

## **The Role of the Military in Nigerian Politics: Governance and Political Influence**

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### **Abstract**

*The military has been a significant actor in Nigerian politics, shaping governance, democratic transitions, and institutional structures through a series of coups and prolonged military rule. This paper examines the historical context of military interventions, their impact on governance, and the influence of military leaders in civilian administrations. It also explores the challenges of transitioning from military rule to democracy and the ongoing implications of military involvement in politics. By analyzing the effects of military governance and its influence on democratic development, this study provides insights into civil-military relations and the necessity of reinforcing democratic institutions. Strengthening civilian control over the military and ensuring political accountability remain crucial for Nigeria's democratic consolidation and political stability. Secondary historical source materials constitute the bulk of information used for this paper.*

**Keywords:** *Military Rule, Politics, Governance, Democracy, Civil-Military Relations.*

### **Introduction**

The military has played a pivotal role in shaping Nigeria's political landscape since the country's independence in 1960. Through a series of multiple military coups and prolonged periods of military rule, the armed forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria have profoundly influenced the nation's governance and stability. Military interventions were often justified by the need to curb corruption, restore National order, and address political instability. However, far from solving these problems, military regimes frequently exacerbated them. Under successive military governments, Nigeria witnessed widespread corruption, nepotism, favoritism, suppression of dissent, civil society groups and erosion of democratic institutions. The suspension of constitutional processes and concentration of power in the hands of military elites led to a decline in transparency and accountability. Furthermore, these military regimes often prioritized personal loyalty over merit, undermining National unity and

institutional development. The transition from military to civilian-democratic rule has been a complex and contested process, marked by efforts to professionalize the military and curtail its political interference and influence. This paper explores the historical trajectory of military involvement in Nigerian politics, the governance structures under military rule, the military's lingering influence on civilian-elected administrations, and the broader implications for democratic development. The paper examined the military in government practices, and the civil-military relations, it also offers a comprehensive understanding of the enduring impact of military rule on Nigeria's democratic evolution.

### **The Historical Overview of Military Government in Nigeria 1966 – 1999**

Nigeria's post-independence political history has been significantly shaped by military coups, which have played a defining role in the nation's governance. Between 1966 and 1999, Nigeria experienced several military interventions, often justified by allegations of corruption, electoral malpractices, economic mismanagement, and ethnic tensions. This section provides a comprehensive historical overview of military coups in Nigeria, examining their causes, execution, and consequences. The first military coup in Nigeria took place on January 15, 1966. It was led by Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu Kaduna and a group of young military officers. The coup resulted in the assassination of Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Premier Ahmadu Bello of the Northern Region, Premier Samuel Akintola of the Western Region, and other senior officials (Sollium, 2009; Paden 1986 & Obasanjo, 1990). The stated rationale behind the coup was to eliminate corruption and regionalism, which were perceived as hindrances to national unity and development. However, the coup failed to achieve its objectives and instead exacerbated ethnic tensions, especially as most of the coup leaders were of Igbo descent. Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, also an Igbo, assumed control of the government, further fueling suspicions of ethnic bias (Falola, 2008).

In response to the perceived ethnic favoritism of Aguiyi-Ironsi's administration, a counter-coup occurred on July 29, 1966. Northern military officers, led by Lieutenant Colonel Murtala Mohammed and Major Theophilus Danjuma, orchestrated the coup, resulting in the assassination of Aguiyi-Ironsi. Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon emerged as the new Head of State (Metz, 1992). This coup significantly deepened ethnic divisions and contributed to the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War 1967–1970, as the Eastern Region, under the leadership of Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, declared independence as the Republic of Biafra

(Nwolise, 1998). After the civil war, Nigeria experienced a series of military coups, each marking a shift in governance. General Gowon was overthrown in a bloodless coup led by Brigadier Murtala Mohammed, who accused Gowon's administration of corruption and inefficiency. Mohammed's short-lived rule was marked by reforms, but he was assassinated in an attempted coup on February 13, 1976 (Ogunbadejo, 1976). General Olusegun Obasanjo succeeded him and oversaw the transition to civilian rule in 1979. Following accusations of widespread corruption and economic mismanagement, the civilian government of President Shehu Usman Shagari was overthrown by Major General Muhammadu Buhari (Ihonvbere, 1998). The Buhari's administration introduced stringent anti-corruption measures but was itself ousted in a coup on August 27, 1985, by General Ibrahim Babangida. General Babangida took power, citing Buhari's allegedly autocratic style and economic failures. Babangida introduced economic reforms such as Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) but annulled the June 12, 1993, presidential election, won by allegedly Moshood Abiola, leading to mass protests (Osaghae, 1998). His administration was weakened by public discontent, and he eventually resigned and handed over power to an Interim National Government in August 1993.

