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THE VIOLATION OF DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES AND THE RISE OF MILITARY COUPS IN AFRICA: EMERGING LESSONS FOR NIGERIA

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Abstract
This study is an examination of the factors responsible for the current uprising of military coups in Africa. The purpose of the study is to also help Nigeria glean some lesson from the coups as a booster to enhance the practice of true democracy in Nigeria. The study relies majorly on secondary data to generate information that supported the aim of the study. The data generated was analyzed using content analysis. The Huntington School of through was used as theoretical framework to support the arguments raised in the study. The findings of the study revealed that military coups are resurging in Africa again due to the breakdown of the genuine practice of the principles of liberal democracy in most African countries. The study concludes that if African countries continue to violate the principles of liberal democracy, more military coups are most likely to take place on the continent. The study recommends that African countries practicing democracy, should at all times adhere to the principle of true democracy.
Key words: Democratic, Principles, Military, Coups, Violation.

Introduction

Since the end of colonialism and the Second World War, most countries around the world saw the need to initiate and practice a system of government that will bring peace, growth and prosperity to its people. In some countries like South Africa where the colonial masters was the British government, who did not want to relinquish power and leadership to the natives in South Africa, the people of South Africa and other African countries rose to the occasion to challenge the basis of the apartheid system in the country.

The struggle continued with Nelson Mandela until South Africa was liberated from the apartheid system. In other places like Algeria, Guinue, Angola, Kenya, Namibia, Somalia, Libya, Ethiopia, Sudan and so on, they initiated wars of resistance against colonial powers. Those wars gave rise to indigenous African country men and women who started taking their rightful place in civilian governance. That is why after colonial rule most African countries opted for western liberal democracy in preference of their traditional and cultural patterns of leadership. Most of the frontline nationalist who struggled for the independence of most African countries like: Jomo Keyatta, Kwameh Nkruma, Obafemi, Awolowo, Kenneth, Kaunda, Patrice Lumumba, Julius Nyerere etc. opted for liberal democracy as system of governance which they believed can unite the people and foster peace and development. These countries that got independence as a result were Ghana in 1957, Nigeria in 1960,

Sudan in 1956, Somalia in 1960, Sierra Leone in 1961, Uganda in 1962, Kenya in 1963, Malawi in 1964, Gambia in 1965 and so on. All these took off with the liberal system of democracy. Unfortunately, those countries that got independence early in Africa were the once that first experienced military coups: Sudan in 1958, Togo in 1963, Nigeria in 1966, Ghana in 1966, Sierra-Leone in 1967, Liya in 1969 (Thomson, 2004).

At a point military coups in Africa ceased for civilian regimes, precisely from 1990s to 2010s the continent of Africa had serious reductions in the frequency of military coups; democracies were thriving in Africa with much calm from the military in terms of unseating liberal democratically elected leaders. Nevertheless, by 2020s a new wave in the rise of military coups started emerging. This resurgence because very worrisome attracting the attention of both scholars and administrators alike in respect to what could be responsible for the sudden rise of military coups in Africa especially in places like Mali, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Niger and so on.

The major aim of this paper is to find out the major factor responsible for the sudden rise of military coups in Africa after a long time of civilian governance. Could it be that existing democratic governments are not adhering to democratic principles?

To investigate this issue, this paper is divided into different segments such as the abstract of the paper, introduction, conceptual explanation, theoretical framework, principles of liberal democracy, cases of violation of liberal democratic principles, emergence of coups in Africa, and the lessons for Nigeria, conclusion and recommendation.

Explanation of Concepts

For the purpose of this study, the concepts explained are: violation, democratic principles and rise of military coups.

i. **Violation**: Violation in the context of this study means the situation whereby the ideal process of operating democracy is altered. The further expression of violation in this study means to practice democracy in such a way that do not align with the interest of the people who institute the contract of democracy between them and their leaders. When violation occur at any point in time, it results to mal-functioning of a system of governance.

ii. **Democratic Principles:** Democratic Principle are the major guiding ideology which determine or serves as the best way of practicing democracy that will bring gains of governance to the people. The principles of democracy are the guiding pillars which direct the way of practicing democracy in society. Any system of governance without principles will find it hard to realize its purpose.

iii. **Rise of Military Coups:** In this study, rise of military coups is referred to a situation whereby the military who handed over to the civilian administration is found gradually returning to take overpower from civilian administration put in place by the people. This rise could also mean the sudden or gradual re-emergence of the military in the place of leadership instead of a democratic government. This rise means the occurrence of more than one case of military coup happening within a short period within a country or across Africa.

