
Media, Democracy and Governance: The Nigeria Experience

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Abstract

This paper addresses Media, Democracy and Governance from a Nigerian perspective, especially since May 29, 1999, when the country returned to democratic rule after decades of brutal military dictatorships. The struggle for democratic rule in Nigeria was championed by ordinary Nigerians, Non-governmental Organization and the private arm of the media which exposed the bad sides of military politics. In gathering data for this work, the author depended largely on secondary sources such as textbooks, journals and newspapers, which are replete with infractions of democratic norms and practices. From all indications, Nigeria's democracy is faced with a lot of challenges many of which remain, surprisingly, unaddressed. It does not seem, however, that many Nigerians are happy about their situation. Among other things the ruling class in Nigeria must wake up to its responsibility of providing competent governance, that de-emphasizes self, ethnicity and corruption while hard working and honest persons should be encouraged to participate in the electoral process. Government must also be continually held accountable to the Nigerian people who, at least, in principle, are the creators of any government in power. In addition, Nigeria should work hard to address the high level of social inequality in the country.

1. Introduction

Nigeria is blessed with material and human resources. Its crude oil, which was first exploited in a little known town of Obibiri, in what is now Rivers State in South-South Nigeria, has earned huge petrol – Dollars in the past sixty years. Herein lies the irony of a country which abandoned its agricultural sector and thoughtlessly embraced the easy life which crude oil revenue guaranteed. This situation produced unpalatable consequences for the country with all attention now placed on oil and a Unitary Federal Government foisted on the nation by the Military, the hardwork and dignity of labour which agriculture encouraged gradually, but steadily, disappeared. In its place was a culture of consumption and greed, especially by the political elite who struggled to access state power, at all costs as it gave it unfettered wealth. This development also encouraged rent-seeking behavior and endemic corruption (Joab-Peterside, 2016).

Today, Nigeria is in dire straits with a huge drop in oil revenue. The cry for a diversification of the economy has remained a mere political rhetoric as no practical steps have been taken to actualize it. Agriculture has been left to the aged with the uneconomic shifting cultivation and antiquated technology. Farmers still use machetes and hoes, resulting in low yields. Encouraged by the euphoria of Petro Dollars many youths, including university graduates, are roaming the streets in search of non-existent white collar jobs. In 2010, the rate of unemployment was officially put at 21.1 percent (Joab-Peterside, 2016). One can only imagine

the level of unemployment and underemployment since then given the near economic paralysis of the country.

2. Definition of Terms

In order to achieve a measure of conceptual and operational clarity, there is need to define some terms. These include mass media, democracy and governance.

Mass Media: Ike (2005) simply sees mass media as “the institutions of mass communications such as radio, television, newspaper and magazine”. On the other hand, Imhonopi and Urim (2009, p.22) define the mass media in the following words: “the mass media play a major role in promotion and sustenance of the norms and values of a society”. Nwanne (2012, p.62) defined mass media as “all the gadgets, tools, instruments of mass communication, professionally deployed to reach heterogeneous audiences spread across disparate geographical areas. They include newspapers, magazines, television, radio, outdoor and the recent wonder of our times, Internet, among others”.

Democracy: A popular definition of democracy is government of the people, by the people and for the people. The word “people” is justifiably repeated in this short and reasonable definition. It suggests that the essence of a political system is for the good of the people, just as they must have a hand in bringing it into being through constitutional means. The emphasis on people makes democracy attractive to many countries across the world, with the United States of America (USA) as the bastion of democratic values in the world.

Governance: Governance is often difficult to define. However, the outcome of the activity on the people gives an idea of the quality of governance people are receiving. The Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of current English defines governance as the activity of governing a country or controlling a company or an organization, the way in which a country is governed or a company or institution is controlled”. It would even seem that the authors had considerable difficulty in defining the term, suggesting a measure of fluidity in meaning. However, such expression as ‘corporate governance’ gives a good idea of political governance which confronts every country today. What is obvious from this is that governance has to do with the way a country manages its human and material resources for the good of all.

3. Theoretical Framework

Given the nature of this paper which deals with Nigeria’s democracy from a political-economic perspective, a political/economic theory would not be out of place. The Neoliberal theory is therefore being explored as a theoretical framework for this study. According to Joah-Peterside (2016) “the term has been used by scholars in a wide variety of social sciences primarily to the resurgence of the 19th Century ideas associated with laissez-faire economic liberalism (Dumenil and Laxy, 2004; Boas and Gans-Moore 2009; Castree, 2013; Arac, 2013; Stephen, et.al, 2015). Joah- Peterside (2016, p.3) articulates the core points of neoliberalism to include:

- i) **The rule of the market:** Liberating ‘free’ or private enterprises from any bonds imposed by the government (the State) no matter how much social damage this may cause. Greater openness to international trade and investment.

