

The Civil-Military Relationship in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999–2025): Explaining the Military's Non-Intervention in Politics

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the evolution of civil-military relations in Nigeria since the country's return to democratic governance in 1999, following decades of military dominance punctuated by recurrent coups and authoritarian rule. It explores the factors that have disincentivized military intervention in politics despite ongoing security challenges such as insurgency, communal conflicts, and political unrest. Through a conceptual framework that clarifies civil-military relations, military intervention, and democratic consolidation, the study analyzes how institutional reforms, normative shifts within the military, public opposition to military rule, and international pressures have collectively reshaped the military's role. Employing theoretical perspectives including Democratic Consolidation Theory, the paper highlights how the entrenchment of democratic norms, enhanced civilian control, and regional anti-coup mechanisms have fostered military restraint. The findings suggest that Nigeria's sustained civilian supremacy over the military reflects both structural changes within the military institution and broader political and societal transformations, marking a significant step toward democratic consolidation in a historically fragile context.

KEYWORD: Military Intervention, Civilian Governance, Civil Military Relations

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of civil-military relations in Nigeria has been characterized by recurring cycles of military coups, prolonged periods of authoritarian military rule, and intermittent democratic experiments. Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has witnessed multiple military interventions, with the military dominating governance from 1966 to 1979 and again from 1983 to 1999. These interventions often emerged during times of political instability, economic downturns, and perceived governmental incompetence (Fayemi, 2017). By the late 1990s, however, internal and external pressures led to a transition that culminated in the return to civilian rule in 1999 with the inauguration of President Olusegun Obasanjo, a retired military general.

Since then, Nigeria has experienced over two decades of uninterrupted democratic governance, marking a significant departure from its history of military dominance. Remarkably, despite numerous crises ranging from the Boko Haram insurgency, herder-farmer conflicts, separatist agitations, and electoral violence the Nigerian military has demonstrated a notable degree of restraint by refraining from seizing political power (Omotola & Saliu, 2020). This is in stark contrast to other African states, where democratic backsliding has often invited direct or indirect military interventions, such as in Mali (2020), Guinea (2021), and Sudan (2021) (Bolarinwa, 2022).

The evolving nature of Nigeria's civil-military relations raises crucial questions about the drivers of this transformation. While some analysts attribute it to institutional reforms and democratic consolidation, others point to the changing normative orientation within the armed forces, public opposition to military rule, and growing international disapproval of unconstitutional changes in government (Onapajo, 2021; Adebajo, 2023). Moreover, the militarization of internal security roles has redefined the military's engagement in national affairs, shifting its focus from political control to operational tasks such as counterinsurgency and peacekeeping (Ibekwe, 2023).

Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to examine the trajectory and dynamics of civil-military relations in Nigeria since 1999, with particular attention to the factors that have disincentivized military coups and political interventions. The study will explore both structural and normative changes within the military institution and analyze the broader political and societal developments that have contributed to this apparent shift in military posture.

2. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

To properly examine the dynamics of civil-military relations in Nigeria since 1999, it is imperative to first clarify the key concepts that underpin this study: civil-military relations, military intervention, and democratic consolidation. These terms not only frame the analysis but also guide the theoretical interpretation of Nigeria's post-military democratic experience.

2.1 Civil-Military Relations

Civil-military relations refer to the institutional and normative balance between the civilian political leadership and the military establishment, particularly in terms of authority, control, accountability, and professional autonomy (Feaver, 2018). At its core, it involves the extent to which civilian authorities are able to exert legitimate oversight over military institutions while maintaining the operational effectiveness of the armed forces. Civil-military relations can vary along a spectrum from authoritarian control to democratic oversight, depending on a state's political structure and historical context.

In democratic settings, civil-military relations are ideally structured around the principle of civilian supremacy, where the military is subordinate to elected officials and is confined to constitutionally mandated roles such as national defense and support in times of crisis (Huntington, 1957; Omotola & Saliu, 2020). However, in many post-colonial African states like Nigeria, the military historically operated as both a political actor and security organ, leading to blurred lines between professional military duties and political ambition. Since 1999, Nigeria has undertaken efforts to redefine this relationship through constitutional reforms, legislative oversight, and institutional reprofessionalization.

2.2 Military Intervention

Military intervention denotes the involvement of the armed forces in the political sphere, especially through unconstitutional means such as coups d'état, the dissolution of democratic institutions, or covert manipulation of electoral or political outcomes (Kposowa & Jenkins, 2021). Such interventions are usually justified by claims of national instability, corruption, or civil disorder. However, in most cases, they lead to the erosion of democratic institutions and the entrenchment of authoritarian regimes.

