

The Press, Politics and Democratic Stability

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Abstract

It's axiomatic to note that, there is indeed an inextricable or close nexus between the realm of mass communication and that of politics. This to a large extent derives from the goal the two seek to achieve. Communication is the oil that lubricates the engine of political and social relations. Politics is meant to realise the goal of the society or to promote the common good. The myriads of political activities in the state and around its agencies can have great impact on the society at large through the instrumentality of mass communication. Arguably, while the complex operational environments of the mass media in older democracies are relatively vibrant and congenial, the same cannot be said of the new democracies. Yet as agents that are meant to check executive recklessness on the one hand and as instruments of sensitisation and mobilisation, the press in the advanced democracies have their own limitations that can hardly be ignored. The peculiar domain in which mass media operate in the less developed societies raises many germane issues that demands answers. The paper seeks to interrogate the nature and character of politics visible in African states that engendered hostile environment for the press. The study contends that there is the dire need for a paradigm shift from sensational reporting to messages that are capable of tilting the mass of the people towards the realisation of the goal of the society, including democratic stability.

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Introduction

In all forms of government, democratic or nondemocratic, communication occupies a central position. Even in autocratic regimes, the massive foundation and the instruments of decision making rests squarely on communication. In a democratic setting, the press is to ensure that the mass of the people are kept well-informed so as to remove the gulf between the government and the governed.

It should be noted that the realm of mass communication cannot be separated from that of politics. The press is expected to create awareness about government policies. This is even more so in many African countries. The failure of the governments to rise to the challenges of meeting the aspirations of the generality of the citizens have given rise to political indifference and apathy. “The growing popular indifference to politics and declining level of participation in civil society have led to the growing democratic deficit and a fading citizenship values and practices” (Gana, 1998:5). Therefore, the mass media has a duty to create awareness, mobilise, educate and relay the programmes of government to the citizens thereby enlisting their support. According to Easton (1965:273),

if the authorities are to be able to make decisions, to get them accepted as binding, and to put them into effect without the extensive use of coercion, solidarity must be developed not only around some set of authorities themselves but around, the major aspects of the system within which the authorities operates.

No other agent or body is best placed to play this role other than the press. It is for this reason that Chance and Fredin (1980:314) aver that: “one of the most powerful hopes advanced by theorists of representative government is that news media should remain free so (that) they may educate the public in making political choice.”

In spite of the gains that the press achieves, it is not without its own shortcomings and with its grave consequences on democratic stability. The paper is organised into five sections. Section one is the introduction while section two deals with conceptual interpretations. The third aspect of the study interrogates the press and democracy in Nigeria. This is followed by

the challenges confronting the press. The final section contains the concluding remarks.

Conceptual Interpretations

Concept of Politics

Politics, like other concepts in the social sciences, offers varied nuances and suffers from definitional pluralism, Kolawole (1997) defines politics as the science of human co-existence within a given state and under a government which regulates behaviours, allocates resources and defines the basis for internal and external relations. This definition sees politics from the social relations point of view, and as a means for allocating or distributing resources within a given territory.

Igbo (2006) cited in Alabi (2010) sees politics as “involving conflicts and their resolutions, negotiation or lobbying, influence and influential contacts, power; its distribution and utilisation, authority and the authoritative distribution of the national cake, policies, their formulation and management, growing interest, their articulation, defence and survival.” This perspective focuses attention on many aspects of politics as an important part of human relations.

We note that people would always go after political power in order to actively engage or participate in the allocation or distribution of scarce resources in the society. This perhaps reinforced the view of David Easton as he defined politics as “authoritative allocation of values for the society” (Easton, 1965). Lapalombara, (1997) also posits that, “the staff of politics is human beings; how they organise and behave politically, what causes variations in this and what consequences stem from these variations.”

Mass Media

In all political systems, mass media are critical to political communication. They provide means through which political opinions, and views are expressed by individuals, groups and the government itself (Omotoso, 2007:217). Mass media could be viewed as the pathways through which messages are disseminated. They are the channels through which information is passed across (Sadeeq, 2006:249). They are devices for moving messages across distance or time to accomplish mass communication

(Defleur and Dennis, 1981). They are specifically meant to pass across messages to a large number of people at the same time.

Democracy

The popularity of the concept of democracy in contemporary times cannot be under estimated. Even in the third world countries, every country wants to be labelled as being democratic. The world over, governments must always seek ways of translating the decision of the people into action. “Governments must have a way to determine what the people want and translate those wants into decision (Janda, Berry and Goldman, 1999:37). Democracy is “how to govern the society in such a way that power belongs to the people (Osaghae, 1992).

