

THE MEDIA AND THE CHANGE AGENDA: TOWARDS SUSTENANCE OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The role of Media in the current ‘Change Agenda’ of President Muhammadu Buhari administration cannot be over emphasized. In fact, media, democracy and good governance are tools that promote stability in any given society. The absence of any one, may suffer the sustenance of the system. Media as an institution is saddled with the social responsibility of mobilizing people towards positive change, thereby setting agenda for democracy and good governance. African development was hindered due to lack of free media. Social responsibility and participatory theories are adopted in guiding the analysis of the work. Quantitative approach/method of data collection is employed by reviewing literatures of reputable scholars on media, democracy and governance, as well as contemporary issues. The paper concludes that the media must be objective, investigative, and observe balance reportage and coverage. Rule of law, participatory, responsible and responsive government should be encouraged for effective democracy and good governance in line with the current change agenda. This is needed to confront the challenge of nation building in Nigeria.

Keywords: Media, Democracy, Governance, Change Agenda, Nigeria.

Introduction

The role of media in Democracy and Governance cannot be over emphasized. This is more obvious when one flashed back to the contribution of media in decolonization of the African States, before and after the Second World War (World War II). Most African States were independent as a result of the awareness through the mass-media, during decolonization process. Newspapers such as the West African Pilot, the Nigerian Daily Record and the Daily Telegraph had been at the Vanguard of political education during the struggle for independence in Nigeria.

Similarly, after the United Nations (UN) Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 which stated that all member nations should promote the universal respect and observance of Human Rights and Fundamental freedom, media played a vital role in ensuring that all member states had domesticated the agenda. At that point, only few African States were independent. However, the media contributed towards domestication of the principles on Human Rights, democratization and good governance. Such sensitization had prompted many countries that were under colonial rule to gain independence. Also in the late 1980s when the wave of change was blowing in Africa, after

the collapse of communism, the media encouraged many countries that were under the military to democratize. In the process, many reputable journalists in the media industry were either killed or put in detention. Nigeria was not an exception, particularly under Babangida and Abacha military administrations. Some prominent journalists in the country became victims of military excesses notable among them were the cases of Dele Giwa in 1990 under General Babangida and Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995 during the reign of General Sani Abacha . Moreover, a lot of fascist leaders in African states were exposed and their attitude and patterns of ruling were carefully aggregated and disseminated to the public for awareness by the media. These happened in addition to enlightenment of the citizens about the philosophy and direction of government for public support. By and large the media came to occupy a front position in the campaign for change among African nations. Anywhere and at any time when election was on course in Africa, the media championed the role of political education and social mobilisation. Such was the case in places like Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, etc.

During the democratization process in Nigeria from 1999, the media has formed a vanguard for the mobilization of the people towards change. In the 2015 election which ushered in Muhammad Buhari as the president, the media had played a vital role in voter education. A lot of masses that had apathy or parochial political culture were enlightened on the importance of election by the media (including the social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, You-tube, etc.). This no doubt had contributed immensely to the change crusade been launched by the present administration. Commenting on his change mission, president Buhari emphasized that Nigerians must work hard since change cannot be achieved on bed of roses. Thus, it is through patience and perseverance that the challenges of the country would be overcome. Hence there is need for collective determination to implement the change through the fight against corruption and curbing excessive waste in government. Through these, integrity in governance can be restored and government will deliver and rescue the country from bad governance (see the Punch News Papers of September 1, 2016).

Conceptual Clarification

- i. **Media:** Historically, media has been evolving since the beginning of human existence. Anyadike (2009) described media as the channel of transmitting information to people especially in a heterogeneous social setting. Those channels are predominantly radio, television, newspapers and magazines. Over the last two decades however, there was a shift in the way media carried out their activities using modern technology as against the traditional methods. As a result the media became more effective, more efficient and most useful in disseminating information across the society. This shift results in a revolution in human life particularly with the advent of the social media (Facebook, Twitter, You-tube, SMS, etc). These modes of communication have made immense contribution to the course of political campaigns by Nigerian political parties. The political parties both used electronic, print and social media to reach-out to the voters and mobilized them and aggregated their opinions. In-fact, the media today is the major means of interactions between groups, individuals, and authorities all over the world. Thus in the Nigerian context, the influences of media networks in politics have grown dramatically since the inception of the fourth republic. For instance, the growing influence and relevance of media (including social media networks) has helped in deepening the democratization process in the country. The media (both electronic and print) as well as social media networks became veritable instruments for carrying out election campaigns, political mobilization and other electioneering activities. Online platforms were created by political parties for easy access to the people.
- ii. **Democracy:** The Wikipedia, defined democracy as a form of government in which all citizens have an equal say in the decision that affect their lives. Yahaya (2011) observed that

