

## Military Coups as a Negation of Social Revolutions: the Nigerian Experience

Frank Enor Ph.D

Lecturer, Department of History and International Studies  
University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria  
Email: [enfrankie@yahoo.com](mailto:enfrankie@yahoo.com)

Sunday E. N. Ebaye

Lecturer, Department of General Studies  
Cross River University of Technology, Calabar, Nigeria  
Email: [sundayebaye@yahoo.com](mailto:sundayebaye@yahoo.com)

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**Abstract** *The military in Nigeria has dominated the socio-political landscape of the country for more than thirty years sporadically. Within these years, the military had executed far reaching reforms and policies in the socio-economic and political substructures of the national economy. Although the military had made some progress in areas where civilian administration had failed, military incursion into politics still negates a populist social revolution, thus failed to institute a genuine democratic culture in the country. This paper attempts an examination of military adventurism from the backdrop of revolutionary pressures in Nigeria and contends that such interventions foreclosed the chances of structural change by the people. The paper concludes that a social revolution is a fundamental approach to a genuine democratic culture in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** *Military, Coups, Negation, Social Revolutions, Nigerian Experience*

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### 1. Introduction

The imperative of nation-building has always imposed on leaders the necessity for evolving development strategies and policies for the overall well being and development of the nation. This is more so with a neo-colonial state like Nigeria which came into being through the administrative ingenuity of British imperialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The haphazard way and piecemeal manner by which Nigeria was moulded into a nation state created structural imbalances and upheavals which set in motion revolutionary pressures. These pressures manifested through ethnic chauvinism, leadership inertia, followership amnesia, political miasma/instability, economic discomfiture and social malaise resulting into coups, counter coups and democratic pretensions. It was the attempt to resolve these contradictions that led to the first military incursion into the Nigerian politics.

In the context of this paper, a coup has been defined as an unconstitutional means of change of government with or without blood shed by the arm forces of a given country. Social revolution on the other hand is a process of resolving the major socio-political and socio-economic contradictions that have developed in a given society. Social revolutions occur only when revolutionary situations exist. Recent examples from the Maghreb, states of North Africa (Tunisia, Libya and Egypt) can be cited clearly as presenting revolutionary situations. Revolutions; with or without bloodshed, take many forms ranging from peaceful protest to violent demonstrations. They involve mass popular uprising by the people to redress wrongs or perceived injustice by the ruling class, protest against unpopular policies by the state or whatever the objective conditions may be in the given society. Successful revolutions upturn socio-

economic formations.

That Nigeria; whether in the pre or post 1960 era have provided a hot-bed for people intervention is attested to by the crisis which existed in the ruling class political system. When the military intervenes, they 'clot up' the revolution thereby negating peoples' collective initiative for change. Military intervention in Nigeria except for a few instances has not instituted radical changes or ameliorated the socio-economic and political conditions which necessitated their intervention. Military coups are at best reformist, they do not provide for a radical overturn of the prevailing socio-economic formation. In the hands of reactionaries, reforms are concessions to the masses or a manoeuvre for consolidating their own position. Therefore a military take over never constitutes a revolution, but a limited modification of existing arrangements (Wangome, 1985).

Examples from Latin America in the 1950s and Nigeria in the 1960s has shown that when revolutionary pressures mature to a crisis, the ruling class invites the military as a counter revolutionary force to foil the peoples' attempt to carry out their historic role. United States imperialism in the 1950s and 1960s in the Latin America provided objective causes for a mass uprising by the people; only for the army to act as counter revolutionary force. In Nigeria, during the first republic, Dr. Nwafor Orizu, then as Acting President of the Federal Republic invited the military to take over the reins of power. This invitation like the one cited above was reactionary and a negation of social revolution.

As recent as 2010, during the constitutional crisis which trailed the ill-health of President Musa Yar'adua and the succession crisis which ensued, a section of the country welcomed a military intervention which was actually imminent but for the division and ethnic affiliation of the top military brass. The crisis was however averted when the 'Save Nigeria Group', a civil society organization led by Professor Wole Soyinka, a noble laurette demonstrated openly and called on the National Assembly to empower the Vice President with 'Acting Powers'. The popular and mass action of the civil society group saved Nigeria from yet another military take over. A genuine democratic culture after a prolonged military interregnum can only be sustained after a long period of trial and error by the people who are in themselves vanguard of change.

