

**THE MILITARIZATION OF NIGERIAN POLITICS:
CONSTITUTIONAL CRISES, CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS, AND THE PATH TO
DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION**

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Abstract

The 1964 constitutional crisis and General Yakubu Gowon's recent memoir reveal the early politicization of the Nigerian military and the fragility of civil-military boundaries in the First Republic. This paper analyzes the crisis using frameworks from strategic security management, organizational performance culture, ethical governance, and legal-forensic studies. It examines the role of military rules and codes of conduct in Nigeria, provides comparative insights from Ghana, India, and the United States, and assesses the contributions and failures of successive civilian and military governments from 1960 to 2024. Drawing on institutional, historical, and policy analysis, the paper proposes a framework for democratic consolidation anchored on constitutional clarity, military professionalization, ethical compliance, and statecraft that prioritizes human security and nation-building.

Keywords: Civil-Military Relations, 1964 Crisis, Military Professionalism, Democratic Consolidation, Governance, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Nigeria's post-independence political history has been defined by a recurring pattern: political deadlock, institutional weakness, and military intervention. The December 1964 federal elections and the resulting constitutional crisis between President Nnamdi Azikiwe and Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa represent the first major instance where the armed forces were drawn into a partisan political dispute. General Yakubu Gowon's 2025 memoir alleges that senior officers, including Lt-Col Chukwuemeka Ojukwu and Lt-Col Victor Banjo, held meetings to engineer military intervention in favour of Azikiwe, an intervention Gowon claims he resisted on grounds of constitutional loyalty and military discipline.

This paper argues that the 1964 episode was not an isolated incident but an early manifestation of institutional decay, ethical erosion, and the absence of a performance culture in Nigeria's security sector. Using Akinade's published works on strategic security, performance culture, ethics, and legal-forensic governance, the paper examines how weak civil-military relations undermine democratic consolidation. It further provides comparative insights from other democracies, analyzes the role of successive governments, and proposes a policy framework for good governance, statecraft, and nation-building.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The paper employs qualitative historical analysis, policy analysis, and comparative institutional analysis. Primary sources include Gowon's memoir, parliamentary records from 1964, and official documents. Secondary sources include scholarly works on Nigerian political history and civil-military relations.

The analysis is guided by four theoretical lenses:

1. Huntington's Civil-Military Relations Theory: Objective civilian control requires a professional, apolitical military.
2. Human Security Theory: Security is the protection of people, livelihoods, and dignity, as developed in Akinade's Social and Human Security for Sustainable Development (2007).
3. Institutional Performance Culture: Sustainable effectiveness requires measurable standards, accountability, and ethical compliance, per Standard Performance Culture For Security Personnel and Organisations (2021).
4. Strategic Security Management: Security must be integrated into statecraft, foreign policy, and public affairs, per Managing Strategic Security In Statecraft, Public Affairs and Foreign Relations (2019).

3. The 1964 Constitutional Crisis: Sequence and Significance

The December 1964 federal elections were marred by boycotts and allegations of malpractice by the NCNC and its allies against the NPC-led federal government. President Azikiwe delayed inviting Balewa to form a government, creating a 24-hour constitutional vacuum. The crisis was resolved after legal advice from British Army Commander Maj-Gen Christopher Welby-Everard favoured Balewa, and after Balewa placed Azikiwe under brief house arrest.

Gowon's memoir adds that during this period, Ojukwu and Banjo convened meetings to discuss military intervention in favour of Azikiwe. Gowon refused, citing the military's duty to support the government of the day.

The significance lies in three areas:

1. Constitutional Ambiguity: The 1963 Constitution lacked clear procedures for resolving executive deadlock.
2. Early Politicization: The military was already being viewed as a political arbiter.
3. Ethical Deviation: The willingness of senior officers to consider unconstitutional action signaled erosion of professional norms.

4. Military Rules, Discipline, and the Nigerian Context

The Nigerian Armed Forces operate under the Armed Forces Act, the Armed Forces Discipline Act, and subsidiary regulations that codify subordination to civil authority, prohibition of political activity, and adherence to the chain of command. Sections 3 and 4 of the Armed Forces Act 2004 affirm that the President is Commander-in-Chief and that the military shall defend the Constitution.

However, the effectiveness of these rules depends on institutional culture. Ethical Standards And Behavioural Patterns in Law Enforcement (2022) shows that rules alone do not prevent misconduct; leadership modeling, accountability mechanisms, and performance monitoring are essential. The 1964 episode suggests that while rules existed, the performance culture to enforce them was weak.

Comparatively, the United States Uniform Code of Military Justice and India's Army Act 1950 both criminalize political interference by military personnel. Ghana's 1992 Constitution explicitly prohibits the armed forces from engaging in politics. These examples show that legal clarity must be matched by institutional norms.

