

18

Politics and coups in Nigeria

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The present intervention was inspired by recent political developments in Nigeria and the animated public discussions they are still generating. Many of the positions I have so far read and heard have proceeded from false historical and political premises, and I think these premises need to be re-examined. We proceed cautiously and slowly. The word, **Coup**, originally French, literally means a **blow**. But generally it means a "highly successful stroke, act or move; a clever action or accomplishment". The term **coup d'etat**, also French, literally means a "blow, or stroke, concerning the state". But in politics it means a "sudden and decisive action ... especially one effecting a change of government illegally or by force". In other words, a coup d'etat, as given in this definition, is characterized by "suddenness", "decisiveness", "illegality" and "force".

This is a basic definition. But an author has added an important elaboration: a coup d'etat may also mean a "violent and unexpected reformulation of state policy" or "unexpected and sudden measure of state often involving force or threat of force". When actual force is used, it is usually "localised" or "concentrated", or both; and the group involved in the exercise of the force is usually small. Another elaboration: a

coup d'etat can also mean a "sudden change of government by force, brought about by those who already hold some governmental or military power". Then, a clarification: a coup d'etat "differs from a revolution in that it is effected from above, while a revolution involves the participation of the masses". Each clarification or elaboration in this gradually developing definition is of paramount importance both in politics and in law. And, I may add, the definition and its elaboration are not Marxist: they are orthodox ones approved for teaching in schools.

We can distill some statements from the foregoing. A coup d'etat is a political act; it is armed politics. A coup d'etat may be staged against a government or a state - and this is the commonly known phenomenon. But it can also be staged by a state or government as represented by the head of that government. For instance, if a government violates the constitution or its own basic law or decree, and goes on to enforce this violation by the employment of any coercive apparatus of state, then that government has staged a coup d'etat. It is in this sense that the following acts in the political history of Nigeria can be considered as coups d'etat: the dissolution of the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) by General Ibrahim Babangida in January 1990, and the constitution of a new one; the annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential election; and the military expedition sent by President Olusegun Obasanjo to Odi in November 1999 without the approval of the Senate. A famous example from history is the coup staged by President Charles Louis Napoleon Bonaparte of France. Elected president in December 1848, he unilaterally extended his powers and then made himself Emperor two years later. This was a coup against the state staged by the head of state. A government that declares a state of emergency, effects changes in the composition, structure and operation of state institutions, and enforces these measures by means outside the provisions of the constitution or basic law, has staged a coup d'etat.

It is, perhaps, not necessary to qualify a coup d'etat with the adjective "military" in so far as every coup involves the deployment of organized material force. But if we must sometimes add "military", then it should be understood that we mean military institution of state to differentiate it from a military force organized outside the state. Chief Obafemi Awolowo was accused in 1962 of organizing such an "outside" force.

Another point relates to a basic difference between a coup d'etat and a revolution. We have already touched upon this, but then **The World Book Encyclopedia** claims that "famous coups in history include those carried out by Napoleon Bonaparte in France in 1799, by the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1917, and by the communists in Czechoslovakia in 1948". I accept the first example; I reject the second; and I submit that the third is debatable.

Let me briefly explain my position on the Bolshevik Revolution. Every successful revolution involves, at a certain stage, what the French would call a **coup de grace**, a final assault on the state as an organized force, an assault which bears some resemblance to a coup d'etat. Even if the state dissolves or collapses before this final assault, the formal assumption of power by the revolutionaries looks like a coup d'etat. But the critical point, as noted earlier, is the involvement of the masses. For this reason, what happened in Russia in November 1917 was not a coup, but a revolution. We may now pose a series of questions: Is a coup d'etat a single act or a process? Can a failed coup d'etat, the one that does not lead to a change of government, be called a coup d'etat, nonetheless? If a coup d'etat leads to a change of government, but the coupists or their principals do not assume power, can it still be called a coup d'etat nonetheless? Is a coup which is still in the planning stage a coup d'etat?

My answer here is a limited and political one, and it is this: Just as attempted murder is not murder, an attempted coup is not a coup; and just as conspiracy to commit murder is different from attempted murder which in turn is different from murder, a conspiracy to stage a coup d'etat is different from attempted coup d'etat and this in turn is different from a coup d'etat. There is no sophistry or semantics here: We know what murder is, what attempted murder is, and what conspiracy to commit murder is. The three acts are in decreasing order of seriousness. Same with coup d'etat. We know, however, that in the hand of the state conspiracy to stage a coup d'etat is often faked; and after being faked, it is then equated to attempted coup d'etat, and finally it is transformed to coup d'etat itself.

We can therefore classify the coups and "coup-related" incidents in Nigeria since independence into five types, namely: coups d'etat proper, that is, successful overthrow of government, whether or not the group that initiated the action actually

assumed power; coups by the state or government against the basic law or the civil society; attempted coups d'etat where there were overt actions, but the initiators failed in their bid to overthrow the government; conspiracy to stage a coup d'etat, where there were only allegations by the state that certain people were planning a coup d'etat; and political allegation of conspiracy to stage a coup d'etat, where the allegation was made, not by the state, but by individuals whose allegation was however not contradicted by the state. This is a broad and rough classification, **but** I think it is good enough for the present exercise.

The successful coups, or coups proper, are well known. Identifying each by its year of occurrence and the person who assumed power or office as Head of State after it, we have: January 1966 (General Aguiyi-Ironsi); July 1966 (General Gowon); July 1975 (General Mohammed); December 1983 (General Buhari); August 1985 (General Babangida); and November 1993 (General Abacha). One of the more prominent coups d'etat by the state against the basic law and the civil society was the annulment by General Babangida's military regime of the June 12, 1993 presidential election won by Bashorun Moshood Abiola. Identifying each of the attempted coups by year of occurrence and the person known or alleged to have led it, we have: January 1966 (Major Nzeogwu); February 1976 (Lt. Col. Dimka); and April 1990 (Major Orka). Conspiracies to stage a coup as alleged - truthfully or falsely - and prosecuted by the state would include: October 1962 (Chief AwoIowo); September 1967 (Colonel Ifeajuna, Biafra); 1982 (Mandara); December 1985 (General Vatsa); March 1995 (no clear leader); and December 1997 (General Diya). Political allegations of coup plans would include: January 1965 (no clear leader); and June 1998, immediately after the death of General Abacha but before the emergence of General Abdulsalami Abubakar (no clear leader).

A philosopher once said that a central question in democracy and the rule of law was how the state was to be constructed so that "bad governments and rulers can be got rid of by a majority vote, without bloodshed, without violence and before they cause much harm". Please, note the pillars of the question: "majority vote", "without violence", "without bloodshed", and "before they (the rulers) cause much harm". I accept the formulation. In relation to our current discussion this is the question of how

the two major types of coup d'etat can be eliminated: coups against the state, and coups by the state. A one-sided treatment of this question will be a dishonest exercise. Since France, through the family of Napoleon Bonaparte, has offered the world a classic example of each type of coup, and also how to eliminate them, I would advise Nigerian politicians to consider a study tour of that country. In the alternative, they should support the convening of a Sovereign National Conference (SNC), to discuss the question.