

## ASSESSING THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE MILITARY REGIMES TO POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN POST INDEPENDENT NIGERIA, 1966-1999

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### ABSTRACT

The military is a vital institution in the modern State system as the major factor that determines the capability and capacity of the State's national power to make policies within the domestic and the international circles for the overall nation building and political development of States. The Nigeria military as a product of colonialism became a veritable institution imbued with the constitutional mandate to protect the territorial integrity of the country and as well maintain robust civil-military relations necessary for nation building in the post independent Nigeria. This expectation was greeted with much char grin and fiasco, when ethnicity which was implanted by the colonial imperialism as a Pandora box imploded the First Republic in the post independent Nigeria. When the political impasse and imbroglio became nauseating and ad nauseam attesting to the inability of the civil authority to address the nation building challenges confronting Nigeria in the incipient stage of her political independence; it became imperative and behoves on the prestigious military institution to rise to these nation building challenges forthwith. It was on the basis of this background and ambience that the military revolution of 15<sup>th</sup> January 1966 was staged to save the nation from drifting into political doldrums and abyss. This scenario offered the military the opportunity to impact and contribute to nation building and political development in Nigeria. The paper examines and analyses how far the military has contributed in addressing nation building challenges that have impacted in the overall political development of Nigeria. The paper also looks at how the military institution has assisted the civil authority in addressing nation building challenges in the Fourth Republic.

**KEYWORDS:** Constitution, Ethnic, Independence, Military, Militia, Nigeria

### INTRODUCTION

Nigeria came to political independence with myriad of nationhood challenges and thorny political problems that threatened its foundation and corporate existence. It will be recalled that Nigeria prior to 1914 amalgamation had over four hundred ethnic groups or tribes (Kirk-Greene 1960). Most of these have their own distinct languages, religions, traditions, and institutions. These were indeed in the Nigerian context where there were really different nationalities, which united and established a political union in the form of federation, as a result of historical circumstances (Nwankwo & Ifejika, 1969). With this kind of background the nationalists got the political independence for Nigeria. This political backdrop created misgivings, mistrust and pitted the major ethnic groups against themselves. There was no national cohesion among the doyen of Nigerian nationalists who took over from the departing colonial overlords became disillusioned about

governance and nation building. This also stemmed from the fact that the early nationalists expressed lack of faith about the unity of Nigeria. This is made manifest in the assertion below: since the amalgamation of the southern and northern provinces in 1914, Nigeria has existed as one country only on paper. It is still far from united (Nwankwo & Ifejika, 1969). This tribal sentiment expressed the view of many nationalists about Nigeria, giving credence that Nigeria is disparate home of many nationalities.

At political independence in 1960, the political elite who constituted the phantom bourgeoisie inherited a nation from a poor foundation difficult for nation building to take place. The general election that brought the First Republic leaders was not entirely credible, free from ethnic bias, jaundice and sentiment. Formations of political parties were done on ethnic bases without paying particular attention to the need of the fragile nation like Nigeria at that material time. The Northern People's Congress (NPC) was Hausa – Fulani dominated, the Action Group (AG) was a Yoruba dominated party, and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) was Igbo dominated. This background of ethnic politics made good governance and nation building very problematic, and Nigeria stagnated and plummeted from one political crisis to other within the six years of the nation's political independence. Nigeria's independent government at the Federal and the State levels experienced a short "honeymoon". Within two years, conflicts had torn apart the ruling coalition in the Western Region. The next year suspicion about the national census destroyed the little trust there was among the regions. Finally, in 1965 law and order broke down in the Western Region over election-related fraud and violence, and the military ended the First Republic in a January 1966 coup (Mundt et al, 2010).

The military intervention in politics in 1966 was necessitated by these crisis and inability of the civil authority to tackle the problems of nation building. The military staged in and took the bull by the horn to address the nation building challenges facing Nigeria, owing to its capacity and professional inclination. The military is an organised institution as a body of armed men and women practising the legitimate profession of arms under the authority of civilian leaders and the control of duly appointed commanders (Hutchful & Bathily, 1998). Given its antecedents in the western European nations, the modern Nigeria (sic) military is supposed to be a highly professional organ of the state, disciplined and organised enough to be entrusted with the monopoly and legitimate use of force. As an institution of the state, it is characterised and distinguished by a command structure, rigid hierarchy of authority, specialised training and skills in the use of the sophisticated means of coercion and a high degree of esprit de corp. It is supposed to carry out constitutionally responsibilities, which usually include defending the territorial integrity of a nation against external aggression and assisting the police in the maintenance of internal security, such as insurrection (Jega, 2007). In the descriptive analysis above, the military is aptly and graphically qualified to take up governance challenges, where there is lacuna in the service of civil authority as it was the case in 1966, when the military ousted the corrupt, inefficient and failed government of the First Republic.

