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DEBATES ON MILITARY INTERVENTIONS IN AFRICA'S POLITICS: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE, 1966–1999

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Abstract

Military intervention in politics represented one of the most contested phenomena in post-colonial African states. Nigeria, as Africa's most populous country, experienced prolonged periods of military rule between 1966 and 1999, shaping debates about governance, democracy, and political stability on the continent. This study examined the debates surrounding military interventions in Nigeria's politics from 1966 to 1999, focusing on the justification, consequences, and implications of military rule for political development. The study sought to interrogate the arguments advanced by both proponents and critics of military involvement in governance and to evaluate how these interventions influenced Nigeria's democratic trajectory. The study adopted a qualitative historical research design. Secondary sources such as scholarly journals, books, official documents, and archival materials constituted the primary sources of data. Data were analysed using descriptive and interpretative techniques to establish patterns and trends in military governance during the period under study. Findings revealed that military interventions were often justified by actors within the armed forces as necessary responses to political instability, corruption, and governance failure. However, the study found that despite some structural reforms introduced during military regimes, prolonged military rule undermined democratic institutions, weakened civil liberties, and institutionalised authoritarian political culture. The debates surrounding military intervention therefore reflected a tension between perceived national rescue missions and the realities of authoritarian governance. The study concluded that military rule significantly shaped Nigeria's political evolution and influenced wider debates about civil–military relations in Africa. It recommended strengthening democratic institutions and ensuring strict civilian control of the military in order to prevent future military interference in governance.

Keywords: Military Intervention, Civil–Military Relations, Military Rule in Nigeria, Political Development, Democratic Transition (1966–1999).

Introduction

Military intervention in politics constituted one of the defining features of post-colonial governance in Africa. Following independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s, many African states experienced political instability, weak institutions, and intense struggles for power among political elites. In several cases, the military emerged as a decisive political actor, often justifying its intervention as a corrective response to corruption, ethnic divisions, and administrative inefficiency (Decalo, 1990). These developments generated extensive scholarly debates regarding the

legitimacy, consequences, and long-term implications of military involvement in governance.

Across Africa, military coups became a recurring phenomenon during the Cold War era. Countries such as Ghana, Uganda, Sudan, and Nigeria witnessed successive military interventions that significantly altered their political trajectories (Luckham, 1971). Scholars and political commentators often disagreed on whether the military acted as a stabilising institution capable of restoring order or as an authoritarian force that undermined democratic governance. While some analysts argued that military regimes occasionally

introduced administrative reforms and discipline in governance, critics maintained that military rule weakened political institutions and delayed democratic consolidation.

Nigeria represented one of the most prominent cases of military intervention in Africa. After gaining independence from Britain in 1960, the country initially operated under a parliamentary democratic system. However, political tensions, electoral irregularities, and regional rivalries culminated in Nigeria's first military coup in January 1966 (Falola & Heaton, 2008). This coup marked the beginning of a prolonged era of military involvement in Nigerian politics that lasted, with brief interruptions, until the transition to civilian rule in 1999.

Between 1966 and 1999, Nigeria experienced several military regimes led by figures such as General Yakubu Gowon, General Murtala Mohammed, General Olusegun Obasanjo, General Muhammadu Buhari, General Ibrahim Babangida, and General Sani Abacha. These regimes justified their interventions on various grounds, including the need to restore order, combat corruption, and maintain national unity. The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), which occurred under military rule, further entrenched the military's role in the political system and reinforced the perception that the armed forces were central to national survival.

Despite these justifications, military governance generated significant controversies and debates among scholars, political actors, and civil society groups. Critics argued that military regimes curtailed civil liberties, suppressed political opposition, and governed through decrees rather than constitutional processes (Joseph, 1991). They also contended that the absence of democratic accountability under military rule contributed to corruption, economic mismanagement, and institutional decay.

Conversely, some scholars suggested that military regimes occasionally implemented reforms aimed at stabilising the political system. For instance, certain military administrations attempted to restructure federal

institutions, reorganise the public service, and implement economic policies intended to promote development. These actions formed the basis of arguments advanced by those who viewed the military as a temporary stabilising force in periods of political crisis.

The Nigerian experience therefore became a focal point for broader debates on civil–military relations in Africa. Questions emerged regarding the conditions that facilitated military intervention, the legitimacy of military governance, and the long-term consequences of such interventions for democratic development. These debates remained particularly relevant because Nigeria's political trajectory influenced governance trends across West Africa and the wider African continent.

