

Adding Fuel to the Fire? American Security Cooperation in Sub-Saharan Africa

Written by Barbara Salera

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BARBARA SALERA, MAY 19 2022

African militaries are currently undergoing monumental upgrades. Western countries, including the United States (US), are pouring training and equipment into these militaries to make them more proficient in helping African governments to provide “African solutions to African problems.” However, many African militaries function under the shadow of human rights atrocities committed in the past. Under the guise of asserting sovereignty and keeping the civil peace, some African leaders have also dispatched their militaries for political purposes, letting them loose domestically as paramilitary-like type forces and commit atrocities to strike fear in citizens. This has set a dangerous precedent of behavior from which African militaries across the continent are still struggling to break free. US security assistance and security cooperation programs overly focused on training and equipping while not addressing the political context in which African militaries function, at best will just serve to reinforce this status quo, at worst can make human rights atrocities much worse and instigate destabilization. In order to address these issues, security assistance and security cooperation under the guise of capacity building efforts must concentrate more on provisions to instill the systemic controls and ethics conducive to developing well trained militaries that are free of corruption, respect human rights and assist in building legitimate governments. Not only will this help prevent future atrocities, promote stabilization and democratic controls over the military but will go much further to support US national security objectives.

Liberia has become infamous atrocities committed by both sides during its long and bloody civil war in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Former president of Liberia Samuel Doe ordered his military to target anyone who threatened his tenuous hold on power. One such challenger was General Thomas Quiwonkpa. Doe’s soldiers apprehended and stripped General Quiwonkpa naked and paraded him through the streets before chopping him up and feasting on the pieces while hundreds watched in horror.[1] Rebel soldiers responded to those atrocities by committing their own, chopping body parts off of rural villagers to demonstrate the incapability of the Liberian government to protect its citizens. These rebels later became regular soldiers in the Liberian army once Samuel Doe was violently overthrown.

Even stable and prosperous countries like Nigeria, which have little difficulty building and equipping their military, struggle with preventing soldiers from committing human rights abuses. Under the guise of countering Boko Haram, military forces have been implicated in the recruitment of child soldiers, the use of intimidation, unlawful killings and generally using heavy-handed tactics against the population. As in Liberia, Nigerian soldiers have been routinely used to intimidate the public and target anyone thought to challenge the government or its supporters.[2] In the 1990s, the government used its military to shut down protests that disrupted its oil production and revenues, including use of helicopter gunships to strafe down unarmed civilians who were focused on calling attention to the pollution damage to water, land, and fishing.

In an effort to develop militaries that can effectively combat insurgents and assist in international peacekeeping and counterterrorism efforts, the United States is building military capacity in African countries. Unfortunately, the human rights abuses and general poor behavior of militaries have not ceased. For example, militaries in Uganda, Rwanda, and South Sudan are known to have engaged in crimes such as rape, torture, the execution of prisoners and noncombatants, and international resource theft. In addition, military coups have also been a constant difficulty for

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many nations within Sub-Saharan Africa, including the Comoros, the Gambia, Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Mozambique, Madagascar, and others. Yet, military capacity building appears to have done little to address these problems, as evidenced by very recent events in the Central African Republic, Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo – countries in which the United States, France, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and China have spent hundreds of millions of dollars in military assistance. In fact, in many instances, military capacity efforts have led to further destabilization as militaries became more capable in the provision of violence without restraint.

In this analysis, first I will review the colonial legacy of African militaries. Since their inception, most African militaries have trained and focused on the provision of internal security rather than external security within the confines of a non-democratic political system. Next I will present a brief case study of Nigeria. Due to factors such as oil wealth and Western government provided security assistance, the Nigerian military is one of the largest, well-equipped and well-trained force on the Continent. However, Nigerian leaders continue to use the military for political purposes, while also ignoring the military's human rights abuses. In an effort to find the missing ingredient in training, I present an overview of military professionalization and its link to building competent militaries that are free of corruption, respect human rights and assist in building legitimate governments. Finally I end with a presentation of policy prescriptions and recommendations on how to build well-trained militaries that reinforce rather than undermine state-society relations.

