

ROLE OF MEDIA IN 2015 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The media is often regarded as one of the pillars of democracy in any society. The media serves as a platform for protecting the fundamental human rights of citizens through the freedom of expression and freedom of information. The role of the media cannot be over emphasized in the annals of Nigeria's history. During the prolonged military era, the media stood like a colossus against dictatorship and the many shortcomings of successive administrations. Notably, the Nigerian media was at its peak during the June 12 annulment saga and the inglorious regime of General Sani Abacha. There was a sigh of relief that Nigeria will evolve into a free society after the military exited the political scene for the establishment of democratic rule on May 29, 1999. Since 1999, Nigeria has organized general elections in 2003, 2007 and 2011 respectively. Nigerian political elites usually employ the media in canvassing for votes. With the ever widening influence of globalisation, credibility of Nigeria's electoral system is hinged on the media. This research will analyze to what extent is the involvement of the media towards influencing voting behaviour especially during the 2015 Presidential election in Nigeria. This paper will attempt to answer these questions - Is the media keeping to its constitutional role? Is the media an agent for democratic consolidation or a tool used for the destabilization of the polity? The paper argues that indeed, media has helped in the strengthening of Nigeria's democracy and in raising the political consciousness of the ordinary Nigerian.

Keywords: *Presidential Election, Media, Political Parties, Candidates*

Introduction

The role of the Nigerian media in actualizing democracy cannot be overemphasized. The annulment of June 12, 1993 election by General Ibrahim Babangida's regime tested the effectiveness and strength of the media. Media houses and journalists were able to sensitize the masses about the evils been perpetuated by the military and the elites who supported the annulment of the 1993 election considered being one of the freest and fairest polls ever seen in Nigeria. The Nigerian media made the Babangida regime become unpopular and eventually Babangida bowed to pressure by stepping aside on August 27, 1993.

All through the Abacha years, the Nigerian media launched sustained attacks on his anti-democratic actions. General Abacha incarcerated MKO Abiola, the acclaimed winner of the 1993 presidential election on June 24, 1994. In order to discredit the Sani Abacha regime, the media engaged in extensive reportage and publication of anti-military news and articles. The constant flow of information supplied by the media about the misrule of the military regime and the need for democratic rule proved decisive in the mobilization of the civil society as well as the international community to pressurize the military government to relinquish power (Ngara and Esebonu, 2012).

The activities of Civil Liberties Organization (CLO); Constitution Rights Project (CRP), Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CDHR), National Association of Democratic Lawyers (NADL), National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), Campaign for Democracy (CD) and the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) exposed the regime of Abacha in a bad light due to its poor human rights records (Obi, 2000).

The dictatorial regime of General Abacha clamped down on several media houses and went as far as putting several seasoned journalists in jail. In 1993, 70,000 copies of *Tell* magazine, 50 copies of *Tempo*, 50 copies of the first edition of *The News* and thousands of copies of *The Sunday Magazine* were seized by security agents (Ajebode, 2010). Likewise, the publisher of Razor Magazine, Mr. Moshood Fayewimo, Tony Irolade and Alex Kaba of *The News/Tempo* were also arrested and detained at different times, while others like Chris Anyanwu, publisher of *The Sunday Magazine*, Kunle Ajibade, executive editor of *The News Magazine*, George Mba of

Tell magazine and Ben Charles Obi of *Classique* were sentenced by a secret military tribunal to various jail terms over alleged involvement in the 1995 phantom coup (Malaolu, 2004:22).

Top notch media outfits such as *Tell*, *The News* and *Radio Kudirat* had to publish and operate from unknown locations to avoid arrest and seizure of publications by coercive state agents. As espoused by Olukotun, the guerilla styled media worked effectively by exposing government's secrets and challenging the authoritarian regime of Abacha (see Iyare, 2004:17).

