Civilian Democratic Government And The Question Of Good Governance In Nigeria: Interrogating Historical Trajectories Of Military Coups

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ABSTRACT

Democracy and good governance have increasingly become widely accepted ideals across the globe, and Nigeria is no exception. Since gaining independence in 1960, the country's democratic journey has often been disrupted by repeated military takeovers. However, from 1999 onward, Nigeria has experienced an unprecedented period of uninterrupted civilian democratic governance. This development, while significant, has also sparked critical debates about the nature of democracy in the country, which many perceive as weak, poorly institutionalized, and lacking in fundamental principles. These shortcomings carry serious implications for Nigeria's political stability, especially given that socio-economic crises and insecurity have historically served as justifications for military interventions. This paper investigated these issues using a historical research approach, drawing on secondary sources such as textbooks, journals, newspapers, and online materials. It concluded by emphasizing the urgent need to deepen democratic practice in Nigeria by strengthening institutions, ensuring free and fair elections, and promoting good governance as safeguards against future coups and as pathways to sustainable political stability.

Keywords: Civilian democracy, military coups, good governance

INTRO DUCTION

Across the globe, democracy has emerged as one of the most widely embraced systems of governance (Egwu, 2018; Kwon-Ndung & Erunike, 2018; Idris, 2018). Its popularity is largely tied to the association of democratic practice with good governance. Citizens across nation-states consistently demand democratic values such as justice, equity, accountability, rule of law, respect for human rights, and credible electoral processes. Nigeria is not exempt from these aspirations. Indeed, as far back as the colonial period, Nigerians agitated for representation and self-rule. Initially, these demands took root within trade and professional associations before gradually extending into mainstream politics (Akilu, 1998).

Nigeria's democratic development can be traced through at least three historical phases. The first phase began during the colonial era with the Clifford Constitution of 1922, which introduced the elective principle and marked the beginning of representative democracy—though only for a limited segment of the population. Ikelegbe (2018) notes that a more substantive practice of democratic politics emerged in 1951 with the MacPherson Constitution, which established a federal system featuring both central and regional legislatures (Otaghagua, 2011). These structures provided platforms through which Nigerians could articulate collective demands to the colonial administration.

The second phase commenced with Nigeria's independence in 1960 but was characterized by repeated interruptions of civilian rule through military coups. This period witnessed chronic instability, with civilian governments often plagued by reckless governance and political crises, as seen in the First Republic (1960–1966) and the Second Republic (1979–1983). Even the short-lived Third Republic failed to materialize fully before being terminated by military intervention. The third phase began on May 29, 1999, ushering in what has so far been the longest period of uninterrupted democratic governance in Nigeria (Guardian Newspaper). Since then, seven general elections have been conducted, and for the first time, the country has experienced successive civilian-to-civilian transitions of power. Otaghagua (2011) emphasizes that this reflects the military's withdrawal to its constitutional mandate of protecting national sovereignty and safeguarding lives and property.

Despite these achievements, serious questions persist about the quality of democracy in Nigeria. For instance: Does the mere continuity of civilian governments since 1999 equate to genuine democracy? Have Nigerians truly enjoyed the dividends of democracy and good governance? And importantly, can Nigeria be considered politically stable under its current democratic order? Such questions have become urgent given the lived realities of many Nigerians. An editorial in *Punch* (July 15, 2025) described citizens' conditions as defined by hopelessness, anger, hunger, and disillusionment, with many losing confidence in governance. Similarly, Ikelegbe (2016, p. 279) observed that since the advent of the Fourth Republic, Nigeria has been marred by widespread poverty, unemployment, insecurity, and corruption, while government attention to citizens' welfare has remained weak. The devastating effects of militancy, terrorism, and violent conflicts further compound the situation, as economic growth continues to bypass the majority of the population.

These realities raise troubling implications for Nigeria's political stability, particularly since deteriorating socio-economic and security conditions historically served as justifications for military takeovers. Against the backdrop of recent resurgences of military coups in West Africa, concerns about the possibility of a "contagion effect" make the question of whether Nigeria could relapse into military rule even more pressing.