General Sani Abacha seized power in another coup, suspending democratic institutions and ruling with an iron fist until his sudden death on June 8, 1998 (Diamond 1997). His tenure was allegedly marked by human rights violations and suppression of opposition. Following Abacha's death, General Abdulsalami Abubakar initiated a transition program that led to Nigeria's return to civilian rule with the election of Olusegun Obasanjo as president (Joseph, 1987). Several factors contributed to the frequent military interventions in Nigerian politics. Nigeria's colonial legacy left behind deep-seated ethnic rivalries that frequently fueled political instability and military interventions (Nwacukwu, 1981). Civilian administrations were often accused of corrupt practices, leading to justifications for military takeovers (Siollun, 2009). Fragile democratic structures and lack of strong governance mechanisms made it easier for the military to intervene (Diamond, 1988).

### **The Military in Nigerian Governance 1966 – 1999**

Military rule in Nigeria significantly shaped the country's political and governance structures from 1966 to 1999. The military intervened in governance through coups, often justifying their actions with claims of curbing corruption, inefficiency, and political instability. However, military governance was also

characterized by authoritarianism, economic mismanagement, and human rights abuses. This section examines the nature, impact, and consequences of military rule in Nigeria.

**Nature of Military Governance in Nigeria** Military governance in Nigeria was hierarchical, centralized, and authoritarian. Unlike democratic governments, military regimes operated through decrees and suspended constitutional provisions that limited executive power. Military leaders often ruled by fiat, dissolving legislative institutions and restricting political freedoms (Siollun, 2009). The first phase of military governance 1966–1979 began with the January 1966 coup, which led to a series of counter-coups and the Nigerian Civil War 1967–1970. Successive military rulers, including Johnson Aguyi-Ironsi, Yakubu Gowon, Murtala Mohammed, and Olusegun Obasanjo, focused on national unity and administrative reforms, such as the abolishing of regional governments and the creation of States (Falola, 2008).

Military rule returned in 1983 with the overthrow of the Second Republic 1983–1999. General Muhammadu Buhari's government was replaced by General Ibrahim Babangida in 1985, who introduced economic reforms, including the Structural Adjustment Program (*SAP*), Federal Road Safety Corps (*FRSC*), the Bureau of Public Enterprises (*BPE*) the Technical Aid Corps (*TAC*), the National Drugs Law Enforcement Agency (*NDLEA*), the Nigerian Deposit Insurance Corporation (*NDIC*), the National Communication Commission (*NCC*), the National Broadcasting Commission (*NBC*), the People's Bank, Community Bank, Mass Mobilization for Self-Reliance, Social Justice, and Economic Recovery (*MAMSER*), Directorate of Food, Roads, and Rural Infrastructure (*DFRRI*) (Babangida, 2025). However, his annulment of the June 12, 1993, presidential election led to widespread unrest (Osaghae 1998). General Sani Abacha's tenure 1993–1998 was marked by severe repression, while General Abdulsalami Abubakar oversaw the transition to democracy in 1999 (Joseph, 1987).

Military governance in Nigeria was marked by several defining features. Military leaders concentrated authority in the executive branch, often sidelining civil institutions (Metz, 1992). Military regimes implemented policies such as Structural Adjustment Programme (*SAP*), which had mixed economic impacts, including inflation and increased foreign debt (Ihonvbere, 1998). The military era saw censorship, political repression, and extrajudicial killings, particularly under Abacha's rule (Diamond, 1997). Despite authoritarian tendencies, military

governments embarked on infrastructural development, including road construction and the establishment of new states to promote administrative efficiency (Ogunbadejo, 1976).

