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# MILITARY ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA, 29 YEARS OF SAD POLITICAL EXPERIENCE AND DEMOCRATIC TRUNCATION

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines Military Administration in Nigeria: 29years of Sad Political experience and Democratic Truncation. It discusses the issues of corruption and constitutional violation. Finally it assesses the inability of the military to prevent the civil war in Nigeria and the frequent military coups. The data were collected from two major sources which were primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include oral interview and archival materials while the secondary sources were books, newspapers, journals, articles etc. It was found that the military juntas were more involved in corruption, extravagancy, and political instability than civilians. Again, it was found that the military administration lack the training, tactics and strategies for civilian rule. It was also found that the civil war in Nigeria could have been avoided if the military administrators were tactful and diplomatic in handling the issues that led to the war. Finally the frequent military coups prevented Nigeria from practicing stable democratic government till 1999.

**Keywords:** Military, Administration, Truncation, Democracy, Dictatorial.

## Introduction

Military rule in Nigeria started in 1966 after the abortive coup of January 15, 1966. Some majors in the Nigeria army led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu organized this coup. Following the failure of the coup, the most senior officer in the army, Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi became the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed forces. Thus the first military administration in Nigeria was established and the military dominated the political scene in Nigeria covering the period between 1966-1979 and between 1983-1999.

Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi became the military Head of State from the 16<sup>th</sup> January 1966 to July 29, 1966. General Yakubu Gowon came to power on July 29, 1966 and was removed from office on July 29, 1975. The Third was General Muritala Muhammed who became the Head of State on July 29, 1975 and was there till Feb. 13, 1976. General Olusegun Obasanjo became the Head of State on February 14, 1976 till 1979. Again General Buhari came to power in December, 1983 until 1985. General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida came to power in 1985 and ruled the country till 1993. General Abacha was in power in 1994-1998 while General Adusalami Abubakar assumed office 1998-1999. So it is not an exaggeration to say that the period between 1966-1999 in Nigeria was essentially that of military rule.

These military administration sought to restore the political and economic stability that had been disrupted during the civilian administration in the country. They therefore purported to correct the ills and streamlined the economy. In the words of the ring leader of the first coup of January 15, 1966, Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu, "our enemies are the political profiteers, swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand ten percent, those that seek to keep the country permanently divided, so that they can remain in office as ministers and VIPS of waste, the tribalists,

the nepotists, those that make the country look big for nothing before international circles”<sup>1</sup>

In the same vein, Brigadier Sani Abacha in his radio broadcast to the nation on the 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1983 said, “you are all living witnesses to the grave economic predicament and uncertainty which an inept and corrupt leadership has imposed on our beloved nation for the past four years”<sup>2</sup>

In keeping with their promises, the different military administrations had to adopt measures to tackle economic and political problems that propelled them into intervening in politics. Unfortunately, it became clear later that, the military can never succeed in political governance because they are authoritarian and insensitive to the general will of the people. This is supported by Dare when he remarks that:

“If the deposed civilian administration has performed poorly, the initial acceptance of the Military may be high but this may not distract from the pervasive feeling that the military rule is illegitimate”<sup>3</sup>

The activities of Heads of State like Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi, General Gowon, General Mohammadu Buhari, General Babangida, General Sanni Abacha showed that the military juntas came to hijack our political process and had stifled political development especially the advancement of democracy. Their misconduct clearly epitomized the altruism that they were only ambitious and wanted to taste the affluence and sweetness of power to enable them display their heroic arrogance.

Again most military administrations in Nigeria were found to be promoting their own interests and encouraging corruption, nepotism, inefficiency, tribalism and political instability. This point has been made by Olatunde Odetola when he posits that the military is by definition and tradition, institutionalized conservative force untrained in the tactics and strategies of civilian rule and political management<sup>4</sup>.

Also contributing in the same vein, Osiruemu observes that, the military in Nigeria as in other countries is perceived as a professional institution whose basic function is the maintenance of the socio-political order<sup>5</sup>. Hence one can say that it is not the right of the military to dabble into politics because they are not equipped for political administration. The military is an apolitical institution, solely endorsed with the defence of the country against external aggression and to maintain order and law in the country.

The military administrations in Nigeria produced an era of tension, anxiety, fear, dissolutionment, frustration and man inhumanity to man. Nigerians witnessed the following vices with a long term sad political experiences.

