

KHAKISTOCRACY: OUR DALLIANCE WITH MILITARY-POLITICIANS IN NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC TRAJECTORY, 1999-2023

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Abstract

Nigeria's democratic transition in 1999 was heralded as a departure from decades of military rule, yet the continued dominance of ex-military officers in civilian governance suggests a more nuanced reality—one best described as khakistocracy, a fusion of khakistocracy (government by the least qualified) and khaki (military rule). This study critically examines the persistent influence of military-politicians on Nigeria's democratic trajectory from 1999 to 2023, interrogating the extent to which their governance has reinforced or undermined democratic consolidation. Through a historical and political analysis, the research explores the structural, ideological, and institutional continuities between military and civilian regimes, focusing on the administrations of former military leaders such as Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari. It investigates how their leadership styles, policy orientations, and institutional frameworks reflect authoritarian legacies, raising questions about democratic legitimacy, civil-military relations, and political accountability. Furthermore, the study examines public perceptions of military-politicians, assessing whether they are seen as stabilizing forces or impediments to democratic deepening. Drawing on historical case studies, and comparative analysis with other post-military states, the research posits that Nigeria's democracy remains constrained by the lingering ethos of military governance. It concludes that while electoral processes have sustained civilian rule, the militarization of political culture, weak institutional checks, and the elite's preference for strongman leadership have perpetuated an oligarchic system that inhibits true democratic evolution. The study offers recommendations for strengthening civilian oversight, deepening democratic institutions, and fostering a political culture that prioritizes participatory governance over authoritarian nostalgia.

Keywords: Khakistocracy, Military-politicians, Nigeria, Democratic rule, Civil-military relations

Background to the Study

The transition of Nigeria from military rule to democracy in 1999 was heralded as a monumental shift in the country's political trajectory, signaling the beginning of the Fourth Republic. This transition ostensibly ended nearly three decades of military dominance, during which Nigeria oscillated between military juntas and short-lived civilian administrations. At the heart of this transition was the belief that democratic governance would finally replace the arbitrary, centralized rule that characterized military regimes. However, more than two decades later, Nigeria's democratic landscape remains deeply enmeshed in military legacies. The endurance of former military officers in civilian governance has raised critical questions about the nature of the country's political evolution: Has Nigeria truly transitioned to democracy, or is it merely a repackaged military oligarchy? This inquiry is central to understanding *khakistocracy*—a term that encapsulates the fusion of military and civilian rule under the continued dominance of ex-military elites.

The concept of *khakistocracy* is a linguistic and political construct that encapsulates Nigeria's unique governance trajectory. It is a portmanteau of khaki, the distinctive military attire, and kakistocracy, which denotes government by the least qualified or most corrupt individuals (iJunoon, 2014) describing a system of governance where military influence remains deeply entrenched within civilian rule often in alliance with political and economic elites. This fusion of terminologies aptly describes a political reality where, despite the formal structures of democratic governance, the ideological, structural, and institutional legacies of military rule persist. Nigeria's Fourth Republic has been dominated by a political class that is largely composed of former military officers who have either recycled themselves into civilian roles or maintained control over the levers of power through economic and institutional influence. The endurance of this military-political elite has significantly shaped Nigeria's democratic experience, raising concerns about the authenticity of its transition. As Angerbrandt and Themnér (2021) argue, the presence of ex-military leaders in civilian governance is not merely a historical coincidence but a reflection of a deeper structural entanglement between Nigeria's military past and its civilian present.

The roots of this entanglement can be traced to Nigeria's post-colonial history, which has been characterized by a recurrent cycle of military coups and unstable civilian administrations. From the first coup in 1966 to the final military regime that ended in 1999, the military positioned itself as the ultimate arbiter of Nigeria's political destiny. This entrenched military hegemony not only eroded democratic norms but also institutionalized a governance culture in which power was concentrated in the hands of a few elite actors, primarily those with military backgrounds (Ojo, 2014). The 1999 transition, therefore, did not represent a radical departure from this

past but rather a negotiated settlement in which former military rulers, such as Olusegun Obasanjo, repositioned themselves within a civilian framework. Esamagu et al. (2020) note that the 1999 elections, which ushered in the Fourth Republic, were not a product of widespread democratic activism but rather an elite-driven process that sought to preserve the influence of military stakeholders while accommodating the pressures for civilian governance.

This phenomenon of *khakistocracy* is not merely symbolic but has elaborate implications for Nigeria's political development. The persistence of military influence in civilian politics manifests in multiple ways, including the continued dominance of ex-military leaders in federal and state positions, the militarization of electoral processes, and the manipulation of democratic institutions for authoritarian ends. Ojo (2014) describes Nigeria as a "Praetorian state" where military actors, even in civilian attire, continue to wield significant influence over governance structures. This influence is reinforced by a political culture that normalizes authoritarian practices such as electoral manipulation, suppression of dissent, and the deployment of security forces for political ends (Obi, 2011). The weak response of the international community to electoral irregularities in Nigeria has further emboldened these practices of "elected dictatorships", allowing former military actors to operate within civilian spaces with minimal accountability (Obi, 2011).

One of the most enduring legacies of military rule in Nigeria is its deep imprint on the country's constitutional and institutional framework. The 1999 Constitution, drafted under military supervision, reflects a continuity of governance structures from the military era, shaping Nigeria's democracy in ways that concentrate power in the executive arm (Zwanbin, 2017). This centralization remains a defining feature of governance, despite Nigeria's official federal status. The executive wields extensive control over security institutions, revenue allocation, and political decision-making, mirroring military-era governance (Ituma & Chukwu, 2018). The presidency commands vast discretionary powers and exerts significant influence over the judiciary and legislature, undermining checks and balances. Judicial independence, though constitutionally guaranteed, is compromised by political interference in appointments and budgetary constraints, weakening its role as an impartial arbiter of justice (Oladipo, 2017). Similarly, local governments, which should anchor grassroots democracy, remain structurally dependent on the federal government, depriving them of meaningful autonomy.

