

The Impact of Military Rule on Nigeria's Nation Building, 1966-1979

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Abstract

For a significant part of its post independence existence, Nigeria was under military rule. The military rule that firstly brought new hopes however did little to salvage the precarious situations that collapsed the first republic. It has to be stated that the army was already contaminated by one of the viruses that brought down the civilian government--regionalism. Therefore it could be said that the 'doctor' himself was ill, and who could cure him but himself. Consequently, there was a 'self surgery' which resulted in the thirty month civil war. This paper assesses the first phase of military rule in Nigeria (1966-1979) in relation to the country's nation building. The paper examines problems and prospects of nation building during this phase of military rule. The paper however concludes that the military rule, 1966-79 contributed both positively and negatively to the building a viable and united Nigerian nationhood

Introduction

The military rule in Nigeria began with the collapse of the first republic on January, 1966 just less than six years of her independence. The independence of Nigeria was considered to be the birth of Africa's greatest country. Given the endowment and potentials of the country in terms of human and material resources, there were high hopes and expectations that Nigeria would make steady progress in direction to building a strong nationhood. It could therefore be said that it was the inability of the political class to manage the controversial situations handed over to them by the colonial masters that provided opportunity for the military to intervene.

Although the coming of military was firstly applauded given the deteriorating situation in the country during the first republic, the role of military in Nigeria's nation building remains questionable. It has to be stated that since independence till 1979, the period that this work covers, the military ruled for more than 70%. By the time the country returned to democracy in 1979, one would expect nothing but high level of socio-economic and political development, given the potentials of Nigeria in both human and natural resources. It is against these that this paper examines the impact of military rule in Nigeria's nation building in the period between 1966 and 1979.

Background to Military Rule

The attainment of independence was a landmark not only in the history of Nigeria's Nation-building but the country's history as a whole. It is quite imperative to state that the independence of Nigeria did not come on a platter of gold; it was through the relentless efforts of nationalist leaders such as Ahmadu Bello, Awolowo Obafemi, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Tafawa Balewa, S.L. Akintola and host of others. Oyedele has stated that in the decade of decolonization, these pioneers of Nigeria's politics understood that there were major differences in their political values and traditions among the various segments of colonial Nigeria (Oyedele Samuel, 2004). It has to be said that despite the differences in ideology and approach, these nationalist leaders shifted ground and worked towards the independence of the country. This assisted the country's nation building in no small measure.

It is however important to note that independence of Nigeria was surrounded by many controversies and many unresolved issues bequeathed to the country to the country by the departing colonialists. These issues according to Sa'ad Abubakar included unbalanced federation with a weak socio-political structure, minority question; ethnic politics, regionalism etc (Sa'ad Abubakar, 2008). These had however resulted in nepotism, tribalism, sectionalism, and greed among other things that had pervaded Nigeria in the first Republic. These contradictions in turn have affected virtually all aspects of the country's life even up till date. While these started before the Nigeria's independence it became more pronounced in the years immediately after country's independence, which ultimately collapsed first Republic in just less than six years of independence.

Oyeleye Oyediran has pinpointed the signposts to the collapse of the first Republic. These according to him included; Action Group Crisis and Treason trial; Census Controversy; 1964/5 Federal Election, 1965 Western Election among other things(Oyediran Oyedele, 1981). With all these, it became apparently glaring that the Nigerian elite could not manage the crisis and contradictions bequeathed by the departing colonialists (Omotola J.S, 2008). The situations in the first republic forced some military officers who considered a coup d'etat the only way to bring the country's military and political situation to normalcy to seize power. However, why would the military have to strike without the knowledge of its top officers? The answer, as Oyeleye opines, can be found in the structural dilemmas of the Nigerian army by 1966 (See Oyeleye 1998, for details on Structural dilemma of the Nigerian army).

