The 1966 counter-coup and the militarisation of ethnicity in Nigeria's political system

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Abstract

This paper explores the 1966 Counter-Coup in Nigeria and its long-lasting impact on the ethnicism of politics in the country. A major turning point in the post-independence history of Nigeria, the Counter-Coup which toppled General Aguiyi-Ironsi's regime again ignited ethnic rivalries in the country's southern, northern, and southeast provinces. This paper uses historical records to examine the impact of the Counter-Coup on the political atmosphere at the time and how it laid the ground for the ethnic war that ultimately culminated in the Nigerian Civil War. The article also delves into the question of how the political control of the military following the coup instilled a leadership trend that gravitated towards serving ethnic and regional interests rather than national unity. The authors conclude the article by offering solutions for the pervasive ethnicism in Nigerian politics. Stress the need for inter-ethnic conversation, democratic reform, and national integration as mechanisms for creating a more welcoming political environment.

Keywords: 1966, Counter, Coup, Ethnicism, Politics, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

One of the popular types of governments is the military government, which basically describes a system of government headed by a serving Military officer. Popular as this type of government is, it is always not looked at as a legitimate government because of at least three factors. First, it does not come to power through the people, second, it does not follow the constitution of the land, and third, it does not respect the rule of law (Islow, 2022; Ifex, 2020; Mbaku, 2020; Okeke, 2018). In most cases, military governments come to power by coups and installs juntas. Despite the criticisms and the unique weaknesses of military government, in most cases they have often come to power as a result of blatant and colossal failure on the part of legitimate governments (Odigbo et al., 2023; Nichols, 2021; Morgan, 2020). The post-colonial Africa continent has witnessed lots of military coups and counter-coups, some of the most recent ones happening in West Africa (Mbugha,

2025; Folola, 2022; Eshiet, 2021; Cassani, 2020).

Currently, 4 of the 17 countries of West Africa are governed by military officers who came to power through coups. These West African countries are Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Guinea. The common denomination of the reasons for their overthrowing the civilian or democratically elected government of their countries has been corruption and gross ineptitude which has resulted in the underdevelopment of their countries (Mbara & Graham 2023; Mwai 2022). Despite criticism in some quarters, which has resulted in these states exiting the Economic Community of West African States, the arrival of these military leaderships in these countries were greeted with approval by the masses in these countries (Odigbo et al. 2023; Eguegu, 2022). The grime beclouding military rule notwithstanding, the reality remains that in the face of brazen failure, blithering impunity, absolute ineptitude and irrational copious corruption on the part of supposed

legitimate governments, the military always stands as the only salvation for the people. This explains why in some cases, the masses will encourage military takeover of the leadership reins of their country. A not so recent but pronounced example where the military were egged to take over power was the 1966 military coup in Nigeria (Turse, 2023; Salah, 2023). The arrival of military government in most instances solve immediate and pronounced problems, but its prolonged stay in power often proof disastrous particularly, if it ends up being caught in the web of the same problems it had come to solve.

In Africa, one of the problems bedeviling the political systems and by extension development has been ethnicity. This sociological constant has affected virtually every fabric of multi-ethnic African countries. Employments, political appointments, campaigns and even admissions into Federal Universities have been pursued along ethnic lines (Olukayode, 2022; Conley, 2021). It was one of the factors that started and fueled the events that culminated into the first Military coup in Nigeria (Oluyemi 2024; Itugbu 2023; Olukayode 2022; Folola 2022). While lots of works have been done on Nigeria's 1966 military coup, the questions remain: Was the coup and the ones that followed able to wriggle themselves out of the web of ethnicity that shrouded Nigeria's public life? How has military rule in Nigeria helped to propagate or diminish ethnicity prioritization in Nigeria's political system? What lessons are there for peace and conflict resolution studies? These questions are the foci of this work.

The 1966 counter-coup in Nigeria represents one of the most defining moments in the country's post-independence history. In this military intervention, the political and ethnic fault lines that have defined Nigerian society since colonialism were in full relief. What happened after the coup was to a great degree defined by ethnicity, both as a political mobilisation tool and a social construction. These occurrences demonstrate how regionalism and ethnic loyalty have shaped the political atmosphere, government, and stability in Nigeria. The first Nigerian coup, staged in January of 1966, was put into action by young Igbo soldiers. These officers were so frustrated with the corrupt, incompetent government that they conspired against top-level politicians, including Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the prime minister, in an effort to bring about change. The coup was strongly objected to by northern officers, who felt that it was an ethnic act. Sani (2020) states the inter-ethnic tensions between the Hausa-Fulani and the Igbos in the north were already high even before the coup.