By the late 1990s, increasing domestic pressure, international criticism, and internal political dynamics within the military contributed to Nigeria's transition to civilian rule in 1999. The return to democracy marked the end of over three decades of intermittent military governance and initiated a new phase of democratic experimentation in the country.

This study therefore examined the debates surrounding military interventions in Nigeria's politics between 1966 and 1999. It analysed the arguments advanced by proponents and critics of military rule and assessed the implications of military governance for Nigeria's political development. In doing so, the study contributed to ongoing discussions on civil–military relations and democratic consolidation in Africa.

Statement of the Problem

Military intervention in politics remained one of the most controversial aspects of political development in Africa. While independence movements across the continent had aimed to establish democratic and representative governments, many African states soon experienced repeated military coups that disrupted civilian rule. Nigeria represented one of the most

prominent examples of this pattern, having experienced multiple military interventions between 1966 and 1999. The emergence of military rule in Nigeria generated intense scholarly and political debates. Some analysts argued that the military intervened in response to the failure of civilian governments to address corruption, electoral malpractice, and political instability. From this perspective, military regimes were sometimes portrayed as corrective administrations that sought to restore discipline and national unity. However, critics contended that military rule entrenched authoritarian governance, suppressed democratic freedoms, and weakened political institutions.

Despite the extensive literature on Nigeria's military regimes, significant debates persisted regarding the overall impact of military intervention on Nigeria's political development. Some scholars emphasised the structural reforms and administrative changes implemented during military rule, while others highlighted the erosion of democratic norms and institutions. These competing interpretations created a need for systematic examination of the debates surrounding military intervention in Nigeria's political history.

Furthermore, understanding these debates remained crucial for analysing contemporary civil–military relations in Nigeria and Africa more broadly. Although Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999, the historical legacy of military involvement in governance continued to shape political discourse and institutional dynamics. This study therefore addressed the need to critically examine the debates surrounding military interventions in Nigeria's politics between 1966 and 1999. By analysing the arguments advanced by both proponents and critics of military rule, the study sought to provide deeper insight into the implications of military governance for Nigeria's political evolution and democratic development.

Research Questions

- i. What factors justified military interventions in Nigeria's politics between 1966 and 1999?

- ii. What were the implications of military rule for Nigeria's political development during the period under study?

Specific Objectives

- i. To examine the factors that justified military interventions in Nigeria's politics between 1966 and 1999.
- ii. To analyse the implications of military rule for Nigeria's political development during the period.

Conceptual Clarifications

Military Intervention

Military intervention refers to the involvement of the armed forces in the political governance of a state, often occurring when the military assumes a decisive role in shaping or controlling political authority. In many developing and post-colonial states, military intervention historically emerged when the armed forces perceived civilian governments as ineffective, corrupt, or incapable of maintaining political stability and national security. Under such circumstances, military leaders frequently justified intervention as a corrective mechanism intended to restore order, protect national unity, or prevent institutional collapse.

In Africa, military intervention became particularly prominent during the early decades following independence, when fragile political institutions and intense competition for state power created conditions conducive to military involvement in politics. Scholars have observed that weak party systems, ethnic fragmentation, economic crises, and disputed elections frequently provided the context within which the armed forces intervened in governance (Decalo, 1990). While some interventions were initially welcomed by segments of the population who hoped for reform, the long term consequences often included authoritarian rule, restrictions on civil liberties, and delays in democratic consolidation.

Recent literature further explains military intervention as a product of institutional imbalance between civilian authorities and military establishments. When civilian oversight mechanisms remain weak, the military may gradually acquire political influence and eventually intervene directly in governance. Contemporary research therefore emphasizes the importance of strong democratic institutions, professional military education, and constitutional safeguards to prevent military interference in politics (Croissant et al., 2020; Powell and Thyne, 2022). These institutional arrangements help ensure that the armed forces remain subordinate to elected authorities while maintaining their primary responsibility for national defence.

Military Coup

A military coup refers to the abrupt and often illegal seizure of political power by members of the armed forces, typically involving the removal of the existing government without widespread public participation or constitutional procedures. Coups are generally characterized by their rapid execution, reliance on military force, and the suspension of normal political processes. Unlike revolutions, which often involve mass mobilization and broad social participation, coups are usually carried out by a relatively small group of military officers who take control of key state institutions such as the presidential palace, broadcasting facilities, and security infrastructure.

