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# Above politics? Ex-military leaders in Nigerian electoral politics

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## ABSTRACT

In countries transitioning from military to democratic rule, authoritarian legacies often continue to influence politics. Whereas previous research has focused on the institutional causes of such deficiencies, there is a lack of studies examining the role ex-military leaders who re-emerge as civilian presidents have in sustaining authoritarian tendencies. In this article, we begin to fill this lacuna by investigating the question: how and under which conditions do ex-military leaders' political identity constructions affect their tendency to place themselves above politics (i.e. expressing the attitude and behaviour of being superior to democratic rules)? The literature on neo-patrimonialism and post-civil war politics points to the importance of the political identities of ex-militaries, and we propose a theory that highlights the role identity construction plays in shaping elites' decision-making processes. Based on a comparison of two Nigerian presidents, Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari, we find that ex-generals' tendency to engage in politics from above is largely a function of to what extent they have diversified their political identities beyond their role as "militaries". In this process, the degree of democratic consolidation also seems to play a role; ex-militaries operating in newly established democracies appear to have more opportunities to place themselves above politics.

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## Introduction

"Emerging democracies" oftentimes show limited signs of democratic development and authoritarian practices tend to coexist with democratic institutions. New democracies face an increased risk of armed conflict,<sup>1</sup> especially if they have previously experienced military rule.<sup>2</sup> Whereas much research has focused on the need for civilian control over military forces,<sup>3</sup> there is a lack of studies examining ex-military leaders navigating the indeterminate terrains of emerging democracies. This is a serious oversight considering that such actors – in particular ex-militaries who have been elected as heads of state – are in a position to either undermine or strengthen democratic institutions. This is especially true in Sub-Saharan Africa where state institutions and political parties tend to be weak and permeated by informal networks.<sup>4</sup>

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We see a particular risk that ex-military-turned-presidents place themselves *above politics* – a mode of governance that systematically undermines democratic institutions by not subjecting oneself to democratic procedures. This implies that ex-military leaders act and express themselves in a manner that equates the presidency with a general's position in the army. Rather than following due process and adhering to the separation of powers, decisions are taken without consultation and institutions are expected to follow the position of the president. Such actions risk “freezing” democratic consolidation processes and cementing militaristic features. However, ex-military leaders are likely to differ in their tendency to by-pass democratic institutions. Studies of democratization processes in post-civil war societies have highlighted that ex-military-turned-politicians can, at times, function as agents of democracy who convince their followers to eschew violence.<sup>5</sup> There is, however, little knowledge of under what conditions ex-militaries place themselves above politics.

We seek to make a contribution to the democratization literature by beginning to fill this lacuna. More specifically, we set out to answer the research question: *how and under which conditions do ex-military leaders' political identity constructions affect their tendency to place themselves above politics?* The reason for focusing on the political identities of ex-militaries is that the literature on neo-patrimonialism and post-civil war politics has highlighted the role identity construction plays in shaping elites', or Big Men's, decision-making process.<sup>6</sup> Not only are there political, economic and military benefits to be made by engaging in “straddling” – having multiple leadership positions to maximize the social networks and resources at ones disposal – the number and type of political identities that Big Men possess affect their ability to succeed at the polls and readiness to employ violence.

We employ a theory-building approach, grounded in theoretical deduction and empirical induction, to investigate our research question. Based on previous research we construct a general theoretical framework for how a link between ex-militaries' political identities and their tendency to place themselves above politics, may look like. According to this framework, ex-militaries should be more likely to place themselves above politics if they have a *diversified*, rather than a *concentrated*, political identity. By holding diverse political identities, ex-militaries can build direct personal ties to numerous constituencies and mobilize resources from diverse sources. Such forms of diversification allow ex-general-turned-presidents to consolidate power and insulate themselves from critique when breaching democratic principles. This should be compared to ex-generals who only build their political identity around their military past. With fewer inroads into key constituencies and lower capacity to generate funds, such leaders struggle to amass power and are more susceptible to critique. This makes them more hesitant to place themselves above politics. We apply this framework on two Nigerian ex-generals-turned-presidents – Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari – who exhibit an interesting between- and within-case variation; while Obasanjo systematically placed himself above politics, Buhari was initially more reluctant to undermine democratic principles. In order to capture the influence of alternative explanations, we also employ an inductive approach when analysing our empirical material. Not only does this allow us to assess the relative importance of our theoretical framework, but also generate knowledge about the conditions under which a diversified/concentrated political identity is most likely to result in ex-militaries placing themselves above politics and if this effect varies over time and the type of democratic institutions (legislature and political parties; media; societal dissent) being targeted. As such, our ambition is to land in a more nuanced theoretical framework, which can be applied to other contexts.

## Previous research

There is a large literature that probes the conditions for democratic consolidation, but the overwhelming part of it focuses on political parties and elections,<sup>7</sup> civil society and social movements,<sup>8</sup> and structural conditions.<sup>9</sup> A key lacuna in this literature is the limited attention given to the role of individual leaders. This is surprising considering the documented influence Big Men – elites who accumulate substantial resources due to their position in informal or formal economic-political structures – have in developing countries in general, and Sub-Saharan African societies in particular.<sup>10</sup> In many of the latter, power is concentrated in informal structures, based on patronage, ethnic loyalties or political or military affiliations. In such societies, political outcomes are influenced by vertical and horizontal alliance-building between central elites and key constituencies.<sup>11</sup>