Statement of the Problem

Civilian democratic governance is widely acknowledged as one of the most popular systems of government globally, primarily because it reflects, to a significant degree, the collective will of the people. According to Nwobashi and Itumo (2018), many scholars argue that democracy serves as a prerequisite for development, given its core attributes such as accountability, checks

and balances, citizen participation, rule of law, respect for human rights, and the promotion of good governance. In Nigeria, however, the practice of democracy has not produced the anticipated level of development seen in many Western democracies. Instead, its flawed implementation has not only undermined its credibility in Nigeria but has also cast doubts on the viability of democratic governance across much of Africa.

Ikelegbe (2016) observes that since the advent of the Fourth Republic, democracy in Nigeria has largely amounted to the periodic transfer of power from one civilian administration to another, without the deeper entrenchment of its essential principles and benefits. In this context, mere political succession has become the most notable achievement of the country's democratic experiment. Yet, Nigeria continues to grapple with weak institutions, the erosion of the rule of law, the absence of a strong opposition, and entrenched corruption in governance. These systemic weaknesses have created a governance deficit, preventing the state from fulfilling its responsibilities to its citizens. For instance, Oluwatosin (2025) reports that the United States criticized Nigerian governors for their lack of fiscal responsibility, noting that such negligence not only exacerbates inequality but also erodes public trust.

Recent surveys and reports highlight the scale of public disillusionment. A Citizen Perception Survey conducted by the African Polling Institute between January and February 2025 found that national cohesion was rated at 46.8 percent, below the 50 percent benchmark while an overwhelming 83 percent of Nigerians expressed distrust in key governance institutions, including the National Assembly, the judiciary, and the executive (Punch, July 15, 2025). Similarly, the World Bank's *Food Security Update* revealed that millions of Nigerians are suffering acute food shortages, with the number of affected individuals rising by 28 percent in 2023 (Punch, July 15, 2025). Insecurity compounds these problems across all six geopolitical zones of the country. Widespread kidnapping, banditry, insurgency, terrorism, and violent conflicts persist, alongside recurring clashes between herders and farmers, which have claimed thousands of lives, destroyed properties, and displaced communities. Mimiko (2023) and Etinagbedia (2023) further stress that these worsening security challenges have severely weakened the capacity of Nigeria's armed forces.

As a result, Nigeria's political stability is under increasing threat. Scholars such as Ikelegbe (2016) and Egwu (2018) caution that political stability cannot be measured solely by the peaceful transfer of power but must also include the legitimacy of governments elected through credible elections, the preservation of strong governance institutions, and effective checks and balances, elements that are largely absent in Nigeria's current political landscape. Consequently, the government's failure to deliver good governance, provide basic social services, ensure security, and uphold legitimacy has created conditions that historically served as rationalizations for military interventions. Against the backdrop of worsening socio-economic and security crises, Nigeria faces the looming danger of renewed military involvement in politics, a concern further amplified by the recent wave of military coups in West Africa, which raises fears of a potential contagion effect. The aim of this study was to analyzed civilian democracy, good governance, and the threats they face in relation to Nigeria's political stability, with particular attention to the historical patterns of military coups and their consequences.

Literature Review

Okunade (1998) argues that the absence of democracy and the poor human rights record across Africa have generated strong political pressure for change, even under authoritarian regimes and civilian governments that suppress dissent. In many cases, successive administrations in Nigeria and other African states have merely paid lip service to democratic ideals after assuming power. Beyond stunted development, one major consequence of this neglect has been recurring military interventions. Eregha (2004) and Etinagbedia (2024) maintain that addressing the challenge of military coups requires both internal and external approaches, emphasizing democratic consolidation, military reforms, and international support. They stress that for coups to be prevented, democracy must guarantee genuine opportunities for political contestation and participation, rather than serving as a vehicle for elite domination and state capture.

