

SCIENTIA MILITARIA

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'What we must stop is a situation where the gun is a means of promotion, a machine gun a way of applying pressure, a tank becomes government policy.' This was the despairing cry of an African lawyer during yet another recent military intervention in that most coup-ridden of African states, Dahomey.

It used to be thought that armies involved themselves in politics only in exceptional circumstances. In Western democracies particularly army intervention was seen as an aberration with criminal overtones. Yet, in practically every European country, the military has at one time or another played a crucial role. France, Italy, Portugal, Greece, Germany and many others have been ruled by army officers. From 1914 to 1923 Spain underwent 43 successful and unsuccessful military coups. Even the two superpowers, both committed to strict control of their military because of fear of nuclear war, have suffered from military interference in politics. During the Korean War, for example, General MacArthur dangerously ignored United States of America's Presidential orders. In the period after Stalin's death, Marshal Zhukov was the kingmaker in the Russian succession struggle. And the United Kingdom has not been immune to such problems. 1914 witnessed the Curragh mutiny against government policy in Ireland. In 1965 sections of the British armed services, particularly in the Royal Air Force, made it clear that they would not use force against their own kith-and-kin in Rhodesia. More recently, ominous rumblings have been heard amongst army officers of all ranks against the conduct of the war in Northern Ireland.

In Latin America and Africa, military rule is the norm rather than the exception. Perhaps we should ask ourselves why democracies survive rather than why soldiers take over from civilian politicians.

The military have tended to kick out their civilian masters for a number of reasons. Coups are usually caused by army disdain of corrupt politicians' management of economic problems and political schisms. Army officers often claim that only they can unify and modernize a developing nation. Armies are frequently the only centrally organized and relatively disciplined group with

modern communication systems in a developing country. They also have the monopoly of heavy weaponry. Soon after independence their prestige is high as they are seen as the talisman of nationhood and of freedom from further colonial interference. Their standing is further enhanced if the army actually forged independence as in Mocambique and Algeria.

In most newly independent states a lack of political consensus prevails. The arbitrarily drawn colonial frontiers often cut across different ethnic groups. Weakly organized political parties frequently fail to curb the tribal clashes between and within states. Amidst the general poverty (democracy has only worked well in prosperous states) and the unrealistically high expectations of new states, the only road to wealth is political influence. Army officers possess unique facilities to grab political office. Thus although most third world armies are too small to attack other countries, they are usually big enough to topple the civilian government, even if it has the support of the police force. But sometimes minimal force is required. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana was ousted by only 600 men in 1966. President Olympio of Togo was overthrown and killed in a coup led by 200 men. If conventional forces are lacking, the supernatural may be invoked for support; in the military plot in the Ivory Coast in June 1973, a variety of magical ploys, including human sacrifice, were used.

Military intervention in politics can range from constitutional pressure, as is common in the United Kingdom, to intimidation and finally, as is common in Africa, to actually supplanting the civilian leadership. The techniques of takeover are varied. The South Americans, above all, have developed the coup into a fine art. Not surprisingly the typical descriptions of coups are peppered with Spanish expressions. Latin American militarists divide coups into two main groups. Firstly, the *golpe de estado* (cutting off the head) which utilizes a small group of men to capture the leader of the government. For example, in 1944 Juan Peron headed a conspiracy against President Ramirez because the latter had taken Argentina out of the

pro-German camp. With a pistol at his head he wrote, 'Fatigued by the intense tasks of government which have obliged me to take a rest.' This method requires a good knowledge of the political situation and a plane ready if things go wrong. The other technique is the *cuartelazo* in which a larger section of the army is used against the government, as happened in Portugal in 1974. Both these methods can be combined. Then follows the familiar pattern of seizure of communications and of key buildings in the capital, a round up of opponents, the installation of a provisional government with a manifesto full of promises; the first one being that after a temporary period of military rule a return to constitutional government will follow. But it rarely does.

These manifestos are decked out with high-sounding phrases to hoodwink the world and to bamboozle the locals. Sometimes these phrases mask personal greed or vanity such as inspired Captain Micombero's ejection of King Charles of Burundi in 1966 or Idi Amin's accession to power in Uganda. On the other hand the motives are not always selfish. The Colonels who took over control in Greece seemed genuinely concerned to halt the spread of communism. Colonel Nasser's and General Neguib's motives were also essentially ideological when they forced the abdication of the pleasure-seeking King Farouk in 1952 in order to establish a more egalitarian society in Egypt. 'Often the army is determined to maintain the nation's unity and to prevent secession and civil war. In Nigeria and Sudan, after a long civil war, the army acted to secure at least an appearance of national unity. President Mobutu of Zaire used his army to prevent the recent attempted secession of Shaba province. (This move was supposedly headed by Cubans from Angola. Mobutu resorted to the unconventional when he enlisted the support of local pygmies to repel the invaders. Hence the no doubt apocryphal order given to pygmy bowmen not to shoot 'until you see the whites of their ankles!')

