

Veterans as a Stabilising Factor in Politics: West Africa as a Case Study

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Abstract

This paper discusses civil-military relations in Africa with an emphasis on regional instabilities as they affect the economic, socio-cultural, and political settings of the people. It observes the involvement of war veterans in civil rule as becoming a norm and underscores the interface between the veterans and the professional politicians in government. This research is intended to bring to light the enormous influence veterans hold and have the potential to wield in the political landscape in Africa.

The further work of this paper is to explore germane issues such as, who are the likely beneficiaries of veterans in politics? why must veterans embrace politics? and, in whose interest will the veterans' involvement in politics be protected? Veterans, especially those who retire with high military ranks, have built knowledge of and relationships with politicians at every level of governance and also occupy high status position notably because of their military background and perceived affluence, materially and otherwise. Such circumstances have produced a president, senate president, executive governors, local government chairmen, and others in Nigeria. Despite the existence of clearly defined checks and balances, trust for the veterans continues to be elusive and shrouded in fear, distrust, annoyance, and hate. However, this author stands with those who believe that veterans as political leaders have brought stability and peace, and serve as a unification point between extremists, thereby fostering peace and unity and a rare form of democratic rule that is not only unique but evolving.

Keywords: veterans, politics, democracy, documentation, war, normalization

The civil-military rule in West Africa is an evolving model that is deeply rooted in African politics. Therefore, this paper is intended to focus on an evolving culture of veterans in politics as a norm, and a need, in West African regimes.

There is no harm in stating the very obvious about the political terrain of the West African region, with its vast land mass and diverse people, rich cultural setting, and thriving economy. The West African region is a powerful regional bloc in Africa, and she has played important leading roles not just in local or regional issues but on the African continent at large. Nigeria and Ghana are the leading economies in that region, which is split along colonial lines chiefly by the Anglophones and the Francophones, whose colonial masters are the British and French respectively. Others include the Portuguese and American former territories of Guinea Bissau and Liberia, respectively.

The nations in the region witnessed their national independence arrive at almost the same time between the late 1950s and early 1960s, with the exception of Liberia, whose independence came in 1847. However, political strife has made a great mess of the enormous potentials of the region. Unfortunately, most of the democratic structures erected by different colonial masters were pulled down by the intervention of the military into politics just shortly after their independence as sovereign states. Since then, the region has known no peace. The truncating of civil rule led to the near-perpetuity of warlords in governance, as witnessed in Ghana, Nigeria, Togo, the Republic of Benin, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Ivory Coast, leading to high handedness, oppression, jungle justice, extra-judicial killings, murders, the plundering of state resources, massive corruption, the stashing of stolen money in foreign banks, nepotism, and mediocrity, to mention but a few—which led to a sliding economy. However, due to sanctions, embargoes, travel restrictions, frozen foreign accounts, and confiscation of foreign-owned assets of military juntas in power by the Western governments, most of the military lords were forced to return to democratic rule.

In a twist of fate, some of these veterans merely transformed from the Khaki (Uniform) to Civil rule, as in the case of Gnassingbé Eyadéma of Togo, while some others transferred power back to the people, especially in the late 1980s to the 1990s. At this point, Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish to emphasize the role of veterans as a stabilizing factor in politics. It is pertinent to state here that though the relationship between the military and the civil society is strained, the urge and desperate need for success by political parties paved the way for veterans to re-emerge as suitable candidates for elective positions for different political parties, especially former heads of state and war veterans like General Olusegun Obasanjo, General Abdusallam Abubakar, General Ibrahim Babangida, Major General Muhammed Buhari, Vice Admiral Murtala Nyanko, Brigadier General Olagunsoye Oyinlola, General David Mark, and Flight Lieutenant JJ Rawlings of Ghana. These veterans are perceived to wield much influence and affluence because of their years in power as military heads of state. It is believed that the veterans can withstand the intrigue, emotions, and horse trading by professional politicians. Again, it is also an open fact that most of these retired military persons had gained a significant amount of wealth. Hence, since politics is a money game, they possess the financial muscle to withstand these demands as professional politicians seek to grab power for their parties as their the sole aim.

Objectively, these Veterans have got not just what it takes to govern the people in a democratic environment alone, but due to their years of experience in power, it appears that they possess the ability, doggedness, and foresight to administer their respective countries and thus their work seems like a mission to right their wrongs. This paper focuses on such veterans within the West African region.

General Olusegun Obasanjo is a three-time head of state/president. I assert that he has been the most successful Nigerian veteran in politics. A country with a population of 160 million people, the largest black nation in the world and endowed with rich human, land, and natural resources. He was the head of state by

chance after a failed coup d'état, during which his boss, Gen. Murtala Muhammed was killed. Obasanjo, then head of government, introduced different reforms and among them is "Operation Feed the Nation," where all were encouraged to go into farming, be it cottage or mechanized. Without pressure, he handed over to a democratically elected president by the name of Shehu Shagari in 1979.

