

The Dynamics of Civilian-Military Relations in Nigerian Politics: A Study of Olusegun Obasanjo Administration 1999-2007

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Abstract: The Nigerian military is an institution charged with the responsibilities of maintaining and defending the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Nigeria. However, weakness in the conduct of civilian politics combined with the zest for power of some Nigerian military leaders to ensure that in its first 38 years of independence (1960 - 1998) Nigeria spent just 9 years under civilian rule. Between 1966 and 1979, only military administration governed the country through a supreme military council that was made up of selected senior officers and functioned as the principal policy –making forum with a federal executive council made up of senior federal bureaucrats who assumed the responsibilities of implementing the decision of Supreme Military Council. During the Gowon years (1966-1975), Nigeria was effectively ruled by a joint military bureaucratic government with civil servants achieving so much influence over the SMC that many were compulsorily retired after the 1975 coup. This paper takes a historical examination of civilian-military relationship in Nigeria. The paper argues that the military and the civilians have enjoyed a preponderant relationship in Nigerian politics with Olusegun Obasanjo using Nigerian army to conduct an election that fraudulently saw his emergence as the Nigerian president in 2003. The paper concluded by saying except that there is an established law that restricts retired officers from going into the politics, Nigerian military cannot be completely diverged from politics.

Key words: Keynotes • Dynamics • Military • Civilian • Relationship • Politics.

INTRODUCTION

Although we don't intend to take a historical excursion on the evolution of Nigerian army, we recommend that its origin pre-dated the history of Nigeria as a nation. Scholars like [1] and [2] hold that the evolution of the Nigerian Army began in the 19th century when Britain decided to make its power and influence effective along the littoral parts of the Niger Delta¹. In other words, the origin of the Nigerian Army could be traced to the forces raised by the colonial government to conquer and establish British hegemony over Nigeria.

As a creation of British government, it became apparent that the British government used them for effective administration without actually terminating their link with the authority of the British Army Council in London. Therefore, whatever we say about the military, we should understand that from the time immemorial, the military had been used as an instrument of administration. They constitute an institution that is charged with

defending the territorial integrity and providing security to the lives and property of the citizenry. Since security of lives and property is the primary responsibility of every nation, it therefore means that the military is directly involved in the administration and governance of the nation.

Moreover, as an institution, it means a body or agency that is put on the watch over the policies of government. Therefore whether military or civilian governments, the army is apparently seen to be part of government administration hence Moskos holds that the military was never entirely separate or entirely coterminous with the civilian society. Sustaining what apparently seems a theoretical foundation of civilian – military relationship, [3],

had propounded a theory of cimilicy to capture the relationship that exists between the civilian and the military. According to him, the theory of cimilicy is an argument for the positive integration of three elements in the public life of Nigeria such that they act in concert to

maximize the general welfare of the people. These elements being (1) civilians, (2) the military and (3) democracy. Collaborating [3] cimilicy theory, Rebecca Schiff propounded a concordance theory to explain under what conditions the military could intervene in domestic politics of nation.

According to him, the concordance theory does not preclude a separation between the civilian and the military, it does not require such state to exist. In other words, she argues that three societal institutions – (1) the military (2) political elites and (3) the citizenry must aim for a co-operative arrangement on primary indicators:

- Some composition of the officer's corps.
- The political decision making processes.
- The method of recruiting military personnel.
- The style of the military.

By this, the military are conceived component of politics as officers of the military become part of the decision making. Most specifically, retired army officers usually court relationship with any presidential candidate who is a retired army general to form a very powerful bloc in the consideration of candidate's nomination. Thus an explanation of the above statement could be seen during the presidential election of president Muhammadu Buhari in which Obasanjo as PDP card carrier was wholly in support of Buhari's candidature.

Aside this, the military have proved strongly that they are the instrument to which politicians can achieve success in politics. This was seen in 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 general elections. In other words, it is the extent to which Obasanjo used the military in conducting elections that fraudulently saw his emergence as the Nigerian president that this paper seeks to unravel. Using concordance theory of civilian – military relations, the paper further seeks to explain that military officers who retired to politics are inclined to military traits. This reflects in their characters, style of leadership, behavioural pattern, attitudes and speeches. Therefore, instances like these are true justification of the dynamism to President Olusegun Obasanjo's civilian administration that is described as to military dictatorship.