The sudden demise of General Abacha on June 8, 1998 brought a sigh of relief on Nigerians especially the civil society organizations and the mass media. With the exit of Abacha, the Nigeria media did not relent in advocating for the return to civil rule. The doggedness of the mass media paid off as Abacha's successor, General Abdulasalami Abubakar released several media practioners, human rights activists, members of civil society organizations and individuals who were perceived to have been enemies of the late Head of State. Eventually, General Obasanjo (retd), who was accused and jailed by Abacha in 1995 for allegedly conspiring to oust him from power, was voted as the democratically elected President of Nigeria in 1999. Obasanjo's emergence as President from the same geo-political zone (Ogun state) as the late MKO Abiola was widely supported by the mass media as a bold move in fostering national integration after the dark episodes Nigeria passed through under the Babangida and Abacha years in power.

Conceptualizing the Mass Media

The word press will include publishers and broadcasters, media, editorial judgment, editorial control, journalistic discretion and news gathering. The term publication implies the means or processes through which ideas and information are publicized, disseminated and made known to the general public (Fatoba, 2012:2). The major means of publication is through the mass media which could be through the electronic or print media.

Print media includes newspapers, magazines, books, handbills and other forms of publication; while electronic media includes radio, television and the internet.

Publication is generally the communication of any kind of information to another person. Information cannot be said to be published until it is communicated to another person (ibid).

Section 22 of the 1999 constitution provides for the obligation of the mass media. It provides that:

“The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people”.

According to Fatoba (2012), the duties of the mass media extend to the following:

1. The press keeps the people and government informed.
2. The press provides a means of communication among the people.
3. The press serves as watchdog on the activities of government, government officials and members of the public in general.
4. The press provides a voice for the people by giving the strong, weak, rich, poor, young, and old the right to express their views irrespective of how primitive, sensible or irrational the view may be.
5. The press is a trend setter as a medium for socialization and social engineering.
6. The press is a market for the presentation of ideas and opinion.
7. The press is a vehicle for change.
8. The press is a medium of enormous influence on people’s views, attitudes, judgments, lifestyles and values.
9. The press is a means of entertainment and relaxation.
10. The press helps the people in the making of an informed decision.

Mass Media and Nigeria’s Electoral System Since 1999

The media was at the forefront of the agitation for electoral reforms, reporting irregularities and malpractices that characterized the 2003 and 2007 elections and called for immediate actions after elections (Omoera, 2010). But while the 1999 elections were not free nor fair, the 2003

General Elections were characterized by fraud, miscounting, rigging and malfeasance. In addition, the election was not issue-oriented; the political parties lacked well thought-out programmes and manifestos, the executive lord over the other two arms through actual disrespect of ruling or threat of impeachment and blackmail (Momoh, 2006 cited in Akubo and Yakubu, 2014).

The 2007 elections were the worst in the history of Nigeria. Everything about the elections in the judgment of most Nigerians was bad. Its conduct had certainly armed critical observers of the Nigerian political scene with weapons to portray the country in a bad light in the world (Uhunmwbangho, 2008).

The media played a crucial role in the emergence of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan as the elected President in 2011. Everything worked well for Jonathan in the run up to the elections. Jonathan is an Ijaw, one of the minority ethnic groups in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. For a long time, the people of the Niger-Delta had advocated for the control of crude oil following years of massive environmental degradation and gross underdevelopment of the Niger-Delta region. Jonathan's humble beginnings story caught the attention of millions of Nigerians through the media. In his nation-wide campaigns, he often spoke about his "grass to grace" story. Jonathan (cited in Busari, 2012) asserted that:

In my early days in school, I had no shoes, no school bags, I carried my books in my hand but never despaired, no car to take me to school, but I never despaired. There were days I had only one meal, but I never despaired. I walked miles and crossed rivers to school every day, but I never despaired. I didn't have power, didn't have generators, studied with lanterns, but I never despaired. In spite of these, I finished secondary school, attended the University of Port Harcourt, and now hold a doctorate degree. Fellow Nigerians, If I could make it, you too can make it.

