

The Nigerian Press and the Struggle for Democracy: Not yet Uhuru

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Abstract

Of all the different types of government so far experimented by the countries of the world – fascism, totalitarianism, monarchy, diarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy etc – democracy has proved to be the best form. Under democracy, the inalienable rights and essential freedoms natural to man as human are realizable. These include; the right to freedom of worship; right to freedom of speech; right to life; right to freedom of association and right to the dignity of the human person and so on. It is perhaps for this reason, among others, that the Nigerian press has continued to struggle for democracy to ensure these freedoms.

For this, the vested interests, the oppressors of the poor saw the watch dogs as a pleasant whipping boy, tormenting, persecuting and using all sorts of draconian legislations and extra – judicial methods to suppress legitimate agitations. Thank goodness, the freedom of information bill has been passed into law.

But despite all the indignities, the press has soldiered on. However, since 1999 when Nigeria appeared to have freed herself from the military strangle-hold, there seems to be a temptation to relax in the false hope that we have arrived the promised democratic land. But the ugly experience of the 2003 and 2007 elections provide a pointer that it is not yet Uhuru. There is the need to stress eternal vigilance as we have only substituted black imperialism for white imperialism. This paper examines the liberation struggle of the Nigerian press towards political emancipation from oppressors and urges a coordinated political mobilization of the electorate to stand up for genuine participatory democracy.

Introduction

The successful practice of democracy has proved an intractable problem in Nigeria. For this, the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) recently concluded that “Democracy has failed in Nigeria.” Describing Nigeria as a failed state, the association noted that “it was common knowledge that across Nigeria, public trust in democracy was being challenged due to the perception that democracy has failed to improve life.” It asserted, that “Democratic institutions such as parliaments, executive branches and political parties are seen as ineffective in representing the people. Popular discontent with lack of economic and social development cannot be divorced completely from recent upheavals” (*The Nigerian Tribune* Tuesday 18 August, 2009:8)

In another breath, Peter Lewis, director of the African studies Programme at John Hopkins University remarked that confidence in the new Nigerian democracy has crashed. According to him Nigerians expected a democratic dividend in 1999. They expected more economic opportunity and better governance. Quoting from Machiavelli’s book, *The Discourses*, Asobie (2000:7) observed that “there is a positive connection between democracy and development, between political freedom/liberty and domestic as well as international peace and stability.” For Machiavelli, Athens in Greece and Rome in Italy were ideal states because of their love of liberty, and the manner in which democratic governance furthered the cause of development. His words:

It is wonderful to think of the greatness which Athens attained within the space of a hundred years after having freed herself from the tyranny of Pisistratus, and still more wonderful is it to reflect upon the greatness which Rome achieved after she was rid of her kings. The cause of this is manifest, for it is not individual prosperity, but the general good that makes cities great and certainly the general good is regarded nowhere but in republics...(2007:3)

Hence, democracy is the only form of government that has the potential of lifting people from poverty, ignorance, hunger and disease by guaranteeing each person the freedom to realize his ambition without man-made encumbrances. Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, after analyzing the different forms of government namely oligarchy, monarchy, and aristocracy, finally settled for democracy as the best form of government. According to him, taken together and compared with the few, the government of the many is stronger, richer and better. (Blum 2000:25).

It is for these advantages inherent in democratic form of government that the Nigerian press has been unrelenting in fighting other forms of government in Nigeria, namely colonialism and military dictatorships.

Zuma, (cited in Ogunsiyi 1989:13) explained that the pre-independence press in Nigeria saw colonialism as totally the opposite of what was right and just. According to him, the press saw colonialism as “politically oppressive, economically exploitative, socially discriminating and culturally polluting, if not entirely destructive” adding that “the press did not however feel shy to fight for justice.” That was, why Aniagalu (1993:2) asserts that the pre-independence press in Nigeria, mainly the newspapers in Lagos and the Zik Group of Newspapers, concentrated on the fight to achieve independence for Nigeria from the British colonial masters. According to him, the press focused on accusations against the British colonialist of exploitation, of discrimination and oppression. The press stooped at nothing to put the heat on the British in those accusations.”