In an African context, ex-military leaders are often the ultimate Big Men. Their influence can be traced back to the period of de-colonization when the armed forces were the only viable state institution. In the interest of defending their colonial empires, the army was one of few institutions that colonial powers had an interest in sustaining. This, in conjuncture with the fact that “democratic” leaders were often seen as corrupt and inefficient, awarded generals a considerable amount of clout to shape political dynamics; either by seizing power, or acting as “Godfathers”.<sup>12</sup> With the advent of democracy, ex-military leaders often continue to control economic resources; either from money acquired during the military regime, or through the businesses and agencies that they head. As such, when ex-militaries run for office, they can often outspend political opponents.<sup>13</sup> Lingering loyalties towards ex-military leaders are also often based on the latter’s political track record. In for example Nigeria and Sierra Leone, ex-generals received public appreciation for upholding law and order and implementing community projects.<sup>14</sup> The fact that many ex-militaries possess economic resources and popular support, entails that there is often societal pressure that they should run for office in order to protect the interests of both clients and political allies.<sup>15</sup>

It is important to note that the prevalence of ex-military-turned-democrats is not unique to Africa. Possessing a military background is also a political asset in consolidated democracies, such as Israel and the United States. By playing on their military credentials, “Western” ex-military presidents and prime ministers can present themselves as protectors of the nation during times of crisis.<sup>16</sup> What makes African ex-militaries unique is the context in which they operate. The weak nature of state institutions often allow them to consolidate personal power on a scale not available to “Western” politicians. This arguably increases their capacity to engage in undemocratic practices.<sup>17</sup>

What do we see when we analyse democratic consolidation processes through the lens of ex-military leaders? When are their political navigations permeated by militarism? Can ex-generals use their clout to build strong state institutions and shepherd their constituencies towards embracing democratic principles? In this context, militarism can be seen as a social frame which emphasizes “military considerations, spirits, ideals and scales of value, in life of states” and where leaders “rank military institutions and ways above the ways of civilian life, carrying military mentality and modes of acting and decision into the civilian sphere”.<sup>18</sup> It can be argued that it is a serious threat to democracy if elected ex-military leaders continue to embrace and act on

such ideals. Not only may it empower ex-military leaders to cement authoritarian tendencies, such as failing to respect democratic principles of separation of powers, but also increase the risk that violence will be used against opponents.<sup>19</sup>

We focus on one aspect of militarism that is particularly likely to affect the consolidation of democracy: whether ex-military leaders place themselves *above politics*. We hold this to be a form of personalized governance where the head of government does not follow constitutional established procedures. Historically, many African officers legitimized their coups as a necessary evil to uproot the corrupt and inefficient rule of democratic regimes. As such, they believed that it was their duty to step in when ordinary politics got out of hand.<sup>20</sup> According to this perspective, the military possesses certain advantages that can be more efficiently used to govern societies. As a hierarchical organization that stresses discipline and the subordination of the individual under a strict bureaucratic order,<sup>21</sup> the military can employ command-and-control structures and principles of loyalty to ensure the rapid implementation of various policies. In an electoral context, such militaristic ideals clash with democratic principles – such as the rule of law, deliberation, and separation of powers – whose ultimate goal is to prevent the concentration of power. Political dissent, within constitutional confines, is generally held as essential to check governmental abuse. Oftentimes, this is done at the expense of efficiency. A key question is therefore how ex-military leaders, once elected, relate to these democratic principles. Do they see themselves as standing above politics, whereby they believe they have the right to by-pass democratic institutions? Such interventions, we argue, risk “freezing” consolidation processes, and cementing authoritarian features.

## Theoretical framework

Drawing on the literature on neo-patrimonialism and post-civil war politics, we construct a preliminary theoretical framework that argues that ex-military leaders’ tendency to place themselves above politics is largely a function of the political identities at their disposal. Authors working within this tradition have highlighted how elites’ access to various identity constructs commonly shape their political and military behaviour.<sup>22</sup> More specifically, we propose that ex-military-turned-presidents are more likely to put themselves above politics when they possess a diversified political identity. By having multiple identities, ex-generals can consolidate power and better shield themselves from domestic and international criticism when undermining democratic principles.

To succeed in electoral politics in an African context, it is essential for ex-generals to build up personal, rather than institutional, loyalties. This is best done by engaging in straddling, whereby Big Men acquire multiple leadership roles – e.g. not only being a politician, but also a businessman, pastor, or security provider.<sup>23</sup> There are three reasons for why it is beneficial to hold such diversified identities. First, in Sub-Saharan Africa, political power is largely a function of “wealth in people” – the ability of elites to amass clients who can be mobilized as voters, demonstrators, and fighters.<sup>24</sup> By engaging in straddling, and presenting themselves as protectors of numerous constituencies, ex-military leaders can maximize the number of clients at their disposal.<sup>25</sup> This is particularly valuable in countries that exhibit high levels of ethnic and religious heterogeneity. Second, a diversified political identity also allows ex-general-turned-politicians to generate resources from various spheres – e.g. from state coffers as elected officials or the private sector as businessmen. Such resources

can either be amassed directly through personal accumulation or indirectly by receiving funds from resource rich individuals in the constituencies ex-militaries claim to represent. Third, a diversification of leadership roles also makes ex-generals-turned-politicians less bound to a particular political, economic or military context. As such, they are better at adjusting to sudden changes in the political landscape.<sup>26</sup>

Thanks to their greater ability to build personal social contracts with numerous constituencies, mobilize resources, and adapt to changing circumstances, diversified ex-generals are better at amassing power to themselves as individuals. This personalized power-base is beneficial for any ex-general seeking to place himself above politics. By having direct ties to various social groups, and potential funders, ex-generals become less dependent on other elites to broker access to clients and funding.<sup>27</sup> Arguably, this increases ex-military presidents' room of manoeuvre. In addition, studies have shown that citizens are often willing to accept that their leaders engage in economic and political transgressions since it signals that they are willing to do "whatever it takes to protect their supporters' interests".<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the prospect of losing protection and support can compel community members to support Big Men even when they engage in controversial policies, such as organized violence.<sup>29</sup> For these reasons, social groups that have established close ties to "diversified" ex-generals may prefer not to criticize the latter if they place themselves above politics. This also allows diversified ex-militaries to present a united front vis-à-vis international actors. With limited domestic critique, it is easier for ex-generals to undermine democratic institutions, while at the same time utilizing their non-military aura to present themselves as credible "democrats".