Obasanjo returned to active politics as a civilian in 1999 after the demise of the maximum ruler General Sanni Abacha, the most authoritarian, tyrannical, and despotic leader in the annals of the country. Abacha took over the reign of power by a palace coup d'état during the interim national government led by Chief Shonekan, where he served as the deputy head in the year 1993, shortly after the international community forced the then-military president Ibrahim Babangida out of office for annulling the freest and most credible election popularly called "June 12" and won by the late industrialist and philanthropist Chief M.K.O Abiola.

On General Abacha's demise in 1998, Gen. Abdulsallam led a successful transition to civil rule wherein Chief Olusegun Obasanjo became the president. Then and there, the veteran showed he's still got stuff under his sleeves. He revolutionized the telecommunications sector by the introduction of a general system for mobile (GSM), formed two vibrant anti-graft agencies—the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission, led by pioneer chairman Justice Mustapha Akanbi, and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, which was then headed by the highly respected and revered young Assistant Commissioner of Police Nuhu Ribadu. Gen. Obasanjo also built a world-class national stadium in the country's capital of Abuja, and he moved the country from a mixed economy to a free market enterprise by privatizing the majority of the government-controlled establishments in the area of power, including telecomms, ports, and aviation.

Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, as he is fondly called, is a source of pride to the veterans for reviving a near-comatose economy. Nigeria's foreign reserves rose from \$2 billion in 1999 to \$43 billion by the time Obasanjo left office in 2007. He was able to secure debt pardons from the Paris and London clubs amounting to some \$18 billion and paid another \$18 billion to get the nation to debt-free status. Most of these loans were secured and spent by past corrupt officials. Just recently, Nigeria's GDP overshot that of South Africa to emerge as the best economy on the continent of Africa. Obasanjo was the first Nigerian head of state to hand over power to a democratically elected president and the first former head of state to be democratically elected. On the completion of his eight years (two terms), he handed the position over to President Umaru Yar'adua who later died in office on May 5, 2010. Obasanjo was then among those who ensured that the present President Goodluck Jonathan (the first President from the oil-rich Niger delta region) was elected and installed.

Gen. Obasanjo was able to keep at bay the threats by ethnic militants of Egbesu from the southeast, the Oduua People's Congress from the southwest, and the Boko Haram from the northeast. He also brought foreign direct investment into the country. He cleaned up the battered image of Nigeria in international affairs, which led to the successful hosting of the 17th edition of CHOGM (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting) with Her Royal Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in attendance. In addition to that, both sitting and former American presidents visited Nigeria during Obasanjo's dispensation—namely Presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush, Jr—as well as British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The former president was the envoy of the Economic Community of West African States to Cote de'Ivoire and the United Nations special envoy to the great lakes in 2008. Banki Moon, UN secretary general, said of him:

"General Obasajo is one of the most distinguished elder statesmen of Africa. He brings with him a long-standing commitment to peace on the African continent and an intimate knowledge of Central African politics. He has been involved in a number of international mediation efforts, particularly in Namibia, Angola, South Africa, Mozambique and Burundi."

People often nurse deep-seated animosity against retired military personnel in politics owing to high-handedness, rumors of corrupt lifestyles and a non-accountable leadership style, yet they really are confronted with little options to pick from because “the devil you know is better than the angel you have never met.” One important factor for people is their desire for real peace, security, and unification as an individual member of a community, and in this, the people are direct beneficiaries of the involvement of veterans in politics.

This is further supported by the fact that they are the rallying point even as oppositions like General Buhari, one-time military head of state known for his conservative and strict discipline during his days in office, in the early 1980s endeared himself to the people as a possible alternative to the powers that be. He is presently being touted as the presidential flag-bearer of the biggest opposition mega-party, All People’s Congress, a merger of some opposition parties. This Fulani General served as the chairman of the defunct Petroleum Trust Fund (PTF) under five years of mismanagement of late maximum ruler, Gen. Sanni Abacha. Paradoxically, despite the unpopular government of Abacha, Gen. Muhammed Buhari’s trust fund performed exceedingly well, even to the admiration of critics. Among the projects his administration embarked upon was stocking up of school libraries at all levels of education, free distribution of textbooks and writing books to pupils, provision of pipe-borne water, road construction, and the strengthening of the small- and medium-scale enterprises, to mention but a few. PTF became a household name in the country because all strata of the economy was positively touched. All these were made possible because of the input, presence, and tenacious leadership of the general.