- ii) **Cutting Public Expenditure and Health Services:** Like education and health care. Reducing the safety-net for the poor. However, advocates are not opposed to government to government subsidies and tax benefit for business.
- iii) **Deregulation:** Reducing government regulation for everything that could diminish profits, including the environment and safety on the job.
- iv) **Privatization:** Sell government owned investments, goods and services to private investors. This includes banks, key industries railroads, toll highways, electricity, schools hospitals, etc. Although usually done in the name of greater efficiency, which is often needed, privatization has mainly had the effect of concentrating wealth even more in a few hands and making the public even pay more for its needs.
- v. **Eliminating the Concept of “The Public Good” and replacing it with “Individual responsibility”.** Pressuring the poorest people of society to find solutions to their lack of healthcare, education and social security all by themselves then blaming them, if they fail, as “lazy” (Martinez and Gracia, 1996, p.1).
No doubt, neoliberalism, an aspect of capitalism which pursues profit without responsibility, has become an octopus of sorts in many developing countries including Nigeria. In this context, many have argued, even vociferously, that government has no business with business. Governance in itself is a high level of business i.e. being busy in its ordinary sense.

4. The Social life in Nigeria

In his widely respected work: *A Political Economy of Africa*, Ake (1981) argues robustly that in the explanation of social life, primacy must be given to material conditions particularly economic factors because “economic need is man’s fundamental need”. He postulates that in order to understand the culture of a society and other aspects, one must understand the material, the assets and constraints of a society, insisting that an empirical study of historical and contemporary societies will show the following (pp 1-2):

1. Those from the economically privileged group, tend to be better educated, ‘more cultured’ to have higher social status, to be more ‘successful’ professionally and politically. This means that economic inequality is extremely important, tending to reproduce itself endlessly in a series of other inequalities.
2. Those who are economically privileged tend to preserve the existing social order; and those who are disadvantaged by the social order, particularly its distribution of wealth, have a strong interest in changing the social order, particularly its distribution of wealth. In this way, the economic structure sets the general trend of political interest and political alignments.
3. In so far as there is economic inequality that society cannot have political democracy because political power will tend to polarize around economic power. Also a society where a high degree of economic inequality exists must necessarily be repressive. This repression arises from the need to curb the inevitable demands of the have not for redistribution. We see here economic conditions not only setting the tone of politics but also defining the role of coercion in society.
4. The morality and values of a society tend to support the preservation of the existing division of labour and distribution of wealth in that society. The autonomy of morality and social values is more apparent than real. Contemporary Western morality condemns theft. And we forget that theft as a moral value is something

created and dependent on a particularly economic condition. Where there is no scarcity and no private property, the idea of theft would not arise.

5. **Media, Democracy and Governance in Nigeria.**

Even the greatest critic of the mass media must acknowledge its institutional role of informing, entertaining and educating the citizens of any country. This is anchored on the right of the people to know. Writing recently in *The Guardian* on Sunday, the Nigerian journalist and well known column Dan Agbese had this to say:

President Mohammed Buhari should make an informed citizenry the cardinal principle of his administration. The reasons should be pretty obvious. An ignorant or unformed citizenry is deleterious to the health, the growth and the sustenance of democracy. No modern government thrives on the ignorance of the people.

Despite the above, it would seem that government in Nigeria thrives on the ignorance of the people. So it is to achieve their selfish aim of exploiting the people. Ignorant and unemployed the people are not in a position to demand their right or even call those in power to order.

The media have been known all over the world to encourage democratic participation. The electronic voting is a form of communication of the voter's preference. As Baran (2002, p.99) has also noted, "the internet is characterized by freedom and self governance, which are also the hall mark of true democracy".

Again, Agbese (2016) argues convincingly, that: *An informed citizenry in a democracy is a product of free flow of vital information between the government and the governed. It packs three critical elements considered as parts of the pillars of democracy namely: openness, transparency and accountability.*

The media in democracies are charged with the responsibility of ensuring openness, transparency and accountability in the system. The media in Nigeria have endeavoured to attain the above objectives. This has often led to an adversarial position by authorities in Nigeria which regards the media as meddlesome. Government has often done this to protect the interest of the ruling class. This explains the draconian laws aimed at 'clipping the wings' of the media right from the colonial era. In 1906, for instance, a press gag law was enacted to keep the media in check. That did not deter the fiery mass media from being a 'thorn in the flesh' of British Colonial Administration. In fact, it is to credit of the press in Nigeria that there was no bloodshed in the fight for independence. Such nationalists as Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and Chief Obafemi Awolowo and others 'deployed' their media arsenal in the fight against colonialism.