The Colonial Legacy in African Militaries

Unfortunately, the legacy of colonialism has negatively affected many African institutions and the military is no different. British, French and Belgian colonial rulers recruited certain tribes or ethnic groups into the military. For colonial governments, this divide-and-conquer strategy was a logical solution to effectively rule large and diverse areas with small imperial armies. This colonial legacy left a built-in bias that is still noticeable in African politics. In Rwanda, the Belgians placed the Tutsi minority into positions of power and Tutsis made up the bulk of the armed forces. The French and British practiced similar tactics, recruiting minority tribal groups into the armed forces in Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Togo and Burkina Faso.[3] For instance, the British-created Kings African Rifles (K.A.R.) in Kenya was composed of mainly Maasai and some Swahili, who fought with the British against the rebellious Kikuyu.[4] These African soldiers also were recruited into fighting in World Wars I and II, and once they had returned back to their home countries, they continued to put down rebellions, often organized by particular tribes, against colonial rule.[5] Once the European powers granted the African territories independence, the die had already been cast, and ethnic biases built into institutions, often predicated upon civil violence to support the overall socio-political and socio-economic status quo, would prove durable.

As African countries made the transition to political independence, positions of political power once isolated from particular, and typically majority, ethnic groups came within reach. The press for democratization and popular control often left out ethnic minorities who were previously in power. In the early 1960s, in ethnically diverse Nigeria, the British-educated Catholic minority Igbo made up the bulk of the officer corps. However, over 70 percent of the rank-and-file were Muslim Hausa or Fulani people. When a group of Igbo officers attempted a coup, killing the Muslim Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Bulewa, the remaining Igbo officers remained loyal to the government and put down the coup. Regardless, many rank and file believed that the Igbo officers were too lenient on the rebels and launched their own rebellion, killing many officers and federal employees of Igbo descent, leaving a predominately Muslim, and military rule in Nigeria.[6] Since the post-war period, similar ethnically-driven military coups took place all over the continent in Burkina Faso, Uganda, the Congo, Liberia and Central African Republic. [7] Underlying such domestic, highly politicized, and paramilitary use of the central armed forces – including the military themselves taking over politics – was the lack of a common civic order and culture, itself a legacy of European colonialism and Cold War divides that put a premium on commercial extraction over sustainable and legitimate development of institutions that could grow a true national identity. Diverse ethnic groups existed on the African continent before European colonizers, but the European powers purposely sharpened ethnic identities and increased existing rivalries (or created new ones) among various tribal and religious groups. Once African countries gained independence, leaders who held a tenuous grasp on power continued to exploit ethnic divisions to ensure political hegemony and longevity.

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One byproduct of this is the politicization of the military. Once many African leaders get into positions of power, they begin to stack their government, including the military, with members of their ethnic group. With loyalty based on purely ethnic or kinship ties, it would be difficult to inculcate a universal code of conduct on how one should behave to citizens at large. In other words, without a broad sense of nationalism, it would be difficult to develop a professionalized military that adheres to a code of conduct, and holds respect for universal human rights and the rule of law. Instead, the armed forces become loyal to the one in power, and in fact, see their economic livelihood based on keeping him or her in power, since as another part of colonial and Cold War legacies, the state traditionally has extremely close indirect or direct ties to the main export commodity industries, whether agricultural or mining. Additionally, when presidents or prime ministers appoint positions in their government based on loyalty as opposed to merit, it is difficult to build trust and legitimacy both within the government and between the government and the people. It also hinders the development of an efficient and effective military corps.

While lack of a proficient, professionalized military may seem detrimental to the security of a state, for political leaders who rule through personalistic means, this serves as an additional safeguard on their power. A state only needs to develop a military efficient enough to act as a deterrent against invasion and internal dissent. In an environment like one that exists in many African states where military coups and civil wars are commonplace, to develop a very efficient military can be a detriment to the political leader, as there is really nothing to stop the military from overthrowing the leader itself. Therefore, by breeding distrust, inefficiency and low organizational capacity, a leader can “coup-proof” or ensure that those with the guns cannot effectively organize to overthrow his or her rule.