The 1966 Coups and the Beginning of Military Rule, 1966-67

The first republic came to an end on 15th January, 1966 through a military coup. The coup has been tagged Ibo-inspired coup given the composition of the planners of and the pattern of execution of the coup. According to Muhammadu and Haruna 'these (officers) were majors Nzeogwu, Onwuategun, Ifeajuma, Okafor, Chukukwa, together with captain Nwobisi and major Ademoyega (Muhammadu T and Haruna M, 1981). The detail or course of the coup has been widely discussed in various books. Our concern here however is the outcome of the coup in relation to Nigeria's nation building. The coup as stated by Crowder resulted in the assassination of Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (Prime Minister), Chief Okotie Eboh (Federal Minister for Finance), and Sir Ahmadu Bello and Chief S.L. Akintola (Premiers of North and West respectively) as well as majority of officers above the rank of majors (Michael Crowder, 1980). The senior officers that lost their lives in the exercise according as observed by Madiebo were Brigadiers Maimalari and Ademulegun and Colonels Largema, Pam, Unegbe, Shodeinde (Madiebo A.A, 1980). It has also been claimed by some writers including Muhammadu and Haruna that most of the senior military officers killed were of Northern extraction.

It is relevant to state here that while the coup was successfully executed in the North as Nzeogwu gained full control in the region, the coup only attained little success in Lagos. It could be said that the inability of the remaining Ministers to agree on who would act (take-over) in the absence of Prime Minister compelled the acting president, Nwafor Orizon, to hand over power to the military headed at that time by General Ironsi. For some times, Ironsi and Nzeogwu were governing separately Southern and Northern Nigeria respectively. In fact, Nzeogwu had already arranged attacks on the south to crush Ironsi regime before he was persuaded by Alexander Madiebo to settle with Lagos on the conditions that nothing would be done to those who participated in the coup, and that the aims of the coup would be upheld (Ibid).

It is to be noted that the coup plotters claimed they wanted a better and united Nigeria which offered equal opportunity to its citizen without geographical or tribal consideration. However, the pattern of execution and composition of the coup convincingly betrayed the alleged aims of the coup. As Muhammadu and Haruna stated, 'even though the coup had been planned with the best of intentions, its outcome looked patently to be other ethnic groups particularly in the North like an Ibo conspiracy (Muhammadu T & Haruna M, 1981). For instance, all the key planners of the coup except one were Igbos. Again, while most of the people that were killed during the coup were of Northern extraction, none of the Igbo leaders was touched by the killing. In fact, Nnamdi Azikwe had to travel to London, at this strategic period, under disguise that he was not well and needed medical attention/care (Adebola A.S, 2009). This was highly suspicious and questionable.

This perception was however validated by the Ironsi policies. For instance, Ironsi refused to bring the leaders of the coup to trial; he changed from federalism to Unitarianism etc. It has to be remembered that one of the conditions on which Nzeogwu settled with Ironsi was that nothing would be done to those that participated in the coup. Nevertheless, the consequence of Ironsi's policies was to increase the fear of the Northerners of the plot by the Ibos to dominate them (and the entire country). This is because the new unitary constitution with its provision of unitary Civil Service could be said to be seen as giving the Igbo special advantage. Since they had a huge number of educated elite, when compared with the North, Northerners could not compete on equal basis for post in the Civil Service and thus would cease to be masters in their own home. Hence Ironsi regime that firstly enjoyed the goodwill suddenly turned to be suspicious by the Northerners. It was reported that the first sign of trouble for Ironsi regime started from Ahmadu Bello University where it was alleged that a group of expatriate and Nigerian lecturers were instigating Northern students against the Southerners (Michael Crowder, 1980). This went along way in preparing the minds not only of Northern students but also of political and military leaders including the Governor, Hassan Katsina. Consequently, there was a counter-coup in July 1966 which consumed Gen. Ironsi together with his host, Fajuyi the Governor of Western region.