### **Corruption**

Initially when they came to power in January 15, 1966, corruption was a major area they kicked against. The political leaders in the first republic use their political office to accumulate immense wealth. The holding of political office now come to mean to the common man the quickest means of getting rich. Elizabeth Isichei notes that in both in the regional governments and at the centre, politicians became notorious for their extravagance and corruption, arousing the hostility of the more politically conscious masses who came to wonder what independence was all about<sup>6</sup>. The issue of corruption was raised by the ring leader of the first coup of January 15, 1966, Major Nzeogwu when he was commenting on the gravity of corruption in the first Republic. He said:

“Our enemies are the political profiteers, swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes, demand ten percent...<sup>7</sup>

One would have expected that their first interest when they came to power was to eradicate corruption and also to ensure that those involved in military governance were not corrupt. Unfortunately during the military administration in Nigeria, there

was wide scale corruption and the military Heads of State and Governors were found to be very corrupt. Corruption during the period under survey graduated from arithmetical progression to geometrical progression.

There was wastage of public funds. This is not a surprise because it is government in which the people cannot call for probity and public accountability. So the government can waste fund without fear. Oni observes that investment in unviable or prestigious projects, despite lack of financial resources, often brings a state to the brink of bankruptcy and caused extreme hardship for its people<sup>8</sup>. This was a common feature of the military administration in Nigeria.

General Gowon was accused of embarking on fanciful or social projects instead of establishing industries. There was fantastic oil boom during Gowon's era, which brought unprecedented wealth. If this wealth was well managed and directed to industrial sector, Nigeria today could have been an industrialized nation. Instead the money was mismanaged and also used for prestigious projects like paying salaries of workers in neighboring countries, provision of electricity to needy countries and increasing workers' salaries in the country especially the nursing sector. In effecting the recommendations of the Udoji Commission on the increase of workers' salaries and allowance, the regime backdated the increases, resulting in very serious inflation.

The Gowon's regime wasted the nation's fund by organizing the 3<sup>rd</sup> All African Games in Lagos which involved over 20 Black African States. It was said that the wealth of the nation got into Gowon and his regime became riddles with corruption and extravagance. The great purge of corrupt and inefficient officers which involved all sections of the society by General Ramat Mohammed shows that the military administration of General Gowon was very corrupt. The Federal Commissioners of General Gowon were accused of corruption, but he could not correct them because corruption started from the top.

During the administration of General Obasanjo, the indigenization decree was reviewed substantially in 1977. Nigerians soon found out that the ownership or majority shareholding does not automatically imply control of such enterprises. Even after seven years, the first indigenization decree control was still elusive as it was manipulated by local capitalists to widen further the income gap between the rich and the poor. This could be attributed to corruption that became a cankerworm in the flesh of the soldiers.

The Government of General Obasanjo was widely criticized for the huge finance committed to FESTAC of 1977. General Obasanjo spent over ₦144million to organize FESTAC. By 1977, ₦144million was a huge sum of money. That money if diverted to economic sector could have enhanced our economic development or stability.

General Abacha looted the national treasury to the tune of over 600 billion US dollars. Sani Abacha legalized corruption. Infact till today, the Federal Government of Nigeria is still visiting different countries of the world to recover the money the dictator dumped in foreign accounts.

Nigeria's experience has shown that military rule is not significantly more free of corruption than the civilian government they replaced. Military officers were always in the habit of amassing wealth at the expense of the nation. They came to power in Nigeria to taste the affluence and sweetness of power. Corruption which has for long been a social ill of the Nigerian society continued under the military regimes in Nigeria. Public funds were embezzled with impurity.

### **Negation of Constitutional Process**

This was a common feature of military administrations in Nigeria. It was a government that has no respect for the rule of law. There was also the issue of bureaucratic violation, taking arbitrary decisions without recourse to bureaucratic channels. Adeyemi notes that the government were taking arbitrary decisions without considering the effects of such action on the socio –economic aspirations of the country<sup>9</sup>.

In Nigeria Military Administrations often jettisoned what was considered as bureaucratic bottlenecks and opted for military fiat. It was a period of horror, tension, fear especially the regime of General Buhari and General Sani Abacha.

Gowon's broadcast to nation on October, 1974 was most unfortunate. In the broadcast, General Gowon said: "it would be unrealistic to handover power to a civilian government because the politicians had learnt nothing and forgotten nothing<sup>10</sup>. This was when General Gowon became intoxicated by the power and spoils of office and wanted to renege in his promise to quit office in 1976. This was very sad indeed, because he did this with military fiat. In the same vein under General Buhari, Nigerians were subjected to coercive discipline administered with calculated military precision. The regime promulgated a number of draconian decrees which include Decree No. 20, 21 and 22 of 1984. These decrees prescribed harsh penalties including death by firing squad for a variety of economic crimes such as tampering with electricity and NEPA installations, cocaine addiction and drug trafficking, currency counterfeiting and trafficking, illegal oil bunkering<sup>11</sup> etc. Many Nigerians became victims of death sentence, without fair hearing, examples were Ojuolape, Ogbedegbe, Bartholome Owoh despite widespread condemnation from home and abroad.