Between 1966 and 1999 the military brass in Nigeria could be said to have performed both positively and negatively in the bid towards nation-building. We shall attempt a review of the revolutionary pressures in Nigeria which culminated into the first military intervention, the theory and efficacy or otherwise of the military and their implication on the Nigerian polity.

## 2. Nigeria in the Pre-Independence Era

British attempt at nation-building during the colonial era included fashioning out a constitution for the country. Wittingly or unwittingly, the division of Nigeria into three regions – the North, East and the West as enshrined in the 1946 Richard's Constitution aggravated the ethno-political and socio-economic competition of the different groups in the country. In the tripartite arrangement, the North enjoyed a far greater population and size and demanded on the basis of their size majority seats in the federal legislature.

Within the three major ethnic groups also sprang political parties which assumed ethnic colourations. The Northern People's Congress (NPC) in the North, the National Congress of Nigeria and Cameroun (NCNC) in the East and the Action Group (AG) in the West. These parties had their primary bases in their ethnic domain. In the ensuing constitutional arrangements towards independence, the N.C.N.C. (Igbo) and the AG (Yoruba), demanded an independent Nigeria to be balkanized into small states so that the conservative North could not dominate the country. Northern distrust and fear of domination of the most westernized elites in the South on the other hand preferred the perpetuation of British rule. As a condition for accepting independence, the North demanded that the three regional structures which gave them a clean majority be preserved. The Igbo and Yoruba leaders acquiesced to Northern demand for the interest of peaceful coexistence and for independence from colonial rule. It was under this volatile foundation that the Nigerian state was laid in 1960. The test of independence was to reveal itself in many of the stresses and strains that accompanied nation-building.

In 1965, electoral malpractice in the Western Region amidst ethnic distrust and crisis over population figures culminated to the first military intervention in the politics of Nigeria, which has however been described as an aberration. Whether or not the first military intervention addressed or justified its coming is another matter here.

Following the failed coup of 1966 led by Major Kaduna Nzeogu and four others, General Johnson Aguiyi -Ironsi, an Igbo and head of the Nigerian Army took over power to become the first military head

of state in Nigeria.

Ironsi alleged that “the democratic institutions have failed and needed revision and clean up before reversion back to democratic rule” (Aliogo, 2009:8). Unfortunately, between 1966 and 1999, the necessary “revision and clean up” exercises have continued to fail in spite of the many military interventions. Unknown to Ironsi it was the people that failed not democratic institutions. Ironsi’s wrong perception of the problem equally led to a wrong prescription of the solution, the country continued to drift away with endless bouts of coups and counter-coups until 1999.

### 3. Military Intervention: Background & Theory

The unconstitutional and violent overthrow of government is not new or peculiar to Nigeria. In 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte sacked the first French Republic through a coup d’état where they were surrounded by battle ready soldiers and sacked the council. In 1811 Mohammed Ali, who ruled between 1805 – 1849, the founder of the modern Egyptian state tricked the two rival ruling classes in Egypt – the Mamelukes to a dinner party where waiting armed men assassinated them (Ogunmesa; 1979). In contemporary times, between 1952 and 1966 and beyond, a flood-gate of coups was thrown wide open in Africa. In Egypt in 1952, Lt. Col. Gamal Abdel Nasser terminated the regime of King Farouk, Sudan had its share in 1958, (Aliogo, 2009:12). In Congo Kinshasa now Democratic Republic of Congo, Mobutu Sese Seko seized power in 1960; Togo in 1963, Gabon 1964, Algeria 1965, Ghana and Nigeria 1966, Sierra Leone in 1967, Mali in 1968, Sudan, Libya and Somalia in 1969 (Wangone, 1985). The chronology builds up to the 1980s and 1990s. The *raison d’être* for coups can be explained in theory as is in practice. When in January 15, 1966, Nigeria took its place in the register of coups in Africa, Major Kaduna Nzeogu, the officer widely reputed to be the leader of the coup identified those revolutionary pressures which according to him made the country big for nothing. The political profiteers, the swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand 10% ... the tribalist, the nepotist..., those who have corrupted our society... (Aliogo, 2009).