Hence, in the face of the unbearable assault mounted by the Nigerian press and progressive unions, the British saw that the game was up and commenced series of constitutional amendments that eventually culminated in grating independence to Nigeria. These include the 1922 Clifford constitution that structured Nigeria into three regions namely, the North, the East and the West and introduced regional unicameral legislature in the East and the West and a bicameral arrangement in the North made up of House of Assembly and a House of Chiefs.

The Lyttleton constitution of 1954 gave a federal system of government to Nigeria; providing a premier for each region. The 1960 Sir James Robertson’s constitution gave independence to Nigeria while the 1963 constitution abolished the British Monarch as the Head of State, and established the office of the president as the Head of state and commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria.

According to Aniagalu (1993) so hot was the Nigerian Press against the British that the Rt. Hon. Anthony Edem, the Prime Minister then sarcastically referred to the Nigeria press as “The Broad Sheets of West Africa.”

There was evidence, says Okonkwo (1968) that the colonial governors were rankled by the criticism spearheaded by the Nigerian press and they sought ways to retaliate. For instance, Lord Lugard complained about newspapers pouring out their columns of venomous abuse often bordering on sedition or libel. Consequently, the seditious Offence Ordinance of 1909 was promulgated in Nigeria to tame the press.

However, despite the dogged commitment of the Nigerian press to wrest power from the colonial master and enthrone indigenous government and democracy, experience so far shows that the Nigerian politician did not appreciate the value of democracy. Their selfish quest for power led to military intervention in the nation's body politic. And with the excesses associated with military dictatorship, the press was again forced to fight to restore democracy which cost many journalists their lives.

Now that democracy has been restored in Nigeria since 1999, experience shows that the way and manner Nigerian politicians have performed so far, especially as regards election into public offices, there is palpable fear that we are not yet done with military intervention into Nigerian politics unless there is a change of attitude before it is late. For instance, Roberts, (2000:61) defined democracy as "A form of rule in which either members of a society acts as policy-making authority (direct democracy) or are represented by a smaller number to make policy in their behalf (representative democracy). According to him:

The growth in size of the populations of cities, and states, the distances they cover, and the vast, complex and continuous stream of issues requiring governmental consideration, decision and action, plus the inability of a population to devote much time to political participation. Set limits to the extension of direct democracy; where popular participation was regarded as desirable, it had to be through the election or representatives and perhaps through the use of occasional referenda and plebiscites.

To him, democracy implies certain operational principles for its realization. Participation must be equal and every vote in a democracy should count for the same as every other vote. But are these empirical characteristics of democracy observed in Nigeria?

A careful observation of elections as the most important aspect of democracy, especially the 2003 and 2007 elections, shows that democracy has not taken root in Nigeria. Election, says Nnoli (1990:41) is an important element of modern representative government. It is so closely tied to growth and development of democratic political order that it is now held to be the single most important indicator of the presence or absence of democratic government. A negation of election, he observed, is a negation of democracy.

In the 2003 and 2007 elections for example, elections were neither free nor fair, nor did the votes of the electorate determine who represented the people in what office. Elekwa (2008:9) lamented that the 2007 general elections in Nigeria “were chronicles of shame and deceit of the population.” He observed that the Nigerian populace as electoral outcomes did not largely reflect the wishes and aspirations of the people. He concluded that the 2007 elections were marred by wide-spread violence and general insecurity right from voter, registration, party primaries to political campaign and the elections proper. The European Union Observer Mission (EUOM) that observed the April 2007 elections in Nigeria summarized the popular perception thus:

The 2007 state and federal election fell far short of the basic international and regional standards for democratic elections. They were marred by poor organization, lack of essential transparency, widespread irregularities, significant evidence of frauds, particularly during result collation process, voter’s disenfranchisement at different stages of the process, lack of equal conditions for contestants and numerous incidents of violence. As a result, the elections have not lived up to the hopes and expectations of the Nigerian people and the process cannot be considered to have been credible (Akitowele, 2007:2)

The Newswatch edition of October 5, 2009 while describing the 2003 general elections as embarrassing and scandalous, it simply labeled that of 2007 as “the worst election ever in Nigeria’s history”. In his work titled. This madness called election 2003, Odey, (2003:52) wrote:

...of all the political tragedies that have been visited upon this country, what happened on April 12 and 19, 2003 is the worst because it made people lose hope in democracy as they lost in military dictatorship. There is much bitterness in the land as a result of the election malpractice.”