Jonathan actively engaged millions of Nigerian youths through the active use of the social media such notably facebook. The facebook platform bridged the communication gap between the political leadership and the ordinary Nigerians. Jonathan's closest rival, General Muhammadu Buhari (ret'd) was portrayed in the media as a rigid personality, an old-fashioned ex-military

dictator and religious fundamentalist who cannot lead a modern Nigeria. It was not surprising that Jonathan emerged as the clear winner of the presidential election in 2011.

Agenda Setting Theory

Since 1999, the media has played a key role in the strengthening of Nigeria's democracy. For theoretical understanding, the Agenda Setting Theory gives a clear view of the role of the Nigerian media in the consolidation of democracy in the fourth republic.

The concept of agenda setting took its name from the idea that the mass media have the ability to carry the salience of items on their news agenda and transfer it to the public agenda. Usually, the journalists deal with news in several important ways. First, they decide which news to cover or which news to ignore. They also assess all the available reports, while some of these news stories are published in greater length, and prominently displayed. The newspapers for instance, clearly state the journalistic salience of an item through its page placement, headline and length etc (Chibuike and Fafiolu, 2015).

Agenda Setting Theory is traceable to Walter Lippman's classic, *Public Opinion* in the first chapter titled "*The World outside the Pictures in our Heads*". Lippman was of the opinion that the mass media play critical role between events in the world and the images in the minds of the public. Bernard Cohen observed that the "press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but to stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about; the world will look different to different people depending on the type of map that is drawn for them by writers, editors and publishers of the papers they read (Ibid).

Agenda Setting Role of the Media in 2015 Presidential Election

The pomp and pageantry that greeted the ascension of President Jonathan soon vanished barely after one year in office. On January 1, 2012, Jonathan in a nation-wide broadcast announced the removal of fuel subsidy. The news prompted the organized civil society groups and Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) to stage the "Occupy Nigeria" protests which began on January 2, 2012. The protests were staged successfully in the major cities in Nigeria as well as in Australia, Toronto, South Africa, London, Sweden and Ghana. In New York, a Nigerian minister sent by

the Jonathan administration to calm the tempers of Nigerians who felt justifiably insulted by the ill-advised removal of oil subsidies was humiliated by angry protesters (Sowore, 2013). The “Occupy Nigeria” episode was the major item on the print and electronic media. In the media, Jonathan’s administration was painted as an anti-people government.

Jonathan’s emergence as President of Nigeria co-incided with the Boko Haram Insurgency that has led to the destruction of several lives and property in different sections in the North and Abuja, the nation’s capital. The media has served as a watchdog in assessing the counterterrorism initiatives of the Jonathan administration. The inability of his government in resolving the Boko Haram Insurgency and the celebrated abduction of 276 Chibok school girls on April 14, 2014 contributed towards the low ratings given to Jonathan by the media.

The anti-corruption crusade which kicked off during Obasanjo’s civilian administration (1999-2007) was widely heralded as a good initiative in rebuilding the battered image of the country and in the promotion of democratic values such as transparency, accountability and excellence within the Nigerian society. Under Jonathan’s administration, the anti-corruption drive was not given top priority. Under Jonathan’s presidency many militant leaders from the oil producing Niger Delta area have become very rich from government patronage and contracts. Some of them have been awarded security contracts to guard the oil installations they once protested against and attacked. Jonathan also pardoned ex-Bayelsa State Governor, Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, who was charged for money laundering in London (Siollun, 2015).

There were cases of widespread corruption involving principal officers in Jonathan’s cabinet. However, his government did little or nothing to investigate corruption related offences. Anti-corruption agencies such as Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) were rendered ineffective during Jonathan’s presidency. President Jonathan committed a big blunder during a television interview when he asserted that:

Over 70 percent of what are called corruption cases, even by the EFCC and other anti-corruption agencies, is not corruption, but common stealing, he added by saying that corruption claims were politically motivated (Vanguard, April 20, 2015).

The intra-party crisis that rocked the People's Democratic Party (PDP) damaged the image of the once gigantic party that held sway in national politics since 1999. So many political bigwigs such as Rivers State Governor, Rotimi Amaechi, former Kwara State Governor and serving Senator, Bukola Saraki, former Vice President Atiku Abubakar, the outgoing Speaker of the House of Representatives, Aminu Tambuwal, former military ruler, civilian President and international icon, Olusegun Obasanjo among several others left the party.