The situation is different for ex-military-turned-presidents who concentrate their political identity around their military background. There can be multiple reasons for why ex-generals do not engage in straddling: lack of resources to invest in new identities and networks, restricted experience outside the military, or high popular esteem as military rulers.<sup>30</sup> Even if a reinvestment in a military identity signals consistency, it also limits ex-military leaders' connections to different sections of society. Unable to strategically select "identity", concentrated ex-generals struggle to present themselves as guarantors of numerous constituencies and gain access to various sources of funding. This makes them more dependent on other elites, who are more socially embedded, to mobilize economic and political support.<sup>31</sup> As a consequence, we propose that one-faced ex-generals are less likely to succeed in consolidating power in their own hands, increasing the risk that constituencies and political allies oppose efforts to undermine democratic institutions. Hence, the key actors that ex-militaries need to take into consideration are not necessarily other political parties, but rather elite allies who ex-generals – depending on how diversified their identities are – may need to appease. One exception is if society is engulfed by insecurity. During such situations, an entrenched military identity can be an asset.<sup>32</sup> By playing on their military credentials as "protectors" of the nation, ex-generals can mobilize acceptance for democratic breaches in the name of security. As such, identity concentration is more context-bound than a strategy based on identity diversification, and only allows ex-generals to place themselves above politics under specific circumstances.<sup>33</sup>

### **Methodological considerations**

The population of cases that this study speaks to is ex-military leaders who have been elected as presidents in Sub-Saharan Africa. By ex-military leaders, we mean military

personnel who previously held a leading position – e.g. head of state, cabinet minister or high-ranking post in the security forces – in a military regime. This concerns presidents such as Idriss Déby (Chad), Jerry Rawlings (Ghana), João Bernardo Vieira (Guinea Bissau), Paul Kagame (Rwanda), and Samuel Doe (Liberia). These ex-generals rule(d) in political systems that have reoccurring elections and tolerate some opposition parties. However, they generally suffer from democratic deficiencies, such as harassment of opponents, electoral fraud, and biased electoral commissions.

For this study, we focus on ex-generals-turned-presidents in Nigeria. The reason for this is twofold. First, Nigeria has since gaining independence oscillated between military and electoral regimes. This has empowered a number of military leaders and allowed them to hold dominant positions during eras of “democratic” rule. Second, by selecting ex-military presidents from the same country, it is possible to hold a number of factors constant: institutional design, foreign influence and economic development. More specifically, we examine the trajectories of two ex-military rulers, Buhari and Obasanjo, who share several similarities. They both belong to the same generation of military and fought in the Biafra Civil War in the 1960s. They were also both part of the military regime that followed the war. Both advanced to the rank of general within the army and have headed military regimes (Obasanjo, 1976–1979; Buhari, 1983–1985).<sup>34</sup>

In this article, we use a theory-building approach, based on theoretical deduction and empirical induction. Such a strategy is particularly useful when there are no existing theories at hand, but the author seeks to identify how various factors interact to generate a certain outcome.<sup>35</sup> More specifically, we deduce a number of observable implications from the preliminary framework developed above – i.e. indicators for how we operationalize *concentrated* versus *diversified* leadership roles (see pp. 7–8) – which we apply on the two ex-militaries. We furthermore employ an inductive approach when conducting our empirical analysis. This entails actively searching for alternative factors, not identified in the original theory, that may interact with our identity-based variable and affect the outcome of interest. Such a strategy constitutes a powerful tool when the objective is to develop, rather than test, theory.<sup>36</sup>

When empirically assessing how and under what conditions Buhari and Obasanjo have placed themselves *above politics*, we focus on their relationship towards three central democratic institutions: the National Assembly and the political parties; media; and societal dissent. Accordingly, what we refer to as *above politics* denotes that ex-military leaders – through their utterances and actions – position themselves as superior to other elected officials; to other democratic establishments in society; and to groups that oppose their rule. As such, we consider public statements and behaviour as observable manifestations of our dependent variable. More specifically, we operationalize *above politics* using three separate indicators. One is to *bypass* democratic institutions. This can be regarded as parallel to the military’s rule by decree. The president does not seek approval from democratic institutions and based on assumptions of moral superiority openly discusses the need for direct presidential intervention. A second is to personally *direct* the activities of institutions – rather than endorsing institutional independence – and evoking images of the military officer leading the troops. The third is to *attack* institutions. This is the equivalent of enforcing superiority by physically quelling dissent, or verbally questioning the right of oppositional elements to act in public. The opposite position from placing oneself *above politics* is when due process is followed, diverging competencies of democratic institutions are respected, and critical voices are contended with within constitutional

limits. Since ex-military leaders are unlikely to fall into two neat categories – always or never placing themselves above politics – we think of these indicators as working on a continuum. We furthermore analyse the behaviour and utterances of the presidents over time, with special emphasis on shifts in the kind of democratic institutions (National Assembly and political parties; media; and dissent) that they target. This will help us to refine our theoretical framework and assess how contextual changes affect the political navigations of ex-militaries.

