



Media and The Struggle for Democracy in Africa

DESMOND ONYEMECHI OKOCHA, PhD & VIVIAN NWOKEJI –UDEH

Department of Mass Communication Bingham University, Karu, Nasarawa State, Nigeria desmondoo@binghamuni.edu.ng
 Department of Mass Communication Bingham University, Karu, Nasarawa State, Nigeria vivannwokeji@yahoo.com

Abstract

For several years in the African continent, a significant part of the continent's history was under various military regimes. Till recently, when most African countries transitioned from military dictatorship and autocracy to civil rule or democratic rule; deliberate and concerted efforts have been made by Africans and the mass media towards sustaining, consolidating and nurturing Africa's democracy. As crucial as the mass media is in all spheres of life vis-à-vis democratic processes, not much attention has been paid to the role and efforts the mass media has played and are still playing in sustaining democracy in Africa. This paper anchored on the Democratic Participant Theory, x-rays the role of the Mass media in the entrenchment and sustenance of democracy in Africa. It concludes that the sustainability of democracy in Africa depends on a free media, good governance, transparency and accountability in governance. It further recommends that the mass media should educate the electorates during elections against selling their votes to "Ghana Must Go" or bag politicians and to encourage free and fair elections in order to ensure that only credible politicians get elected into positions in Africa.

Keywords: Africa, Democracy, Freedom of expression, Mass Media and Media practitioner

Introduction

Over the years many African countries have battled with the institution of democracy. This is because the mass media (comprising of newspapers, magazines, radio and television) has been undergoing some kinds of subjugation and attacks by some political leaders especially during military regime. Freedom of expression which is one of the fundamental human rights has not been fully enjoyed by the media in most African countries including Nigeria (Alma and Perez, 2014). Many a times media practitioners have been made to suffer hardships and other forms of humiliation in the course of doing their jobs. These humiliations and intimidations are opposed to true democracy.

In any democratic government, citizens have the freedom to express their views without fear of intimidation or attacks. However, in some African countries, this freedom is not enjoyed.

The historical evolution of democratic system of governance in most African countries can be traced to 1990s. Successive governments in Africa succumbed to the pressures and demands for political reforms in the face of increasing disenchantment under various military regimes; hence, the agitations for democratic system of government in the continent (Bwakan, 2013). In the

aftermath of cold internal wars and grumbings, African leaders found it increasingly difficult to hold on to prolonged power due to the massive agitations for political change that was gaining great support from the masses. It took a combined effort of the mass media, trade unions and civil society organizations to fast-track the process and emergence of democratic system of governance in most African countries (Harber, 2004). For instance, in Ghana, Asare (2009) asserts that the media played significant roles in the entrenchment and sustenance of Ghana's democracy since 1992 and the country's democracy journey started very well but was plagued by the series of military coup d'etat which marred the beauty of the vibrant Ghana's democracy and trampled on the rights of many Ghanaians. In South Africa, media practitioners fought against the apartheid regime in the 1990s. Harber (2004) says in South Africa, most media practitioners emerged from many years of fighting against state, corporate and political pressures under the apartheid in the 1990s with a fierce commitment to independence.

However, this great feat of having a democratic system of governance was not achieved without some media practitioners paying the supreme price with their precious lives. For example in Nigeria,

many media practitioners had their precious lives cut short in their prime ages, some were brutalized and jailed (Bwakan, 2013). For example, Bwakan (2013) cited the case of Dele Giwa, the Editor-in-Chief of *Newswatch* magazine who was one of Nigeria's fire-brand Journalists that was assassinated with a letter bomb in October 19, 1986 in Lagos during the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida. Continuing, Bwakan hints that Giwa was assassinated because of his doggedness in agitating for Nigeria's transition from military rule to democratic rule. As a way of frustrating the agitations for democratic governance in Nigeria, the then military regime proscribed the *Newswatch* magazine for about six months. The attack on *Newswatch* magazine was so fierce that even its Lagos office was sealed in April, 1987 for publishing the report of a political bureau set-up to fashion out a new political agenda for Nigeria's third republic (Sambe, 2008).

In the same vein, another ace correspondent of *The News* magazine, by name Bagauda Kaltho was murdered with a bomb by Abacha's hit squad on January 19, 1997 in Durbar hotel (Bwakan 2013). The military also accused bold and fearless Journalists intentionally of plotting coup and subsequently incarcerated them in varied dehumanizing conditions. These and many others are some offensive attacks by the military dictators to silence the media.