In response to what was seen as ethnic profiling, the counter-coup in July 1966 took place. The pent-up ethnic hate between the Igbos and the Northerners was in full spotlight in this coup, which was carried out by Northern officers and was a direct response to the January coup. One of the Igbo military officers assassinated in the counter-coup was General Aguiyi-Ironsi, the country's first military leader. The coup, Ibrahim (2020) writes, was an explicit repudiation of the earlier coup and a firm manifestation of the disastrous consequences of ethnic cleavages in Nigeria's political and military spheres. It is characteristic of current tendencies in Nigeria's political process that the 1966 counter-coup was built on ethnicity. Colonial and ethnic identities were also consolidated by the British through their divide-and-rule policies. Colonial state policies that provided some ethnic groups with more power than others brought about the development of a politically divided society along ethnic lines (Oye, 2021). Consequently, following independence being attained by the country, its elites started to control this highly fragmented structure, and ethnicity quickly became a

national political force. The NCNC, Action Group, and Northern People's Congress (NPC) then all sought to widen the gap between the two groups. The effects of ethnic identity were further consolidated by the later military rule. Military dictatorships, in which power was usually monopolised by one ethnic group, saw ethnic tensions reach boiling point and become institutionalised in political decision-making.

Since the majority of Nigerians viewed the military rank as promoting their individual ethnic agendas rather than the country's unity, Akinyemi (2020) contends that the involvement of the military in the country's politics after the 1966 counter-coup fostered ethnic disintegration. Due to a lack of a collective national idea, ethnic differences were further deepened. There was still ethnic politics in Nigeria after the civilian government took power in 1999 since the 1966 coups. Rather, it has persisted to shape political campaigns and election outcomes, essentially determining the fate of the politicians. A person's ethnicity and locality have long been an aspect of politics, more so in the sharing of wealth and public office. Nigerian politicians like to appeal to their ethnic group to vote for them, as Ojo (2020) has discussed. This ongoing obsession with ethnic identity has consistently frustrated national integration and unity efforts. Nigerian ethnicity influences election politics and, to a lesser extent, national security and stability. The 1966 counter-coup and its aftermath were only the latest in a long history of violent ethnic conflicts. The ethnic hostilities which were ignited by the 1966 coups eventually led to the 1967 Nigeria-Biafra Civil War. Nigeria and Nigerians were shattered by the vicious war which erupted mainly along ethnic lines.

As Sani (2020) argues, the failure to manage ethnic cleavages following the counter-coup was to a great extent accountable for the escalation of tensions that eventually led to the Nigerian civil war. Consequently, I can illustrate how ethnicity has continuously been a force in shaping our nation's history. In Nigeria, the 1966 counter-coup inflicted permanent scars on the nation's politics and culture. Ethnic rifts still rule Nigerian politics, even with the nation's massive strides toward democracy and economic advancement. Deep ethnic identities in most cases have frustrated federalism, power-sharing, and national unity projects in eliminating ethnic cleavages. Ethnic cleavages within the country's political parties and ethnicity in policymaking remain issues of concern to the government. According to Oye (2021), Nigeria has failed woefully in its attempt to establish a robust and representative democracy due to the failure of its citizens to move beyond ethnic politics. The 1966 counter-coup is the latest occurrence where ethnicity has shaped Nigerian politics. Military intervention, politicization of ethnicity, and the violence that followed all bear witness to the depth of ethnicism in Nigerian politics. The Nigerian military was outraged by deep-rooted ethnic tensions throughout the country, which driven the counter-coup and the resulting bloodbath. To have a proper understanding of the modern-day political issues in Nigeria, it is enlightening to look back at the ethnic politics that fueled the 1966 counter-coup.