Case Study: Nigeria

At political independence, the Nigerian military was a well-trained and well-equipped force. Due to British colonial rule, the Catholic, southern Igbo population were also well educated and made up the bulk of the officer corps. After independence, ethnic-based rebellions left the Nigerian military organizationally weak and ethnically divided. In particular, the 1967 military coup against the Igbo-dominated civilian government fissured the military to the point where loyalty was almost entirely based upon ethnic lines. Once the Igbos were out of political power, the distrust within the military degraded, with Christian soldiers lead a secessionist movement in the Nigerian region of Biafra. The Nigerian military was able to quell the secessionist movement, but it left in its wake a precedent of Muslim, northern-based military rule in Nigeria that did not end until 1998.[8]

Nigeria has commanded Western attention because of its large population and extensive reserves of oil and natural gas. Regardless, with a per capita income of more than \$2,700 and vast wealth in natural resources, Nigeria paradoxically has one of the world’s poorest populations. It is estimated that over 70 percent of the population survives on less than \$1.25 a day. As Africa’s most populous nation boasting the largest economy, Nigeria’s potential has been challenged by a troubled history, persistent violence, and prevalent corruption contributing to significant economic losses and instability. Nigeria, once home to an excellent education system, saw it gutted during the course of military rule. Public works and infrastructure were left in ill-repair and health systems collapsed. At the same time, the drug trade, once absent began to flourish. Illegal diamond mining and resource exploitation made the government and the Muslim-dominated north wealthy while southern Nigeria fell behind economically.[9]

Despite these issues, Nigeria has the reputation of having the best trained and equipped military in West Africa. In addition, it still provides the bulk of troops to address conflict all over Sub-Saharan Africa. It was Nigerian troops that helped put an end to the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Nigerian oil wealth was used by successive military governments to keep the Nigerian military well resourced. Public coffers were pilfered to buy off military officers with expensive cars and large salaries. In exchange, the Muslim-dominated governments used the military to keep their hold on power by targeting opponents through intimidation, harassment, torture, and murder.[10] For most of its history, the Nigerian military was used to keep the population oppressed and obedient.

Access to political power, economic opportunity and a strong military apparatus kept the north fairly loyal to the government in Lagos. Ethnic minorities in the south made up the bulk the rebellions and targeted killings carried out by the Nigerian military. A famous example is the oppression against the Ogoni people, culminating with the hanging of Ken Saro Wiwa. Though Shell Oil Company, and more critically – the Nigerian Government – had long made

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profits from the oil on Ogoni land, the Ogoni people only saw poverty and environmental disaster caused by the oil. Oil spills were common and left the land of little value to farm. Frustrated, the Ogoni people launched various civil protests against these practices, led by playwright Ken Saro Wiwa as well as a few others. The Nigerian government responded by sending in the military to put down the protest and arrest the leaders. The political leaders were then brought before a military tribunal and accused of murder. The leaders were found guilty and hanged.[11]

In 1998, Nigeria finally began a tenuous transition to democracy. During this time, Western governments, especially the United States, showered Nigeria with millions of dollars of foreign aid. While much of this was given for education or to fight AIDS, \$42 million dollars was given to Nigeria to train their military as peacekeepers to deal with conflicts in neighboring countries.[12] However, human rights abuses continued. As in its dealings with its own citizens, the Nigerian military used heavy-handed tactics with citizens in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Nigerian military members raped, looted and harassed citizens. Nonetheless, the Nigerian military is still used as a key component in armed interventions both internationally and internally, and the Ogoni region still has a large military presence. This focus on the South, in turn, left a largely permissive environment in the North that led to the flourishing of Boko Haram.

In part because of the legacy of these practices, the Nigerian government and the military are faced with an even more crippling issue – corruption. According to *The Washington Post*, much of the Nigeria's defense budget of more than \$6 billion is lost to corruption.^[13] Even with such a grand budget, many low-level soldiers complain about not receiving their \$300-per-month salary on time and having to deal with outdated and insufficient weaponry as well as insufficient supplies of munitions and spare parts.^[14] The military also continues to be accused of grave human rights abuses. Furthermore, "evidence that the military is engaged in illegal oil bunkering" in the oil-rich regions in the Niger Delta has emerged.^[15] The difficulty becomes for Western governments, who continue to train and equip Nigerian militaries how to do so in a way that discourages such behavior.