The media is the eye of the nation and as such the masses rely heavily on the efforts of the media for updates on any issue relating to the citizens and the nation at large (Crosbie, 2002). Media practitioners have been struggling over the years to gain their freedom as the voice of the masses but their efforts seems to be limited due to the intimidating activities of some political leaders. However, despite these attacks and intimidation, the mass media has never relented in agitating for a democratic system of governance where freedom of the masses, the media and freedom of expression is guaranteed (Crosbie, 2002). It is based on the foregoing that the authors wish to examine the media and the struggle for democracy in Africa.

Literature Review

Conceptual Clarification

Democracy

Democracy is a system of government where citizens of a state exercise power to rule the state, either directly or through elective representative (Nwogu, 2015). It empowers the masses or citizens to exercise political control over the form and functions of their government. Democracy is popularly defined as the government of the people, by the people and for the people". The commonest features of democracy are; freedom of expression, elections, human rights and protection of individual's liberties and rights (Munck, 2014).

According to Obasanjo and Mabogunje (1992), the concept of democracy is better discussed from the points of ideology and politics. As an ideology, democracy is a philosophy of governance which places high premium on the basic fundamental human rights of the citizens, the rule of law, the right to property, free flow of information and the right of choice between alternative political positions. Democracy as politics is concerned with the institutions and processes of governance that prompts as well as fosters consensus that promote and sustain democratic ideals.

UN (2014) declaration on Human Rights notes some of the essential elements of democracy as follows;

- i. Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms'
- ii. Freedom of association
- iii. Freedom expression and opinion
- iv. Access to power and its exercise in accordance with the rule of law
- v. Holding of periodic elections by universal suffrage and by secret ballot as the expression of the will of the people

In true democracy, citizens enjoy freedom of expression. Media practitioners have the leverage to speak against the evils in the land or to challenge bad governance. This is because the interest of the masses is the bane of all democratic government.

Mass Media

Mass media refer to the channels of communication that involves transmitting information in some ways or forms to large numbers of people (Crosbie, 2002). It is generally referred to as one-to many communications. Mass media are channels of communication in modern society. Mass Media can be classified broadly into two; the print (newspaper, magazine, books and pamphlets) and electronic media (radio and television) but lately social or new media emerged as another form of media.

McQuail (2000) posits mass media as the organised means of communicating publicly and at a distance to relatively large, heterogeneous and anonymous audience simultaneously. Mass media uses gadgets in disseminating information through radio, television, newspapers, magazines, books, pamphlets and lately social/new media channels such as facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok among others.

Primarily, the function of mass media is to disseminate information to the masses through radio, television, radio, television and social media (Crosbie, 2002). The aim of disseminating information is to create awareness on the rights of the citizens. It also aimed at informing the masses about the things happening around them. The role of the Media in information dissemination is at the pivot of the growth and development of societies. The media raises the awareness of audience and listener in the case of radio, television (viewer), reader in the cases of both newspaper, magazines, books and pamphlets (Dutton, O'Sullivan & Rayne, 1998).

Media and the Struggle for Democracy in Africa

The media has been an indispensable and formidable force in entrenching democracy in Africa. The bravery and courage demonstrated and exhibited by African media practitioners during the military reigns in most Africa continent is worthy of commendation as many of them lost their precious lives in the course of the struggle for the entrenchment of democracy in Africa. It is an undisputable fact that, the mass media has played very important role in the struggle for democracy in

numerous African countries, Nigeria inclusive (Abubakar, 2001). Over thirty years after most African countries embraced democratic system of governance, the media is still playing vital role in ensuring the sustainability of democratic values in most African countries. Ojo (2003) posits that in countries that have gone through autocratic and dictatorial rule, the mass media have helped in the entrenchment of democracy and cooperation between democratic leaders and the citizenry through ideological persuasions that has helped to legitimize the democratic government and won the loyalty of the people.

According to Ngara and Esebeonu (2012) the media has played significant roles in ensuring democracy in most African countries including Nigeria. Continuing, Ngara and Esebeonu noted that the mass media has long been a leading edge of social warfare and change in the African continent. It performed an essential and lively position inside the anti-colonial battle and become instrumental in the eventual attainment of political independence of many countries on the continent. At some stage in the colonial length, the mass media turned into especially beneficial in exposing the misrule, exploitation and evil of colonial rule to the worldwide community and the mobilization of the civil society organizations to mount pressure on the colonial authorities that ultimately culminated inside the independence of African colonial territories (Adesoji, 2006). In Tanzania, Ghana, Namibia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Gambia, and much greater currently in South Africa, the successes recorded via nationalists consisting of Julius Nyerere, Kwameh Nkrumah, Obafemi Awolowo, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Nelson Mandela in their struggles towards the colonial governments have been very plenty tied to the resilience and vibrancy of the anti-colonial press (Adesoji, 2006). For example, the African countrywide Congress (ANC) virile propaganda gadget personified in Nelson Mandela and the anti-apartheid press (the alternative press) has become an arrowhead of the liberation warfare (Ngoa 2010).