Beyond constitutional constraints, Nigeria's security institutions, particularly the police and military, continue to operate with impunity, echoing past military command structures. The frequent deployment of military force in civilian matters, such as the suppression of protests, exemplifies the militarization of governance and the reluctance of state actors to fully embrace democratic principles (Ituma & Chukwu, 2018; Babatunde, 2015). The Nigerian state's heavy-handed responses, including the use of live ammunition against demonstrators during the #EndSARS movement (Amnesty International, 2021), highlight the persistence of authoritarian tendencies. This entrenched centralization fosters a top-down governance approach resistant to participatory democracy and decentralization. Institutional weaknesses inherited from military rule continue to hinder effective governance, as both the judiciary and legislature struggle with executive overreach and limited independence (Olasunkanmi, 2020). Until these structural imbalances are addressed, Nigeria's democracy will remain constrained by the very governance patterns it sought to replace.

Beyond institutional design, the security architecture of the country remains deeply militarized, with the police and armed forces operating with a level of impunity reminiscent of past military regimes. Security agencies frequently act as enforcers of state power rather than protectors of civic rights, often resorting to forceful suppression of dissent. Civil-military relations have remained problematic, as successive governments have continued to deploy military force in civilian matters, a practice that undermines democratic governance and the rule of law (Ituma & Chukwu, 2018; Babatunde, 2015). The Nigerian state's heavy-handed response to protests, including the use of live ammunition against unarmed demonstrators exemplifies this trend. The 2020 #EndSARS movement, which called for an end to police brutality, was met with violent state repression, culminating in the Lekki Toll Gate massacre, where security forces opened fire on peaceful protesters (Amnesty International, 2021). This event reinforced public perceptions of a government still deeply entrenched in the militarized tactics of its past.

Moreover, the persistence of a top-down approach to governance has stifled participatory democracy and decentralization. The executive's vast powers, coupled with weak institutional safeguards, have fostered a culture of impunity, where public institutions function more as extensions of elite control than as mechanisms of public service delivery. The judiciary and legislature, while constitutionally independent, continue to struggle against executive overreach, political interference, and chronic underfunding, which limit their ability to serve as effective counterweights to presidential power (Olasunkanmi, 2020). Judicial inefficiencies, in particular, have eroded public confidence in the legal system, as court rulings are often subject to executive influence, delaying justice

and reinforcing the perception of an unaccountable government. These institutional weaknesses, inherited from decades of military rule, have contributed to governance inefficiencies, policy inconsistencies, and a fragile democratic culture, making democratic consolidation in Nigeria an ongoing struggle. While Nigeria operates under a civilian government, the legacies of military rule remain deeply embedded in its political system. The centralization of authority, militarization of governance, and systemic institutional weaknesses all point to a democracy that, while procedurally intact, still grapples with the authoritarian structures of its past. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive constitutional reforms, institutional strengthening, and a shift toward genuine decentralization and democratic accountability—a transformation that remains both urgent and elusive. The resilience of *khakistocracy* in Nigeria is also linked to the broader socio-political and economic conditions that have shaped governance in the post-1999 era. The securitization of economic resources, particularly in the oil sector, has entrenched military involvement in governance, as both local and international actors rely on security forces to maintain access to these resources (Obi, 2019). The intersection of military and economic elites has created a patronage system that sustains authoritarian tendencies even within civilian governments. The persistence of corruption, another legacy of military rule, has further weakened democratic consolidation, as political elites continue to leverage state resources for personal enrichment rather than national development (Ottuh & Onimhawo, 2023). The inability of democratic institutions to break this cycle has led to a governance crisis where electoral processes serve as mere formalities rather than genuine expressions of democratic will. This reality is further complicated by the intersection of military and political elites, which has created a self-perpetuating oligarchy. Nigeria's post-1999 political economy has allowed ex-military officers to amass wealth and consolidate power, ensuring that political transitions occur within a tightly controlled elite circle (Angerbrandt & Themnér, 2021; Ojo, 2014). The revolving door between military and civilian rule has resulted in a system where retired generals hold key political and economic positions, reinforcing the oligarchic structure of governance. The pervasive role of corruption, an entrenched feature of military rule, continues to thrive in civilian administrations, further weakening democratic institutions (Ottuh & Onimhawo, 2023). The persistence of patronage politics, where loyalty to individuals rather than democratic principles determines political ascension, underscores the resilience of *khakistocracy*.

Yet, perhaps the most telling indication of Nigeria's *khakistocratic* nature is the governance style of its ex-military leaders. Both Obasanjo and Buhari, the two most prominent military-politicians in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, have exhibited authoritarian tendencies despite operating under a democratic framework. Obasanjo's administration was characterized by a strongman approach to governance, marked by attempts to extend his tenure beyond constitutional limits and the use of state apparatus to suppress opposition (Angerbrandt & Themnér, 2021). Buhari's presidency, meanwhile, saw an expansion of security-state tactics, including the increased militarization of governance and the shrinking of civic space (Beliakova, 2021; Croissant et al., 2010). These patterns raise critical concerns about whether Nigeria's democracy is merely a procedural exercise rather than a substantive system of governance rooted in civilian oversight and institutional accountability.