Military intervention in Nigeria has a long history, beginning with the 1966 coup that toppled the civilian First Republic. From that point until 1999, military rule became a recurring feature of Nigerian governance, with successive juntas justifying their actions as necessary corrections of civilian misrule (Fayemi, 2017). In the post-1999 period, although there have been no overt military takeovers, concerns about indirect intervention persist especially in relation to military involvement in electoral processes, internal security operations, and alleged bias in handling protests and civil unrest (Ibekwe, 2023). It is therefore essential to distinguish between formal coups and more nuanced forms of military intrusion into civilian affairs.

2.3 Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation refers to the process through which democratic institutions, practices, and norms become deeply embedded and widely accepted in a political system, to the point where a return to authoritarianism becomes highly improbable (Schedler, 2001; Ojo, 2020). It goes beyond the mere holding of periodic elections and includes elements such as rule of law, judicial independence, protection of civil liberties, political pluralism, and effective civilian control over the military.

In the context of Nigeria, democratic consolidation is both a goal and a process. Since 1999, the country has held multiple general elections and witnessed peaceful transitions of power. However, challenges such as electoral fraud, judicial interference, ethno-religious conflict, and security threats continue to undermine the depth of democratic entrenchment (Onapajo, 2021). One of the key indicators of democratic consolidation is the normalization of civil-military relations under a framework of constitutionalism and accountability. The continued withdrawal of the military from overt political life, if sustained, is a positive sign of Nigeria's progression toward a mature democracy.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand the military's sustained non-intervention in Nigerian politics since 1999, several theoretical perspectives offer valuable insights. These frameworks help explain the evolving nature of civil-military relations in Nigeria by emphasizing institutional, normative, and strategic dimensions of military behavior. Among the most relevant are Democratic Consolidation Theory, Professionalism Theory, Civilian Control Theory, and Rational Choice Institutionalism.

3.1 Democratic Consolidation Theory

Democratic consolidation theory posits that as democratic institutions, norms, and practices become entrenched within a political system, the likelihood of a return to authoritarianism especially military rule diminishes significantly (Schedler, 2001). In such contexts, regular elections, separation of powers, judicial independence, and media pluralism foster a political culture that is incompatible with military dictatorship. Over time, the military internalizes these democratic norms, seeing itself more as a defender of the constitution than a political power broker.

In Nigeria's case, the uninterrupted civilian governance since 1999, coupled with periodic (albeit imperfect) electoral transitions and increased civic awareness, suggests a maturing democratic order. This growing legitimacy of civilian rule makes military coups less justifiable and more politically costly. Moreover, the presence of regional and international democratic actors such as ECOWAS and the African Union both of which have adopted strong anti-coup stances further reinforces this norm against unconstitutional seizures of power (Bolarinwa, 2022).

Democratic consolidation theory posits that as democratic institutions, norms, and practices become deeply embedded within a political system, the possibility of a return to authoritarian rule particularly military dictatorship significantly declines (Schedler, 2001). Consolidation is not merely the conduct of elections but involves the institutionalization of democratic rules, values, and

expectations. These include the separation of powers, rule of law, accountability, media freedom, and civil liberties. The central idea is that as democracy becomes "the only game in town," political actors, including the military, begin to see democratic processes as the legitimate means of political engagement. In mature democratic systems, the military's role is constitutionally limited to defense and security functions under the authority of civilian leadership. Through this process, the armed forces begin to internalize democratic norms, increasingly viewing themselves not as political actors but as guardians of constitutional order and national unity. The culture of civilian supremacy over the military becomes normalized, while the political costs of intervention rise significantly. When the military becomes socialized into a professional and nonpartisan role, the temptation or perceived necessity to intervene in governance weakens considerably.

In Nigeria, the uninterrupted civilian governance since the return to democracy in 1999 marks a critical shift from its previous history of repeated military coups. Although Nigeria's democracy has faced serious challenges including electoral violence, judicial compromise, and corruption the country has managed to conduct six general elections, with instances of power changing hands between opposition parties. This continuity in democratic governance has gradually reshaped elite and public expectations, reinforcing the legitimacy of civilian authority. The military, once accustomed to political dominance, has increasingly accepted its subordination to democratic institutions and constitutional protocols. Furthermore, regional and international contexts have also played a crucial role in consolidating Nigeria's democratic gains. Organizations like ECOWAS and the African Union have taken firm positions against unconstitutional changes in government, often imposing sanctions on coup-led regimes. Nigeria, as a regional power, faces considerable diplomatic and economic pressure to maintain democratic stability. The threat of global condemnation, suspension from international bodies, and economic isolation has served as a deterrent against military intervention (Bolarinwa, 2022). These internal and external factors jointly contribute to a political climate where democratic consolidation is not only desirable but strategically rational for all actors, including the military.