Furthermore, in Ghana, the overdue Kwame Nkrumah's independence battle successes have

been attributed to a colourful anti-colonial press (Ngoa, 2010). Within the specific case of Nigeria, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe anti-colonial marketing campaign changed into very plenty associated with his media employer The West African Pilot (Malaolu, 2004). Different mass media outfits together with Lagos Weekly, The each day Comet and others became the voice of African nationalists.

In most African countries, there are no systematic national communication policies aimed at achieving collective national goals as expressed in the Coat of Arms. As a result, mass media messages reflected the disputations, selfish competition and conflicts among rival political elites on the one hand and between them and the mass media practitioners on the other. In these circumstances, the mass media often find themselves in the crossroad between globalization and the preservation of national interest and dominant culture

According to Isola (2008) mass media in African countries, especially northern African Islamic countries are characterized by a large dose of state intervention. Thus the level of freedom for media practitioners operating in Arab countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Libya, Tunisia and Algeria is low. In these countries, media practitioners face physical harassments, threats and assault by state agents. In Somalia, where a protracted armed conflict and political crisis have rendered the state comatose, it has the worst record for providing the worst scenario for professional activities of the media (Isola, 2000). With the exception of Iraq, a lot more media practitioners were killed in Somalia than in other Arab countries.

The Amman Center for Human Rights Studies (2006) report reveals that Mauritania provides the best and most conducive operating environment for the African Arab media because the media are allowed enough freedom to encourage them to contribute to democratic governance. In some weak and failed states, such as Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Rwanda, the mass media reflected the environment within which they operate (Imoh, 2013). The risk of operating as a journalist or media owner is high in such states and this discourages media professionals and investors in the media. The

most plausible option is for the media practitioner or owners to align with the dominant political groups who may facilitate media operation in exchange for media support and patronage to sustain the ruling groups ideologies, interests or hold on to power Akinfeleye (2006).

Rwanda is another country where media practitioners had terrible experience. Isola (2008) states that in the 1994 Rwanda genocide, radio and other print media were used in coordinating the effort to prosecute mass murder of the Tutsi ethnic group by the Hutu dominated government forces and civilians. In Zimbabwe, (where the media refused to collaborate with the state or dominant groups to perpetuate atrocities during crisis), the media has become a victim of official repression by the state (Imoh, 2013). The constant harassment of journalists and media establishments has resulted in the inability of the media to perform their role as watchdog of society.

Theoretical Framework

Democratic Participant Media Theory

The Democratic Participant Media Theory was formulated by Dennis McQuail in 1987. It calls for the decentralisation and democratisation of the media industry. The democratisation and decentralisation of the media industry allows for easy access to channels of communication and active participation of community members in media content.

McQuail (1987), says the focal points of the theory are the needs, interests and aspirations of the active listeners in a political society which has to do with the right to relevant information, the right to reply, the right to use the media in small scale settings for the interest of community, small groups and sub-culture. Anaeto and Solo-Anaeto (2010) highlight some of the principles of the theory as follows:

- i. Media organizations and contents should not be subject to centralized political or state bureaucratic control.
- ii. Certain social needs relating to mass media are not adequately expressed through individual demands or through the state and its major

- institutions.
- iii. Media should exist primarily for their audiences and not for the media organisation, profession or clients of the media.
 - iv. Small-scale, participative media forums are better than large-scale, one-way, professional media.

The theory advocated for democratisation of the media industry, therefore the media should be interactive, participatory and people should be involved in all the stages of media development and should have the right to communication and reply. The media through reportage should promote and sustain democratic values in the African continent.

Functions of the Media in Democracy

Democracy is all about the people. In any democratic government the focus is on people. That is why the masses decide the order of the day. Consequently the media plays greater roles in democracy. Akinfeleye (2006) posits that the basic philosophical roles of media in any democratic society, such as the Nigeria include to inform, educate, entertain, and set agenda for government. Monitor governance and hold government accountable to the masses among others.

