

Nigerian Military and Power Relations in Democratic Governance 1960-2012

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Abstract

Nigeria had an experience of prolonged military rule and its bureaucracies which compelled hardship in preserving civil democracy in the country. However, in May 29, 1999 the Nigerian military surrendered the vehicle of governance for democratic leadership which in May 2012, Nigeria celebrated thirteen years of uninterrupted civil democratic dispensation, the longest in her fifty-three years of existence as an independent nation. Previous experiments with democracy had failed due to a combination of societal and military-related forces. The peculiarity of ex-military officer in occupying strategic positions mostly within the two main organs of “legislation” and “execution” in the current civil democratic government has stimulated the entire processes and this factor have certainly resulted to positive civil-military relations and spurred the survival of democracy. This paper explores the military power relations in civilian democratic governance in Nigeria.

Introduction

The relationship between the military, political leadership and the society at large has always been one of intense intrigue and is as old as humanity itself. Civil-military relations refer broadly to interactions between armed forces as institutions and the sectors of society in which they are embedded. Most commonly, civil-military relations focus on the relative distribution of power between the government and the armed forces of the country. They involve, as one specialist recently wrote, a process in which civilian control is measured and evaluated by weighing “the relative influence of military officers and civilian officials in decision of state concerning war, internal security, external defense and military policy (that is the shape, size and operating procedures of the military establishment). Civil-military

relations exist within the context of particular political systems. Though civilian control of the military as an aspect of democracy has attracted the attention of policymakers around the globe, it is difficult to achieve and maintain. (Center for Democracy and Governance: July, 1998).

According to Oman (2001) Civil-military relations defined “as the arrangement of political and military power, assuming that the manner in which both types of power are exercised and controlled is as crucial as who wield them”. Perceived in that context, Civil-military relations should be based on the democratic principle that the military is subordinate and accountable to the civilian authority. (Cited in Dunmoye; 2011:9).

According to Huntington (1968), Civil-military relations refer to the role of the armed forces in society: It implies that the relations between the military and the civilian population are like labor-management relations; legislative-executive relations; where two concrete organized groups with real interests contend and bargain with each other. This suggested a basic dichotomy and opposition between civilian and military viewpoints. However, this assumption is not entirely correct for two reasons. First, in many countries, there is hardly any unity of interests, skill or viewpoint, among the military. Secondly, even if there is a distinct and identifiable military viewpoint, interest and institution, in no society is there ever comparable unity among civilians. (Cited in Dunmoye; 2011: 9).

Theoretical and Historical Review

The spate of military interventions in the politics of African countries and elsewhere in the Third World in the early 1960s spurred sundry scholarly theories that have been reviewed in recent works. Invariably, these theories are one of two major types, which ascribe military intervention to societal or military factors. For example, the “internal characteristics” model of Janowitz posits that military intervention in politics can be explained by reference to the socio economic background of the officers, their skills, internal social cohesion and cleavages and professional and political ideology of the military.

Samuel Decalo’s review of the literature on military coups and military regimes in Africa in the early 1970s actually concluded that “the personal and idiosyncratic elements in military hierarchies” appeared to be more important than any other factors in accounting for military intervention in Africa. The opposing school of thought led by S.P. Huntington rejects the Janowitz model contending that “military explanation does not explain military interventions” because the “most important causes of military intervention in politics are not military but political” Rather, it is argued that military intervention results from the generalized politicization of society and its institutions including the bureaucracy, churches, labor union, universities and the armed forces.

Consequently, group that ought to be impartially detached, serving any government in power become involved making it impossible to accept any institution or political leaders as unbiased umpires. With no consensus on authoritatively binding rules, the entire society gets out of joint and experiences political decay. Claude Ake provides a more recent statement of the “political decay’ thesis albeit,

informed by a different theoretical and ideological orientation. He contends that “it was not military that caused military rule in Africa by intervening in politics; rather, it was the character of politics that engendered military by degenerating into warfare, inevitably propelling the specialists of warfare to the lead role.”

Empirical studies of military coups and regimes in Africa have shown that neither of these two perspectives alone accounts for all instances of military takeovers. Thus, there is a third perspective that recognized both societal and military factors as an explanation for military intervention. Early study by Claude Welch Jr. revealed both external characteristics such as internal social schisms, economic hardship occasioned by austerity measures, and poor governance on the part of governments and political parties while in the latter, as well as “awareness within the military of its power to influence or displace political leaders. (Ehwarieme, W. 2001:497).