3.2 Professionalism Theory (Huntington)

Samuel P. Huntington's theory of military professionalism remains one of the foundational perspectives in the study of civil-military relations. In his seminal work *The Soldier and the State* (1957), Huntington argued that a truly professional military is defined by three core attributes: expertise in the management of violence, a sense of responsibility toward the state and society, and corporateness, or a strong internal sense of identity and institutional culture. These characteristics, when effectively cultivated, create a military institution that remains apolitical and subordinate to civilian control. According to Huntington, professionalism acts as a safeguard against the politicization of the armed forces, as professional officers are socialized to prioritize national defense over personal or institutional political ambitions.

In professionalized militaries, officers are trained to accept and respect civilian supremacy, even when civilian leadership is perceived as inefficient or corrupt. The emphasis on technical expertise, ethical conduct, and loyalty to constitutional authority reorients the military's self-image away from that of political guardian to that of a neutral security provider. Such professional orientation discourages interventionist tendencies, reinforcing the idea that the military's primary role is external defense, not internal governance (Huntington, 1957; Feaver, 2018). In many democracies, including emerging ones, deliberate efforts to professionalize the military are a key strategy in preventing coups and ensuring the military's alignment with democratic norms.

In Nigeria, significant steps have been taken since 1999 to reprofessionalize the armed forces following years of military rule. These include reforms in recruitment, promotion standards, officer training, and defense policy planning. The Nigerian Defense Academy (NDA) and Command and Staff College have revised their curricula to emphasize democratic civil-military norms, constitutional governance, and international humanitarian law (Fayemi, 2017). Nigeria's increased involvement in United Nations and African Union peacekeeping operations has also exposed its officers to global military standards and norms of professional conduct, further distancing them from political roles. These developments contribute to a growing internalization of the military's non-political identity.

Nonetheless, the path to full professionalism has not been without challenges. Instances of human rights abuses during internal security operations, political favoritism in senior appointments, and the military's occasional involvement in electoral processes raise concerns about the extent of professionalization (Onapajo, 2021; Agbibo, 2020). However, even with these shortcomings, there is evidence of a shifting institutional culture within the Nigerian military. Compared to earlier periods of outright military dominance, the armed forces today exhibit greater restraint and are more inclined to operate within the boundaries of constitutional democracy. This transformation, while still evolving, has played a significant role in discouraging direct military intervention in Nigeria's political affairs.

3.3 Civilian Control Theory

Civilian control theory underscores the necessity of institutional frameworks that ensure democratic oversight of the armed forces. The core assumption of the theory is that in a democratic setting, the military must be subordinated to civilian authority through clearly defined legal, political, and administrative structures (Feaver, 2018; Bruneau & Matei, 2013). Key mechanisms include the establishment of legislative oversight bodies, the appointment of civilian officials to lead defense ministries, parliamentary approval of defense budgets, and robust judicial and constitutional safeguards that restrict military autonomy. When effectively implemented,

these mechanisms help prevent the military from operating as an independent political force and reinforce the normative expectation that political power belongs solely to elected civilian authorities.

The presence of these control mechanisms not only limits the institutional space for military interference but also reshapes the political culture of civil-military relations. As civilians take the lead in shaping defense policy, allocating resources, and overseeing military conduct, the legitimacy of democratic rule becomes reinforced in both institutional and symbolic terms (Croissant, Kuehn, & Lorenz, 2013). Moreover, regular and transparent interactions between military leaders and civilian institutions such as legislative committees or presidential briefings serve to build mutual trust while signaling to the public that the armed forces are firmly under civilian control. In turn, this reduces the perception of the military as an autonomous actor capable of political intervention.

In Nigeria, the restoration of democracy in 1999 marked a turning point in the state's efforts to assert civilian control over the armed forces. Legislative oversight, particularly through the National Assembly's Defense Committees, has increased in scope and frequency, including deliberations on defense procurement and security strategies (Omotola & Saliu, 2020). Furthermore, successive administrations have made symbolic and practical moves to consolidate civilian supremacy by appointing civilians as Ministers of Defence and introducing public audits of defense expenditures. These steps, while not always fully implemented or free from corruption, represent a meaningful shift from the military dominated regimes of the past. The gradual normalization of civilian oversight signals to the military hierarchy that its authority is constitutionally limited and democratically supervised.

Nonetheless, the efficacy of civilian control in Nigeria remains a work in progress. Instances of off-budget military spending, executive-military alliances during elections, and limited transparency in security-related matters have raised concerns about the robustness of oversight (Olaniyan & Akinbobola, 2021). However, even when inconsistently applied, institutional mechanisms of civilian control contribute to the political cost of military intervention. The very existence of legislative checks, media scrutiny, and civil society advocacy introduces accountability pressures that did not exist during previous military regimes. These mechanisms, though imperfect, play a significant role in discouraging unconstitutional ambitions within the armed forces and reinforcing democratic norms.