The 1966 Counter-Coup
As the second military coup in two years since independence, the 1966 Counter-Coup was a turning point in the history of Nigeria. in taking control in January in a coup, Major General Johnson Thomas Umunnakwe Aguiyi-Ironsi was deposed and assassinated on July 29, 1966. In putting an end to the ethnic wars between the largely northern military of the Hausa-Fulani extraction and the Igbo-controlled federal government, his regime was seen as one-sided by a large majority. Others perceived Aguiyi-Ironsi's policies, which

excluded northern interests, as dangerous, and Major General Yakubu Gowon provoked the coup in response to it. Because it increased ethnic tensions and divided the country's military leadership, this counter-coup set the stage for the 1967–1970 Nigerian Civil War (Coleman, 1967).

After the 1966 Counter-Coup, tensions between Nigeria's regions, especially the north and the south, were heightened, and this impacted the political climate of the nation. After the coup, there was a sudden shift in the country's military leadership, with northern (Hausa-Fulana) officers taking control. The Igbo were especially threatened and victimised by this and further escalated the existing hatred between ethnic groups. Secessionist militancy in Nigeria, and notably in the southeast, increased in strength as an after-effect of the escalating political instability wrought by the coup and its fallout that ultimately led to the nation's civil war (Dike, 1968). Besides realigning military dynamics, the counter-coup shaped the path of the country in terms that lasted forever.

Nigerian Civil War

The Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafran War, erupted in July 1967 and lasted until January 1970, following the secession of the southeastern region of Nigeria to form the independent State of Biafra. Ethnically, politically, and economically, tensions between the country's west and north and the Igbo-dominated southeastern region were the primary causes that initiated the war. Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu was the leader of the Igbo who declared Biafra's independence after a chain of brutal pogroms in northern Nigeria. The government of General Yakubu Gowon in Nigeria denounced the secession and immediately began a military operation to reunite the country. Biafran famine was one of the catastrophic humanitarian tragedies that accompanied the war and drew aid from all over the world (Browning, 2017).

The war had devastating consequences for Nigeria, resulting in an estimated one to three million deaths, largely due to starvation, disease, and combat. It also left a lasting impact on the country's political landscape, as the Nigerian government emerged victorious but was forced to rebuild a fractured society. The war highlighted the deep ethnic divisions within the country, and its legacy continues to influence Nigerian politics and inter-ethnic relations. While the conflict officially ended in 1970 with the surrender of Biafran forces, the war's scars are still felt in the socio-political fabric of modern Nigeria (Okafor, 2019). Efforts toward national reconciliation were made after the war, but the healing process remains complex and ongoing.

The Context of Ethnic Tensions

The 1966 counter-coup in Nigeria occurred in a politically charged environment marked by deep ethnic and regional divides. These tensions were primarily rooted in the colonial legacy that structured Nigeria along ethnic and regional lines, which were further reinforced by the post-independence political system. Nigeria's diverse population, consisting of over 250 ethnic groups, was divided into three primary regions: the Northern, Western, and Eastern regions, each dominated by different ethnic groups. In the North, the Hausa-Fulani were dominant, and in the West, the Yoruba were dominant, and in the East, the Igbo were dominant. Their precarious balance of power was also exacerbated by the fact that their political and economic interests frequently clashed (Sani, 2020). By the mid-1960s, regional and ethnic identities had become the primary determinants of political allegiance, and ethnic competition had become well established.

Nigeria's political system was weak when it gained independence from Britain in 1960. In a bid to include Nigeria's ethnic

complexity, federalism was introduced, but with the negative consequence of reinforcing regional cleavages. The 1964 federal election was tainted with allegations of electoral manipulation and revealed the system's weakness, paving the way for bloodshed and violence. As a result of the election, the North gained substantial representation in the Federal Government, to the anger and fear of the other regions. This revealed the increasing political power of the regions. The rise of ethnic and regional loyalty as a basis for political manipulation discouraged national unity (Akinyemi, 2020). The inaction on the part of the political elite in alleviating the long-standing grievances of the suppressed ethnic minorities did nothing to ease the already tense tensions in an already conflict-prone setting. Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu and other predominantly Igbo soldiers staged a coup in January 1966 in an effort to overthrow the government because of these grievances.