Military regimes left a lasting impact on Nigeria's political and economic landscape. Military rule centralized decision-making, often sidelining democratic processes (Falola, 2008). Military governments introduced economic programs, such as Babangida's Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), which had mixed effects on Nigeria's economy (Nwachukwu, 1981). The military era was marked by widespread human rights violations, press censorship, and suppression of political opposition (Joseph, 1987). Military coups played a dominant role in shaping Nigeria's political history. While the military often justified interventions as necessary to curb corruption and misgovernance, their rule frequently resulted in authoritarianism and economic instability. Since 1999, Nigeria has sustained a democratic system, though challenges remain. Understanding the historical context of these coups provides valuable insights into the nation's political evolution and the need for stronger democratic institutions.

### **The Influence of the Military in Nigerian Politics 1966 – 1999**

The military has played a significant role in shaping the political landscape of many nations, particularly in countries that have experienced prolonged periods of military rule. In Nigeria, the military's influence in civilian governments remains a defining feature of the nation's political system. Even after the transition to democratic rule in 1999, military structures and personnel have continued to shape governance, policy-making, and political stability. This section examines the various ways in which the military influences civilian governments, its historical roots, and the implications for democratic consolidation.

Nigeria's history of military rule 1966–1979 and 1983–1999 laid the foundation for continued military influence in governance. The repeated intervention of the military in politics created an environment where military elites established political networks, controlled economic resources, and dictated national policies (Siollun, 2009). The transition to civilian rule in 1999 did not entirely erase military influence, as former military officers continued to hold key positions in government. Numerous former military officers have held significant political positions, including ministerial roles, senatorial seats, and ambassadorships. These figures represent a blend of military background and civilian political service. David Mark, a Brigadier General, served as a Senator and notably as

Senate President for an extended period. Jeremiah Useni, a Lieutenant General, held various political offices, including governorship, ministerial positions, and a senatorial seat. Ike Nwachukwu, a Major General, served as a minister and a senator. Tanko Ayuba, John Shagaya, Lawrence Onoja, and Mohammed Magoro all transitioned from military careers to serve as Senators. Mamman Kontagora and Buba Marwa held governorships and ministerial positions, with Marwa currently leading the *NDLEA*. Olagunsoye Oyinlola served as a Governor. Sadique Abubakar, an Air Marshal, has served as an Ambassador and was a gubernatorial candidate. Joseph Garba served as a Commissioner for External Affairs and a UN Diplomat. Patrick Aziza was Minister of Communications. Joseph Akaagerger and Idris Garba also served as senators. Sam Momah served as Minister of Science and Technology. Ibrahim Sani, Ahmed Abdullahi, and Lawan Gwadabe served as Senators (Diamond, 1988; Babangida, 2025).

For example, political appointments and leadership, several former military officers have transitioned into civilian political roles, leveraging their experience, connections, and influence. Notably, former military heads of state, Olusegun Obasanjo 1976 – 1979 and Muhammadu Buhari 1984 – 1986, became civilian presidents (Josep, 1987). The appointment of ex-military personnel to strategic political offices, including security agencies and advisory roles, underscores the military's continued presence in governance. Such individuals held roles such in national security, primarily as Defence Ministers and National Security Advisers. Shehu Musa Yar'Adua served as Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters. Augustus Aikhomu and Ebitu Ukiwe both served as Chief of General Staff. Mohammed Aliyu Gusau and Sambo Dasuki served as National Security Advisers, with Gusau also serving as Minister of Defence. Muhammad Mansur Dan-Ali, Bashir Salihi Magashi, Theophilus Danjuma, and Bello Matawalle served as Ministers of Defence, with Matawalle currently serving as Minister of State for Defence. Mohammed Chris Alli served as Chief of Army Staff. Owoye Andrew Azazi and Abdullahi Sarki Mukhtar served as National Security Advisers. Gabriel Olonisakin served as Chief of Defence Staff. Abdulrahman Dambazau served as Minister of Interior (Metz, 1992).

The military remains a key player in national security decision-making. Civilian governments often rely on military expertise to address internal security challenges, such as insurgencies and ethnic conflicts. This reliance has granted the military significant leverage over security policies and governance decisions (Ihonvbere, 1998). Military regimes established economic policies and institutions

that continue to shape Nigeria's economic framework. The military's control over oil revenues during its rule provided it with lasting economic leverage. Many retired officers have ventured into business and politics, maintaining economic dominance and political influence (Osaghae, 1998; Babangida, 2025).