3.4 Rational Choice Institutionalism

Rational Choice Institutionalism (RCI) interprets the behavior of political actors including military elites through the lens of strategic decision-making within institutional frameworks. According to this approach, actors are utility maximizers who make decisions based on rational assessments of the likely costs and benefits of available options (Hall & Taylor, 1996). Institutions, in this context, are not merely formal rules but the broader set of incentives, constraints, and expectations that shape strategic behavior. Applied to civil-military relations, RCI suggests that military officers will refrain from political intervention when the perceived costs legal, reputational, organizational, or operational—outweigh the potential benefits of seizing power (Geddes, Wright, & Frantz, 2018).

From this perspective, the military's decision to intervene in politics is not purely ideological or historically deterministic but contingent on a rational analysis of potential outcomes. If the risks include sanctions, internal resistance, loss of professional standing, or disruption of institutional cohesion, military elites may opt to maintain the status quo. Additionally, rational incentives can shift over time depending on international pressure, domestic legitimacy, elite unity, and public sentiment. For example, global condemnation of coups, the withdrawal of economic aid, and the risk of international isolation serve as deterrents to military adventurism in modern democracies (Powell & Thyne, 2011). Thus, when institutional environments penalize extra-constitutional behavior, rational military actors are more likely to support democratic continuity.

In the Nigerian context, several developments since 1999 have contributed to raising the cost of military intervention. The entrenchment of international and regional norms against unconstitutional takeovers such as those articulated by ECOWAS, the African Union, and the United Nations has made military coups politically and diplomatically costly. Countries like Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso have faced suspension from regional bodies and sanctions following military takeovers, signaling a broader intolerance for undemocratic behavior on the continent (Adebajo, 2023). Nigerian military leaders, aware of these precedents, are likely to consider the diplomatic and economic consequences of any unconstitutional action. Furthermore, Nigeria's strategic position as a regional leader makes it particularly sensitive to international scrutiny and expectations.

Domestically, the presence of a vibrant civil society, independent media, and increasing public commitment to democratic norms have created a politically costly environment for military adventurism. Protest movements such as #EndSARS in 2020 demonstrated the capacity of Nigerian citizens to mobilize against authoritarian tendencies and demand accountability from state institutions, including the military. Additionally, internal divisions within the armed forces, generational shifts, and the professionalization of military education contribute to a culture less inclined toward political engagement (Ogundiya, 2020). Viewed through a rationalist lens, these factors suggest that military elites in Nigeria are operating in a strategic environment where political intervention is increasingly irrational due to the unpredictability of outcomes and the high likelihood of reputational and institutional damage.

4. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE MILITARY AND CIVILIAN RULE IN NIGERIA

The trajectory of civil-military relations in Nigeria is deeply rooted in the country's post-independence political history. Following Nigeria's independence from Britain in 1960, the First Republic struggled to manage regional tensions, electoral fraud, and elite

competition. These political challenges culminated in the military coup of January 15, 1966, led by young army officers who claimed to be saving the country from corruption and misgovernance. This marked the beginning of military intrusion into politics, a pattern that would define Nigeria's political landscape for over three decades (Ajayi, 2016). Following the first coup, Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi assumed power but was soon overthrown in a counter-coup in July 1966. This triggered a cycle of coups and counter-coups that intensified ethnic divisions and set the stage for the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), a conflict that further entrenched military rule. From 1966 to 1999, the military governed Nigeria for 29 years, leaving only intermittent periods of civilian administration (Olorungbemi & Egwu, 2020). This dominance shaped the political culture and institutional norms, with authoritarian rule and centralization becoming deeply embedded features of governance.

The long reign of military rule led to a weakened civil society, suspended constitutions, and the erosion of democratic institutions. Military leaders frequently assumed legislative and executive functions, often ruling by decrees and sidelining judicial autonomy. As Agbese (2021) notes, this period cultivated a political environment characterized by fear, censorship, and suppression of dissent. While some regimes made infrastructural progress, the overarching legacy was one of democratic backsliding and institutional fragility. Despite rhetoric about restoring order and fighting corruption, many military regimes were themselves marked by impunity and economic mismanagement. For instance, General Ibrahim Babangida's regime (1985–1993) implemented the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), which contributed to widespread poverty and social unrest. Similarly, General Sani Abacha's rule (1993–1998) was marked by unprecedented levels of corruption and human rights violations (Duruji et al., 2020). Public trust in military governance steadily declined as Nigerians experienced the authoritarian consequences of military hegemony.