Historically, military coups have been one of the most common mechanisms through which military regimes emerged in many regions of the world, particularly in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia during the twentieth century. In the African context, the post-independence period witnessed a significant number of coups as military officers intervened in response to political instability, electoral disputes, and economic crises. While coup leaders often claimed that their actions were necessary to restore stability or combat corruption, the resulting regimes frequently centralized power within military councils and restricted democratic freedoms (Powell and Thyne, 2011).

Contemporary research on coup dynamics highlights several factors that increase the likelihood of military coups. These include weak democratic institutions, politicized armed forces, economic downturns, and internal divisions within the military hierarchy. Scholars have also noted that coups tend to occur more frequently in states where civilian governments lack effective mechanisms for maintaining professional control over the armed forces (Luttwak, 2016; Albrecht, 2021). In recent years, the resurgence of coups in parts of West Africa has renewed scholarly and policy attention on the structural conditions that enable military actors to challenge civilian authority.

Understanding military coups therefore requires examining both institutional weaknesses and the internal dynamics of military organizations. Strengthening democratic governance, improving civil–military relations, and enhancing military professionalism remain essential strategies for preventing coups and sustaining constitutional rule.

Civil–Military Relations

Civil–military relations refer to the complex interaction between civilian political authorities and the military institution within a state. The concept focuses on how political power is distributed between elected leaders and the armed forces, as well as the mechanisms that ensure the military remains subordinate to civilian control. Effective civil–military relations are considered essential for political stability because they help prevent military interference in governance while allowing the armed forces to perform their professional responsibilities of national defence and security.

One of the most influential theoretical contributions to the study of civil–military relations was provided by Huntington (1957), who argued that stable political systems require a clear institutional separation between civilian political authority and the professional military establishment. According to this perspective, civilian leaders are responsible for determining national policy and strategic objectives, while the military focuses on executing defence responsibilities within the

framework established by civilian authorities. Huntington referred to this arrangement as objective civilian control, in which the military remains politically neutral and professionally autonomous in operational matters.

Subsequent scholarship has expanded this perspective by emphasizing the importance of democratic accountability, institutional oversight, and transparency in managing civil–military relations. Contemporary research highlights that effective civilian control requires legislative oversight, defence policy frameworks, and strong democratic institutions capable of monitoring military activities (Feaver, 2003; Croissant et al., 2020). In many developing countries, however, weak institutional structures have historically allowed the military to exert significant political influence, sometimes resulting in direct intervention in governance.

Modern democratic systems therefore prioritize mechanisms that strengthen civilian authority while maintaining a professional and apolitical military. These mechanisms include parliamentary defence committees, transparent defence budgeting, and clear constitutional provisions that define the roles and responsibilities of the armed forces. When these institutional arrangements function effectively, they contribute to political stability and democratic consolidation.

Military Rule

Military rule refers to a system of governance in which the armed forces assume direct control over the state apparatus and exercise political authority in place of civilian institutions. Under military rule, the leadership of the state is typically composed of senior military officers who govern through military councils, command structures, or provisional authorities. In such systems, constitutional frameworks are frequently suspended or modified, and governance is often conducted through decrees rather than legislative processes.

Military regimes often emerge following coups in which the armed forces overthrow an existing civilian government. After seizing power, military leaders may justify their rule by claiming that it is necessary to restore political stability, combat corruption, or address national crises. However, despite these initial justifications, military regimes frequently consolidate power within a small group of officers, limit political participation, and restrict civil liberties. As a result, military rule is often associated with authoritarian governance and limited democratic accountability.

Studies on military governance indicate that such regimes tend to prioritize security and order over democratic participation. Decision making is typically centralized, and political opposition may be suppressed to maintain control. While some military governments have introduced administrative reforms or infrastructure programmes, their lack of electoral legitimacy and institutional accountability often undermines long term political development (Geddes et al., 2018).

Recent scholarship has also examined the conditions under which military regimes eventually transition back to civilian rule. These transitions may occur due to domestic political pressure, economic challenges, international sanctions, or internal divisions within the military leadership. Democratic transitions are more likely to succeed when institutional reforms strengthen civilian oversight and establish constitutional safeguards against future military interventions (Powell and Thyne, 2022).

Understanding military rule is therefore essential for analysing political transitions and the broader challenges of democratic consolidation in post authoritarian societies.

Democracy

Democracy refers to a system of government in which political authority ultimately derives from the will of the people. It is characterized by regular and competitive elections, the protection of civil liberties,

the rule of law, and institutional accountability. In democratic systems, citizens participate in the selection of political leaders and have the opportunity to influence public policy through political representation and civic engagement. Democracy therefore represents both a political structure and a normative ideal centred on popular sovereignty and political equality.

