

A black and white photograph of the Nigerian flag (green, white, and green horizontal stripes) flying on a tall flagpole. The flagpole is on the left side of the cover, and the flag is partially visible, showing the green and white stripes.

NIGERIA BEYOND 2007:

**ISSUES, PERSPECTIVES
AND CHALLENGES**

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Chapter Fifteen

Building Critical and Active Electorate in Nigeria and A New Agenda for the Media

Mustapha K. Lambe

Introduction

The year 2007 is in many ways epochal in the annals of Nigeria's political life. Apart from the fact that the political score-card loaded with many *firsts*, there is a great need to consolidate Nigeria's democracy, which could presently be best described as "Exclusive Democracy"- (to borrow Gani Fawehinmi's words).

For the first time in Nigeria's chequered history, there was a 360-degree transition of leadership from one civilian to another within a republic. Also, the nation, for the first time, witnessed a completion of a second and terminal term of any civilian dispensation, having truncated the tenures of the leaders in the first and second republics via coup d'état. In a similar vein, Nigerians, for the first time, sent off, honourably too, the longest serving democratically elected civilian leader from the centre of power.

All these portend a new ray of hopes for the nation's march to democratic El Dorado, at least on the face value. The fact, however, remains that politics of inclusion, a basic tenet of democracy, has not been entrenched even though Nigeria is under a democratic dispensation that supposedly thrives on majority rule.

This issue becomes relevant because of the fact that governance in Nigeria has been reduced to a level of *benevolent* service by the ruling elite, creating a feeling of the citizenry being at the mercy of the leaders. The fact that Nigeria is operating a constitutional government and a signatory to many human rights charters have not made the country egalitarian in her political philosophy since independence. She has failed to reflect her adherence to the letters of the constitution and the wordings of those charters. This is confirmed by the breach of the laws during past military regimes and their civilian successors.

Perhaps, the effects of colonization and militarization of the polity are alterations of the behavioural as well as participatory instincts of the leaders and the led alike. This has serious implication for the nation's body polity and its people as aptly captured by Ogunba (1997, p. i):

The way a people are governed is of paramount importance in determining the quality of life of the people. If governance is arbitrary, oppressive or capricious, the collective psyche of a people can be damaged and individual within the community can suffer various forms of disorientation. If, on the other hand, governance is open, democratic and

humanistic, a people can experience a sense of rejuvenation and fulfillment, which can lead to highly positive achievements.

It is an understatement to say that participatory governance is presently held in abeyance in Nigeria, given the erosion of the people's power of achieving change through the vote. This has resulted into political apathy by the Nigerian electorate. The Nigerian political horizon is today laden with extreme disaffection among all segments of the society who now believe that regardless of their votes, politicians will be *elected* into offices via the power dynamics of the rich and famous godfathers, not on the basis of their votes (M'Bayo, 2006, pp.7-8).

This attitude, no doubt, discounts the electorate's votes and by extension, reduces voters' interest in participating in the political process. Many voters now feel alienated from participatory governance and thus resign to fate, fueling the imperialistic ego and instincts of the political elite, who now see Nigeria as their conquered territory. The democratic reality today is that people are participating in voting and not democracy. Other nuances of democratic rule, such as protest and petitioning, have no meaning, even to the "minimal participants" in Nigerian electoral system.

This chapter is premised on the great roles played by the Nigerian mass media during the agitations for self rule and against several draconian military dictators. Their efforts were intended to rally the entire citizenry towards an egalitarian state, which has been the desire of the nation and the cause of several "battles" against imported or home grown imperialistic rule.

Theoretical Perspectives

Since their introduction in the mid-19th century, the Nigerian mass media have, in addition to being the setters of agenda for public discourse, assumed a socially responsible stance. The earlier practitioners, using the newspapers medium, championed the transition of the country from the status of imperialist's colony to that of an independent nation and eventually a republic. Using the might of the *pen* over that of the *sword*, the media men of that time such as Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Dutse Mohammed Ali, to mention but a few, demonstrated that the mass media can really rise to the level of intellectual fortress, charting the cause of the people.