The annulment of the June 12, 1993, presidential election widely regarded as the most credible in Nigeria's history was a turning point. General Babangida's decision to annul the election result provoked national and international outrage, and intensified civil resistance. The ensuing political crisis and the repressive environment under Abacha galvanized a broad coalition of pro-democracy activists, civil society groups, and international actors demanding a return to civilian rule (Onapajo, 2021). These efforts laid the groundwork for the eventual transition. Following General Abacha's sudden death in June 1998, General Abdulsalami Abubakar assumed power and promptly initiated a transition to democracy. This culminated in the 1999 general elections and the inauguration of President Olusegun Obasanjo a retired military general as a civilian president. The Fourth Republic was born out of a negotiated settlement, signaling a new era of civil governance, albeit with lingering military influence (Agbese, 2021). Nonetheless, it marked the formal exit of the military from direct governance and the beginning of Nigeria's longest democratic stretch.

Since 1999, Nigeria has experienced six general elections, three of which have led to changes in ruling parties 2007, 2015, and 2023. Though electoral irregularities persist, the institutionalization of electoral competition, the resilience of democratic norms, and growing civic engagement point toward a gradual democratic consolidation. Most notably, the 2015 presidential election marked the first time an incumbent president was defeated and peacefully handed over power to the opposition an important milestone in Nigeria's democratic journey (Adebajo, 2023). Importantly, throughout this period, the Nigerian military has refrained from direct political intervention despite numerous national crises, including Boko Haram insurgency, electoral violence, separatist agitations, and economic downturns. Analysts attribute this restraint to both internal reforms and external pressures. Internationally, regional organizations like ECOWAS and the African Union have adopted strong anti-coup norms, suspending countries like Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso for unconstitutional changes of government. Nigeria, being a key member of these bodies, is sensitive to reputational costs (Adebajo, 2023).

Internally, democratic norms have gradually taken root within the military. Training programs now emphasize respect for civil authority, constitutionalism, and non-partisanship. There has also been an effort to professionalize the military through increased international engagements, peacekeeping missions, and human rights training (Fayemi, 2017). Although challenges remain such as human rights violations during internal security operations there is a clear shift in the institutional orientation of the Nigerian Armed Forces away from political dominance. The historical trajectory of Nigeria's civil-military relations reveals a profound transformation from a militarized polity to a developing democracy. While the legacy of authoritarianism continues to affect governance, the post 1999 period represents a critical break from past patterns. The durability of civilian rule, the entrenchment of democratic norms, and the strategic recalculations by military elites underscore the changing dynamics of civil-military relations in Nigeria. Continued vigilance and reform, however, remain necessary to prevent democratic reversals.

5. CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS SINCE 1999: PATTERNS AND TRENDS

5.1. Obasanjo Era (1999–2007)

The return to civilian rule in 1999 ushered in a new phase of civil-military relations in Nigeria, with former military Head of State, General Olusegun Obasanjo, emerging as the country's first democratically elected president of the Fourth Republic. Obasanjo's military background positioned him uniquely to address the challenge of asserting civilian supremacy over a historically interventionist military. Aware of the potential threat posed by politicized military actors, Obasanjo's administration prioritized the demilitarization of politics and institutional reforms aimed at establishing firm civilian control (Ojo, 2016). One of Obasanjo's earliest actions was the compulsory retirement of numerous senior military officers who had held political appointments during

previous military regimes. This move was both symbolic and strategic, sending a clear message that the era of military political dominance was over. Scholars have described this purge as the most significant restructuring of the armed forces since independence, effectively decoupling the military from its entrenched political networks (Agbese, 2021). It also served to create a new generation of officers less connected to Nigeria's era of coups and counter-coups.

Beyond personnel changes, Obasanjo invested in reforms geared towards professionalizing the military. These included updating training curricula, strengthening the Ministry of Defence with civilian expertise, and promoting Nigeria's involvement in international peacekeeping missions under the United Nations and African Union. The goal was to reorient the military's focus from internal political dominance to external defense and international cooperation (Fayemi, 2017). Nigerian troops participated in missions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Sudan, experiences that not only enhanced military capacity but also exposed officers to global norms of civilian oversight and democratic accountability. Obasanjo also leveraged legislative frameworks to support institutional change. The National Assembly, particularly its Committees on Defence and Security, began exercising oversight functions albeit inconsistently. Budgets for defense were subjected to parliamentary review, and defense procurement began to receive public scrutiny, though not without criticisms of opacity and corruption (Omotola & Saliu, 2020). Despite these limitations, the seeds of democratic oversight were sown during this period, setting a precedent for subsequent administrations.