It could therefore be clearly seen that what the military accused civilians for, that is regionalism, had now become a feature of the military too. For instance, it could be suggested that the young officers that planned and executed January 15th 1966 coup wanted to install Igbo domination, while those that planned and executed the July counter coup on the other hand were dissatisfied with the Ibo leadership and therefore wanted their own people to be in control. This resulted in the regional politics within the army. This was not good for building a young nation like Nigeria. The effect of these coup and counter-coup was very disastrous as it resulted in the thirty month civil war. Therefore, many scholars have referred to the period between 1966 and 1970 as the highest point of threats to the Nigeria's nation building

Nigeria's Civil War, 1967-70 and the Challenge of Nation-Building

The counter-coup of July 1966 resulted in the death of the Head of state, Gen. Aguiy, Ironsi, and his host, the Governor of the west – Colonel Fajuyi as well as various senior and junior officers of Southern origin especially the Igbo (Muhammadu T & Haruna M, 1981). It has been claimed that this counter coup was undoubtedly aimed at getting even with the Ibos for the January coup. It is important to state however that like with most attempts 'to settle an eye for an eye', the decision to counter Ibo domination evidently went too far as it degenerated into

mass killings of Ibos in July and September, 1966 (Ibid). It is also significant to understand that with the death of Ironsi during the coup, colonel Yakubu, who was apparently not the most senior military officer, was brought to power. This was however as a result of inability of the most senior officer, Brigadier Ogundipe, to assert his authority over the troop. This was later going to cause leadership crisis as Ojukwu the Governor of Eastern region, and who considered himself to be superior, would never recognize Gowon's position as the Head of State.

As a matter of fact, some have concluded that without the leadership crisis between Gowon and Ojukwu, it was still possible to save the country from the woes of the civil war, notwithstanding the massive July killings of Ibos (Ibid). However, despite his reservations about Gowon's position, Ojukwu did agree at first to treat with the new regime (Michael Crowder, 1980). In fact, in September it was in a conference where the leaders of thought were designing constitutional arrangement for the future of Nigeria that came the news of new massacre of the Ibos in the North, this time organized by both civilians and soldiers (Ibid). While the Ibos (and other Southerners) had started streaming south following the killings of Ibos in North in May and July, the exodus of Ibos from North became more evident after the "September Massive killing".

It was indeed this September massacre that made the Igbo including Ojukwu understand that nowhere in Nigeria was safe for them but their region. Gowon was then seen as a symbol of 'Northern domination' which was in turn considered a threat to survival of Ibos. Therefore Ojukwu refused to attend any meeting in Lagos as it was considered not safe for him. It was however in Aburi that Ojukwu agreed that a conference be held to discuss a constitutional formula that would hold Nigeria together. This however tells us how charged the atmosphere was in Nigeria that a meeting could not be held in but outside. The topic at the Aburi meeting was that whether Nigeria should be a federation or confederation. In fact at Aburi, it seemed as if accord had been reached.

However, when Gowon and Ojukwu got back to Lagos and Enugu respectively, both began to give 'entirely contradictory interpretations of the accord'. Muhammedu and Haruna have talked on the contradiction: for Gowon, Aburi in essence still meant a federation albeit a weak one. For Ojukwu, however, Aburi meant a confederation similar to that of East African community in which the Ibos would be virtually free to run their own lives and thus feel secure (Muhammadu T & Haruna M, 1981).

In May, 1967 some groups including the National Reconciliation Committee (which had Awolowo as one of its members) made several attempts to prevent crisis. It was however clear that Ojukwu was heading towards secession, as some of his actions including seizing 'federal money' had shown. In fact Ojukwu had declared in May that at the earliest predictable date that Eastern region would be free and independent of Nigeria with the name 'Republic of Biafra' (Ibid). The day after, 27 May 1967, Gowon addressed the nation that 'military regime had not been given any mandate to divide the country into sovereign states, and plunge them into bloody disaster. He therefore announced the division of the country into twelve states, after he had declared state of emergency throughout Nigeria. This creation of more states went well with minority groups in both the North and South as they had been yearning for creation of their own states to avoid their being dominated by the major ethnic groups.

In response to this, Ojukwu declared on the next day (28 May, 1967) the former Eastern region 'Independent State of Biafra'. It has to be said that the federal government took no immediate action to repress Ojukwu rebellion. Even when it did, it declared 'Police Action' to crush the rebellion. And to agree with the decision to use 'Police Action, Ogoja and Nsuka were captured on 11th and 15th July respectively, and eleven days later on the 26th, the oil terminal at Bonny was occupied by federal forces (Michael Crowder, 1980). Occupation of Bonny by federal forces in a Joint Military Naval Operation made it possible for them to blockade secessionist ports. With these early military achievements of the federal government, the operation indeed could be said to be a 'Police Action'.