To collect data on whether our ex-militaries put themselves above politics, we analyse their speeches and actions in relation to critical events during their time in office. We have systemically collected transcribed versions of speeches – e.g. at the presidential inaugurations, Democracy Day and Independence Day, and international forums – reported in Nigerian newspapers and biographies. We have also included statements in relation to special events, for example when responding to violence in the Niger Delta, Biafra secessionist protests, and the Boko Haram insurgency. When analysing the ex-militaries' statements, we conduct a structured discourse analysis (SDA). According to Themnér & Sjöstedt, this approach “[...] follows a methodological tradition in which key theoretical concepts guide the analysis, and the discursive method is used mainly as a tool to chisel out what is being said, how it is said, the underlying meaning of the statements, and how different statements are bound together in a web of intertextuality”.<sup>37</sup> Even if SDA differs from post-structuralist discourse analysis, that tend to work in a more inductive fashion, it equally questions the usefulness of more positivist attempts (e.g. content analysis) that focus on the quantifications of expressions. Studies have shown that elites' ability to instil inter-group fear is not a function of how often they make threatening proclamations, but equally a question of how, when and in which forums they say it.<sup>38</sup> Hence, rather than summarizing and categorizing all types of utterances, we present statements that clearly signal presidential preferences in relation to democratic institutions. Based on our conceptualization and three operationalizations of “above politics”, we create a coding frame for this variable. We search for statements that can be assigned to one of three categories: 1. ex-militaries legitimize actions to *bypass* democratic institutions by referring to the immoral character of the institutions and the actors associated with them (e.g. calling them e.g. “corrupt”, “looters”, “thugs”); 2. ex-militaries seek to personally *direct* institutions by employing military terminology (e.g. “loyalty”, “obey”, “leading the troops”); and 3. ex-militaries *attack* institutions by questioning the right of oppositional actors to engage in political manifestations (e.g. using labels such as “irresponsible”, “criminals”, “destroyers”, “terrorists”).

In analysing behaviours that place ex-militaries above politics, we use newspaper reports and secondary material. To limit selection bias, we have included newspapers from different parts of the country, e.g. Vanguard and Daily Trust. By the time of writing, Buhari recently started a second four-year term as president and we have limited the time to cover the first term. Obasanjo served two terms in office, which gives a larger body of material. In order to avoid skewing the analysis, comparable material has been studied.

We employ a two-pronged approach when examining the *concentrated* versus *diversified* leadership roles of Buhari and Obasanjo. First, we trace what kind of leadership positions the ex-militaries had before being elected as president – e.g. general, political reformer, businessman, head of state, or international mediator. Second, we discursively trace how the ex-generals have presented themselves and their political

identities before, during and after the elections that heralded them into office. For the purposes of this study, ex-military presidents are therefore seen as having a concentrated character when they: (a) possessed relatively few leadership roles, besides their position as militaries, before being elected into office, and (b) foremost stressed their military credentials when legitimizing their political aspirations. Consequently, ex-military leaders are considered possessing a diversified identity when they: (a) held multiple leading positions before becoming president, and (b) employed various identity constructs to shore up political support.

## The military in Nigerian politics

Nigeria's first military coup took place in 1966, six years after independence. From then, the military ruled until 1999 except from 1979 to 1983 when there was an elected regime in place. Civil war (1967–1970) commenced when the Biafra Republic was declared in south-eastern Nigeria. After the war, the military retained power and legitimized their rule by referring to their role in protecting national interests against irresponsible and corrupt politicians. However, once the political system had been “sanitized”, the official position was that there would be a transition back to democracy.<sup>39</sup>

Both Obasanjo and Buhari were officers in the civil war and were also part of the military regimes in the 1970s. Obasanjo was second-in-command to Murtala Muhammed and became the military head of state when Muhammed was killed in a failed coup attempt in 1976, a position that he held until 1979. Buhari headed a military regime during 1983–1985. He came to power through a coup that ended a short civilian interlude from 1979. As former heads of state, Obasanjo and Buhari were also part of the National Council of State – an advisory body to the president.

## Olusegun Obasanjo

When Obasanjo became military head of state, he inherited a transition programme that he followed through. Subsequently, Obasanjo became the first military ruler in Africa to hand over power to a civilian government when he stepped down after elections in 1979. Obasanjo ascribed the completion of the transition programme to his own character: “I had every excuse to hang on in 1979 but I did not because of honesty and purpose”.<sup>40</sup> However, while in power his regime was not grooming democratic ideals, as dissent was largely met with threats, repression, and co-optation.

After ceding power, Obasanjo retired from the military and started to diversify his activities and interests. For example, Obasanjo set up a farming business, published a number of books, and was active on the international arena.<sup>41</sup> He furthermore became a board member on international organizations such as the Ford Foundation, Carter Foundation, and Transparency International, and set up the African Leadership Forum. Obasanjo grew increasingly critical of the military regime and in 1995 Obasanjo was imprisoned by military dictator Sani Abacha for alleged involvement in a coup attempt. Hence, when Obasanjo entered electoral politics as a civilian he did so with a “basket” of leadership roles to fall back on – military, businessman, democrat, dissident, as well as an internationally connected board member and mediator.

