

Sustenance of Military Disengagement from Nigeria Politics: The Imperative for an Enduring Democracy

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Abstract:

Military involvement in politics in Africa and Nigeria to be precise has never been welcomed at any time. This is because, the military, by their nature was never trained to get involved in politics. Military leadership in the country has remained an unpleasant memory and each successive military regime the country ever had, has its unique evils that left it not to be desired. It is a memory many don't want to remember, but after long years of military involvement in politics, with the attendant brutality and human right abuses, what has the current political leadership learnt and how are they poised to ensure that the military permanently disengages from politics? This paper examined how to dissuade the hitherto, incessant military intervention in the politics of Nigeria. The study adopted the Institutional Theory as a framework of analysis. The paper posited that factors like military professionalism, separation of power, strong institutions, and good governance amongst others will engender a sustained military disengagement from Nigerian politics. The paper recommended amongst others that good governance should be encouraged; transparency entrenched at all levels of governance, respect for rule of law, and accountability of public office holders, if the drive towards democratic consolidation in Nigeria must be achieved and sustained.

Keywords: Accountability, Democracy, Good Governance, Military Disengagement, Nigerian Politics.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The 1952 Egyptian Military Coup against King Farouk led by Abdel Gamel Nasser triggered an avalanche of coups across the length and breadth of Africa. On January 15th 1966, Nigeria's baptism of coups came about when Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu led other Majors to the coup that toppled the government of Alhaji Tafawa Balewa. The coup was however lopsided and led to a further coup of 29th July, 1966 that resulted in the overthrow of General Johnson Thomas Ummakwe Aguiyi-Ironsi who had become the first Nigerian military head of State – an aftermath of the upheaval that followed the Nzeogwu coup.

General Yakubu Gowon ascended the throne at the overthrow and demise of General Ironsi and held office until his overthrow on July 29, 1975. One of the cases against him was his reneging on his promise to hand over political power to the political leadership in 1975. General Murtala Mohammed who ousted him promised to re-establish democracy in 1979. His tenure at the helm of affairs was however cut short by a coup that snuffed out his life. General Olusegun Obasanjo, his deputy, succeeded him in office and kept faith with General Murtala's promise to bring back the country to a democratic path.

Democracy was reestablished on 1st October 1979 after a keenly contested election involving five registered parties viz - National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP), Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), Great Nigerian Peoples Party (GNPP) and Peoples Redemption Party (PRP). The Second Republic led by Alhaji Shehu Shagari did not however last long because of inherent corruption and squandamania. The politicians of the Second Republic were not really different from the politicians of the First Republic. As Iheonu (2011) puts it

The politics they played did not deviate from that of the first Republic. It was corruption galore... The politicians appeared not to have learnt from the mistake of the First Republic and Nigeria's history went full circle on December 31st, 1983.

The military took over the reins of power again and did not fully relinquish power until May 29, 1999. After long years of military involvement in politics, what has the current political leadership learnt from the military interregnum and how are they poised to ensure that the military permanently disengages from politics? What is the role of the military itself toward this? These and others are what this study intends to look at.

The Concept of Democracy

Many political thinkers since the time of Socrates have grappled with the idea of which type of government will give the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people in a given society. Each political thinker came up with his own idea but after years of thought, it appeared that the type of government that has endured is the one that was said to have developed from the Greek city-states especially Athens. This system of government is known as democracy which comes from two Greek words *demos* which means people and *Kratia* which means to rule. Democracy therefore means the rule of the people.

This basic understanding notwithstanding, many scholars have tried to define democracy. The most enduring definition of democracy is that of Abraham Lincoln who saw it as the government of the people, by the people and for the people. Some critics have argued that democracy in such absolute terms can only occur in direct democracies like those of the Greek city-states in which everybody in the society participates in the political debates (Harries, 1976). Almond, Powell, Dalton and Strom (2008) define democracy as a political system in which citizens enjoy a number of basic civil and political rights, and in which their most important political leaders are elected in free and fair elections and are accountable under the rule of law. The definition of democracy by Almond et al brings three things to the fore and these are the issues of free and fair elections, accountability of the political leadership and the respect for the rule of law. Sodaro (2008) sees democracy as a system in which the people have the right to determine who governs them and hold them accountable for their actions. Embedded in Sodaro's definition is the concept of popular sovereignty.

Popular sovereignty means that the people, the ruled, are the ones endowed with the power to determine who rules them, how they are ruled and must be accounted to. This means that the people are really the source of the state legitimacy and should have sovereign power over the governing institutions and officials. It is from this notion that the term "power to the people" was conceived.