Principles of Democracy

The major guiding ideology of democracy identified in this study are those enumerated by Professor Iain Mackenzie. According to Mackenzie (2005) the principles of democracy can be identified to include:

i. **Participation in the Democratic Process:** This implies that the citizens or electorates should be allowed to determine the process of making and executing the rules and regulations governing their existence.

ii. **Representation**: Since it's not possible for every electorate to form the cabinet in a government, the principle of representation implies that the electorate be allowed to decide those to be in governance on their behalf. The process of them deciding those to stand in for them is through free and fair election.

iii. **Legitimacy:** Legitimacy means the representatives being accepted by the people or electorates. The concept of legitimacy as a principle of democracy is vital, it is the backbone of democracy it implies consent by the people.

iv. **Accountability**: The conceptual principle of accountability in democracy means being responsible to the people being represented. It further means that the representatives are in close touch with the representatives. Democratically, the representatives are not expected to do what pleases them at the experience of the people, when this happens it amounts to violation of democratic principles.

v. **Fundamental Human rights**: This principle of democracy means that citizens have certain rights which cannot be violated. These rights are also to be protected. When they are not protected or allowed to exist it amounts to the violation of democratic principles. These rights are also regarded as political liberty, such liberties are right to life, speech, association, to vote and be voted for, safe environment, ownership of property etc.

vi. **Sovereignty of the People**: As far as democracy is concerned, the people are supreme. It also mean power and authority belonging to the people. The representatives of the people are the source of political authority, and it is only for the people that political leaders can derive their power/authority to function. This is the reason political candidates are not supposed to be imposed on the people, otherwise it will amount to violation of the principle of democracy.

vii. **Equality**: This principle means that every citizen is political equal to each other. Politically speaking, no citizen is greater than another, this is the reason everyone has only one vote at every point in time. Equality also include in the opportunity to decide how the government operates. The egalitarian principle of democracy is important to address minority, social and economic status issues.

viii. **Pluralism**: This principle means that, in a true democracy, there are varying components in society such as religious or ethnic differences, different political affiliations. These differences can constitute sources of disagreement and conflicts. This should be allowed in democracy, the minority should be allowed a place in governance, competition and disagreements should be allowed but conflicts be amicably resolved. This is democracy. Tolerance is very necessary if democracy will thrive.

The foregoing principles of democracy show that there is a pattern or requirement that must be considered to enhance the practice of liberal democracy. When any of those principles are violated or not allowed to exist it will surely affect the way a democratic government operates.

It is based on these principles that many scholars like Abagen and Kajira (2024), Acho and Tachman, (2023), Thompson (2004), Duadley (1982) etc. seek to find out why military rule take place in the society. These efforst notwithstanding, it is important to explain the causes of military rule from a theoretical standpoint rather than considering specific individual scholastic stand point.

Theoretical Framework

The military is associated with the armed soldiers or the armed forces whose powers rest on the use of the gun. The threat of the military compels obedience for fear of the gun the military possess. Military rule implies the period in which the armed forces take over the administration of a given nation in this case the civilian regime. But why will the military take over civilian administration?

There are three leading school of thoughts which theorize the factors responsible for military coups. These school of thoughts are:

i. The Samuel Huntington and S.E. Finer School of Thought

ii. The Morris Janowitgz School of Thought

iii. The Marxist School of Thought.

For the purpose of this study Samuel Huntington and S.E. Finer School of Thought is used because it captures the realities of the study. According to Thomson, (2004), the major assumptions of the Huntington school of thought is that, the socio-political environment of the state are to a large extent responsible for military croups in Africa. The scholars of the Huntington school of thought are usually regarded as environmentalists. Huntington and Finer argue that coups are most likely to occur in states lacking institutionalized political culture which also suffers economic hardship and social division (Huntington, 1968, Daudley, 1982).

The most important causes of military intervention in politics are not military but political and reflected not the social and organizational characteristics of the military establishment but the political and institutional structure of society (Huntington, 1968; Siollun, 2009; Schraeder, 2004; Offodile, 2016; Ojiako, N/D; Odigbo., Ezekwelu, Okeke 2023; Ihumdu & 2011).