this should include equal (and more or less direct) participation in proposal, development and passage of legislation into law. It can also encompass social, economic and cultural conditions that enable the free and equal practice of political self-determination. In the word of Abdullahi (2008) democracy refers to a form of government, whose majority of people (as oppose to participation and control by a minority, single class or autocrat) participate or share in deciding the direction of the affairs and activities of the state and the government which it runs. Tukur, (2005) described democracy as a system that allows the people to choose and change their governments at prescribed regular intervals by means, which are free of coercion, cheating, corruption and undue interference. The electoral processes must be transparent, free and fair, credible and devoid of manipulations. Democracy thrives under a functioning economy, educated and patriotic citizenry, gainfully employed population, responsible power elite and a competent political leadership. Without these basics, it is not possible for democratic institutions, such as political parties, pressure groups and associations and the media to be sustained.

- iii. **Governance:** This refers to all process of governing, whether undertaken by government, market or network (Gambari, 2001). It also implies establishment of policies and continuous monitoring of their proper implementation, by the members of the governing body of an organization or state. It includes the mechanism required to balance the powers of the members (with the associated responsibility) and their primary duty in the organization. On the other hand, democratic governance covers all sections of the society to serve as the regularized way of ordering human values. It refers to a viable government that provides the people with security and addressed their fears. It raises peoples' hope on government towards realization of their aspirations as well as creates conducive atmosphere and environment to attain the highest of their ambitions (Abdullahi 2014).

Nigerian Democratization

The current and on-going democratization process in Nigeria was a quest for institutionalizing democracy as a system embedded with the articles of economic and political reforms to set the nation on the path of development after years of soma-soul both under the military and corrupt civilian regimes. This process began with the coming to power of General Abdulsalami Abubakar in 1998. The prolonged military rule characterized by human right abuses of the highest order resulted into total loss of hope among the citizens. This state of affair led to institutionalization of impunity under military which persisted under the subsequent civilian rulers of the PDP. The resoluteness of General Abubakar led to assiduous implementation of political reform in the country. He took bold steps towards liberalization of the society. Elections were conducted into the various political posts between December 1998 and February 1999. This marks the beginning of a new dispensation that sought to bring changes in governance that would impact positively on the lives of the citizens paving way for economic development. Unfortunately for Nigeria, the period of civilian rule from 1999-2015 was characterized by lack of accountability, coercion, violence, greed, brazen manipulation and wider scheming (Abdullahi, 2014). Thus, the peoples' hope soon turned into a state of despair and disenchantment that led to renewed agitations for change. During the count down to the 2015 general elections the opposition gang up against the then ruling party (PDP). An alliance was formed which gave birth to a new party (APC) that led the opposition. During the elections the APC succeeded in taking over the federal government and majority of the states. This paved the way to a change in leadership style under the Muhammadu Buhari administration.

The role of the Media in Democracy: Theoretical Perspective

Theory act as foundation of analysis especially if the analysis is social science oriented. Theoretical framework therefore provides a focal guide within which to test our proposition and verify our variables. For this purpose, both responsibility and participatory theories of democracy have been adopted to guide the analysis of this work. The choice of the two theories is necessary because of the role of media in democracy and governance.

Responsibility Theory

The social responsibility theory posited that mass – media should serve as a forum for the exchange of ideas, comments and even criticism as well as offers a balanced view point of the constituent groups in the society. The proponents of the theory include Peterson (2006), Ebo (1998) among others. The theory further maintained that media should not only offer opportunity for all parties in democracy and governance, they should represent all views – points and carefully access all source of news.