A number of top Northern politicians, including Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, were murdered in the coup that disproportionately affected the Northern political elite. This response was taken by the Northern military leaders, and a counter-coup was planned in July of that year the Northern counter-coup in July to restore its power and influence marked a turning point in Nigeria's political ethnicity (Ibrahim, 2020). Political and military power were further defined by ethnic and regional identities during the counter-coup. In addition, the ethnic cleavages that became increasingly obvious after the 1966 coups sparked the Nigerian Civil War in 1967. The Igbos, perceiving that they were being politically and militarily persecuted, declared the Eastern region independent and formed the State of Biafra. Because they thought the counter-coup was against them, the Igbos were even more determined to be alone and fend for themselves. The Igbo reaction to the counter-coup was a violent one due to the fact that they viewed it as an attack on their political and cultural identity, and an ethnic conflict. The Nigerian civil war was sparked mainly as a result of the widening ethnic fault lines which had marked the nation prior to and intensified by colonial policies (Hutchful & Aning, 2021; Sani, 2020).

Ethnic politics in Nigeria has been taking place for several years, and it started with the 1966 counter-coup. The perceived threat to the North's political dominance following the January coup provoked the coup d'état, which marked a change in the salience of ethnicity in Nigerian politics. The Nigerian counter-coup deepened already existing fault lines and consolidated ethnic identity as the driving power in political alliances and governance, laying the ground for the outbreak of the country's civil war. Ethnic bitterness is still deeply rooted in Nigerian politics due to the events of 1966 and their aftermath (Ibrahim, 2020).

2. Literature Review

The 1966 Counter-Coup in Nigeria was a pivotal event in the country's post-independence history, marked by ethnic rivalry, political instability, and military intervention. Nigerian structural and historical problems were the main underlying factors of ethnic tensions and political maneuvering that led to the coup. Several political, ethnic, military, and colonial factors precipitated the outbreak of the 1966 Counter-Coup. The five major reasons for the counter-coup are discussed below:

Ethnic Rivalry and Political Tensions: The deep-seated ethnic animosity across the country's major regions resulted in the 1966 Counter-Coup. Having been organized along ethnic lines (the North, the West, and the East), the country's federal system was destined for political fragmentation. Igbo military officers (mainly from the Eastern Region) toppled the government in January 1966, which

was viewed by most as a move by the Igbos to seize the nation's government. The northern elites saw the coup as a threat to their political interests because they had dominated political powers for centuries. The Northern military initiated a counter-coup in July 1966 against what they felt was marginalisation of the North and the Igbos' attempts to take over Nigeria's political space. The January coup resulted in the assassination of important Northern political figures, further fueling ethnic tensions and dividing the people further (Suberu, 2010).

Political Instability and the Failure of the First Republic: Its political system after independence was characterized by corruption and political instability. Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, Nigeria's First Republic was unable to consolidate its political system. There were a number of ethnically based political groups that had tremendous influence; there was the Action Group (AG) in the west and the Nigerian People's Congress (NPC) in the east. National disunity was intensified since such parties tended to act more as ethnic coalitions rather than as ideological ones. Although the January 1966 coup was in part justified as a reaction to corruption and inefficiency within the elites, some perceived it as an effort to rectify the malaises of the First Republic. Political instability was nevertheless already significant even before the coup, and the democratic process was further eroded as a result. Attempting to restore political order, the July counter-coup by the Northern military did so along ethnic lines, acrimoniously polarizing Nigerian politics (Adebayo, 2013).

The Centralization of Political Power: The 1966 Counter-Coup was caused mainly by the concentration of political authority in the hands of a small group of ethnic elites. Northern political elites focused powers prior to independence in the independent federal government of Nigeria. Powerful positions within the administration and the army were held by Northern political and military elites. But the Northern elite started feeling threatened as the Eastern Igbos were dominant in the military and in the administration at the beginning of independence. One of the reasons why the January 1966 coup happened was that the Northerners felt this leadership change was a bid by the Igbo to seize power. In planning the counter-coup against the January coup, the northern Nigerian army set out to continue their political ethnic hegemony as well as regain political power concurrently (Smith, 2015).