Through incisive reporting, the press was able to create a cloud of public opinion that altered the colonial policies. Nigerian newspapers considerably influenced the colonial policies and people's attitudes. They occupied the stage in the emancipation of the people towards political awareness and meaningful participation in government through successfully spreading disaffection against colonial policies (Omu, 1978, p.166).

The power of the mass media in setting agenda for public discourse has

become a subject of concern in media research, attracting a deluge of research from the likes of Dannel Katz, David Weaver, and of course Maxwell McComb and Donald Shaw. Weaver (1982, p.546) concludes that media emphasis on certain issues and subjects over certain period of time has tremendous influence on what becomes a matter of concern to a certain group of people in an organized democracy. Mass media act as the conscience of the state by revealing bad things, commending good things and keeping the interest of the citizenry uppermost in their agenda (Owens-Ibie, 1997, p. 469).

In addition to the mediating power of the media to set public agenda, the mass media have, by constitutional and conventional powers, become the societal watchdogs, watching over the activities of those trusted with the common wealth and the state's instruments of security management. So powerful is the institution that a former American President, Thomas Jefferson, pontificated on its supremacy over government via his declarative statement;

the basis of our government is public opinion and the very first objective should be to keep the right... were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without the press or the press without a government I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter(cited in Akinfeleye, 2003, 3).

This tremendous role of the media dovetailed into the emergence of the libertarian theory of the press, which presupposes a belief in free and public expression as the best way to arrive at the truth, expose error and attain the sovereignty of the popular will. The central idea embedded in the theory as well as the writings of the likes of John Milton in his *Areopagitica* and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* provided the ground for the First Amendment to the American constitution: "Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech or of the press "(Baran, 200, p.145).

The libertarian theoretical approach gave birth to the social responsibility paradigm, which seeks additional responsibilities for the free media that fails to live up to the expectation of free market place and deliver appropriate benefits to the society. Social responsibility challenges media professionals' ingenuity to develop new ways of serving their communities. It also challenges them to see themselves as frontline participants in the battle to preserve democracy in the world drifting inexorably towards totalitarianism (Baran and Davis, 2004, p.110).

Given the peculiar nature of Nigerian democracy, which has transformed the ultimate holders of power-the voters- into apathetic participants and subsequently empowers political leaders, only the media, practising within the social responsibility theoretical and philosophical orientations and working with other critical stakeholders in the civil society, can mobilize the voters to a height that can guarantee full and informed participation. Thus, Potter (2006, p. 2) argues

that;

democracies, established or emerging, depend on the consent of an informed citizenry, and the news media are a primary source of the information (that) people need in order to govern themselves.

The mass media is not only central to disseminating governmental information, but can also create the empathy needed by the citizens to become active participants in the political process (Odunewu, 2000, p.5).

Politics and Political Participation in Nigeria

After several ideological battles between the imperial colonialists and the news media, particularly the newspapers, the nation attained independence in 1960, albeit with low level of the western form of literacy. However, the political management of the nation was marred by extreme emphasis on tribal politics, popularized by patriarchs of Nigerian politics-Ahmadu Bello, Obafemi Awolowo and Nnamdi Azikiwe. This contributed significantly to the faulty political foundation that later plagued and is still plaguing the nation's politics. Oyediran (1997, p. 8), for example, avers that;

there is abundant evidence to suggest that at least up to the decade of independence, electoral behaviour in Nigeria was not guided by ideology, party programmes or merit of those standing to be elected, but by political calculus based on ethnic geo-politics, the need to assume power at all costs, either singly or by a fluid conglomeration of small power blocs around a big power bloc for the purpose of fighting the war with which to win the right to rule and share out the anticipated booty.

There were insinuations that the very election that led to the eventual lowering of the Union Jack in Nigeria was a compromise rather than the true reflection of the wishes of the electorate. This assumption was based on the party-government relationship at the twilight of the colonial rule, which saw the Northern Peoples Congress emerging as the favourite of the colonial government that was then contending with the staunch oppositions of the Action Group (AG), United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC), and United National Independent Party, among others. Citing Smith et al, Jibo (2001: 4) confirms that;

the only big party which consistently related cordially with the British, with a measure of civility, was the NPC which relied on the advice of British administrators whom it regarded as friends.