Furthermore, Obasanjo utilized strategic appointments to maintain civilian dominance over the armed forces. While he appointed some military officers to sensitive national security positions, these were often individuals loyal to civilian supremacy or those who supported democratic transition. His own credibility as a former military ruler who voluntarily handed over power in 1979 bolstered his legitimacy and enabled him to enforce reforms with minimal resistance (Olorunbemi & Egwu, 2020). However, critics argue that Obasanjo's military-style leadership also contributed to a centralization of power and a weak institutionalization of democratic norms within the presidency. The Obasanjo era marked a critical turning point in Nigeria's civil-military relations. It represented the initial and most robust effort to subordinate the military to civilian authority since independence. Through personnel retirements, professionalization, international engagement, and legislative reforms, the foundation for a non-political military was laid. While challenges such as corruption, weak institutional capacity, and executive overreach persisted, Obasanjo's tenure created a relatively stable civil-military framework that subsequent administrations would inherit and navigate.

5.2. Yar'Adua & Jonathan Era (2007–2015):

The period spanning the administrations of Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (2007–2010) and Goodluck Jonathan (2010–2015) witnessed significant transformations in civil-military relations in Nigeria, primarily shaped by internal security challenges. During these years, the Nigerian military was heavily involved in addressing insurgency, militancy, and other threats to national security most notably in the Niger Delta and the northeastern region. This operational engagement limited the military's institutional appetite for direct political control and further consolidated the democratic order established in 1999. Under President Yar'Adua, the focus was largely on the Niger Delta crisis, where militant groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) carried out attacks on oil installations, kidnapped expatriates, and disrupted national oil output. In response, Yar'Adua initiated the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) in 2009, which offered militants a pathway to disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. While this policy was led by the civilian government, it relied on military support for implementation and enforcement (Obi, 2016). The military's embeddedness in these operations necessitated closer collaboration with civil authorities, reinforcing their subordinate role in national governance.

Following Yar'Adua's death and the ascension of Goodluck Jonathan, civil-military relations became more strained due to the escalation of the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast. From 2010 onwards, the military was deployed to Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states under a state of emergency to quell the rapidly spreading insurgency. This marked a major shift in the military's post-1999 role from peacetime professionalization to active internal combat (Adebajo, 2023). The enormous operational demand placed on the military created a context in which seizing political power became less feasible and less desirable. Moreover, the Jonathan administration increasingly relied on the military not only for counter-insurgency but also for supporting civil authority during elections and in curbing communal violence in central Nigeria. Despite occasional concerns about overreach, such as the deployment of troops during the 2015 general elections, the military largely adhered to its subordinate constitutional role (Ibeanu & Orji, 2015). Their continued subordination to civilian control, despite growing operational power, reflected both institutional restraint and the political legitimacy of the democratic government.

Nevertheless, this era was not without tensions. Accusations of human rights violations by the military in its fight against Boko Haram drew both domestic and international criticism. Organizations such as Amnesty International reported extrajudicial killings and abuses in detention facilities (Amnesty International, 2015). However, these criticisms did not translate into political ambition or military insubordination. Rather, they sparked public debate on the need for more effective oversight and reform further embedding civilian institutions in the governance of security affairs. The Yar'Adua and Jonathan years were characterized by a pragmatic and operationally focused military, whose deep involvement in internal security conflicts diverted attention from any direct political aspirations. The sustained civilian oversight, combined with growing democratic awareness and external scrutiny, ensured that civil-military relations, though tested, remained within constitutional limits during this period.

5.3. Buhari Era (2015–2023):

The administration of President Muhammadu Buhari, a retired Major General and former military Head of State, brought renewed attention to the nature of civil-military relations in Nigeria. His electoral victory in 2015 marked the first time an opposition candidate unseated an incumbent president through democratic means, a milestone in Nigeria's democratic consolidation. However, given Buhari's military pedigree, concerns emerged about the potential re-militarization of Nigerian governance under a democratic cover (Ajayi & Ikuejube, 2020). Buhari maintained the appearance of civilian supremacy and operated through democratic institutions, but his leadership style was often criticized for centralizing authority and relying heavily on military and security operatives for civil functions. His government was marked by frequent deployment of the military for internal security operations across nearly all 36 states, under various operations such as Operation Python Dance, Crocodile Smile, and Operation Lafiya Dole (Ogundiya, 2021). These operations, while addressing security threats like insurgency, banditry, and separatist agitations, also raised questions about the blurring of lines between military and civilian responsibilities.