The Nigerian military rose to these challenges of nation building, tactically determined to bring about political change and development in emergent polity. At the time of military intervention in 1966, Nigeria was already manifesting certain indexes of failed States such as: lack of the authority to make collective decision or capacity to deliver public services, political and economic stagnation, civil disobedience, uneven development and inequality, armed conflict, electoral instability, agitation for autonomy and slow and steady deterioration of institution and criminalisation (Ifesinachi, 2011). There were the questions of Nigerian federalism, nature and character of the constitution operable and applicable to the Nigerian situation, national question and all above the core issue of citizenship. The patriotic Nigerian military

attempted and made frantic efforts while in governance to address the above nation building challenges and putting the country on the path of political development akin to that of the advanced democracies among the comity of nations. The discourse takes on the polemic that the military institution has made diametric and meaningful contributions to nation building and political development, while the civilian governments continue to build on their legacies after military rule in the post independent Nigeria.

### **THE MILITARY AND ITS CONTRIBUTIONS TO NATION BUILDING: UNDERSTANDING THE DEPTH OF MILITARY IMPACT IN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT**

The broad contributions of nation building shall be considered holistically with due emphasis to facts and empiricism, so that one will be able to appreciate in concrete terms the performances of the revered institutions of military in Nigeria from 1966 to the dawn of the Fourth Republic.

### **FEDERALISM AND STATE CREATION**

The origin of Nigerian federalism was an old idea stemming from the recommendation of 1898 Niger Committee headed by Lord Selbourne, which among other things recommended amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorates (Tamuno, 1998). This was implemented by the colonial masters in 1914 amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorates. The 1946, 1951 and 1954 constitutions all toyed and tinkered further the idea of federalism before the political independence in 1960. In spite of the paraphernalia of federalism and parliamentary democracy, Nigeria was neither a nation nor a democracy by the time of the military takeover of January 15, 1966 (Nwankwo & Ifejika, 1969). The task of welding divergent views and ethnic groups to forge a nation became an uphill job before the military government following the coup d'état. While the military held sway, the counter-coup of July 1966, the pogrom committed against the Easterners and subsequent declaration of the Republic of Biafra informed the action of the military to create States in 1967. In response to the need of the hour, the military created twelve States, giving a measure of political restructuring to the polity, all in efforts to check the secessionist bid of the eastern part of the country. The creation of twelve States in Nigeria by Gowon gave a pattern of equality between the Northern and the Southern parts of the country (Ikejiani, 2000). The nation building efforts of the military continued unabated as agitation for the creation of State continued to characterise the polity.

The creation of States proliferated under the regime of Muritala Mohammed. Brigadier Muritala Mohammed overthrew General Gowon in July 27, 1975. He appointed a committee headed by Mr. Justice Ayo Irikefe to examine the matter of creation of more States in December 1, 1975. The committee presented its report on December 23, 1975. On February 3 1976 just two weeks before he was assassinated, Muritala Mohammed announced in a radio broadcast that seven new States had been created bringing the number of States to nineteen (Ikejiani, 2000). The structure and vastness of the entire federation makes it difficult for the people to feel the impact of governance especially the minorities that stand perpetually peripheralised in the polity. The military saw anomaly and imbalance in the federal structure of Nigeria and embarked on the spree of State creation to address and meet the aspiration of the people.

Subsequent military regime of Ibrahim Babangida created additional two States in 1989 and in 1990 brought the number of States to thirty, while the regime of General Sani Abacha created additional six States in 1996 making the number of States in Nigeria thirty-six, and 774 local government areas in Nigeria. State creation has paved way for political participation and development over time. Today so many hands are in governance attesting to military

liberalisation of the political landscape. It will be recalled that the military ingenuity in governance brought the reforms of local government system in 1979 thereby bringing democracy down to the grassroots. From 1979, the populace began to participate in grassroots political decision courtesy of local council representative assembly, which proved an effective medium for training future political actors.