This *civilized* relationship was said to be the tonic that assisted the NPC to succeed the colonialists. The period immediately after independence was that of

bitter struggle for supremacy among the three biggest parties, with serious ethnic cleavages. This unbridled politics of bitterness catapulted the nation into the abyss of violent politics, where violence became a rule rather than the exception. This was either a cause or consequence of massive rigging at the polls. More than anything else, it was the twin-incident of violence and rigging that led to the militarization of Nigerian political culture. As a consequence, the electorate became disillusioned with having their votes discounted and their lives threatened.

Popoola (2004: 190) observes that;

there have been several instances in Nigeria where thugs were hired by desperate politicians with the main objective of bulldozing opponent into passivity...

From the 1950s, elections in Nigeria approximated a war that was waged to determine 'who got what, when and how'. All weapons were available for these combatants to use- religion, ethnic sentiments, outright bribery, the power of incumbency, corruption, the abuse of electoral processes, etc. (Oyediran, 1997, p. 8). The Shagari-led Second Republic suffered the same fate, culminating into political *cul de sac* or what is well known as the *maradonic* era in the Nigerian political lexicon.

As a corollary to politically induced passivity, the long term militarization of the Nigerian polity has done incalculable damage to the political psyche of an average citizen and eroded the political activism in him/ her. This militarized instinct still resides with the successors of the military in governance, who now bestride the nation's political landscape with colossal militarized behaviours. Galadima (2001: 177) captures the danger of militarism in Nigerian polity so eloquently:

Militarism, no doubt, destroyed the political elites in the country and rendered some of them corrupt, confused and unprincipled. Many political elites in Nigeria have served at various times and at various capacities under military. Indeed quite a number of them also are retired military officers. These political elites, having been thoroughly schooled and orientated in the values of militarism over the years, still exhibit militaristic attitude even in this democratic dispensation.

It requires little exertion to know that participatory democracy in Nigeria is nothing but a cosmetic arrangement that is devoid of democratic space and democratic culture, which are fundamental to true democratic dispensation. A democratic state, where people are intimidated or cajoled to perform simple democratic obligations like registering and voting during the election, deserves a

serious democratic re-engineering, which every socializing agent and not the least the media should champion. The act of threatening workers with loss of pay and making registration a precondition for enjoyment of social utility, such as school enrollment, hospital registration, market stall allocation, among others, is nothing but political blackmailing and robbery by the government and the political elite.

Many a times, the ruling elite have abused the voters in many ways than one, thereby making them psychologically deflated and politically empty. It is unfortunate that several years into democracy, Nigerians are yet to realize the power of their combined votes. In this regard, it has been observed that:

The unawareness of his (voter's) sovereign powers in democracy makes the common man oblivious of his rights as citizen, of effectiveness of his rights and powers when combined with those of others and lead to his helplessness before the administration, to his dependence upon it and often to his surrender to the might of the government... (Sawant, 2000: 18).

This state of affair is not only dangerous but poisonous to democracy, for it has left the voters with no choice than being passive participants. The growing popular indifference to politics and declining level of participation in civil society have led to the growing "democratic deficit" and a fading citizenship values and practices (Gana, 1998: 5)

Given the love and disdain of the electorate by the Nigerian political class, it will not be out of order to canvass for the enthronement of sound democratic order that has worked for the advancement of mankind in advanced nations. Democracy thrives in the West largely because of the core values of fraternity (popular sovereignty), liberty (people's right embedded in the rule of law) and equality (people socio-economic right)... (Eteng, 1996: 30). Therefore, the challenge facing the people of Nigeria is not just the replacement of military regime but making democracy work in deed and utterance.

The Place of the Mass Media

One of the most powerful hopes advanced by theorists of representative government is that news media should remain free so (that) they may educate the public in making political choice (Clarke and Fredin, 1980: 314). Citing Lasswell, Akinfeleye (1987: 67) notes that "man has always needed something to watch over his environment and report to him on the danger, discoveries, opportunities, opinions, facts, decisions, changes, and current trends". Viewed critically, all these needs of man exist in all societies- democratic or autocratic- and they can better be served by the mass media in order to create a sound political culture and champion continuous political education.