The forays of the “evil genius,” as he is popularly referred to in Nigerian media circles, Gen. Ibrahim Babangida’s entry into Democratic politics as being a quiet one. Though a card-carrying member of the People’s Democratic Party, Babangida is yet to assume a national position as his run for the presidency saw him stepping down for his godson and kinsman who eventually lost the race. The general still holds the record of been the longest-serving military president in Nigeria, having spent eight years in office. This brilliant general from the north-central part of Nigeria intervened in the political crisis that engulfed the hitherto peaceful former American Territory of Liberia during a seige by militia fighters, which later led to the gruesome murder of the then-Liberian President Samuel Doe by militia troops led by Alhaji Kroma and Charles Taylor. The intervention of Nigerian troops to forestall intensified bloodshed, destruction of property, and rape of innocent girls and women of the West African nation won international the general applause and accolades. Nigeria almost single-handedly bankrolled the mission under the aegis of the Ecowas Monitoring Group, and after years of mission, her troops were gradually withdrawn on the installation of a democratically elected president. However, even though Babangida’s political return to Aso Rock (the Nigerian equivalent to the U.S. White House) might not have been realised, the general still wielded great influence nationally in the political equation of Nigeria.

Another testament to the stabilizing effect of veterans in politics is Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings of Ghana. In fact, Ghanaians hold him in high esteem for redirecting their economy and laying the foundation for what they now enjoy as a robust economy, one of the most vibrant on the continent and second-best to Nigeria in the West African bloc. Rawlings, whose origin is partly Ghanaian and Scottish, rose to power by two different coup d’etat and successfully re-engineered the country by creating a National Commission on Democracy to study ways of establishing participatory democracy in Ghana. The commission issued a “Blue Book” in July 1987 outlining modalities for district-level elections, which were held in 1988 and early 1989, for newly created district assemblies. After mounting pressure to return to democratic rule, Rawlings also contested and won the presidential polls. He joined the ranks of those who transformed from Khaki (Uniform) to Civilian presidents. Jerry, as he is fondly called, handed over the reigns of power to another civilian by the name of John Koffour and to date, the democratic structure he erected is very strong and a model to other

West African nations. He is still actively involved in Ghanaian politics, having served two successful terms of four years each, and is presently the African Union envoy to Somalia.

Brigadier (Ret.) Julius Maada Wonie Bio is another worthy veteran. He conformed to the popular maritime quote “our word—our bond.” He was the military head of state of Sierra Leone from January 16, 1996, to March 29, 1996, under the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) military junta government.

Bio led a military coup in Sierra Leone on January 16, 1996, ousting his close friend, his immediate boss, and the leader of the NPRC junta government, Captain Valentine Strasser (the youngest head of state in the world), following a division within senior members of the NPRC junta. In his first public broadcast to the nation following the 1996 coup, Brigadier General Bio stated that his motivations for the coup were his support for returning Sierra Leone to a democratically elected civilian government and his commitment to ending the Sierra Leone civil war.

Bio fulfilled his promise to return Sierra Leone to democracy and handed power to Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of the SLPP (Sierra Leone People’s Party) following the latter’s victory in the 1996 presidential election despite the lure of office, the sit-down-tight of most military heads of state, and the temptation of wealth the office affords. After retiring from the military in 1996, he moved to the United States to continue his education. Bio is a graduate of American University in Washington, D.C., with a master’s degree in international affairs. Bio is currently an active member of the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) and was its presidential candidate in the 2012 presidential election, having won the nomination at the July 31, 2011, SLPP national convention held at the Miatta Conference Hall in Freetown. He is just another of many veterans who have taken to politics and spread their influence within acceptable democratic norms.

It is evident that veterans should be seen first and foremost as humans who are and can make mistakes like every other person in the society. Their judgments, though an off-shoot of their military trainings, are nonetheless fallible. Conclusively, the entry of veterans into the political matrix is undoubted, following conflicts in the context of weak and failed states that face a range of challenges to governmental authority—ranging from criminality to insurgency and finally to avoiding active military supplantment in politics—to enhance corrective measures of imbalances which in fact are not limited to the scope of Africa.

Substantially, veterans in politics can then be seen as a guard and guide to a state success. According to Niccolo Machiavelli, “It is necessary to be a fox to discover the snares and be a lion to terrify the wolves.” In justification of the topic, if veterans are permitted to pilot the nations of the sub-region, they are capable of discovering the snares and terrifying the wolves, as it is obvious that all the achievements of these military veterans in politics is where civilian administrators stumble. As Winston Churchill said, “The truth is incontrovertible, male may attack it, ignorance may deride it, but at the end, there it is.”

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