Closely related to what Huntington says, Duadley (1982) posits that coups occur in certain countries because these countries have low political culture, a country has a low political culture when among other things, its political structures have not been institutionalized or only weakly institutionalized, and dominant political norms, the rules of the game have not been sufficiently internalized. Similarly, Decalo (1990) further reiterates that the Huntington school of thought argues that, “societal and structural weakness – institutional fragility, systematic flaws and low levels of political culture. Which act as a sort of Magnet to pull the armed forces into the power and legitimacy vacuum.

From the foregoing arguments of the assumption of the Huntington school of thought, it is clear to place at the bottom-line that political institutions such as political parties, pressure groups, legislature, executive and the judiciary are weak and corrupted, ineffective and insufficient as instruments for mediating social conflicts such as the absence of development, justice, security and equality. The implication is that Africa presents a society in which there is lack of development, and a poor political culture which would have generated stability and unity.

That is why Thompson (2004) argues that the Huntington and Finer school is of the view that the military not only needs the ability but also the right socio-political environment, before it is persuaded to intervene. Most countries in Africa like Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Guinea and Sudan failed to meet the expectations of democracy which brings development. As soon as underdevelopment, violence, insecurity and poverty took the centre stage in the above six mentioned countries, "it became the defining mechanism of regime change, the military with its superior access to the resources of coercion, becomes a key political player" (Thompson, p. 136, 2004). In support of Thompson, Obasanjo (2015, p. 172) reported the speech of Lt-Col. Philip Effiong in that line, Effiong said "we are not exempted, we took up arms because of the seen of insecurity generated in our people by the event of 1966. We have fought in defense of that cause." Furthermore, the Huntington and Finer school of thought advance that the military intervene in politics when the role played by the political leaders are below the expectations of the people (Sudley, 1982).

The Huntington and Finer school of thought best captures the scenario of the reasons the military intervene in politics in Africa. The major issues surrounding military coups in some African countries like Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Sudan, Gabon, Guinea and Mali etc range from political instability in Guinea, humanitarian crisis in Sudan, the manipulation of the constitution of Guinea, insecurity in Burkina Faso, electoral malpractices in Gabon, corruption and religious extremism in Mali. The case cited to justify military coups in the six mentioned countries are all related to the violation of principles that are supposed to regulate democracy. In some cases, the factors are the manifestations of the absence of the principles of democracy. Going by the provisions of the Huntington and Finer school of thought that, what happens in the environment of politics and how political leaders respond to it greatly explains why the military intervene in politics in Africa. For the military to stay away from taking overpower from civilian regimes, the political class has the challenge to address the missing links between the practice of democracy and the existence of the principles of democracy.

Cases of Violation of Democratic Principles and Military Coups in Africa

For the purpose of this study, the scope for military coups in Africa range from 2021 to 2023. The countries that are considered are Mali, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Gabon. In this section, attention is concentrated on the aspects of democratic principles which were violated that led to the rise of military coups.

In September 5, 2021, there was a successful military intervention which overthrew the civilian government of President Alpha Conde in Equatorial Guinea. The coup was led by Colonel Mamady Doumbouya. President Alpha Conde attempted to use the civilian structure including his office as the president to alter the constitution of the Republic of Guinea in other to run for the presidency for the third time. The attempt to alter the constitution against the popular will of the people was to take for granted the sovereignty of the people. The development resulted in a widespread protest. On the 5th of September 2021, the military had

to push aside the civilian government led by Alpha Conde, installing a military led government in person of Colonel Mamady Doumbouya. According to Odigbo, Ezekwelu and Okeke (2023), the reason for military coup in Equatorial Guinea on 5th September, 2021 was tied to issues relating to poverty, corruption, mismanagement and the bid for tenure elongation. The attempt to alter the constitution is what Dudley (1982) calls violation of the rules of the game that can attract military coup.

Before the September 5, 2021, coup in Equatorial Guinea, on the 24th May, 2021 a military coup took place in Mali. The civilian government led by President Bale N'Daw was overthrown and Assimi Goita became the president. According to Odigbo et al (2023), the reasons advanced for the coup was alleged cases of corruption, insecurity and economic hardship, weak governance structure and the warning of public trust from the citizens. The case of Mali's coup in 2021 conforms to the argument of Dudley (1982) that the military take over from civilian due to weak government structures and institutions.

