

# The Role of the Military in African Politics: The Case of Ethiopia and Nigeria 1970s-1990s A History; Comparative Analysis

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**Abstract:** *Military in African politics had a long history. It was the military that had dominated the politics of pre-colonial Africa and influenced the continent's history at different times. Following the 1966 military coup in Nigeria, Ethiopia also experienced interventions of military in its history in the 1974 at large. It was a surprise that the army in Ethiopia had controlled the political power in 1974. Because, all sections of the country had stood against the old administrative regime, Emperor Haile Selassie from 1960s onwards. Similarly, Nigeria's history was dominated by military rule throughout the mid of 1960s and the entire 1970s. The role of the military in African Politics, most importantly in both Ethiopia and Nigeria was only to dominate power than fulfilling what people wished to enjoy peace and political stability in the period*

**Keywords:** coup d'état, Derg, Military, Opposition, Red Terror

At the beginning of the 1970s, African politics was dominated by military rule. Using military forces in Africa was the main option of government change throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Military in African politics had a long history. For instance it was the military that had dominated the politics of pre-colonial Africa and influenced the continent's history at different times. With the exceptions of the two World Wars, the army in many African state was reserved to put down rebellions in different districts that safeguarding the entire sovereignty of different African states. But, during independence, the military in Africa had shown national sentiment.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of Ethiopia, the intervention of the military in the country's history was not novel. For example, the role of the *Mahal Sefaries* in bringing political change in the years 1910, 1916 and 1918, the role of the military during the Yeju dynasty in the political affairs of making and unmaking of kings and the unsuccessful coup 'd'état of the 1960s were among the roles played by the military. The 1960 coup 'd'état of Ethiopia remained unsuccessful. In contrast, the military regime of the Derg seriously handled its political progress with effective method and tactics, to avoid failure like the previous military interventions.<sup>2</sup>

If we see the case of Nigeria, after election of 1965, the first military coup was seen in January 1966 and after six months in June another coup 'd'état was materialized. The reason was the prevalence of corrupt and unjust rule in Nigeria. Because of the fear of ethnic domination, Igbo of the southeast and Hausa of the North, the bloody massacre of 20,000 Igbo who lived in the northern region resulted in the Secession Movement of Biafra and Nigeria experienced a civil war from 1967 to 1970. The Leader of Nigeria, General Gowon, who dominated power by military coup, data of June 1966 had failed to maintain political stability in Nigeria. With the exception of relief and recovery that was seen in the post war era, the government of general Gowon became weak and worked against the country's will.<sup>3</sup> The military rule of Gowon in Nigeria was not in a position of handling ethnic based question. To show the weakness of the military rule in Nigeria, Fage outlined "*Many Nigerian politicians think that the plan of Gowon in dividing Nigeria to small*

*federal State may lead to the dominations of the Northerners in which Gowon himself born. As a result, the military governor of Ibo prescribed the secessionist of Eastern Nigeria.*"<sup>4</sup> As Fage indicated, the civil war in Nigeria became the next controversial history. Unfortunately in the early 1970s, Ojukwu left the country and Biafra's were suppressed. As a result of serious ethnic problems and weakness in administering the vast country, Nigeria other military coup forced Gowon to resign and General Murtara Mohammed tried its best to restructure the government and change it in line with civilian rule. But, the country still was not free of military coups and counter coup data's. Then, Mohammed was assassinated by officers from the middle rank in 1976. Though Nigeria held a multiparty election in 1979 which provided executive presidency and federal state divided into nine regions, only a few had benefited from this constitution. It was only for the lawyers who had played a pivotal role in its endorsement and the politicians who had seized powers in which public funds might be spent for their benefit. Nigeria, very rich country, which potentially has large oil output, was under financial trouble throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The 1983 coup that paved the way for General Mohammed Buhari to seize power in Nigeria and major general Ibrahim Babangida's presidential post in 1985 were only possible through military intervention.<sup>5</sup>

If we see Nigeria under Babangida's rule, electoral law of the country was put into effect. But each and every article had been bounded by restrictions. So, Nigeria under Babangida's rule suffered a lot and disturbance, debts, oppositions were bad historical features in the country in the end of the 1980s.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1993, another election was held in Nigeria and two prominent personalities Abiyola, from the Yoruba and Bashir Tofa from the Northern Hausa were candidates that tried their best in the presidential election of Nigeria. Before the end of election results, with an increased roamer that Abiyola would win, the military rule of Babangida carried on a "Babangida must-stay" campaign. In this campaign, different Pamphlets detailed the importance of Babangida's rule on the pretext of Association for Better Nigeria (ABN). But, all the sayings, tactics and options in

