The reasons for military interventions (militocracy) in Africa are as varied as they are complex. They range from personal grievances to the political and economic kleptocracy of civilian regimes. In a struggle to cope with this predicament between the devil of tyranny (as in one-party systems) and the deep sea of anarchy (as in multiparty systems) military rule has often been invoked. The balance sheet has largely been negative, with very few being benign, that is serving the interests of the people whether in a short or long political life span.

Soldiers as Power-Mongers

The 1960 civilian leadership in Africa was basically pan-African to the extent that some failed to cover enough ground in their own national territories. This gave leeway to soldiers as power-mongers. Among the prominent military take-overs in the 1960s were those in Congo (Kinshasa) in November 1965 by Colonel Joseph Désiré Mobutu, and in the same year in Algeria by Colonel Houari Boummedienne; in Nigeria in January 1966 by Major Nzeogwu followed later by a counter-coup by Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi; a month later in Ghana by Colonel Akwasi Amankwaah Afrifa; in Togo in January 1967 by Lieutenant Colonel Etienne Gnassingbe Eyadema; in Mali in 1968 by Lieutenant Moussa Traore; and in Libya in September 1969 by Colonel Muammar Ghaddafi.

The symbol of benign militocracy in this epoch is Muammar Ghaddafi. He, with a small group of unknown young officers, overthrew the monarchy
of King Idris I to establish a participatory democracy based on people's congresses and committees. Still, the leader of Libya today, Ghaddafi has succeeded in wresting power from the former colonialists by exploiting Libyan wealth and putting it at the disposal of the citizens. The results are for anyone (not wearing neo-colonial blinkers) to see.

**Soldiers as Power-Brokers**

The 1970-1980 civilian leadership in Africa was basically nationalist to the extent that it wanted to have a tyrannical grip on every facet of national life. Torn between the exigencies of “under the tree” rule and the pressures of Cold War politics, the leadership opened avenues for soldiers to step in as power-brokers. Prominent among the military coups in the 1970s were the experiences in Uganda in 1971 by Idi Amin Dada; in Ethiopia in 1974 by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam; in Nigeria in July 1975 by General Muhammad Murtala; and in Ghana in 1979 by Flight-Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings. The most benign of these take-overs was that of Muhammad Murtala. General Murtala's eight-month government gained a reputation for integrity and commitment to radical change and was welcomed by most Nigerians.

In the 1980s, there were take-overs in Liberia in April 1980 by Master-Sergeant Samuel K. Doe; in Ghana in 1981 once again by Rawlings; in Nigeria in 1983 by Major-General Muhammad Buhari; and in 1986 by General Ibrahima Babangida; in Burkina Faso in 1983 by Captain Thomas Sankara; in Guinea in 1984 by Colonel Lansana Conte; and in the same year in Uganda by Yoweri Museveni.

The most spectacular of military rules in the 1980s was that of Captain Thomas Sankara. He instituted a nation in which all citizens participated in its development and brought the masses into political and economic decision-making. He lasted in power only four years.

**Soldiers as Power-Sharers**

In spite of some of the positive records of military rule, it has been observed that the military should stick to their legitimate places in the barracks. They should return to their roles as protectors of state security, not as custodians of political power. The people of Africa saw the one-party tyranny as a front for militocracy, and the only way the military could be excluded was through national constitutional reforms. The 1990s were therefore years of national debate. That debate was to provide Africa with a democratic system which would enable it to aspire to a stable political and economic future. Unfortunately most African leaders refused to budge and where they did, it was for political convenience not conviction, and so the military rode on.

Prominent among the military coups in the 1990s were Mali's 1991 coup by Ahmadou Toumani Toure; Nigeria's 1993 coup by General Sani Abacha; the 1997 coup in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) by Laurent Désiré Kabila; and Sierra Leone's series of coups embodied by Foday Sankoh. The most benign of these was Ahmadou Toumani Toure who took power, installed a national conference, and the following year left the scene for civilian rule. That he came back in 2001 as elected leader is proof of his charisma and political vision.

**Soldiers as Statesmen**

Africa has tried both the single party (where there
was discipline without democracy) and multi-party system (where there is liberalisation without discipline) but the military seldom remained in the barracks. National debates were deferred until the late 1990s. In 1999, Ghaddafi - who thought the gains African countries had made during independence had all been lost back to the colonialists - called for continental debate. One of the main things to come out of Sirte was the transformation of the Organisation of African Unity into the African Union. Among the 33 articles that were adopted in the African Union Treaty was Article 30: “Governments which shall come to power through unconstitutional means shall not be allowed to participate in the activities of the Union.” Was the word 'unconstitutional' to mean just coming to power by the bullet?

In spite of this resolution, the wave of military coups continues even in twenty-first century Africa. The early years of the new century saw coups from Robert Guei followed by Guillaume Soro in Côte d'Ivoire, from François Bozize in Central African Republic, from Sekou Damateh Conneh in Liberia (although the transition is now manned by a civilian businessman, Gyude Bryant), and General Verissimo Conneia Seabra in Guinea Bissau, with a transition also manned by a civilian businessman.

From the utterances of these coup leaders, there seems to be a return to benign militocracy. The coup leaders are all establishing a short-term transition during which there will be a national debate, national catharsis and national reconciliation. Strangely, the coup leaders are enjoying maximum co-operation not only from their citizens, but recognition and support as well from regional bodies in the continent. The central African organ, CEMAC, gave Bozize the red-carpet treatment after he ousted elected leader Ange Patasse, who sought political asylum first in Cameroon and then in Togo. The West African organ, ECOWAS, yielded to rebel pressure and presided over the departure of democratically elected leader Charles Taylor from Liberia. Taylor has now found asylum in Nigeria. ECOWAS also negotiated the smooth resignation from power by Kumba Yala in Guinea-Bissau to make way for a rebel-led agenda.

In the 1960s-1980s, coups were quickly and decisively condemned, but what is happening today that 'young Turks' are given more prominence than opposition leaders? Is the African Union holding the tenets of the African Peer Review Mechanism more to its chest than Article 30 of its treaty? Should we not now agree with Antonio de Figueredo, Basil Davidson, Claude Ake, Thandika Mkandawire, Adébayo Oluwosho, Samir Amin, Kwesi Prah, Micere Mugo and other African revisionist scholars that Africa's real political and development problem lies in copying the wrong borrowed Western models?

In presiding over transition periods, the twenty-first century military must move from being benign soldiers to visionary statesmen. Transition periods are not only meant to establish civilian election calendars. They are avenues to re-examine and reconsider our models of democracy and development, which so far have served Western countries and their African lackeys in power. Transition governments have the advantage of practising consensual democracy (no party ideology) and proposing home development models. So what works for a transitional government can work for a permanent government.

Finally, militocracy, whether benign or malign, has no legal binding; it is not the people's best choice, but as long as democratic avenues are gagged by truncated elections and constitutional panel-beating, and as long as civilian leadership in Africa is by grotesque routine instead of by grandiose reform, the military will remain the people's hidden choice.

Militocracy, whether benign or malign, is a dangerous trend but as long as the weak civil society is pauperised and emasculated by civilian (mis)rule, the masses will be tempted to yield their voices to benign militocracy in the hope that the bloodless bullet will silence the fraudulent ballot and bring to national debate, the unanswered questions of what independence, democracy, citizenship, justice, and economic empowerment mean to the people of Africa.