Armed Forces as an institution & the Civil Populace

Traditionally in complex emergencies, there has been a distinction between the military and the non-military domains: an approach built upon the principles of international humanitarian law that make a distinction between combatants and non-combatants, protecting the latter from armed attacks. In recent history, however, military forces have become increasingly involved in operations other than war, including provision of relief and services to the local population. At the same time, due to the changing nature of modern complex emergencies, the humanitarian community has faced increased operational challenges as well as greater risks and threats for their workers in the field, which at time have compelled some of them to seek the support or protection by military forces on a case-by-case basis. Thus, practical realities on the ground have gradually necessitated various form of civil-military coordination for humanitarian operations (IASC Reference Paper: 2004).

Forty years ago, the great theorist of civilian control, Samuel P. Huntington, argued in his book: *The soldier and the State: The Theory and Practice of Civil-Military Relations*, that the way to optimize civilian supremacy was to recognize such “autonomous military professionalism.” An officer corps focused on its own profession—and granted sufficient independence to recognize itself and practice the art of war without interference in those areas which required technical expertise—would be politically neutral and less likely to intervene in politics. The paradox of Huntington’s formulation is that the greater a military’s autonomy, the less control civilians actually exercise; while “objective” civilian control might minimize military involvement in politics, it also decreases civilian control over military affairs. And in the end, there will always be disagreement over how and where to draw the line between military and civilian responsibility. With war increasingly dangerous and destructive, where to divide the authority and assign the responsibility have become increasingly situational, and uncertain (Richard: 2012).

Military Leadership & Political Leadership

The vicious circle created by the seizure of political control, disengagement and reappearance of the military on the political landscape in Nigeria has become a subject for much thought. In the post-independence era, political power, transition processes, mechanisms and outcomes have centered on civil-military competition for political control. While permanent military disengagement from political office apparently eludes the country, the precarious rule of the military may not necessarily be rooted in a military-class interest agenda (Jide O. etal: 2012).

The Nigerian civil war and the military's successful prosecution of that thirty-month war and its subsequent near decade of power contributed to the military's sense of self-importance, desire, and ability to intervene in 1983. First, the war provided opportunity for officers and men to interact more with the rest of society in ways that reduced the social distance between them and encouraged social and political alliance and networks that set the stage for coup making and wide acceptability of the resulted military regimes.

Secondly, by successful prosecuting the war to "keep Nigeria one," the military came to see itself as the symbol of national unity and felt justified to intervene when electoral politics became violent and fractious. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the military's stay in power for a long period in which the first phase of military rule exposed them to the pleasures of political power and opportunities for primitive capital accumulation. The rising profile of stupendous oil revenues available for post-war reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction made this time in power very lucrative. Indeed, judging by the flamboyance and corruption of military leaders during the Gowon regime, his decision to shift the date for handover of power to elected civilian officials was not unconnected with the desire of the top echelon of his administration, to stay longer to enjoy the spoils of office (Ehwarieme: 2011:499).

Nigeria represents a peculiar but interesting case in civil military relations for a number of reasons. First, the country was under military rule for 29 out of her 52 years of existence as a sovereign state. Second, the military, while in control of government appointed civilians, often ex-politicians they replaced, as ministers. The military also dominated the socio-political and economic terrain thereby creating a reverse case of civilian segment of society being subservient to military authority. Thirdly, the new democratic system produced a former military Head of State as President; in 1999. Fourthly, the civil democratic government has some retired military officers in elected positions as members of National Assembly, and State Governors. They also participate actively in party politics as functionaries. In fact, the tempo of contemporary Nigerian politics is dictated by retired military officers who held high positions under previous military regimes either as Head of State, Military Governors or Ministers. (Dunmoye:2011;24).

As a consequence of these factors, Nigerian political leadership exhibits certain militaristic characteristics. Paradoxically, these factors may also endanger positive civil-military relations. Serving military officers, who command military institutions/armed forces are likely to respect the former military supervisors who now dominate the civil-military government. On the other hand, the military officers in government

may be unduly inhibited in ensuring military subordination to civil authority.

It is in the light of this that one should evaluate the address of the ex-President Olusegun Obasanjo's on military subordination to civil-authority at the Course 7 (seven) Graduation ceremony of National Defence College in July 1999, just two months after taking office as the President, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. Obasanjo gave the outline as follows (Shinyanbade cited in Dunmoye; 2011:25).

- Acceptance of the constitution as the sole and supreme document defining the role of the Armed Forces;
- Acceptance of the elected civilian President as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and of the supremacy of the elected officials of state over appointed officers at all levels;
- Acceptance of civilian headship of the Ministry of Defence and other strategic establishments;
- Acceptance of civilian or legislative deliberation and decision-making over military budgets;
- Acceptance that decisions regarding the goals and conduct of military operations must serve the political and strategic goals established by the civil authority;
- Acceptance of the application of civilized principles to all military investigations and trials; and
- Acceptance of the right of civil (Supreme Court) Authority to review any actions or decisions taken by the military judicial officers.