While the question of whether Nigeria has truly transitioned to democracy or remains a repackaged military oligarchy is complex, the structural realities of governance suggest that democratic consolidation remains incomplete. The presence of ex-military leaders in civilian governance is not inherently problematic; however, the extent to which their leadership style retains authoritarian tendencies raises significant concerns. Angerbrandt and Themnér (2021) argue that the political identity of ex-military leaders greatly influences their governance approach, with many exhibiting a tendency to operate "above politics" and to view democratic institutions as instruments to be controlled rather than strengthened. This reality has contributed to the erosion of civilian oversight, the militarization of political discourse, and the deepening of elite dominance in Nigeria's political space. The continued use of security agencies to suppress political opposition, manipulate elections, and maintain elite power further illustrates the incomplete nature of Nigeria's democratic transition (Jiang et al., 2024; Croissant et al., 2010).

The persistence of *khakistocracy* in Nigeria calls for a critical reassessment of the country's democratic trajectory. While the formal structures of democracy which includes, elections, political parties, and civilian governance, are in place, the underlying power dynamics remain deeply influenced by military legacies. This raises fundamental questions about the nature of democratic consolidation and the extent to which Nigeria's political evolution represents genuine progress or merely a reconfiguration of old power structures. The challenge moving forward is whether Nigeria can break free from this military-political entanglement and build a truly democratic governance system. Addressing this challenge requires a concerted effort to reform electoral processes, strengthen democratic institutions, and dismantle the culture of militarized governance that continues to shape Nigeria's political landscape. Until these changes occur, the specter of *khakistocracy* will continue to loom over Nigeria's Fourth Republic, reminding us that the transition from military rule to democracy remains an unfinished journey.

Conceptual Clarification

Conceptualising *Khakistocracy*

Khakistocracy, a portmanteau and a pun, merges *khaki*, a symbol of military rule, with *khakistocracy*, a term denoting governance by the least qualified or most corrupt individuals. This fusion encapsulates a political reality where military influence persists within civilian governance, shaping policy, leadership culture, and institutional frameworks long after formal military rule has ended. Unlike stratocracy, which refers to a system of government directly controlled by the military as an institution, *khakistocracy* operates within a nominally civilian framework while retaining the ethos, hierarchical command structure, and coercive tendencies of military rule. *Khakistocracy* on the other hand, which focuses primarily on the incompetence or corruption of rulers, *khakistocracy* highlights the enduring legacy of military dominance in political affairs, even within ostensibly democratic structures. The concept is particularly relevant to Nigeria's political landscape, where former military leaders and security elites continue to wield significant political and economic power despite the country's return to democratic rule in 1999. As argued in iJunoon (2014), *khakistocracy* is not merely about governance by ex-military figures but rather the entrenchment of military logic—commandism, hierarchical authority, and securitized governance—within civilian political institutions. In Nigeria, this manifests through the persistent influence of former military rulers in electoral politics, policymaking, and economic decision-making, reinforcing the idea that the state, though formally democratic, operates under a militarized framework.

The broader theoretical discourse on *khakistocracy* can be framed within the historical antecedents of military influence in post-colonial African states. Scholars like Salihu (2021) and Ismaila (2022) trace this phenomenon to colonial military formations, where African armies, structured for imperialist and suppressive purposes, evolved into politically active forces after independence. These armies, often lacking a nationalist ethos, became instruments of political control rather than defenders of constitutionalism, leading to the cycle of military coups and authoritarian rule that plagued many African states from the 1960s to the 1990s (Luckham, 1994; Taylor, 2018). While *khakistocratic* regimes, such as those identified in post-Soviet states, are marked by the merger of oligarchic and state structures (Abadjian, 2010), *khakistocracy* distinguishes itself by embedding military structures and logic within civilian governance. Nigeria's post-1999 political history exemplifies this, as successive administrations have maintained a militarized approach to governance, from the securitization of civil protests to the prioritization of defense budgets over social services (Peveri, 2022). This situation is worrisome and raises fundamental questions about the extent to which Nigeria's democratic evolution is genuinely civilian-led or whether it remains, in essence, a continuation of military rule by other means.

Despite democratization efforts, the military's influence in Nigeria has remained a defining feature of governance, a reality that may be framed as *khakistocracy*. Adeakin (2012) and Ojo (2014) describe this phenomenon as a militarized democracy, where military elites transition into civilian leadership while retaining their hierarchical and authoritarian decision-making patterns. Unlike post-military regimes such as Brazil, where former military rulers have seen diminished political relevance (Egretau, 2021), Nigeria continues to recycle ex-military leaders within the highest political offices. Notable figures in this regard *inter alia* include Olusegun Obasanjo, Muhammadu Buhari and David Mark exemplify this trend, embodying a hybrid leadership model where civilian institutions function within the broader framework of military organizational culture (Angerbrandt & Themnér, 2021). This has profound implications for governance, particularly in the areas of civil-military relations, electoral integrity, and policy formulation. The continued reliance on retired military officers for key governmental roles and the use of military force to manage internal crises underscore the persistence of *khakistocracy*, demonstrating how democratic governance in Nigeria remains deeply intertwined with military legacies.

