

Election Coverage and Safety of Journalists in Nigeria

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Introduction

Journalists are understood to be individuals who are dedicated to investigating, analysing and disseminating information, in a regular and specialised manner, through any type of print media (newspapers, magazines), broadcast or electronic media (television or radio), outdoor (bill boards) as well as new forms of communication. Elections are platforms through which electorate make choices of their valued political parties and candidates, who gain legitimacy to lead. During elections, journalists work close to centers of political power, and function as key mediators between political actors and institutions on the one hand and the citizenry on the other (Van Dalen, 2016). With the wind of democracy across the world, elections have become a key feature and journalists that operate during elections retain their character as civilians. As such all the protection offered to civilians by laws of a country are inherently also applicable to journalists. Given that the media category and environment at every milieu shapes the behaviours and practices that bring individuals into the sphere of performing journalistic activities, journalists are always exposed to specific types of risks of varying dimensions.

The rising cases of assaults on journalists the world over in the coverage of elections and other fundamental duties has become a recurring trend that calls for serious attention by all stakeholders in society. The safety of journalists has become an increasingly urgent issue globally because the scale of violence against journalists is growing at an alarming rate. It becomes worrisome when these attacks are premeditated and well -coordinated presumably by the ruling class ostensibly to foster or promote their selfish interest. By the same token, whenever journalists, other media actors, their family members, close friends or associates are

murdered, tortured, attacked, abducted, detained, threatened, harassed or intimidated on account of their professional activities, a similar societal dimension opens up (Mijatović, 2010).

Globally, journalists are seen as endangered species of people who are faced with all manner of threats, harassment, and intimidation and even death for carrying out their constitutional role. In reference to International News Safety Institute (INSI), Cottle (2017), presents a gloomy picture that, “111 media workers were killed in 2015, and 115 in 2016. Recent years have recorded some of the worst death tolls. In 2006, 168 journalists lost their lives, many of them killed when working in Iraq. In 2007, a particularly bad year, 172 media workers died...Many of these deaths go largely unnoticed and unreported in the world’s media” (p.21).

For instance, it is common to see journalists arrested arbitrarily without recourse to constitutional provisions. Political reporters are also constantly facing political and commercial pressures from different election stakeholders during period of elections. This is coupled with an array of suffocating regulations meant to stifle the press from performing their duties objectively. It is in recognition of the indispensable role of journalists and the corresponding ill-treatment they are subjected to that birthed the Intergovernmental Council of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) in 2010. According to Frank La Rue cited in McGonagle (2013), the programme works “toward the creation of a free and safe environment for journalists and media workers in both conflict and non-conflict situations, with a view to strengthening peace, democracy and development worldwide” (p.13).

It would suffice to reinstate that the media where journalists work and elections they cover are fundamental concepts that are critical to the sustenance and survival of the democratic process. The media is the fourth estate of the realm; the watchdog and agenda setter in the political system and election is the lubricant through which democratic processes strive. This perception on election was corroborated in an editorial titled, “Strengthening the Electoral Process” thus, “the representative democracy is solidified by credible elections and that it is a formal decision by which a population chooses its leaders” (*The Punch Newspaper*, 15 April 2015, p. 22 cited in Seteolu, 2017). It would therefore, be mistaken to take for granted that safety of journalists and journalism has emerged as a global concern. To ensure that the democratic process is successfully monitored and well coordinated the media is strategic in promoting fairness and accountability in the entire electoral process. Performing this onerous task by the media is not always palatable given the political environment the media finds itself. This is

especially true in Africa where election is seen as a theatre of battle to gain access to political power.

The 2019 annual report of the Council of Europe Platform states that, in the last few years, the number of alerts about serious threats to journalists' lives has sharply increased, almost doubling on an annual basis since 2015. The report further says that this increase includes a marked upsurge in insults and verbal abuse, and in the public stigmatisation of the media and journalists by elected officials and representatives of various authorities. For example, on 21 February 2018, in Slovak Republic an investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his partner Martina Kusnirova were killed in their home, causing outrage among the political class and society as a whole. The journalists were investigating the alleged links between certain Slovakian politicians and the Italian mafia, and fraud involving European farm subsidies. On 8 March 2019, the Slovakian billionaire and businessman Marian Kocner, whose name featured in Mr. Kuciak's investigations, was charged with ordering the murder (Council of Europe Platform States Report, 2018).