The Obasanjo administration took certain decisions that were geared towards the improvement of civil-military relations and facilitating the process of military subordination to civil authority after three decades of military rule. He retired all military officers who held political appointments under previous military regimes. This was in order to ensure professionalism and discipline within the armed forces. He also set up the Human Right Violation Investigations Committee (HRVIC) otherwise known as the Justice Oputa Panel to investigate and expose human right abuses in the past, particularly under the military. Nigeria also intensified her participation in multi-lateral peace keeping at both regional and sub-regional levels. Although the financial burden of these missions have been enormous, the Obasanjo administration usually prefer the financial burden to be shared especially with the international organizations concerned like the United Nations, ECOWAS and the African Union (Adekanye 2005; cited in Dunmoye).

He also retired a chief of Army Staff for in subordination. However, certain activities of the Obasanjo administration which have also continued after him might hinder civil-military relations and jeopardize civil control of the armed forces. One of these actions was the deployment of troops for internal security arrangement- examples are the military deployment to the Niger Delta and Odi. (Bayelsa State) 1999, Zaki Biam in Benue State 2002. However, urban guerrilla

tactics which include bombs and killings of security agents cum the post-election violence of 2011 in many Northern States and the Boko Haram have put a threat and suspicion where many Nigerians believe that the military should be deployed sparingly for internal security assignments. The other important issue is the suspicion that the involvement of a foreign security outfit, NIPRI in the country's military re-professionalism programme would jeopardize Nigeria's national interest. Many military associations regarding this policy as bier counter-productive. It was on account of this open criticism that General Victor Malu lost his job as chief of Army Staff (Dunmoye 2011:27).

However, since 1979, the greatest military threat to Nigeria's democracy has come from two categories of officers. The first is officers who joined the military before or during the civil war and therefore participated in it. As a result, they see rulership as one of the spoils of war. The second is officers who have held political appointments in the various military regimes since 1966. It includes officers in the first category as well as those enlisted in the armed forces after the war. Officers in this overlapping set have the largest appetite for power, wider and longer links with the society and hence greater ability to undertake coups (E. William 2011).

Military in their cumulative fifteen years of rule, they socialized followers who were appointed as ministers and state governors in to a culture of insatiable desire for political power. As retired Chief of Army Staff. General Salihu Ibrahim noted in his farewell retirement speech, the army became an "Army of anything is possible" in which officers lobbied for and preferred political appointments to purely military postings resulting in indiscipline and loss of a sense of professionalism. Just as Buhari, Babangida, and Abacha terminated the second Republic's life and prevented reintroduction of democracy for decade and half, it is reasonable to expect their followers would do the same for the Fourth Republic. But, this did not occur for two reasons. First, officers in the two coup-prone categories have left the military on attainment of retirement age. Second, the dynamics of military politics resulted in potentially coup-threatening officers being sent home prematurely or sent to their early graves. This internal military process was augmented by Obasanjo civilian presidency's landmark political decision to retire all officers who had held political offices irrespective of their ages, period of enlistment and length of service.

There have also been a number of other measures targeted at the military by that regime and its successor since 2007 which explain why there have been no successful coups. A number of these have been well captured by Ojo which includes:

1. Retirement of "politically" ambitious officers
2. Seizure of selected officers corruptly acquired wealth.
3. Revocation of their oil licenses and plots of land.
4. Reprofessionalization through training and seminars.
5. Appointment of retired Generals to strategic positions.
6. Appointment of loyal officers to leadership positions.
7. Messianic outlook of the military's role in mainstream politics has been eroded by years of corruption.

(Ojo: 2006&Ehuarieme: 2011)

The efficacy of the foregoing measures has come under serious questioning especially in light of the coup plot in April 2004. To be sure, it would be fool hardy to expect that there no longer exist politically minded officers. In fact, the influx of young University educated professionals into the military since the end of the civil war and the increased struggle by serving officers to acquire degrees are not unconnected with the belief that the military was the surest avenue to political power, wealth, prestige, and good thing of life.

In addition, there are two categories of officers who were close to power and on whom the privileges of power could not have been lost. First, those who served as Aide de Camp (ADC) to military governors and other political appointees who would have been retired with their bosses by Obasanjo but for pleas from the military that the retirements should not go that far. Second, the biological children and boys of retired officers. It would have been absurd to retire officers because their fathers held political offices while in service. Some of those measures generated initial tension and there is evidence that some military officers believe they would be better off in power "even for one week"

Be that as it may, the coup plot cannot be strong evidence that the measures have failed. On the contrary, while it does show that the military threat to Nigeria's democracy is still real, providing justification for this study's focus on the military, the fact that it was uncovered points to the efficacy of a number of these measures and other peculiarly military circumstances that constitute an explanation for the relative democratic stability between 1999 to Date. For instance, the warnings by military chiefs to officers to eschew coups were not empty but backed by stricter surveillance and control of men and weapons. It is significant that the 2004 plot was not hinged on any plans by the plotters to use weapons and take control of major military formations that are usually crucial to the success of Nigerian coups. Self-preservation is a motive for military chiefs and serving generals increased vigilance. If experience is a guide, they stand to be the first casualties of a successful junior officer coup. (Ehwarieme: 2011: 505).

