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RETURN OF CIVILIAN CONTROL: AN AFTERMATH
OF COUP D'ETAT IN SUB-SAHARA AFRICA

Julius Debro

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Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania

23 May 1975

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USAWC MILITARY RESEARCH PROGRAM PAPER

RETURN OF CIVILIAN CONTROL: AN AFTERMATH
OF COUP D'ETAT IN SUB-SAHARA AFRICA

INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH PROJECT

by

Lieutenant Colonel Julius Debro
Military Intelligence



US Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania
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A. Introduction.

Soldiers stormed the presidential palace in Chad early today and killed the President in a coup d'etat. The acting chief of staff, Gen. Noel Odingar, announced the military takeover in this north central African nation in a statement broadcast by the national radio shortly after the attack on the palace.

This has been a familiar sound in many African countries since they began receiving their independence from colonial rule in 1957. Governments established on democratic principles have within a few years fallen victim to coups contrived by the military. There have been more than forty successful coups since 1958 and the majority have been instigated by the military. This paper will deal with the problem of how and why the military overthrows a government and enters the political arena, with emphasis on examining and analysing the conditions under which the military returns power to civilian control.

The focus of this study will be three nations, Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Nigeria, that have been successful coups and have returned or attempted to return power to civilian control. In Sierra Leone, there have been several coups since its first in 1967 eventually leading to a brief restoration of power to civilian authority. In a 1971 coup the military reasserted its control. In Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah was elected in 1959; and was ousted in 1966 and governmental power was eventually returned to the people in 1969. Yet in 1972 another coup again wrestled power from civilian authority. In Nigeria, General Gowon achieved power in 1966 and has promised to return control of the government to the people in 1976.

1. Background:

Many studies have been written about the successful military coup d'etat but few scholars have addressed the subject of how the military returns the government to civilian control. This study is an attempt to examine this aspect of political development within three African states (Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone) in which military control has been voluntarily or is about to be voluntarily returned to civilian control.

Military coups occur whenever members of the regular armed forces remove or attempt to remove a state's chief executive through the use of force or threat of force. During the twenty-five year period between 1946 and 1970, approximately one out of every five coups involved military actors in the actual coup effort. Most of those actors were members of the Army rather than other services. The Army is generally the logical candidate because it has the largest organizational force. At the organizational level, planning and execution for the coup is generally a coalition of unit commanders who commit their respective units to political combat.

Coups have occurred in countries which are important to our national interest in Japan, Mexico, China, Germany, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Spain, and frequently can change the political orientation of the country. The last fifteen years have seen the coups dominate politics in Sub-Saharan Africa and currently more than half the states have military governments.

2. Statement of the Problem:

The basic problem is how and under what conditions does the military return the government to civilian control once a coup has occurred?

3. Investigative Procedures:

The main thrust of the research will be to examine, through library research, the causes for the coup and the conditions that are necessary to return the government to civilian control. This will be done through an exhaustive search of all available literature relating to successful coups conducted by the military between 1946 and 1970 in Africa.

The military in any nation is an organization of power. It is the most logical institution to overthrow the government because it controls the weapons of violence and it alone is equipped with structural cohesiveness and discipline sufficient to muster forces to bring about a coup. Historically, the military mission has been to protect the country from foreign invaders and internal strife. In practice, the military believes itself to possess some special interest and identifies with the national interests of the state. If the military believes that the national image and sovereignty is endangered, the military organization will assume control of the government in an attempt to arbitrate or provide custodial rule. The national self interest within the military organization emerges "to save the nation from political disaster" and attempts to ensure some degree of stability and order in a period of chaos and anarchy.²

Professor Claude Welch gives us six propositions that may or may not lead to a coup d'etat:

1. The likelihood of military intervention rises should the armed forces become heavily involved in primarily domestic, police-type or counterinsurgency activities.

2. The likelihood of military intervention rises should the armed forces be ordered, contrary to the advice of the officer corps, to use coercion against domestic opponents of the government.

3. Military intervention resulting from specific policy grievances may lead to the restoration of civilian rule when the grievances have been rectified; military intervention resulting from distrust of the total political system leads to the establishment of a military regime of long duration.

4. The likelihood of military intervention rises as the content of officer education is expanded to encompass political issues customarily resolved by civilians.

5. The likelihood of military intervention rises with a perceived deterioration of economic conditions, especially if accompanied by a belief that the government cannot resolve, or is responsible for, this deterioration.

6. The likelihood of military intervention rises in the absence or weakness of agreed-upon procedures for peaceful political change.