It was however unfortunate that what seemed initially a 'Police Action' suddenly turned full scale war when the secessionist/rebel forces on 9th August invaded (Ibid, Muhammadu T & Haruna M, 1981). In fact what was tagged 'Police Action' by federal government was to result in the thirty months civil war between the federal government led by Gowon and secessionist Eastern government led by Ojukwu. The course of the war was dynamic and complex. This thus explains the long period of the war. In fact, the thirty month civil war represents highest threat to the building of Nigeria as a polity.

Aftermath of Civil War and the Search for Nation-building in Nigeria, 1970-1975

It could be stated that the military government under Gowon did not really settle down until the end of the civil war in January 1970. In fact, any assessment of Gowon regime till this period could only be done majorly within the context of civil war. While could be understood that the federal government under Gowon believed it fought civil war in order to keep Nigeria as one. This could be said to be an effort towards Nigeria's nation building. What would have happened if the federal government did not stop the secessionist Biafra? The answer is very simple; that might be the end of Nigeria as a nation. Therefore, the military regime under Gowon should be acknowledged for keeping Nigeria one. Although the federal government won the war, Gowon declared 'no

victor no vanquished' at the end of the war. This was apparently to pacify the Igbo.

For the building of nation to happen, there was the need for restoration of peace, order and stability. (Kagame, 2010) As Kagame has noted, 'for the country coming out of a conflict, the first priority should be one of stabilization and security, which requires strong internal political leadership, systems and institutions. (Ibid) This first nation building policy of Gowon was the three R's theory of Reconciliation, Reconstruction, and Rehabilitation. At the end of the war, a general amnesty was offered to those who had fought against the Nigerian army. (Michael, 1970) It was said that the re-integration of the secessionist areas took place more easily than expected by outside observers. (Ibid) The bridges, markets, cement factories and other properties that were destroyed during the civil war received quick 'reconstruction' attention of the federal government. (Otoghagua, 2007)

In furtherance the project of national integration and by extension nation building, the National Youth Corp Service was established in 1973. As earlier stated, national service was one of the nation building mechanisms Sanghamitra B and Elliott Green disclosed that many African countries in the post-independent years adopted. The establishment of NYSC was a landmark in the history of Nigeria's nation building, given its objectives. (Ibid) NYSC scheme requires all university graduates to participate in a year compulsory service to the nation in communities other than theirs. The most important objective of the establishment of NYSC was to make 'Nigerian Youth develop common ties among themselves and therefore promote national unity'. There have been cases of inter ethnic marriage among Nigerian youth of diverse background. This was a good effort towards building a united nationhood.

In 1973, the Naira and Kobo were introduced.(CRN India) The introduction of naira and kobo was also another milestone in the country's nation building project. The pound which the country's was hitherto using was a colonial legacy. Sanghamitra B and Elliott Green have quoted Helleiner to have argued that national currency can attribute to nation building in a variety of ways, both through imagery present on notes and coins and through the stable management of a currency that can help to provide for a stable government.(Sanghmitra et al,) While majority of Franco-phone African countries retained the CFA franc after independence, majority of Anglophone African countries like Ghana Zambia , Malawi, Sierra Leone and Angola replaced pound with national currencies that reflect the indigenous names. (Ibid)

Since nation building entails building virile and viable polity, Military government under Gowon also launched nine-point agenda. This agenda/programme according to Arnold was to include:

the reorganization of the armed forces; the implementation of the second National Development Plan; the eradication of corruption.., the creation of more states; the preparation and adoption of a new constitution; the new national census; the organization of genuinely national political parties; and organization of elections... at both state and federal levels. (Arnold Guy, 1977)

While in the foreign affairs, Gowon was very active in the post-war periods. Nigeria under Gowon played leading role in asserting independence of Africa against European, especially French, influence in West Africa; in establishing the ECOWAS of which Nigeria was the "grand financier" (Otoghagua E, 2011). All this was to give Nigeria a new and progressive international image following the trauma of the civil war. All these could rightly be said to be efforts geared towards nation-building project.

