

Romancing the Gun

The Press as Promoter of Military Rule

Ndaeyo Uko

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Preface

In every country, the role and freedom of the press depend largely on the attitudes of the country's leadership to press freedom. Other significant factors are the history of the country's media and the expectations of the media audience.

The relationship between the press and the government is an index of the freedom, power and influence of the press. More importantly, this relationship is an indication of the health of democracy in a given country. This is because a major role of the press is to provide the public professionally processed information essential for members of that society to operate as safe, motivated, informed, good and accomplished citizens under just governance. But does just governance essentially mean western democratic governance?

Not necessarily. Yet conventional wisdom, canvassed by western communication and media scholars, dictates that the press operates better under a western multiparty democracy than under dictatorships. To question the age-old theory would be to question one of the canons of modern communication scholarship, and conventional wisdom. Questioning existing knowledge is one of the vital attributes of good scholarship. Testing this theory is particularly critical because attempts by researchers to judge the press of nonwestern countries using western libertarian criteria can generally lead to the propagation of suspect and academically untenable theories. As information technology and other trends shrink the world into a tiny global village, a fuller understanding of the disparate components of this village becomes an urgent necessity for our collective growth and survival.

Each society operates a government that best suits its socio-political needs or realities. And the journalistic perception of just governance and the role of the press differ from civilization to civilization and from country to country, depending on the country's peculiar circumstances. The failure to take into account the peculiarities of a country's social dynamics and the political, cultural and historical realities of nonwestern countries, has led western researchers into thinking that the role of the press is

essentially the promotion and preservation of a western type democracy and that the press cannot operate effectively in a political setting other than the western democratic model. The best known findings in this area come from the west and not from the regions in question. There are reasons for this.

Research into the media in Third World countries is hampered by two major factors. Third World scholars generally lack the research facilities and the finance to conduct research on their institutions and culture. Consequently they often rely on the findings of western researchers whose insights can be, at best, shallow. This problem is magnified by justifiable fears of reprisals from the regimes in power that may not be pleased with the findings of their own citizens. Though many of the observations made by western scholars about nonwestern life have been misleading, they are valuable for research in the sense that the errors provide material for reference and debate.

Using Nigeria as a model, this book takes into account factors often overlooked by traditional western scholars and illustrates that the press and people preferred military rule to democratic governance in Nigeria. The book also determines that given certain historical, social and political factors, the press can fare better under military rule than under "democratic" governance. I chose this topic and Nigeria because Nigeria, Africa's political giant, has the largest and most vibrant press on the continent. The Nigerian press is considered one of the freest in Africa, and indeed the world, although by 1998 the military ruled the country for 29 out of 38 years of independence. Like most Third World countries that encountered colonial rule, Nigeria experienced the type of unstable democracy that usually results in the installation of military governments. The relationship between Nigeria's military governments and the inconceivably vigorous press even under military rule, have been a subject of keen interest internationally. I also chose Nigeria because of my familiarity with its media and government. As a practicing journalist and academic in Nigeria and in the west, I have watched Nigeria attempt everything from a multiparty British parliamentary government and an American styled executive presidential model to many years and many shades of military dictatorship. As a reporter, editor and media critic for 20 years, I have reported and commented on two of Nigeria's three postcolonial democratic experiments and most of

the military regimes. And I have met most post-independence Nigerian heads of government.

In the formulation of the ideas for this book, I have had to rely selectively but extensively on the analyses and observations of both western and nonwestern historians, scholars, advocates and journalists. Even when these works miss the point, they have generated doubts and therefore engaging questions that help advance scholarship. Otherwise, I relied on firsthand information obtained while on the job, from interviews and informal encounters with Nigerian military and civilian leaders, content and textual analyses of newspapers, official documents and deep sources within the media establishment that for security reasons or precondition of anonymity cannot be quoted.

This book is divided into four main parts. Part I establishes the origin, growth and phenomenal powers of the Nigerian press under the intolerant, press-bashing British colonial dictatorship. Part II portrays the press as a victim of democracy under the first two of Nigeria's three democratic experiments. Part III exposes the romance between the press and the military and the effect that peculiar relationship has had on the military, the press, public institutions and the people. It also highlights the role of the press in Nigerian military coups. Part IV explains the dynamics and perplexity of the press-military romance and the benefits the Nigerian press establishment and practitioners derived from this relationship.

Ndaeyo E. Uko
Cairns, Australia, August 2004

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I am grateful to Captain Sunday Kazi and Lt. Colonel Audu Kaka who initiated me into the psyche and culture of the Nigerian military even before I became a journalist. I am also indebted to senior military officers, intelligence chiefs, military governors and ministers, military service chiefs and heads of state who discussed their work and ideas with me. In particular, I'd like to thank the following military chiefs whose discussions with me while they were in office provided excellent insights to the press military relationship: Military President Gen. Ibrahim Babangida, military Head of State Gen. Sani Abacha (late), Air Marshall Ibrahim Alfa, Chief of Air Staff (late), Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Murtala Nyako, Colonel U. K. Bello (late, ADC to President Babangida), Major Debo Bashorun, press officer to Babangida, military governors Colonel Lawan Gwadabe, Brigadier Godwin Abbe. Most other officers would, for varying reasons, rather not be named in this book. I also acknowledge the insights of civilian presidents and ministers, high ranking civilians serving both military and civilian regimes, civilian governors, ministers and ambassadors.

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Part 1

The Source of the Power

Chapter 1: Word of Man, Word of God

The book starts with the exploration of the peculiar origin of the Nigerian press, establishing that its divine birth conferred on it enormous influence, authority and credibility, and a formidable tool in the fight against colonial rule.

Chapter 2: Press Bashing, Colonial Style

Chapter 2 captures the stormy relationship between the belligerent Nigerian press and the colonial administration. In addition to its responsibility as public watchdog, the Nigerian press also played the role of the political opposition. The key people crusading for independence and for personal political power were journalists who would emerge as leaders of independent Nigeria. The chapter examines the struggle of the press against the many colonial laws and other attempts to muzzle the press.

Chapter 3: Two Colonial Experiences: Nigeria and Australia

The third chapter compares the circumstances of the birth of the press in two former British colonies, Nigeria and Australia. The comparison explains the enormous power and influence of the Nigerian press and the considerably weaker and less influential press in Australia. It also highlights the confounding resilience and combat potentials of the Nigerian press.

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