The *Insider Weekly* (April 28, 2003:23) described the alleged well-planned rigging strategy employed by the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in collaboration with the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as “Scientific rigging”.

According to the magazine, the strategy included, but not limited to:

1. Electoral officers not showing up in some polling station yet election results were declared for such stations;
2. Lack of privacy for the voter to cast his vote;
3. INEC officials coming very late for the polls by which times many voters had left in frustration.
4. Intimidation of voters through violence and bribery;
5. Recruitment of party members as electoral officers;
6. Disappearance of unfilled result sheets that later surfaced with figures;
7. Exchange of fake ballot boxes with genuine ones fully thumb printed.

Hence Ike (2009:9) after observing how democracy is practised in Nigeria as typified by the 2003 and 2007 general elections concluded that Nigeria was still toddling and has not made any significant growth because the electoral system, the major plank on which democracy can stand is faulty.

Even, the 2011 elections acclaimed to be free and fair has had its own share of irregularities especially in terms of violence, multiple and under age voting. According to the *Daily Sun* (Tuesday, May 10, 2010) report:

More condemnations have continued to trail the killing of some National Youth Service Corp (NYSC) members in the post-election violence that erupted in over five states in the North. At the last count, about seven members were confirmed dead in Bauchi by the state police command, with fears of higher figures in Kano and Borno States where officials have declined official comment on death toll.

Also, the post-election analysis report, according to the INEC Chairman, showed that less than 50% of eligible voters participated in the 2011 elections. It is on the strength of the above scenario that a wake-up call is made on the Nigerian media to pick up the gunlet for public enlightenment and political mobilization to develop more, the participant political culture in the Nigerian electorate come 2015. This is because there is still a high degree of political apathy and skepticism engendered by long years of intimidation both by the military and politicians in their do-or-die brand of politics. This is not democracy hence we have yet a long way to go.

Theoretical framework

This study finds the agenda setting theory of mass media congruent with the objectives. Developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972) the theory arose as an end point of the 1968 study of American election. Its thrust is on “how” the mass media can influence political process, especially voting behaviour. It was discovered that the mass media besides setting agenda for campaigns also dictated the issues on which many electorates based their voting decisions ultimately.

Also, Griffin (1991:340) opined that the agenda-setting theory is a proof that the media serve as a sign post to the electorate during elections. According to him:

McComb and Shaw have established plausible cases that some people look to print and broadcast news during, election campaigns for clues to guide them on deciding which issues are important.

In his own view, Nwodu (2003:53) listed a number of ways in which the media impact on the electorates.

These include:-

- a) Providing an objective focus on a candidates antecedents primarily to reinforce or expose what is respectively good and bad about the candidate’s image.
- b) Creating necessary awareness about a candidate and his/her campaign.
- c) Guide the electorate’s voting decisions by shaping their opinions through sound interpretation and analysis of political matters.
- d) Educating the electorate on the overall electoral process and procedures as well as informing them adequately about the election dates, venues and other relevant information about the election.

For Agee, Ault and Emery (1982) the basic idea of agenda-setting-the ability of the media to influence the salience of events in the public mind-was a part of Walter Lippmann’s description of “the pictures in our heads.” In 1963, wrote the scholars, political scientist Benrad Cohen declared in his book, *The press and foreign policy* that “The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.”

In a similar vein Theodore White (1972) noted in Agee et al (1982) that: The power of the press is a primordial one. It sets the agenda of public discussion...” According to him, “No major act of the American Congress, no foreign adventure, no act of diplomacy, and no great social

reform can succeed in the United States unless the press prepares the public mind. And when the press seizes a great issue to thrust onto the agenda of talk, it moves action on its own.”

The agenda-setting press here, it is suggested, will be highly comprehensive. Fortunately, in *Ukaegbu v Attorney-General of Imo state* (1983) (cited in Nwokolo (2007) The Supreme Court gave a broad interpretation of section 36 (2) of the 1979 (now section 39(2) 1999 constitution) whereby the press now includes “any intervening means, instrument or agency” such as “schools” rather than the mass media alone.