Civilian- Military Relations: a Historical Perspective: Looking back to history, the relationship between civilians and the military could be traced to the writings of Sun Tzu and Carl Von Clausewitz. Both of them argued that military organizations were primarily servants of the state. This implies that the military is a servant of society which exercises its monopoly over the most violent means

of violence in the interest of its citizens in response to popular will and consent. To exercise this role however, the military must have unique expertise within a corporate structure guided by a strong sense of ethical and moral responsibility. While the civil society should on the other hand have strong institutions through which the will and consent of the citizenry are projected.

Traditionally, the civilian–military relations presume civil supremacy which entails a full democratic control of the military in its role and responsibility to society as the ultimate guarantor of national security. Trained generally for the purpose of security, thus apolitical, the military therefore intervened in politics in order to rectify all the political defects which they considered were capable of distorting the peace of the country. Being the first experience in the political history of Nigeria, the military had by 1966 staged a coup that claimed the lives of senior officers and top political leaders. Between 1966 – 1979, each military administration governed the country through a supreme military council that was made up of selected senior officers as the principal policy – making forum with a federal executive council made up of senior bureaucrats who assumed the responsibilities of implementing the decision of supreme military council.

The spates of military involvement in civilian politics have demonstrated that the military cannot be completely separated from civilian politics. For example, by August 1985 there was a successful coup that toppled the government of General Mohammadu Buhari and ushered in a new military regime headed by General Ibrahim Babangida. Babangida on assumption of office declared himself a president which is civilian title. In other words, the relationship existing between the military and civilian population has shown that on number of occasions, the military have been used to stop uprising, defend the nation from external attacks, maximize a political will and ensure smooth running of the nation. [2],holds that there were some instances to which soldiers act as hired thugs to politicians as company clerk in the Bauchi garrison once engaged a group of soldiers to assault an individual who owed him money.

By this, it is quite obvious that the duty of the military has gone beyond protection of lives to falling prey to civilian influence and political control. To that extent, one can add that the military have played a complementary role as the defenders of national sovereignty and as a strong actor within the polity of Nigeria. According to[1], during the 1959 and 1964 federal elections, the army was ordered to organize parades and demonstrations in order to assure the citizens that

government had the power to quell political disturbances and to protect lives and property. This and other sundry issues totally transfer the legitimacy of the soldiers to act independent of political control to civilianize them.

To this extent, [3] holds that there are two kinds of “civilianized” soldiers. One set are those who assume civilian mannerisms and continue to maintain direct control of the armed forces while ruling the country. The other set of civilianized soldiers are those who formally retire from the services and make a second career of politics.

It is clear anyway that these sets of civilianized soldiers have contributed significantly to the political development of the nation. There is no gainsaying of the fact that these people always take into political office the skills they had acquired while in service in armed forces. These skills, for sure include technology and the decision making capabilities of “military managers”. In other words, they also brought to bear in their new role as politicians such concepts as discipline, skill, initiative and the encouragement of a merit system career motivation, career guidance and development. Thus, they are apparently concerned with broad ranges of political, social and economic policies of government. This shows that as wars do not occur often enough, soldiers of their rank are part and parcel of society’s elite corp. Therefore their positions and contacts with civilians in the area of drafts, recruitment of personnel or short term reservists, must have taught them that the military establishment must accommodate itself to personnel who are essentially civilians.

Collaborating the fore going [4] holds that there were instances to which politicians who wanted to cling to power had in order to win the support of the army, tried to indoctrinate their kith and kin in the army¹⁴. Hence politics provides a platform for military recruitment and the military ensures the sustenance of political will and offices.

Military as a Component of Politics: As usually the case, politics is an expression of power. Politics is always the demonstration and struggle to outwit, maneuver and constitute an element of state sovereignty. Therefore, the right of a state to exist depends on the power to impose its will. Thus power becomes an essential element of state, as its importance shows that no nation can talk about politics without first the element of power which is the military that will be able or capable of maintaining order in any given society.

In fact, long tradition of military involvement in politics has definitely revealed the interplay between politics and the military. Experiences have shown that of all the independence of the third world nations, the military phase of the independence struggle acted as an integrating mechanism of all the nationals while the political and negotiation phase marked the disintegration phase of the pre-independence struggle. By this, politics constitutes military power and vice versa. In other words, the military establishment of any nation is understood by its rise and popularity defined in terms of the role it played in the struggle and defense of that country’s independence. Hence Meister opines that once the sovereignty is won, the military acquires a critical role with respect to the national affairs of the state. Therefore the military act as a catalyst against expansion, maintain power against any uprising or internal threats and also act as a moderating mechanism by preventing political infighting among the various ruling groups in a democratic setting. It is against this background that in spite of all the theories of exclusiveness, Nigeria military regimes have made extensive use of civilians. For instance, the Nigerian civil war was managed by a joint effort of the military and the civilian bureaucrats and politicians. [5], holds that the result of the war, one might add, might have been different if the co-operation between the soldiers and civilians had not been encouraged and sustained.