In Africa several cases of journalists being arrested, beaten and even killed abound. For instance, on 31st August, 2018 in Kampala, Uganda, a journalist suffered brutality at the hands of the army when they were covering protests related to the arrests and detention of opposition Members of Parliament who participated in the Arua Municipality by-elections. In this incident, Joshua Mujunga, a photojournalist working with NBS TV was covering operations by the Police who had been deployed to quell the protests where some youths had lit tyres along the road. The soldiers pounced on the journalist and beat him up with sticks. The soldiers forcefully deleted the video footages from his camera and left him in severe pain (Human Rights Network for Journalists, 2018).

In the recent governorship elections conducted by INEC in Kogi and Bayelsa States in Nigeria many journalists were harassed and beaten during the election. For instance, two journalists, Sam Egwu of the *Leadership newspapers* and Sunday Omachi of Radio Kogi, were attacked at Ayangba area of the state. Both journalists were on election duty when they were attacked by the hoodlums at the Unity Roundabout, Ayangba. The State Commissioner of Police, Akeem Busari, confirmed arrest of the masterminds of the mayhem, while reinforcements were sent to the area to help bring the situation under control (Premium Times, 2019).

The upsurge of coordinated attacks on journalists while covering elections and other crucial assignments are becoming normal around the globe. And this raises serious questions to the safety of journalists in Nigeria today. This chapter examined this issue with a view to drawing the attention of the government to evolve measures to contain this trend before the situation escalates beyond control.

Media Coverage and Elections in Nigeria

The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the National Broadcasting Code, and the Independent National Electoral Commission Act (Electoral Act, 2015) are quite explicit on the role that the mass media are expected to play in the electoral process in Nigeria. Section 22 of the Constitution, for instance, requires “the press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media to at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this Chapter” (p.30).

The National Broadcasting Code is even more explicit about the role of the broadcast media in the electoral process. In Section 5 of the Code, the role as well as the regulation of the broadcast media with regard to elections is discussed. Such roles include providing political enlightenment to voters and conducting a balanced coverage of election activities. Based on these legal provisions, the media and journalists are empowered to cover elections activities in the country (Institute of media and society, 2018). But as Pate and Idris (2017) argue, the constitution does not accord journalists any specified safety and protection framework. The only exception is that like every other citizen, all journalists in principle benefit from the right to life, and the prohibition against forced disappearance and torture. The right to life and freedom of expression include positive duties such as the duty to investigate and prosecute perpetrators if a journalist is victimised (Soremekun, 2013). One nearest official position on the safety of journalists is contained in the mandate of the Nigerian Press Council, which directs the Council to ensure the protection of the rights and privileges of journalists in the lawful performance of their duties. Even at that, the question of enforcement remains a wishful thinking.

Historically, the media in Nigeria has been very active in overseeing the conduct of election processes in the country. The function of voter’s education, mobilisation, monitoring of election proceedings and the subsequent announcement of election results lies squarely on the Nigerian media. Citizens depend on the media and the journalist to receive vital information. The Independent National Electoral Commission works in conjunction with the mass media to carry

out awareness campaign to mobilise electorate to participate in elections. Adeniyi (2019) asserts that “the build up to elections in Nigeria is usually tense. Politicians and pundits make variegated projections, using the media as a springboard. Destructions, deaths and different shades of crisis are often feared” (p. 62). In the midst of the charged political atmosphere journalists are expected to provide objective and accurate information on election proceedings.

Journalists are required by law to cover and report election activities the moment the electoral umpire rolls out the timetable for election processes. In the process of carrying out their functions, journalists are often put under pressure to compromise the ethics of their profession. Usually, this pressure comes from the government, political parties, political candidates and the electorate. Due to these encumbrances, the Nigerian journalists tend to be skewed in their coverage of election. Elections reports are often slanted to either demonised or promote the interest of a particular ethnic region, candidate or media organisation.

For example, the 2015 presidential election which held on March 28, 2015 is a case in point. There were two foremost candidates: The incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), and General Mohammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC). Goodluck Jonathan is from the South-South geo-political zone, while Muhammadu Buhari hails from the North-West zone. The men represented distinct identities in a multi-ethnic state: South (Jonathan) versus North (Buhari); Christian (Jonathan) versus Muslim (Buhari) (Adeniyi, 2019). The media in their reportage of the election framed the election as a battle between the Christian South and the Muslim North. This perception created by the media influenced electorate voting pattern during the election (Sule, 2019).