It is significant to state that the post war years saw the emergence of Nigeria as major producer of oil. (Michael Crowder, 1980) It could therefore be stated that the country was greatly helped by the new-found wealth that came from oil. With this, Gowon was able to pursue aggressive economic programmes. It is however unfortunate that since the oil boom in the country in the 70s, the wealth from oil boom has not made significant impact in the lives of Nigerians. The money from oil was perhaps so enormous that Gowon was recorded to have said that 'money is not the problem of Nigeria but how to spend it.' Despite this disappointment, oil boom could be said to have contributed immensely to the reconstruction and rehabilitation programme of the post civil war era.

Despite the prospect of Nigeria's nation building after the civil war, there were some challenges. The first challenge was the over stay of the military rule. It was in 1974 that Gowon stated that his promise to return the country to civilian rule in 1976 was unrealistic and it would amount to a betrayal of trust to adhere rigidly to that target date. Arnold Guy, 1977³⁹ It is important to state that 'military in politics is an aberration.' Therefore, military government should be a corrective regime and therefore transitional. (Nwankwo, 1979)It becomes a threat when it refuses to be transitional. This danger became apparent when Gown reneged on his promise to return the country to civilian rule in 1976.

Another case in point was Gowon's indecision and inaction over the cases of his Governors and his Commissioner for communication, Joseph Tarka. The first noticeable abuse of office by Governors was in River State where a journalist, Mr. Amachree, was arrested, bodily assaulted and unlawfully detained and as well had his head shaved off with broken bottle, apparently on the order of Governor who was said not to be amused by a news item the journalist sent to his employer, *The Observer* (Nwankwo A.A, 1979). Mr. Amechree however

sued the Government through Lawyer Gani Fawehinmi (Ibid). Another case was that of Mr. Aper Aku who swore affidavits, accusing Governor of Plateu State, Gomwalk, of corruption and abuse of office (Ibid). Then come to the case of Mr. Joseph Tarka, Commissioner for Communication, who had come under several accusations including one that was supported with tapes and documents (Ibid).

It is however unfortunate that, appeals to the federal government were met with inactions. Not only that federal government under Gowon did not intervene, 'Gowon himself publicly exonerated Governor Gomwalk of all charges of corruption. It is however important to consider the influence of the State Governors who made up 70% in the Supreme Military Council. It is therefore understandable that it would be difficult to remove the Governors given their influence in the Supreme Military Council. However, the case of Joseph Tarka, an ordinary Commissioner who was not replaced, gave credence to the impression of Gowon's weakness.

Amidst this public disenchantment with General Gowon, his nine-point agenda was examined. It has been estimated that only 50% of this agenda had been accomplished as corruption got worse; creation of more states was ignored, as was the preparation of new constitution; while the organization of national parties and elections were set aside (Ibid, Arnold Guy, 1979).²⁵ It has to be stated too that the wealth that came from oil was mismanaged. Over dependence on oil revenues resulted in the neglect of agriculture as Nigeria's economy shifted to mono-cultural economy. This military regime should have used the oil-wealth to develop agriculture in order to serve as complement to oil economy. This failure was acknowledged by Gowon himself so much that he in a broadcast in 1974 he announced that 'it was impracticable for the military to handover government in 1976'.

It is at this point important to state that military in politics is an aberration. Therefore, military government should be a corrective regime and therefore transitional. This will definitely increase their credibility in nation building. It however becomes a threat when it refuses to be transitional. Therefore when Gowon failed to be committed to the handover date which he had earlier promised, the danger and threat of the military rule became apparent. It was amidst these that Gowon's regime was overthrown in a 'palace coup' on July 29th, 1975, exactly nine years after he came to power.

Murtala/Obasanjo Regime and the Prospect for Nation-building, 1975-79

The coup that overthrew Gowon regime resulted in the emergence of General Murtala as the Head of state with Obasanjo as the Chief of Army Staff. It could be suggested that this was the first coup to have been motivated by national consciousness in advancement of the country's nation building project. Therefore, the coup was highly welcome by the nation.