The attainment of Independence did not stoke the fire of agitation by the press. This is because no sooner did local politicians take over than it became obvious that many of them were largely driven by personal and ethnic considerations in running the affairs of the nation. By January 1966, there was the first military coup which overthrew the Government of Abubaka Tafawa Balewa, snowballing into the Nigeria civil (1967- 1970). From 1966 to 1999, Nigeria was ruled by the military with only a civilian 'interregnum' between 1979-83 and the 82 -day Interim National Government (INC) in (1993) headed by Ernest Shonekan, a former czar of the United African Company (UAC), the economic arm of British Imperialism in Africa.

During those years of military dictatorship, Nigerians lost access to basic fundamental freedoms as the military churned out Decrees which ousted, the jurisdiction of the courts on many political issues. It was an absolute rule. One of the Decrees that were churned out during

those dark days was the Notorious Decree No. 2 under which Nigerians could be detained at the pleasure of those in power and Decree No. 4 which criminalized any criticism of Public Officers. Momoh (2002) points out that the colonial laws, which have remained in our laws through several amendments, were aimed to suit the whims and caprices of those in power, irrespective of the colour of their skin (Nwanne, 2008).

As time went on, the struggle against Military Rule became more vociferous because military rule had become oppressive and corrupt. Besides, the ‘gale’ of democracy was sweeping across the world and Nigeria could not afford to be left out. There was a near consensus that military rule was anathema and should be discontinued. The long, and often bloody confrontations, coordinated by the private arm of the press, eventually led to the handover of power on May 29, 1999, to Olusegun Obasanjo, a soldier turned politician. Since then, Nigeria has been grappling with the challenges of democracy which is the concern of the next section.

6. Challenges of Democratic Governance in Nigeria

Since 1999, Nigeria has had an uninterrupted democracy, an achievement by itself. However, there have been many challenges confronting democratic governance in Nigeria. Coming from decades of Military rule which encouraged “a with (which seemed to have percolated the polity) immediate – effect “mentality” it would seem that many Nigerians began to develop a quick- fix culture which was hollow, preferring the easy and immediate gratification which encouraged corruption. In specific terms, the underlisted are some of the challenges bedeviling democracy in Nigeria.

i. Ethnicity: In this seminal work *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria*, Nnoli (1977) admits that “ethnicity often intrudes into African Politics”. This statement is valid as seen in Nigeria which is believed to have more than 250 ethnic and linguistic groups. (Joab-Peterside, 2016). Given the multiplicity of ethnic groups, which ordinarily is an advantage as captured in Nigeria’s motto “Unity in diversity”, many politicians see it as an easy route to national resources through the exploitation of ethnic sentiments.

As Nnoli (1977, p.27) has clearly noted that:

In the atmosphere of extreme socio-economic and political scarcity that prevailed in the colonial societies and are still prevailing in the post colonial societies, few members of the privileged classes are confident enough of their own ability to survive and prosper to advocate a merit system of hiring, promotion, trade and business. Most prefer the security of at least being able to rely on exploiting ethnic preferences whenever and whenever this is possible. Each gives preferences to members of his group whenever he can as a means of ensuring that they will return the gesture sometime when he may need it.

Indeed, this is the situation in Nigeria which has even legitimized it through what is called ‘Federal Character’. The use of Federal Character has been wrongly applied where admission is given to less qualified applicants in government schools and institutions and employments and

promotions given to less qualified candidates just because of where they come from. This has gradually led to the promotion of mediocrity.

Achebe (1981, p. 19) connects a line between tribalism or ethnicism and mediocrity with his observation that:

‘The major objection to the practice of tribalism is that it exposes the citizen to unfair treatment and social injustice. Less advertised but no less damaging to social morality is the advantage which tribalism confers on mediocrity’.

No doubt, ethnicity has so much influence on mediocrity to the extent that in Nigeria meritocracy appears to be given a back bench. Except for a few oases of meritocracy in Nigeria, it seems mediocrity is preferred as people remind one another that knowing somebody is more important than merit. Practical situations appear to support this assertion in Nigeria.

ii) Corruption and Social Inequality: Corruption is a clear and present danger in Nigeria’s political and social life. As Nwanne (2011, p. 65) has previously noted that: “One of the most destabilizing problems of the democratic dispensation in Nigeria is massive corruption which has put enormous financial resources at the disposal of the political class to the detriment of the poor and oppressed masses.”