In the same vein, Seteolu (2017) cited *Vanguard* (2015) accused the Nigerian press for propagating inflammatory remarks made by stakeholders prior to the 2015 general elections. He argued that a prominent Northern leader, Lawal Kaita was quoted to have said that “the only way Nigeria can remain as one is for the presidency to return to the North in 2015”. The former All Progressives Congress (APC) National Chairman, Mr. John Odigie Oyeogun was also quoted to have said, that they “will not hesitate to consider forming a parallel government if the 2015 elections was rigged either by the use of security agencies (police and military), to harass, intimidate and cajole voters or through the compromise of Independent National Electoral Commission”. It will be recalled that it was as a result of unguided inflammatory remarks of this nature that led to post-election violence in the 2011 general elections.

With the proliferation of the use of social media in elections campaigns in Nigeria, political parties and their supporters are using the platforms to spread all kinds of propaganda on their opponents in order to tarnish their image. For example, a publication on Senator Buruji Kashamu almost marred his political carrier and eventually his swearing-in. Similarly, a hate video on YouTube was broadcast on both General Muhammadu Buhari and Senator Bola Tinubu to discredit their personalities and their party (Oyenuga, 2015).

Election coverage in Nigeria is often characterised by bias reporting. This problem stems from the media ownership structure in the country. The predominant media organisations in the country are either owned by the government or by influential politicians. The current system of monopolisation of the broadcast media in the hands of the government has led the opposition party to be denied equal air time to run their political jingles during election campaigns. The European Union Election Observation Mission (2015) cited in Seteolu (2017), confirms this position when presenting their report of the 2015 general election. They observed that most state owned broadcast outfits were not fair in providing equal air time to various political parties and their candidates during the election. The observer mission equally found that the same disparity was a predominant feature among private stations. Thus, journalists must be willing in the spirit of fairness, objectivity and accuracy to voice out the differences and divergent opinions of various ethnic, religious and political interest groups in the polity. This will provide the latitude to recognise the diverse groups in society.

Review of Relevant Studies

With the rising cases of threat to journalism profession globally, scholars are extensively investigating the upsurge with a view to proffer solution to the menace before it gets out of control. According to Alayande (2019), world statistics for the murder of journalists in 2012 showed that sixty three percent of journalists covering politics were murdered, while fifty one percent covering war were murdered. In countries where politics is practiced as war, the death figures hardly come as a surprise. The other beats showing percentages of journalists murdered include: 9% of those covering Business, 13% of those covering Corruption, 16% of those covering Crime, 14% of those covering Culture, 40% of those covering Human Rights, and 3% of those covering Sports. With the war within Syria, the country has the highest number of journalists killed in 2012, 22 journalists were killed.

With this staggering statistics, it is quite revealing that journalists covering elections and crisis situations are frequently killed. And if this development continue unabated, we may lose very many of our journalists in the near future and the future of journalism profession may be bleak. In an urgent call to tackle the menace of the killings of journalists Horsely (2014), discovered in his studies that the Human Rights Committee identified journalists among the groups frequently subjected to threats, intimidation and attacks on account of their activities, together with persons who engage in gathering and analysis of information on the human rights situation and who publish human-rights related reports, including judges and lawyers.

It was in response to this rising global concern that in November 2012, the 2nd United Nations Inter-agency meeting on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity was held in Vienna. The meeting marked the launch of an unprecedented global programme to strengthen the safeguards and protections for journalists and to counter impunity. The UN Action Plan on the Safety of journalists and the issue of impunity calls for the active participation of all the relevant agencies and programmes of the UN, the willing co-operation of the UN and practical partnerships and support from civil society and media-related actors and organisations (Stone, 2014).

Elliott, Elbahtimy and Srinivasan (2012) found that Political reporting is often a dangerous exercise worldwide, but particularly so in Russia, parts of Latin America and the Philippines, where there have been many reported killings. Threats against journalists in these countries are by criminal operations that sometimes have government links. They also noted that political reporting that is critical of the incumbent government and its authorities, which uncovers government corruption or which gives voice to the opposition tend to pose a greater risk to journalists' safety in emerging democratic countries.

For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo a number of journalists were attacked by those linked to the ruling party while reporting on opposition allies in the final run up to the November 2011 presidential and parliamentary elections. An editor of a weekly magazine in Kazakhstan was arrested on January 6, 2009 after publishing an article linking the National Security Committee to trafficking.