Okeke and Ahmed (2023) reinforce Eregha's position, highlighting the importance of external assistance in tackling the resurgence of coups in West Africa. Similarly, Otoghile (2024) and Osadalor (2019) examined the link between democratic deficits, insecurity, and coups, underlining the urgent need to address governance failures alongside the region's security threats. Democratic principles such as popular sovereignty, rule of law, separation of powers, political participation, human rights protection, judicial independence, accountability, transparency, and free and fair elections have continued to deteriorate. David Beetham, as cited in Okunade (1998), identified four pillars of democracy: credible elections, accountable governance, civil and political liberties, and democratic societies. These can be further expanded to include two critical areas:

Strengthening democratic institutions: Nigeria's fragile democratic institutions have been unable to withstand or effectively manage political crises, thereby worsening challenges to nation-building. Weaknesses in the judiciary, legislature, electoral bodies, civil society organizations (CSOs), political parties, and pressure groups undermine democratic consolidation. For example, the judiciary's lack of independence has tainted its credibility, especially in election and corruption-related cases. Similarly, the legislature is often perceived as subordinate to an overbearing executive. In contrast, democratic institutions in Western countries are mature and resilient, functioning as self-regulating mechanisms in times of crisis. Strengthening Nigeria's democratic institutions has thus become an indispensable prerequisite for stability and development (Etinagbedia, 2023).

Ensuring credible elections: Another cornerstone of democratic governance is the electoral process. Hunter (n.d.) identifies credible elections as one of the key safeguards against coups. The likelihood of military intervention is significantly reduced when citizens perceive elections as transparent. Effective conditions for free and fair elections include: (i) electoral systems and legal frameworks must guarantee political equality; (ii) electoral processes must be independent of government control, offering voters real choices between parties and candidates while ensuring effective communication of policies; and (iii) central governments must not be so powerful as to stifle the autonomy of popularly elected regional or local governments. Ultimately, the extent of a system's democratic nature lies in its ability to uphold the principles of popular control and political equality in decision-making.

Good governance: Good governance has become closely associated with modern democracy, though the demand for it predates contemporary political systems. International frameworks,

including those of the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU), and ECOWAS, underscore good governance as essential for stability. The debate around good governance typically revolves around issues of transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, anti-corruption measures, equitable wealth distribution, protection of rights, and provision of social services and infrastructure. These factors reduce inequality and instability, thereby minimizing conditions that could trigger coups.

In Nigeria, however, governance failures remain glaring. Obialor and Ozuzu (2018) argue that weak governance in the country results from unresponsive, unaccountable, unproductive, and over-bureaucratized state institutions incapable of addressing contemporary challenges. Idris (2018) supports this view, noting that Nigeria and many other African states are "democratizing without necessarily achieving good governance." Persistent poverty, widespread insecurity, and other negative socio-economic conditions provide further evidence of these governance failures.

Factors Militating against Democracy and Good Governance in Nigeria

Emoghene and Okolie (2020) argue that several factors have increasingly fueled instability in Nigeria's current democratic era. These include leadership crises, ethnic and religious divisions, electoral disputes, poverty, and worsening insecurity in the form of terrorism, insurgency, banditry, and farmer-herder clashes. Among these, some have severely undermined Nigeria's democratic governance and threatened its stability, thereby creating conditions that could invite military intervention.

The Challenge of Poor Leadership, Ethnicity, and Religion: Since independence, leadership failure has remained a central problem for Nigeria. Civilian governments have often obstructed democratic governance, exacerbated religious and ethnic divisions and fuelled intolerance across the country. Leaders have manipulated ethnicity and religion in discriminatory ways to allocate political offices and resources at national and regional levels. This has entrenched uneven development and intensified ethnic rivalries, confrontations, and violent conflicts. Okpala and Onudugo (2023), in an empirical study, confirmed that the intersection of politics, ethnicity, and religion has significantly undermined Nigeria's political stability. Persistent flashpoints of conflict include Jos (ethnic/religious), Benue (ethnic), and Kaduna (religious). Beyond these hotspots, the North-East, South-East, South-West, and other parts of Nigeria continue to be impacted by ethnic and religious tensions.

