

MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: THE 4TH REPUBLIC EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

The new democratic experiment in Nigeria, after years of military rule, came to reality on the 29th May, 1999, thus, setting the pace for the Fourth Republic. This was facilitated by the media support of democracy and renunciation of the stifling military dictatorial governments. The democratic experiment is now two years. How have the media performed vis-a-vis political, economic and social issues in the body polity of Nigeria? This shall be the crux of this paper.

Conceptual Clarification

Democracy

The term Democracy is capable of having many definitions and connotations to different schools of thoughts. However, we would adopt the definition by Obasanjo and Mabogunje (1992:1) that:

The concept of democracy should be examined from two points of view, that is, as ideology and as politics. Democracy, as ideology, is the philosophy of governance which sets a high premium on the basic freedom or fundamental human rights of the citizen, the rule of law, the right to property, the flow of information and the right of choice between alternative political positions ... democracy as politics is concerned with the institutions and processes of governance. These institutions and the procedures of governance that they elicit tend to foster consensus whilst simultaneously promoting and sustaining respect for the ideology of democracy.

Plausible as this definition looks, does it reflect the new democratic set up in Nigeria? Why are the issues raised in the definition not being perceived or felt in the body polity? These are questions that should be axiomatic in the minds of every Nigerian and most importantly the media as the fourth estate of the realm.

Media

Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution stipulates what constitutes *the media*, viz: "*the press (Newspapers, Magazines), radio and television*". These are classified as print and electronic/broadcast media respectively. These are media of information dissemination, education and entertainment. But how have they fared in reporting issues that bother on governance in Nigeria especially the current dispensation?

Ideally, in a democratic set-up like Nigeria, a lot is demanded from the mass media. Participants at the African Leadership Forum (ALF) farmhouse dialogue streamlined what we feel the mass media should not only embrace but also carry out. These are:

- i. To monitor the performance of the government with a view to preventing deviation from expressly stated objectives;
- ii. To help strengthen the economic, social and political fabric of the nation;
- iii. To assist in setting agenda of priorities in the social, cultural, political and economic development of the nation;
- iv. To provide a forum through which the governed could react to government policies and activities. (Obasanjo & Mabogunje 1992:149)

The journalist is therefore faced with the challenges of putting into practice the functions of the mass media such as "reporting the news, interpreting same, influencing the citizen's opinions and socialising the citizens about politics" (Janda, *et al*, 1992:188).

The subsequent section of this paper deals with the manner in which the media have handled vital and pertinent issues bothering on the political system in Nigeria.

The Sharia Issue

The issue of the Sharia declared by the Zamfara State Governor, Alhaji Ahmed Sani brought about series of problems and reactions in Nigeria. For the most part, people were killed both in North and the South. People were embarrassed at motor parks: there were unlawful arrests and those who violated the Sharia law had their hands amputated. The media reportage of the issues also does not help matters. The papers/media in the North tend to defend its introduction since it is predominantly Muslim, while the Southern media denounce it. Many people had their hands amputated for stealing especially the poor people. This act violates the international human rights principles.

The act of declaration itself is against the constitutional provision as provided for in Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution. Section 38 subsection 1-3 upholds the practice of various religions in the country and not state religion as misquoted by the Governor in an interview with *ThisDay* Newspaper of April 4, 2000. His attitude towards the opponents of Sharia, is to us, undemocratic as can be seen from this statement below; "We don't care about comments and reaction from anybody over this (Sharia) issue". (*ThisDay*, 4th April, 2000:1).

Both the Executive, Legislature and the Judiciary have not handled the issue satisfactorily because so many interests would be offended. However, one Hon. Olaka Nwogu appealed to the government of the day to tackle the issue headlong. According to him, "This is a time bomb and the earlier we resolve the constitutionality of the

Sharia, the better". (Olawale and Buhari, 2000:2).

The journalist's role here is to create room for meaningful dialogue to take place and where the rights of others would not be infringed upon. Waziri Adio of *ThisDay* (2/4/2000:48) notes that:

On both sides of the divide, ignorance, arrogance and emotion have defined the debate. Inevitably, violence, has come in ... But dialogue is actually the only thing that has been absent here.

The media must not take sides on sensitive national issues whether from the North or the South. Objective reporting of the truth is the crux of the matter and the best way to bring about national unity and integration.