On other occasions the army will act to protect its own vested interests. This has happened in advanced countries such as France, Germany and Russia and could well apply to Rhodesia and South Africa in the future. The actual timing of coups in Africa is largely explicable in terms of the conversion of colonial defence forces into national armies. British and French backstage influence is often blamed. MI5, the CIA or French Intelligence are often accused of manipulating Sandhurst or St. Cyr graduates into overthrowing pro-Russian re-

gimes. The colonial influence may not be explicit. In French-speaking Africa, many African statesmen consciously emulated General de Gaulle. Emperor Bokassa copied him *and* Napoleon. Many of the British-trained leaders, such as General Gowon or Colonel Ojukwe (who led the breakaway Biafra), may have learned from their colonial mentors the discipline and the exclusiveness which are regarded as the virtues of professional organization in the West. These qualities are also the tools of conspiracy and coup. Nevertheless, except in the marginal cases such as Uganda and in certain French-speaking ex-colonies such as Chad, it is difficult to apportion direct blame to the former colonial power.

What is more important is the length of preparation for the transition to black rule. The Africanization of the officer corps is a crucial factor. There were only 9 black officers in Uganda (slightly less than the present number of black Rhodesian officers) at the time of the first attempted army coup. Other issues are the expansion and training of the new armies. Armies are enlarged to provide more jobs for officers (as in Nigeria) and these new officers may then be sent to train in a new country. In Ghana, the fact that the older officers were Sandhurst-trained and the younger Moscow-trained added to the intergenerational conflict which is common in many less professional armies. This factor partly explains the series of coups in Ghana in the 1960's and early 1970's.

The reduction of privileges and amenities or the creation of a rival security force can also cause discontent within the army. But a more explosive issue, and one which could apply particularly to Rhodesia, is the interference with the professional autonomy and standards of the army. The first step in transitional government is the forced retirement or exile of senior officers and their replacement at the personal whim of the new political leader. These kinds of conflict lead to an escalating series of coups and counter-coups.

Once the military get into power, they set about legitimizing their control. A military junta may decide to rule directly but often a facade of civilian government is erected such as Nasser established in Egypt in the 1960's. Other methods are again best described in the cynical vocabulary of Latin America. A popular ploy is *continuismo* (quietly setting aside the constitution instead of setting up a bogus facade); another is the *imposicion* (the rigging of elections). More simple is the election with one candidate.

Despite the military's powerful position, many military regimes are toppled, usually by opposing military leaders. Few succeed in the permanent transition back to civilian rule, although sometimes interim periods of civilian government emerge as in Ghana or Turkey. Ghana is an important African example. After the overthrow of the extravagant regime of Nkrumah the army eventually withdrew to the barracks. The elections that followed were the most democratic and best conducted in the history of post-independent tropical Africa. Dr Busia's civilian government was completely constitutional and legitimate. Yet the military acted against him and deposed him. Thus it seems that *any* government in Africa can be overthrown by the army *whatever* its record and democratic credentials. If civilian governments of such a pedigree cannot survive, what judgement can be made about the military autocracies that almost inevitably seem bound to dominate at this stage of African history?

It is difficult to prove that civilian rule could have done any better but military governments in Africa have done little to generate economic prosperity or encourage constitutional evolution. Yet what alternative is there to army control if the civilian infrastructure is inefficient, weakly organized and corrupt? Armies have a good reputation for efficient day-to-day administration but a poor record for long term political policy and planning. However, armed forces are trained to fight not to govern. This dilemma is reminiscent of the occasion when a guest said to Victor Hugo that his cook, who was also his mistress, had served a lousy meal and Hugo replied, 'After all, you cannot expect her to be good at everything.'

Military regimes, although they can veer to the left as in Libya or to the right as in Zaire, tend to be more pragmatic, less ideological than civilian regimes. Ironically, the style and system (where it exists) of African military government closely resembles the previous autocratic colonial regimes. And the rationale used is the same as well: strong government to educate the people for democracy and to provide the framework for austerity measures to put the country on its feet.

In the Sudan and Nigeria a common-sense, pragmatic approach helped to end their respective civil wars. President Nimeiry ended the long war in

the South of his country by patient conciliation. In Nigeria, before he was deposed by another general, General Gowon's magnanimity as a Christian from a Northern minority tribe enabled him to show clemency to the defeated Ibos of Biafra. (Gowon even trusted his own private plane to an Ibo pilot.) This spirit of conciliation has been compared with a similar mood prevailing at the end of the United States civil war.

Outside Africa, military leaders such as Ataturk of Turkey and Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia did much to instil a sense of national identity. Perhaps the nearest comparison in Africa is General Mobutu who more than most military men despises politicians. His rule, sometimes likened to Mussolini's Italy, is perhaps more a personal dictatorship than a military regime. Like Mussolini, Mobutu seems to revel in flattery. In order to woo the erratic leader of Zaire the Western states sometimes go overboard in their praise of him (despite his massive debts). During his state visit to London in 1973 he was described as 'a Henry Tudor after the Wars of the Roses' and 'a Richelieu after the Wars of Religion'. In some ways this was an accurate assessment because the economy of Zaire is perhaps in the same shape as France and Britain a few hundred years ago.

Whatever the style and relative success or failure of military regimes in Africa, the question remains whether army rule is a passing or permanent phase. No one, except Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, has thought about scrapping armies completely and relying on small police forces. At present a sense of the inevitable pervades. Is it impossible to escape from military despotism in Africa?

Worldwide, the examples of modern totalitarian government show that a well-organized machine of terror cannot be overthrown from within so long as it remains austere, ideologically committed and led by capable men. None of these attributes pertain to African armies. Inefficient military regimes may just be passing, perhaps in the short term even necessary, transitional phase in African history. In time, guns and tanks may give way to constitutional debate and effective political policy. By that time the soldiers will be more than glad to return, perhaps permanently, to barracks. For as De Gaulle once quipped, 'Politics is too serious a business for soldiers.'