However, increased professionalism has also made it difficult to build significant support for military takeover within the military. Opportunities for training especially overseas, which depended so much on whether one was an Abacha or a Babangida supporter, are liberalized since 1999, permitted many more officers without special connections to benefit. Additionally, there has been a significant improvement in the welfare of officers and rank and file. Apart from salary increases, all categories of military personnel benefitted from generous distribution of transport facilities ranging from cars to bicycles depending on their ranks. While these benefits would not deter those bent on power, it certainly made many feel democracies better served their interests.

Some check on military coups may have been provided by the close connections between retired generals turned politicians and serving military officers. Not a few of these politicians including former President Olusegun Obasanjo and incumbent Senate President, David Mark have their sons in the military, many of them in the most coup active ranks (Majors to Colonels). It is being suggested that these

officers with their good networks of course mates do not want to rock the boats of their biological and godfathers. It should be noted, however, the safety valve provided by the linkages between serving officers and retired military and contemporary politicians can only be temporal. It is reasonable to predict three possibilities could alter the balance. One, the son may feel their father have had enough. Two, father quit by reason of age or death. And three, if the competition among fathers becomes too fractious and the chances of over winning in opposition parties get slimmer, then the losers would ask their sons to come to their rescue and discard democracy in the process. In this case, the fathers would be testing their strength against the sons of those in power and unfortunately which ever wins, democracy would be casualty. (Ehwarieme: 2011).

However, given the 1999 Constitutional Provisions that made the President, the Commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces, with the power to appoint Chief of defence Staff (section 2 18(1) and the powers given to the National Assembly to makes laws regarding the appointment, promotion and disciplinary control of members of the Armed Forces, mechanism for military subordination to civil authority has been put in place. Furthermore, the senate and the House of Representatives have four standing committees that deal with the military. These are the committees on Defence, Air force, Army and Navy. There is also a committee on National Security and Intelligence in the House of Representatives. The jurisdictions of each of this committee are all-embracing. For instance, the Committee on Defence of the House of Representatives has the following responsibilities amongst others;

- a. Annual defence budget estimate
- b. Defence generally
- c. Army, Navy and Air force department
- d. Ammunition depots, forts, arsenal, Army, Navy and Air force reservations and establishments
- e. Pay, promotion, retirement and other benefits and privileges of members of the Armed forces
- f. Conservation of fuel for the armed service
- g. Scientific research and development in support of the armed forces
- h. Selection services
- i. Size and composition of Army, Navy, and Air force
- j. Barracks
- k. Strategic and critical materials necessary for the common defence
- l. Military application of nuclear energy
- m. Military cadets
- n. Special over sight function with respect to disarmament and military dependent education
- o. Veterans measures generally
- p. Composition, vocational rehabilitation; and education of veterans;
- q. Re-adjustment of service men to civil life
- r. Soldier and sailors' civil relief (Standing Rule of the House of Representative 2003:74-75).

These functions represent a clear demonstration of serious attempts being made by the civil authority to ensure military subordination under the new democratic dispensation. The military can use various avenues to lobby and influence civil authority in order to pursue its corporate interest and positive civil military relations (Dunmoye: 2011:28).

Summary & Conclusion

The relatively stable civil-military relations in Nigeria between 1999 to Date can be explained by the internal division within the military- division reflecting the same ethnic, religious, and regional lines as in the rest of society. For example, the 2004 coup plot had a ring of religious and regional sentiments and had it been successful, it would have set in motion a chain of countercoups as the 1966 coup did. Those who risk their lives to plot and execute coups do so in the hope that they would succeed and enjoy the wealth and privileges political power confers and not to get killed or sacked in a counter-coup. Given the circumstances that brought Obasanjo from the southwest to power in 1999 and the ruling PDP zoning formula that ensured that power returned to the north in 2007, it would have been difficult not to see a coup between 1999 and 2007 as one against southern presidency or any between 2007 and 2009 as against a northern presidency. The fears of the possibility of such interpretation with its attendant consequences have restrained both the military and the civilian financier of coup.

In conclusion, the paper has analyzed the dynamics of Nigerian military and power relations in democratic governance by starting with the empirical postulations of the subject matter. It also looked at the stand point between the Armed Forces and the civil society and analyzed the Nigeria's civil-military relationship and the way in which the relationship enhances democratic stability in the country.

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