Certificate Scandals

The certificate verification exercise was one of the issues that the media focused on at the early stage of this regime but after sometime, it was put in the cooler. The certificate scandal started with Alhaji Salisu Buhari, the former Speaker of the House of Representatives and later on moved to the Senate where the integrity of the former President, Hon. Evan Ewerem's certificates were also questioned. The last was that of Ahmed Tinubu, Lagos State Governor. Reviewing the media coverage/reportage of these incidents, it was glaring that the press/media took sides with the political actors involved. The Buhari saga was championed by the press in the South with magazines/newspapers like, *The News, Tell, Nigerian Tribune*, to mention but a few, which actually pressurised to ensure that Buhari was removed. And when it came to the case of Tinubu, the media mentioned above did not pursue vigorously his removal as was the case with Buhari. Instead, it was papers like *New Nigerian, Weekly Trust, Today*, etc., which are based in the North that advocated for his removal from office.

Generally, the House Committees on Certificate Verification was constituted but up to this moment, the press has not been able to give a report of what is happening about it in the National Assembly. This means that they do not go out to investigate issues independent of political wranglings which normally results in news leak. There must be conscious efforts by the media to monitor aspects of life as it relates to democracy and good governance in every sector of the economy. This is not the case now.

Moreso, there seems to be connivance between the press and politicians on sensitive

issues. Once all parties have been settled, money wise, everything lies low and investigation stops. Janda, *et al* (1992:205) considers this unseemingly attitude or practice as pack journalism where:

... Journalists adopt similar viewpoint toward the news simply because they hang around together, exchanging information and defining the day's news. Often a story hounded by the pack does not offer enough substance to sustain pursuit and so it is abandoned as quickly as it was begun.

Resource Control

This is the issue that is trying to widen the gap between the Southern and the Northern regions on the one side and the Southern States and the Federal Government on the other side.

The issue is made more contentious because the federal government has taken the case of on-shore - off-shore dichotomy to the Supreme Court for constitutional interpretation. The political leaders in the Southern states prefer a political resolution of the case rather than the constitutional and legal resolutions.

The mass media have adequately publicised this issue to a point that the ignorance that initially beclouded it has been reduced. One impressive thing about it was the mass media's reports of the natural resources found in all the states of the federation (*The Week*, April 30, 2001). This is important because the clamour for resource control by the governors of the southern states is about the control of petroleum and petroleum resources. By this singular act, the media have made Nigerians aware of the availability of other important resources outside petroleum.

Corruption

The major programme of this democratic regime is the declaration of corruption as a terrible criminal act that must be fought resolutely. This was the reason for the anti-corruption law whose copies are being distributed nationwide. The mass media have adequately publicised the cases of scandal in the Senate under the presidency of Chuba Okadigbo and Pius Anyim (*Newswatch*, August 14, 2000:7; *ThisDay*, April 29, 2001:14). This is how it should be since they passed the bill into law.

However, the mass media are not always persistent and investigative in their reports of these corrupt practices whenever they are informed of such. An example is the allegation that money was given to the members of the House of Representatives to remove the Speaker. The money was said to be given by the presidency through Peter Odili (Governor of Rivers State) and the N.A. Liaison Officer and this money was deposited at the floor of the House for all to see. What happened to that issue? Nigeria wants an answer from the press.

Legislative Versus Executive Coverage

Daily reporting of activities in the media gives the new democratic dispensation a sense of direction. However, there are two observable trends in the mass media reports of the legislature/executive.

First, the mass media seem to devote more time and space to the coverage of the executive than the legislative arm of government. The chairmen, commissioners, ministers, governors and the President still attract more attention than the honourable members of the local, state and national assemblies.

Second, the executive arm of government gets more positive coverage as against the legislative arm which gets only more of the negative coverage. Barely six months into the Fourth Republic, most houses of Assembly were impeaching their speakers. The nature of reporting creates tension rather than bring the parties to settle the issue amicably. This sends bad signal to other peaceful houses to foment trouble. Oyo, Anambra, Nassarawa, Taraba, and other Houses of Assembly are cases in point.

The judicial arm of government is worst in terms of mass media coverage, let alone, positive coverage. We know that it is the trend in other countries such as the United States, where Janda, *et al* (1992:206) have found out that in a year, television stations devoted an average of seven and a half minutes to the President (executive) compared with one minute for the Congress (legislature) and only half a minute for the judiciary.

This trend is very wrong in the sense that in terms of numerical strength, the legislature surpasses the executive and in terms of contact and protection of the people's interests, the legislators are the representatives of all groups in Nigeria.

The pattern of media coverage, therefore, is still more urban based, executive-concentrated and tilts towards activities of the elite. This is as much as to say that the media are partisan and tend to uphold the status quo.