Each of the above factors taken singularly or collectively may lead to armed conflict by the military. Morris Janowitz says there is a cluster of variables such as skill structure and career lines, social recruitment and education, professional and political ideology, and the presence or absence of cohesion among officers that may lead

to a takeover by the military.⁴ Others say that the Army soldier has special administrative skills which puts him in a peculiar position to manage affairs of state.

Many of the skills commanded by the arms are peculiarly relevant to civilian and particularly administrative abilities. The Army thus takes considerable pride in its ability to develop modern skills and believes that it is well-fitted to manage all aspects of government.⁵

Professor Finer has indicated that in highly industrialized societies where rules are clearly drawn the threat of a military takeover is miniscule, but in societies of low political culture, one finds neither agreement on the mode of political intercourse nor the presence of highly institutionalized structures. Thus military intervention is extremely likely.⁶

Whatever the reasons are, the military has become a powerful political force and potential threat to civil governments throughout Africa. Some writers attribute this vulnerability to coups to the lack of Africanization of the officer corps prior to independence. Africanization of the officer corps was delayed for a number of years after eventual independence became an unavoidable factor. The colonial powers had generally envisaged the slow, separate development of African countries to a point of self-sufficiency when they could become self-sustaining; they did not anticipate the instant rise of nationalism and drive for immediate freedom. Thus, African officers were not trained to take over the Army when independence was established. In 1948, the French colonial governments in Africa had approximately two percent commissioned officers who were Africans.⁷

Those Africans that were selected by their colonizers were often from well-known families, were well-educated, and were on good terms with their counterparts in the civil elite.⁸ Military and civilian training for these officers was accelerated after the advent of Nkrumah's government in Ghana in 1957. Most went to elementary training schools in West Africa, then to Britain and the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, and some had service training at other schools. After completion of training, there was rapid promotion within the military establishment. The accelerated promotion of the military elite within the African armies created among some a sense of destiny, a sense of leadership concerning the destiny of their homeland. Traditionally, in history the officer corps comes only from the ruling elite, but since in Africa virtually all the responsible positions were held by Europeans, the African elite did not see the military as an attractive alternative to power. Thus, the majority of persons of African descent in the Army were from the lower class. With independence this element was rapidly promoted and its primary concern was social reform and redistribution of the country's wealth. A complementary concern was the distribution of power in society and the proper status of the military within society.

The belief that Africa is prone to coups d'etat has led many commentators to overlook social factors in their explanations. Zolberg relies on specific circumstantial and current factors. Without actually attempting an analysis, he claims that it is "impossible to specify variables which distinguish as a class countries where coups have occurred from others which have so far been spared."⁹ Janowitz concurs.

Others say that explanations, if there are any, must be sought within the particular situation of each troubled African State.

Essentially, there are three explanations given for coups :

1) Colonial background of African countries: because of the different political systems imposed on multicultural groups by France, Britain, and Belgium, colonial countries are vulnerable to coups. The British legacy provides a more promising base for nation building and development. Countries having unitary one-party systems are so constructed that they are vulnerable to military coups. 2) Contagion theories: a coup in one country stimulates those in other countries, especially neighboring ones. This idea is implicit in the work of Bell who talks of two waves of military intervention in the political affairs of Africa. The first began in December 1962 and continued until February 1963. The second began in November 1965 and continued until February 1966. Evidence has been given to support these theories; however, the theory is somewhat insufficient because it does not explain or cannot predict when and where an initial wave of coups will begin, nor which countries will follow the examples of the first. 3) Temporal theories: these rest on the assumption that most newly independent countries are equally vulnerable to coups. Political structures in newly developing countries erode. Most civilian politicians fail to fulfill their own goals or confront the problems posed by their typically heterogeneous populations, internal conflict, and fragile economies. Power is devalued and force comes to the fore.

The above explanations of why coups occur are only theories which have never been tested and they may have some validity but we must keep

in mind that to forestall military coups some degree of economic and social progress is necessary. There must be economic and political participation by all citizens, not just a few, and there should not be high unemployment or depression or inflation.

In any coup, there are always at least three conditions which must be taken into account: the sympathies of the nation's armed forces, the state of public opinion, and the internal situation; we must also keep in mind that there are certain variables which play a part in the military coup: the military may intervene if it feels threatened as an institution by civilian rules or if required to carry out policies unacceptable to it, or the military may intervene if it feels it is the only group with the technical competency to run the country; and finally, the size of the military force may be a crucial factor in its potential for effecting a military coup.