For the purpose of this paper, *khakistocracy* is conceptualized as a governance model where military dominance persists within civilian political structures, shaping leadership culture, state policies, and institutional dynamics despite formal democratization. Unlike conventional definitions that view military influence as a transitional phase in post-military democracies, this study argues that *khakistocracy* represents a sustained governance pattern in Nigeria, where military-derived authority, The Constitution and decision-making frameworks continue to shape the democratic process. This conceptualization is particularly relevant to Nigeria's post-1999 political history, where successive administrations have been led by former military leaders or have retained militarized governance strategies, blurring the boundaries between civilian rule and military authoritarianism. By examining Nigeria's political trajectory through the lens of *khakistocracy*, this paper provides a nuanced understanding of how military influence is perpetuated within democratic institutions, challenging the assumption that civilian governance necessarily equates to democratic consolidation.

Concept of Military-Politicians

The concept of military-politicians emerges at the intersection of military service and political governance, reflecting a historical phenomenon where individuals with military backgrounds transition into political

leadership. At its core, the term embodies figures who, having been entrenched in the hierarchical and command-driven culture of the military, assume political roles that often influence governance, policy-making, and democratic structures. The extent of their impact varies across political systems ranging from democratic states, where their presence is tempered by civilian oversight, to post-authoritarian and fragile democracies, where military influence can persist as an informal mechanism of governance. Scholars such as Stadelmann et al. (2015; 2016; 2018) suggest that military backgrounds shape legislative behaviour, particularly on national security and defense policies. In contrast, Peveri (2022) highlights how ex-military leaders tend to prioritize military spending over social services, reinforcing the argument that their governance style reflects their institutional upbringing. This dual nature—one of perceived efficiency and discipline, yet potentially authoritarian in approach—raises questions about their role in democratic consolidation.

The academic discourse on military-politicians is divided into competing schools of thought. One perspective, rooted in civil-military relations theory, argues that the transition of military leaders into politics poses a fundamental challenge to democratic norms, as they often retain military prerogatives that dilute civilian control (Hunter & Vega, 2021). This view aligns with Lopez (2018), who posits that democratic continuity inversely correlates with military participation in elections where institutionalised democracies see fewer ex-military politicians. Conversely, a realist institutionalist perspective suggests that former military leaders can act as stabilizing forces, leveraging their organizational discipline and strategic insight to manage complex governance issues, as seen in Indonesia (Aminuddin, 2017) and post-military Brazil. However, Egretau (2021) complicates this narrative by demonstrating that in some post-military regimes, such as Myanmar, ex-military figures suffer political decline due to weakened moral legitimacy and the rise of civilian opposition. Thus, while military-politicians might bring governance experience, their adaptation to democratic norms remains contested.

Nigeria offers a compelling case study in this debate, given its history of military rule and the continued presence of former military leaders in civilian politics. Figures such as Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari exemplify how military identity can shape political culture, often positioning ex-military rulers as figures "above politics" (Angerbrandt & Themnér, 2021). The persistence of a militarized democracy (Adeakin, 2012) and praetorian influence (Ojo, 2014) highlights how Nigeria's democratic evolution remains tethered to its military past. Despite formal civilian rule since 1999, military-politicians continue to exert influence through electoral interventions (Tino et al., 2020) and elite patronage networks (Themnér & Karlén, 2020). This sustained entanglement of military actors in governance suggests a hybrid system where democratic aspirations co-exist with deeply embedded military legacies.

In this *expose*, the concept of military-politicians will be understood within the framework of "*khakistocracy*", a system where individuals with military backgrounds dominate civilian governance, maintaining authoritarian tendencies while operating within nominally democratic institutions. Unlike conventional analyses that treat military-politicians as either stabilizers or disruptors of democracy, this study argues that their influence in Nigeria's democratic trajectory (1999–2023) reflects a paradox: their governance style, while outwardly democratic, often retains the commandist logic of military rule, shaping political institutions, electoral processes, and national policy in ways that blur the lines between civilian and military authority. As such, this paper situates military-politicians within a broader critique of Nigeria's post-military democratic order, examining how their political dominance both sustains and subverts democratic consolidation.

Military-Politicians in Nigeria's Democratic Trajectory (1999-2023)

The return to civilian rule in 1999 marked a significant moment in Nigeria's political evolution, as it heralded the transition from decades of military governance to a fragile yet hopeful democratic dispensation. However, the ascension of Olusegun Obasanjo, a former military general, as the first president of the Fourth Republic, signaled the enduring grip of ex-military figures on Nigeria's political system. The elections that brought Obasanjo to power were not merely a democratic exercise but a carefully orchestrated transition designed to pacify military elites and international stakeholders. The involvement of the military in shaping the transition ensured that its political dominance did not simply dissolve with the handover of power. Instead, the structures and ideologies of military rule were embedded in the new civilian leadership, allowing for a seamless continuation of military influence under a democratic guise (Angerbrandt & Themnér, 2021). This paradox of civilian governance under ex-military leadership would come to define much of Nigeria's democratic evolution between 1999 and 2023.

Obasanjo's presidency (1999–2007) exemplified the tension between military discipline and democratic governance, as his leadership style bore hallmarks of military authoritarianism; an overbearing executive approach, unilateral decision-making, and strong control over political institutions (Olorunyomi, 2016). His firm belief in his ability to control events, shaped by his military background, influenced his approach to both foreign policy and national security (Olorunyomi, 2016). Despite efforts to strengthen democracy, his administration exhibited a strong centralizing tendency, reinforcing the perception that Nigeria's democracy remained an

extension of military rule by other means. His reluctance to sufficiently empower institutions allowed individual leadership styles to exert undue influence on governance (Ochanja & Ndem, 2013). This was particularly evident in his failed attempt to amend the constitution for a third term, which, though ultimately rejected by the National Assembly, was less a sign of democratic commitment and more a strategic retreat in the face of overwhelming opposition (Sklar et al., 2006). A similar dynamic was visible in his handling of the Niger Delta crisis, where his administration relied on military intervention to suppress unrest, a response rooted in Nigeria's broader militarized political culture. This approach was widely criticized for being counterproductive, leading to civilian casualties and failing to address underlying economic and environmental grievances (Oluyemi, 2020). Obasanjo's presidency in simple term highlights the broader dilemma of Nigeria's democratic evolution: the persistent struggle between institutional democratization and the personal ambitions of former military leaders.

