

THE MILITARY AND SUSTENANCE OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: A PHILOSOPHICAL PROBE

GODWIN OKANEME, PhD

Department of Philosophy
Faculty of Arts
University of Abuja
Email: godwin.okaneme@uniabuja.edu.ng
G.S.M. 08036775774

Abstract

Democracy has had a chequered history in the Nigerian state. The simple reason for this unfortunate situation is to be located in the unfortunate but true fact that there has been series of military interventions in the country since she attained her political independence leading often to a halt in the nation's march to democratic tranquillity and paradise. The role of the military is clearly defined all over the world. It has the traditional duty of guarding the territorial integrity of any nation against external invasion and aggression. However, for some time in Nigeria, the military has left its traditionally assigned role and dabbled in politics and politicking through military interventions. This paper critically analyses why the military often intervenes and interrupts the nation's march to democratisation on a very regular basis. Military intervention no matter the reason or reasons for its occurrence is an aberration. Since the general notion is that the worst democracy is better than any best military government, the paper strongly advocates for the enthronement and sustenance of true and abiding democracy in the country to make a future military intervention in the nation's democracy unachievable and unrealisable.

Keywords: Military, sustenance, democracy, Nigeria, Philosophy, probe.

Introduction

Since she attained political independence in 1960, Nigeria's democracy has been in shambles. This is obvious due to incessant military interventions in the polity which has made democracy look like an unstable mode of governance to most Nigerians. In all the past military interventions, the military has always accused the civilians, nay the politicians of insensitivity to the plight of the masses, tribalism, nepotism, corruption and ineptitude in leadership among other numerous vices usually given as reasons for taking power from the civilians.

However, the irony of it all is that the military once they take up the mantle of leadership in the country usually fall victim to those same vices they accuse the politicians of. This paper strongly opines that the military in Nigeria should be subordinate to civil authorities. However, it equally postulates that the only way to make this subordination come to fruition is for true democracy to be enthroned and sustained in the country to make military intervention unfashionable and highly unreasonable. Anything short of this may still bring back the military in power sometime, someday and this will be an unwanted development and a serious drawback on the nation's democracy.

The Military in Nigerian Politics

One of the most remarkable events in world history during the past three or four decades has been the incessant occurrence of military coups in Africa and other Third World countries. Nigeria, the self-acclaimed giant of Africa has had more than its fair share of these military coups. Okadigbo (1986:30) opines that *“military government is the specific form of authoritarian government wherein power is held by soldiers or wherein soldiers constitute a nominally civilian government”*. In this segment of the paper, we shall give a concise history of military interventions in Nigerian politics.

According to Gutteridge (1975:5) *“it is now statistically justifiable to regard military rules as norm rather than a deviance, certainly in comparison with any other satisfactorily defined form of government”*. This could be said to be true of Nigeria prior to the return of democracy in the country in 1999. Since the bulk of African countries had political independence in the early sixties to date, military intervention has virtually been on the rise in these countries but the preponderance of such interventions in Nigeria has been unprecedented and highly disturbing.

The history of military interventions in Nigeria is quite rich, vast and varied. The first military coup in the country took place on January 15, 1966. The build-up to that military coup could be said to have started in 1964. The election of that year was Nigeria's first major post-independence election and it had heavy tribal leaning. The various political skirmishes that bedevilled the country within this period greatly weakened the bond of trust and friendship among the people of the three major tribes in Nigeria. There was general discontent among the citizenry. The discontent, acrimony and insecurity made the first military intervention desirable for the people then as the politicians had lost grip of political affairs in the country.

The second military coup took place on July 29, 1966, which was barely six months after the first coup. This was as a result of the disenchantment of a section of the country against the leaders of the first coup. Speaking on the coup, Madiebo (1980:27) stated:

I saw the handwriting on the wall. Indeed no one could have failed to recognise the signs of the impending disaster. But to reassure myself, I personally forwarded a report to Army headquarters in Lagos attaching texts of some of the speeches and publications. I did not expect any reaction from Lagos and there was none.

