

Media, Military and Democratic Struggles in Nigeria: Tensions and Contentions

Abiodun Adeniyi, Ph.D.

Senior Lecturer, Department of Mass Communication, Baze University, Abuja

Abstract

The press in Nigeria has waded through different challenges, more especially under military regimes. While it was bruised and persecuted to no end in the military era, it yet remained the bastion of hope for the larger populace, compliant with its constitutionally enshrined role as the watchdog of society. This paper examines some contending notions about the media and the military, the might to rule and the right to ask questions, and the tension between the power of the sword and the creativity of the pen, against the background of the quest for freedom in a country desiring qualitative democracy and good governance. This desire is meant to follow a nation's multi-faceted history, founded on colonialism, post colonialism, coups, counter-coups and the lingering challenges of social, political and economic development. The paper discusses media experiences under different military regimes, and examines how the experience of media resistance of the military played out after democracy was restored in 1999.

1.1: INTRODUCTION

The press in Nigeria have never ceased to be a platform for democratic struggles. It is either that journalists are themselves assuming the role of fighters, often snowballing to guerrilla journalism (Dare, 2007), or exilic journalism, or their platforms and pedestals are opened to other professionals, to wit lawyers, politicians, medical doctors, writers, academics, or retired military officers for democratic activism. The media in those circumstances become avenues for the ventilation of pent-up pro-democracy emotions, gestating from extended periods of subjugations, harassments, intimidations, incarcerations, trials, detention without trials, accessory after the "fact of coups" (A charge brought up by the military to try journalists who reportedly got wind of coup plots but did not revealed it) and a host of others. This paper re-examines the experiences of the media in the military regimes, and locates the relevance of that experience to post-military media practice in Nigeria.

1.1.1: METHODOLOGY

This work is based on the analysis of secondary data, and the observation of the events as a journalist, then involved in the extensive coverage of the military politics of the 1990s in Nigeria. Newspaper and magazine coverage of events were always extensive, passionate and penetrating. Reasons being that the practitioners were in the centre of military might, either with the closure of newspapers/magazines; search for one writer or the other; or trial of one journalist or the other. Not a few colleagues directly fell victim of military intransigence, while the author was also once a guest of the state secret police over a seemingly innocuous story. The aggregation of reports, which forms the secondary data, alongside the personal, participant observation experience formed the source of materials for this article.

2.1: MILITARY/MEDIA RELATIONS: THE PAST, THE LAW AND THE SOLDIER'S MINDSET

The tale of media maltreatment under the jackboots of military was minimally signposted during the General Yakubu Gowon elongated regime, when a journalist, Mr. Minere Amakiri, then Rivers State Correspondent of the Benin based *Nigerian Observer* published a story about the strike of teachers in Port Harcourt. The story provoked the Military Administrator, Commander Alfred Diette-Spiff as it coincided with his birthday celebration on August 30, 1973. The administrator's Aide De Camp (ADC), ASP Ralph Micheal Iwowari ordered his detention, where he was eventually brutalised (*Vanguard*, September 13th, 2009, cited online). The journalist was mishandled in a show of distemper, in what was likely typical of minds not tolerant of unfavourable facts, ideas and debates.

The closure of Lagos based *Newbreed* Magazine in 1977 by the succeeding General Olusegun Obasanjo regime further epitomised the impatience of the military with the emerging independence of the Nigerian media mind. Published by Mr. Christopher Maduabrochukwu Okolie, the magazine had in the reckoning of the military, consistently been unconstructively critical, and reportedly got to head when it ran story of exiled rebelled leader, Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu (Mohammed Haruna in www.gamji.com/haruna/haruna204.htm). The military had poised to possessing the wisdom to determining what was constructive and what was not. Sedition was threatened, which worsened the plight of the media, through the predicament of the *Newbreed* predicament.

Worthy of note is that the law of sedition that would eventually rear up at different instances of government versus media tension in the country is often nebulous, open ended and largely subject to the determination of the prosecuting state. In the Nigeria Criminal Law, sedition is

“(a). To bring in hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against the person of the Head of the Federal

Government, the Governor of a State, or the Government or Constitution of Nigeria or a State as by law established or against the administration of justice in Nigeria or, (b). To excite Nigerians to attempt to power the alteration, after wise than by lawfully means, or any other matter in Nigeria as by law established, or (c). To raise discontentment or disaffection among the inhabitants of Nigeria, or (d). To promote feelings or ill-will and hostility between different classes of the population of Nigeria”

The law of sedition remains a colonial heritage. Under its provisions, any publication that purportedly seeks to bring the government to disrepute is actionable. The contention is the elastic definition, which minimises the range of the definer. The government reserves the power. Military regimes have found it more suitable for their unilateral causes.