In addition, in the same year in which the Equatorial Guinea and Mali's military coups took place, Sudan had its portion of military insurrection. Precisely, on 25th October 2021, the month after the coup in Equatorial Guinea, Sudan was in the turmoil of military insurrection. The government of President Omar al-Bashir was taken over by General Abel Fattah al-Burhan. Factors that led to the coup were associated with the inability of the Putschist to form the government. The Putschists were those military officers who took over power, they could not form a legitimate or acceptable representative government. So, while they were in power, they lacked the legitimacy or acceptance of the people because of poor governance skills or ability which Budley (1982) earlier alluded to. The lack of legitimacy resulted to wide range protest and civilian resistance. Again, the inability to handle the economic problem effectively escalated the political tension that led to the counter coup in Sudan which further deepened the pressure from the Sudanese for the military to return power to a democratically elected government. It is clear at this point also that the Huntington school of though is correct in its argument that the lack of democratic governance could mount pressure for military coups. The putschists were not legitimate government in the first instance, it positions in power were wrong in the first instance, that error or omission gave rise to the coup that took place. The counter coup in Sudan is what Thomson (2004) calls, the breakthrough "coup" in which the military overthrows an authoritarian or traditional regime.

Furthermore, in April 2021, there was a successful coup in Chad. In that coup, the civilian led government of President Idris Deby was ousted by Mahamat Idris Deby to emerged as the new leader. The reason for the coup in Chad in 2021 was not much different from what happened in other countries earlier on discussed. It was mainly around the issue of tenure elongation which is against the principle of periodic election in a democratic system. One of the principles of democracy is constitutionalism. Once the provisions of the constitution are violated especially, in this case, the desire to rule beyond two terms, it is most likely to attract resistance by the people, and the military will find it as an opportunity to take over government. So, both Dudley (1982) and Thompson, (2004) agree that the political class in most cases creates the opportunity for the military to organize coups by refusing to follow the principles of democracy.

The following year on 30th September 2022 there was another coup in Burkina Faso. This time around, a young military officer, Captain Ibrahim Traore ousted the military regime led by Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba. The reason Captain Traore gave were related to worsening security situation in Burkina Faso. Before the 30th September, 2022 coup, there

was an earlier coup in Burkina Faso in January 2022 in which Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba overthrew the government led by President Roch Marc Christian Kabore on the grounds that the civilian government failed to address terrorist activities. In the two coups of January and September 2022 in Burkina Faso, it clearly points to the fact that democratic principles were not given room in Burkina Faso which resulted to insecurity and bad governance.

Subsequently, in Niger, in July 26, 2023, some group of persons identified as presidential Guard plotted a coup and removed from office a democratically elected President, Mohamed Bazoun on the grounds that the civilian governed failed to guarantee security which is the first objective of democracy. Other reasons were associated with matters relating to poverty and lack of legitimacy and support for the civilian government by the people. The president was replaced with General Abdourahamane Tchiani (Odigbo, et al. 2023). The case was so serious that democracy was used to harass political opponents, opposition parties, the media and civil society. It was reported that the constitution in the country was allegedly drafted without public opinion. These are the issue the Huntington and Finer school of thought adduce to be precursors to military coups around the world.

Closely following the coup in Niger in 2023, on August 30, 2023, there was successfully plotted coup that ousted President Ali Bongo which brought in a military leader, Brigadier General Brice Oligui. According to Odigbo, et al (2023), the soldiers overthrew the government because of the inclination to remain in power forever against the constitution. The other factors were corruption-related issues and electoral malpractices.