The third military coup took place on 29th July, 1975 with the overthrow of Gowon's regime in a bloodless coup that saw the emergence of General Murtala Mohammed as the next Head of state. His rein though short, was very revolutionary in outlook and it brought a lot of positive changes to the Nigerian state. He in turn was overthrown by Colonel Dimka in a bloody coup during in which the former lost his life. This happened on the 13th of February, 1976. However, Mohammed's short regime is to be remembered by Nigerians for the sweeping changes it made on the nation's socio-political and economic landscape. With the brutal assassination of General Mohammed by Colonel Dimka's coup, the lot of the leadership of the country fell on General Olusegun Obasanjo who ruled the country from February 1976 till 1979 when he handed over the reins of the state to President Shehu Shagari, the first elected executive President of Nigeria.

Under Shagari, the civilians ruled for four uninterrupted years but could not get their acts together. Corruption, ethnicism, nepotism, crass opportunism and monumental electoral malpractices still characterized the Second Republic culminating in the military seizing power again on 31st December, 1983. Major General Muhammadu Buhari who subsequently became the Head of State after that coup was himself toppled in another bloodless coup on 27th August, 1985 culminating in General Babangida becoming the next military ruler. He took the title of President thus becoming the first military ruler in the country to take such a title. Babangida ruled the country till 1994 and his regime plunged the Nigerian state into one of the worst political crises in her annals. His regime is to be remembered for annulling the 1993 presidential election adjudged by both Nigerian and foreign observers as the most free and fair election ever conducted in the history of the country. That election was acclaimed to have been won by Chief M.K.O Abiola of blessed memory.

With the annulment of the June 12 1993 poll and the attendant political, social and economic brouhaha it brought on the country, Babangida stepped aside on August 27, 1993 and installed an Interim National Government led by Chief Ernest Shonekan. Such a political nomenclature was hitherto unknown in the country's political lexicon. The heat of the cancellation of the June 12 1993 election was too much for Shonekan to handle and on November 17, 1993, he was effortlessly eased out of office by General Sani Abacha who subsequently became the next military Head of State.

Abacha set up his transition programme with the convocation of a Constitutional Conference in June, 1994. The conference concluded its assignment a year later and was subsequently dissolved. Abacha's penchant for materialism made him one of the most corrupt leaders the country has ever produced. His clandestine plan to transform into a civilian president through self-succession made him very unpopular among Nigerians. His high-handedness and dictatorial tendencies earned him the obnoxious sobriquet of Nigeria's maximum ruler. His demise on June 8, 1998 brought his deceitful, treacherous and dubious transition programme to a natural end and Nigerians were freed from his draconian rule.

With his demise, the army high command unanimously chose General Abdulasalam Abubakar as the next head of state of the country. It was him that midwived the Fourth Republic by conducting elections within so short a time he assumed power and handed over to Obasanjo who was duly elected as the second executive president of the country on May, 29th, 1999, thus bringing to an end the long and torturous cycle of military rule in the country.

However, it should be noted that the frequent military coups that had bedevilled the country over the years is a pointer to the instability of military regimes for according to Finer (1985:16), "*only one thing is so far certain. The coups and counter-coups affirm the fundamental instability of military governments themselves*".

Why Does the Military Intervene in Nigerian Politics?

According to Dukor (2003:225), "*The general concern, regrets, skepticism and cynicism about military incursion in African politics is because it is an aberration and against civilized conventional practices and democratic norms*". Despite the widely held view, that military rule is an aberration, and a deviance, rather than the norm, the military has continued to intervene in Nigeria's political affairs. The question then is why is it so? It is a historical fact that out of Nigeria's nearly sixty years as an independent nation, she has spent almost three decades in military rule.

The reasons for constant military coups are not far-fetched. One of the greatest problems in Nigeria that has aided the flourishing of military rule is ethnicity. According to Nzeribe (1986:45):

The central body has been consistently under the control of people with strong ethnic bias. Ethnic interests have therefore stood paramount in the activities of these individuals. Those ethnic groups whose persons do not occupy important positions within the central body become alienated, frustrated and left with the crumbs of the national income. This sometimes results in an attempt at secession for instance the Biafran war.