Rourke (2008) sees democracy in terms of rights that should accrue to the people. For him democracy is a system of government that extends two types of rights to the citizens of the state. The first set of rights includes the right to vote freely and frequently for competitive candidates who have different policy inclinations and who have the capacity to make positive impact on policy making. The second set of rights is civil rights such as freedom of expression and association, and that of equality before the law.

Democracy should not however be seen from a narrow conception as the substitution of bullets for ballots (Ngwu, 1983). This definition merely sees democracy as the supplanting of the military with civilian rulers without due cognizance for the place of the ruled in the scheme of things. But most disturbingly, this is how the political leadership of Nigeria actually views democracy - the soldiers are out, we are in, the people are secondary and inconsequential. What does this attitude portend for Nigeria's nascent democracy?

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the institutional theory as its framework of analysis. The theory has two strands, by Samuel P. Huntington and the other by Walter W. Powell. Huntington's view is captured in his work "The Soldier and the State". For Huntington, there is a sharp difference in the world of the military and the world of the civilians. He insisted that an enduring and sustained democracy is achievable only through the professionalization of the military. Professionalism to him can only be actualized in what he termed 'professional officers corps' (Iheonu, 2014). He argues that it is only professional military officer that holds the key to controlling the military world (Iheonu, 2014). The other strand of the theory, advanced by the American Sociologist, Walter W. Powell is captured in an article written with Paul DiMaggio titled "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields", (1983) and their subsequent edited book, *The New Institution in Organizational Analysis* (1991). The thrust of the Institutional theory of Walter W. Powell is on the deeper and more resilient aspects of social structures. It considers the processes by which structures, including schemes, rules, norms and routines become established as authoritative guidelines for social behavior. The basic assumption of the theory is that organizations and their members are not rational actors but are affected mostly by their environment and how things are done in the past.

Therefore, the two strands of the institutional theory advanced by Huntington and Powell and their variant perspectives and prism help the study explain how to ensure a long sustained military disengagement from politics and political activities. These and many more are visible today especially in the level and extent to which the military have become professionalized and their acceptance of their place in the barracks. It is so because overtime, as a result of prevailing rules, norms, routines and structures, the military as part of societal structures have gradually accepted the fact that their place is at the barracks. As a result, the hitherto, quest to overthrow a democratically elected government is becoming a thing of the past. Therefore, the two strands of the institutional theories help the study to understand the steps which are necessary for a sustained democratic practice and as such most suitable for the study.

Reasons for Military Intervention in Politics

There are many reasons why the military intervenes in a country's political process but for the purpose of this study we shall look at these three:

(1) Economic Reasons

The most dominant factor that brings about military intervention in the political process is economic. The economic aspirations of Africans were not realized at independence and thereafter. Corruption and general bad governance stagnated the African economics and in some cases sent them on a downward surge. The politicians only concentrated at enriching themselves, their families and cronies. Contracts were often inflated and shared among themselves.

Another problem was that the economies of African states after independence was still tied to that of theirerstwhile colonial masters and capital flight was still as serious as it was before political independence was granted. Prices kept shooting up and the African people kept getting poorer. Furthermore, the development plans of the post-colonial African states never saw the light of the day. What was rather seen was that the money earmarked for them went down the drain. The military watched in silence but at a point could no longer endure the pains and woes of the people. They struck.

(ii) Political Reasons

Another strong reason for military intervention in politics is the inability of the political leadership to steer the ship of politics without the violation of the constitution, persecution of the opposition, or general recourse to coercion. The political elite simply refused to allow the ship berth safety in our political waters. Coupled to this is the non-fulfillment of election promises, rather they allowed their proximity to power to seduce them, a situation in which, according to Lord Acton, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Most of them were power drunk. Rather than fulfill their promises they tried to victimize those who speak out against them.

During elections, the ruling party uses everything within its disposal to rig the election and sustain themselves in office even in the face of their glaring unpopularity. The battle cry is "win the election first and leave the court battle to us". What follow before, during and after the conduct of election is murder, arson and general mayhem. The military watching from the periphery may decide that it is their lot to save the country from going down,

(iii) Socio-cultural Factors

Most African countries are a mixture of ethnic groups and religions. The European colonialist did not consider the inherent problems while packaging territories that were economically viable and politically manageable to them. By the time these colonies got their independence most of them could not manage their diversity which could be positive if properly handled. The competition for power was centred on ethnicity and religion, with every actor trying to protect his group. People were not considered for jobs or other appointments based on ability or qualification but on the bases of his ethnicity or religion. And because federal allocation is done according to population strength of the regions, various leaders of each section fought to inflate their numbers. The military being part of the society soon got involved in themiasma. Before long they got so factionalized that they planned coups to aid politicians from their own ethnic groups, or to remove those not of their own sections of the country.