Hence, schools could be one of the instruments for developing and mobilizing towards a participant political culture among young Nigerians for now and for the future. The colonial masters appreciated the role of the school as training ground for the propagation of any redeeming social endeavour. In other words, the use of the western type media namely, newspapers and magazines etc. need to be complemented and supported in view of their inherent weaknesses. These shortcomings, noted by Dissayanake (2006:41) includes the fact that they are:

- a) Linear and one-way rather than circular and two-way;
- b) Lay heavy emphasis on the communicator as opposed to the receivers;
- c) Ignore the context which, in point of fact, provides us with the bulk of meaning of communication;
- d) Give pride of place to manipulation over mutuality and reciprocity;
- e) Perceive individuals as atomistic entities as opposed to interacting elements in a collectivistic or communalistic system; and
- f) Treat communication in mechanical rather than organic terms.

Also, the advocates for democracy and other concerned citizens should be the arrow-head in the mobilization process in the tradition of the Zikst movement. This will enable the permeation of the ruralities and the illiterate section of the population. And in view of the shortcomings of the western type media listed above, there is need to integrate the traditional modes of communication in the mobilization enterprise. This has proved effective in different parts of the world. Ugboajah (1985) observed that the use of rituals in oral-media for social solidarity in cases of emergency is not limited to Africa. Gandhi, and Mao, he noted, had little access to the modern media in mobilizing the masses for their revolution in India and China. They relied on credible secular symbols, and channels that were deeply integrated into the life of the masses and participatory exposure to their messages.

Also, Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers, said Ugboajah, demonstrated the impact of indigenous networks in mobilizing popular support in which case they relied on solid institutional infrastructure and activated highly information conductive symbols of Oramedia. He noted that, Khomeini's 90,000 mosques under the guidance of 20,000 mullahs (priests) provided a solid infrastructure for a revolutionary communication network, a model, he said, could have been adapted to a successful 'Green Revolution' in Nigeria. Hence, a broad spectrum of well respected opinion leaders and traditional rulers in the community, the church, schools, women, youth and other non-governmental organizations will be required in this struggle towards genuine democracy in Nigeria.

This is going to be a long drawn battle for freedom. Media influence is cumulative and long-term. As observed by Center and Jackson (2007:206) "A single news report, even if covered by media across the country, or an item in a single medium even if it's the evening news, usually causes little if any behavior or attitude change. But when many media cover a subject over the years perhaps expressing a viewpoint on the topic, whole generations can be influenced." Credible, free and fair election is the basic ingredient of participatory democracy and it is not obtained on a platter of gold. The earlier the agenda for this noble task is set, the better for Nigeria and the rebranding campaign. The Nigerian press has done it before, it can do it again. The memories of the struggles with the colonial masters and the military are still fresh in our minds. We must stand up and fight for our rights against internal colonization. As said earlier, eternal vigilance remains the price of liberty.

The Nigerian press and the struggle for political emancipation from the colonial masters.

An off-shoot of imperialism, colonism has proved to be one of the worst forms of government in the world. Colonialism, says Roberts (2000:35) refers to "The practice of occupying by force or by peaceful means, territory which is relatively underdeveloped for the purposes of establishing settlers from the parent state using the territory mainly for economic, but secondarily perhaps for political or strategic advantage of the colonizing power." Hence, colonialism is naturally exploitative, selfish and retrogressive to the victims or objects of the un-Godly order. To facilitate their predatory exploits, colonial powers always come up with obnoxious laws that are dehumanizing and subjugatory in letters and spirits. The aim is to destroy the spirit of resistance and maintain a groove of silence and peace of the graveyard among the colonized. Infact, the whole

period of colonial rule in Nigeria was replete with obnoxious policies and ordinances to which the Nigerian press reacted adequately.

In a public lecture Azikiwe (1978) summarized the point thus:

The Nigeian experience portrays how some colonial Governors succeeded in castrating the Nigerian Press. The roles played by Freeman, Macgregor, Glover, Egerton and Lugard are clear examples. But history turned tables on them by the glorious martyrdom suffered by Benjamin, Johnson, Davies, Jackson, Macaulay, Ernest Ikoli, Yekini Tinubu, Increase Coker, Chike Obi, Patrick Agbu and other Nigerian Journalists.