The governance of Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023) further illuminated the resilience of military influence in Nigeria's democratic politics. Unlike Obasanjo, whose military background was often masked by his international statesmanship, Buhari's leadership bore a direct imprint of his previous tenure as a military dictator (1983–1985). His administration was marked by an overt centralization of power, a security-focused approach to governance, and a disregard for judicial independence and human rights (Onyekachi & Hyginus, 2020). While his supporters lauded his aggressive anti-corruption campaign and perceived firm stance against insurgency, his presidency also witnessed an erosion of democratic norms, particularly through selective law enforcement and frequent suppression of dissent (Onyekachi & Hyginus, 2020). His government repeatedly violated court orders and treated political opposition as an insurgency to be neutralized rather than as a legitimate democratic engagement (Akingbade & Bassey, 2024). This militarized approach to statecraft reinforced authoritarian tendencies under the guise of democratic governance, demonstrating how ex-military rulers could reassert control through democratic institutions while simultaneously undermining their effectiveness. The centralization of power was also evident in his governance style, where key political appointments were concentrated within a narrow circle of loyalists, often drawn from his military and regional affiliations (Eme-Uche & Eme, 2023). This perceived nepotistic approach fueled national discontent, exacerbated ethno-political divisions, and undermined the principle of inclusive governance. Buhari's presidency underscored the persistence of military influence in Nigeria's democratic evolution, revealing how democratic institutions could be manipulated to serve authoritarian ends.

The broader role of ex-military leaders in shaping Nigeria's political landscape extends beyond the presidencies of Obasanjo and Buhari. Figures such as Theophilus Danjuma, Aliyu Gusau, and David Jemibewon have wielded substantial influence, occupying key ministerial and advisory positions that bridge the gap between military and civilian governance. These individuals, while not directly in elected positions, have played significant roles in shaping defense policy, internal security strategies, and political decision-making at the highest levels. Their continued relevance brings to fore the deep entrenchment of military structures within Nigeria's democratic apparatus, where retired generals and former security chiefs remain pivotal actors in policy formulation and implementation (Muheeb, 2020). This dynamic creates a form of civilian-military hybridity, where democratic governance is punctuated by military-influenced decision-making, often at the expense of institutional autonomy and civilian oversight.

The influence of ex-military leaders in Nigeria's democratic trajectory extends beyond individual presidencies to the broader structural dynamics of governance. The centralization of power, a defining characteristic of military rule, persisted under democratic governance, stifling federalism and exacerbating ethno-regional tensions (Taiwo, 2021). The 1999 Constitution, drafted under military supervision, retained several provisions that reinforced executive dominance and weakened institutional checks and balances (Muheeb, 2020; Oladipo, 2017). This constitutional legacy ensured that even under civilian rule, Nigeria remained governed by a framework that privileged executive authority over legislative and judicial independence. Consequently, the democratic process often functioned as a mere procedural exercise, while substantive decision-making remained concentrated in the hands of a select elite, many of whom were former military figures who had successfully transitioned into civilian politics.

Beyond governance structures, the militarization of Nigeria's political culture also manifested in electoral processes. Elections in Nigeria have been consistently marred by irregularities, voter suppression, and violence, all of which can be traced back to the country's history of military intervention in politics (Obi, 2011). The deployment of security forces during elections, often justified as a measure to prevent electoral violence, has instead been used to intimidate in most parts, opposition parties and suppress voter turnout in opposition strongholds. This reality highlights the extent to which democratic processes remain susceptible to military-style control, even in the absence of direct military rule. Additionally, the practice of former military leaders serving as "veto players" in policy negotiations has allowed them to retain substantial influence over political outcomes, ensuring that major policy shifts do not occur without their tacit or explicit approval (Dube, 2019; Dube, 2018).

The continued dominance of ex-military leaders has had profound implications for Nigeria's economic and political development. Under Obasanjo, economic policies were largely shaped by neoliberal reforms, driven by international financial institutions and a transnational capitalist agenda that often sidelined domestic economic concerns (Amuwo, 2009). While these reforms were touted as necessary for economic growth, they reinforced elite control over national resources, mirroring the extractive economic policies of previous military regimes. Similarly, under Buhari, economic management was characterized by an interventionist approach that lacked coherence, leading to economic stagnation, inflation, and widespread unemployment (Arum & Babatola, 2023). These economic challenges further weakened public confidence in democratic governance, creating conditions ripe for political disillusionment and the resurgence of authoritarian sentiments.

Despite these challenges, the role of ex-military leaders in Nigeria's democratic process is not entirely negative. The transition to civilian rule in 1999 was, in part, facilitated by military figures like General Abdusalami Abubakar, whose decision to relinquish power helped stabilize the country after years of military dictatorship (Mustapha, 1999; Ojo, 2014). Similarly, the experience of former military leaders in governance has contributed to institutional continuity, albeit within a flawed democratic framework (Muheeb, 2020). However, their continued dominance also raises fundamental questions about the nature of Nigeria's democracy, whether it is a truly participatory system or merely a civilian extension of military rule?