### **CONSTITUTIONAL MAKING BY THE MILITARY IN GOVERNANCE**

The 1922, 1946, 1951, 1954 and the 1960 Independence constitutions had not addressed the constitutional needs of Nigerians. Constitutional crisis was the major nation building challenges inherited by the military in governance as the country drifted and slid towards disintegration. Given the political disturbances and imbroglio orchestrated by the counter coup in July 1966, the massacre of Igbo military and civilian population especially in the northern parts of the country impelled the military government under General Yakubu Gowon to organise Ad hoc Constitutional Conference in 1966 to fashion out way to accommodate the interest of the discordant views bothering on human rights violations particularly of the Easterners. The circumstances surrounding the organisation of the Ad hoc Conference drastically impeded its success. In fact, the Ad hoc Constitutional Conference was moving towards confederation or loose form of association. In the broadcast of November 30, Gowon immediately seized the opportunity to state his disapproval of having a confederal system of government (Nwankwo & Ifejika, 1969). This action on the part of Federal Military Government (FMG) forestalled and stalemated the Ad hoc Conference aimed at fashioning out ways to save the country from imminent doom. However, the country went to war against Eastern part known as the Republic of Biafra under leadership of Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu between 1967-1970; a situation that caused untold hardship to the Igbo.

As Gowon's government could not deliver on giving the country a befitting constitution; the government was overthrown in 1975, Muritala Mohammed quickly released transition time – table to return the country to democracy by 1979. The road to constitution making and restoring democracy in the country has not been easy. The military was never deterred in her journey to nation and State building for the country. The regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo that took the reins of government consequent upon the assassination of Muritala Mohammed inaugurated the Constituent Assembly in 1978 to consider a draft constitution that will pave way for a return of democratic order in 1979. The attendant political impasse blamed on the inefficiency of parliamentary constitution inherited from the erstwhile colonial masters. The parliamentary system as practised in the 1<sup>st</sup> Republic was not suitable and adaptable to the political culture of the new Nigeria and its rudiments were never mastered by the practitioners early enough to avert pitfalls. In its verve and the spirit of nation building, the military succeeded in giving the country a presidential constitution that ushered in a democratically elected Executive President under the leadership of Alhaji Shehu Shagari. In attempt to douse ethnic agitation and tension from various ethnic groups, the 1979 constitution embodied the federal character principle aimed at ensuring that no ethnic group lays preponderant and dominant control of certain political positions in the polity. The subsequent intermittent military intervention between 1983 and 1999 all worked and modified the 1979 presidential constitution. The 1989 constitution, and 1994 conference under General Sani Abacha, which later transformed into the 1999 constitution was supervised and superintended by General Abdulsalami Abubakar, took the trajectory of 1979 constitution. A cursory look at the political history and development in Nigeria, the roles of the military is super ordinate and enormous attesting to significant impact the military made while in governance. The civilian rule particularly in the Fourth Republic is to prove her mettle and surpass the military in nation building. The National Assembly of the Fourth Republic has not given the

nation the phenomenal amended version of the 1999 constitution; the problem of corruption, clamour for the exalted office of the President, poor infrastructure, insecurity, disease, poverty and unemployment remain the critical nation building challenges currently bedevilling the polity.

The creation of geopolitical zones is the direct product of military rule under the aegis of Abacha's government as a way of accommodating divergent views and opinions in governance. This is akin to a model consociational democracy advocated by Arend Lijphart. A consociational democracy he contends, embodies the following four aspects, which could address the agitation of divergent groups in plural societies like Nigeria. The fundamental attributes include: (i) government by a grand coalition of the political leaders of all significant segments of the society (ii) the mutual veto or concurrent majority rule which serves as additional protection, especially for vital minority interest (iii) proportionality as the principal standard of political representation, civil service appointments, and allocation of resources and (iv) a degree of autonomy for each segment to run its own affairs (Lijphart, 1977). In a plural society such as Nigeria, an application of diverse measures of consociational model could address the major fundamental national questions bothering on political stability and national cohesion. Thus, the consociational model which explicitly defines specific modalities for power sharing has some relevance in resolving the national question problematic in Nigeria (Dauda, 1998). The attempt by the military in governance to adopt the federal character principle and establishment of Federal Character Commission embodies effective mechanism to solving the national question tailored towards accommodating the interest of the minorities. Other variants of federal character include the zoning arrangement, and the quota system. If strictly applied as propounded by the military proponents will go a long way in addressing the teething national question in Nigeria.