The Official Secret Act of 1962 stands as another trap for media practitioners, as it seeks to sanction any person, who:

“transmits any classified matter to a person to whom he is not authorised on behalf of the government to transmit it; or obtains, reproduces or retains any classified matter, which he is not authorised on behalf of the government to obtain, reproduce or retain, as the case may be, is guilty of an offence” (Nigerian Criminal Code, 1962).

This law is one amongst other similar provisions, and they were available to the military for whimsical manipulation, abuse and for vilifying the media.

The period of Generals Muhammadu Buhari and Tunde Idiagbon regime marked a serious beginning for media persecution. The regime had toppled the democratic President Shehu Shagari administration in a military putsch. Important in the Shagari period was the intervention of the courts in government versus media disputes. A case was the celebrated *Tony Momoh Vs The Senate*, culminating in the expansion of understanding on the significance of media protection of sources, and by extension the value of anonymity of volunteers of hints, clues, cues, snippets, leads and storylines, that would eventually offer insights, provide explanations and stimulate debates on public issues. Specifically, the court held that the invitation of the editor by the senate committee to appear before it and explain how he sourced some information violated constitutional guarantee of press freedom under S. 36, and by extension obstructed the people’s right to know. Spelled out in section 39 (1) of the 1979 constitution, the right entitles every citizen to free information flow, which should not be hindered under any guise, as the government is a trust and the leaders trustees.

The court pronouncement on non-disclosure of sources was significant for the press, because it provided an ethical cover for the practitioner against disclosing the source of his/her information. Information are supposed to be the entitlement of the populace. Even against that background, not many will be willing to divulge a piece of information that can be potentially beneficial to the public. If in that challenging circumstance, somebody volunteers information, and his/her identity is revealed by the journalist, no one else will volunteer any information in the future, which is antithetical to the free flow of information, and the people’s right to know as envisaged in the constitution. That was the wisdom for the court ruling in the case between Tony Momoh Vs. The Senate. That civil experience did not last for too long, however with the coming of the Buhari/Idiagbon regime.

They soon promulgated the Decree No 4 of 1984, which, amongst other things, restricted the operational latitude of journalists as professional public educators, capable of raising issues, investigate and report them, or who can proceed to interpret issues in specialised or generic format. The decree seemed worse than a seditious charge in terms of provisions and sanctions, and soon caught it its web two journalists from *The Guardian* Newspaper staple, Messrs Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor. The prosecutors averred that the journalists had gone ahead to publish a scoop on a government policy pronouncement regarding the diplomatic posting of one military diplomat, General Ibrahim B.M. Haruna, by another General, Haldu Hananiya, as Nigeria’s envoy to the United Kingdom (UK).

To the military, that scoop was early! The reporters should have waited for an official pronouncement, perhaps in the form of a press statement/release, or an announcement. The rulers would not understand the “haste”, and were probably ignorant of the fact that an ideal newspaper priority is to break the news, report the unheard, and publish what the newsmaker is literally yet, but likely to think about. The fact that the professional minds were disparate was in evidence. One (the military) desired perhaps a robot-like compliance with state process: official release, then publication. The other (the journalists) would opt for some creativity: a rather legitimate deviation from a set, traditional pattern (in public interest), so long as libel, slander or sedition are not involved, at least in their own civil understanding. Messrs Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor were eventually tried and jailed, despite pleas from colleagues, and against the grain of public outcry.

3.1: NEW DEATH, NEW STRESS AND THE GENERAL IBRAHIM BABANGIDA REGIME

General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida upstaged the Buhari/Idiagbon regime in another coup, citing amongst other things, the absence of press freedom to gain an immediate public acceptance. It worked. The populace was indeed choking under the weight of military leaders, seemingly unbothered about public concerns. Babangida

enjoyed the reception for a while, until he began his own sojourn in media vilification. Though a more personable, affable and suave leader, his military mindset soon began to manifest in arrests of journalists, closure of newspaper houses and intimidations. Before long, the media was shocked to see that a leader who had earlier released the two jailed journalists by his predecessor and who had abrogated the draconian Decree No 4 of 1984 presided over a regime that peppered the journalism trade, and which revealed in journalist's worst experiences, ever.