Elections: Elections have historically been a major source of instability in Nigeria, dating back to the country's first post-independence election. The political contest for power has been highly contentious, largely because the state is perceived as a channel for wealth accumulation at all costs. Over time, political elites have exploited ethnicity and religion as tools for electoral manipulation, stoking division and fueling violence during elections, thereby heightening threats to stability. Ojukwu, Umeifekwan, and Okeke (2023) note that despite 23 years of uninterrupted civilian rule and four general elections in 1999, 2015, 2019, and 2023, Nigeria's elections cannot yet be regarded as free, fair, or credible. Instead, the electoral process is riddled with irregularities before, during, and after elections, further eroding public trust in the system.

Rising Insecurity: Insecurity, marked by widespread violence and destruction, poses another grave challenge to Nigeria's political stability. Non-state actors, including terrorist groups, bandits, and insurgents, frequently attack security forces, displace communities, and extort payments from residents to live or farm in their own localities. This has weakened the Nigerian state's monopoly over the use of force, with certain local government areas in the North and East effectively controlled by armed groups. Corruption among military and political leaders further hampers effective responses, making it more difficult for the government to restore security.

Socio-Economic Deficits: Nigeria's weak economy has translated into widespread poverty and social hardship. High inflation, rising unemployment, particularly among the youth and economic mismanagement have deepened the crisis. Numerous studies have established a strong correlation between political stability and economic growth. Nomor and Lorember (2017), for example, demonstrate that the political environment is a critical factor in economic growth, whether in the short or long term. The World Bank (2023) reported that the removal of fuel subsidies for Premium Motor Spirit (PMS) led to a 163% price increase, alongside a 41% depreciation of the naira against the dollar. These economic shocks have further strained citizens' welfare. The widespread protests tagged *"End Bad Governance"* highlighted the frustrations of Nigerians facing extreme hardship. The demonstrations, which turned violent, led to the loss of lives, destruction of property worth millions of naira, economic disruptions, and the imposition of curfews in Yobe, Kano, and Borno States (Vanguard, August 2, 2024). During this period, the Sultan of Sokoto publicly called for caution, warning of the grave risks these crises pose to Nigeria's stability.

Historical Context of Military Coups in Nigeria

The emergence of military coups in Nigeria can be traced to both immediate and remote causes. The immediate causes were largely tied to the failure of the First Republic to consolidate democratic governance by ensuring a peaceful transfer of power from one civilian government to another. Widespread corruption, maladministration, political instability, and violent conflicts created fertile ground for military intervention. The First Republic was marked by deep political crises, regional repression, corruption, abuse of office, and intolerance. Disputes over census figures, revenue allocation, and flawed elections further intensified tensions. Political competition was driven by ethnic and regional cleavages, with the three dominant parties, the Northern People's Congress (NPC), Action Group (AG), and the National Council for Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), struggling for dominance at the federal level.

Against this backdrop, on January 15, 1966, Major K.C. Nzeogwu and other junior officers staged a coup that led to the assassination of key leaders, including Sir Tafawa Balewa, Chief Okotie Eboh, and S.L. Akintola. However, the next day, January 16, Major General J.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi, then the General Officer Commanding, assumed power with the backing of Senate President Dr. Nwafor Orizu. According to Otaghagua (2011), unlike similar instances elsewhere, such as Boris Yeltsin's civilian resistance in Russia, the First Republic politicians offered no resistance to the coup. Ironsi's regime was short-lived, as he was overthrown and killed in another coup on July 29, 1966, which brought General Yakubu Gowon to power on August 1. Gowon's administration is remembered for leading Nigeria through the Civil War and defeating

the Biafran secessionists, but it failed to produce a transition plan to return to civilian rule while corruption flourished.

