BOOK REVIEW

Editors: Lai Olurode and Remi Anifowose
No. of pages: ix + 224
Publisher: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), Lagos

All Flail the Military!

Adigun Agbaje
Department of Political Science, University of Ibadan

The task that this book set for itself relates to how to urgently re-orientate the military away from antidemocratic behaviour in the Fourth Republic while also taking other steps in civil and political society that will ensure that the military no longer disrupt Nigeria’s democratic agenda but remain content with the pursuit of their constitutional charge of serving as instruments of that democratic order.

The book discharges its self-appointed charge in thirteen chapters, twelve of which are organized into three sections. The first section addresses what it identifies as theoretical considerations on the military and democratization in six chapters. The second section comprises four chapters that address socio-psychological, economic and legal issues while the last section contains two chapters that address the role of the media and health-related matters. The last chapter (Chapter 13) concludes the book.

While it is not the intention here to do a chapter-by-chapter review, it must be noted that there is no consistency in the quality of these chapters, and this finding is not surprising. It is often the case that edited collections contain essays that cover the spectrum from very good to very poor and beyond, and it is indeed a rare and happy event to come across such collections that consistently evince high quality, from the first page to the last. While all the contributors are to be commended for discharging their mandate to the best of their ability, it is important to comment briefly on specific aspects of this book.

For one, apart from the detailed theoretical exposition in parts of chapters one and three, much of what is left of the six-chapter Section One is less of a theoretical discourse and more of an empirical exposition. That section, therefore, delivered much less than it promised. It also seems that Chapter Two, which interrogates the democratic credentials of the Fourth Republic against the background of a notion of what a democracy should be, is longer than required, having occupied a whole twenty-four pages to prove the incontrovertible point that:

\[ \ldots \text{although democratic yearnings are widespread and thunderous in Nigeria, in the light of concrete realities, it would be terminologically more precise to typify the current form of government as civilian, but not democratic as such. (pp.36)} \]

The book itself is longer than necessary. It contains, at least, three chapters that should not have found a place within its covers on the basis of the advertised focus on the military and democratization. First is the chapter on ‘the prestige of the military profession in relation to some others’ (pp. 131-142). The contributor tries to provide a link between the chapter and the rest of the book. He suggests, for instance, that his very interesting finding, to wit, that ‘the military’s misadventure into politics has not increased its prestige in the hands [sic] of the Nigerian people’ (p.140), could, if made available to the military, ‘help in re-directing the attention of those few inordinately ambitious men in uniform and their politicians-collaborators [sic] away from military
coup d’etat for a long time to come’ (p.141). At best, the suggested link is tenuous. On the other hand, serious methodological flaws relating, in part, to the nature of sample and sampling utilized in the study call into question the result reported in that chapter, and further underscore the point that it might have been better to publish this contribution in an outlet more specialized than the book being reviewed.

Another chapter that appears out of place in terms of content and methodology is that on the impact of democratization on the re-socialization of the Nigerian military. The chapter is based on a survey of the attitude of Nigerians in non-military occupations toward the Nigerian military. The respondents to the survey were reported to have been selected with the aid of accidental sampling technique. I find that the so-called tables summarizing findings from the survey, and the use to which data therein were put, including the way data were presented and interpreted, constitute a gross abuse of method and process. I equally note that the chapter (along with aspects of some other chapters to which I shall return shortly) contains inaccurate assumptions and declarations. These range from the opening statement on how military coups became popularized by developments in South America in the 1960s (p.160) to the wild and unqualified claim that under military rule, ‘the military live a life of indolence and engages [sic] in conspicuous consumption’ (p.161). Finally, the chapter on HIV/AIDS and the Nigerian military (pp. 188-203) should equally have been published in a more specialized outlet. It definitely should not have been included in this volume.

This brings me to yet another point: why did this book elect to focus on the military, six years after the inauguration of the Fourth Republic and in the face of the mounting malfeasances of that Republic’s civil leaders, in discussing the all-important question of democratic consolidation? Let us consider the book’s responses to this poser. First, the book’s Foreword notes that:

The military is as relevant to the achievement of lofty objectives of democratic governance as any other segment of the society. The process of re-orientation for the military must be treated as a matter of priority so that in spite of its vilification for the setbacks occasioned by military dictatorship, its officers and members could adopt an attitude of making amends for past (mis)deeds, creating a new positive and popular image for the institution, accept democratic oversight and governance and be supportive of all efforts aimed at consolidating democracy in the country.

