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*The role of the military in political transitions:
from the 18th century to the present day*

XLIX International Congress of Military History

1 - 6 September 2024, Lisbon

Volume I





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OPENING SESSION

Opening remarks by the Military University Institute Commander

Lieutenant-General Hermínio Maio

Mr. President of the International Commission of Military History, Professor Massimo de Leonardis,

Mr. President of the Portuguese Commission of Military History, Major-General João Vieira Borges,

Admirals, Generals,

Fellow colleagues from National Institutions and Defense Departments,

Esteemed guests attending the conference, distinguished speakers, and chairpersons,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning to you all, and a warm welcome to the Military University Institute, which is hosting this important international congress on “The Role of the Military in Political Transitions”.

In many parts of the world, the military has often played a pivotal role in shaping the course of political transitions. Whether in times of peace or turmoil, in moments of progress or setbacks, the military’s influence on a country’s political framework can be profound and far-reaching.

It is crucial to reiterate that “the armed forces should not interfere in the internal political affairs of a nation”. Their primary responsibility is to protect national sovereignty and security from external threats, while the management of political power and governance

is a task for civilian legitimated institutions. By adhering to this role, the military acts as a stabilizing power, maintaining the conditions necessary for the democratic governance.

However, we must also recognise that this principle has often been challenged by various factors. I will mention three: Institutional imbalances, internal crises and socio-economic factors.

“Institutional imbalances”, such as controversial politically driven systems, ineffective checks and balances, or the lack of an independent judiciary, can create vulnerabilities that may open the door to military involvement. When civilian institutions fail or become dysfunctional, the military may perceive itself as the only entity capable of restoring order. This perception is dangerous, because it threatens to blur the lines between civilian and military rule.

Another critical factor is “internal crises”, which in some situations have led the military to become politically involved. Mass protests, electoral disputes, or widespread corruption can create conditions of chaos that challenge the legitimacy of the institutions. In such moments of uncertainty, the military has been forced to intervene, under the guise of restoring order or national integrity. But history shows that such interventions often lead to a further erosion of democratic norms rather than a path to stability.

“Socioeconomic factors” also play a role in this dynamic. Severe economic inequality, social unrest, and the marginalisation of large sectors of the population can create fertile ground for military intervention. As societies fragment, the military may be seen as a unifying force, or at least a guarantor of stability. But, at what cost? The challenge here is to address deep-rooted economic and social inequalities through political means.

From personal experience and observation, as someone who has recently been involved in capacity-building missions in several African countries, I can illustrate what I have just said with the situation in the Sahel region, with the various military-led coups in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

Given these pressures, it is crucial to consider the role of “military education” in shaping how officers approach their duties. High-quality military education should not only equip officers with tactical, logistical and strategic skills, but also impart a profound understanding of their constitutional role within the state, with the indispensable “encadrement” provided by history. This includes a respect for democratic principles and the clear separation between civilian authority and military power. Officers with this foundation are far more likely to uphold the values of democracy.

As we engage in discussions over the next few days, I am, very excited about aspects related with the role of the Military University Institute, in particular, “how can we foster an educational culture within the military that emphasises loyalty to democracy,

constitutional order, the rule of law and the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms?

While recognising the commendable adherence of the men and women of the Portuguese Armed Forces to these principles, this Congress, which brings together an impressive array of experts—delegates, scholars, researchers, military professionals and civil society leaders from around the world, is undeniably beneficial for us as a Military University Institute.

Thank you for your attention, and best wishes for a highly productive and enlightening congress.