In 1975, General Murtala Mohammed seized power in a bloodless coup that ousted Gowon. His government pursued bold reforms, including purging corrupt officials, but his assassination in 1976 during an attempted coup led by Colonel B.S. Dimka cut his rule short (Ikelegbe, 2016). His deputy, Lieutenant-General Olusegun Obasanjo, assumed leadership on February 14, 1976, continuing Mohammed's reforms. Significantly, Obasanjo introduced the first concrete timetable for a return to democracy, culminating in the handover to a civilian government on October 1, 1979.

The restoration of democracy ended 14 years of military rule, but it was short-lived. On December 31, 1983, barely into President Shehu Shagari's second term, the military struck again, installing Major-General Muhammadu Buhari as Head of State. Buhari himself was later ousted in August 1985 in a palace coup that brought General Ibrahim Babangida to power. Babangida announced a phased transition program, promising to restore civilian governance by 1990 at the state level and 1992 at the federal level (Otaghagua, 2011; Etebom, 2021). However, these promises proved hollow. The annulment of June 12, 1993, presidential election sparked massive protests, deepening political unrest, and international condemnation. Between August and November 1993, Nigeria endured a transitional period under Ernest Shonekan's Interim National Government (ING), which lacked legitimacy and authority (Adebayo, 2022). In November 1993, General Sani Abacha, then Secretary of Defence, seized power in a coup. Abacha ruled with an iron fist until his sudden death in June 1998. His successor, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, initiated a short transition program, which led to the drafting of the 1999 Constitution, the registration of political parties, the conduct of elections, and ultimately, the inauguration of a civilian government in May 1999.

Analysis and Impact of Military Coups

i. The Challenge of Ethnicity, Military Professionalism, and National Unity: The first military coup of January 15, 1966, led by Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu, not only triggered the cycle of successive coups in Nigeria but also planted the seeds of ethnic mistrust and division within the armed forces, which later extended to the wider society. Siegle (2021) notes that "every successful coup significantly increases the probability of subsequent coups in that country as well as its neighbors," a reality that played out in Nigeria. Major-General J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi assumed power after the coup and quickly restored order, particularly in the crisis-ridden Western Region. His attempt to establish a unitary system of government, however, was strongly resisted by northern leaders, who perceived it as a deliberate strategy to entrench eastern dominance since his government was viewed as largely controlled by Igbos. According to Ikelegbe (2016), sections of the population expected Ironsi to correct the perception of Igbo dominance by decisively punishing the coup plotters, but his failure to do so created suspicion. Consequently, his reconciliatory approach was interpreted as insincere and as an attempt to consolidate southern control. The third coup, which brought General Yakubu Gowon to power, was widely regarded as a retaliatory action aimed at avenging the deaths of northern military officers killed during the January coup. Supported by northern civil society, it escalated ethnic tensions and, as Otaghagua (2011) observes, turned into one of the bloodiest episodes in

Nigeria's coup history. These events entrenched ethnicity and regionalism within the military, undermining professionalism by influencing recruitment, promotions, and performance. This ethnicization of the military spilled over into the wider political sphere, shaping Nigeria's divisive politics.

ii. The Rise of an Elitist Military Bourgeoisie, Militarization, and Human Rights Abuses: With each successive military regime, corruption deepened, reaching unprecedented levels. National wealth was diverted to foreign accounts while top officers indulged in extravagant lifestyles, projecting themselves as a privileged class. Otaghagua (2011) argues that this elitist culture was not only entrenched during military rule but also sustained by subsequent civilian governments. Moreover, coup plotters were rarely punished; instead, they were often reintegrated into governance and rewarded with influence. Prolonged military rule also entrenched a culture of militarization in Nigeria. Excessive use of force became normalized as the primary means of enforcing law and order, even in civil contexts. As Ayu (1985) observed, the military evolved into a repressive tool of the state, with its coercive methods becoming accepted as standard practice. For instance, the regimes of Generals Babangida and Abacha were notorious for human rights abuses, unlawful detentions, assassinations, and suppression of press freedom. This legacy of repression did not end with military rule. In contemporary Nigeria, elements of militarization persist within civilian governance. Security forces are still deployed to silence opposition, intimidate political rivals, and suppress dissent, demonstrating how the authoritarian tendencies of past military regimes continue to shape democratic institutions.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted two theoretical frameworks for analysis: Democratic Nation-Building Theory and State Fragility Theory**.** The Democratic Nation-Building Theory emphasizes the establishment of a legitimate and stable political system in states transitioning to, or consolidating, democracy. Key proponents include Karl Deutsch, Gabriel Almond, James Coleman, John Stuart Mill, and Robert Dahl. The theory rests on the assumption that democratic values are universal and self-evident truths. Thus, embracing and applying principles such as self-government, universal suffrage, majority rule, rule of law, an effective and transparent judiciary, equitable wealth distribution, social justice, tolerance, and the protection of human rights will promote nation-building and political stability.