In the same manner, Dakas (2003) espouse the functions of the media to include; informing, educating and enlightening the masses on their right and exercising the freedom of expression as enshrined in Section 39 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

On his part, Imoh (2013) provides other roles of the media in a democratic society as following:

- i. To convey information to the people with a view to letting them know how their mandate is being discharged.
- ii. To provide a forum through which the governed could react to government policies and activities.
- iii. To provide such analysis as would enable the people secure an adequate understanding of events and background to events.
- iv. To assist in the articulation and pursuit of national interest.

- v. To help strengthen the economic, social and political fabric of the nation.

Also, Sambe (2008) opines that one of the functions of the media is the surveillance role under which the media serves as the eyes and ears of the society by alerting the society of changes that are taking place around them. This is the reason why the media is referred to as the “watchdog” of the society. The watch dog role is done by exposing political corruption and bad governance at all levels of government. The media provides immediate connection with the world as the society tune to radio, television and social media platforms for breaking news (Sambe, 2008).

Challenges of Media in the Struggle for Democracy in Nigeria

Since the return of democracy in Nigeria the mass media and media practitioners have come under serious prosecutions and reprisal attacks due to the media watchdog role in the society. Some media practitioners have been arrested, intimidated and harassed even under the present democratic dispensation. This is in spite of the fact that Nigerian constitution empowers the media (press) to hold and express opinions and information. Sambe (2008) says under the right to freedom of expression and press, Section 39 (1) of the 1999 Constitution as amended states that:

... "Every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference. Without prejudice to the generality of subsection (1) of the section, every person shall be entitled to own, establish and operate any medium for the dissemination of information, ideas and opinions"

Sambe (2008) further explains that Section 40 of constitution attempted to provide for the right to be informed of government activities. It states that:

...every citizen of Nigeria shall be entitled to know and be informed of the activities of the state and any of the organs and agencies.

In spite of the acknowledgement of the role and importance of mass media in the constitution, as the “Fourth Estate of the Realm”. The media acts as the watchdog and helps checkmate the three arms of the government (The Executive, Judiciary and Legislature). However, the media in Nigeria is yet to be seen as truly playing the role of checkmating the Executive, Legislative and Judiciary arms of government due to the fact that most of the media outfits are owned by either politicians or friends of politicians. Hence ownership or allegiance of media owners is an inhibiting factor for the attainment of democracy in Nigeria.

Highlighting some of the factors impeding, the media from discharging its full responsibilities of informing, educating, entertaining and monitoring and holding government accountable to the masses, Imoh (2013) identifies some of the factors that constrain the efficacy of mass media in discharging its functions in the present democratic society. Some of them as identified by Imoh (2013) include low level of infrastructural development and essential facilities, pattern of media ownership and control, unstable socio-economic and unfavourable political conditions, low level of literacy and political education, ethnicity, parochialism, unfavorable legal environment and lack of private sector involvement.

Others factors include religious pluralism and military intervention as witnessed in Nigeria, Uganda, Burkina Faso, Ghana and other African countries (Sambe, 2008).

Conclusion

The media in most African countries have gone through turbulent times that spans the colonial period, to days of coup d'etats. Till date the continent trudges towards stable democracy. Yet, relative freedom of expression and democratic stability are some features and beauty of the democracy being experienced in Africa. The Mass media has played a vital role in ensuring the sustenance of the democracy by providing useful information to the masses to make informed decisions in crucial periods such as during elections. For democracy to be sustained in the African

continent, media practitioners must be empowered to freely operate without any form of harassment, threat and intimidation. The practitioners must be seen discharging their constitutional responsibilities responsibly and objectively by informing the masses of new development around them as well as expose corrupt practices in government circle through investigative journalism and reporting which will serve as the panacea for Africa's development problem.

Recommendations

- i. If Africa's democracy must be sustained and be seen as true democracy in the eyes of the world, harassment, arrest and intimidations of media practitioners should be stop and the practitioners must be objective and responsive in their reportage.
- ii. The masses should be given unhindered access to the various media platforms (newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations) to vent their feelings against bad governance, for good governance in either English language and vernacular for ease of communication.
- iii. The media should educate the electorates during elections against selling their votes to “Ghana Must Go” or bag politicians and to be bold enough to ask the money bag politicians the source of their money.
- iv. The media should educate the electorates on the consequences of ballot box snatching and election violence.
- v. Media practitioners should be more investigative in their reportage by exposing corrupt practices or tendencies in order to promote good governance and accountability in government.

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