Obasanjo was released from prison after Abacha died in 1998. He was then, allegedly, more or less broke.<sup>42</sup> However, his multiple leadership roles allowed him to nurture diverse political identities and gain access to a wide network of influential

people. This may also have contributed to Obasanjo being approached by the founders of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) who consisted of retired militaries and other influential politicians, to become the party's presidential candidate for the 1999 election. According to Obasanjo's own account, he mobilized resources for the presidential campaign through his national and international networks.<sup>43</sup> In this endeavour, his non-military commitments were instrumental at the international level, whereas both military and non-military networks were nationally important. His military connection to the late Murtala Mohammed provided a link to constituencies in the north, while his opposition to Abacha and his international ties helped him gain traction in the south-east. Finally, Obasanjo's Yoruba identity and businesses gave him links to the south-west.

### ***National assembly and political party***

Obasanjo's ability to amass resources and constituencies entailed that he was able to consolidate power in his own hands after being elected President. He asserted loyalty from his military connections, as well as from his business networks. Obasanjo therefore had access to dependable people throughout the country, who he knew would continue to support him since he had helped them gain positions as governors or party leaders. This concentration of power allowed Obasanjo to take an aggressive stance against both the National Assembly and PDP. As such, Obasanjo came to embody the idea of being above politics. For instance, Obasanjo had several conflicts with the National Assembly, regardless that PDP had the majority in both chambers. Obasanjo referred to the MPs as "legislotters" and "boys" having "power without knowledge or experience".<sup>44</sup> These depictions signalled that Obasanjo intended to bypass the National Assembly as he considered himself as more competent for the task. It can be recalled that this was at a time when the Nigerian democratic system was newly established, pointing to the possibility that this made it easier for Obasanjo to place himself above the political institutions.<sup>45</sup>

After being re-elected as President in 2003, Obasanjo continued his belligerency and personally directed the ruling party. He side-lined PDP in the setup of his new cabinet, declaring that the ministers were at his own choosing.<sup>46</sup> The emphasis on a personal string of attachment was further accentuated when new civil servants were appointed:

To me, there is no 99 percent loyalty. It has to be total. If you cannot give total loyalty, then you should look for another job. You have heard of something they call military loyalty. If that means total, then there is no other thing except military loyalty.<sup>47</sup>

Military norms, such as loyalty, were thus directly referred to as a desirable basis for organizational relations. The same attitude seemed to guide Obasanjo's strategizing for taking personal control over the ruling party. Obasanjo was widely believed to have engineered the removal of the chairman of the party and replaced him with the coordinator of his 2003 electoral campaign. Obasanjo's control of PDP reached its peak when the PDP National Executive Committee declared him as "life leader of the party, father of the nation, and founder of modern Nigeria" and restricted the chair of the party's Board of Trustees to ex-presidents or "credible" party chairmen. At the same time, the powers of the chairman were extended to "call to order any officer of the party whose conduct falls below the norms".<sup>48</sup> Obasanjo had accordingly secured his continued influence and his position as transcending politics.

A further indication of Obasanjo's tendency to place himself above politics was the attempt to change the constitution to extend the number of terms that a president is allowed to serve from two to three. Although Obasanjo himself never commented on his position, his role was generally perceived to be the organizer.<sup>49</sup> While the term extension agenda came to a halt in the senate, Obasanjo used his control of the party and electoral institutions to foist his successor. Later, Obasanjo claimed that he had corrected the mistakes observed in 1979: "One thing that was not properly done in 1979 was that we were not really interested in the personality of who succeeded us".<sup>50</sup> In other words, Obasanjo bypassed the party in selecting the candidate. Obasanjo made sure his hand-picked successor, Umaru Yar'Adua (brother of his Chief of Staff as military head of state), won a landslide victory in an election characterized by widespread irregularities.<sup>51</sup>

### ***Press freedom and dissent***

Obasanjo's ability to concentrate power also facilitated his efforts to place himself above the media and dissenting actors. Whereas press freedom made progress compared to the military regime that preceded Obasanjo's government, Obasanjo subverted legislative attempts to increase the rights of media. For example, Obasanjo refused to sign the Freedom of Information Act into law with reference to Nigeria's security. Furthermore, Obasanjo used the security forces to attack media houses for critical reports on the use of the presidential jet, and to raid a private television station to prevent the broadcasting of a critical documentary. The government agency monitoring the broadcast media threatened to sanction the station if the programme was aired, presumably acting on directions of Obasanjo.<sup>52</sup>

Throughout his presidency, Obasanjo relentlessly attacked social dissent. This was particularly true in the Niger Delta, which had a history of social movements mobilizing for self-determination.<sup>53</sup> In November 1999, Obasanjo sent the military to the hometown of a youth gang leader in the Niger Delta after twelve police officers had been killed. The town was razed to the ground and a local NGO counted 2 483 deaths.<sup>54</sup> Similar summary killings by security forces in Benue State in 2001 and Rivers State in 2004 displayed a pattern where excessive use of violence was, if not encouraged, at least tolerated.<sup>55</sup>

### **Muhammadu Buhari**

Buhari first came to power after a coup in 1983 and his regime ended with a palace coup 20 months later. Buhari's military regime is recognized as one of the more authoritarian in Nigeria, responsible for frequent human rights violations.<sup>56</sup> After his time as military Head of State, Buhari moved back to his home state, Katsina, and limited his executive positions to a local development foundation. In 1993, Buhari served under the Abacha military regime as executive chairman for a petroleum fund, which further strengthened his appearance as connected to the military.<sup>57</sup> Buhari did not start any businesses, neither was he involved in any international organizations. As a presidential candidate, he repeatedly emphasized that his only income was his pension as a retired general. This indicates that Buhari had a concentrated military character when he entered electoral politics.