On the other hand, the State Fragility Theory focuses on the deficiencies of the state in three fundamental areas of governance: authority (monopoly of force), legitimacy (representation), and capacity in service delivery. Contributions to this theory have come from scholars such as J. Di John, Ingo Trauschweizer, Steven M. Miner, Gerald B. Helman, and Steven B. Ratner, who variously describe unstable sovereign states with concepts such as state failure, dysfunction, weakness, collapse, or fragility. Di John (2010) defines state fragility as a condition of varying capacity deficits, ranging from weak to failing, failed, or collapsed states. The last two categories represent the extreme stages of fragility, marked by a rapid or gradual breakdown of socio-economic, political, and legal structures, leading to the erosion of state authority and institutional fabric.

Applying these two theories to this study underscores the significance of democracy, good governance, and political stability for Nigeria's political development. Nigeria's early post-independence crises, combined with the inability of leaders to effectively consolidate democracy, paved the way for military rule. The State Fragility Theory is especially relevant here, as it provides insights into Nigeria's multidimensional challenges, spanning the social, economic, and political spheres and explains how the military's central role in politics has perpetuated instability and undermined democratic consolidation.

Major Findings

i.   The study found that the collapse of civilian democratic governments largely accounted for past military coups in Nigeria. The persistent failure to uphold democratic principles such as credible elections, the rule of law, and an independent and transparent judiciary continues to weaken democracy.
ii. Escalating socio-economic hardships, worsening security crises, and the recent trend of military takeovers in West Africa present a significant risk of renewed coups in Nigeria, particularly since similar conditions have historically served as justification for military interventions.
iii. The weakening of professionalism within Nigeria's military has reduced its effectiveness in fulfilling constitutional responsibilities and made it more vulnerable to being manipulated against the state.

Conclusion and Recommendation

To forestall the recurrence of military coups, the preservation of political stability in Nigeria depends fundamentally on the consolidation of democracy and the practice of good governance. Without these essential pillars, the likelihood of military intervention remains ever-present. Democracy in Nigeria must transcend the mere ritual of periodic government transitions and must instead reflect genuine democratic tenets such as accountability, inclusiveness, transparency, respect for human rights, and adherence to the rule of law. A democratic system that fails to guarantee these values risks creating conditions that justify or invite unconstitutional military involvement in governance.

Drawing from the findings of this study, it is therefore imperative to emphasize that the sustainability of Nigeria's democracy rests on institutional reforms, strong political will, and citizen-centered governance. Only when democracy is not reduced to procedural elections but is experienced in everyday governance through equity, social justice, security, and efficient service delivery, can Nigeria truly guard itself against the dangers of political instability and possible military resurgence. Based on these insights, the study makes the following recommendations:

i.   The Nigerian state should prioritize the core principles of democracy and good governance by upholding key tenets such as the conduct of free and fair elections, the strengthening of democratic institutions, the provision of essential social services, and the safeguarding of human rights.

ii. In addition, the Nigerian state must constitutionally address the lingering challenges within its federal system in order to promote genuine decentralization of power and deepen the process of democratization.

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