Colonial Legacy and Divisions: The 1966 Counter-Coup in Nigeria was shaped, to a very large degree, by the ethnic politics left by the country's colonial occupation. Nigerian territory was divided ethnically and culturally under British colonial rule. By disproportionately sharing political power and resources, the British "divide and rule" policy increased ethnic tensions. As a result, Nigeria was a country whose citizens valued their ethnic and regional identities over their national identity. Even after independence, the federal character of Nigeria's post-colonial political system was an expression of the same ethnic divisions. Because some ethnic groups in Nigeria viewed the military's intervention in politics as an opportunity for them to prove their dominance, ethnic factors were at play in military coups. The coup in January and the counter-coup that followed in 1966 re-established the ethnic lines that had been highlighted under colonialism (Soyinka, 1997).

Military Weakness and the Breakdown of Professionalism: The institutional weakness and ethnic influence susceptibility of the Nigerian military was yet another decisive factor that led to the 1966 Counter-Coup. Despite playing a dominant role in gaining independence, the Nigerian military was weak and fragmented as a quite young institution. Their decision-making processes were

dominated by their Northern rivals, which left junior armed forces, especially the Eastern ones, feeling marginalized. The January coup, which was organized by junior officers, reflected the fragmentation of the military. Further racial polarization resulted from the inability of the military to overcome internal divergences without sacrificing professionalism. There was a July 1966 counter-coup to restore ethnic balance and reclaim control over the military, partially caused by such internal divergences (Macaulay, 2012).

3. Methodology
3.1 Research Design
A qualitative research design is most appropriate in this study, given that the focus is on qualitative data. Qualitative research is best suited for studies involving complex social phenomena and nuances of various stakeholders' perceptions.

3.2 Data Collection
Secondary Data: The main secondary sources of this study are academic papers, government publications, international organisation reports, and other related documents.

Selection Criteria: Data sources are pre-selected based on the reliability and applicability to the research.

Data Triangulation: Triangulation requires the use of the central hypothesis in support of data from the multiplicity of sources. The use of data from multiplicity of sources makes the conclusions more credible and reliable.

3.3 Data Analysis
Thematic Analysis: In the analysis of qualitative data, thematic analysis could be helpful. The identification of themes, patterns, and commonalities in the data can permit you to draw some useful conclusions

4. Results and Discussion
Was the coup and the ones that followed able to wriggle themselves out of the web of ethnicity that shrouded Nigeria's public life?

There are sufficient proofs that the first military coup in Nigeria was encouraged by ethnic sentiments and their consequences that enveloped the country after the independence. Unfortunately, this coup itself and the ones that followed could not wriggle free from the grasped of ethnicity. The very first challenge or criticism leveled against the first coup was that it was ethnic motivated. This criticism is sustained with the argument that the coup was spearheaded by soldiers of a particular tribe, the Igbo and that no key civilian political officer of the tribe was killed (Duzor & Williamson, 2022; Eshiet, 2021; Cassani, 2020). To further foster the existing ethnic suspicion that clouded the 1966 coup, the officer that emerged to take charge of the leadership of the country was an indigene of the Igbo tribe; a tribe that was already suspected of masterminding the coup for ethnic benefits (Moorsom & Raber, 2024; Okechukwu; 2023; Olukayade, 2023).

An ethnicist political system—a political system in which different ethnic groups are fragmented and compete with one another—had a significant role in the 1966 counter-coup in Nigeria. Following the coup, ethnicity was a dominant impulse. The Northern ethnic minority perceived itself as being threatened by the ousting of political power following the January 1966 revolution by predominantly military officers of Igbo extraction. Concretively, in July 1966, there was a counter-coup. Ethnic identity, political allegiance, and military action have a potent connection; the primary motive of the counter-coup to revive Northern power is a case in point. The event had significance in Nigerian political history in that it signalled the impact of ethnicity on the politics of governmental and military influence by

Ibrahim, (2020). Ethnic and regional identities continue to influence political allegiances and political decisions in present-day Nigeria, vindicating the controversiality of ethnicity in the country's politics.

The rise of ethnic nationalism after the counter-coup of 1966 was a potent political force. Politically mobilised to defend their social, cultural, and political interests, the people of a particular ethnic group are known as ethnic nationalism. Isolated by the counter-coup, the Eastern region, under the Igbo administration, yearned to secede once more. There was a secessionist crisis in 1967 as a result of ethnic anxieties that they were being further excluded from the affairs of the state, and it saw the birth of the Republic of Biafra. Whenever specific groups feel their interests are not being accounted for in the broad national order enough, such as in 1966 and its subsequent war, ethnic nationalism could lead to political disintegration and violence (Akinyemi, 2020). Ethnic tensions in Nigeria run deep and have long-lasting effects on the country's politics; the 1966 counter-coup and its aftermath reflected this.

