic political structure without setting the question of how to curb recurrent militarism. To this Nwankwo (1987:25) argues that a first step in this direction is to accept that, as Nigerians we have reached our highest level of political secularity, that days of pretences are gone and that every Nigerian, whether in the military or out of it should view the future of this country with a considerable amount of objectivity. Secondly, there is an urgent need for realizing that the construction of a responsible and integrated democratic system cannot be achieved by the wishful thoughts of the military establishment.

The train of events in the society shows that the political terrain looks bleak as well as the socio-political life. Basic infrastructure as NITEL, Education, NEPA, NNFC etc, exist in name due to nonchalant as well as the military legalized bribery and corruption. The only cure to this situation is good leadership, which had eluded the country due to military incursion into the political arena. It is in the spirit of safeguarding the country from further dictators that this paper sets out to review the roles of the military, analyze its involvement in politics, weigh its good as well as bad side, look at the effects of the military action and proffer the way forward because as the "Weekly Trust" rightly observes:

From the look of things, coups are not yet over, so long as we have ambitious and power seeking military boys that just want to have their names in the register of past heads of state.

The Military

The military is a legal national institution solely responsible for the defence of the territorial integrity of a country as well as overseeing its internal security. However, the Armed Forces in Nigeria, deriving its legitimacy from the barrel of the gun have usurped power for thirty (30) years. To this, it has unconstitutionally constituted itself as self-acclaimed alternative government at the slightest sign of invitation by the populace or laxity on the part of the legitimate government of the day. According to E[^]aigwu (1966:34):

... the military feels it can act as a political physician or usher order in

the society but in most instances discovers itself as a patient infested by the disease of its predecessors it has set up to cure resulting in political instability triggered off by numerous coups.

Despite these lapses stated above on the part of the military, it was able to perpetuate itself in power because the officers have been the major political actors by virtue of their "actual or threatened use of force." The concern of this paper however, is to find out how the military incursion into politics has affected the socio-political life of the citizenry. In the constitution, military intervention in whatever form is frowned at because it usually breeds regimental life into the civil society thereby trampling on the rights of the people.

Historical Background of Military Incursion Into Politics

Military incursion into politics is known as coup d'etat according to Nwankwo (1987:42) is "continuation of politics by violent means or an alternative method of voting - voting with gunshots rather than with ballot papers." Historically, this "violent" government received its first baptism in the hands of the late General Abdul Nasser, then Lt. Colonel against the monarch King Farouq of Egypt on July 23, 1952. The "whooping cough" exploded and spread to Zaire (now Congo) in the early 60s where Late Mobutu Sese Seko ousted Patrick Lumumba. Out of the fifty-one (51) countries that make up the continent, only 6 have not experienced one form of coup or the other. (Caron 1972:15).

In Nigeria, the first coup was staged six years after independence (precisely on 15th January, 1966) by a group of Nigerian military officers led by late Major Patrick Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu. Ever since, the military had been on the governance turf till the first break in 1976 that lasted till 1983 when yet another group of military officers struck and seized power even though the leadership changed a couple of times owing to counter coup de'tat. However, the civilians tasted power briefly through the Interim National Government that lasted a few months in 1993 from August 27th to November 11th 1993. Therefore, the military seized power once more till 1999 when the country was returned to democratic rule.

Having traced the historical background of the military incursion into politics, it is pertinent for the paper to raise this fundamental question; what are the reasons given (convincing or otherwise) by coupists for embarking on the "unholy" takeover of government? A couple of reasons had been adduced by the coupists as a back-up or justification for their dastardly acts. These reasons are mostly centred on embezzlement of funds by the previous government, neglect of the plight of the citizenry, non-maintenance of the public utilities etc.

Reasons For Military Incursion Into Nigerian Politics

The paper believes that no system is infinitely "bad" in itself. On the contrary, the actual character of a system may be distorted in the process of the implementation. The point still remains that military regimes could either be an instrument of national enslavement or a tool for national liberation, depending as well on the master minders.

However, any military takeover in the country, usually follows the same traditional reasons summed up by Osadebe (1978:25) to include:

Failures and mistakes made by politicians such as regional intolerance; the desire to rule forever, which produced gerrymandering, rigging of elections, inability to accept defeat, floor-crossing or changing from one party to the other, in order to gain personal advantage or profits; and unwillingness to observe political party discipline when such was regarded as something thwarting personal ambitions and interests. Besides these reasons, favouritism, sectionalism, religious differences, civil strife are some of the usual reasons cited by the military from Nzeogwu to Abacha. In fact, the list of the reasons is inexhaustible.

If the military has participated in the politics of the country for such a long time, what are the good as well as the bad side of such participation? To this, the paper sets out to put the military on a scale to weigh which side is heavier, the pros or the cons.

Achievements and Failures of Successive Military Governments

To wave aside all military governments as "bad" is to be unrealistic. This is because at some points in time in the country, politics was so bastardized that the populace had to even invite or sponsor the military to take power. At some particular times, vanquished politicians who refused to accept defeat after election tended to seize confusion thereby leaving the military with no choice than to step in to sanitize the situation. Squabbles between legislators and executives also witnessed military take over.

Other advantages of the military in politics are the unnecessary bureaucratic bottlenecks in the face of emergencies by elected offices, creation of states and local governments which helped to bring government closer to the people as successive attempts by civilians governments usually ended up in failure due to sentiments. Political analysts believe that the three years of the Nigerian Civil War would have completely degenerated into secession if the military were not in control.