Of particular note was the assassination of *Newswatch* Editor-in-Chief, Mr. Dele Giwa, through a letter bomb in his Opebi, Lagos home. The bomb was delivered to his home October 19th, 1986 on a Sunday morning, during breakfast, snuffing life out of a promising career, and leaving media practitioners in an everlasting shock, worsened by fact that the killers have never, and may never ever be found.

The tragedy was unheard off in the history of the country. Many of his colleagues were terrified. A lot more panicked. Not a few were determined to help the security agents in finding the killers, and in ensuring that the memory of his death lingered. Many newspaper houses therefore published bits, asking “*who killed Dele Giwa?*” Soon, the military mind and might began moving in. The hitherto undying question was said to be putting pressure on investigations. One after the other, the publications started disappearing, until it finally faded, leaving the campaigning only at the doorsteps of the irrepressible attorney, the late Chief AbdulGaniyu Fawehinmi (SAN). The lawyer unsuccessfully fought the battle to find his killers, until he died decades later.

Many are of the opinion, as principally alleged by the lawyer that the journalist was killed because he was investigating an alleged drug deal by an influential Nigerian. Again, there was a clash of ideas, and of purposes. One was the side of a powerful citizen dealing in an illicit trade in a military set up, convinced that the only way to deal with a possible obstacle was elimination. Because of their convictions, the worth of human life was immaterial. Likely public reaction was insignificant. So was the attendant international opprobrium. The dip in global image was secondary. The point was to simply eliminate the obstacle, no matter the price. And indeed, they did. To the investigating journalist, the drive for the story was powerful. It was propelling enough to prevent a thought for venom from the powerful. The story was big, and was going to be earthshaking. A proverbial “world exclusive” in journalism parlance was in the offing, and there was no stopping the process, except in the case of death, as was eventually the case.

The Babangida regime also proscribed *Newswatch* Magazine, although in a different incidents. The publication was alleged to have published the report of the Political Bureau, which the regime had set up to chart a new political roadmap for the country. The magazine was banned for six months in the first instance, through a purposely drafted decree, while the charge of contravening the Official Secret Act was dangled. The case resembles the “too early” publication of diplomatic postings by *The Guardian* Newspapers, which led to the jailing of Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor. The military psychology was one of one step at a time; you go when asked to. This should happen before that. That's not the deal the journalist training bequeaths. Theirs is to break the ice and carve a niche. Theirs is to squeeze water from the rock. The journalist wants to be the first to know, and be the first to report it, even if the heavens will fall, albeit with due regards, in the ideal sense, to the laws of libel, slander and sedition.

The Guardian newspaper was soon to suffer closure through the orders of Lagos State Military Administrator, Colonel Raji Rasaki for reporting the shooting of two students of Yaba College of Technology during a student's protest by the security agents, in May 1990. The paper's Rutam House, Isolo premises were shut, even to the detriment of other companies operating in the environment. *Punch* Newspaper as well suffer a similar fate obviously for being too pungent, trenchant and banner in its headlines, especially as it concerned the botched Gideon Okar led coup, staged to sack the Babangida regime.

Deductively, it often does not matter whether facts were being reported. The rulers were concerned about how the reports came: are they temperate, but critically sophisticated in the case of *The Guardian* or matter-of-factly, but with more popular appeal in the case of *The Punch*? The military minds took none slightly, believing that brave reporting was equal to a challenge of their autocratic and then a bang: closures, proscription, or the slamming of sedition charges.

Babangida capped his tramples on press freedom with a further decree on freedom of opinion, through his restriction of the then senate with a decree on “no-go-areas”. The general had many democratic pretensions. He claimed civil administrations in the local Governments and in the states, before conducting a National Assembly election, where senators and members of the House of Representatives emerged. Then the smack: they could deliberate on a number of issues, not on those that could challenge the military's commanding position in federal administration, including foreign policy, defence and Internal security, amongst other issues. By extension, the ban also limited the press from excessive contemplations on those areas. It revealed, therefore, a contempt for public debate; an ironic wisdom in failing to appreciate the thinking capacities of the human mind, in a plural society in an increasingly liberalised world, where growth and development have been galvanised by the power of thoughts, and ideas in the sciences and in the humanities, with debates in public life not being less so.

