

My Ethnic Coup is Holier than Yours! Revisiting Nigeria's First Military Coup

True, a number of Ibo army officers were instrumental to the execution of Nigeria's first military coup of January 1966, but to hold the entire Ibo ethnic nationality liable is absurd. Similarly, the wanton, murderous acts of some Northerners is not sufficient grounds to indict all indigenes of the region; this is a philosophy that should apply in an appraisal of the violence inflicted by fanatical groups like Boko Haram and the Maitatsines that preceded them.

There was a July coup that same year (1966). Before, during and after it was carried out, thousands of Easterners, particularly Ibos, were slaughtered in Northern Nigeria. The truth, however, is that many more would have died if Northerners hadn't provided a safe haven for them in their homes and workplaces, and often at great risk. What unusual and sacrificial demonstration of benevolence by an allegedly ferocious and hysterically bigoted group!

Most coups in Nigeria have, arguably, been dominated by people from specific regions of the country. Nonetheless, it would be erroneous to define any coup as Hausa, Middle Belt, Ibo, Yoruba, etc., regardless of ethnic or regional composition. In fact, except for the first coup, it has been unfashionable to define coups along these lines. This coup was largely foiled by an Ibo man, Major General JTG Aguiyi Ironsi; so, what was so Ibo about it except that some of its ringleaders (among a group of ethnically diverse participants) were Ibos? And how many were they? Even if they were up to a thousand, and they weren't, what would it matter since this ethnic group comprises millions of members?

But I don't want to be misunderstood here. A coup is not a revolution. Certainly, no Nigerian coup has been a revolution as none has sincerely engaged the larger populace. They have all been vengeful, spiteful, indignant, self-seeking and hateful, and largely informed by a desire to gain and sustain power. None of them has made the welfare of the people a priority. At best, the beneficiaries were the circle of coup plotters and their cohorts, family members and trusted military and civilian associates whose loyalty could be unconditionally counted on. After all, coup plotters understand that they are susceptible to being deposed in the manner that they deposed someone else. In spite of what I say about the first coup, therefore, I should reiterate that its justification or lack thereof should not be dependent on its regional composition. All Nigerian coups

should be condemned. So, whether the first coup was ethnically biased or not is beside the point. Its participants were heartless, bloodthirsty and largely cowardly murderers. Those of you who disagree with me, would you describe them as heroes or revolutionaries if it were your fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, children or friends that they slaughtered? And if corruption were a valid reason for murdering anyone, how many of us should be alive today? The manner in which coup plotters come into power is an indication of what they would do if they actually consolidate power. The message from Majors E. Ifeajuna, C. Nzeogwu and their trigger-happy partners was loud and clear: if we disagree with you and do not like you, we will kill you! I certainly don't want to be ruled by such neurotic thinkers.

We should also stop getting sentimental about nothing and throwing a pity party over the consequences of that coup. I do not support any coup and certainly decry the murder of anyone during a coup, and that includes the murder of thousands of Easterners in the North as an offshoot of the July 1966 coup. But supposing a coup took place and some of the major players were Yorubas? Supposing a significant number of the people killed were Ibos? Supposing only one Yoruba man was killed? Supposing key Yoruba leaders were spared or just happened to be out of the country when the coup took place? What would Ibos be saying even if the coup were foiled by a Yoruba general who, under controversial circumstances, became the new commander-in-chief? Like I said, I don't defend the murder of Easterners during the July 1966 coup. My own father, after all, was very nearly a victim of that coup. However, I understand the sentiments of those who cried "foul" in response to the first coup, and who sought vengeance, notwithstanding the irrationality and cruelty of their actions. While the first coup was certainly not an Ibo coup, the impression was hard to quash. And, sometimes, impressions, not reality, are what we act upon. This is only human and not restricted to the habits of Northern Nigerians!

Copyright © 2015 Philip Effiong