According to Ubi (2008:90), *“the term ethnicity is the sanitised and politically accepted version of the term “tribe” or “tribal” officiation”*. Having stated all these, one may naturally ask, how has ethnicity been a reason for frequent military interventions and therefore a stumbling block to the growth of democracy in Nigeria? The answer may be very obvious and perhaps easy to explain.

Ethnicity which is the fanatical love for one's ethnic group has really hampered political growth in Nigeria. Many scholars are of the considered view or opinion that the type of politics played in the country is mainly “ethnic politics”. This could be seen from the fact that many Nigerians still cast their votes during national elections not according to the political ability of the candidates vying for elections but according to the ethnic group of the candidates. In some past elections, ethnic disturbances have led to a breakdown of law and order in the country leading to military coups.

Another reason for constant military interventions in the country is the poor quality of leadership being offered to the country by the political class. Bello (2005:48), Amadu (2005:95), Okolo (1994:85), Okolo (1985:12), Ekweke (2008:21), Agu (2005:69), Toyo (2008:153) and Achebe (1983:1) all agree to the unfortunate reality of ineffectual political leadership in the country and its attendant negative consequences.

One other major reason for frequent military interventions in Nigeria is the preponderance of corruption among the political class. Corruption normally takes the form of both diverting public fund to party and private coffers or of the enrichment of the political leaders at the expense of the public good through the illicit award of contracts and other deviant behaviours. Allegation of public officers demanding 10 per cent 'kick back' is common among the political fold and has always been cited by the military top brass as one of the major reasons for military interventions in the country. In the words of Akpotor (2003:356):

The society cannot be expected to bring public officers to ridicule for corrupt practices with their appeals to moral conscience when the leadership is not a saint. We support this position with the popular equity maxim which says 'who come to equity must come with clean hands'. It is therefore recommended that corruption can only be reduced or eliminated through a combative political will of the leadership and the reciprocal social will of the governed. This is so because the society can never be watchdog for a government that lacks the political will to neither unveil corrupt practices nor deal with the culprits.

While allegations of corruption are at times difficult to substantiate, the nagging issue is not whether they are true or not but whether people believe them to be true. Although corruption

alone should not necessarily be a cogent reason for military intervention, a situation whereby a few people that make up the political class live in great affluence and opulence while majority of Nigerians wallow in abject and unmitigated poverty is simply unacceptable. A lot of Nigerians unwittingly support the military taking over power as a result of disenchantment with the style of leadership offered by the political class in the country.

Finally, it must be stated without equivocation that the unbridled quest for power by the military has also contributed immensely to the escalation of military interventions in the country in the past. According to Dukor (2003:225):

There is the physical natural law of causation to which everything in space is susceptible. It seems therefore that military foray into the body politics of African nations must have backgrounds or causes or circumstantial environmental or polity that necessitated it. In the history of human thought, the military is not totally alien to political struggle.

The truth of the matter is that despite their attraction to power, the military is not trained for political leadership but is primarily trained to defend the territorial integrity of the nation for according to Ogbinaka (2003:248), *“the military is a government of men, not of law. It is to this extent a bad system. It is an authoritarian government”*.

Sustaining Democracy in Nigeria to Make Military Intervention Unfashionable

Before delving into the issue of sustaining democracy in Nigeria, we will try and clarify the concept of democracy itself. To define democracy is indeed a herculean task or responsibility. This view is shared by Elaigwu (2005:281), Adeyemo (2001:86), Jega (2007:11), Omoregbe (2007:21) and Michael (2006:73)

Democracy simply defined is the government of the people, by the people and for the people. This is a popular definition of democracy as was enunciated by Abraham Lincoln, an American statesman and lawyer who served as the 16th president of the United States of America. However, democracy is much wider in scope than a special political form, a method of running a government. It takes into full account material and spiritual values, culture, the standard of living, social and economic relationships. If one follows this line of thought, it can be seen that this type of meaning raises democracy above the level of a mere governmental system.