4.1: GENERAL ABACHA AND THE NEW ANTI-PRESS LAWS

If the nation thought they had seen the worst, they were totally mistaken. General Sani Abacha emerged from the ashes of the troubling confusion that attended the departure of Babangida, through the Ernest Shonekan interregnum. Abacha, unlike Babangida, made no pretensions to democratic principles. He returned the country to a full blown military regime, after sacking all the vestiges of democracy left behind by the Babangida regime. The press rose in response, characteristically thinking critically, naturally envisaging and acting their role as societal watchdogs. Unfortunately for it, it was going to be a bad day in the office.

Abacha banned *The Guardian* once again. *Punch* was shut down. Critical newsmagazines, *Tell*, *The News* went underground. Many journalists practised from underground. A lot fled abroad. The list: Dele Momodu, Alex Kabba, Nduka Obaigbena, amongst others. Some were imprisoned without trial. Mohammed Adamu of the *African Concord* was one of them. A number got jailed for “accessory after the fact of coup”. Chris Anyanwu, George Mbah were on this list. Some like Bagauda Kaltho was kidnapped and was never to be seen again, dead or alive. Some of those who fled abroad began a Radio Station, Radio Kudirat, from where they peppered the regime with critical stories.

Those who practised in Nigeria were either caged or cautious. Otherwise, they will pay an unknown price. Every story mattered. This writer was first questioned in the Alagbon, Lagos police station, before being briefly detained by the nation’s secret service for reporting a known crisis in a government establishment for *The Guardian*. Segun Adeniyi of *Thisday* Newspaper was intimidated by a military agent in Lagos. Ever fleeing Bayo Onanuga of *The News* was threatened with gruesome death, if caught. This writer was a quest of the state secret police, and was interrogated for hours on end. The fear was palpable. Even bedroom discussions were in hushed tones, lest a real or imaginary government spy might be all ears.

Discussions of government and governance in social gatherings were avoided by citizens. Trust amongst peers, friends and colleagues vanished. The next person might be an agent. Thoughts were stifled. Public debates were measured. They are safer when it towed government lines. Otherwise, detentions, destruction or death awaited the culprit. Media operations were close to paralysis. It was bad, even terrible. The regime was a reticent one, and could not understand the value of speech, even if not freedom of speech. To be compliant, citizens were to tow its line; otherwise they will be whipped into line.

The radical press that was chastised, caged, and chased abroad turned out to be the armour bearer of the new democratic Nigeria. Though their activism probably did not kill General Abacha (He died in office), but they ensued from Nigeria and abroad that he had no peace. They reminded the populace that there was still hope. This genre of journalism taught the rulers that the military mind may be regulated, the civil mind is not: it needed tension, contention and consensus to move the society on. The succeeding General Abdulsalami Abubakar regime slightly understood this and was relaxed with the press, before providing the platform for the emergence of a new democracy and then a relatively free press, blossoming and embedded in the nascent and yet fragile democracy.

5.1: THE MEDIA IN POST-MILITARY NIGERIA: HOW THE EXPERIENCE OF MEDIA STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY IMPACTED ON THE NEW DEMOCRATIC EXPERIENCE

With the return of democracy to Nigeria 1st October, 1999, the country’s civil society especially the media literarily heaved a sigh of relief. First, media houses which had resorted to guerrilla publishing and which had begun quitting the “bushes”, “hide-outs”, and “ghettos”, to return to the high streets, in the temperate General Abdulsalami Abubakar regime, quickly sought re-definition. *Tempo*, *The News*, and *Tell* magazines which can be counted amongst this group, reintegrated with sister publication, or refocused, changed editorial policy, or became defunct in a few cases. Some journalists in their firm, notably Bayo Onanuga (*The News*) Nosa Igiebor (*Tell*), and a few others, who had emerged from their hideouts and had been appearing in public places, as post-military media celebrities on account of their braveries and the risks they took, witnessed different shades of further official recognitions.

Many of them become highly politically aware, and a lot began seeking political office. Some did immediately, while others bided their time, sort of. Babafemi Ojudu who belonged to *The News* Magazine became politically prominent and was soon elected senator from his native Ekiti State. Onanuga barely missed being elected a senator from Ogun State. Chris Anyanwu, publisher of TSM magazine, imprisoned for “coup plotting”, was elected senator from her native Imo State. She was also invited to document her experiences while in jail, by many publishers, as other freed colleagues were equally invited to do. The invitation gave rise to her book: “*The Days of Terror: A Journalists Eye-Witness Account of Nigeria in the Hands of Worst Tyrant*”. Kunle Ajibade, another *The News* Magazine writer authored: “*Jailed for Life*”, which was a record of his trial and prison experiences while serving a life jail term. These journalists became heroes of a democratic struggle, a status that could slight their military traducers. Even intangibly, this emergent regard for the journalist became a reminder on the need for more military professionalism, as against interfering in civil governance.