“Democracy, no matter the variant whether, classical or social democracy... talks about representative government and empowerment of the people” (Momoh, 2006).

Sallah, (2008) sees it as “fundamentally about the exercise of power by the people.” Lord Bryce (Quoted in Joseph, 1991) views democracy as “government in which the will of the majority of qualified citizens rules.” In all these, the notion of democracy epitomises that power resides with the people. In other words, the citizens are involved in the decision making process of the state. We argue that active participation on issues that affect the majority of the people often creates sense of belonging and to that extent fate on the leadership selection processes.

Mass Media and Democracy

There is a nexus between mass media and democracy. As both cannot be separated. “To govern is to communicate. To democratise is to ensure, free, unhindered flow of communication” (Saddeq, 2006:254-255).

The mass media has a duty to freely and consistently oil the engine of democracy and democratic stability, central to our argument is that information plays very important role in educating the mass of the people on government programmes and policies. It is important that we “accept the fact that the press creates and moulds public opinion and behaviour either positively or negatively” (Abdullahi, 1999). Given this view point, information passed to the people can either stabilise or destabilise the polity.

As Otufodurin (2013:3) aptly puts it, “the media can choose to inflame passion through sensational reports informed by commercial interests, be used as a propaganda tool for publication or broadcast of falsehood and undermine efforts to resolve conflicts.”

No matter the nature of the political system, politicians, irrespective of the ideological orientations, are open to various options to market their programmes to the public during electioneering campaigns. Such alternatives may include pamphlets distribution, house-to-house visits and a host of others. Yet, in all these, the most profound and far reaching means of communication that politicians often utilise to reach the people through the mass media. Others may be relevant but their processes of dissemination are cumbersome.

The media in Nigeria and other African countries have played prominent roles in the struggle for the enthronement of democracy and democratic governance. It is germane to state that, despite the various resolve breaking mechanisms planted by the government, most media outfits stood up to be counted during the heightened period of engagement with military rules, arrests, killings, maiming and closure of media organisations, which formed the thrust of responding to media agitations, in the period of dictatorial rule. They were not sufficient for the media to abandon the democratic struggle (Saliu, 2010:48). Sharing the same view, Kolawole (1998) affirms that “it is an irony that in spite of government’s repressive measures, the proscribed newspapers on de-proscription remained as vibrant, courageous and objective as never.” Little wonder that the late elder statesman, Awolowo (1981); poignantly noted that: “...any newspaper that values its freedom and believes sincerely in the liberty of the citizens of this country must wield the cudgel heavily, fearlessly and relentlessly against the oppressor and the budding dictators in our midst.”

The media provide the major channels for two-way flow of information. They are the dual capacity reflecting and shaping our political views. (Janda, Berry and Goldman, 1999). In my view and to demonstrate the synergy, the press must reinforce democracy while democracy must necessarily reinforce the press. In sum, media provides the leverage to mirror the level of democratic maturity in a country, and is in turn affected by the maturity of that democracy.

The Press in Contemporary African States

The propaganda attributes and functions of the media are more visible in totalitarian states and the autocratic environment of Africa (Otubanjo, 1999). The media face unwarranted sanctions. This was the case in the immediate post-independence era and under military dictatorship. African leaders, beginning from the post-independence era were intolerant of press freedom just like in totalitarian regimes. To them, journalists are not only agents of oppositions but enemies of the state. For instance, Mathieu Kerekou of Benin, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, Eyedema of Togo, Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya and a host of others were intolerant of the media. The ruthlessness of African leaders in censoring the press led the London-based Economist Magazine in September, 1983 to describe Africa's experiment with democracy as "Lull in the wind." The coups and counter-coups and military rule in many African states had debilitating consequences on the press and democracy.

The reasons are not farfetched. One, the long period of military dictatorship engendered the militarisation of the polity. Two, the masses of the people were polarised along ethnic, religious and cultural cleavages. In addition, promotion of personal interest over and above national interests gained prominence. Consequently, even though many African states have been disentangled from the grip and yoke of prolonged military dictatorship, the emergent political leaders are far from being committed to the goal of entrenching democracy and press freedom.

In Nigeria, for instance, the State House correspondent of the *Monitor Newspaper*, Cyril Mba was in September, 2003 expelled from Aso Rock Villa, the seat of government, by former President Olusegun Obasanjo over a write up that was unpalatable to the government. Similarly, *Nigeria Tribune* and *New Age* got their own bitter taste when their reporters and photographers were banned from Aso Rock by the former government. Again a resolution was passed by the Akwa-Ibom State House of Assembly to expel *The Punch* correspondent, Haruna Acheneje. The security operatives also arrested and incarcerated *The News* correspondent in Taraba State. A photo journalist with the *Daily Independent*, Tunde Akinleye was beaten to a state of coma and his camera smashed by security operatives

attached to the Vice President at the coronation of the Oba of Lagos in August, 2003. (Quoted in Sadeeq, 2006:259).