Buhari made three unsuccessful attempts as presidential candidate before winning the 2015 election. In the first three attempts, he was not able to gather support outside his northern stronghold. In order to appeal to a wider constituency, Buhari joined a coalition with the strong man of Lagos, Bola Tinubu, and other powerful politicians in 2013 to form All Progressives Congress (APC). Ahead of the 2015 election, there was growing dissatisfaction with President Jonathan, especially relating to corruption and the failure to counteract the Boko Haram Islamist insurgency.<sup>58</sup> In this context, Buhari's concentrated military identity and anti-corruption profile became an asset that contributed to winning the election.<sup>59</sup> However, Buhari was in many parts of Nigeria dependent on the backing of regional strongmen both for connecting with the constituencies and for resources.

### ***National assembly and political party***

As a consequence of Buhari's concentrated character, he repeatedly denounced his military past during the presidential campaign. After winning the election, Buhari stated that he would respect the constitution:

The Federal Executive under my watch will not seek to encroach on the duties and functions of the Legislative and Judicial arms of government. The law enforcing authorities will be charged to operate within the Constitution.<sup>60</sup>

There was accordingly pressure on Buhari because of his concentrated character, but Buhari also needed to distance himself from the criticized behaviour of Obasanjo as they shared a background in the military. Buhari's room for political manoeuvre was further restrained by the fact that his concentrated identity left him with limited resources and without networks outside his "core constituency". This made Buhari dependent on other strong men and did not provide him with the autonomy to act more assertively. For instance, it was Tinubu who had assigned Buhari's vice-presidential candidate as a condition for his support and for making resources available for the campaign. In addition, throughout Buhari's first term, the First Lady – and other commentators – claimed that Buhari was side-lined and the government was hijacked by a "cabal", suggesting that some people were involved in secret intrigues and that the president was too dependent on other leaders.<sup>61</sup>

With limited clout, Buhari was not inclined to bypass or direct the National Assembly and APC. Buhari did not voice expectations that the former should follow his directions, despite Buhari's initial presidential phase being characterized by an uneasy relationship with the assembly. His party had a majority of the seats in the senate but still voted against the official party candidate as senate president. Yet, Buhari did not interfere in the dispute. Buhari's reluctance to place himself above the National Assembly, was arguably also influenced by the fact that Nigeria's democratic institutions had been somewhat consolidated since 1999.<sup>62</sup> An alternative interpretation of Buhari's non-belligerency vis-à-vis APC would be to see this as a consequence of Nigerian political parties having grown stronger and more independent. It is true that parties had gained organizational experience, but they remained weakly institutionalized and organized around regional strongmen.<sup>63</sup>

Interestingly, a slight shift could be detected towards the end of his first term as Buhari asserted that the principal task of the National Assembly "is to cooperate with the Executive".<sup>64</sup> Whereas he was not directing the institutions *per se*, he was

neither upholding the idea of a separation of powers. A few weeks before the 2019 election Buhari bypassed the National Assembly when he dismissed the head of the judiciary, the chief justice, without due process.<sup>65</sup>

### **Press freedom and dissent**

Buhari was initially reluctant to place himself above media actors. Buhari made a big point of declaring that the restrictions of press freedom during his regime in the 1980s were a consequence of military rule. This implied that he would, as elected president, respect the media as a key democratic institution.<sup>66</sup> However, press freedom gradually declined under his presidency.<sup>67</sup> A number of journalists were arrested for giving unfavourable reports of the government. On several occasions, the police raided newspapers' offices.<sup>68</sup> Attempts by the government to regulate the press were condemned by the Nigerian Press Council as "vestiges of the dark days of military rule".<sup>69</sup>

It was with regard to societal dissent that Buhari's military legacy was most evident. Buhari had invoked his military background in ensuring his ability to fight Boko Haram. There was also a military approach in his attacks against non-violent dissident groups. The security forces made a crackdown against a procession by the Shia Islamic Movement of Nigeria, killing 347 people and keeping their leader and his wife detained, despite a court order of their release.<sup>70</sup> In south-east, pro-Biafra activists encountered repression resulting in 150 deaths as well as the detention of the leader who was charged with treason.<sup>71</sup> Buhari firmly attacked the movements that were calling for a break-up of Nigeria, calling them "irresponsible elements" that had "crossed our national red lines by daring to question our collective existence as a nation".<sup>72</sup> Buhari defended his position with reference to his military experience, and the "horrendous consequences" of the Biafra Civil War.<sup>73</sup> Accordingly, both verbally and through the behaviour of cracking down on dissenting movements, Buhari saw himself as the one deciding the limits for the political discourse.

### **Comparative discussion**

When comparing Obasanjo and Buhari's propensity to place themselves above politics, some interesting differences appear. Not only did Obasanjo breach key democratic principles throughout his presidency, he did so in relation to all three institutional spheres studied. This should be compared to Buhari who was more restricted when it came to engaging in politics from above. His hostility was foremost directed against societal dissent and during much of the studied period, he refrained from bypassing, directing or attacking the National Assembly and media. It was only during the end of his first term that Buhari targeted the two latter. As such, there are interesting variations when it comes to the timing and type of institutions that Buhari targeted.

We argue that the differences between Obasanjo and Buhari can largely be explained by the two ex-militaries' political identity constructs. Obasanjo could use his diversified character to take an authoritarian route. Whereas he entered electoral politics with few resources, he could use his diversification of leadership roles to mobilize resources, gain access to key constituencies and consolidate power – gaining control over PDP as well as over security and electoral institutions – which in turn gave opportunities to place himself "above" the political system. Buhari, on

the other hand, had a concentrated persona and could not claim loyalties outside his military networks, nor mobilize resources, without negotiating with other influential leaders. As such, Buhari's political position was more precarious and he continuously needed to renounce his authoritarian past and recommit to democratic standards. Unable to build a power centre around himself, it was not possible for Buhari to act as belligerently as Obasanjo. Our inductive analysis also highlights that differences in democratic consolidation may also have affected the ex-militaries' relations with key institutions. The fact that democratic institutions were stronger during Buhari's presidency could have had a moderating effect on the latter.