A coup is only half accomplished with the capturing of the instruments of force in society. Effective authority is based on legitimacy, and the public must be convinced that the coup and the leaders who achieve power by it are legitimate. And once the military has intervened successfully, there are two basic options: to retain power, or return it to the civilians. This may be done in four ways: return and restrict power; or retain and expand power. Finer indicates that in order to arrive at disengagement by the military, four conditions must be met: First, the new leader imposed by the military on the state shall positively want his troops to quit politics. Second, the new head of state shall be able to establish a regime capable of functioning without further military support. Third, that this viable

regime shall be favorable to the armed forces. And fourth, that the armed forces shall have sufficient confidence in its leader to be prepared to return to the barracks when he so orders.

Sierra Leone:

Let us now look at Sierra Leone which experienced its first military coup in March of 1967. Brigadier David Lansana, the Army's Force Commander, declared martial law on the 21st of March and placed the leader of the opposition All People's Congress (APC) under house arrest which had just won an apparent victory at the polling booth. Two days after the takeover, the Force Commander was in turn arrested by a group of senior officers who immediately set up a military junta. Overt military rule lasted thirteen months before the Army rank and file decided to arrest all the commissioned officers and to restore civilian rule. Military coups or attempted coups have since become an inevitable by-product of political change in Sierra Leone. In March 1971, the military Force Commander again tried to overthrow the government. The coup lasted four hours before he himself was overthrown by the military who disassociated themselves with his actions and remained loyal to the ruling civilian group.

Sierra Leone achieved independence in April 1961 and showed no indications of discontent such as ethnic divisions, elite corruption, flirtation with foreign ideologies, etc.¹⁰ The 1962 general election remains perhaps the fairest, most orderly election of its kind ever held in Sub-Sahara Africa.¹¹ Why, then, was she prone to a military coup? By 1966, serious political problems began emerging. Corruption within government was contributing to the breakdown of the power

structure. Problems within the military hierarchy also contributed to the rising discontent. These problems were primarily with leadership rather than with material things. Some officers called for the resignation of the Force Commander (Lansana) charging him with "nepotism, tribalism, immorality, drunkenness, and the inability to administer."¹² These complaints were taken to the Prime Minister who refused to act. The recent coups in Nigeria and Chad helped to identify the dangers that the Army might pose. In February 1967, an apparent coup plot was discovered and eight Army officers were arrested. Many officers wanted to see Lansana removed and this just contributed to the dissatisfaction. The Army had tried democratic methods of protest which failed. Lansana then took over the country in March 1967, but was unable to rule because of dissatisfaction within the military.

The military takeover in Sierra Leone was caused because Lansana had aligned himself too closely to the ruling party and when it lost he found it necessary to take over to ensure continued power. The National Reformation Council assumed office on March 25, 1967. The Council dissolved the House of Representatives, banned all political parties, suspended most sections of the 1961 Constitution and ordered all newspapers except the government owned paper to discontinue publication. The military was not seen as the savior in Sierra Leone. Instead, they were seen as opportunists who responded to political weaknesses by seizing the government.

For a regime to legitimize its authority, it must first establish certain broad guidelines for action.¹³ In Sierra Leone, the new leader told all the people to conduct themselves as one nation and not look at things along tribal lines. He also indicated that he would

eliminate corruption within government, but that there was a need for obedience to authority as well as a need to rely on the civil servant. What the Army was attempting to do was to establish a non-political model for nation building but it failed to recognize the conflict of interest and values inherent in any society.

The educated elite within the country disavowed the military takeover from the very beginning and made efforts to have the government returned to the people. The common people supported the coup and looked forward to better government. The basic problem for individuals responsible for running the government is the judicious use of power as well as the possible unwillingness to relinquish that power. Both the military leaders and his assistants seem to enjoy the exercise of apparently limitless power. A basic mistake, once a coup has occurred, is the failure of the officer corps to upgrade the enlisted personnel. In Sierra Leone on April 17th another coup occurred within the ranks of the military. This was highly unusual because it was a takeover by the warrant officers and noncommissioned officers who returned the control of the country to the civilians. In 1971, the Army again took over the country. The Army, by interfering with political evolution, showed clearly that it is the agent for the suspension of activities in a deteriorating situation, and will takeover the country to bring about changes in the governmental structure.