The Capacity-Building-Professionalism Gap

All professions share a common set of characteristics that set them apart from other jobs, and the military profession is no different. These characteristics include:

- Specialized knowledge and skills that society needs and expects to be performed reliably and effectively; these skills require continuous study and practice.
- Institutional autonomy and self-regulating recruitment, and standards of competence and standing or rank within the profession.
- A role in or legitimate relationship to society.
- An ability to exercise a degree of independent judgement, intellectual capacity, and moral capability within the practice of the profession.
- A shared sense of identity and collective responsibility for the quality of their service and the reputation of their profession.

Military professionalism is the essential foundation upon which building partner capacity must be built. Many African militaries lack the institutionalization of a code of conduct necessary to be profession, such as integrity, service, and respect for human rights. As Emile Ouedraogo states in "Advancing Military Professionalism in Africa," there is a widespread politicization of the military in many African countries. When the military is used as a tool of politics, it loses its autonomy and ability to independently exercise its responsible role in society. The military mission is the management of violence and disciplined application of lethal force against enemies of the state. If the military creates violence against or uses lethal force against its own people outside of the parameters of law and its own professional standards, it no longer performs the role that society requires. Additionally, instilling professionalism in the military is a necessary step towards the consolidation of not only democracy but also stable government. Samuel Finer argues that developing a highly professional military corps is also a necessary ingredient for democracies to develop militaries strong enough to effectively deter aggression in a manner that does not violate the liberal values of civilian control, rule of law and respect for individual rights.[16]

Emphasis on building military professionalization has been a key in building effective civilian-subordinated militaries

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since Samuel Huntington's 1958 classic *Soldier and the State*. Huntington's study emerged as an answer to resolving an issue that Feaver has called the "civil-military problematique" of creating an effective institution of violence that could be strong enough to protect society without becoming a danger to the society itself.[17] Huntington argued that an officer corps that is both technically well-trained and instilled with appropriate professional values can create an effective military institution posing a minimal threat to society. In particular, instituting what Huntington called objective control over the armed forces, both militaries and the civilians who control them are bound by professional ethics.[18] This professionalism ensures civilians and militaries do not use their positions of power for personal gain. It also helps to restrain the military as it inculcates a sense of higher purpose, to serve the state and its people.

Towards the above visionary goal for healthy development, the term "Building Partner Capacity" (BPC) first came into use in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) as the following argument:

Long-duration, complex operations involving the U.S. military, other government agencies and international partners will be waged simultaneously in multiple countries around the world... Maintaining a long-term, low-visibility presence in many areas of the world where U.S. forces do not traditionally operate will be required. Building and leveraging partner capacity will also be an absolutely essential part of this approach, and the employment of surrogates will be a necessary method for achieving many goals.[19]

Understanding that the U.S. military cannot be everywhere in the world at all times, building partner capacity is a means by which the United States can help establish integrated global security while simultaneously empowering Africa governments to solve their own security problems.

Building partner capacity includes the following activities:

- Conducting bilateral and multilateral exercises with partner nations
- Engaging in multilateral military planning and discussion of capabilities development among partners
- Including foreign military officers as students at U.S. military schools
- Training and equipping of foreign military and security forces
- Fostering specific capabilities in a country or given region of the world

There is a broad distinction between professionalism and capacity building. While professionalism can help build capacity and vice versa, both address different aspects of an effective military. Capacity building ensures militaries are well-equipped and well-trained to handle threats to security in an effective manner. Professionalism enhances capacity building by ensuring these well-trained and well-armed militaries do not use their power to threaten the state or its people.

Addressing the Military Capacity Building-Professionalization Gap

The solution involves continued training and mentorship at every level of the African militaries with whom the United States is partnered. Human rights training and military professionalism classes must continue to be included in basic technical or tactical training, leader development courses and contact activities, and regular diplomatic communications. US and European warfighters at all levels must seize every opportunity to instill and reinforce the ethics inherent in a military professional amongst their African counterparts. American and European leaders must demand that these efforts be included early on in any initial military engagement as a prerequisite to any significant partner capacity building. A clear signal must be sent that there is no tolerance for human rights abuses, blatant corruption or the politicization of the armed forces. For example, the suspension of most forms of U.S. security cooperation with Nigeria during President Goodluck Jonathan's last year in office provided an appropriate message to its government. Moreover, military assistance and capacity building programs must include provisions that measure the effectiveness of professionalization at all levels of government and the military.