Ethnic conflict in Nigeria was brought to the top of the country's politics by the 1966 Counter-Coup. Igbo commanders who had previously eliminated important political figures toppled the government in January of 1966. In July of 1966, northern commanders toppled the coup in a counter-coup that resulted in a ruthless vengeance against the Igbo. A great deal of Nigeria's post-colonial politics was marked by this cycle of ethnically oriented violence. Within the Nigerian military in particular, ethnic differences were a dominant characteristic of political affiliations, as the events of the counter-coup and its consequences illustrated. As ethnic groups in Nigeria grew more dominant in the political arena, ethnic tensions mounted and became institutionalized within the political system in Nigeria. The Igbo, who were mostly found in the Eastern Region, were apprehensive of mounting marginalization and ethnic violence, and this consciousness was largely to blame for the disintegration of national unity and the eruption of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970).

Ethnicity dominated political allegiances and military politics in Nigeria, as 1966 demonstrated. Ethnicity, rather than political ideology, motivated the military in both coups. To maintain power in a highly polarised political setting, political elites began to identify with the ethnic groups that supported them, laying the groundwork for the development of ethnic-political mobilisation. In an attempt to protect its own interests and political hegemony, the three regions of Nigeria—the North, the West, and the East—grew more polarised, further entrenching ethnicism in the political structure of the nation. Scholars believe that the counter-coup of 1966 marked a turning point, where the effects of colonialism, which had already created ethnic cleavages, were magnified within the context of post-independence power struggles (Levan, 2015; Suberu, 2010). Therefore, ethnocentrism continues to be central to understanding Nigeria's political conflicts and challenges of nation-building.

How has military rule in Nigeria helped to propagate or diminish ethnicity prioritisation in Nigeria's political system?

In many respects, military rule in Nigeria has helped propagate ethnic prioritization (Mbara & Graham, 2023; Eguegu, 2022). After the counter-coup of 1966 led predominantly by the officers of the Hausa/Fulani tribe of the country, a young Northern military officer came to power even when there were senior military officers from other tribes (Odigbo et al., 2023; Okechukwu, 2023; Mohammed, 2022). This led to ethnic fracas even in the Nigerian military resulting in the country's civil war of 1967 – 1970. The Northern

tribe would go on to dominate, to the displeasure of other tribes, 26 years of the cumulative 30 years of the military rule in Nigeria. Another indication that military rule in Nigeria helped to propagate ethnic prioritization and distrust in Nigeria's political system is the fact that till date, the Igbo tribe, largely believed to have masterminded the 1966 coup and the resulting Nigerian Civil War, till date, has not been able to produce a president of the country. Grapevine say this is due to fears that if allowed to produce a president, the tribe will usurp power and divide the country (Oluyemi, 2024; Okechukwu, 2023; Mohammed, 2022).

In Nigeria during 1966, the counter-coup, the military was instrumental in determining the political history of the country. It had become an ordinary matter by 1966, using military intervention to settle political crises in Nigeria. Coups and counter-coups were the norm. Lest they lose power in the wake of the January 1966 coup by predominantly Igbo officers, the Northern political elite launched the counter-revolution in July. Ethnic allegiance and the North's pursuit of political domination were the main reasons why this intervention took place. Akinyemi (2020) argues that whenever the military was involved in these coups, it illustrated how ethnic identity and regional allegiance typically dictated Nigerian political conduct at the time.

Northern army officers, including General Yakubu Gowon and Lieutenant Colonel Murtala Mohammed, wanted to reclaim power after having been bypassed in the January coup, and the ethnic basis of the 1966 military coup was this need to reclaim power. Ethnic tensions arising from the previous coup's Igbo-dominated perception motivated the counter-coup, which was more than a military coup. It was clear that ethnicity had a significant contribution to making military loyalty in Nigeria; thus, officers within different regions identified themselves with their respective ethnic groupings, which affected the political trajectory of the nation. Ibrahim (2020) believes that the military coup in Nigeria opened up gaps of divergence between the North and the East by its ethnic facet, which also resulted in the beginning of the Nigerian Civil War. A defining characteristic of Nigerian politics over the last few decades, ethnic groups utilized military involvement in order to push their agendas, as seen with the 1966 counter-coup.

