The subordination of African armies to civilian control: Theory and praxis

In the fifth of his series of articles on African military and security issues, Dr Simon Baynham of the Africa Institute examines a key dilemma in the realm of civil-military relations: the question of political control of the military, a topic of vital importance as Africa emerges from the straitjacket of authoritarian (and often military) rule towards political pluralism and the “second liberation”.

Introduction

In an earlier essay on security issues and civil-military relations in Africa, the background to and explanation of the interventionist inclinations of the continent’s armed forces were discussed at some length. It was noted that, in numerical terms, 31 African states have already experienced a successful coup d’état and 19 have been subjected to more than one. By the beginning of 1987, half the continent’s countries were under military rule, in many cases for the second or third time. Some of them (for instance, Ghana, Nigeria, Sudan and Libya) have been governed by the armed forces for most of their independent existence.

On the other hand, the armed services have not been politically dominant throughout Africa. Far from it, in fact. A significant number of regimes have maintained civilian authority over their military establishments for periods exceeding 25 years: Côte d’Ivoire, Cameroon, Senegal, Gabon, Swaziland, the Gambia, Botswana, Tanzania, Mauritius, Kenya, Malawi and Zambia all fit into this category.

Indeed, added together, well over a third of the continent’s states have remained free of military domination since independence. And in a number of cases, civilian supremacy has remained intact despite top-level leadership successions – for instance, when Jomo Kenyatta died in 1978 and after Julius Nyerere handed office to Ali Mwinyi in 1985.

We come, therefore, to a crucial issue in the study of African civil-military relations: the question of political control of armed force – in other words, of how civilian governments maneuverize resources and mechanisms to protect themselves from their own security forces. Clearly, this is a subject of key importance but one that has received inadequate attention in the study of African political affairs.

At some risk of simplification, conceptualizations of civilian control over military institutions tend to be of three types, the first of which – the traditional model – may be discarded for our purposes since it is premised upon the absence of differences between civilians and soldiers, as exemplified by seventeenth century European monarchies where the “...aristocracy simultaneously constituted the civilian and military elite ... [In short] The same men wore both hat and helmet.” In this model, civilian supremacy is maintained because the differentiation between military and non-military élites is absent or insignificant, the corollary of which is no armed intervention. From the 1800s onwards, the system gradually disappeared with the introduction of standing armies and the displacement of ascriptive by achievement criteria as the basis for selection and promotion.

However, since the traditional system is a mainly historical phenomenon, and therefore of marginal contemporary applicability (some conservative Gulf emirates excepted), the theoretical and practical interest here is on the alternative liberal and penetration models, which roughly replicate Samuel Huntington’s “objective/subjective” pattern variable.

In his classic text on the theory and politics of civil-military relations, Huntington gives considerable attention to the question of how civilian supremacy over the armed forces might be assured. He begins by making a conceptual distinction between what he calls “objective” and “subjective” control.
In the former, the officer corps is disciplined by its own professionalism, the most important constituent involving service to the community. Huntington concludes that the more professional an army (that is, the more it saw itself serving society), the less of a threat it would pose. This objective or liberal model is closely associated with Western parliamentary democracies (United Kingdom, Scandinavia, USA and so on), where control is affected through the maximization of military professionalism, thus...

Put another way, the formula operates on the premise that the soldiers internalize, or become attitudinally disposed to, their own subordination. At the same time, the politicians are expected to exercise due regard for the internal professional autonomy of the fighting forces.

According to the subjective model, civilian supremacy is enforced by the denial of an independent military sphere. Here the military becomes an integral, though subordinate, part of the political authority and is inculcated with civilian political values and interests.

The subjective format is most clearly identified with absolutist or totalitarian regimes, such as Nazi Germany, Cuba and the former USSR, where policy is or was ultimately determined by force and coercion. In such states, internal military power is checked, inter alia, by:

- breaking up the officer corps into competing groups,
- establishing political armies and special military units (Waffen-SS, Soviet MVD security troops, etc.),
- infiltrating the armed services with parallel political chains of command (commissars), and
- indoctrination, covert surveillance and close party supervision in the appointment of reliable officers to sensitive commands.

This system approximates to Eric Nordlinger's "penetration" (as well as Robin Luckham's apparat) model, where civilian dominance is ensured through the widespread deployment of ideological controls and surveillance, founded upon a dual structure of authority in which military personnel are subordinate to political functionaries.

To sum up the above in Huntington's own words:

Subjective civilian control achieves its end by civilianizing the military, making it the mirror of the state. Objective civilian control achieves its end by militarizing the military, making them the tools of the state.