The new regime quickly settled for business. Heads of Armed services and the Governors in the twelve states were removed. Given the reasons previous regime was toppled, Murtala/Obasanjo regime set a target date, 1979, for the transition to civilian rule. Dedicated and committed to this, General Murtala Muhammed launched a five stage programme. According to Otoghagua, this five stage programme included:

...appointment of Constitution Drafting Committee to work on preliminary draft;
creation of new states; election into a constituent Assembly on Oct 1977,
Reunification of the Draft constitution by the constituent Assembly by Oct, 1978,
and lifting of the 1966 ban on politics and political parties, and conduct of states and
federal general elections before October 1979 (Otoghagua, E, 2011).

General Murtala Mohammed recommended executive presidential system of government as against the parliamentary system adopted in the first republic. The regime also created seven more states to make nineteen states. On the international arena, the regime was open in its condemnation of apartheid policy in South Africa. The regime also back the M.P.L.A. government of Angola as it helped to swing the majority of the O.A.U member-states behind it. No doubt, these were apparently good steps towards Nigeria's nation building. Given this manifest determination by the Murtala regime in undertaking reforms both at home and in foreign policy, it got unprecedented popularity especially among the intellectuals who were critical of the previous regime.

However, it was amidst its popularity and dynamism that the regime of Murtala Muhammed was brought to an end through an abortive coup. Unlike the July coup that was expected and welcome, the coup led by Lt. Col. Dimka B.S., Head of Army's Physical Training Corps, failed in its attempts to wipe out Murtala regime, though it succeeded in assassinating Murtala himself (Arnold, 1979). People were said to be disappointed by the coup as they felt that the regime it wanted to terminate was the only regime since independence which reflected hopes for the Nigeria's future (Otoghagua, E 2011). Widespread hostility toward the leaders of the abortive coup confirmed the popularity and dynamism of Murtala regime. Following the death of General Murtala, Lt. General Obasanjo as the next in line of succession was appointed by the Supreme Military Council to take up the mantle of leadership.

In a broadcast to the nation, Obasanjo said that there would be no change in the policies of the Federal Military Government (Sakariyau R., 2012). In other words, he would be implementing the programme already designed by his late predecessor. Within months of his appointment, Obasanjo tried and executed those involved

in the abortive February coup.

In May 1976, Obasanjo launched Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) aimed at encouraging production of food and cash crop as it would make the country self-sufficient (Lawal A, 2012). There was also Local Government Reform in 1976 (Ibid). This marked a watershed in the evolutionary process of the grassroots governance. These were giant steps towards nation-building especially when it is understood that Nigeria had maintained the colonial heritage (in relation to grassroots governance) till this time. General Obasanjo also set up Price Control Board to deal with inflation (Otogaghua, E, 2011) unlike the Gowon's regime which lacked foresight. He also introduced Universal Primary Education which helped to develop and enhance adequate supply of manpower to meet the needs of the economy.

By September 1978, General Obasanjo lifted ban on political activities. Following the legalization of partisan politics, more than fifty (50) political associations desired to be registered. It was however five (5) parties that were eventually registered to contest 1979 elections. These five parties included Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), Nigeria People Party (NPP) National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Great Nigeria Peoples' Party (GNPP) and People's Redemption Party (RRP) (Ibid). The result of the election brought Alhaji Shehu Shagari of NPN as the President of Nigeria in the Second Republic.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the impact of Military rule on Nigeria's nation building in the period between 1966 and 1979. It is evident that the military rule contributed both negatively and positively to the process of Nigeria's nation building. For instance, the January 15th, 1966 coup and the July 29th, 1966 counter coup as well as the Civil war, 1967-1970 all caused by the military have been identified as challenges to Nigeria's nation building. On the other hands, Gowon administration's three Rs theory of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reintegration, and Muritala/Obasanjo regime's nation building- driven policies can rightly be said to help Nigeria's nation building. However, the legacy of the military rule between 1966 and 1979 could be seen in Nigeria's government and politics during the Second Republic

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