How should we understand the above-mentioned variations within the Buhari case? First, taking a tough line against societal dissent fits closely to the political profile of ex-military leaders who possess a concentrated identity. By constantly stressing their role as defenders of the nation, it may even be expected that such ex-military leaders repress various forms of regional or religious mobilizations. For instance, Buhari's emergence as president was aided by the Boko Haram insurgency, and with the trauma of the Biafra War cemented in Nigerian political consciousness, it was not difficult for Buhari to legitimize his repression of the Shia Islamic Movement and pro-Biafra activists. Key political audiences may, however, be less tolerant if ex-militaries with a concentrated persona take an aggressive stance against other institutions, such as the legislature. Second, previous research on militarism may shed some light on why Buhari – even though he had a concentrated identity – confronted the National Assembly and media during the end of the studied period. Studies have shown that individuals with a military background often struggle to build sustained political relations and have a propensity to employ aggression when challenged.<sup>74</sup> Hence, when faced with increasing demands and complexities, and having a constrained capacity to negotiate competing elite interests, it may have been too difficult for Buhari not to fall back on old militaristic types of leadership.

To what extent are there other factors that explain the variations in “undemocratic” behaviour between Buhari and Obasanjo? Interestingly, the two ex-generals were: (a) schooled in the same military institutions at the same time, (b) part of the same military regimes and political elites for a long time, and (c) presidents in the same country with less than a ten-year interval. This helps to minimize the possible effect of context and individual-based explanations. We also argue that if personal factors have a bearing, this should show in the access to different leadership roles. Ex-generals who are more extrovert will arguably have an easier time diversifying their political identities. As such, personality can be seen as a background factor – rather than alternative explanation – affecting the plurality of leadership roles available to ex-military leaders.

## Conclusion

Military leaders who have become elected presidents are common in transitioning countries. These ex-generals are in a position to shape trajectories at crucial stages in the democratization processes. It is particularly problematic if such actors place themselves above politics – that is, employ a mode of governance that systematically undermines democratic institutions by not subjecting themselves to democratic procedures. In this article, we have assessed how and under what conditions the political identity constructions of ex-military leaders affect their tendencies to engage in such

undemocratic practices. To address this question, we employed a theory-building approach. We deduced an initial theoretical framework which posited that ex-militaries are more likely to place themselves above politics when they have a diversified, rather than a concentrated, political identity. To assess, and further refine, our argument, we included an inductive investigation in our analysis of two Nigerian ex-military-turned-presidents that allowed us to identify other factors of importance.

We find that even if ex-militaries with a concentrated persona appear to be less likely to place themselves above politics, they are not totally averse to doing so. While their “military” identity – based on an image of being “defenders of the nation” – may constrain their ability to bypass, direct or attack institutions such as the legislature and media, it does appear to give them a mandate to take a stern position against societal dissent. However, as the complexities of governance increases, there is a risk that concentrated ex-generals begin to target institutions such as the legislature and press. It is important to stress that democratic consolidation also seems to play a role; ex-militaries operating in newly established democracies may have more opportunities to place themselves above politics. It is vital to keep in mind the limitations of our study. Presumably, our findings are most valid in a Sub-Saharan African context, where patronage-driven politics is strong. Further studies are required to confirm how well our arguments travel outside Nigeria.

The findings have implications for how to view ex-militaries’ role in democratization processes. In their pursuit of “agents of change”, policymakers often assume that political leaders who they have a history of fraternizing with – as international mediators, in boards of directors, or democratic dissidents – are more likely to develop democratic norms. Put differently, liberal forums are assumed to socialize political elites into “good” democrats. Such assumptions may not only be faulty, but dangerous. Under the guise of international democratic legitimacy, “benevolent” ex-military presidents can engage in undemocratic practices. Conversely, those ex-generals seen as being stuck in their military role may have fewer opportunities to undermine democratic institutions. This also highlights that a topic for future research is to compare presidents with military backgrounds, to those without such experiences, in order to further scrutinize the implications of recycling ex-military generals.

## Notes

1. Mansfield and Snyder, “Democratic transitions.”
2. Cook and Savun, “New democracies.”
3. Bruneau and Matei, “Towards”; Cottey, Edmunds, and Forster, “The Second Generation.”
4. Utas, *African conflicts*.
5. Themnér, *Warlord democrats*.
6. See e.g. Bayart, *The State in Africa*; Chowdhury and Krebs “Making and Mobilizing Moderates”; Themnér, *Warlord democrats*; Themnér and Sjöstedt, “Buying Them Off”; Utas, *African Conflicts*.
7. Randall and Svåsand, “Political Parties”; Schedler, “The Nested Game.”
8. Burnell and Calvert, *Civil society*.
9. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*; Pop-Eleches and Robertson, “Structural Conditions.”
10. Utas, *African conflicts*.
11. Themnér, *Warlord democrats*, 12.
12. Baker, “The class”; Clark, “The Decline.”
13. Themnér, *Warlord democrats*.