Military subordination in Africa: Praxis

In the Third World – and certainly in Africa – civilian authority over the military owes most of what success it has had to the subjective (or penetration) model rather than to the objective (or liberal) formula outlined above. This brings us to a more focused examination of the actual techniques and institutional mechanisms used by African civilian regimes in their efforts to subordinate the armed services to their authority.

Eight strategies or devices are discussed here, but it should be stressed that there is some overlap between them and most regimes employ a combination of strategies to preempt the praetorian ambitions of the military.

Ethnic/kinship selectivity

Experience in India had led the British to believe that some tribes were inherently fit for soldering: the concept of the "warrior type" and "martial races" – from whom ready loyalty and absolute obedience to command could be expected – was deeply entrenched. The same attitude prevailed in Africa, where the colonial authorities deliberately manipulated the ethnic profile of locally recruited forces in order to build reliable armies for the subjugation and pacification of the indigenous population.

This technique has been borrowed by the post-independence political elites, as exemplified in Daniel arap Moi’s Kenya, where the Kalenjin (Moi’s group) dominate the top positions in the security establishment. Today, only one of the seven most senior security posts in the military, paramilitary and police is occupied by a Kikuyu, while the Commandant of the General Service Unit (GSU) and President Moi’s Sandhurst-trained Chief of Military Intelligence are just two examples of a virtual Kalenjin monopoly in Kenya’s top military brass.

Another case in point is Chad, where President Idriss Déby relies on his own ethnic group for his personal security. In other countries the ascriptive manipulation of posts has been taken one step further by the appointment of presidential family members to strategically important commands in the security services. Ian Khama’s meteoric rise through the ranks of the Botswana Defence Force (BDF) is just one instance among many.

Instrumental pay-offs

A second stabilizing control mechanism has been to “buy” the loyalty of soldiers through the maximization of material satisfactions relating to pay, privileges and related rewards.

This might entail, for example, the allocation of a very high proportion of the defence budget to pay and benefits rather than to hardware.

In Zambia, but also in Kenya and other African states, the senior commissioned ranks have been drawn into the inner circles of privilege by the allocation of land grants for commercial farming. Other methods of patronage for keeping the military “sweet” include selection for overseas diplomatic posts and training courses. Such postings inevitably carry special allowances and other financial perks, particularly the rare opportunity of returning home with a duty-free motorcar.

In countries where civilian governments have included the armed forces in economic austerity measures, the result has often been military intervention – as in January 1972, when the expelled premier, Dr Kofi Busia, described Colonel Acheampong’s takeover as “an officers’ amenities coup”.

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Political/bureaucratic co-optation

Closely linked to the instrumental purchase of fidelity through the provision of creature comforts is the widely-used method of co-optation. In a number of African states, senior and even middle-ranking members of the officer corps have been drawn temporarily into government circles by appointments to the boards of parastatals or as regional governors and party/political functionaries.

In a deliberate strategy to neutralize the interventionist inclinations of the Tanzania People’s Defence Force (TPDF), the CCM (Chama Cha Mapinduzi) has incorporated the TPDF into the party/governmental system along the lines seen in Mexico during the 1920s. The Tanzanian armed forces are, in fact, part of the governing élite, with frequent transfers of officers from the TPDF to ministerial, diplomatic and party positions and back again.

When I visited Tanzania in late 1990, General Kimario, for example, had just been appointed Regional Commissioner for Dar es Salaam, having been Minister for Home Affairs (and thus of cabinet rank) before that. Until late 1989, General Luhanga was Chief of Operations and Training; but for the past three years, he has been Regional Commissioner for Ruvuma - a civilian appointment. Similar examples of co-optation are to be found in Gabon, Zambia and Côte d’Ivoire, to name but a few.

Manipulation of military mission

Another control device is what might be called manipulation of the military mission. By this is meant the deliberate deployment of the armed forces in order to keep them fully occupied and - it is hoped - professionally happy. This may take the form of countering external threats, or it might mean using the military for civic action programmes or for domestic law and order operations in aid of the civil power. There is, however, a danger to civilian control here since internal security commitments have a potentially politicizing impact on the minds of the military - as some claim has occurred in South Africa.

Ideological indoctrination

A fifth technique - and one that mostly reflects the subjective mechanisms of control still seen in the People’s Republic of China and in Castro’s Cuba - is to deliberately indoctrinate the armed forces with the ideological values of the party-state. After the mutiny by the First and Second Battalions of the Tanganyika Rifles in 1964 (a mutiny put down by British marines at Nyerere’s request), the army was virtually dissolved and a new one - the TPDF - was created, whose members were obliged to join Tanu, the Tanzania African National Union (now the CCM). Since then, and in order to identify the military with the ideology, policies and orientation of the governing party, the officers and ranks have been systematically subjected to political education, which accounts for 20 per cent of the time devoted to training.