Such were the practical reasons for Nzeogu’s coup in 1966. Generally speaking, the military has taken it as a national and patriotic obligation to salvage, or provide a panacea to the socio-economic and political dilemmas. Unfortunately, as noted by Major Jimmi Wangome (1985), more often than not, the guise of national interest and patriotic duty “turned out to be more corrupt, oppressive and downright inefficient than the civilian governments they deposed”. Nzeogu’s coup was foiled, creating yawning gaps in curious attempts to place Nzeogu’s regime in history. It remained to be conjectured whether Nzeogu could have addressed the many faceted problems which he identified in the Nigerian polity.

Incompetence and mismanagement of the national economy, unemployment and high crime rate, inflation and protracted economic crisis leading to the failure of political leadership, corruption and political squabbles are advanced as reasons for military intervention. However, failure of political forces is not enough justification for military takeover; for as this attempt seeks to show, the military has not lived above corruption, inefficiency and oppression. It was during the reign of General Ibrahim Babangida that Nigeria witnessed one of its most oppressive moments when the Structural Adjustment Programme introduced by the regime reduced the toiling masses of Nigerians to walking corpses. Babangida’s maladministration provided enough reasons for counter coups. Babangida and latter Gen. Sanni Abacha systematically censored the press and drove the progressives underground. Abacha’s loot until recently cannot be recovered from foreign Banks.

Perhaps a glimpse at few theories will further shape our understanding of the military in Nigerian politics. Two major schools of thoughts have dominated theoretical postulations and discourses on coups in Nigeria and Third World in general. There are the “internal characteristics” model and the “politicization model”. The internal characteristics model also known as the “internal structure” of the military propounded by Morris Janowitz holds that the social backgrounds of the officers, their career lines, professional and political ideology within the military are important factors which help to explain military intervention in politics.

The second school of analysis propounded by Samuel Huntington has condemned the first thought and contends that military intervention is political. His analysis is based on the premise that military intervention in developing countries is only one specific manifestation of general politicization of social forces and institution. According to this school of thought, societies where social forces and institutions are highly politicized have political universities, political labour unions, political corporations and of course political armed forces (Ndoh, 1997:14). All these professional groups according to Ndoh tend to become involved in political issues which affect their interest or groups and also in issues which

affect the society as a whole. The result is that no group or political institution “is recognized or accepted as legitimate intermediary to moderate conflicts. As plausible as Huntington’s analysis may seem one cannot divorce Janowitz “Internal structure” in any exhaustive discourse on military intervention. Though peculiarities exist, a synthesis of the two schools of thought explains the predominance of coups in Nigeria and the third world.

#### 4. The Military & Nigerian Politics

The military has really shown itself to be partners in nation-building. They did some good and some bad things in their effort to build the Nigerian state. The attempt here is not much about showcasing their achievements and failures, than the concern to show that military engagement in Nigerian politics foreclosed historic attempts by the people to rise up in demand for popular rule. It may be argued that no military regime in Nigeria operated without civilian appointees who served in different capacities including advisers. In reality, the ‘bloody civilians’ were merely taking directives from their juntas; any dissenting opinion including radical thought was not accommodated.

Between 1966 and 1999, Nigeria experienced eight military regimes viz: General Johnson T. U. Aguiy Ironsi (January 16, 1966 – July 29, 1966); General Yakubu Gowon (August 1st, 1966 – July 29th, 1975); General Murtala R. Mohammed (July 29th, 1975 – February 13th, 1976); General Olusegun Obasanjo (February 14th, 1976 – October 1st, 1979); General Mohamadu Buhari (December 31st, 1983 – August 27th, 1985), Gen. Ibrahim B. Babangida (August 27, 1985 – August, 27, 1993), General Sanni Abacha (November 17th, 1993 – June 8th, 1998); General Abdusalami Abubakar (June 9th, 1998 – May 29th, 1999). It is interesting to observe that the military coups or regimes did not only oust civilian regimes that “failed to stimulate democratic structures” to meet the yearnings of the people, they also replicated themselves. The meaning of this is that the military also failed to correct the anomalies which in the first place necessitated their intervention which suggests that vaulting ambitions drives officers to seize power.

Indeed it has been observed that ideological orientation of leaders is a factor in their leadership style. General Murtala Mohammad’s (1975 – 1976) regime which lasted only six months was more proactive and determined than all the military regimes in Nigeria put together. Murtala’s domestic and foreign policy returned Nigeria to an enviable position within the comity of nations. His total commitment to the eradication of all forms of colonialism in Africa and support for the frontline states was seen by the West as anathema to their interest in Africa. In domestic matters, Murtala came up with a ‘clean-up’ exercise which re-ordered and over-hauled government parastatals and the civil and public service. The ‘clean-up’ exercise shook the whole nation as both the civilians and military personnel were affected (Otoghagua: 2007:105).