A few examples of attempts to castrate the Nigerian press by the colonial overlords through obnoxious laws will elucidate our point. In a pamphlet titled "Governor Egerton and the Railway-Letter No. 1" Herbert Macaulay charged Governor Egerton with maladministration for disregarding the serious allegations of scandals in the railway because the person involved was his friend. In a swift reaction, the governor pushed through the seditious offences ordinance of 1909 to strengthen the government against "publications and speeches designed to inflame an excitable and ignorant populace." (Okonkwo, 1978).

As explained by Nwabueze (1973:146) "the law of sedition...had to be more rigorously enforced than in Britain in order to guard against the possibility that the relatively small, politically articulate section of the population might exploit the natural resentment against colonialism to incite the populace to disaffection." Sedition laws, says Okonkwo (2003), throughout history have inhibited openness and therefore incompatible with democracy. Thus Harry Kalven Jr. in his comment "*The New York Times* Case: A Note on the Central Meaning of the First Amendment" posited that the presence or absence in the law of the concept of seditious libel defines the society. "if it makes seditious libel and offence, it is not a free society no matter what its other characteristics."

On another occasion, Thomas Horatius Jackson published two articles in his Lagos Weekly Record captioned: "The Dangers of the Judicial system in Nigeria" and "A Great Constitutional Issue" respectively. In the Publications, Jackson referred to the decision of the Acting Chief Justice in a case and other similar decisions earlier alleging that judges of the then Supreme Court were too anxious to return judgments favourable to the Executive. Said the publications, the judges

“would not and dare not give a decision unfavourable to government, and have been impelled to invent plausible arguments in order to be able to record decisions compatible with the wishes of the Executive.” For this, the publisher was summarily punished for contempt of court and sent to prison for two months and also ordered to pay the cost of the proceedings.

But despite the affront the press did not relent in attacking and pouring venoms on the evils of colonial rule. For example in 1894, the newspapers condemned the expedition against chief Nana of Benin River which led to his trial and deportation to the Gold Coast now Ghana. *The Record* (8 Sept., 1894) observed that “to the Africans eager for the perpetration of his race, the hunting down of native chiefs and their being made fugitives in their homeland by civilized nations armed with modern warfare, can only draw the severest of censures.”

Earlier, *The Weekly Times* (11 Oct., 1840) had condemned what the British did to King Jaja of Opobo and emphasized the incompatibility of the action with the honour and dignity of the British Government. *The Record* equally condemned those who championed the “smash up” of Benin as “wild brained. It added that such a policy of retaliation detracted from the Christian principles that were supposed to “actuate and influence civilized governments.” (See the Record of 23 January, 1897). Infact, the local press matched force with force. According to Perham (1960:597) the Nigeria Press christened Lord Lugard, one of the colonial Governors editorially with a series of cognomens: “Napoleon of Nigeria.” “Thou art the man” “One man rule” and “Unadulterated Autocracy.” *The Times of Nigeria* (24th March, 1914) published a litany of evils of Lugard and other colonial officials thus:

From a prancing proconsul who must have his way and does not care one iota for the safety of the innocent people under his charge;

From a born and bred-in-law chief Justice, who mercilessly drafts our oppressive ordinances in order to maintain the prestige of autocratic officials, to the detriment of 16 millions of souls;

From a set of ‘influential’ Englishmen, who live only to suggest and support drastic measures to deprive the poor natives of his right;

From a colonial secretary, who having been influenced by ‘the man on the spot’ deliberately deafens his ears and shuts his eyes to the moans and groans of an oppressed people;

And from Negrophobism, colour prejudice, oppression and deceit;

“Good Lord, deliver us

In view of this ferocious and sustained attacks by the Nigerian Press, the colonial governors sought ways to stifle it first by discontinuing an earlier subsidy arrangement. But this rather drove the press to be even much harder in attacking the government. In reaction, the colonial government then decided to enact the first newspaper ordinances of 1917. According to Omu (1978:175) “The policies and persons of the governors were attacked unceasingly and a regime of hostile propaganda was established and this widened the gulf between the administration and the people.” Justifying the introduction of the newspaper ordinance designed to gag the press, Ralph Moore, the colonial high Commissioner said he deprecated the vigour and influence of the Lagos Press. He called the attention of the secretary of state to the fact that education was spreading throughout the territory and that the educated and semi-educated elements would no doubt be guided in their views and opinions by the local press.