Another example comes from Ghana, where in 1962 the Minister of Defence issued a directive that party education would be introduced into the army through an Armed Forces Bureau; and officers were to be sent on extended courses to the Kwame Nkrumah Institute of Ideological Studies. For Nkrumah, the inherited (British) model of civil-military relations clashed, diametrically, with his vision of a one-party state encompassing the national institutions of Ghana. What was required, he argued, were politically committed armed forces who owed loyalty, not only to Ghana, but to the Convention People’s Party (CPP) and to himself in person.

In this context - and there are plenty of other African examples - Western traditions of political detachment and neutrality are rendered meaningless and are replaced by an ethos in which enthusiasm for the existing regime becomes an essential quality in a military officer.

This view has been expressed succinctly by the former Tanzanian leader, Julius Nyerere:

Our conception of the President’s office is obviously incompatible with the theory that the public services are and ought to be politically impartial. 9

Expatriate recruitment

Another method of control has been the recruitment of foreign officers (or mercenaries) to the crucial command posts and to other sensitive appointments inside the security establishment - a strategy with a time-honoured lineage as seen in the Vatican’s Swiss Guard.

One African example is Gabon, "... where a major mainstay of Bongo’s control of the Gabonese armed forces is the number of [expatriate] appointments of this kind." 10 This method of control maintenance is also characteristic of a number of Gulf states, where British officers and NCOs (including former Special Air Services personnel) have acted as loyal guardians for the likes of the Sultan of Oman.

Divide et impera: Security counterweights

The appointment of expatriates to serve as sentinels for the security of the regime is closely associated with one of the most prominent mechanisms for control visible in independent Africa: the creation of rival security formations to act as a check on the regular armed forces.

The Ghanaian case, with which I am most familiar, provides one of the best examples of an attempt by politicians in a one-party state to subordinate the military to civilian authority. 11 In the early 1960s, President Nkrumah set up a National Security Service (NSS) - composed of five units (Military Intelligence, Counter-Intelligence, a Cuban-trained bodyguard, Special Intelligence and the President’s Own Guard Regiment) - which duplicated and usurped the functions of the regular military and police.

In this deliberate system of institutionalized dualism, Nkrumah encouraged rivalries and dissensions among officers, thereby hoping to discourage them from taking united action against him. In fact, he was unsuccessful because in February 1966, shortly before the counterweight security apparatus threatened to become effective, Nkrumah was overthrown by his army and police.

In many cases, the counterweight military and paramilitary forces are trained by a foreign government or even by a
number of foreign armies. For instance, in Zaire — where Mobutu Sese Seko’s political longevity is explained partly by his creation of numerous security agencies – the Civil Guard (Garde civile) is Egyptian-trained, the army’s 31st Brigade is French-trained and the élite Special Presidential Division (Division spéciale présidentielle) is Israeli-trained.

It is interesting to note that the DSP is composed mainly of Ngwandi, Mobutu’s own ethnic group, and that several of its officers are foreign nationals. In short, the Division (which was responsible for flushing out army rebels from the Voice of Zaire in the January 1992 coup attempt) reflects a mixture of control techniques within one organization. On top of this, divisional and brigade commanders in Zaire are constantly moved and re-posted in order to undercut any base of support they might otherwise develop.

Two final examples worthy of special note are Kenya’s paramilitary General Service Unit (GSU), built up by President Moi to break the monopoly of the regular armed services, and the heavily-armed Police Field Force in Tanzania, one of six bodies comprising that country’s security establishment in a comprehensive system of checks and balances.

External guarantees

The penultimate, and more than usually effective, method of civilian control in this inventory boils down to external guarantees from friendly foreign powers. With the possible exception of Cuba, French military policy have attracted the greatest international attention in this regard. Almost every francophone African state had – or continues to have – defence agreements with Paris; and standing French garrisons in the Central African Republic (CAR), Djibouti, Gabon, Côte d’Ivoire, Cameroon and Senegal have been an abiding feature of the continued French presence on the continent for the past thirty years.

In all these countries, Paris has underwritten – and at various stages acted in order to ensure – the stability of her African friends. Indeed, on one occasion, French legionnaires intervened to restore the civilian administration of President M’ba after he was overthrown in the coup of 1964.

The United Kingdom has been much less active in this manner. Nevertheless, British troops were responsible for putting down the East African army mutinies in 1964 (in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) and élite troops from the SAS moved into the Gambia to restore Sir Dawda Jawara to power in 1981.