However, the other side of the coin speaks volumes of the weaknesses of the military in politics. In order to stress this, Alexis de Tocqueville (1957), a Frenchman asked:

Can a man, trained to be sudden and quick in quarrel, or taught to seek the bubble reputation even in the Camion's Mouth be a true shepherd of a flock of aspiring free willers?

The part of the constitution that mentions the military is only in the definition of its legitimate role as such, "Military Government" is an unconstitutional coinage. Nwankwo (1987: 57) sums up the "unholy" military take over as being neither corrective nor redemptive as they usually claimed. In his words:

They (the military) are stale, uninteresting, docile, and corrupt. They remain dictators even though they might garnish the oppressive power structure, which they operate with confusing democratic slogans. While they are confined to the barracks, the officers constitute a source of anxiety to civilian administration. When in power, they sit tight, act as a brake on the wheels of national development.....

The disadvantages of the military are so numerous that this paper cannot exhaust them. In fact, the shortcomings of the Nigerian Armed Forces have been centred on ethnic, religious bias. The looting of the immediate past military administrators is not out of place as such has been the tradition any time they relinquished power.

The military is in no way better than the worst civilian government because if they claim civilians were the problems, there would have been no need to overthrow Gowon, Murtala and Buhari.

The Role of the Military

For the military to effectively restrict itself to its traditional roles as stipulated in the constitution, all hands must be on deck. The elected officers, the military itself as well as the masses each has its part to play.

The elected officers must provide responsible leadership worth defending. Openness and accountability, sense of justice, courage to take popular decisions for the common good are some veritable tools for sustaining the present democratic tempo. Besides, they must be humane as leaders and not masters and must also show exemplary leadership. The welfare of the military such as salaries, and other benefits due for them must all be paid promptly and accurately. If all these democratic obligations are nurtured by the politicians, coups will be part of history.

On the part of the military, there is no doubt that while in office, the high standards of professionalism suffered serious decline. This is because the high-ranking officers were too busy in politics that they hardly had time to outline policies aimed at catering for the training of the officers and men. On the part of the subordinates, they were also too busy canvassing for everlasting stay in power of the officers as "the crumbs of bread" from the masters' table were to their own advantage. Besides, sanctions imposed on the military for its involvement in politics denied them of the opportunities to go for further training.

" In the present democratic dispensation, the new Service Chiefs need to take it as a challenge and look at their assumption into office as a way of normalizing the lapses in the past. The

environment is conducive enough for them to set about not only the demilitarization of the armed forces but to depoliticize as well as professionalize them with all the sanctions lifted, a comprehensive programme of training, equipping and defending the nation's territories should be quickly drawn and implemented.

As the unifying factor between the military and the elected officers, the populace should henceforth try to seek redress in the law courts when the leaders fail them. The previous practice of inviting or even sponsoring coup d'etat should stop. Rather, if the politicians fail, the poll should be where the electorate should exercise their voting power as stipulated in the constitution. The need for change as the year 2000 draws near is urgent. Otherwise, the country's ruling forces, even in 300 years from 2000 AD, will continue to perpetuate the false pretence of the past regimes.

The paper believes that if the parties that make up the nation's democratic force can team up to checkmate one another, no doubt the much elusive democracy that has been put in place will be the expected way forward.

Conclusion

The future democratization of Nigerian affairs calls for the unification of forces among the elected leaders, the masses as well as the military. If there is a derailment on the part of any of the three, the democratic violence will still visit the people in the shape of unemployment, wage freezes, poverty, armed robbery among others. Nwankwo (1987:70) observes that the way forward "calls for the mobilization of all democratic forces within the Armed Forces and Civil Society.

Strict compliance to the constitution is the way forward else; the self appointed alternative government will still bother the nation one morning with another unrhythmic martial music, which will be followed by "Fellow Nigerians" thereby pulling down the coveted democratic structure in place.

Recommendation

At last, the military kept their promise by ushering in a democratic rule. They have realized that the dictatorial scales on their eyes have fallen. However, the extent to which the new democratic experiments operate will make them either to stick to their guns in the barracks or come back. The recent appearance of some past military administration before probe panels testifies that the military is ready to be submissive to the civil authority.

Nigerians must practice a new political culture where participation, tolerance and compromise reign supreme. The politicians must also imbibe the spirit of sportsmanship and adhere to the rules, which govern the game. We must gradually develop an acceptable political culture and this is the task for every Nigerian not only the political actors.

References

Editorial Column (Dec. 1998) *New Nigerian Newspaper*. Kaduna: New Nigerian News Paper, Ltd.

Editorial Column (June 1991) *Vanguard Newspaper*. Lagos: Vanguard Media Ltd.

Editorial Column (June 1999) *Weekly Trust*. Kaduna: Media Trust Nig. Ltd. Federal

Government of Nigeria (1999) *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*. Osadebe,

D. C. (1978): *Building a Nation*. Ibadan: Macmillan Publishers Ltd. Caron, M. (1992)

Democratic Transmission in Abuja. Ibadan: University Press Ltd.

Nwankwo, A. (1987): *The Military Option to Democracy: Class, Power, and Violence in Nigerian Politics*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Company Ltd.