The Nigerian mass media have not faltered in this role from inception,

having been linked, remotely or strongly, to the quest for a humane and just political system, devoid of oppression, dictatorship and exploitation (Owens-Ibie, 1997: 463). The fierce opposition of the colonial system, the galvanization of powers that led to *step-aside* from office by Nigerian self-style military President, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, and the guerilla journalistic warfare waged against the vicious regime of General Sanni Abacha are pointers to the zeal of the Nigerian media in keeping dates with destiny.

Mass Media and Political Culture

Early theorists in political communication on the relationship between the mass media and political development, posit that there is natural affinity between the media and the political structure of any nation (Uche, 1989: 51). Because of their wide reach, mass media can contribute immensely to public information and political culture, especially in a society where literacy is low, and news spread via multi-step flow down to the population, by educating the incumbents and enlightening the rank and file (Obada, 2005: 31-32). In defining the concept of political culture, Ayedun-Aluma (1996: 46) offers a comprehensive definition of this term when he says:

The political culture provides the framework of principle and values which shape the demand, expectations, processes, perceptions, and statutes of the media, the political actors and the audience. Political culture determines the operative principle such as free speech, censorship, market mechanism, media plurality and media autonomy. It functions such as mobilization, agenda setting, legitimization, political gate keeping and so forth.

It follows from the above that democracy does not thrive on mere periodic election or the absence of the *Khaki Boys* at the helm of the state affairs, but rather it is a way of life that leads to the attainment of political freedom as contained in the Article 21 (3) of the United Nation Declaration of Human Rights:

The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government. This will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine election which shall be made by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedure (cited in Wanyonyi, 1997: 21-22).

Democratic political culture imbues the citizens with the right attitudes that will not only guarantee their rights but set a stage for a well participatory society, where dividends of democracy can be optimally enjoyed by the people. As a nation with long history of military leadership, Nigeria's media have a tremendous role to play in engendering a political culture that is democratic in

philosophy. For example, the media have a vital role to play in promoting the culture of peace, development, people's participation, positive virtues and in promoting stable polity as necessary imperatives for the sustenance of democracy (Gana, 2000: 10).

Mass Media and Political Education

Education is essential to democracy because one of the most fundamental requisites of a democratic system is informed citizenry. Thus, according to Berelson (1966: 493), possession of information and knowledge makes the electorate to be informed about any matter under consideration. With political education, therefore, the electorate will develop a sound political initiative that will enhance their participation in all aspects of life, including political matters. It is therefore, important to note that political education entails planned, programmed and coordinated activities to enable people to be alive to their civic rights and responsibilities. One of the major facilitators of political education is the mass media. Baran and Davis (2004: 82), citing John Dewey, raise the importance of the mass media in facilitating critical political thinking and knowledge:

Newspapers and (other media) needed to do more than simply serve as bulletin board for information about current happenings. They should serve as vehicle for public education and debate. They should focus more on idea and philosophy...they should teach critical thinking skills and structure public discussion on important issues.

The amount of information at the disposal of the voters will go a long way in determining their level of knowledge and by extension, their political preferences. In effect, any knowledge that must be passed through the media must be well designed and diffused to prevent it from being lost in a clutter. There is therefore, a correlation between media political education and the density, breath and depth of information. Therefore, "in order to be able to arrive at a rational decision, access must be had to relevant information... the relevant information must appear with a certain frequency to avoid being swamped by irrelevant information" (Asp, 1980, pp.342-343).

Often regarded as the Fourth Estate of the realm, the mass media contribute to the education of the public on state affairs and the dissemination of information on the activities of the government which are often shrouded in "top secrecy". They also expose wrong doings, including corrupt practices and ensure accountability, transparency, probity and integrity in governance (Obada, 2005:18-19).

The importance of rational and well informed civil populace to the enthronement of egalitarian order, preached in the *gospel* of democracy and the

role of the mass media thereof, cannot be overstretched. This finds a tacit agreement in the media motivating statement of the first African president of Gold Coast (now Ghana), Kwame Nkrumah, cited in Akinfeleye (2003: 3):

...to true African mass media men and women, their media are collective instruments of education, mobilization and a collective weapon of fighting illiteracy, poverty, ignorance and the essential weapon to overthrow colonialisms and imperialism and serve as liberation of African independence and unity.