There was also the Decree No 4, public officers, which prohibited the publication of any information that could embarrass the government. The Guardian journalists, Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor were sentenced to jail for publishing the list of new diplomatic postings that government was just to make public<sup>12</sup>. This clearly shows that there was no freedom of the press as contained in the 1979 constitution.

In the case of General Ibrahim Babangida, he did all he could to truncate the transition programme. Until he was caught in his own web in the heat of the nationwide protest that greeted the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential Election presumed to have been won by the late Chief Mko Abiola. He could not achieve his

self-perpetuation goal and was compelled by both internal and external forces to quit office under the guide of what he called stepping aside.

General Sanni Abacha silenced all presidential aspirants and coerced the five political parties to adopt him as a sole presidential candidate in an election scheduled for August 1, 1988. Alade Fawole maintains that under the Abacha dictatorship Nigeria became a country shunned by the major powers and the country was suspended from the commonwealth, investigated by the UN for human rights abuses<sup>13</sup>.

A critical assessment of the above situations of military regime in Nigeria in the area of constitutional violations and arbitrary actions explain itself that military regimes are repressive and much sinister to the development of the country. The military administrations in Nigeria made the country to experience harse human rights violations. The military rule has no respect for the rule of law. Also, it does not admit and tolerate any opposition. It was said that when the military come to power, they often abolish all para-political associations, suspend the constitution because they felt that these para-political associations and agencies would serve as base of mobilization against their political will and illegality. It was also based on this that Chinua Achebe posits that “only a masochist with an exuberant taste for self-violence will pick Nigeria for a holiday, Nigeria, he continued may be a paradise for adventurers and pirates but not tourists<sup>14</sup>.

### **The Issue of Nigerian Civil War**

The Nigerian civil war which took place between July 1967-January 1970 gave a strong lesson that the military cannot effectively manage the affairs of this country. The bloody civil war could have been avoided if General Yakubu Gowon and Lt. Col. Odumegu Ojukwu were tactful and diplomatic in handling the issues that led to the war. General Aguiyi-Ironsi in the first place lacked vision considering the policies of his government. It was a costly mistake when General Ironsi abolished federalism in favour of a unitary system of government. This was done at a time, when the Northern



elements were still bitter over the military coup of January, 1966 which they saw as one sided. The failure of Ironsi's regime to punish the organizers of this coup exposed the Igbo to public suspicion.

Another area in which General Ironsi provoked the North was in the promotion exercise. Both the national and diplomatic appointments, were mostly Ibos. The stage was now set for a counter-coup and subsequent civil war. Considering the above blunders committed by Ironsi, which can easily be avoided by a seasoned administrator, can such military ruler provide solutions to this country's problems one may ask?

When Gowon became the Head of State in this troubled period more maturity was expected from him if the country must remain as one. It can be argued that after the assassination of General Aguiyi Ironsi in the counter-coup, it was not necessary for the Northerners to have embarked on mass killings of the Ibos in the north. It was necessary for General Gowon to have taken some drastic actions against those responsible for the mass killing in the interest of the Nation. This he did not do giving room for suspicion that he had taken sides with the North<sup>15</sup>. In the same vein, Lt. Col. Odumegu Ojukwu, the military Governor of East Central State, refusal to accept General Gowon as the Head of State for any reason, when he assumed office was unpatriotic. This was against the background that the most senior military officer in Nigeria at the time, Brigadier Ogundipe, escaped to London, thereby creating vacuum in government which lasted for three days. Since General Gowon was the person approved by the army, it could have been necessary for Lt. Col. Ojukwu to recognize that position in the interest of national unity. This he did not do thereby creating another problem, for this attitude created the seeds of discord and acrimony between the two<sup>16</sup>.