As the military institution exited the political landscape in 1999 paving way for the Fourth Republic to flourish, it became imperative and incumbent on the civil authority to apply all these democratic and governance instruments enunciated by the military. The National Assembly should by matter of necessity amend the 1999 constitution to incorporate the zoning formula for top political offices especially the plum office of the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The zoning arrangement should not be political party affairs because the parties will never ensure full application on representative basis without patronage, cronyism, patron client practice, tribalism, nepotism and prebendalism.

However, the recrudescence of ethnic militias such as Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), Odua People's Congress (OPC), Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Bakassi Self Determination Front (BSDF) testify that Nigeria is still sitting on the Pandora box awaiting implosion, if the appropriate instruments and mechanisms are not strictly applied as stipulated in this paper. Call them the Egbesu Boys, Ogoni Youth Assembly, MASSOB, MOSOP, BAKASSI or whatever name, they represent discordant voices fighting for solution to poverty, disease, insecurity, hunger, and starvation, variously plaguing them (Mbagwu, 2004). Also the emergence of Boko Haram unleashing terror, carnage, mayhem, wanton killing and destruction attested to the fact that the Fourth Republic is sick and wobbling and need urgent surgery. The panacea to all these problems is to ensure equitable power sharing and fair allocation of economic and political resources.

## **THE MILITARY AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION: THE FOURTH REPUBLIC EXPERIENCE**

The military institution has played several roles in keeping the country united in spite of many political and nation

building challenges since our political independence in 1960. The military made the supreme sacrifice between 1967-1970 by going to war against the former Republic of Biafra that attempted secession from the federation and succeeded in whipping the recalcitrant East back to the federation. The sacrifice to keep Nigeria united during the civil war was a great feat by the military; this is because the corporate existence of the country was threatened and hurried to the brink of abyss. The post civil war Nigeria had witnessed multiple political crises and civil unrest capable of undoing the nation; if not the military ingenuity and statecraft in managing the country giving credence to the military as an advanced power fungibility in Nigeria.

In the Fourth Republic, the emergence of ethnic militias in the oil rich Niger Delta constituted security challenges to national security in Nigeria. The Niger Delta crises became pronounced under the watch of the Fourth Republic leaders thereby affecting oil production and output for sale in the international market. The Nigerian economy was declining drastically, given the attack on oil facilities by militia groups in the Niger Delta areas. The violence in the area grew to the point that the internal security outfits could not handle the matter, so it became imperative to invite the most credible institution, the military to take up the security of oil installations and facilities in the Niger Delta States. The Joint Task Force was undertaken by the military in order to maintain internal security and national integration. The arms acquisition and use of violence by the militants challenged all the State apparatuses threatening the country's economy and possibly overrun the State and amounting to anarchy and revolution. The security situation in the Niger Delta aggravated under President Yar'Adua forcing the government to evolve urgent policy to tackle it as a national security challenge. Resolving the Niger Delta problem was a cardinal part of President Yar'Adua Seven Point Agenda (Adeninyi, 2011). The military staged in as Joint Task Force to implement the Federal Government policy of amnesty and demobilisation of the highly sophisticated and weaponized militant groups in the area. The military has proved its efficiency in this respect by saving the country from possible disintegration as a result of militant activities. The roles the military has played in the maintenance of internal security has salvaged the country from total collapse and disintegration in spite of the enormous security challenges bedevilling the polity since 1999 to the present day Nigeria.

## CONCLUSIONS

The military institution remains an individual writ large in the maintenance of external and internal security in the post independent Nigeria. The abysmal failure of the First Republic necessitated military debut and incursion into governance in 1966. Despite the attendant harmatia and weakness of military rule; its merits and contributions remain crucial and preponderant in the political development of Nigeria. The military has saved Nigeria from disintegrating during the fratricidal war between Nigeria and the former Republic of Biafra 1967-1970. The intermittent military rule between 1970 and 1999 has brought significant constitutional and political reforms such as: the 1979 Presidential constitution operable today, local government reforms, creations of States and local government areas. Civil service reforms were also principal and fundamental reforms introduced by the military.

Ethnic and minority agitations were attended to by introducing federal character principle and Federal Character Commission to ensure that majority of the people are accommodated in political positions and in the Federal Civil Service. The military has put in check the activities of terror groups and militants in the present Nigeria.

Therefore, the civil authority should strengthen the military institution in order to enhance the capacity and capability of the military to provide internal and external security. This will also make the military more proactive in case of emergency. Sister security organisations should as well be equipped to meet future security challenges.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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