Under Buhari, the military's visibility in civilian life increased significantly. Critics argued that this trend represented a subtle militarization of governance, where state responses to dissent, protests, and civil unrest were disproportionately forceful. The military's involvement in quelling the 2020 #EndSARS protests particularly the controversial Lekki Toll Gate shooting was widely condemned and seen as a regression in civil-military norms (Amnesty International, 2020). These developments highlighted the tension between maintaining national security and protecting civil liberties within a democratic framework. Nonetheless, despite these militaristic tendencies, Buhari did not attempt to suspend the constitution or extend his rule beyond legal limits. Elections continued to hold, albeit amid controversies, and institutional checks though weakened were not dismantled. Buhari's approach can therefore be characterized as "militarized democracy," where military logic and personnel were prominent in governance, but within the boundaries of formal civilian rule (Aborisade & Eme, 2022). The persistence of electoral democracy and the military's continued subordination to presidential authority reinforced the perception that Nigeria had moved past the era of overt military coups. In essence, the Buhari era exemplified a paradox in civil-military relations: a democratically elected former general who upheld constitutional governance but relied heavily on the security apparatus to manage political and civil challenges. This period underscored the importance of building strong institutions and civilian oversight mechanisms to prevent democratic backsliding, even under civilian leaders with authoritarian leanings.

5.4. Tinubu Era (2023–Till Date):

The presidency of Bola Ahmed Tinubu, beginning in May 2023, has so far continued the democratic tradition of civilian control over the military, while introducing strategic reforms aimed at redefining the military's role within Nigeria's broader national security framework. As a seasoned politician with a strong background in governance and statecraft, Tinubu's approach to civil-military relations has emphasized both institutional reform and operational recalibration, particularly in response to evolving security threats such as terrorism, banditry, and separatist agitation. One of the defining features of Tinubu's early administration has been a renewed emphasis on transparency and accountability in defense spending. The president ordered audits of defense procurement processes and pledged to plug leakages in military budgeting long viewed as opaque and susceptible to corruption (Premium Times, 2023). This aligns with global best practices for strengthening civilian oversight of the armed forces, where transparent defense budgeting acts as a tool for both democratic accountability and operational efficiency (Bakke, 2018).

Tinubu's government also initiated reforms aimed at reshaping the Nigerian military's engagement in internal security. Rather than defaulting to military responses, the administration has advocated a "whole-of-government" and community-based security strategy, where the military supports rather than supplants civilian law enforcement agencies. This shift has included strengthening intelligence-sharing platforms between the military, police, and Department of State Services (DSS), as well as encouraging military withdrawal from non-combat civil duties where appropriate (Daily Trust, 2024). These reforms aim to realign the military with its constitutional mandate while minimizing overreach. Furthermore, the administration has emphasized regional and continental cooperation in security management, particularly in West Africa. Amid a rise in military coups in neighboring countries such as Niger and Burkina Faso, Tinubu, as Chairman of ECOWAS (appointed in 2023), has taken a firm stand in defense of democratic governance. He led diplomatic efforts and supported sanctions against unconstitutional regimes, reinforcing Nigeria's commitment to anti-coup norms and further distancing its own military from any temptation of political intervention (ECOWAS, 2023). His foreign policy stance thus mirrors his domestic civil-military policy, which seeks to entrench professionalism and constitutionalism within the armed forces.

In terms of military leadership, Tinubu has shown a preference for merit-based appointments, balancing ethnic and regional considerations with operational competence. The appointment of service chiefs in 2023 was widely seen as a move to professionalize leadership within the armed forces, even as debates continued over their effectiveness and political neutrality. These appointments were followed by new directives aimed at improving military welfare, housing, and combat readiness key morale boosters that reinforce loyalty to civilian authority (Vanguard, 2024). While Tinubu's administration remains relatively young, the early signs point to a deliberate effort to consolidate democratic control over the armed forces, enhance professionalism, and reposition the

military as a key stakeholder in a civilian-led national security architecture. These efforts, if sustained, may further distance Nigeria from its coup-prone past and reinforce the norms of democratic civilian supremacy in the post-1999 era.

6. REASONS FOR MILITARY NON-INTERVENTION (1999–2025)

6.1. Increased Professionalization of the Armed Forces

One of the most significant shifts in Nigeria's post-1999 civil-military relations is the deliberate move toward increased professionalization of the armed forces. Since the return to democracy, military training curricula have been revised to include civil-military relations, democratic norms, and human rights (Onapajo, 2021). Nigerian officers now participate in international military training programs and defense dialogues, particularly with democratic countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. These engagements have contributed to the military's growing apolitical ethos. Professionalization is further supported by institutional reforms such as the establishment of military-human rights desks, codes of conduct for internal operations, and participation in global peacekeeping missions, which reinforce the notion that the military's role is primarily defensive and subordinate to civilian authority (Fayemi, 2017).

6.2. Influence of International and Regional Norms

Nigeria's continued integration into the international system has made adherence to global and regional democratic norms more imperative. Organizations such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have developed strong normative frameworks against unconstitutional changes in government. The Lomé Declaration (2000) and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2007) clearly oppose military coups and have been institutionalized through punitive mechanisms such as sanctions and diplomatic isolation (Bolarinwa, 2022). As a leading member of ECOWAS, Nigeria's foreign policy now aligns with these anti-coup norms. This has not only reduced the legitimacy of any potential military takeover but has also influenced the internal military culture to conform with democratic expectations.