It gives it the power and inspiration to seek for the individual in the society the *“good life”* and the promotion of his well-being. This seems to be the view of Laski (1942:24) when he posited that *“Democracy has a context in every sphere of life”*. Democracy can flourish only in a country where democratic ideals like respect for the rule of law, separation of powers, freedom of the press and freedom of expression among others are in place. This view tallies with that of Odey (2002:14) where he stated:

Abraham Lincoln, the great American President, knew why he defined democracy as *“a government of the people, by the people and for the people”*. There in America, where he gave that definition, the government has remained for the people. The brains that fashioned the American system of presidential

democracy were men and women who believed in the philosophy of common good. That is why Americans cherish Lincoln's definition to date. The man believed in the type of democracy he defined and worked on the principles of that definition and made America great.

Despite the much taunted advantages of democracy, one cannot in all honesty and sincerity say that we have enthroned true and lasting democracy in Nigeria despite two decades of unbroken democratic practice in the country. As already stated in this paper, much of the military interventions that occurred in this country were as a result of democratic instability in the nation's polity. According to Sha (2005:141-142):

The factors that obstruct the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria include the ultra-privatization of transition projects, political instability due to recurring ethno-religious conflicts, weakening of political institutions, corruption and the weakening of the national economy through bad management.

It may therefore not be wrong or out of place to assert that democracy as presently practiced in Nigeria is bereft of most if not all the democratic tenets and ethos hence Nigerians are gradually losing faith in our present democratic experiment that has almost succeeded in relegating the masses to the background in the daily scheme of things in the country. The issue of good governance has almost become an unrealizable dream and ideal in our democracy and yet true democracy is supposed to engender good governance for according to Yahaya (2004:109):

A democratically elected government should be the guarantor of good governance. A viable institutional framework must exist to facilitate the operation of democratic order. Both state and non-state organisations must have sufficient political space to interact and compete for influence. The institutional framework that will facilitate the plural democratic process must be strong and viable. It must be supported and not undermined by the political leaders so that these institutions can play their role in the consolidation of democracy through checks and balances and a vibrant press.

Democracy can never be sustained in the country if all the factors impeding its true and enduring entronement are not eliminated or at least minimized or mitigated. Such negative factors include electoral malpractices, especially election rigging, political corruption, ethnicity, excessive materialism. Democracy, nay politics is service-oriented in the sense that it offers individuals the opportunity to offer selfless service to humanity. However our politicians may never offer this type of service when all they have in mind while entering politics is embezzlement of public funds. Our politicians should therefore cultivate new and enduring value of service to humanity as opposed to the present rat-race to share the national cake with reckless abandon, no wonder Okolo (1993:14) asserts that "among Nigerians, the dominant values which also characterize the society as a whole are easily discernable. Perhaps, the most glaring one is excessive love for money".

Again our elections in Nigeria deserve a critical scrutiny. The most recent general elections held in Nigeria – the 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019 elections left much to be desired. While in the elections, Nigerians demonstrated their patriotism towards enthroning democracy, the politicians on their own had a different agenda as they were busy manipulating the elections to their shameful advantage. Even the 2015 and 2019 general elections were said to have been hopelessly rigged to the utter consternation of the people who tramped out in their numbers to vote in those elections. It is therefore suggested that our electoral laws should be strengthened to deal with election riggers and other electoral vices.

Conclusion

We have all along been discussing issues of the military and sustenance of democracy in Nigeria. It must be noted that one of the safest guarantees against military intervention in any democracy is good governance. Good governance ensures that democratic tenets are put into full use thus making available to the people real dividends of democracy. When that happens, the masses themselves will become the real defenders of democracy against military intervention. Even the military themselves will become direct beneficiaries of true democratic rule in the country. Anything short of good governance in our democracy may still bring back the military into the political terrain sometime, someday and this is something millions of Nigerians will never desire. Our democracy should therefore be deepened and made people-oriented to ensure that the welfare of the citizens is always guaranteed. This is perhaps the only sure way to make the country's democracy take root and prevent any future military intervention in the country.