Military regimes in Nigeria were most successful in the areas of state creation. General Yakubu Gowon created twelve states on May 27, 1967 from the four regional structure of the country. His regime changed Nigerian currency from pounds and shillings to naira and kobo, introduced right hand driving; universal primary education (UPE), the Youth Service Corps and played a leading role in the formation of ECOWAS. (Ujam: 1995).

General Murtala Mohammad created seven more states in 1976 from the already existing twelve bringing the number of states to nineteen. Murtala’s policies which were completed by Obasanjo’s regime produced the 1979 Constitution, launched the Operation Feed the Nation and Local Government Reforms in 1976. It was during this period that Nigeria hosted African Festival of Arts and Culture (Festac 1977) and Abuja carved out as a federal capital territory.

The Buhari/Idiagbon regime which torpedoed the democratic pretensions of Shehu Shagari’s regime ruthlessly enforced law and order through War Against Indiscipline (WAI).

In 1987, General Ibrahim Babangida created two states and nine more in 1991. Babangida’s regime inter alia introduced MAMSER, SAP, two political parties – the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC), new local government reforms and civil service reforms in 1987. The Road Safety Commission and the People Bank are credited to Ibrahim Babangida’s regime.

General Sanni Abacha on assumption of office dissolved the two political parties: (S.D.P) and (N.R.C) and political institutions and their manipulators. His stock in trades were assassination and detention without trial. His excesses put the civil society into panic and pandemonium with social forces like the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), and other human rights groups driven underground to plumate radio Kudirat – a progressive voice of the people which made news broadcast against the excesses of General Sanni Abacha. Sanni Abacha’s wife however came up with a community

development programme, the Family Support Programme (F.S.P), aimed at improving the experiences of women in development as well as showing the role of the entire family in national development (Otoghagua: 1999).

In 1996, General Sanni Abacha created six new states that brought Nigeria to the present thirty-six states structure. The underlying current behind state creation is to balance the federal structure which has been lopsided in favour of some major groups in the federation. Until recently, this accomplishment has remained unbeatable by the civilian politicians in government.

General Abulsalami's regime (9th June, 1998 – 29th May 1999) shied away from holding on to power for too long, having been suffocated by the six points condition issued to it by the NADECO, as a condition for cooperation. Abudusalami midwived a one year transition to democracy and handed power in May 29th 1999 to set the stage for another democratic experiment in the country.

The longevity of military rule in Nigeria and the military memorabilia infused in Nigerians emasculated social forces to a point of socio-political amnesia creating room for political apathy, mediocrity, and passivity. The military in Nigerian politics has not exonerated itself from massive corruption and looting of the national coffers as do the political class. The ruthless killing of real and imaginary coup plotters especially during Babangida and Abacha's regime drained the Nigerian Army/Armed Forces of part of its best cream of officers. Untold hardship, frustration and desperation unleashed on Nigerians by the military resulting from the haphazard implementation of economic policies reinforced dependency on the international economy, leading to poverty amidst plenty on Nigerians.

The military in the words of Professor Okon Uya (2009:13) "was avowedly anti-intellectual characterized by open hostility towards progressive intellectuals, some of whom were jailed, cajoled into submission or driven into exile".

The hunting down of the 'progressives' by men in uniform resulting from fear, and suspicion according to Uya, began the alienation of the intellectual classes from governance, and the de-radicalization of social forces in the country. This singular factor amounted to the greatest disservice of the military to their fatherland. It is little wonder therefore that the military under Gen. Babangida annulled June 12, 1992 election, and Chief MKO Abiola; a Yoruba, popularly claimed to be the winner of the election arrested and remanded in custody. Abiola died in custody while pressing to regain his mandate.

The southwest region and the progressive forces were violently suppressed by Abacha in their attempt to demand the restoration of June 12 mandate to Chief Abiola.

The military, it should be remembered, is a colonial product, and an instrument of government created to manage external security. Little did the regime know that the colonial heritage would turn against its master through the activities of coups.

Coup as stated by Ujam H. Ujam (1995:188) "is an outrageous act which is contrary to the modern order of things. It is only those perpetrating acts of middle ages that encourage military coups today". The action of the military no doubt can be likened to the acts of the 'middle ages', as when it is ordered to roll tanks against innocent and armless students in Nigerian universities during their protest-march or demonstrations against poor state policies.