The military have demonstrated clearly to be susceptible to politicians and thus has made their relationship more cordial. In other words, interactions between military and civilian elites can come in four main ways beginning from civilian employment of retired soldiers, joint action ties in professional associations or clubs, direct participation of retired soldiers in partisan politics and the co-option of civilians in military regimes. These are factors that combine to show military as a component of politics.

Again we have learnt through the short but dynamic span of General Murtala Mohammed’s regime that the military too can be an agent of social and attitudinal change. Therefore military regimes are integrative and the future of the military profession in Nigeria can only lie basically on a solid foundation in which there is a balance between the armed forces and the civilian politicians.

The Man “Obasanjo”: Olusegun Mathew Okikiola Aremu Obasanjo was born circa 5 March 1937 in Ogun State and grew up in Owu in Abeokuta. His name “Olusegun” means the lord is victorious. Obasanjo at the age of 21

was enlisted in the Nigerian army in 1958 and attended the 6 month short service commission training at Mons officer cadet school in Aldershot in England. He was thereafter commissioned as an officer in the Nigerian army. Shortly after that, he was trained in India at the Defense Service Staff College Wellington and at the Indian Army School of Engineering. His military services began in 1 Area Command in Kaduna where he was promoted to Chief of Army Engineer and later made commander of 2 Area Command from July 1967. He is married to three wives among who are in order of seniority: Mrs Oluremi (Remi) Obasanjo, Lynda Obasanjo and Stella Obasanjo. Obasanjo has numerous children among who are Dr. Iyabo Obasanjo Bello and Dare Obasanjo the principal program manager for Microsoft.

Obasanjo's Military Regime: Obasanjo's military popularity began after the July 29, 1975 military coup led by Murtala Mohammed. Although Brig. Obasanjo did not participate in the coup but he lent support to it as he was later named Murtala's deputy in the new government. However, the assassination of General Murtala Ramat Muhammed in an attempted bloody coup of 14 February 1976 brought General Olusegun Obasanjo as Nigeria's head of state. The coup marked him, Murtala and other senior military personnel for assassination. Therefore the failure of the coup plotters led by Col. Buka Suka Dimka to execute the assassination of Obasanjo and General Theophilus Danjuma who was apparently the chief of army staff made the coup unsuccessful.

General Obasanjo was the Chief of Staff, supreme head quarters under Murtala's government, a position which was effectively number two in both the government and the armed forces. As a military head of state, he pursued vigorous policies that were aimed at terminating all forms of colonialism in Africa. [6] holds that the Nigerian military regime under Obasanjo's leadership enjoyed tremendous domestic political support for its anti apartheid policies. By this, he took the most dramatic step of nationalizing the assets of British Petroleum Company in Nigeria. Announced on July 31, 1979, the eve of the Commonwealth summit scheduled for Lusaka, Zambia, the action arm twisted the British government of Margaret Thatcher from recognizing the dubious internal political settlement that excluded the main guerilla factions that had engaged in the liberation war since the 1960s. The import of the nationalization inhered in the fact that BP was at the time the largest British investment in Nigeria and possibly the whole of Africa.

Also his anti-apartheid stance and quest for eradication of all forms of colonialism galvanized him to nationalizing British owned Barclays bank, Standard bank and discriminated against British firms in the award of government contracts. This was a perceived measure to put the British government on notice that Nigeria was ever ready to apply economic sanction in the course of Africa's liberation. Coming on the heels of liberal democracy, Obasanjo promised a return of civilian democratic rule, a project that became real on October 1, 1979, as he saw a successful election that brought President Shehu Shagari as the first executive president of Nigeria.

Civilian Democracy and Obasanjo's Presidency: With the demise of the first republic that paved way for much vaunted military regimes in Nigeria, Nigeria transited to civilian administration following the 1999 elections. Before the election, there were political repressions to which Obasanjo was allegedly culpable and imprisoned for speaking out against human right abuses of military dictatorship of Sani Abacha (1993 – 1998). He was released only after Abacha's sudden death on 8 June, 1998 and while in prison, he became a born again christian. Being nominated on the platform of Peoples Democratic Party as the sole presidential candidate, Obasanjo won the 1999 election with 62.6% of the vote, sweeping the strongly Christian southeast and the predominantly Muslim north, but decisively lost his home region, the southwest to his fellow Yoruba and Christian Olu Falae the only other candidate.