Ghana:

On March 6, 1957, the Gold Coast became an independent State, was renamed Ghana, and Kwame Nkrumah became its first president. Ghana has subsequently had three types of political administration since

becoming independent. From 1957-1960 the constitutional structure resembled that of Australia or Canada today, with executive power vested in a governor general and a Prime Minister acting on the advice of a Cabinet of ministers (all of whom are members of Parliament). They had collective responsibility for the general direction and control of the government. Legislative power was vested in a Parliament comprising 104 members elected by adult suffrage. On July 1, 1960, Ghana was declared a sovereign unitary Republic. Under the Republican constitution, the Governor-General was replaced by a President combining the functions both of head of state and head of government. A peculiar system was developed which concentrated political and executive power in the hands of the President making it possible for him alone to take important decisions affecting every type of government activity. The progressively authoritarian nature of the regime was characterized by gross mismanagement and the inevitable result was economic chaos. There was a decline in Ghana's economic situation from relative prosperity in 1957 to near bankruptcy by the end of 1965. Nkrumah was overthrown by a military coup on February 24, 1966. The coup was carried out by a group of Army dissidents led by LTC E. K. Kotoka and MAJ A. A. Afrifa. Immediately after the coup, the armed forces began releasing political prisoners. The National Liberation Council (NLC) was established, which consisted of seven persons from the Army and from the police force. The coup leaders said they had taken over the country because Nkrumah had abused individual rights and liberties and had brought the country close to economic bankruptcy. The coup group indicated that it had no political ambitions

and was anxious to hand over power temporarily to GEN Ankrah assumed command until a duly constituted civilian form of government. Ankrah had pledged that his military regime would return to Ghana to civilian rule as soon as possible, in a year or eighteen months (it took three and a half years).¹⁴ An opposition group was formed in London, The Ghana Progressive Popular Front, which had as its aims (a) to ensure that the military/police regime which came into existence after the coup did not perpetuate its existence in power longer than necessary; (b) to ensure that respect for the rule of law was maintained; (c) to ensure that power was not ultimately handed over to people of a particular political group or tribe; (d) to maintain and ensure that the future constitution was drawn up by the direct representatives of the people; (e) to create a truly democratic Socialist State; and (f) to strive for the attainment of a united Africa.¹⁵

The military indicated that four conditions had to be met before power was returned to the civilians: (1) the people had to be reeducated in their political rights, (2) they had to accustom themselves to their freedom and understand the qualities of leadership before they could vote, (3) the image of the old Convention People's Party had to be finally destroyed, (4) the junta had to be assured that the country was headed toward economic recovery and that the administration had purged of the faults that led to Kwame Nkrumah's overthrow.¹⁶

On April 17, 1967, another coup was attempted by a group of junior and field-grade officers and some civilians but it failed. This coup

occurred because of the discontent of the junior officers concerning promotions and minor problems within the military.

Public criticism of military rule grew more outspoken during March 1968. The Ghana Bar Association urged the repeal of a military tribunal with power to impose severe sentences. The military promised that civilian rule would return before September 30, 1969. The military tried economic reforms which were necessary but created major labor problems. Unemployment rose, strikes in various industries occurred. The military warned that the government would deal severely and firmly with anyone inciting or taking part in an illegal strike.

In April of 1969, the chairman, General Ankraj resigned after admitting that he had received money from a foreign company for political purposes. He was succeeded by COL Afrifa who suggested needed reforms and abolished the three year ban on political parties.

In the latter part of 1969, civilians were again back in power after a constitutional election. The Progress Party led by Dr. Busia captured 105 of the 140 seats. The government inherited some of the major problems such as high unemployment, foreign indebtedness, low cocoa prices, rising imports, etc. In attempts to deal with the many problems, the government expelled large numbers of aliens from the country and dismissed many civil service workers. The people complained that the government was not responsive to their needs. On January 10, 1972 the military again staged a coup led by LTC Achcampong. The coup was indifferently received but not opposed.

"After nearly three years in power, the military is well entrenched in the machinery of administration at all levels. Talk of return to civilian rule has been firmly squashed."¹⁷

Nigeria:

Nigeria has more than sixty million people and is the size of Great Britain, France, and Belgium combined. It was a colony from 1900 to 1960. On October 1, 1960 the country became a federation of three regions, the eastern and western regions, having become internally self-governing in 1956 and the northern region in 1959. Nigeria tried to live under a federal constitution but factionism because of tribal, linguistic, religious, and economic differences created deep divisions within the government. The federal government attempted to take over the western region and establish a federally constituted government. Elections were rigged which led to a breakdown in government.