The military system used as a vehicle of ethnic groupings to gain and retain political power after the counter-coup. There was a cycle of violence of instability due to the fact that military appointments and decisions were frequently made on ethnic grounds. Sani (2020) observed that the ethno-inspired military interventions in Nigeria's history have left an irrepressible mark on the country's political order, cultivating an atmosphere of military lordship and rekindling power struggles that transcended mere political bounds.

An ethnicist political system—a political system in which different ethnic groups are fragmented and compete with one another—had a significant role in the 1966 counter-coup in Nigeria. Following the coup, ethnicity was a dominant impulse. The Northern ethnic minority perceived itself as being threatened by the ousting of political power following the January 1966 revolution by predominantly military officers of Igbo extraction. Concedevely, in July 1966, there was a counter-coup. Ethnic identity, political allegiance, and military action have a potent connection; the primary motive of the counter-coup to revive Northern power is a case in point. The event had significance in Nigerian political history in that it signaled the impact of ethnicity on the politics of governmental and military influence by Ibrahim, (2020). Ethnic and regional identities continue to influence political allegiances and political decisions in present-day Nigeria, vindicating the

controversiality of ethnicity in the country's politics.

The rise of ethnic nationalism after the counter-coup of 1966 was a potent political force. Politically mobilised to defend their social, cultural, and political interests, the people of a particular ethnic group are known as ethnic nationalism. Isolated by the counter-coup, the Eastern region, under the Igbo administration, yearned to secede once more. There was a secessionist crisis in 1967 as a result of ethnic anxieties that they were being further excluded from the affairs of the state, and it saw the birth of the Republic of Biafra. Whenever specific groups feel their interests are not being accounted for in the broad national order enough, such as in 1966 and its subsequent war, ethnic nationalism could lead to political disintegration and violence (Akinyemi, 2020). Ethnic tensions in Nigeria run deep and have long-lasting effects on the country's politics; the 1966 counter-coup and its aftermath reflected this.

The political landscape of Nigeria was significantly and irreversibly altered by the 1967–1970 Nigerian Civil War. Regional and ethnic polarization became more clearly apparent as one consequence that has persisted in defining Nigerian politics. The Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa-Fulani were the country's largest ethnic groupings, and their hostilities and mistrust were further exacerbated by the war. Remembering the war and ethnic groups' grievances remains integral to Nigerian politics, even though the war officially ended in 1970, as declared by the government. This adds to electoral politics, government, as well as national integration (Nigerian Political Science Association, 2018). The conflict also cemented federal power centralisation, which has defined politics since then at the cost of state and local autonomy.

The Nigerian political process has also been militarised as another long-term legacy of the war on Nigerian politics. After the civil war, Nigeria was ruled by the military for decades before civilian rule was reinstated in 1999. As a result of its disproportionate influence on government and civilian affairs, the Nigerian military became a political giant. Destruction of democratic structures and political disconnection were resultant effects of the military domination and the poor transmission of power into civilian hands. The dictatorial tendencies, lack of transparency, and shaky political institutions associated with military dictatorship continue to bear an impact on Nigerian politics until the present moment, in the aftermath of democratic restoration (Akinyemi, 2020). Consequently, the nation has struggled to establish stable government, with recurring political instability and violent elections being a product of long-standing grievances from the war.

What lessons are there for peace and conflict resolution studies?

The 1966 coup in Nigeria and the military rule in the country hold some lessons for peace and resolution studies. Basically, it shows what peace and development studies should encourage or downplay in the interest of peaceful resolution of conflict or conflict management. Below are discussed what should be done to avert not just ethnic polarized coups, but military coups in general.

1. **Promoting National Unity Through Education**: The Nigerian teachers must focus on national unity exercises that unite the country's many ethnic groups under one umbrella. By educating the young ones on the virtues of acceptance, respect, and national unity, this practice can heal past wounds and minimize political divisiveness (Duru, 2021).