In a consummated effort to consolidate Nigeria's nascent democracy, Obasanjo spent most of his time abroad soliciting for western support in strengthening Nigeria's democracy.

Politically, Obasanjo pursued programmes and policies that lauded him international praises for Nigeria's role in crucial regional peace keeping missions in Sierra Leone and Liberia. This amounted to the reason Britain and United State particular were glad to have an African ally who was openly critical of abuses committed in Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe at a time when many other African Nations (including South Africa) were taking a softer stance.

He sought for re-election in a tumultuous 2003 election that had violent ethnic and religious overtones and defeated his closest rival Army General Muhammadu Buhari who drew his support mainly from the north. In that violent election, Obasanjo defeated Buhari by more than 11 million votes.

However, in his national broadcast shortly after the electoral robbery, president Obasanjo declared;

It is my fervent wish that Nigerians would consider this experience as a necessary step in our journey as a people towards consolidating our democracy. After all, in another four years, there will be an opportunity for a fresh contest, which I hope will take care of ballot paper and ballot paper malpractices.

The result of the election was widely condemned and recognized as the worst election in Nigeria. Both the EU and AU recognized the fact that during the election, Obasanjo and his unconscionable members of PDP used the army, the police, other security agents and thugs to turn political elections in the country into a mini civil war against the innocent people of Nigeria in order to rig himself into power. This manifested on the high rate of corruption, insecurity, kidnapping and bribery that nearly crumbled the country.

The Dynamism of Obasanjo's Military and Civilian Administration: With the transition to civilian democracy, May 29, 1999 was earmarked as a relief day from military dictatorship of civilian population in Nigeria. Marked as a democracy day, it was not quite long that this political excitement dovetailed into another military dictatorship.

By this, the felony of the then leadership of the country under civilian democratic rule between 1999 to 2007 amounted to military brutality. During this period, there was fact of military invasion of Odi as ordered by President Olusegun Obasanjo in which 2,500 civilian citizens were killed. As noted by [7]:

The facts are that five police men and four soldiers were killed by a group of Niger Delta militants when they tried to enter the town of Odi in Bayelsa state in order to effect their arrest²⁶.

This happened in 1999, after the brutal killing of these security personnel, Obasanjo asked the then governor of Bayelsa state, Alamieyeseigha to identify, locate, apprehend and hand over the perpetrators of that crime. With Alamieyeseigha's inability to do as directed by Mr. President, Obasanjo as the commander-in-chief of the Nigerian armed forces took the position that security personnel could not be killed with impunity under his watch without a strong and appropriate response from the federal government. Thus he sent the military in, to uproot

and kill the terrorists and to destroy their operational base which was Odi town.

More so, there was similar killing of civilian population in Zaki-Biam in Benue state in the North central zone in Nigeria in 2001 as response to the killing of 19 soldiers by some terrorists. These horrendous situations are records of military dictatorship.

Aside this, Obasanjo attempted to amend the constitution to suit his third term bid. When he saw that that was not possible he denied any involvement with that agenda. On June 12, 2006, he unilaterally signed the Green tree Agreement with the president of Cameroon, Paul Biya bringing finally the cession of Bakassi to Cameroon.

CONCLUSION

The history of civilian – military governments have demonstrated that there is a strong tie between civilian – military organizations in Nigeria. Throughout the 39 years of military rule in Nigeria, the army has proven to be the instrument to which political instability, corruption, bribery and violence can be stopped. Therefore joint co-operation between civilian and the military beginning from the independence struggle in which civilians used the military as an instrument for political agitation exposed the military into politics. Therefore, whenever the military took over power, they always blamed it on the weaknesses of the civilians to keep intact the unity of the country. Against this background, several military regimes have at one time used the civilians to implement their policies and programmes of their regimes while at other times become susceptible to political manipulations. An example of this could be seen from 1966 – 1979 military regimes.

This fact explains the dynamism existing between the civilian – military relations in Nigerian politics hence the case of Olusegun Obasanjo in Nigeria. Aside this military regime is often characterized with brutality, brutality in speeches, attitudes, behaviours and operation. Hence Obasanjo civilian administration is a replica of military dictatorship. This was found in his collapse of the constitution, judiciary inaction, high rate of human right violation, ethnic extinction etc.

Today the league of retired military association as was seen during the presidential campaign of President Muhammadu Buhari has revealed that unless, there is a constitutional amendment to restrict retired military officers from joining politics, the military cannot be completely separated from politics in Nigeria.

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