In January 1966, the military staged a coup, killing the Prime Minister, the premiers and senior Army officers from the north and west. A military regime was established under Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi. Military governors were appointed to run the government of each region. In the latter part of 1966, another coup occurred in which Ironsi was killed, General Gowon assumed control and has governed since that time. When General Gowon seized power in 1966 he promised to return power to the civilian community in 1976. Now he has established various stages before power can be returned. He has embarked on a multi-billion dollar five year plan for national growth spurred by the discovery of oil. He also has problems with corruption in government. Gowon promised five years ago to hand over the government to the civilians; he has not yet done so. Instead, he has initiated another five year plan which is called the "third national development

plan" and is to extend from 1975-1980. It would appear that General Gowon has no intention of relinquishing power to civilians and that he will rule until such time as another coup occurs.

We have explored some of the reasons military coups occur and have looked at existing situations in Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Nigeria. But to explore and try to understand under what conditions the military returns power to civilian control after a successful coup d'etat involves mostly speculation.

In each of these three countries the government has been overthrown by the military, and each military regime has promised to return the power to the civilians. Yet each has found that once power has been secured it is extremely difficult to relinquish. All three countries have given reasons to the people for the coup, but none have returned power willingly. The military profess to govern for the benefit of the people, but do not get non-military people involved in the decisionmaking process of running the government. Overtly the coup is for the benefit of the people; covertly it appears to be for the benefit of the leaders of the coup.

That there are difficulties involved in restoring civilian authority is obvious. But to pin point the difficulties involves speculation and theorizing. There seem to be two major trends in the military's unwillingness and refusal to give up political control: a realism of fear of letting go and desire to retain power. The fear of letting go is comprised partly of the military's feeling that only they have the requisite technical competency to govern properly. Especially in underdeveloped countries with a small elite and a large, illiterate,

impoverished population it would be logical for the elite to distrust the people, regarding them as ill-equipped to participate in the government. Also with such a small elite population the military is likely to comprise a large proportion of the educated element and therefore the power of the military is out of proportion to begin with. Additionally, after years of colonial rule the newly emerging military elite surely feels a need for control and security. They have been shut out of power for many years and fear being shut out again, fear letting go of their new found power. The desire to retain power would be of equal strength to the fear of letting go of power. The economies of emerging nations are generally fragile and need strong support and structure. The military would surely wish to retain power to facilitate the steady growth of a stable economy before pulling out and releasing the reins of power to untried and possibly weak, divided civilians. Concomitant with the desire to retain power ' , the ability to do so. The military has control of necessary weapons to subdue any opposition; they have a ready made administrative structure, organized chains of command which easily contribute to its perpetuation in power. Institutional cohesion, administrative skills and structure, technical competency--plus the unvarnished attractiveness of unlimited power make it unlikely that the military, once entrenched in government and heavily involved in politics, would be able to easily give up control.

This two-fold resistance to returning authority to civil government is made more complex by the given political situation in many newly developing African nations: the lack of a solid basis for a

stable political system. Lack of familiar political institutions, lack of cultural cohesion, tribal differences, class cleavages, lack of education, lack of clearly defined national goals, all these are obstacles to building a strong, viable government. The military probably has more cultural, educational, and class cohesion than any other single group in these three countries with such diverse tribal, religious, and language differences.

Perhaps the military coup will be seen in the long run as a possible short cut to economic, political, and cultural development. There is much catching up to do, much basic work to be done in these nations, and possibly the rigidity and authority of a military controlled government provide the necessary structure, control, and security to begin this work. Later when economic progress is more certain the more philosophical and esthetic issues of political flexibility and freedom will overcome the now dominant need for progress at almost any price.

The military certainly is a viable force in any country and will not willingly return to the barracks unless they feel that the interest of the military will be protected and that the government under civilian rule will serve for the benefit of all the people and not just a chosen few. Finer has stated that if we are desirous of the military returning to the barracks four conditions must be met and it appears that these conditions are the driving force for the return to civilian rule.

1. This new leader imposed by the military on the state shall positively want his troops to quit politics.

2. The new head of state shall be able to establish a regime which is capable of functioning without further military support.

3. That this viable regime shall be favorable to the armed forces.

4. That the armed forces shall have sufficient confidence in their leader to be prepared to return to the barracks when he tells them.

Even when these conditions are met, other writers feel that after a limited time, the military will relinquish power because of the political game. That the military is not necessarily competent to govern even moderately complex societies and that they are willing to give up power to the civilians and return to the barracks because they are essentially apolitical.

If these theories are true, then we can expect within the very near future to see the Army returning to the barracks in those African countries that are governed by the military. Yet, we must keep in mind that there is a reluctance to give up power once obtained and that to forestall military coups there must be some degree of economic and social progress within developing countries. Africa as a group of nations is very young and it has many growing pains. It is likely that the nations will continue to go through a period of coups, repression, stagnation, chaos, and revolt for a long period of time before truly representative governments will be able to govern.

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