One of the most influential scholarly interpretations of democracy was presented by Dahl (1989), who conceptualized modern democratic systems as polyarchies characterized by inclusive political participation and public contestation. According to this framework, democracy requires not only elections but also institutional guarantees such as freedom of expression, access to alternative sources of information, and the right to organize political associations. These elements collectively ensure that citizens can meaningfully participate in political decision making. Contemporary research has expanded the concept of democracy to include broader dimensions such as transparency, accountability, and effective governance. Democratic systems are expected to provide mechanisms through which public officials can be held responsible for their actions, including independent judiciaries, free media, and active civil society organizations (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Diamond, 2021).

Despite its normative appeal, democracy faces numerous challenges in many parts of the world, including electoral manipulation, political polarization, and institutional weakness. Strengthening democratic institutions therefore remains essential for ensuring that governance reflects the collective interests of citizens while protecting fundamental rights and freedoms.

Political Development

Political development refers to the process through which political institutions, governance structures, and civic participation evolve to create stable and effective systems of governance. It encompasses the strengthening of political institutions, the expansion of citizen participation in public affairs, and the

establishment of institutional mechanisms that ensure accountability, legitimacy, and stability in governance. Political development is closely linked to democratic consolidation because strong political institutions are necessary for sustaining democratic practices over time. Early scholarship on political development emphasized institutional capacity and political modernization. Scholars argued that developing states needed to establish stable political institutions capable of managing social demands, regulating political competition, and maintaining order within society. In this context, political development involved strengthening administrative structures, building effective legislatures, and fostering political parties capable of representing diverse societal interests.

More recent perspectives view political development as a multidimensional process that includes democratic governance, inclusive participation, and institutional resilience. Contemporary studies highlight the importance of transparent governance, rule of law, and effective public administration in promoting sustainable political development (Fukuyama, 2016; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2019). These elements contribute to the legitimacy of political systems and enhance the ability of governments to respond to societal needs.

In many developing countries, political development has been influenced by historical experiences such as colonial rule, military interventions, and economic challenges. These factors often shape the trajectory of institutional growth and democratic consolidation. Strengthening political development therefore requires institutional reforms that promote accountability, enhance citizen participation, and ensure the stability of democratic governance structures.

Empirical Review

Empirical studies on military intervention in Nigeria had examined various dimensions of military governance and its implications for political development.

Joseph (1991) analysed the role of military regimes in Nigeria's political history and found that military administrations often justified their interventions as responses to corruption and political instability. However, the study observed that prolonged military rule weakened democratic institutions and hindered the development of political accountability.

Falola and Heaton (2008) examined Nigeria's political evolution and noted that the military played a central role in shaping the country's governance structures between 1966 and 1999. Their analysis suggested that although certain military regimes introduced administrative reforms, the overall impact of military rule was the entrenchment of authoritarian political culture.

Decalo (1990) conducted a comparative study of military regimes in Africa and found that military interventions were often linked to weak political institutions and elite competition for power. The study concluded that military governments rarely succeeded in establishing stable political systems.

Luckham (1971) also explored the political role of the military in developing countries and argued that military regimes tended to centralise power and restrict political participation. These studies collectively demonstrated that while military interventions were sometimes justified as corrective measures, their long-term impact often undermined democratic governance.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Samuel Huntington's Theory of Civil–Military Relations, originally articulated in his influential work *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil–Military Relations* published in 1957. Huntington's theory represents one of the most widely cited analytical frameworks for understanding the relationship between the military institution and civilian political authority within modern states. The central concern of the theory is how to maintain a military force strong enough to defend the state while ensuring that it remains

subordinate to civilian political leadership. Huntington conceptualised this dilemma as the core problem of civil–military relations in democratic systems.

According to Huntington, the most effective mechanism for achieving stability in civil–military relations is the establishment of objective civilian control, a system in which the military is granted professional autonomy in strictly military affairs while remaining politically neutral and subordinate to elected civilian authorities. The theory distinguishes between objective control and subjective control. Subjective control involves the attempt by civilian leaders to dominate the military through political integration, ideological control, or institutional manipulation. In contrast, objective control promotes military professionalism by clearly separating military expertise from political decision making. Huntington argued that when soldiers remain professional specialists in the management of violence and refrain from political competition, the likelihood of military intervention in governance is significantly reduced (Huntington, 1957).