In a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria, it was expected of Jonathan believed to be humane and cerebral, to shy away from ethno-religious cleavages. In the public, Jonathan was perceived as an ethno-centric leader who only satisfied faithful supporters from the Eastern and South-South states. His administration also witnessed the polarization of the country through religion. Religion became a power tool for politicians to campaign irrespective of their track records.

Jonathan's administration in June 2014 moved to clamp down the circulation of some newspapers in Nigeria. Army soldiers and operatives of the State Security Service raided distribution vans, seized and damaged copies of newspapers nationwide (The Punch, June 7, 2014). By doing that, Jonathan's government was seen as an enemy of democracy by the media, otherwise called the fourth estate of the realm.

Some of the campaign strategies adopted by President Jonathan's media campaign team were quite uncivilized. Some television stations such as African Independent Television (AIT) and Silverbird Television (STV) owned by ace businessmen from the South-South region aired video documentaries that were targeted at damaging the personalities of the leading opposition candidate, General Muhammadu Buhari (ret'd) and some ex-military rulers. On January 19, 2015, Ekiti State Governor, Ayodele Fayose sponsored one of the most bizarre newspaper campaign adverts in the front pages of national dailies such as the Sun, Guardian and Punch titled "Nigeria Be Warned". Images of three former Nigerian Heads of States from the Northwestern states who died tragically in office were placed on the advert, while a question mark was placed on Buhari's photograph as the next victim (Sahara Reporters, January 19, 2015).

The hate campaigns run contrary to Section 95 of the Electoral Act 2010 which stipulates that:

- (1) A political campaign or slogan shall not be tainted with abusive language directly or indirectly likely to injure religious, ethnic, tribal or sectional feelings.
- (2) Abusive, intemperate, slanderous or base language or insinuations or innuendoes designed or likely to provoke violent reaction or emotions shall not be employed or used in political campaigns.

BUHARI's GAIN:

All the factors that led to the dismal performance of the PDP during the 2015 polls served as gains for General Buhari and the All Progressives Congress (APC). All through Buhari's campaigns, his campaign team emphasized on tackling issues such as terrorism, corruption, unemployment and infrastructural development. The media in Nigeria gave daily reports about the activities of both the PDP and APC prior to the polls. Months before the polls, there was a general feeling among Nigerians that the incumbent government will lose the election. With the help of the media, Nigerians at home and abroad belonging to different social classes showed keen interests in the outcome of the 2015 polls.

Despite the postponement of the general elections from February 14 to March 28, the incumbent government could not overturn the negative perceptions towards Goodluck Jonathan and the ruling party PDP. During the electioneering period, the media did a good job by covering events at the polling units and the collation centres. The media was able to expose some hitches encountered, for instance, the ineffectiveness of the Smart Card Readers in some polling units across the country.

Eventually, Muhammudu Buhari of APC emerged as the winner of the presidential poll with 15,424,921 votes as against Goodluck Jonathan's 12,853,162 votes (INEC website).

Conclusion

The paper has analyzed the agenda setting role of the Nigerian media during the 2015 presidential election. The various issues that were given priorities on the front pages of national dailies as well as topical issues discussed in privately owned television and radio stations influenced the election results to the advantage of the opposition candidate, General Muhammadu Buhari (retd).

Undoubtedly, the mass media in Nigeria has come of age and the use of internet technology in electioneering campaign has further widened political participation among millions of Nigerian youths.

Recommendations

The 2015 general elections were adjudged to have been successful by local and international observers. Going forward, this paper is of the view that institutions such as the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), Nigerian Press Council (NPC) and Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) should become more proactive in the censorship of the political campaigns of politicians. These agencies can engage aspiring candidates and political parties by training and re-orientating them on democratic values. Additionally, the leadership of the political parties should ensure that there is internal party discipline that will curb the excesses of party members that sponsor hate campaigns.

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