In a study entitled "covering post-conflict elections: Challenges for the media in Central Africa", Frère (2011) examined six elections conducted in six Central African countries that experienced "post-conflict" cases. This includes the polls that took place in Burundi (2005), the

Central African Republic (2005), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2006), Congo-Brazzaville (2002, 2007), Chad (1996, 2001, 2006) and Rwanda (2003) which were crucial for peace-building. The study found that most of the problems that the mass media and the journalists had in covering the elections cut across the six states. For example, they discovered in their study that the use of hate speech was pronounced among various political contenders, denial of access to public information by incumbent leaders and media men, lack of adequate training of journalists for election coverage and the use of propaganda to tarnish political opponents' image. The conclusion of the study points to the fact that given the numerous constraints that plague the election in these countries, one might wonder if the media should be considered actual democratic tools in Central Africa or just gimmicks in a "peace-building kit" (including "free and fair" elections, multi-partisan and freedom of the press) with no real impact on the democratic commitment of the elite or the political participation of the electorate.

Ibrahim, Pate and Usman's (2020) study entitled "Silencing the media and chaining the watchdog: Threats to journalists' safety during elections in Nigeria" investigated the factors responsible for causing threats to journalists during poll times and how the menace can be mitigated in Nigeria. Drawing on the experiences of 12 journalists who were interviewed face-to-face, their investigation reveals that aggressive journalistic practices, overconfidence, and breach of journalistic ethics are responsible for threats to journalists' safety. The study concludes that professional incompetence is one of the critical factors exposing Nigerian journalists to threats. Therefore, the study recommended among other things that media practitioners must be exposed to constant training on how to cover conflict situations in the country.

Adebayo (2015) further explains why the 2015 general elections in Nigeria were not marred by post-election violence like the ones conducted previously. According to him, prior to the build up to the 2015 elections in Nigeria several peace journalism trainings were conducted with journalists across the country, to forestall a reoccurrence of the violence that flawed previous elections. For example, in Nigeria's North-Central State of Kwara, 40 journalists were trained and equipped with skills for conflict-sensitive reportage of the elections. The training, funded by the peace building programme of the Durban University of Technology, involved journalists who were selected from both print and electronic media. Building the capacity of journalists through this training was able to positively impact on their coverage of the elections and thus reflected on the general outcome of the election.

Nigerian Journalists and Threats to Election Coverage: Some Selected Cases

The safety and threats of journalists and the issue of impunity in relation to election coverage are associated with many things including the media structure, media law, media ownership, access to media, digital inclusion, media literacy, gender, and journalism education (Carlsson & Pöyhtäri, 2017). All these have economic, political and cultural colouration which Unaegbu (2015) surmises that the safety of journalists in Nigeria has a lot to do with the societal conditioning and framing. It is on this pedestal that better insights can be made into the Nigerian context. Citing his personal experience, Sam Olukoya, a BBC correspondent in Lagos, explained the realities of reporting in Nigeria and the types of threats he has faced during his career.

...I have covered several crisis situations in Nigeria. These have included oil-pipeline explosions, ethnic clashes, religious conflicts, refugee problems, cooking-stove explosions and military attacks on civilians. Looking back, I would say most of these crises were man-made and preventable. They reflect the very low value (Nigerian) society places on lives and property. I have seen human cruelty at its worst – children, women and elderly people killed in the most horrific ways. In Odi, in the Niger Delta, I saw corpses of women and spent shells in a town that was completely destroyed. In Jesse village, an oil-pipeline fire killed more than a thousand people, and children were left without parents. Grandparents, who ordinarily cannot even cater for themselves, had to fend for their grandchildren. Across the country, I have witnessed wanton killing and destruction of property as people prey on each other in ethnic or religious conflicts. Perhaps the most appalling thing is when people are abducted and never heard from again (International News Safety Institute, 2012, p.22).

Recent elections held in Nigeria clearly demonstrated that journalists have become targets of threats and physical attacks by political activists and thugs simply for doing their work – putting out information about activities of parties and candidates, developments at polling stations and collation centres, and acts by activists that could lead to violence, among others. Several cases point's to the fact that the protection of the lives of journalists cannot be guaranteed by the state during election. A recent case that comes to mind is the detention, harassment, and assault of journalists nationwide during the March 9 gubernatorial and state assembly elections, in 2019. The Committee to Protect Journalists reported that several journalists covering the election nationwide were severely intimidated by security operatives.

For instance, Nonso Isiguzo, a news editor with the privately owned Nigeria Info radio station, told CPJ that he was traveling on election day to report election proceedings in the Ahoada West Local Government Area in Rivers State when armed men, ordered him and his driver, Sunday Isiitu, out of his official car and collected their car keys. They were eventually released after being held hostage for more than two hours but they could not monitor the elections in that area as planned.