The Record declaimed against the law which it described as “inequitable and vicious in principle.” It said the legislation was a tyrannical measure designed to fetter the press and stifle public opinion and that it lacked warrant and wisdom and opposed to reason and equity (See *Record* 3 May, 1902). Omu (1978:18) noted that the Newspaper Ordinance was capable of hindering the growth of the newspaper press in many ways. For instance, the bond of £250 as required by the ordinance made the newspaper business a relatively expensive venture. Also, the demand for sureties created fresh problems for newspaper owners as it was not always easy for proprietors to get sureties. People in high places were reluctant to openly identify themselves with the critics of government. However, despite these obstacles, the Nigerian press continued the struggle until the colonial hegemony yielded showing that the pen is mightier than the sword. A special tribute therefore, goes to those early Nigerian press. Some of them involved in the struggle for freedom and democracy include: *The Lagos Observer, The West African Pilot, The Times of Nigeria, The Lagos Times, The Lagos Weekly Record, Lagos Standard, The Gold Coast Colony Advertiser etc.* Through these newspaper aided by various associations, the work of mobilization for nationalism was begun, paving the way for smooth transition to the formation of political parties in Nigeria. Hence, Okonkwo (1978:167) observed that through the newspaper, Nigerians became associated with the struggle for rights, freedom from and opposition to colonial domination, and later military oligarchy, and now, internal colonization and oppression by self-appointed politicians.

The Nigerian press and military dictatorship

Just as the Nigerian press rather than accept the situation as it was, became totally involved and committed to sensitizing the educated Nigerians of the injustice called colonialism, so also did they discover evils of military dictatorship and the negative effect on national development and then took up the gunlet again. For hardly had the dust of independence jubilation of wining and dancing in 1960 settled when our untrained politicians started messing up the polity through corruption and inter-ethnic rivalry. By 1965, the failures of our politicians, accentuated by political violence, killings, kidnaps and rigging of elections gave the nation's young officers the opportunity to strike in a military coup d'état.

However, despite the fact that the military had genuine reason to strike, allegedly to stem the tide of corruption and other socio-political vices, they not only overstayed their welcome, but proved to be worse in committing the offences they claimed prompted their intervention. Ezima (1999.:17) observed rightly that "they alleged that civilians took 10 percent kick back. By the time Abacha dropped dead in offices in 1998, the military were taking 100percent of the funds earmarked for development. They alleged that external debt was increasing. By the time Babangida stepped aside, Nigeria owed \$30 billion dollars, 20 times more than civilians owed." He concluded that under the military, Nigeria became a large prison in which innocent citizens were inmates and the soldiers were the warders. The prevalent attitude was that "might is right".

For instance, in 1969 under Gowon's regime, one Andrew Obeya, the secretary to the Benue / plateau State government almost snatched Hanatu, the wife of a Jos factory worker, but for the intervention of the late legal icon, Gani Fawehinmi. Although this should normally have been a private tussle between two citizens, the state government, under the military Governor got involved on behalf of its official. (*Newswatch*, September 21, 2009).

Also, it was under the Murtala/Obasanjo regime that we had the N2.8 billion case. The introduction of counter trade by the Muhammad Buhari regime nearly dragged Nigeria back to the primitive age of trade by barter. And as shocking as Babangida's profligacy was, the regime of General Sani Abacha took kleptomania to higher heights. The serving military officers in government dispensed economic patronage to those close to them while those outside of them were starved out of business. This brought so much increase in the rate of violent robberies. Although cases were made against civil politicians who corruptly enriched themselves, soldiers turned out to be committing more astounding crimes. The worst victims were the press, the human

rights and political activists. The murder of Ken Saro Wiwa, Kudirat Abiola and Dele Giwa are still fresh in our minds.

It was in the light of these prevailing circumstance that the press knew that the enemy within was even more deadly than the colonial masters that they had just forced out some few years back. Infact, there was the general belief in the Nigerian military regimes that unrestricted circulation of newspapers could constitute a danger to their government, hence, like the colonial overlord, they promulgated all kinds of decrees to gag the press. These decrees, however, did not stop the press from commenting on many wrong doings under the military. The Gowon era provides a good example of open confrontation between the press and military rulers. This eventually contributed to the fall of Gowon in 1975. According to Panter-Brick (1970:8) “The press played a vital role in preparing the ground for removing Gowon’s government through reporting views of the government opposers and showing its own dissatisfaction. This was especially the time of the *New Nigerian* (before its nationalization by the Federal Government) in spite of the fact that it was owned by government of six Northern States.”