2. **Strengthening Democratic Institutions**: A more accountable and open government has to be one of Nigeria's topmost priorities, and thus the country has to work

towards consolidating its democratic institutions. To have a more stable political climate and to ensure that ethnic identity is not politicized, we have to strengthen the electoral process, provide fair political representation, and increase the independence of the court (Ogunyemi, 2019).

3. **Decentralization of Power**: More balance of power among the regions would be achieved by examining Nigeria's federal structure. This would de-escalate tensions arising from sole ethnic control. To achieve this, it may be necessary to assign more power to the states and local governments so that they are able to control resources effectively and not have any ethnic group feeling disenfranchised (Akinyemi, 2020).

4. **Fostering Inter-Ethnic Dialogue**: For Nigerians to move on from the trauma of the 1966 Counter-Coup, ethnic groups must talk to each other and work together. Government-initiated programs, e.g., peace-building initiatives and collaborative ventures, can help ensure inter-ethnic understanding. Such initiatives may go a long way in de-tensioning inter-ethnic conflicts and strengthening national integration (Adeleke, 2022).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the 1966 Counter-Coup significantly shaped the trajectory of Nigeria's political landscape, intensifying ethnic divisions and reinforcing regional power dynamics. Apart from further polarizing the Nigerian people ethnically, the military coup also established the precedent for the politicization of the military, a trend which dominated the country's political process for decades to come. Politics, political appointments, and policies are all dictated by ethnic background, a vestige of the coup in this nation. The long-term effects of the counter-coup point to the need for more inclusive and representative government to bridge the ethnic gaps and promote national integration (Duru, 2021).

The significant takeaways from the realities of the 1966 military coup and the attending military regimes in the country are that, the multiplicity of ethnic groups is a significant challenge to the effectiveness of military rule; the prolonged stay of military in power, most times, results in a situation where the military begins to indulge in the same things it was called upon to solve; and military coups conducted along ethnic lines are bound to fail (Davidson, 2023; Gbadamasi, 2023; Okechukwu, 2023; Khan & Cooper, 2023; Conley, 2021;).

It is addressing the deep-seated ethnicism in politics that would open Nigeria up for success. Healing the wounds of yesterday and building sustainable peace demands an overarching approach that centers democratic reform, inter-ethnic dialogue, decentralization of authority, and national unity. Decrease in ethnically motivated political instability is attainable by promoting inclusive government, democratic institutional strengthening, and provision of equal opportunity to all ethnic groups. Moreover, trust and sustainable cohesion can be built by developing inter-ethnic collaboration platforms and promoting respect between Nigeria's divers' communities (Akinyemi, 2020). Prioritizing these strategies at the top will help Nigeria transcend its divisive past and construct a more stable, inclusive political future.

Recommendations

1. The Nigerian political ethnic polarisations and the long-term effects of the 1966 Counter-Coup can be addressed well by fostering national harmony and unity. Attempts must be made to create a more inclusive political atmosphere that does not discriminate based on ethnicity, as the counter-coup aggravated regional and ethnic divisions. One way to achieve this goal would be to reinterpret current federal institutions so that all ethnic groups have an equal representation in major political and military roles. This would work to diminish any single group's authority. Educating Nigerians on both sides of the divide on the imperative of ethnic peace, especially at the tertiary level of education, would go a long way in bringing the country's many ethnic groups together. To heal the wounds of the past, those programs that promote inter-group dialogue and understanding need to be implemented. These can take the form of public forums, media campaigns, and community building exercises. By diverting attention away from ethnic identity and toward common values, this approach can be expected to promote a more robust sense of national identity (Duru, 2021).

2. Improvement in the democratic institutions and governments that decentralize ethnic influences is a second recommendation. Militarization of the political arena, a result of the 1966 Counter-Coup and retention of authority among the military class, often to the exclusion of democratic protocol, was the great concern emanating from this affair. Nigerian institutional reforms must center on accountability, transparency, and the rule of law to avert ethnic strife that is driven by political instability. This can be achieved by consolidating political parties that focus on national unity and not ethnic or regional identity, by advocating for electoral reforms that ensure free and fair elections, and by creating independent judiciaries. In addition, it would be in the interest of all human beings, rather than just privileged few ethnic groups, if political decision-making considered their interests more when civil society organizations were more engaged in mobilizing to press for and participate in politics (Ogunyemi, 2019).

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