This is depressing as it brings to the fore the question of social inequality which Ake (1981) explains clearly the high rate of crime and other indicators of social disorder. Many now engage in socially disapproved form of wealth redistribution. Nigeria’s case is disturbingly high. A recent newspaper report indicated that only two percent of Nigerians own 90% of bank deposits. According to *Vanguard*, a privately own newspaper outfit, “this represents the wide gap between the rich and the poor, which continues to pose major socio-economic challenges to the nation”.

This kind of unnatural, unsatisfactory, distasteful economic situation is possible because of the free rein which the political class and their cronies enjoy in Nigeria. Appointment to any office of significance in Nigeria is celebrated by family, cronies, well wishers and not so well wishers. It is seen as an opportunity to access one’s share of the legendary “national cake”. This also largely explains the often bloody power struggle in Nigeria. Ake (1981) has earlier explained that in so far as there is economic inequality, that society cannot have political democracy because political power revolves around economic power. Nothing better describes Nigerian’s democracy. It is terribly monetized activity. Hardly can a morally upright person who is not financial strong ever ascend to any position of significance, in fact, any position at all. In the cut throat competition for political positions, the role of financial strength is immeasurable. Politicians call it ‘structure’. This situation reinforces the social inequality in the system. Therefore, the real victims of the prevailing social order are that ordinary Nigerians who should ordinarily be the focus and the beneficiaries of democratic governance in Nigeria.

iii. Low Political Participation: When Nigeria returned to democratic rule, there was palpable excitement among the populace. The expectation was that democracy would restore their fundamental human rights which prolonged military rule trampled upon. They had also, legitimately, thought their material well – being would improve through prudent and accountable governance. It is obvious to state that these expectations have not been met with the deteriorating living conditions of the masses of the country. As previously stated, political ascendancy is

intricately tied to economic power. Thus, devoid of economic empowerment, the vast masses of people are not in a position to contest for political power which is the surest way to the good life. Indeed, the profligacy of the ruling elite in Nigeria is well known globally. A glean into the approved earnings of a Nigerian Federal Legislator will make the point clearer. According to Joab – Peterside (2016, p.14):

A recent study based on data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and The Economist Magazine of London revealed that Nigerian Federal Legislators with a basic salary of US \$ 189, 500 per annum (N30.6m), are the highest paid. The US \$ 189, 500 basic salary (which excludes allowances), is 116 times Nigeria’s Gross Domestic product (GDP) per capita of \$1,600. This implies that Nigerians earn on average \$1,600 (N259,000) per person by year while National Assembly (NASS) members earn N30.6million per person, per year (BusinessDay, November 19, 2013, p.1).

Despite the national outcry and international outrage against the earnings of the members of the National Assembly and other political office holders (both elected and appointed) Nigeria has been unable to address the issue because the political class would not compromise on their economic advantage over others.

iv. Vote Rigging: Besides the factors already discussed, it must be noted that vote rigging has remained one of the challenges of Nigeria’s democracy. In fact, the entire electoral process is often compromised to the extent that those who emerge may not be the true representatives of the people. Many politicians employ political touts to carry out their instructions, leading to political violence. In the process many potential voters are scared away from their voting centres but this does not reflect in the counted and announced votes. Emboldened by this development, many politicians often brag that the votes of the voters do not count as they would be returned elected whether or not people voted. In some cases, though, the judiciary has mustered incredible courage to dethrone even sitting governors and members of National and State Assemblies for not being lawfully elected.

This was the situation in 2007 when Present Umaru Musa Yar’adua stated that Nigerian’s electoral system was poor, bravely admitting that the election that brought him to power was flawed. President Yar’adua, perhaps Nigeria’s most honest helmsmen, who publicly declared his assets and those of his wife, set up a committee to reform the electoral system. His death early 2010, put a halt to his transparent and simple life style.

5. Infrastructural Deficiency

With a population of about 170 million, going by current estimation, Nigeria has the largest concentration of black people in the world. But its huge population, unfortunately, has not matched facilities and infrastructure. Its roads compare with the worst in the world, education and health facilities are terribly poor, hence its leaders and the rich private persons rush to better organized countries at the slightest feeling of ill-health. This situation in, itself, is a disincentive to improve facilities at home. Housing, potable water and electricity are in short supply. This

situation explains the horde of homeless people in the urban areas while those in the villages live in mainly ramshackled houses. Clean, potable water which should be available to all remains elusive. Electricity is even worse. The power situation in Nigeria keeps worsening as political office holders keep coming up with excuses which their predecessors also gave! The Olusegun Obasanjo Administration was said to have spent over 16 billion Dollars on electricity during his tenure (1999-2007) without any noticeable improvement. It is unheard of that a country of about 170million people generates only about 2000 megawatt while smaller countries, with better managed economies, many times more than this figure. Infrastructural deficiency has put Nigeria's march to development at a reverse gear.