In recent times, we may liken the dastardly self serving, and greedy acts of Nigerian politicians to the 'middle age' behaviour. In Nigeria, politicians are poorly organized with no integrity. Some are ill-equipped for progressive leadership while others are interested in their families and themselves rather than the nation. Indeed, it has been stated in some quarters that good governance, effective and transparent leadership may discourage military intervention. Politicians and the ruling class could work to uplift the standard of Nigerian political culture as this only can keep the military out of governance.

As stated earlier, when the military intervenes, it forecloses the chances of the people from popular and mass uprising to effect the desired changes of their dreams. Nigerians could learn and grow from their mistakes than accommodate military intervention. The military according to chinweizu "... may be driven from power by superior force, through arm revolt as in Bolivia (1952) where armed civilians defeated the army in three days of street fighting and installed a civilian president" (Chinweizu in Ujam, 1995:200).

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has attempted an examination of the long interregnum of military rule in Nigeria. A review of the revolutionary pressures which culminated into the first military intervention was undertaken. Our examination has shown that the military contributed both positively and negatively in the bid towards nation-building.

Interestingly, the military in Nigeria made some advances towards social mobilization of the populace.

As contained in the MAMSER Handbook, social mobilization is defined as “the process of pulling together, harnessing, actualizing and utilizing potential human resources for the purpose of development” (Ndoh; 1997: 89). The different programmes of the social mobilization include Gowon’s programme of Reconciliation, Reconstruction and Rehabilitation (3c), Murtala’s ‘Unlabelled Social Revolution’, Obasanjo’s Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), Buhari/Idiagbon’s War Against Indiscipline (WAI), Babangida’s National Orientation Agency (NOA), MAMSER, and Better Life for Rural Women, and Abacha’s War Against Indiscipline and Corruption (WAIC).

While this paper may not examine in detail the success and failure of these programmes, suffice it to state that these programmes achieved as little as their precursors were themselves not sincere or lacked the will-power to pursue their goals objectively as a result of complicity with nefarious activities which these programmes were set to avoid. It may also be stated that military approaches to social issues leaves much to be desired as the military itself needed sufficient doses of civil and political education before delving into civil administration. It is needless to state that none of the programmes was set to radicalize the masses who can lead the nation to social change.

The long period of military dominance of socio-economic and political affairs estranged and reduced civil society to passive on-lookers of political developments. The military is always suspicious of the intellectual class and would not collaborate with the progressives. The effect is the militarization of civil society and far from inculcating a genuine democratic culture.

Frequent and prolonged military regimes foreclosed popular uprising for sustainable change and development and de-radicalized social forces in Nigeria. Intervention is at best reformist and not far reaching to affect the socio-economic formation which could induce structural changes.

## 6. Recommendations

The task of instituting a genuine democratic culture in Nigeria is not the business of the ruling class alone or the politicians alone. A genuine democratic culture will remain a far cry if the people do not rise up to the challenge of self assertion, self rebranding and ethico-cultural cleansing. The “man know thyself” maxim holds the key to the future of democratic stability in Nigeria.

Electoral reforms, if not preceded by the ‘individual reformation’ may amount to a dissipation of energies. The civilians, the military, the politicians, the press, the ruling class and all stake holders owe this nation a duty of national transformation and rebirth.

A genuine democratic culture is still possible if ‘immunity clauses’ which allow corrupt and indolent political office holders are removed from our constitution; if corrupt and non-performing representatives are recalled by their electorates; if the judiciary remains proven and practically independent and the civil society politically conscious. The Nigerian political class is indeed too comfortable therefore insensitive to their electorates. This can be checked if political office holding in Nigeria is made financially unattractive and money-bag democracy checked. Indeed performance should be the yardstick for a second, third, and fourth tenures which representatives clamour for. This can be summed by a comprehensive review of the constitution to reflect the people’s aspirations.

As underscored by Professor Uya, a genuine democratic culture for Nigeria is still possible by: The creation and institutionalization of appropriate apparatus of democratic governance, the mobilization and education of the citizenry, both civilians and military to an awareness of their rights, duties, responsibilities, and obligations for the sustenance of democracy; and above all, the improvement in the welfare and well-being of Nigerian citizens (Uya: 2009: 16).

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