6.3. Economic and Logistical Constraints

Since the early 2010s, the Nigerian military has been significantly overstretched due to its involvement in multiple internal security operations, most notably against Boko Haram in the northeast, banditry in the northwest, and separatist movements in the southeast. These ongoing security challenges have drained military resources, strained personnel capacity, and placed immense logistical burdens on the armed forces (Adebajo, 2023). The day-to-day engagement in counter-insurgency and internal stability operations has redirected focus from political ambitions to operational survival. This overstretch has also undermined the military's institutional cohesion, making any idea of a political takeover both logistically impractical and strategically undesirable.

6.4. Strengthening of Civilian Oversight Mechanisms

Another crucial factor is the gradual, albeit inconsistent, strengthening of democratic institutions tasked with civilian oversight of the military. The National Assembly, through its defense committees, has increasingly scrutinized defense expenditures and military operations. Civil society organizations and the media have also played watchdog roles, exposing corruption and human rights violations, thereby exerting pressure for greater accountability (Omotola & Salii, 2020). Judicial pronouncements on military excesses and increased public discourse on the role of the military in a democratic state have collectively enhanced civilian oversight. Although challenges such as executive overreach and weak enforcement remain, the democratic architecture has created institutional constraints that limit the military's political agency.

6.5. Historical Fatigue and the Negative Legacy of Military Rule

The legacy of Nigeria's military regimes (1966–1999) continues to haunt public consciousness and military memory. Military rule is widely associated with economic mismanagement, widespread human rights abuses, suppression of dissent, and the erosion of civil liberties. The Decree-heavy governance structure, political assassinations, and systemic corruption under military rulers such as Sani Abacha left a bitter imprint on national identity and legitimacy (Ajayi & Ikuejube, 2020). The military institution itself, in retrospect, acknowledges the reputational damage incurred during this era. As a result, there is little appetite within the officer corps to return to power and risk repeating historical blunders. This historical fatigue acts as a powerful normative and psychological barrier to intervention.

6.6. Internal Divisions and Lack of Cohesive Consensus

Ethnic, regional, and religious cleavages within Nigeria's sociopolitical landscape are mirrored within its armed forces. The military, though national in structure, is often fragmented along ethno-regional lines, with recruitment, promotion, and deployment sometimes perceived to be influenced by identity politics (Ogundiya, 2021). These internal divisions hinder the possibility of forming a unified front capable of orchestrating a coup. Without a cohesive ideological or institutional consensus, the military lacks the solidarity required to plan and execute a successful intervention. Moreover, any attempt at political takeover by one faction would likely be opposed by others, increasing the risk of internal conflict within the military establishment itself.

CONCLUSION

The Civil-Military Relationship in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999–2025): Explaining the Military's Non-Intervention in Politics

The absence of overt military intervention in Nigerian politics between 1999 and 2025 is the result of a confluence of critical factors that have collectively reshaped civil-military relations in the country. The transition to democratic governance in 1999 marked a significant turning point, ushering in a new era characterized by constitutionalism, political pluralism, and the institutionalization of civilian control over the armed forces. The consolidation of democratic practices through successive elections, increased civic engagement, and the strengthening of democratic institutions have all contributed to delegitimizing military rule as an acceptable means of political change.

Additionally, the Nigerian military has undergone considerable professionalization since the return to democracy. Reforms in military training, doctrine, and command structure have emphasized subordination to civilian authority, non-partisanship, and a focus on internal and regional security roles. This has fostered a culture of restraint within the armed forces and a growing recognition of their role within a democratic framework. International influences, particularly from regional bodies like ECOWAS and global actors such as the African Union, the United Nations, and Western democracies, have also played a deterrent role. Nigeria's strategic partnerships and its leadership role in regional peacekeeping and security operations have increased the costs both diplomatically and economically of any potential military takeover.

Furthermore, the internal security challenges Nigeria has faced over the years, including terrorism, banditry, separatist agitations, and communal conflicts, have placed a heavy operational burden on the military. This has not only diverted its focus away from politics but also underscored the necessity of political solutions to complex national problems, thereby reinforcing the primacy of civilian governance. While the possibility of military intervention cannot be entirely ruled out especially in a context marked by political instability, economic hardship, or weakened democratic institutions the trend from 1999 to 2025 indicates a maturing and increasingly stable civil-military relationship. This suggests that the Nigerian military is gradually internalizing its role as a professional institution subordinate to civilian democratic authority, thereby contributing to the deepening of democratic governance in the Fourth Republic.

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