The military has occasionally played a role in stabilizing or influencing political outcomes during crises. Military endorsements or opposition to certain political figures has shaped electoral processes and governance stability (Ojo, 2008). The deployment of military forces during elections, under the pretext of maintaining order, has often been criticized for intimidating opposition parties and affecting electoral credibility (Falola, 2008). Even though the influence of the Nigerian military in politics come along with some negative consequences, it weakens democratic institutions. The military's continued presence in governance undermines the independence of democratic institutions. Civilian leaders with military backgrounds often retain authoritarian tendencies, limiting political freedoms and weakening checks and balances (Said, 2011).

The political influence of the military in civilian governments is a persistent reality in Nigeria and many post-military rule societies. While military expertise in governance can be beneficial, excessive influence undermines democratic consolidation. Strengthening democratic institutions, ensuring civilian oversight of the military, and promoting transparency in governance are essential steps to reducing military influence in civilian politics. Military involvement in politics has been a recurrent phenomenon in many developing nations, particularly in Africa. Nigeria, with its history of military coups and prolonged military rule, provides a critical case study of how the military's engagement in governance affects democratic development. While the transition to democracy in 1999 marked a new political era, the influence of the military in governance continues to shape democratic institutions, political culture, and governance processes. This paper examines the various impacts of military involvement in politics on democratic development, with a focus on governance, electoral integrity, political participation, and institutional stability.

### **The Historical Context of Military Involvement in Nigerian Politics**

Nigeria has experienced multiple military coups since gaining independence in 1960, with the first occurring in 1966. Military rule lasted for a total of nearly three decades 1966–1979 and 1983–1999, during which the armed forces dominated political and economic spheres (Siollun, 2009). The military's political intervention was often justified as a response to corruption, inefficiency, and

political instability, but it also resulted in the erosion of democratic institutions and practices (Diamond, 1988). Military rule historically dismantled democratic structures such as the legislature and judiciary, replacing them with military decrees and autocratic governance. Even after the transition to democracy, the remnants of military influence continue to undermine institutional independence and effectiveness (Joseph, 1987).

The military's history of interfering in political processes has long-term effects on electoral credibility. During elections, the deployment of military forces to maintain order has sometimes resulted in voter suppression, intimidation, and manipulation of electoral outcomes (Metz, 1992).

Military rule instilled a culture of authoritarianism in governance, influencing civilian leaders who adopt autocratic tendencies. This has resulted in weak civil-military relations, where civilian authorities struggle to assert control over military institutions, impacting democratic governance (Ihonvbere, 1998). Under military rule, political opposition and civil society organizations were frequently repressed. This legacy persists in some civilian administrations, where dissent is curtailed, and press freedoms are restricted, stunting democratic engagement and participation (Osaghae, 1998). Military regimes established economic policies that centralized control and prioritized military interests. The patronage networks developed during military rule continue to affect economic governance, with retired military officers occupying influential political and economic positions (Ojo, 2008).

The continued involvement of the military in internal security matters reflects the weakness of civilian security institutions. Military responses to internal conflicts, such as insurgencies and communal clashes, often lack accountability and exacerbate human rights concerns, thereby affecting democratic credibility (Falola, 2008). On the other hand, the Nigerian military influence in politics has some positive implications by strengthening institutional independence, reducing military influence requires strengthening democratic institutions, particularly the judiciary and legislature, to ensure checks and balances in governance (Adejumobi, 2011).

Civilian oversight of the military must be enhanced to ensure that the armed forces remain subordinate to democratic authorities. Clear delineation of roles between military and civilian authorities is crucial for sustaining democratic

governance (Nwolise, 2002). Ensuring free and fair elections without military interference is vital for democratic consolidation. Electoral bodies must be strengthened to resist external pressures and maintain electoral integrity (Nwachukwu, 1995).

The involvement of the military in politics has had profound effects on Nigeria's democratic development, shaping governance structures, political culture, and institutional resilience. While Nigeria has made significant progress in consolidating democracy, residual military influence continues to pose challenges. Strengthening democratic institutions, promoting civil liberties, and ensuring military accountability are essential steps toward deepening democratic governance and preventing future military interference in politics.