From the foregoing, Nigeria's democratic trajectory from 1999 to 2023 appears to have been greatly shaped by the enduring influence of military-politicians. The presidencies of Obasanjo and Buhari illustrate how military discipline, centralization of power, and authoritarian tendencies have persisted within a democratic framework. While former military leaders have played a role in stabilizing the democratic process, their governance styles have often undermined true democratic consolidation by reinforcing executive dominance, weakening institutional accountability, and perpetuating a militarized political culture. The Nigerian experience thus presents a paradox: a democracy that remains heavily influenced by its military past, raising critical questions about the possibilities and limits of democratic deepening in a post-authoritarian society. The future of Nigeria's democracy would not only depend on electoral transitions but on a seeming fundamental reconfiguration of governance structures to break the cycle of military influence and establish a truly participatory political order.

Democratic Consolidation or Authoritarian Hangover?

Nigeria's democratic trajectory since 1999 as aforesaid has been shaped by the lingering shadows of military rule and the contested process of democratic consolidation. While the country has experienced multiple civilian-to-civilian transitions, fundamental weaknesses in its democratic institutions suggest that what some have heralded as progress may, in reality, be a tenuous hold on democracy, susceptible to regression. The political landscape remains deeply militarized, with a governance style that continues to reflect authoritarian legacies rather than the deepening of democratic norms. Nigeria's experience thus presents a paradox: while democratic structures have been formally established, their substance remains fragile, constantly undermined by institutional weaknesses, executive overreach, and the erosion of civil liberties. This raises an existential question, on whether "has Nigeria truly embarked on a path toward democratic consolidation, or is it merely experiencing an authoritarian hangover cloaked in electoral rituals?"

The persistence of military influence in Nigeria's democratic institutions suggests a form of hybrid governance where formal democratic structures coexist with informal authoritarian practices. This is evident in the executive dominance of the political system, a direct inheritance from military rule, where power remains centralized in the presidency, often at the expense of the legislature and judiciary (Oladipo, 2017). The result is a weakened system of checks and balances, where civilian oversight mechanisms struggle to assert their independence against entrenched political elite that often governs with impunity. The National Assembly, despite periodic assertions of independence, remains largely constrained by executive influence, financial dependence, and an internal culture that prioritizes personal gain over institutional strengthening (Yusuf & Ojoduwa, 2022). The judiciary, while sometimes displaying resilience, remains vulnerable to executive manipulation, as seen in instances of judicial interference and politically motivated dismissals of judges. These institutional frailties raise concerns about the extent to which Nigeria has moved beyond the authoritarian tendencies of its shadowy past.

At the heart of Nigeria's democratic crisis is the militarization of its political culture. The historical experience of military rule fostered a governance style that emphasized strongman leadership, the suppression of dissent, and the securitization of political opposition. This legacy remains deeply entrenched in Nigeria's post-1999 politics, as successive administrations have employed state security apparatuses to intimidate opposition figures, curtail civil liberties, and suppress mass protests (Siollun, 2018; Amuwo, 2001). The violent suppression of the 2020 #EndSARS protests, where security forces were deployed against unarmed civilians demanding police reform, shows the persistence of state-sponsored repression reminiscent of military regimes. Instinctively, political

opposition continues to be systematically weakened through politically motivated arrests and legal manipulations, reinforcing a political landscape where dissent is tolerated only within limits defined by the ruling elite. These patterns of governance comparatively suggest that rather than consolidating democracy, Nigeria's political class have instead retooled authoritarian tactics to function within a nominally democratic framework.

Elections, often praised as the hallmark of democratic consolidation, have not necessarily translated into substantive democracy in Nigeria. While the country has witnessed multiple electoral cycles, the process remains deeply flawed, with persistent issues of electoral malpractices, violence, and vote suppression (Ekong & Anthony, 2016). The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), despite periodic reforms, continues to suffer from credibility deficits, often accused of lacking the autonomy necessary to conduct genuinely free and fair elections (Omotola, 2010). Electoral violence, a recurrent feature of Nigeria's democratic experience, not only delegitimizes the electoral process but also perpetuates a culture of political intimidation that discourages genuine democratic participation (Harry & Kalagbor, 2021). The 2023 elections, which saw widespread reports of voter suppression, electronic transmission failures (*technical glitches*), and partisan security interventions, further accentuates the fragility of Nigeria's democratic experiment. In this context, elections become more of an instrument of elite competition rather than genuine mechanisms of democratic choice and accountability.

A comparative analysis with other post-military democracies, such as Ghana, Indonesia, and Brazil, provides further insight into Nigeria's democratic predicament. Ghana, for instance, has managed to establish a more stable democratic order by strengthening electoral institutions and ensuring greater transparency in governance, despite sharing a history of military rule with Nigeria (Saka, 2023). Indonesia, after decades of authoritarianism under Suharto, has seen a more successful diffusion of democratic norms through institutional reforms that have curtailed executive overreach and promoted legislative independence (Manea & Rüland, 2020). Brazil, another country transitioning from military rule, has implemented reforms that have gradually reduced military influence in politics, allowing for greater civilian oversight (Ojo, 2014). In contrast, Nigeria's post-military political elite have largely resisted deep structural reforms, preferring instead to maintain the centralized power structures inherited from military rule while operating under a democratic façade. This reluctance to dismantle authoritarian legacies due to "the fear of class suicide" by the political elite has hindered Nigeria's ability to build a truly consolidated democracy.