The last opportunity to avert the civil war came in Aburi conference conveyed in Ghana at the instance of their president, General Joseph Ankah. The military juntas at

the conference did not consider national interest instead they were more concerned with pride, heroism and sectional interest, so the interpretation given to the decisions of the conference differed on arrival in Nigeria. It would be recalled that Ojukwu refused to attend any meeting in Lagos because of fear for his safety<sup>17</sup>. However, Ojukwu agreed to attend a meeting in Aburi in Ghana in the last attempt to find a constitutional formula/solution that would hold Nigeria together. At the end of the conference, Ojukwu claimed that they had all agreed on a confederation and supported his claim with the publication of a transcript of the tapes that General Ankrah had suggested they make of their discussion<sup>18</sup>. The conference failed to produce desirable results so the civil war in Nigeria started in 1967. While it is necessary to condemn in strong terms the killing of innocent Ibos in the North after the counter coup. It was also unpatriotic and unnationalistic for Lt. Col. Ojukwu to declare the then Eastern Region, the independent Republic of Biafra in the interest of the Nation. The decision was too hasty, it is on record that millions of our people died during that war including soldiers and innocent civilians. The above analysis clearly shows that military administration lack the vision to manage crisis-situation hence it was wrong for them to have doubled into politics.

### **Truncation of Democratic Process in Nigeria**

The military regimes truncated the democratic process for a longtime in Nigeria thereby preventing the country from establishing our indigenous enduring political structures. The attainment of independence in 1960 in Nigeria enhanced the spirit of patriotism, enthusiasm and national pride among Nigerians. Independence saw the emergence of Nigerian elite assuming powers over the affairs of their country. The dividends of democracy enabled some democratic structures to be established and more Nigerians had the opportunity to participate in the government of their country. It was a government that had respect for the rule of law especially human rights which were protected.

Unfortunately, the military junta did not allow this novel democracy to survive, in order to promote their selfish interest and to taste from the sweetness of power. They used flimsy excuses of eradicating corruption, tribalism, embezzlement squandermania, fraud, to organize a bloody coup which terminated civilian administration in Nigeria in January 15, 1966. In this unfortunate coup, many of our heroes that fought for the attainment of independence were killed. Such politicians were Sir Tafawa Balewa, Sir Ahmadu Bello, Chief Akintola and some top military personnel like Brigadier Zakari Maimalari, Col. Kur Mohammed.

This coup of January 15, 1966 marked the beginning of military coups in Nigeria. Before you know it, there was a counter-coup in July 29, 1966 in which the Head of State, General Aguiyi Ironsi was assassinated and General Gowon came to power. In the Daily Times comment of August 6, 1975, the regime of Gowon was accused of lack of consultation, indecision, indiscipline and neglect<sup>19</sup>. Hence the regime was overthrown by yet another military coup which took place on 29<sup>th</sup> July, 1975 under the leadership of General Ramat Muhammed.

On February 13, 1976, General Ramat Murtala was assassinated by Lt. Col. Buka Suka Dimka in another coup. This laughable coups continued when again, major General Buhari organized a coup d'état which brought about the end of president Alhaji Shehu Shagari's administration. This coup again landed Nigeria into relegation among the comity of Nations as a military state. No government is perfect, even the USA seen today as the citadel of democracy in the contemporary world has its flaws. As a result of the military, the democratic structures put in place by the civilian administration between 1979-1983 went into extinction. The democratic knowledge gained by political parties, individuals and groups went into abeyance.

Adeyemi maintains that Nigerians were subjected to coercive discipline administered with calculated military precision<sup>20</sup>. Fawole notes with sadness that General Buhari was rather xenophobic in his treatment of neighboring countries and

was engaged in prolonged border closure and aliens expulsion and appeals to re-open the borders failed<sup>21</sup>. He posits that, Buhari however bears the brunt of his policies<sup>22</sup>. Nations need other nations for exchange of ideas, for the promotion of trade and for diplomatic purposes. No country is an Island unto itself and no country can provide all the resources it needs for development within her territorial borders. Every country is therefore, relevant in the exchange of goods and services provided in the internal system. The needs of states have therefore created an interdependence international system that affords countries of the world the opportunities of securing from other countries what they lack themselves. S.E. Orobator sees international relationship as constituting the sum total of the relationship between two or more sovereign nations at both governmental and non-governmental<sup>23</sup>.

Nigeria was deprived of these benefits as a result of the overthrow of the democratic governance by General Buhari in December, 1983. More especially his dogged and unfriendly policies towards Nigeria's neighbors. Regrettably in August 27, 1985, there was another coup led by General Ibrahim Babangida which brought the regime of General Buhari to an end. This regime pretended to be serious about returning the country back to civilian rule. Unfortunately the same regime truncated the democratic process by the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election presumed to have been won by the late Chief MKO Abiola. In 1993, General Babangida was compelled by both internal and external forces to quite office under the guise of what he called "stepping aside". General Babangida put in place an interim National Government (ING) headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan. The interim National Government lasted for 82 days between 26<sup>th</sup> August, 1993 to 17<sup>th</sup> day of November, 1993.