The media given their previous performances and current expectations are, therefore, vantage to bring about necessary awareness to arrest the ugly trend of democratic rape that is ravaging the Nigerian polity.

Media Agenda for Participatory Politics

Normatively, the mass media are supposed to be performing their roles of educating, informing, entertaining as well as serving as platform for unhindered expression of public opinion (free market place of ideas). The performance of these roles is subject to other variables such as ownership, censorship and viewers' media literacy. Throughout the world, freedom of communication is an ideal; no country has actually achieved it. This ideal is simply a continuum somewhere between absolute control and absolute freedom (Merrill, 1991: 3). This and many more led to the development of the civic journalistic movements.

The main thesis of civic journalism is to facilitate an interactive form of journalistic practice that is public/people centred. It is a form of interactive journalism, where the newspaper actively enlists and engages people from all walks of life in the creation of stories and the reports it develops (Baran and Davis, 2004: 116). It redefines the responsibility of journalism by emphasizing the search for answer instead of simplistic narration under the cover of journalistic objectivity (Okigbo, 2004: 38). Civic journalism commands many appellations—advocacy journalism, public journalism, citizen journalism and participatory journalism, to mention but a few. The stimulus behind public (civic) journalism was the realization that many citizens felt and still feel alienated from participating in public life in a meaningful way (Campbell, Martin and Fabos, 2005: 500).

Civic journalism began as a movement in 1997 in the North Carolina (Baran, 2002: 161 citing Effron). However, M'Bayo (2005: 30) gives account of how African nationalists, who are mainly journalists, used the approach long before the American movement:

Nationalist leaders who fought for political independence for their respective countries dominated African journalism in 1950s and early 1960s. These politician-journalists

practiced the trade not as disinterested observers of events, but as passionate advocates of the rights of their fellow citizens against colonial administrator. Hence, they sought to influence public opinion and to bring about the demise of colonialism; they did so unapologetically and with every rhetorical means at their disposal. In other words, they unabashedly practiced what is referred to in the profession as advocacy journalism.

Civic journalism becomes imperative given the aloofness of the so-called leaders in the Nigerian political arena. The only time they seem to recognize the existence of the masses is when they want to use them to fill a vacuum. This is mostly during the election period when the votes of the masses serve as leverage to legitimizing their ascendancy. Even at that, the masses are only needed for cosmetic display, at least to show the world that we are practising democracy.

Nigerians deserve more than gathering information from their media. They require a media that can really fit the status of the unofficial fourth branch of government as postulated by Edmund Burke. These media will need to downplay extreme commercialism, which is the order of the free market structure that forms the pillar of the political economy of liberal democracy. More emphasis should be focused on working within the ambit of social responsibility and theoretical orientation, which challenge media professionals' ingenuity to develop new ways of serving their communities. Civic journalism comes handy in a polity that is tactically excluding the masses.

Conclusion

In this chapter, attempt has been made to show that there is a major lacunae between the political class and the electorate in Nigeria. The chapter examined participatory politics in Nigeria and draws attention on the apathy of the voters occasioned by the tactical exclusion of the masses from participatory politics and the role of the mass media in re-ordering of the polity.

The importance of democratic political culture and sound political education as *sine qua non* for development of critical and rational body of voters was examined, for their importance in democratic experimentation cannot be quantified. Although the media, as socializing institutions have done well in fighting the evil of colonialism and military authoritarianism, there are apparent needs, even in the contemporary political state of Nigeria for them, working in concert with other socialization agents and the civil society, to raise the awareness level of the citizenry on the need for a new battle against *imperialistic democracy* that is currently ravaging the nation's polity in a manner that HIV/ AIDS is decimating the world population.

It is not enough fighting for entrenchment of civil governance, but making

it work as it has done in other climes remains a great task in the hands of all those that championed the cause of the return of democracy, of which the mass media stand tall. All efforts should, therefore, be channeled towards building the civic capacity of the Nigerian electorate; particularly via media reporting and programming in the same manner the duo were used in the decolonization and demilitarization processes. Only this can make the dividends of democracy accruable, in their quantum, to all and sundry.

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