5. Comparative Insights: Civil-Military Relations in Other Democracies

Ghana: After the 1966 and 1981 coups, Ghana adopted the 1992 Constitution with explicit provisions for civilian control. The Armed Forces now operate under strict apolitical norms, and no coup has occurred since 1992. Key factors include judicial independence, professional military training, and civil society oversight.

India: Despite early political turbulence, India maintained civilian control through a strong parliamentary tradition, a professional civil service, and a military doctrine that emphasizes subordination. The Indian Army's non-intervention in the 1975 Emergency is a case study in institutional restraint.

United States: The principle of civilian supremacy is embedded in the Constitution and reinforced by the Posse Comitatus Act and strict codes of military conduct. The U.S. experience shows that legal frameworks must be supported by a culture of professionalism.

Nigeria can draw from these cases: legal provisions must be complemented by training, leadership accountability, and civil society engagement.

6. The Role of Successive Governments: 1960-2024

First Republic 1960-1966: The failure to resolve the 1964 crisis democratically created conditions for the January 1966 coup. Political parties prioritized regional dominance over national cohesion.

Military Regimes 1966-1999: Successive military governments weakened institutions, entrenched corruption, and politicized the military. The absence of performance culture and ethical compliance became systemic.

Fourth Republic 1999-Present: Civilian rule has restored constitutional order, but challenges persist. The Police Act 2020 and the National Security Strategy 2019 represent progress, yet implementation gaps remain. Electoral disputes, insecurity, and weak accountability continue to strain civil-military relations.

Akinade's *Contemporary Security Issues in Governance and Statecraft* (2017) argues that governance failures are the root cause of insecurity. Without addressing corruption, weak service delivery, and exclusion, military intervention will remain a recurring temptation.

7. Legal and Forensic Dimensions of Political Crises

Legal and Forensic Issues in Elections and Peace Education (2018) highlights that unresolved electoral disputes and weak forensic capacity create pathways for extra-constitutional actions. Nigeria's electoral tribunals often lack the capacity to adjudicate disputes swiftly and transparently.

Strengthening forensic auditing, chain-of-custody procedures, and judicial independence is essential. Peace education and civic literacy can reduce the perception that only force can resolve political disputes.

8. Strategic Security Management and Statecraft

Security cannot be separated from statecraft. *Managing Strategic Security In Statecraft, Public Affairs and Foreign Relations* (2019) argues that foreign policy, public communication, and domestic security must be coordinated.

In the Nigerian context, this means:

1. Integrating security considerations into economic and social policy.
2. Using strategic communication to counter misinformation and build public trust.
3. Aligning foreign policy with national security objectives to prevent external exploitation of internal divisions.

9. Recommendations for Good Governance and Nation-Building

9.1 Constitutional and Legal Reform

Clarify the roles of the presidency, legislature, and judiciary in crisis situations. Codify procedures for resolving executive deadlock to prevent reliance on military intervention.

9.2 Military Professionalization

Implement mandatory training on constitutionalism, human rights, and ethical leadership. Establish independent military ombudsman offices to investigate misconduct.

9.3 Performance and Ethical Compliance Systems

Adopt the performance culture framework outlined in Akinade (2021). Link promotions and funding to measurable outcomes, ethical conduct, and public trust metrics.

9.4 Institutional Oversight

Strengthen the National Assembly's oversight of security agencies. Empower civil society and the media to monitor security sector activities without intimidation.

9.5 Human Security and Nation-Building

Shift security policy from state-centric to people-centric. Invest in education, health, and economic opportunities to address the root causes of instability, as emphasized in Akinade (2007).

9.6 Regional and International Cooperation

Engage in peer learning with Ghana, India, and ECOWAS states on civil-military relations. Participate in international frameworks on security sector reform.

10. Conclusion

The 1964 constitutional crisis was a warning that Nigeria ignored. It revealed how constitutional ambiguity, weak institutions, and ethical erosion can draw the military into politics. Gowon's memoir confirms that the seeds of intervention were sown in deliberations among senior officers, not merely in response to later crises.

Nigeria's path to democratic consolidation requires more than elections. It requires a military that is professional, apolitical, and subordinate to constitutional authority; a political class that respects institutional rules; and a governance system that delivers human security.

By integrating legal clarity, performance culture, ethical compliance, and strategic statecraft, Nigeria can break the cycle of military intervention and build a resilient democracy. The cost of failure is continued instability. The opportunity of success is a nation that fulfills the promise of its independence.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Draft Framework for a National Civil-Military Relations Charter

Appendix B: Comparative Table of Military Rules in Nigeria, Ghana, India, and the United States

Appendix C: Checklist for Ethical Compliance in Security Institutions

Appendix D: Proposed Structure for a National Security Sector Oversight Committee.

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