The major thrusts of the theory can be outlined as follows:

- i. Provision of truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day today events in context which gives them meaning.
- ii. The media should serve as a forum for exchange of comments and criticism.
- iii. The media should project a representative picture of the constituents group in the society.
- iv. It is the responsibility of the press to present and clarify the goals and values of the society.

In democracy, more especially in the African context the media should base their reporting on the above listed principles. The media must live above board, unbiased, truthful, and comprehensive and objective in reporting issues in governance by identifying facts and opinions. In conflict situation, the media should report views contrary to theirs without abdicating their own right to advocacy. They should interpret where necessary, but should give their inputs, when necessary to help resolve the conflict in governance. The theory canvases for self-regulation in line with the professional codes of ethics.

The relevance of the social responsibility theory can be seen in the Voter Education programme by the BBC, VOA, Daily Trust, The Nation, The Guardian and most media industry in creating awareness among the Nigerian masses in preparation for the 2015 general elections. Moreover, concerning the rift between the Executive (President) the APC on one hand and the National Assembly on the other hand in the nomination of the speaker and the senate President of Nigeria, media played a vital role in updating the masses about the issue. Media also mediated on the opinion of Nigerians on other issues which affects their lives.

Generally during the election held in March 2015, the media had played a very fundamental role in educating the prospective voters for active political participation. The issue of good governance was analysed by the media, and citizens' opinions were ventilated towards the sustenance of Democracy. The social responsibility theory was anchored as a tool of analysing the phenomena. President Buhari praised the role played by the Nigerian media towards the success of the 2015 general elections as well as the country's democratic resilience. In his comment he reiterated that, when the history of the last general election as well as our democracy is eventually written, the media would no doubt occupy a prominent place. He further stated that the Nigerian media had always stood on the side of the people and fought for their interest both during democratic and military rules (Punch News Paper of September 1, 2016).

Participatory Theory

Another theory employed in analysing this work and its relevance, is the one anchored on the idea that the people's political participation is the basic principle of democracy which also denote the active involvement of individuals and groups in the governmental processes affecting their lives. In other words, when citizens themselves play an active role in the process of formulation and implementation of public policies and decisions, their activity is called political participation. The proponents of the participatory theory of democracy are Robert Dahl (1956), C.B. Macpherson (1973). The relevance of the participation theory in democracy and governance is that, the active involvement of people in politics particularly in voting pattern may result to change. The justification of the participatory theory can be seen in 2015 Presidential Elections in Nigeria, where Muhammadu Buhari emerged the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This change is informed by the active political participation. In fact, the current campaign for change has gathered momentum under the APC led federal government largely due to wide support enjoyed by the president. The linkage between peoples' participation and the media is obvious in that the latter played the role towards voter education. It also exposes the weaknesses of undemocratic systems. These have precipitated the desire for change in Africa. A number of explanations have been advanced for this desire for change in Nigeria in particular since 1999. The reasons include poor economic performance, social and human rights abuses coupled with increasing hardship and poverty resulting from bad policies and high rate of unemployment among young people. Thus the change mantra in the country was precipitated by internal pressures due to state failure and desire for democracy.

Nevertheless, both the responsibility and participatory theories have a number of weaknesses as outlined below:

- i. The theories are not an African initiative and therefore bound to fail. It is more or less a Eurocentric ideology.
- ii. Sometimes some media outfits are not investigative. They just view things superficially and made a bias reportage, due to ethnic or regional sentiment.
- iii. In the participatory theory, few elite dominate the major decisions at the detriment of the masses.
- iv. Despite the active participation of citizens in politics, yet there are quite a number of those that have parochial political culture.

However, despite the weakness of the theories thereof, these theories succeeded in promoting voter education, sustenance of the democratic principles and the awareness on good governance and are therefore relevant even in African countries.