It is often assumed that outside foreign powers have played the only deterrent role in this regard. But that is not so. A large number of African states have provided military assistance to protect endangered civilian neighbours from the political ambitions of their own armies.

Surprisingly perhaps, Guinea emerges as the leading exponent of the external use of military power, having intervened to support friendly civilian regimes on no less than five separate occasions. But Tanzania comes a close second with regime-supportive military assistance to governments in the Comoros, Seychelles and Uganda. (Of course, Tanzania’s forces were also responsible for the best-known instance of regime-opposing intervention, when 20,000 Tanzanian troops invaded Uganda and overthrew Idi Amin in 1979.) A final example here of African outside military guarantees is in Equatorial Guinea, where President Obiang retains office assisted by a large detachment of Moroccan troops provided by King Hassan.

Other considerations

Although the issue is not included in the list of mechanisms offered above, there is another critical determinant of control that has little to do with the military at all. “It is the existence of civil institutions which are both legitimate and effective” especially over an extended period of time.

As regards the relationship between effective legitimacy and the format of civilian control, one might summarize as follows.

The higher the levels of legitimacy and effectiveness, the more likely it is that control will take “objective” forms (self-restraining military professionalism ...); and the lower the levels of legitimacy and effectiveness, the more likely control is to assume “subjective” forms.

To sum up: from the evidence available, it seems clear that once the subordination of the military has been engineered, subjective control may be singularly effective. But its limitation lies in the fact that it can only be implemented at great risk.

Before concluding, two other observations must be noted, both of which have relevance to the current and future pattern of civil-military relations in South Africa.

In the first place, it is important to stress that, to a greater or lesser extent, all armies intervene in politics. In Finer’s continuum, the possibilities range from “influence” (legitimate inputs into defence budget decision-making), to “blackmail” (intimidation of the civilian authorities), to “displacement” (removing, or permitting the removal, of one set of civilian politicians for another) and, finally, to “supplantment” (where the military seize power and install themselves in office).

In the second place, a sense of military professionalism may make the armed forces less rather than more responsive to civilian control. His is because the soldiers may see themselves, first and foremost, as the servants of the state rather than of the particular government of the day. In such circumstances, the military might intervene to protect the national interest (as it sees it) from a parochial or ineffective administration.

Conclusions

With the major general exception of Southern Africa, military coups have been widespread on the African continent, escalating in number over time as the process of decolonization created ever more sovereign states. By the 1970s and 1980s, armed interventions had become the principal manner by which governments were changed.

The erosion of constitutional channels of opposition in one-party states, against a backdrop of escalating economic

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There are at least four reasons for this assessment:

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and inadequacies - has contributed to a pattern of lasting political instability in the majority of African countries. The
Western conditionality regarding democratic and eco­
meric reforms - together with similar demands for an
improvement in human rights and for major reductions in defence spending - suggest that the answer is “No”.
On the other hand, there are plenty of reasons why we
ought to continue, indeed heightened, levels of political turmoil in Africa during the next decade and beyond. There are at least four reasons for this assessment:

- economic sacrifices and social suffering: which are inherent in the implementation of structural adjustment programmes
- heightened expectations raised by the surge towards political pluralism and democracy: inevitably, the process is going to be an extended and painful one and popular aspirations will not be matched by material results in the short to medium-term (if ever)
- the global renaissance of ethnic/nationalist sentiment and secessionist demands: the outside world is already providing a role-model for separatist tendencies; indeed, the creation of new and internationally recognized states such as Armenia and Croatia (and the virtual recognition of Eritrea) suggest that the status of Africa’s colonial borders will not remain wholly sacrosanct
- finally, there is the danger of marginalization: the West is totally preoccupied with the Middle East and with the monumental tasks confronting the CIS republics and Eastern Europe; for these reasons, the dangers of aid

fatigue are very real and Africa faces a fate worse in some respects than being fought over – being ignored.

All these developments suggest growing and parallel problems relating to domestic and regional security. Under such conditions, the armed forces of Africa may become more, rather than less, interventionist. And in a number of countries, the future may quickly resemble Hobbes’ savage state of nature, where life is “… solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short”. Indeed, Somalia has already reached that point, and other states such as Mozambique have not far to go.

Notes and references

2 Ibid, p 185.
3 E A Nordlinger, Soldiers in politics: Military coups and govern­
5 Ibid, p 84.
6 E A Nordlinger, op cit, p 11; R Luckham, “A comparative typol­
7 S P Huntington, op cit, p 83.
12 D Goldsworthy, op cit, p 56.
13 Ibid.