REFERENCES

- Achebe, C. (1983). *The trouble with Nigeria*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers.
- Adeyemo, F.O. (2001). *Government made simple* (4th ed.). Lagos: Franesoba.
- Agu, S.N. (2005). The challenge of democratization: An expository analysis of Nigeria's claim to Democracy. In *Uche, Journal of the Department of Philosophy, UNN, 11*, 69-78.
- Akpotor, S. (2003). Corruption, the civil society and government. In M. Dukor (Ed.), *Philosophy and politics: Discourse on values, politics and power in Africa* (pp.355-367). Lagos: Malthouse Press.
- Amadi, E. (2005). *Ethics in Nigerian culture*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Bassey, C.O. (2008). The military in Nigerian democratic dispensation. In O. Uya, (Ed.), *Civil Society and the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria* (pp.222-241), Ibadan: Daybis.
- Bello, A.G.A. (2005). Democratization as social engineering. *Philosophy and praxis, Journal of Nigerian philosophical Association, 1*.

- Dukor M. (2003). The Military and African Revolution. In Dukor, M. (Ed.), *Philosophy and Politics: Discourse on values, politics and power in Africa* (pp.225-240). Lagos: Malthouse Press.
- Ekweke, E.E. (2007). *Governance and responsibility in Africa: the Nigerian context*. In *Amamihe, Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 5, 13-28.
- Elaigwu, J.I. (2005). *Nigeria, yesterday and today for tomorrow: Essays in governance and society*. Jos: Aha publishing House.
- Eskor, T. (2008). The labour movement and advance to democracy in Nigeria. In O. Uya. (Ed.), *Civil society and the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria* (pp.153-171). Ibadan: Daybis.
- Finer, S.E. (1985). The retreat to the barracks, notes on the practice and the theory of military withdrawal from seats of power. In *Third World Quarterly Journal*, 7(1), 22-35.
- Gutteridge, W.F. (1975). *Military regimes in Africa*. London: Methuen and Company.
- Jega, A. (2007). *Democracy, good governance and development in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Laski, H. (1942). Democracy. In *Encyclopedia of social sciences*, (405-406) New York: Macmillan.
- Madiebo, A. (1980). *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers.
- Michael, B. (2006). Democratisation and conflict in an emerging civil society. In I. Odimegwu (Ed.), *Philosophy and Africa* (pp. 72-80). Amawbia: Lumos.
- Nzeribe, A. (1986). *Nigeria: The Turning Point, a chapter for stability*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension.
- Odey, J. (2002). *Democracy; our lofty dreams and crazy ambitions*. Enugu: SNAAP Press.
- Ogbinaka, K. (2003). The Military, sovereignty and democracy in Africa. In M. Dukor (Ed.), *Philosophy and politics; Discourse on values, politics and power in Africa* (241-253). Lagos: Malthouse Press.
- Okadigbo, C. (1986). *Power and Leadership in Nigeria*. Enugu; Fourth Dimension.
- Okolo, C.B. (1985). *Philosophy and Nigerian politics*. Obosi: Pacific College Press.
- Okolo, C.B. (1993). *Education and Nigerian values*. Enugu: CECTA.
- Okolo, C.B. (1994). *Squander mania mentality: Reflections on Nigerian culture*. Nsukka: University Trust Publishers.
- Omeregbe, J.I. (2007). *Socio-political philosophy and international relations*. Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers.
- Sha, D. (2005). Too much politics, too little: Assessing the quality of Nigerian democratic transition project. *Nigerian Journal of Policy and Strategy*, 15 (1&2), 68-86.
- Ubi, O. (2008). Ethnicity and Nation-building in Nigeria. In Uya, O. (Ed.) *Civil society and the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria* (90-113) Ibadan: Daybis.
- Yahaya, A. (2004). Implementing the good governance agenda in Nigeria: The critical issues. In *Agenda for a better Society: Reflections from the National Institute*, 2, 58-76