Challenges of Media in the Democratization process

Media as a professional body had encountered a lot of challenges and problems in the course of promoting democracy and good governance in the contemporary Nigerian society. Some of the challenges can be analysed below:

- a. Incessant persecution and even threat to death, particularly in crisis prone zones or highly tense political campaigns. This is in the process of coverage and making an unbiased reportage. Sometime journalists faced unlawful arrest and detention while on duty like the arrest and detention of "The Sun" Editor in 2014. In some cases journalists even lost their lives while on duty. A notable example was the alleged killing of Dele Giwa through a later bomb in 1985.
- b. Media officials are sometimes vulnerable to brutal attack and hostage taking in the coverage of conflict situations in some part of the country. A good example is the current Boko Haram insurgency which has caused the death of many people including journalists.

In 2011 at the peak of Boko Haram attacks a journalist named Zakari Isa of NTA Maiduguri was killed on October 16 (Titus 2014). Also three media houses including the Daily Times office, were bombed by terrorists in Abuja on April 26, 2012 (Abdullahi 2016). Even when some politicians are not comfortable with certain reports, they might engaged hired killers to threaten the lives of some journalists. This had happened in Nigeria from 1999 to early 2015 under the PDP administration that ruled with impunity.

- c. The media practitioners are vulnerable to hazard or accidental killings in the warfare. Most of the media industry and government rarely paid the hazard allowances to media staff. Considering the difficult nature of the job particularly in most political campaign and conflicts areas, this remained a serious challenge. A notable example was the recent “Sambisa Forest” tour by some journalists that accompanied military contingents to the Boko Haram militants built out. The difficulties that the journalists undergo were very terrible and become vulnerable to terrorist attack.
- d. The challenge of unconditional support for the government in power, at the detriment of the opposition. Notably, the campaign of calumny against Buhari by the Nigeria Television Authority and AIT at the eve of the 2015 general elections is a case in point.
- e. Low level of education among journalists. Some media practitioners have diploma as their highest qualification, but had been registered as professional journalists. This low level education encourages bias reportage by some journalists. The proliferation of fake journalists may not be unconnected to the least attention accorded to the entry qualification in to the media/journalism profession. A lot of quack and emergency journalists have been discovered, some parading themselves as media staff, but causing a lot of damages to the media industry.
- f. The problem of corruption has penetrated the media industry in the country. Today there are reported cases of collaboration of some journalists with corrupt politicians to sabotage the institutions that are fighting corruption like the EFCC. In buttressing this point, the acting Chairman of EFCC Ibrahim Magu stated that corrupt people hired journalists to abuse the EFCC every day, claiming that the commission was not doing its work according to the law. This exposes some of the weaknesses of some media industries and journalists in terms of reportage (not been clearly investigative).

Conclusion

This paper discussed media, democracy and governance. In the process, the roles of media in the sustenance of democracy which will enhance good governance were carefully identified. The challenges of the media industry in the crusade for democracy and good governance have been succinctly investigated such as the incessant persecution and even killing of some journalists, lack of political “will” in the part of government to promote democratic principles of freedom and liberty for good governance among other things.

The paper highlighted the way forward in promoting the media industry which will have a multiplier effect on democracy and good governance. These could be achieved through the practice of rule of law, citizenship rights and intensive mobilization of citizens in the fight against corruption. The paper concludes that there must be high level of education and strict adherence to professionalism in the media industry. Similarly, government must engage the media in promoting democracy and good governance. Short of the foregoing, least can be achieved.

Recommendations

This paper recommends the following measures in addressing the current challenges facing media industry for the sustenance of democracy and good governance. These are:

- Media should be objective and neutral in its reportage.

- Leaders should always engage and accommodate the media in ensuring and maintaining the philosophy of democracy and good governance.
- There has to be a search light in the media industry so as to fish out the non-professionals in the industry.
- Rule of law must be respected and adhered to, in enhancing democracy and good governance at all levels.
- There must be free and fair election, devoid of any irregularities.
- The independence of the judiciary must be upheld by the government so as to enjoy the legacy of democratic transition.
- Nigerians should be ready to accept positive changes no matter the difficulties, but the leaders must be accountable to the followers in all ramifications. To this end, people must support the current government in the fight against corruption in the country. The government on its part must carry out the crusade against corruption without fear or favor.
- Finally, in order to enhance the role of media in democracy and good governance, hazard allowance should be given to media officials.

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