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Nigeria mad by Babangida was not to accept the new election results and favoring only the military rule in Nigeria.<sup>7</sup>

Following the 1966 military coup in Nigeria, Ethiopia also experienced interventions of military in its history in the 1974 at large. It was a surprise that the army in Ethiopia had controlled the political power in 1974. Because, all sections of the country had stood against the old administrative regime, Emperor Haile Sellassie from 1960s onwards. The student movements, peasant uprisings, opposition from taxi drivers and so on were some to be listed. By far, the Derg is the result of different revolutionary processes of the country that seized power in 1974.<sup>8</sup>

In February 1974 in an attempt to reverse the growing instability, a new cabinet controlled office to make reforms effective. But in the following months instability among the army occurred and alternative reforms were not seen. As a result in June 1974 the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Force and the Police formed the Derg. The Derg began its Job by arresting prominent aristocrats, senior military officers and notable figures of the imperial regime and deposed the Emperor from power in September 1974. The Provisional Military Administrative council (PMAC), replacing the Imperial Regime came in to existence.<sup>9</sup>

Lieutenant General Aman Andom was elected as the head of the PMAC. Aman had served as a commander in chief of the Ethiopian force in Ethio-Somali war of the 1960s. But, because of disagreement between Aman and other military leaders like Mengistu Haile Mariam in the Eritrean case, Aman was eliminated in November 1975. In fact, power struggle between different military personnel of the PMAC on how to lead and organize the country had also another problem that manifested the character of the early Ethiopian revolution of the 1974. General Teferi Benti, who replaced Aman Michael Andom, was also assassinated in February 1977 at the main office of the Derg.<sup>10</sup>

An attack from the Northern Insurgent groups from 1975 onwards and opposition from the member of Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU), who dominated the Northwestern part of the country as well as fighting between different leftist movements versus the Derg were signs of disturbances and political instabilities in socialist Ethiopia. The Derg also declared the so called Red Terror which resulted in mass arrest execution and torture in the country which signified the dark history in which the military regime of Ethiopia negatively responded to different Leftist movements.<sup>11</sup>

With the support given from the Soviet Union, the Derg continued its rule and in 1984 Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE) was established. Drought in the Northern Part of the country, which broke out in 1984 was also another problem that the military could not handle. The 1987 constitution of the Derg came into effect to reflect "Popular Sovereignty." The military in Ethiopian Politics of 1974-1991 which brought little success in literacy and green campaign largely remained as a period of political instability, disturbance and loss of thousands of lives in the

name of "Red Terror" This harsh situation of the military was expressed by Berouk as follows:

*Paradoxically, as the post 1974 regime completed its transition in to an ostensibly civilian Marxist Leninist regime, Soviet Ideological and military support began to wane and its became increasingly fragile. As a matter of fact, fatally weakened by the three years of military reversals in Eritria and Tigray, the loss of internal legitimacy, the absence of political accountability, escalating corruption and its instability to spore economic development the Regime ended in 1991.<sup>12</sup>*

Generally, the role of the military in African Politics, Most importantly in Both Ethiopia and Nigeria was only to dominate power than fulfilling what people wished to enjoy peace and political stability in the period. To this end, Ethiopia under the military rule began by assassinating old Aristocrats and members of the Derg like Aman and Atnafu and concluding its chapters with war against the Northern Insurgents. The Case of Nigeria was almost similar with the Ethiopian experience and the military regime of the country finally paved the way for ethnic conflicts in different parts of Nigeria and this became the controversial history of the country since 1970s.<sup>13</sup>

#### Note

1. Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa* (London, 1989) p.415
2. Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991*, second edition (London 2001), p.234
3. Kelvin Shillington, P.416
4. J.B.Fage, *A History of Africa*, fourth edition (London, New York, 2002), p.515
5. Ibid, p.515-516
6. Marthin Meredith, *The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence* (London, 2005) p.394.
7. Ibid, pp.395-396.
8. Addis Hiwot, *Ethiopia: From Authocracy to Independence* (London 1975) p, 112.
9. Berouk Mesfin, "The role of the military in Ethiopia's National security 1974-1999" (MA Thesis, Addis Ababa University, International Relation, 2002) p.33.
10. Ibid P, 33.
11. Tefera Haile Sellassie, *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974-1991: From a monarchical Autocracy to a military Oligarchy* (London, 1977) pp, 200-202
12. Berouk, p.35
13. Bahru, p.262

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