

Military Rule

The Supreme Betrayal

Nigerians do not seem to have a full grasp of the fundamentals of military dictatorships and there are a number of possible reasons for this apathy. Perhaps we have suppressed admiration for the rogues that ran the system and therefore have a hidden desire to one day be like them. Or is it that we are more preoccupied with overblown and sometimes imaginary enemies like our ethnic neighbors, practitioners of unfamiliar religions or the biggest of them all—colonialism. Then again, maybe it is because we are hoodwinked into concentrating all our rage on invisible threats that many of us have never and may never make contact with in our lifetime, like homosexuals.

Military dictators seize managerial, political and economic power by force of arms. The consequence, holding millions of people to ransom and imposing their will on them. Don't fool yourself; if anyone abuses power by taking it forcefully, they will abuse everything else, including public funds and resources. This recurring trend in many African countries is one of the worst (if not the worst) forms of ruthless betrayal that could be meted out to citizens of any nation. It is not just that the military is sworn to protect the people; the people also provide the tax money to train and equip the military. Essentially, coupists turn on the people that eagerly look up to them for protection. Worse still, the guns they use for their treachery are the same guns provided by the people. Once subdued, the people are then mugged and burglarized in the most heinous fashion.

Even if your boss were adjudged to be sinfully incompetent and detrimental to professional progress, what are the chances that you would consider overthrowing him as a viable option? If you did, you would be diagnosed as mentally deficient and liable to some form of institutionalized punishment, even if just time spent in a psychiatric facility. But, except in rare situations, our military brigands are accorded utmost reverence as long as their ascendancy is prompted by a successful coup. Even after they step down, they remain superstars.

One aspect of military rule that we rarely talk about is the sense of entitlement assumed by every military personnel on account of their superiors being the bearers of absolute power and wealth. Granted, low-ranking men and women amount to little or nothing in their barracks where they hardly attain a position higher than scum or, perhaps, farm animals. They are nameless, faceless and subject to round-the-clock

orders. But their irrelevance in the barracks is more than made up for when they parade the streets and harass civilians for no apparent reason. For people who are utter nonentities within the chain of command, it is always psychologically refreshing to beat the crap out of civilians just for the fun of it. How many times have people been abused, yelled at, slapped, punched, kicked or flogged with *koboko* because some corporal felt like it? Maybe the soldier didn't like the way you looked at him. Maybe the navy man didn't like the way you walked past the gate leading into his master's house. Or could it be that you dared to answer the military policeman when he abused your mother? I remember when my brother, a friend and I were hurled out of the radio station in Calabar because the guard soldiers didn't like the way we walked into the facility. Then there was the day when the occupants of an entire street in Calabar were pummeled by navy men because one of their colleagues had apparently been in a fight with someone on that street (someone who, however, may not have lived on the street). There was also that fateful day when about a hundred of us were forced out of the United Bank of Africa (UBA) building by a band of soldiers as we waited for the bank to pay our delayed salaries. It is no surprise, therefore, that the opportunity for soldiers to quell demonstrations with teargas, guns and any other instrument of violence has always been a prized assignment executed as if in some frenzied state of dementia. It is also why they were thrilled to be sent to secondary schools in the 1970s where they habitually thrashed and harassed students in what became something of a random, sadistic pastime. Remember, these soldiers had no academic counselling or administrative skills, little or no education and no real understanding of the concept of discipline beyond being barked at into submission. But because their superior officers were invincible and immeasurably powerful, these dregs of the barracks also arrogated such superiority to themselves, even if in limited circumstances.

There is this erroneous assumption that fraudulence ends and democracy is restored after the military relinquishes power. But power is never relinquished by the military. One of Nigeria's former military dictators, Olusegun Obasanjo, has gone on to serve two terms as civilian president. Though unsuccessful in three attempts, Muhammadu Buhari finally clinched the presidency in 2015 after contesting the position for an unprecedented fourth time. It would seem that he was supremely confident about wearing the title of commander-in-chief a second time; it was a matter of time. Beyond confidence, it is even plausible that he had come to perceive the office as his birthright. Senate President David Mark was a staunch participant and barefaced beneficiary of military rule from the 1980s to the early 90s. When our ex-military dictators are not contesting to be senator or president with money they stole, they are sponsoring other

contestants from whom they will be rewarded lavishly. It is an absolute win-win situation for them. Are we not aware that our Council of State is significantly populated by former military dictators? Interestingly, within this group are retired officers working alongside the colleagues that deposed them. (With obvious animosity between them, is it humanly possible that they can work together efficiently?) But they continue to occupy this influential position and continue to be rewarded handsomely for the redundant work they do as members of this body. Have we not bestowed all of them with national awards? Numerous streets and institutions bear their names and our best known international airport, Murtala Muhammed is named after one of them, the same one who has his photo displayed on one of our currency notes, albeit a currency that has long depreciated in value. His martyr status derives from his being slaughtered in the same manner that he had participated in slaughtering innocent people during the July 1966 coup.

It is a win-win situation, therefore, not because military men have mastered the art of plundering the country, but because we tolerate, venerate, vindicate and encourage them. None of them should serve in any capacity that affords them the opportunity to influence national policies. None of them should be brazen enough to parade themselves in public, let alone contest for any political office, high or low. At best, they should be arraigned and forced to answer for their crimes. In many countries, that would be the case, but not in African countries. After all, many of the people in current positions of power are their payees and acolytes. This therefore is the problem—not that military men once enforced autocratic rule, but that these criminals are still held in high esteem, have never been held responsible for their atrocities and continue to wield remarkable political and economic influence. Shame on us!

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