Civil-military relations play a crucial role in the political stability and democratic development of any nation. In many post-colonial states, including Nigeria, the military has historically been a dominant force in governance, often intervening in political processes through coups and prolonged military rule. The transition to civilian rule is a complex process that involves restructuring military influence in politics, strengthening democratic institutions, and redefining the role of the armed forces within a democratic framework. This paper explores the dynamics of civil-military relations, the challenges of transitioning to civilian rule, and the implications for democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

The study of civil-military relations is grounded in various theoretical perspectives. For example, S. Huntington's theory of objective civilian control argues that professionalizing the military and maintaining a clear separation between civilian and military authorities is essential for stable governance (Samuel, 1957). M. Janowitz, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of political socialization within the military to align its values with democratic norms (Janowitz, 1960). These theories provide insight into the factors influencing military engagement in politics and the pathways to achieving stable civilian rule. Nigeria's political history has been characterized by multiple military coups, beginning with the 1966 coup that led to a succession of military regimes. The military justified its interventions as necessary to curb corruption, political instability, and economic mismanagement (Siollun, 2009). However, military rule often resulted in authoritarian governance, the suppression of civil liberties, and weakened democratic institutions (Osanghae, 1998). The transition to civilian rule in 1979, 1993, and ultimately in 1999 was marked by complex

negotiations and structural adjustments aimed at limiting military influence in governance (Ojo, 2008).

Decades of military rule eroded the strength of democratic institutions, making transitions to civilian governance difficult. Civilian governments often struggle to establish authority over the military due to institutional weaknesses and historical power imbalances (Diamond, 1988). Many retired military officers have maintained significant influence in civilian governments, shaping policies and political outcomes. This persistent influence creates a challenge in achieving full civilian supremacy over governance (Metz, 1992). Transitioning to civilian rule requires restructuring the security sector to ensure the military remains apolitical. However, weak oversight mechanisms and institutional resistance often hinder effective reforms (Ihonvbere, 1998).

Military regimes have a history of allegedly human rights violations, including suppressing opposition, restricting press freedom, and curbing political participation. Addressing these legacies is crucial for building a democratic society (Falola, 2008). Ensuring free and fair elections is fundamental to consolidating democracy. However, military interference, electoral violence, and political instability continue to pose threats to electoral credibility and civilian governance (Adejumobi, 2011). Establishing clear legal frameworks that define the military's role in governance and reinforce civilian supremacy is essential for democratic consolidation (Nwolise, 2002). Strengthening institutions such as the legislature and civil society organizations to provide oversight over military activities is crucial for democratic governance (Nwachukwu, 1995). Investing in military education and training programs that emphasize democratic values and human rights can help align military conduct with democratic principles (Olukoshi, 1998).

Encouraging political participation, protecting civil liberties, and fostering a democratic political culture can mitigate military intervention in governance (Ogunlade 2014). Civil-military relations are central to the stability and development of democratic governance. Nigeria's transition to civilian rule has been marked by significant challenges, including weak democratic institutions, entrenched military influence, and security sector deficiencies. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive legal reforms, strong civilian oversight, and a commitment to democratic values. Strengthening civil-military relations remains

a critical component of ensuring sustainable democratic governance in Nigeria and other transitioning democracies.

### **Conclusion**

The military's involvement in Nigerian politics has had far-reaching consequences, shaping governance, political institutions, and democratic development. While military rule was often justified as a means of stabilizing the country, its prolonged interventions weakened democratic institutions and hindered political progress. The transition to civilian rule, though significant, has not entirely removed military influence from politics, as former military leaders continue to hold prominent positions in governance. Strengthening democratic institutions, reinforcing civilian control over the military, and fostering a culture of political accountability are essential for ensuring lasting democratic governance in Nigeria. As the nation moves forward, the consolidation of democracy requires continuous efforts to professionalize the military, promote electoral integrity, and enhance civil-military relations. Ultimately, achieving political stability and sustainable development in Nigeria depends on maintaining a clear separation between military and civilian roles in governance, fostering democratic norms, and ensuring that political power remains firmly in the hands of the people.

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