The Concept of Military Disengagement

The reasons for military intervention notwithstanding, the military as a matter of fact are not trained to govern but rather trained in security tending. In many cases they did not do better than the civilians they kicked out. Moreover, they are usurpers of power and do not have political legitimacy. Therefore, it gets to a point when the people will want to exert their sovereignty and make rulership difficult for the military. The military at this point will decide to disengage from politics. The job of the military is the application of the lethal force or the threat of it in security tending. The military, therefore are not trained in the science of governance, and in Africa and other thirdworld countries, military intervention in the political process is seen as an interim measure after which they go back to the barracks and continue with their professional job of safe-guarding the territorial integrity of the state and ensuring internal order and cohesion of the same. This, in a nutshell, is military disengagement.

However, when the military disengages from politics, it is not entirely because they are sure that the politicians will not disappoint again but rather to give them the benefit of doubt knowing that they, the military, can always strike again if the political leadership derails once more. Miller (2004) agrees with this when he states that:

This...addresses the question of military disengagement from politics in states emerging from prolonged cycles of military intervention in politics. The case of El Salvador is particularly interesting given the decades of repeated intervention by the Salvadoran military. These cycles of military intervention indicate that intervention in politics is seen by the military as part of their job. Long term military disengagement therefore comes from a change in the military's self-identity and orientation towards intervention in politics because the military will always have the ability to intervene due to their preponderance of force.

Flight Lt. Jerry J. Rawlings did it in Ghana when he intervened in the political process once again after handing over to a civilian regime. In the same vein it may be very necessary and important to take cognizance of the question Damilola (2011) asked about military disengagement. The question is, would military officers who have been used to enjoying certain prerequisites and privileges of political power and who have been accustomed to being treated as lords like the politicians before them be content with the non-prestigious life of the barracks?

Before the military embarks on disengagement, they weigh the pros and the cons. This is because military life is a romance with death whether in the battle field, staging a coup or disengaging from politics. In the battle field it is obvious, Staging a coup is equally dangerous because it could take the life of the perpetrators if it fails. Military disengagement from politics is equally a risky business. The military government which is bent on withdrawal from politics must hand over to those it could trust. Careless handover could prove disastrous as was the case in Ghana when the first generations of military rulers were shot by Flight Lt Jerry Rawlings. We also have the Argentine case when the military handed over to the political leadership in 1984 and three ex-military rulers Generals Biola, Gattlieri and Dignone were later put on trial. Military disengagement is therefore a serious business and is often handled with care.

Patterns of Military Withdrawal

There are three patterns and/or models of military disengagement or withdrawal from politics. Adekson (1979) delineates these as:

- (a) The counter-coup approach,
- (b) The military-turned politicians pattern and
- (c) The constitutional-evolutionary model.

A. The Counter-Coup Approach

In this situation, the military is not yet sure whether it wants to withdraw from politics or to stay on. While the military leaders are not yet decided on which move to make, there might be a seething dissent within the ranks that do not support elongation of the military regime. This group may decide to topple the incumbent military leaders. However, this change of guard as a result of increasing erosion of the legitimacy and credibility of the military as a corporate body may not necessarily result into civilian succession into political power (Igwe, 1994), at least not immediately. The Murtala/Obasanjo regime that came on board after the overthrow of Gowon regime in 1975 is a good example. The regime quickly came up with its transition programme that culminated in the handover to civilians on 1st October, 1979.

B. The Military-Turned-Politicians Pattern

This type of military disengagement is also known as the institutionalization method. Igwe (1994) states that, this is where a military leadership transforms itself into quasi-civilian political elite to perpetuate their rule; a situation where the military remove their uniform to adorn civil clothes and continue their rulership. Sometimes the national assembly is created to give legitimacy to the new regime. Some good examples of this sort of transformation are Samuel Doe of Liberia, Yahya Jammeh of the Gambia, Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire and Nasser of Egypt. The late General Sani Abacha was on course for this before sudden death put a wedge to his ambition. The features of this type of regime are:

- i. A military that is supportive of the new government
- ii. A president who exercises supreme power through civilians
- iii. The military gets special treatment from the president for if he disappoints the military he would get the same treatment as his civilian predecessors.

C. The Constitutional-Evolutionary Model

The constitutional-evolutionary model is also known as the abdication model. In this model the military after a while wholeheartedly disengages from politics by handing over to a duly elected civilian government. The military then return to the barracks to resume its traditional role of tending the country's security. This occurs partly when the military knows that it should be apolitical and only came as a corrective regime.