In a related development, in Kaduna State, a group of more than 20 men attacked Shindong Bala, a reporter with the publicly funded Radio Nigeria station, and Amos Tauna, a reporter with the privately owned *Daily Post newspaper*, while they were investigating alleged election-related arrests and burning cars around the town of Zonkwa's police station. Bala and Tauna were attacked by hoodlums with stones and sticks. The hoodlums allegedly took their phones and collected their recorder and car keys. This was quite disturbing because the journalists could not continue with their assignment after the incident (Committee to Protect Journalist, 2019).

Furthermore, some journalists were arrested while others were killed during the Presidential and Senatorial elections held on Saturday February 23, 2019 in Anambra State. For instance, the arrest of Nwanosike Onu of *The Nation Newspaper*, Geoffrey Anyanwu of the *Sun Newspapers*, David-Chyddy Eleke of *Thisday*, Vincent Ujumadu of *Vanguard* and Tony Okafor of *The Punch Newspaper* by a team of fully armed police officers close to the residence of Mr. Peter Obi (Vice-Presidential Candidate of PDP), in Anambra where they had gone to cover him during the voting exercise. These journalists were not allowed to cover Peter Obi probably because of his political party affiliation. Similarly, some groups of journalists were barred from monitoring the results collation in Ugheli North, Delta State; Amuwo/Odofin Local Government Area of Lagos State; Bauchi and Kebbi States. This is a bad development for the media profession because it hampers the freedom of expression of the men who are supposed to feed the public with information about the elections (IPC, 2019).

According to Media Foundation for West Africa (2019), a lot of recorded cases of press violations were recorded during the State Governors' elections held on November 16 in Kogi and Bayelsa States in 2019. Some thugs attacked four journalists, threatened and prevented others from reporting on the elections. A group of thugs allegedly threw stones at Tobi Kusimo and David Bello from Splash FM radio station when the journalists tried to interview a polling

nofficer at Aiyetoro Gbede, a town in Kogi State. At another polling station in Bayelsa State, some journalists of African Independent Television covering the elections were attacked by thugs.

In the same vein, in Plateau State, Kunle Sanni, a *Premium Times* journalist was abducted by political thugs for taking pictures of alleged underage voters at a polling unit of Governor Simon Lalong in Plateau State. He was later released after he was forced to delete the pictures. While in Yobe State, Soldiers at ORO3, Union Bank formation in Damaturu, confiscated a car belonging to a journalist and kept several of them hostage for hours. The journalists are Musa Mingye of *Blueprint* and Hamisu Kabir Matazu of *Daily Trust*, who were using their personal vehicles with an INEC approved sticker, INEC's reflective jackets, INEC issued Identification cards and the company's identity cards. The heavily-armed military men threatened to resort to brutality if the journalists insisted on leaving the location to continue their election (Inter National Press Centre, 2019). These are only a few cases of the brutality that journalists face in the coverage of election in contemporary Nigeria.

The Way Forward

It is glaring that Nigerian journalists are no longer safe to cover elections in a country that pride itself as the bastion of African democracy. And if this trend continues without been nib in the bud, the nascent democracy the press fought to gain will be replaced with an aristocratic form of democracy where the rights of citizens are denied.

First, the government must come to terms with the reality of the fact that in a democracy citizens and members of the press must be allowed to function within the ambit of the law. To suppress the press like in the military era will only tarnish the image of the country and thus present a caricature form of democracy to the outside world.

Second, the government must uphold international best practices by providing security cover to journalists covering elections and other crime related events. Countless of Nigerian journalists were left to die without this provisions. It is only in Nigeria that journalists covering elections will be physically manhandle by security forces that were meant to protect the lives and property of the people including journalists. This development has made the relationship between journalists and security forces to be unfriendly. They see themselves as enemies rather than partners in revealing the shady deals and corrupt activities of government. Hence insurance cover should be provided for journalists.

In addition, laws restricting media freedom and the safe conduct of journalism should be repealed in advance before political campaigns starts. Part of the safety of journalists is not being at risk of arrest for normal professional activities. For example, this could include police or judicial powers to compel journalists to divulge confidential information. Given public statements by government to ensure that journalists are provided safe haven during elections are not enough. The government must back these assurances with practical commitment to protect journalists in performing their duties. Government must equally respect fundamental laws of the country to proof its commitment to protect journalists in covering elections.

The journalists themselves must demonstrate high level professionalism in the coverage of elections. They must be trained and acquaint themselves with international best practices in reporting elections and crisis. Capacity building workshops and seminars will ensure that they keep abreast of facts alongside their counterparts in other parts of the world. In this regard, government can collaborate with international professional bodies to provide capacity building in this direction.

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