Given this scenario, political leaders in developing countries, including Nigeria, often claim to be democrats. However, this is just as a means to acquire political power. It is trite to posit that they pay lip service to democracy while the ingredient or attractions of democracy which include a vibrant press do not matter to them. Their style of governance is not at variance with the preceding military counterparts. Therefore, reign of fear and terror, gagging of the press and of course large scale human rights violations have become the norms. In spite of the manipulations, the mass media have clearly demonstrated the courage and relentlessness in their match towards democratic stability.

Role of the Press in Ensuring Democratic Stability

One of the salient attractions of democracy is literacy. In other words, democracy thrives in societies that are highly literate. Africa is a continent that is characterised by high levels of illiteracy, ignorance, diseases and wide spread poverty. The grinding poverty in Nigeria and, the comatose economy have aggravated the challenge of what to eat, what to wear, and how to settle school fees of children in many homes. Therefore, majority of the people are seriously battling with how to meet the basic necessities of lives. Getting actively involved in national, state or local governments' decision making is not only secondary but pedestrian. A personal experience will help to illustrate this. In year 2011, I was armed with my voter's card and walking towards a polling booth. It was on an election day and accidentally, I came across a herdsman with his herds facing another direction and I quickly encouraged him to come and vote. His response is that, "voting to elect the President or Governor is not important to me, what is important is how to feed my cattle."

Given this state of affairs, political participation is hampered, rather massively, by the low level of education of the citizens. The role of the press, in such context is fundamental by creating awareness so that citizens can begin to nurture a sense of belonging. This will make the people part and parcel of the entire political system. The politics of alienation prevalent in Africa must be discouraged through political education by the media.

According to Baran and Davis (2004), newspaper and other media need to do more than simply serve as bulletin board for information about current happenings. They should serve as vehicle for public education and debate. They should focus more on ideas and philosophy.... They should teach critical thinking skills and structure public discussion on important issues. Therefore, the press should be the agent of mass education and the defender of the rights of the citizens.

Hitherto, the dominant control of the media by the governments in Africa has transformed them into mere organs serving, primarily, the interest of the ruling class rather than the state. However, in contemporary times private ownership of media stations has increased tremendously. Today several “millions of citizens turn to the news media daily and ‘the media’ is a cornerstone in our democracies” (De Vreese, 2005). The wide coverage and reach of the mass media contributes greatly to information dissemination and political culture. According to Ayedun-Atuma (cited in Lambe, 2008),

the political culture provides the framework of principle and values which shape the demand, expectations, process perceptions and statues of the media, the political actors and the audience. Political culture determines the operative principle such as press speech, censorship, market mechanism, media plurality and media autonomy. It functions as mobilisation, agenda setting, legitimisation, political gate keeping

The Nigerian press which grew out of the zeal for democratic values has, from the onset, been unwavering in the vigorous pursuit of these values. However, a number of factors explain the incapability of the media to realise their goals as agencies for deepening of democracy and democratic values. One, the tottering economy that has left many industries closed has had grave consequences on the press. Also, many of the private owned newspaper fraternise with the government for contracts. In addition, many newspaper proprietors have identified with one political party or the other, particularly the ruling party. Without mincing words, the harsh and hostile economic environment has called to question the vibrancy and criticality of some of the newspaper in their duty as the “watch dog”.

Concluding Remarks

Attempt has been made in this paper to show that there is a synergy between the realm of mass communication and that of politics. The nature and character of African politics and the attitude of politicians towards power combine to affect the ecology in which mass media operate. In a fundamental sense, since most African states attained independence, the press has been in the vanguard in the enthronement of democracy and the deepening of democratic values.

Yet, the style of governance of African leaders poses serious challenges to the press as an agency that is meant to close the gap between the government and the governed. With the tremendous participation in the private ownership of the newspaper, in contemporary times, Nigerian press has enormously demonstrated the zeal and zest to deepen democracy and collaborate with other democratic forces to sensitise, mobilise and educate the mass of the people in order to achieve the goal of democratisation, democracy and democratic stability. Mass media in Nigeria and many African states have engaged in both cooperation and confrontation strategies in engendering democratic stability. No matter the perspective we view it, the press has joined forces with other bodies to stabilise the democratic space.

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African Journal of Stability & Development Vol. 11, No. 2, 2018

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