The role of ex-military politicians in Nigeria's democratic journey further complicates the consolidation process. Leaders such as Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari, both former military generals, have shaped Nigeria's democratic process in ways that mirrors their military backgrounds. Obasanjo's tenure was marked by an initial commitment to constitutional governance, but his eventual push for a third term in office revealed an underlying authoritarian impulse that, if successful, could have set a dangerous precedent (Sklar et al., 2006). Buhari's administration, on the other hand, was characterized by a more overt authoritarian tendency, with frequent disregard for court rulings, suppression of press freedoms, and an aggressive clampdown on political opposition (Onyekachi & Hyginus, 2020). His presidency exemplified the enduring challenge of military-politicians' influence in civilian politics, where former military leaders often struggle to fully embrace democratic governance, instead resorting to the familiar tactics of centralized control and coercion.

Beyond leadership styles, the structural weaknesses in Nigeria's democratic system show a broader failure to institutionalize democracy beyond electoral processes. Democratic consolidation requires more than periodic elections; it demands the entrenchment of democratic norms, respect for civil liberties, and the establishment of accountable governance structures. However, Nigeria's experience suggests that while democratic institutions exist, they remain susceptible to manipulation by political elites who prioritize power retention over genuine democratic development (Harry & Kalagbor, 2021). The absence of strong democratic safeguards has created an environment where authoritarian tactics can be repurposed within a nominally democratic system, allowing for the continuity of military-era governance styles under civilian administrations.

Ultimately, Nigeria's post-1999 democratic journey is seemingly a delicate relationship between progress and regression. While civilian rule has been sustained, the resilience of authoritarian legacies suggests that Nigeria is not yet firmly on the path to democratic consolidation. Instead, the country operates within a hybrid framework where democratic and authoritarian elements coexist, often in tension and unsettled.

Public Perception and the Future of Nigeria's Democracy

Since Nigeria's transition to civilian rule in 1999, public perceptions of democracy have remained contested terrain, shaped by historical grievances, contemporary governance failures, and paradoxical nostalgia for military rule. Nigerians generally regard military-politicians with deep skepticism, associating their involvement in governance with authoritarian tendencies, human rights abuses, and economic mismanagement (Onah, 2017).

However, the failures of civilian administrations have created a somewhat paradox where, despite the rhetoric of democratic consolidation, segments of the populace express a longing for the order and decisiveness that military regimes once projected (Marenin, 1995; Oladipo, 2017). This contradiction lays bare a deeper crisis of democratic legitimacy in Nigeria, one that is fueled by weak institutions, endemic corruption, and the enduring dominance of ex-military figures in political leadership (Angerbrandt & Themnér, 2021). The challenge, therefore, lies not merely in sustaining democratic structures but in fostering a governance culture that is both participatory and accountable, ensuring that civilian rule does not merely become a façade for oligarchic control.

The skepticism toward military-politicians is not merely a reaction to past military regimes but is also a response to their continued entrenchment in Nigeria's political space. Former military leaders who have transitioned into civilian politics, such as Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari, have often governed with an authoritarian imprint, undermining democratic norms even within an ostensibly civilian framework (Angerbrandt & Themnér, 2021). Their administrations, while cloaked in the legitimacy of electoral processes, have exhibited patterns of military-style governance, centralization of power, suppression of dissent, and a preference for top-down decision-making. This phenomenon of governance, obviously by the least qualified, better described as *khakistocracy*, reflects the persistence of military ethos in civilian governance, creating a blurred distinction between military rule and democratic leadership. While democratic transitions were expected to dismantle these authoritarian residues, the recycling of former military leaders has instead institutionalized them, leading to a democracy that more often functions like a managed autocracy than a truly participatory system.

Paradoxically, despite their historical grievances against military rule, many Nigerians harbor a nostalgic view of the past, particularly when juxtaposed against the perceived failures of contemporary democratic administrations. This nostalgia is rooted in the perception that military regimes, despite their authoritarianism, provided a semblance of order and economic stability that civilian governments have failed to replicate (Marenin, 1995). The inefficiency, high level corruption, and insecurity that characterize Nigeria's democratic dispensation have made some citizens yearn for the discipline and decisiveness associated with military governance. However, this romanticization ignores the structural repression, economic mismanagement, and political instability that military rule engendered. The challenge for Nigeria's democracy, therefore, is to address the deficits in governance that fuel this nostalgia, rather than dismissing it as an irrational yearning for the past. The failure to do so risks eroding public faith in democracy by creating a fertile ground for authoritarian resurgence under various guises.

The resilience of civil society, youth movements, and political opposition in challenging military influence and advocating for democratic deepening represents a counterforce to this nostalgia. Movements such as the "Obidient" movement, which emerged in support of Peter Obi in the 2023 elections, have demonstrated the potential of citizen mobilization in reshaping Nigeria's political landscape (Mokuye et al., 2023). Civil society organizations (CSOs) have historically played critical roles in electoral transparency, policy advocacy, and civic education (Umar & Tambai, 2020). However, their effectiveness has often been curtailed by financial constraints, state repression, and co-optation by political elites (Chukwudi & Ojo, 2023). Similarly, political opposition has been instrumental in contesting undemocratic practices, yet it remains hampered by internal fragmentation and the tendency of opposition figures to defect to ruling parties for political convenience (Amao & Omilusi, 2019). Strengthening these democratic actors is imperative for countering the influence of military-aligned politicians and ensuring that democratic governance is not merely a rotational exercise among the same elite circles.