Sustenance of Military Disengagement from Politics

One thing is for the military to disengage from politics, another thing is for its withdrawal to be sustained. This is important because it is known fact that Flight Lt. Jerry Rawlings handed over power to a civilian government only to return and boot out the government. In Nigeria, the military disengaged on Oct 1, 1979 only to return less than four years when General Buhari and Idiagbon sent the ShehuShagari's led government packing on 31st December, 1983.

Factors that sustain Military Disengagement

There are certain factors that could sustain military disengagement from a country's political process and ensure civilian supremacy. These are;

- i. Military professionalism
- ii. Separation of power
- iii. Good governance

❖ Military Professionalism

A military that disengages from politics and means to really remain neutral in the political process must forget the trappings of political office and concentrate on its traditional duty of security tending. Military professionalism from the western orthodox-liberal perspective which most of the third world countries adhere to maintains that the military must be apolitical and subservient to the civil political leadership. Military professionalism calls for the military sensitization of officers and men of the armed forces on civilian supremacy in the political process. There must be constant orientation and reorientation of the military by the military on the need to hold allegiance to the constitution.

Military professionalism rests on the knowledge according to General Douglas MacArthur that "The mission of the armed forces remains fixed, determined and inviolable - it is to deter external aggression and win wars. Everything else in the military career is but a corollary to this vital dedication" (Opara, 2002). The military should dedicate itself to its profession and show dislike for mundane politics. As Opara (2002) submits

This focus on traditional concern and specialized expertise tend to make the military a politically neutral professional institution. Such a military profession would be allowed to separate itself from much of the society it serves and would be concerned primarily with developing and financing its functionalexpertise as a military instrument of war and deterrence. What this implies is that the... military must first and foremost be committed to its traditional role.

When the military fully commits itself to its traditional role of security tending and subsumes itself under civilian leadership it will not meddle with the political process.

Separation of Power

It was Baron Montesquieu who propounded the principles of separation of power. He said that it would be wrong for one person or institution to control the three branches of government. The principle of separation of power holds that government business should be divided into three functions of the executive, the legislature and the judiciary with different set of people running each. The separation of power leads to check and balances in the running of the government so that power will not be concentrated on one set of officials

The military is part of the executive arm of government and in strict separation of power should concentrate in the performance of executive function without meddling with issues of legislation and the judiciary. The military should therefore be strictly under the directive of the president who is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. And based on military control of command, no subordinate military officers should challenge the authority of the President. The buck stops at the table of the President.

The Good Governance Approach

The most often cited reason by the military for shoving off the civilian government is corruption and the abuse of the constitutional provisions of government. The degree of corruption and abuse of office by the political leadership of third world countries is often mind blowing. Sheer corruption, tribalism, nepotism, bribery, looting of public fund and property, inflation of contract etc. is the rule rather than the exception. It is done with impunity and nobody cares, at least not until the military come calling.

For the military to stay in the barracks, the elite whether political, economic, social, religious and otherwise must be committed to democracy. Democracy cannot succeed unless the people are committed to it: this in practical terms means that for democracy to thrive and formilitary disengagement to be sustained, the people must be prepared to adopt the defining features of modern democracy which include the core values especially rule of law, accountability, freedom, inclusion, equality, equity, tolerance and compromise (Sodaro, 2008). The economic well-being of the people should be of great importance to the elite.

The most troublesome monster of Nigerian democracy as of today is prebendalism. This is the use of public office for self-aggrandizement and enriching family members, friends and cronies. Public officers do not account to any person on what they do with public money. There is still no effective mechanism to check official corruption as we have in advance democracies. In the developed world people do not just use official position to enrich themselves, their families and friends. It is on record that the former President of the United States, Bill Clinton, borrowed money from a mortgage bank to build his family house after his presidency. Such a thing would be a sacrilege in Nigeria where the Presidents double as the de facto ministers of petroleum resources or the de facto Governors of the Central Bank. We are in a country where the state governors pocket the State Houses of Assembly, a country where the local government chairman are seen as lords, a country where nobody checks nobody, a country where nobody accounts to nobody (Iheonu, 2011).

Politicians in the advanced countries do not use official political positions as instrument of prebendalism. Public office is a call to duty, a career in public service for the welfare of the people. Such public officers make do with salaries and allowances of the office. The salaries and allowances of course are not atrocious. They are determined by the government agency responsible for salaries and allowances and are not subject to willful changes by political office holders. But in our country the opposite is the case. And until Nigeria finds a way of combating this, no one could say what the future portends.

II. CONCLUSION

The need for Nigeria's democracy to endure cannot be over emphasized. The political leadership must do everything to ensure that the military stays disengaged from the political process of the country. The most important step toward this is good governance. Transparency should be the watchword and the way to accomplish this is through popular sovereignty, respect for rule of law, and accountability. When we learn to do these, our democracy will grow from strength to strength.

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