However, the rural areas are getting more coverage than before as seen in the programme "from the grassroots" of NTA Network, 'Rural Watch' NTA, Jos and advertisements of activities from various local government in the press. Ironically, most of these publicity are determined by the local government officials that pay for such as against the media itself doing such purely on account of the newsworthy events. The local government councils that get more publicity are those that are in the state capitals and those in crises that have adverse effects on the state or the nation.

The media also still continue with the military mentality as can be seen in their reports. The continuous use of military expressions such as "let's go to war" (*TheWeek*, April 30, 2001), "North set for war" (*The News*, December 4, 2001), etc., are not encouraging. The reports of coup as reported by *Tell* magazine (as alleged by Senator Waku, Gani Fahinwemi and Governor Adéfáratí), are still part of the military mentality. The mass media still exhibit some of the sectional tendency typical of the first and second republics. This is not healthy for the Fourth Republic to thrive.

The issue of the next president and other national issues are normally seen from the sectional angle. *Weekly Trust*, *Hallmark* and *Nigerian Tribune* newspapers still maintain their Northern, Eastern and Western interests respectively. This was what happened in the First Republic and which prompted Omu (1996:10) to assert that the newspaper press provided a remarkable example of overzealous and irresponsible partisanship and recklessness.

This same practice continued in the Second Republic and at a higher level. Nwosu (1990:131) captures the trend thus:

The press played ignoble role during Shagari regime in which it was divisive, partisan, fallacious and scandalous and grossly unpatriotic and this seems to be the reason why the masses and government see the mass media as irresponsible.

We hope that the media does not degenerate to this level in this democratic republic. This is because the press should not be championing the course of sectional interests which if not well managed can lead to military re-emergence - a thing abhorred in the system.

Mass Media Achievements

The present democratic era has given rise to some media activities and programmes which should be considered as major landmarks cum achievements. Some of these programmes are:

- i) The President speaks of FRCN,
- ii) The Presidential Media Chat of NTA,
- iii) The Senate Media Chat of NTA,
- iv) The morning broadcast and its programmes such as One-on-One, From the Grassroots, etc.
- v) Tuesday live on NTA
- vi) Point blank on NTA, etc.
- vii) Assembly in Focus
- viii) National media tour.

The different state broadcast stations have their people-oriented programmes too. In Plateau State, we have 'Lighthouse Chat' every Saturday on NTA Jos, 'Details' on PRTV every Saturday morning, etc. These are media programmes that enable the electorate to interact with their elected representatives - both at the national, state and local government. It means there is participation. However, even though they are people-oriented programmes, only a few elite who have access to the Tv/Radio and telephone contribute to the discussions.

The media have started setting political agenda as was the case with *ThisDay's* "Meet the Nation and Town Hall Meetings" programmes. The workshop organised by the Management of *ThisDay* Newspapers (29/4/2001) on the exchange rate of the Naira is a laudable development. It calls for all stakeholders in the sector to rub minds with a view to revamping the ailing Nigerian economy. The Naira has been so devalued that the inflationary trend is at its peak.

ThisDay had earlier in the year also organised a "Meet the Nation" programme trying to bring different ethnic groups in the six geo-political zones to a round table conference. This was to reduce the ethnic tension that arose as a result of misunderstanding that brought up ethnic militias such as OPC, MASSOB, APC, Bakkasi boys, etc.

Recommendations

The mass media in this era have been trying but their efforts can be improved upon. Therefore, we recommend that:

- i) The mass media should help in entrenching the political culture of orderly succession of one regime to another (civilian). They can do this by engaging in the political education of the electorate to see election and succession not as a do-or-die affair.
- ii) The media should always investigate events that come from government officials for proper knowledge of such events.

- iii) The mass media should hold government officials accountable to the people for their unfulfilled promises. They should consequently investigate why promises are not kept by politicians.
- iv) The mass media houses should be engaged in constant in-house training of their staff for better output.
- v) There should be local government media outfits for proper coverage of the grassroots rather than relying on the private, state and federal government media.
- vi) The mass media should begin to do precision journalism. This is because as Janda, *et al* (1992:206) have said:

The media now have the tools to do a better job of reporting mass opinion than before and they use those tools extensively in doing precision journalism with sophisticated data collection and analysis techniques.

Therefore, like the *New York Times* and CBS of America, the Nigerian media should start conducting surveys of public opinion on national issues to gauge people's feelings about what they report daily.

Conclusion

From the foregoing therefore, the media has a lot to contribute to the democratic dispensation. The creative initiative must come from the media, either government controlled or private, for any meaningful service to democratic values and development. The onus is on the politicians and government machinery to live above board and allow the media some freedom or independence to operate. The media must also be objective and truthful in its reporting, research, and coverage in order to positively affect the socio-political and economic setting.

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