Along this line, the book’s introduction sets for it the twin task of examining how the military has fared since 1999 under democratization, as well as how the military itself and (if I may add) fear of the military has impacted on the democratization process (p.7).

For me, two issues arise at this point. One relates to the question of how long we will continue to see the military as the major threat to Nigeria’s attempt to democratize, and therefore continue to pay the kind of attention reported in this book to it, in the face of compelling evidence that the civil political elite is increasingly becoming the most critical threat to the democratic agenda. Even one of the book’s editors, quoting S.P. Huntington (p.8) on the balance of threats confronting emerging democracies, notes:

Future problems in civil-military relations in new democracies are likely to come not from the military but from the civilian side of the equation. They will come from the failures of democratic governments to promote economic development and maintain law and order. They will also stem from weak political institutions and ambitious political leaders who may enlist the military as their accomplices in undermining and destroying democracy.

This then brings me to the second issue relating to the evidential bases of much of what we, as academics, civil society activists, media managers, other professions, civil politicians, and plain folk, think that we know about the military. Contributors to this book, as indeed other books, and many other Nigerians have routinely taken positions and expressed assumptions on the Nigerian military that are at best not informed by a scientific and rigorous understanding of the empirical situation of their subjects and at the worst reflect an unacceptable level of ignorance or naivete or both. We know very little of the Nigerian military and security community. Worse still, we remain ill-equipped or unwilling to
empirically engage the community to advance knowledge and understanding of defence and security issues for the benefit of the Nigerian society.

An immediate case in point is the book under review. This book is replete with assumptions that are apparently taken as the gospel truth and are, therefore, neither illustrated nor confirmed by empirical data. A list of such assumptions would include the following:

a. **Nigerians have settled for civil rule in the belief that the worst form of civil rule is better than the best form of military rule.**

My comment: Where is the evidence to support this claim?

b. **The military have realized that they do not fare better under military rule.**

My comment: Again, where is the evidence, perhaps, results from a survey of the military, or an empirical assessment of quality and standard of military hardware, software and infrastructure, to support this claim constantly made on behalf of the military by their leaders, academics and the media, among others?

c. **The military have realized that professionalism suffers under military rule.**

My comments: If this implies an absence of professionalism in the military under military rule, it must be demonstrated. In addition, we need to also know what actually happens to professionalism in the partisan context of civil rule.

d. **Intra-military tensions arising from the involvement of the military in politics gradually disappear under civil rule.**

My comment: Please demonstrate this. While doing so, also look for data on what happens to the military community under the partisan context of civil rule.

e. **Nigerian Army generals are among the richest in the world.**

My comment: I know a retired Army General that moves around Lagos in taxi cabs and buses, and many more others who are not rich even by Nigerian standards. So, how do these generals compare globally at the other end of the spectrum — among the world’s poorest generals — and in relation to civilian politicians, among others?

f. **The Nigerian military waged an economic war of looting on Nigeria and plundered its resources.**

My comment: Defined as the Army, the Air Force and the Navy, the Nigerian military has always numbered in tens of thousands. How many of its officers and other ranks were involved in this war and plunder?

For me, the point of this exercise is to reemphasize what we all know; namely, that as academics, we are constrained by the tradition of our vocation and the demands of the science that we practice, in what we do, say or write. The challenge is to move to acquire empirically-grounded and theoretically-rigorous knowledge of our subject-matter, whatever that may be, and then contribute assiduously to the task of strengthening and protecting that stock of knowledge from forces that seek to degrade and devalue it. It is in doing that that we can literally retain our licence to practice as academics and discharge honourably our basic mandate to our country as it continues to wobble and grope on its troubled march to democracy and good governance.

This book has contributed its quota to the acquisition and expansion of such knowledge with regard to the role and place of the military in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic. It has highlighted the negative dimensions of the legacy of the long years of military rule in Nigeria in such areas as the de-institutionalization of the public sphere and the erosion of a political economy and accompanying value systems of a culture of restraint supportive of democracy, development, equity and good governance. Beyond this, the book has identified what needs to be done in the areas of re-institutionalization and constitutional re-engineering to fully establish the illegitimacy of military rule.

Its shortcomings notwithstanding, I commend this book to every Nigerian, friends of Nigeria, and all scholars interested in the future of democracy and good governance in Nigeria.
Biographical Note

Adigun Agbaje is a professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.