The theory further emphasises that military professionalism is the key variable in maintaining stable civil–military relations. Professional armed forces are characterised by specialised expertise, a strong sense of responsibility to the state, and a corporate identity that discourages political participation. By strengthening these professional norms, the military becomes an institution dedicated to national defence rather than political power. Huntington therefore maintained that the most reliable way to prevent military coups is not excessive civilian interference but rather the cultivation of a professional and politically neutral officer corps that respects constitutional authority.

Despite its enduring influence, Huntington's theory has been widely debated and criticised in contemporary scholarship. One major criticism is that the model was largely developed from the experience of Western democracies, particularly the United States, where institutional structures and political traditions differ

significantly from those found in many developing countries. Critics argue that in societies characterised by weak political institutions, ethnic fragmentation, and fragile democratic traditions, the strict separation between civilian and military spheres proposed by Huntington may be difficult to maintain. In such contexts, the military may become involved in governance due to institutional weakness, political crises, or national security challenges.

Scholars have also pointed out that the boundaries between political and military decision making are often blurred in practice, especially during periods of conflict or national emergency. The assumption that military affairs can be clearly separated from political considerations has therefore been questioned by several analysts who argue that security policy inevitably involves both political and strategic dimensions. Consequently, alternative perspectives such as concordance theory and agency theory have been proposed to provide more flexible explanations of civil–military interaction in different political environments. Notwithstanding these criticisms, Huntington’s theory remains highly relevant for analysing the historical pattern of military intervention in Nigeria. Nigeria experienced repeated military coups between 1966 and 1999, which resulted in prolonged periods of military governance. These interventions reflected the absence of strong institutional mechanisms capable of ensuring effective civilian control over the armed forces. The application of Huntington’s framework therefore provides a useful analytical lens for understanding how weak political institutions and inadequate professional boundaries between civilian authorities and the military contributed to the frequent disruption of democratic governance in Nigeria.

Within the context of this study, the theory helps explain the relationship between military intervention and political development in Nigeria by emphasising the importance of institutionalised civilian control and military professionalism. By examining the historical dynamics of Nigeria’s civil–military relations, the study seeks to demonstrate how the absence of these institutional safeguards contributed to cycles of military intervention and delayed democratic consolidation. Huntington’s theoretical framework thus provides a valuable foundation for analysing the structural factors that shaped Nigeria’s political evolution during the period under investigation.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative historical research design. The population of the study consisted of political events, military regimes, and governance structures in Nigeria between 1966 and 1999.

Secondary sources constituted the main sources of data. These included books, academic journals, government documents, archival materials, and historical records relating to military governance in Nigeria. Data were collected through documentary analysis. The analysis involved examining historical records and scholarly works in order to identify patterns of military intervention and the debates surrounding them. The technique of data analysis employed was descriptive qualitative analysis. This approach allowed the researcher to interpret historical events and assess the implications of military rule for Nigeria’s political development.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Major Military Regimes in Nigeria (1966–1999)

Regime	Period
Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi	1966
Yakubu Gowon	1966–1975
Murtala Mohammed	1975–1976
Olusegun Obasanjo	1976–1979
Muhammadu Buhari	1983–1985
Ibrahim Babangida	1985–1993

Sani Abacha	1993–1998
Abdulsalami Abubakar	1998–1999

The table showed that Nigeria experienced multiple military regimes between 1966 and 1999. The frequency of military administrations indicated the central role of the armed forces in governance during this period and highlighted the instability that characterised Nigeria's political system.

Table 2: Major Justifications for Military Interventions

Justification	Description
Corruption	Alleged misconduct of civilian leaders
Political instability	Electoral violence and governance crises
National unity	Preservation of territorial integrity

The table indicated that military leaders often justified their interventions on grounds of corruption, political instability, and national unity. These arguments formed the basis of debates about whether military rule represented a corrective mechanism or an authoritarian deviation from democratic governance.

Conclusion

The study concluded that military interventions significantly shaped Nigeria's political development between 1966 and 1999. While military regimes often justified their actions as necessary responses to political crises, prolonged military governance weakened democratic institutions and entrenched authoritarian political culture. The debates surrounding military

intervention therefore reflected tensions between claims of national rescue and the realities of authoritarian rule.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommended the followings:

- i. Nigeria should strengthen democratic institutions and constitutional frameworks in order to ensure effective civilian control of the military.
- ii. Continuous democratic consolidation and civic education should be promoted to prevent future military interference in politics.

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