Discussion of Findings

Based on the data and arguments presented above, the study found out the following:

i. **Rise in Military Coups:** It was found that from 2021 to 2023 there was a steady back-to-back rise in military coups in Africa. The records show that in 2021 alone coups were recorded in Chad (April, 2021), Mali (May 24, 2021), Equatorial Guinea (5th September, 2021), and Sudan (25th October, 2021). In 2022 there was one coup in Burkina Faso on 30th September 2022, while in 2023 there were two coups Niger (26th July, 2023) and Gabon (August, 2023). Thus, trajectory points to the fact that there was resurgence and rise of military coups in Africa.

ii. **Violation of Democratic Principles:** From all the case studies considered in this study, the findings were consistent with the reasons identified by the Huntington and Finer school of thought on the factors responsible for military coups. Across the countries examined in this study it was found that democratic principles like constitutionalism, legitimacy, representation, fundamental human rights, tolerance, accountability, pluralism, poplar sovereignty etc. were either violated or not given room to exist. This was found to have been the reason for the incessant coups in African countries.

iii. **Retrogressive Political Culture:** The steady rise of military coups in Africa despite the known reasons responsible for those coups points to the fact that Africa is not improving in its political culture, rather than improving on the practice of the principles of democracy, it is found lagging behind, this is slowing down the process of democratization in Africa.

Lessons for Nigeria

Due to the rising number of coups in Africa, Nigeria and its leaders should be worried and move quickly to take precautionary measures to prevent military insurgence in the country. These lessons should be learnt by Nigeria.

i. **Fight Against Corruption:** Nigerian politicians and political leaders should know that most Africa countries that experienced military coups was because of the corrupt practices in those countries. Political leaders and citizens alike should refrain from corruption and to sincerely fight it head long to avoid the consequences of military coups.

ii. **Security of Lives and Property:** The primary aim of government is to provide security for the people. When lives and property are not safeguarded it opens the window for military coups. Nigeria should be alerted to reducing or eradicating the alarming rate of insecurity in the country. It is not a good signal for democracy; the military is watching.

iii. **Constitution and Constitutionalism:** Nigeria Should know that no constitution can stand the taste of time if it does not originate from the people.African countries that attempted to alter their constitutions for tenure elongation attracted military coups. Nigeria should listen to the public outcry for a comprehensive review of the 1999 constitution which was the product of military regime. Nigeria should also be guided by extant or existing laws in all transactions in the country. The alteration or violation of any part of the constitution in Nigeria is risky these days of military insurrection.

iv. **Political Tolerance:** One of the major principles provided by Mackenzie (168) is political tolerance especially in a society where there are multiple diversities. Opposition parties should be allowed their constitutional rights, ruling political parties should avoid political harassment to silence opposition. The hunger for one party dominance should be discouraged because it has some political consequences these days of military uprising in Africa.

v. **Government of the People:** the Nigerian state should learn the lesson of the civilian rules in Africa which were overthrown because they were not in the interest of the people. Persistent hunger, poverty, lack of development and inflation is a very bad signal for Nigerian democracy. Efforts should be made by the government of the Federation of Nigeria to address hardship.

vi. **Strong political and administrative institutions:** One of the reasons Huntington and Finer School of Thought advanced to be responsible for military coup is weak political institutions. Nigeria should learn to strengthen its political and administrative institutions to promote effectiveness, social justice and efficiency.

Recommendations

The recommendations provided in this section are based on the findings of the study. If the recommendations are implemented, it will reduce or eradicate the spirit of military coup in Africa.

a. **Adherence to Constitutional Democracy:** African leaders and governments should strongly follow the laid down rules and regulations of their countries in running governance.

b. **Strong Political and Administrative Institutions:** Institutions of governments like the legislative, the executives, judiciary, agencies, political parties, Commissions and Ministries should be allowed their constitutional rights to operate without interference.

c. **Tenure Elongation:** African political leaders and head of governments should stop the illegal process of constitutional amendment to continue in power forever.

d. **Military and Public Governance:** The military governments in Africa should adhere to their professional responsibility of protecting lives, property and the territorial integrity of their countries. The military should stay away from public governance, where it is necessary, after taking over power to restore normalcy, it should quickly arrange a transitional process to hand over to a democratically elected civilian government.

e. **Democratic Welfarism:** The welfare of the citizens should be the major targets for African leaders and head of governments. Civilian governments should use the democratic structures in their countries to meet the needs of the people who put them in power. They should know that they are in office as representative of the people, and they hold national resources in trust of the people. They should be accountable and transparent as much as possible to the citizens of their respective countries which they head.

Conclusion

Military coups in Africa are products of bad political leadership. The inability of political leaders in Africa to stay away from corruption and selfishness is consistently responsible for the rise of military coups. If African political leaders adhere to the principles of democracy, the military will not intervene in African politics.

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