African governments must create clear mandates under which armed forces are to be used, when and for what purpose. This is especially important in the ever-changing security environment present in sub-Saharan African

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countries where there is “a nexus of domestic terrorism...coming together with counterinsurgency”[20] presenting a unique challenge not previously encountered. Instituting mandates on the use of security forces will set clear expectations of behavior and encourage the de-politicization of the armed forces. African military cultures must also further adapt to international norms and standards regarding respect for human rights and the institutionalization of values of professionalism so that they become well institutionalized. Like in other armed forces around the world, this must begin with training as soon as men and women first join the armed forces and this inculcation of values must continue throughout their career. American and European countries that provide foreign assistance to African security sectors can help make governments accountable to ensure expectations are met.

The DoD already has the tools necessary to ensure its programs strengthen military professionalization in an effort to limit human rights abuses. The DoD’s Ministry of Defense Advisors (MoDA) program which places US personnel in foreign ministries to address technical gaps can help to reinforce democratic norms of civil-military relations between African functionaries and the military, an important aspect of helping to institutionalize norms of professionalization.[21] MoDA personnel can assist their African counterparts in developing mandates on the use of security forces and under what circumstances. The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) of FY2017 which authorizes the DoD to engage in certain security cooperation programs has a provision that mandates the DoD to conduct assessment, monitoring and evaluation (AM&E) of its programs. The intent of the AM&E process is to monitor progress of various security cooperation programs to ensure implementation and programs are meeting their intended objectives.

The DoD is still in the early stages of developing its AM&E criteria; therefore, provisions to measure professionalization at all levels of the security sector can be incorporated as part of the AM&E process. Between FY2015-18, the DoD has provided \$954 million in counterterrorism aid programs to sub-Saharan Africa.[22] In addition, between FY 2016- FY 2020, the Department of State has provided an additional \$19 million in security assistance aimed at professional military education, military professionalization, equipment, and advising.[23] Tying receiving future assistance to meeting certain professionalization milestones incorporated into AM&E framework will help to ensure both human rights abuses are limited and military professionalization norms of behavior become institutionalized throughout the entirety of the security sector.

Prescriptions for Nigeria

The Buhari administration must prioritize security sector reform by implementing accountability in the chain of command, undertaking measures to professionalize soldiers and police officers and reducing the military’s reliance on vigilante groups.”[24]

Due to rampant human rights abuses, the U.S. government began to distance itself from the Nigerian military, curtailing millions of dollars of funding from 2003 to 2010.[25] In an effort to reconcile past behavior, current Nigerian President Buhari has made reforming the military a top priority. The Buhari administration has begun the process of vetting military leadership to ensure professionalism on the battlefield is consistent and that the rule of law is followed.[26] To do this, priority must be given to strengthening the manpower of the military, developing individuals professionally and ensuring units are competent while instilling core values such as loyalty to the civilian government, duty to uphold the laws of the nation, respect for human rights, selfless service, honor and integrity. Until the Buhari administration provides adequate training and compensation for military members, unethical conduct will continue to be common. Weak institutions of civil governance and insufficient civilian oversight will continue to make secondary employment highly corrosive to ethical behavior among military professionals.[27] It is this combination of inadequate compensation and weak governance that makes security sector reform critical to sustaining the momentum of military transformation within Nigeria.

Conclusion

African militaries came into being and developed in a highly politicized environment. Colonial and native African leaders alike often used the armed forces to exert punishment on opponents and instill fear in the citizens that they ruled. This led to the creation of African armed forces that may have been militarily effective but lacked professional

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values. The result of this can be seen in human rights abuses, continued armed conflict in the region and democratic backsliding. While this may seem like a localized problem, the lack of an effective and professional network of militaries within Sub-Saharan Africa has exacerbated the problem of weak states and their inability to govern territory within their borders, and has allowed instability to become a greater regional problem. This instability poses an enormous problem to the United States, its allies, and the entire civilized world. Africa, with its sheer size and wealth of natural resources, framed by an environment of diversity, division, and complexity, is a fertile breeding ground for these problems to flourish. Understanding this, the United States and other western nations are partnering with African countries to bolster their capabilities and build willing and capable partners who can assist in the struggles ahead. However, as shown in this article, there is inherent danger in building partner capacity without first ensuring that there is a strong foundation of military professionalism. The two must go hand-in-hand in order to withstand the temptation to abuse the power that comes with a strong military.

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