There also emerged a pattern amongst the press to be protective of the new democracy. It seemed like

wanting to protect a long lost, but found item. They tended to defend very passionately the new democratic experience, and condemned in no unmistakable terms whatever threatened civil rule. For instance, President Olusegun Obasanjo had assumed power, promising to encourage foreign investments. To do this, he felt he needed foreign travels. He travelled to many countries as a result. The president soon drew the ire of the press. He was called names like “Travelling President”, “Flying President”, and “President that Rules from Abroad”, amongst many others. These happened through editorials, cover stories, and opinion articles. *The News Magazine*, *Thisday*, and *The Guardian* Newspapers were prominent in this media onslaught. Dominating their argument was the need for the president and the new ruling class to be careful with the yet fragile democracy, and not to encourage military mischief makers, who may cash-in on an “absentee president”, to stage a coup.

The protective mind set of the press in post military Nigeria also played out when a serving Senator, Joseph Waku once became angry with President Obasanjo, and then granted a *Tell* magazine interview calling for military intervention. He was not spared. The press lampooned him to no end, irrespective of the freedom of expression that is implied in a democracy. The subtext in the press standpoint was that it was wrong for anyone to ask that the nation do away with what it took years to clamour for, no matter the provocation. Many years after Waku’s extremist call, no one else has been heard making similar demands, in what suggest a concern for a backlash if an anti-democratic or pro-military sentiment is read into it.

Equally of importance is the expansion of media outlets following gains in new technologies of communication. In the traditional days of the physical media, military coups were staged through essentially Radio announcement. The announcement was usually carried out on the Federal Government owned Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN). The coup masterminds simply had to capture the station broadcast headquarters, and get the station manager on duty to guide them to make their announcement, as they desire. The coup information may now spread to other media, like the state television and newspapers, and subsequently other private media, especially the print.

With liberalisation of media ownership and the rise of online media, outlets and platforms for the dissemination of information have multiplied. There are now many private radios, and many private television stations. The implication of this is that with the democratisation of media ownership, a potential coup planner would have to do the impossible task of muffling the voices of tens of other media houses to prevent countermanding messages from being relayed. The unilineal flow of information obtainable through FRCN in the previous arrangement, did not just whipped the populace into line as soon as there was a coup, but could shut out counter coups, just in case. With the present state of numerous media, the success chance of a coup has been largely reduced, all thanks to the expansion

6.1: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The press experienced challenging times in the military era. The tougher section of the press obviously confronted the military through their pen, albeit from the underground. Those who weren’t directly confrontational were however loathed, even for their sophistry, elegance or their punch. *The Guardian*, *Thisday*, and *The Punch* belonged to this section. By implications, no section of the press was left out of the military crisis in Nigeria. It all reflects the impatience of a regime for the civil engagement for which the press is primed. From the ashes of media resistance to military rule, came a beaten press, ever determined to protect democracy, and with the continued determination of the vibrant press to guide the democratic experience, the military should have gone for good, in Africa’s most populous nation.

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About the Author

Dr. Abiodun Adeniyi graduated with a Second Class Upper Honours in Sociology from the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, after which he worked as a reporter and writer for *The Guardian Newspapers*, Nigeria, covering various beats in Lagos and Abuja, for more than a decade. He won the British Chevening Scholarship in 2003 to study International Communications at the University of Leeds, England and began his Ph.D. research immediately after his Master's Degree programme at the same University. He was awarded his doctorate degree in Communication Studies in 2008, for his research on Migrant Nigerians and the Online Mediation of Distance, Longing and Belonging, as a case on Internet and Diasporic Communication.

Adeniyi returned to his native Nigeria in 2009, working as a Communications Consultant on the platform of the World Bank Economic Reform and Governance Project (ERGP) at the Bureau of Public Procurement (BPP), Presidency, Abuja. On expiration of the project, he became Lead Consultant at Witswords Consults Limited (WCL), Abuja, before joining Baze University as a senior lecturer in Mass Communication. His present research interests are in the fields of Public Relations and Advertising Practicum, Strategic Communications and the dynamics of media and governance.