Following the formal resignation of Chief Ernest Shonekan on the 17<sup>th</sup> day of November, 1993, General Sanni Abacha became the Head of State of Nigeria. General Abacha did all he could to succeed himself in office as a civilian president to the extent of coercing the five political parties to adopt him as a sole presidential candidate in an

election scheduled for August 1, 1988 if not for his sudden death seen in many quarters as God's intervention.

Equally suicidal was the arrest and detention of Moshood Abiola for years without trial inspite of national and international protests. To compound his problems, he hanged the world famous writer, environmentalist and minority rights crusader, Ken Saro-Wiwa, at a time when summit was in session in Auckland, New Zealand which was seen by many as undiplomatic. The country was suspended from the commonwealth for two years as a result of the death sentence passed on Saro-Wiwa and eight others from Ogoni land. Infact the country was investigated by the United Nations Organization for Human Rights Abuses.

Hence Fawole condemns Abacha's domestic policies, actions and reckless mismanagement of external relations<sup>24</sup>. The democratic process started by General Sani Abacha was truncated again following his tragic death on June 8, 1998. On Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> June, 1998, a new military Head of State General Abdusalami Abubakar was appointed. His main focus was to return the country back to democratic government. A new transition time-table for elections and handover was released. In order for the transition to be translated into reality, new political parties were formed and registered. Such political parties were Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), All Nigerians People Party (ANPP) and Alliance for Democracy (AD) etc. Elections were conducted into the different local governments, State and Federal offices. General Abubakar finally handed over power to civilians on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1999 with General Obasanjo of the PDP sworn in as an elected President.

The above analysis clearly indicate that military regimes are repressive and they stifled democracy in the country because the military as an institution can never engender democracy. The military is the anti-thesis of democracy in regards to its norm, values, purposes and structures. It is not the government of the people rather, it is government by force. A regime characterized by corruption, indiscipline, favoritism,

oppression, disrespect for the rule of law, wild scale embezzlement, uncertainty, confusion and tension, cannot be said to be capable of providing answers to the problem of this great country, Nigeria, instead military regime in this country compounded our problem as Nigeria was relegated in the comity of democratic nations in the world.

It can be established that the series of military coups in Nigeria, were borne out of selfish ambitious of military leaders to rule. Nigeria could not learn from the experience of the United States of America, which today is celebrated as the melting pot of democracy in the world. Since 1776 when America obtained her independence from Britain, we have not heard of any military coup, instead the military is concerned with its basic function of providing security for the American people and defending the territorial integrity of the nation.

### **Conclusion**

Military rule in Nigeria started in January 15, 1966 after the abortive coup led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu. As a result of the failure of the coup, the most senior officer in the army Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi became the Head of State. General Yakubu Gowon, General Muritala Ramat Muhammed, General Olusegun Obasanjo, General Buhari, General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, General Abacha and General Adusalami Abubakar governed the country at different times as a result of frequent military coups which became a serious embarrassment to the country.

The military administration in Nigeria came to an end in 1999 when General Abubakar finally handed over power to civilians on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1999 with General Obasanjo of the PDP sworn in as an elected President. Although these military administrations often pretend to restore the political and economic stability that had been disrupted during the civilian administration in the country, it was later discovered in the course of times that they were only ambitious and wanted to taste the affluence and sweetness of power to enable them display their heroic arrogance. Again it was

found that most of the military administrations in Nigera were promoting their own interests and encouraging corruption, nepotism, inefficiency, tribalism and political instability. More especially the military administrations by their conduct clearly show that they were not equip for political administration, as they produced an era of tension, anxiety, fear, frustration and panics throughout the period of their stay in office.

This situation was created because the military administrations in Nigeria were involved in bureaucratic violation, taking arbitrary decisions without recourse to bureaucratic channels. This was in juxtaposition to using military fiat without considering the effects of such actions on the socio-economic aspirations of the country. It was quite unfortunate that the military juntas allowed the civil war commence in Nigeria in 1967 because they lack the vision, technical skills and charismatic ability to manage crisis situation it is on historical records that the costly mistake made by General Gowon, Lt Col. Ojukwu and other military leaders for not adequately addressing the issues that led to the Nigeria civil war became counter-productive, as millions of Nigerians including soldiers and innocent civilians were killed in that war that was not necessary.

The frequent military coups in Nigeria truncated our democratic process thereby depriving the country from evolving a sustainable indigenous political process that can stand the test of time. It should be our collective prayers that Nigeria should not witness military administration again.

## ENDNOTES

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