14. Akinrinade, "An army"; Nilsson, *Dangerous Liaisons*.
15. Themnér and Sjöstedt, "Buying Them Off", 18, 23.
16. Cain, "29 American presidents"; Heller, "Former commandos"; Themnér, *Warlord democrats*.
17. Themnér, *Warlord democrats*.
18. Vagts, *A history of militarism* cited in Stavrianakis and Selby, *Militarism and international relations*, 12.
19. Stavrianakis and Selby, *Militarism and international relations*.
20. Luckham, "The Military"; Omotola, *Unconstitutional changes*.
21. Kuehn, "Midwives or gravediggers."
22. See endnote 6.
23. Bayart *The State in Africa*; Themnér, *Warlord Democrats*; Utas *African conflicts*
24. Bledsoe, "No Success"; Utas, *African Conflicts*.
25. Themnér and Sjöstedt, "Buying Them Off",
26. Themnér *Warlord Democrats*.
27. Themnér and Utas, "Governance through Brokerage."
28. Vaishna, *When Crime Pays*, 168.
29. Hoffman, *The War Machines*.
30. Themnér, *Warlord Democrats*.
31. Themnér and Utas, "Governance through Brokerage."
32. Lyons, *Demilitarizing Politics*.
33. The presented causal chain – whereby (a) a diversified political identity, (b) provides access to more constituencies/resources, (c) and allows ex-militaries to engage in politics from above – is purposefully simplified. In reality, the interactions between these factors may be more "messy". First, as any elite, all ex-militaries will arguably initially possess access to at least some resources/constituencies. For this purpose, we are interested in the *relative* increase in access to resources/constituencies that a diversified political identity provides. Second, it is possible that there are feedback loops, whereby access to constituencies/resources make it easier for ex-militaries to "reinvent" themselves (diversify their identities). While this may be true, it is generally difficult for elites to totally manufacture the social identities that they seek to politicize (Gurr, *Peoples Versus States*). As such, a diversified identity should, in most instances, predate an increase in resources/constituencies.
34. There are also differences between Buhari and Obasanjo. When Obasanjo was elected president, he took over from a disgraced military regime and there were no clear political alternatives to his Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Meanwhile, after Buhari was elected President he, and his All Progressives Congress (ANC), had to contend with PDP. In addition, Buhari was older than Obasanjo when he entered office: 72 years as compared to 62. However, we find no evidence that these factors explain the differences in Buhari and Obasanjo's tendency to place themselves above politics. First, PDP was rife with internal conflict before, during and after the 2015 elections. As such, the strength of the opposition facing Obasanjo and Buhari were not that different. Second, Buhari become more, not less, belligerent with age. As such, age cannot explain the problem at hand.
35. George and Bennett, *Cases Studies and Theory Development*, 262.
36. *Ibid.*, 111.
37. Themnér and Sjöstedt, "Buying Them Off", 14.
38. Chowdhury and Krebs "Making and Mobilizing Moderates"; Hansen, "The Little Mermaid's".
39. Siollun, *Soldiers of Fortune*, 4
40. Obasanjo, *Not my will*, 227.
41. Iliffe, *Obasanjo, Nigeria*, 100.
42. The imprisonment does not seem to have influenced Obasanjo's attitudes towards the military style of governance. He did not show signs of retribution and commented that he "never wished [Abacha] anything bad" (Olawale 2017).
43. Obasanjo, *My Watch*.
44. Iliffe, *Obasanjo, Nigeria*, 226.
45. Measuring the level of "institutionalized democracy" (on a scale from 0–10), the POLITY 5 project gives Nigeria a score of four in 2000. This should be compared to eight in 2015. See "INSCR Data Page."
46. Iliffe, *Obasanjo, Nigeria*, 226.

47. *New Nigerian*, January 5, 2006: 1–2.
48. In Iliffe, *Obasanjo, Nigeria*, 292.
49. Ibrahim, “Legislation.”
50. In Iliffe, *Obasanjo, Nigeria*, 287.
51. EU Election Observation Mission Nigeria, *Final Report*.
52. Freedom House country reports 2002–2008; HRW, *Renewed Crackdown*.
53. Obi and Rustad, *Oil and insurgency*.
54. Environmental Rights Action, *Blanket of Silence*.
55. Gillies, “Obasanjo.”
56. Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*.
57. Lawal, “Buhari”, 9–11.
58. Warship, “Insurgency, Corruption Challenge”.
59. Owen and Usman, “Briefing.”
60. Buhari, M. Inaugural speech of President Muhammadu Buhari, 29 May, 2105 available at <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/05/read-president-buhari-inaugural-speech/> (accessed 23 March 2019).
61. Akinpelu “Cabals not controlling”
62. See endnote 45.
63. Angerbrandt, “Party System Institutionalization”
64. Tukur, “I Had a Bad.”
65. *BBC*, “Nigeria dismisses criticism over Chief Justice Onnoghen suspension,” 28 January 2019, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47027752> (accessed 22 May 2019).
66. Buhari, M. Speech to the Nigerian Press Organisation, Abuja, 17 March, 2015 available at: <http://www.thescoopng.com/2015/03/18/transcript-muhammadu-buharis-speech-nigerian-press-organisation-read/> (accessed 23 March 2020).
67. Reporters Without Borders, <https://rsf.org/en/nigeria>.
68. HRW, *Journalists, Activists Detained*; HRW *Military Raids Newspaper*.
69. Ogunipe, “Journalists.”
70. HRW, *End Impunity*; Searcey and Akinwotu, “Nigeria Says Soldiers.”
71. Amnesty International, *At least 150*.
72. Reuters, “Nigeria’s Buhari”
73. Buhari, M. (2017). *President Buhari’s 2017 Independence Day speech*. Available at <http://venturesafrica.com/president-buharis-2017-independence-day-speech/> (accessed 27 May 2019).
74. Themnér, *Warlord Democrats*, 20.

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