One of the fundamental challenges to democratic consolidation in Nigeria is the enduring influence of the military in governance. While constitutional reforms have sought to define clear boundaries between civilian and military roles, the reality remains that the military continues to exert considerable influence over political and security affairs (Elewomawu, 2024). Efforts to reduce this influence must go beyond legal provisions to address structural factors that make military intervention an attractive option. Strengthening civilian institutions, particularly the judiciary, legislature, and electoral bodies, is crucial in this regard (Aiyede, 2015). A robust and independent judiciary can serve as a check on executive excesses, while a competent electoral commission can safeguard the integrity of democratic processes. Equally important is the need for a professional and politically neutral military that is insulated from partisan interests. This requires comprehensive civil-military relations reform, including mechanisms for civilian oversight and accountability (Nwagwu, 2002).

The persistence of ex-military officer's dominance in Nigerian politics also raises questions about the prospects for genuine political leadership beyond the military elite. The continued circulation of the same set of leaders, many of whom have military backgrounds, has stifled political innovation and hindered democratic renewal (Obi, 2011). The transition from military to civilian rule in 1999 was largely orchestrated by elite pacts that preserved the interests of the military establishment, rather than facilitating a broad-based democratization process (Levan, 2018). This legacy continues to shape Nigeria's political environment, where new entrants often struggle to break

into the system unless they are co-opted by the existing elite structure. The rise of youth-led political movements and alternative leadership figures offers a glimpse of potential change, but this requires sustained efforts to create an enabling political environment that is not dominated by the old guard.

Therefore, the future of Nigeria's democracy hinges on the ability of civilian institutions to assert its authority against military and elite dominance, while also addressing the socio-economic grievances that fuel public disillusionment. Electoral processes must be reformed to ensure greater transparency, political parties must be democratized to allow for genuine competition, and governance must be reoriented towards delivering tangible benefits to the citizenry (Ugwuoke et al., 2020). Without these structural changes, the democratic project risks remaining an elite-driven exercise with little substantive impact on the broader population. In the absence of meaningful reform, the paradox of democratic nostalgia where citizens long for authoritarian rule while simultaneously demanding democracy, will continue to haunt Nigeria's political evolution.

Conclusion

The persistence of khakistocracy which is a system where former military rulers dominate civilian governance has to a great extent shaped Nigeria's democratic trajectory since 1999. While the country ostensibly transitioned to democracy, the legacy of military rule remains entrenched in political structures, leadership styles, and institutional frameworks. Public perception of military-politicians reflects this paradox: widespread hostility toward military rule coexists with periodic nostalgia for its perceived order and decisiveness. This ambivalence underscores the fragile nature of Nigeria's democratic consolidation, as democratic institutions struggle to assert civilian supremacy over a political class still tethered to the ethos of military authoritarianism.

At the heart of Nigeria's democratic struggle is the tension between historical experiences of military governance and the aspirations for genuine democratic consolidation. While military rule was marked by repression, corruption, and centralized control, democratic governance has yet to convincingly distinguish itself as a superior alternative in the eyes of many Nigerians. Electoral irregularities, systemic corruption, weak institutions, and governance failures have fueled disenchantment, allowing former military leaders often regarded as "strongmen" to remain politically relevant. This has led to a structural paradox: Nigerians demand democracy but often finds the country reverting to military-trained leaders to achieve it. The enduring influence of former military rulers, exemplified by figures like Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari, David Mark (former Senate President), Atiku Abubakar among many others illustrates how khakistocracy has not only survived the transition to democracy but has been rebranded and legitimized within civilian rule.

Despite this enduring military influence, civil society, youth movements, and political opposition have redefined democratic resistance, demonstrating that khakistocracy is neither absolute nor immutable. The emergence of movements like the "Obidient Movement" and the resilience of civil society organizations highlight a growing demand for democratic accountability and leadership beyond the ex-military elite. However, these forces remain constrained by institutional weaknesses, elite manipulation, and the systematic erosion of civic engagement. The challenge, therefore, lies in translating popular discontent into structural reform—a task that requires dismantling the deep-seated military legacy within governance, strengthening civilian institutions, and expanding political leadership beyond the traditional military-civilian elite.

The future of Nigeria's democracy hinges on a fundamental recalibration of power dynamics that reduces military influence in governance and prioritizes the development of a truly civilian-led political class. This necessitates rigorous institutional reforms, from enhancing electoral credibility to reinforcing legislative and judicial independence. Besides these, fostering a political culture that values democratic principles over authoritarian legacies is imperative in breaking the cycle of khakistocracy. As long as military-trained politicians continue to dominate the highest echelons of power, Nigeria's democracy will remain a hybrid construct, oscillating between civilian aspirations and military legacies. The ultimate challenge is not just to sustain democratic rule but to ensure that it is owned, operated, and defended by genuine democratic actors rather than repurposed military elites.

The burden of this transformation lies with Nigeria's citizens, civil society, and democratic institutions. The task is not merely to prevent military intervention in politics but to dismantle the lingering ethos of militarization within civilian governance. The success or failure of Nigeria's democratic project will be determined not by the absence of military rulers in office, but by the ability of its institutions and political culture to foster an unambiguous, non-militarized democratic ethos. Addressing this paradox requires deliberate efforts to dismantle the structures of militarized governance, strengthen democratic institutions, and cultivate a political culture that prioritizes accountability, transparency, and the protection of civil liberties. Without these fundamental changes, Nigeria risks remaining in an endless cycle of electoral democracy without substantive democratic development, perpetually haunted by the ghosts of its authoritarian past. Until then, khakistocracy remains the defining

contradiction of Nigeria's democratic trajectory, a persistent reminder that political uniforms may change, but the structures of power often remain the same. Therefore, the challenge is not merely to sustain democracy, but to make it to truly function in a manner that earns public trust and consolidates democratic norms in the true sense for national development.

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