To gag the press, the first major step taken by the Murtala/Obasanjo regime was the acquisition of 60 percent shares in the *Daily Times* and the total take-over of the *New Nigerian* by August 30, 1975. The government also went further to promulgate the Public Officers Protection Against False Accusation Decree Number 11 of 1976, which took a retroactive effect from July, 1975.

Also, to muzzle the press and protect itself from public criticism, the Buhari regime promulgated the obnoxious Degree Number 4 of 1984, known as Public Offence Protection against False Accusation. Olayiwola (1991) noted that the Babangida regime also promulgated decrees to curb political communication and gag the press. Journalists were imprisoned, newspaper/magazines were proscribed, university teachers were sacked, social critics were arrested and jailed, students were massacred and a press council was established. The murder of Dele Giwa by a parcel bomb, and the proscription of Newswatch for six months for publishing Cookey Political Bureau report were among the atrocities perpetrated by the military all aimed at crippling the press while the looting of the national treasury and violation of human rights lasted. But despite the indignities, the military was shown the way out in 1999 the same way the colonial hegemons were forced out following unbearable press onslaught. It follows that since the colonial days, through the military to date the Nigerian press has had no rest. It has been from one

repressive regime to another. But there is no rest and there should be no rest for one surrounded by enemies. According to Dusen (2003), during the 2003 elections in Nigeria, polling stations were “sacked by hired thugs. There were thefts of ballots boxes, kidnapping of polling station workers, swapping out of polling workers on Election Day with party loyalist... this is democracy at work in Nigeria. Murder and money, violence and fraud.” Lewis (2005) noted that of the 12 African countries surveyed in 2005, only Zimbabwe which has been described as an “outpost of tyranny” had a lower score than Nigeria.

Amucheazu (1999:205) captured the situation when he distinguished between civil rule and democratic governance. According to him “we must go beyond civil rule to real participatory democracy before we can really talk about political development and attendant social transformation, which is our goal.” He observed that some state Governments alienated the citizenry by their dictatorship and irresponsibility between 1979 -83 so much that military coup of December 1983 was once again received warmly with a sigh of relief. But ever since, matters have become worse by the day, there is danger. Hence the press should make the stitch in time to save us the nine!

Recommendations and conclusion

If we recall the past, we know that during the colonial period, the press served as a medium of sustained public debate and political protest, an uncompromising advocate of administrative and political reforms, and a seething critic of the excesses of the colonial order.

By its political activities, the press not only stimulated the emergence of nationalist movement, served as vehicles for changing political consciousness, but also played a prominent role as recruiters and mobilizes to political movement.

Omu (1968) and Duyile (1987) agreed that the press was among the major weapons used by the nationalist leadership to gain and consolidate political power and government control.

The Nigerian press also played a pivotal role in civil rule in Nigeria following series of military dictatorships. But from all indications, all is not yet well. There is need for a reorientation towards a participant political culture.

The Political Bureau report of 1987 captured the need for political education for easy mobilization, hence the establishment of the National Orientation Agency. Due to high level of illiteracy, poverty, frequent power outage, there is need to complement the role of the press with

the advocacy of the orientation agency. They can physically address people in the market, in the church in collaboration with church leaders who can also be co-opted, community leaders in their monthly meetings, town unions, university communities and other tertiary institutions.

As observed by Klapper (1960) when mass communication functions as an agent of change one of two conditions is likely to exist: either: (a) the mediating factors will be found to be inoperative and the effect of the media will be found to be direct; or (b) the mediating factors which normally favour reinforcement will be found to be themselves impelling toward change.

The various social groups and institutions listed above constitute the mediating factors that inhibit or facilitate the effects of communication. Hence, when contacted face-to-face, together with message from the press, the audience effect, we hope, will be monumental, more so as almost everybody is disenchanted with the low level of political participation in Nigeria. The press can play this crucial leadership role. It has done it before, it can do it again.

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