6. Insecurity

No doubt, insecurity has been a major feature of Nigeria's democracy, worsening with the inauguration of a new regime. Boko Haram which started as a set of religious bigots protesting Western values later became a blood-thirsty group with territorial ambition. The Niger death militancy which had been well handled returned with more vibrancy, allegedly because of the altitude of the current government towards the Amnesty Programme of the Yar'adua and Jonathan regimes. Apart from politically and religiously motivated insecurity, many Nigerians have been exposed to insecurity more than previously. The promise to strengthen the police and make them more useful to the citizenry has not happened.

7. Dwindling Revenue

In Nigeria as with other Oil Producing and Exporting Countries, dwindling revenue is a major issue at the moment. From a revenue of over \$100 per barrel in the past few years, to as low as \$35 currently the credit 'alert' hitting the Federation Account is frighteningly poor for a mono-cultural economy. This has destabilized the economy as government is unable to meet its obligation. This should not have been the case of the country had managed its resources better during the period of plenty. As the National Bureau for Statistics (NBS) has shown, N51.50 Trillion accrued to the Federation Account between (1982-2013). A forward – looking, visionary and patriotic leadership would have invested a large part of this huge resource in social infrastructure to make the country a sound and modern state.

8. Impunity of the Ruling Class

Since the re-introduction of democracy in 1999, the ruling class has exhibited a level of impunity not acceptable in a democratic setting. The National Assembly, has not been unable to credibly perform its oversight functions on the executive. As Joan-Peterside, citing Lucas (2013) has reminded us, the impunity with which Nigerian government officials spend government funds is legendary. While political office holders are overfed in all aspects, the ordinary people are miserably hungry. The opulence of the ruling class is clearly demonstrated in their conspicuous consumption. The absence of effective oversight has made Nigerian Presidents prone to whimsical actions and pronouncements which at times have no constitutional basis (Nwakanma, 2016).

9. Summary

Nigeria is blessed with human and material resources, earning huge petro – dollars since 1956 when oil was found in commercial quantity in Oloibiri. Oil later became the sole source of

revenue, with the country abandoning agriculture, which was the mainstay of the economy before the disruptive influence of oil. The paper defined mass media, democracy and governance for clarity while the neo-liberal theory provided theoretical anchor. The paper took a brief look into the social life in Nigeria, agreeing with Ake's (1981) explanation that primacy must be given to material conditions. Essentially, the crucial role of the mass media in democracy and governance in Nigeria was explored. The paper identified the challenges, to Nigeria's democracy to include ethnicity, corruption, low political participation, vote rigging infrastructural inadequacy and the impunity of the ruling class.

11. Recommendations

- 1 Political leaders in Nigeria should immediately "prune" their salaries and allowances which are considered as the highest in the world. At the moment the high financial position of members of the political class makes them emphasize the gains rather than the services to the people.
- 2 Nigeria should return to the path of meritocracy which will give every citizen the confidence to transparently compete for any opportunity. The current practice where 'federal character' (read ethnicity or tribalism) is a major mode of distributing resources through appointments, promotions, etc. is not efficient and fair, rather it promotes mediocrity which does not put the country in a competitive position. It is like going for a football tournament with a 'fifth eleven' because of ethnic consideration. The outcome is obvious.
- 3 Corruption remains a major problem in Nigeria because the system encourages it but as president Muhammadu Buhari is quoted to have said during his electioneering campaign, "If Nigeria does not kill corruption, corruption will kill Nigeria." However, he does not seem to be going about it the right way. He might wish to embrace a more transparent and creditable fight against the monster of corruption.
- 4 The mass media institution in the country should be strengthened and encouraged to carry out its constitutional responsibility to the society. This is because of the importance of information in a democracy. No doubt, a well informed citizenry is a big advantage in a democratic setting.
- 5 There is need to address the high level of social inequality in Nigeria because of its many problems such as increase in crime rate and criminal behavior by persons seeking to redistribute wealth by all means possible.
- 6 The government, especially the executive, must purge itself of the culture of impunity which has often led them to make pronouncement and act in breach of the constitution. A greedy legislature weak institutions and a poor and docile citizenry have encouraged this development over the years.
- 7 There is urgent need to revamp the economy through a diversification of the economy, using agriculture as a linchpin while the infrastructure must be gradually but steadily rebuilt for the benefit of the long suffering masses of Nigeria.

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