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A DISCOURSE ON THE MASS MEDIA AS IMPERATIVES IN NIGERIA'S EVOLVING DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

Democracy is perceived as the best form of inclusive governance because it allows for periodic selection or rejection of key government officials in free and fair elections. With this, democratic governments tend to operate with high sense of responsibility, probity and equity. While democracy is a laudable form of government, it is a process and not a state and collective efforts are needed to guarantee its proper development and protect it from being hijacked and derailed. There is evidence that democracy in Nigeria has not been evolving properly since political independence in 1960 because of long period of military interregna and presence of civilian cabals who often hijack power at all levels of governance. There is also evidence that almost all general elections under Nigeria's democracy have been characterized by irregularities and malpractices. Incidentally, the country has a heavily populated, robust and politically active mass media industry. This discourse therefore focuses on how the mass media can contribute to the survival of democracy in Nigeria through effective political communication, serving as societal "watchdog", setting of societal agenda and serving as societal documentation resource.

KEYWORDS

Democratic governance; Political communication; Societal watchdog; Societal agenda setting; societal documentation

INTRODUCTION

Democracy, which in the words of Abraham Lincoln, is *the government of the people, by the people and for the people*, is the best form of inclusive governance from the opinions of many (if not all) political scholars (Isma'Ila & Othman 2015, Santas & Ogoshi 2016). This is because it rests on the principles of periodic selection of persons to lead the government in free and fair general elections (Wallace, Kundnani & Donelly 2021). The fact that persons running the government and controlling the resources of a democratic society would always come to a point when the people would appraise their performances and either re-elect them or vote them out of office instills the consciousness of accountability on them. This means that the government under a democracy, is more likely to be run with the sense of responsibility, probity and equity than other forms of government where the masses do not have a say in the selection of those that run the government.

Among the features of democracy is that it promotes inclusiveness. Inclusion in governance denotes deliberate and sustained efforts to promote cultural, social, economic, civil and political incorporation of everyone in the society in its affairs (Zilla 2022). By this, everyone has a say in the governance of the society in one or the other, even if is only during elections with just one vote. In an atmosphere of inclusiveness, which democracy promotes, every vote counts and is counted.

Democracy, as laudable as it is, is not an end in itself. It has been aptly described as a process and not a state (Wallace et al 2021). This means that it evolves – It develops gradually. Therefore, all hands should be on deck to ensure that it develops in the right direction. Otherwise, the evolution of democracy could be hijacked and derailed to deprive the society of its dividends (Egobiambu 2022). This discourse focuses on what the mass media can do in an evolving democracy to help it stay on track.

THE NIGERIAN MASS MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Nigeria is well-endowed with appreciable mass media presence. This is evident in the large number of broadcast stations transmitting across the country and many newspapers and magazines publishing regularly in hard copies and online versions (Osazee-Odia and Ijeh 2017). The mass media industry in Nigeria is not only heavily populated but also vibrant and politically active (Ijeh 2008, Oso 2013).

The newspaper medium in Nigeria, particularly, has been playing significant roles in political communication from inception. The first newspaper in Nigeria – *Iwe Irohin fun Awon Egba ati Yoruba* – ventured into politics by criticizing European officials in the 1890s to the point that the proprietor – Rev Henry Townsend – was reported to the British authority in London and was cautioned on account of the newspaper's critical editorials (Duyile 2019). Many other newspapers that followed continued to make serious impact on politics and succeeded in playing very crucial role to support agitations for political independence (Aghamelu 2012; Ijeh 2012; Ijeh and Oji 2020). No wonder it is said among media scholars that the war for political independence in Nigeria was waged on the pages of newspapers hence not a single bullet was fired (Santas and Ogoshi 2016).

Broadcasting arrived Nigeria in the form of a radio re-distribution service in 1932 (Ijeh and Onojeghwo 2009), but it did not take off with the political bites of newspapers. This may not be unconnected to the reality that for 60 years after its debut (1932-1992), it was the sole preserve of the federal and state governments. Under this atmosphere of government ownership and control, not much would have been expected from radio and television as they would naturally had been limited to

the political interests of their proprietors. Private broadcasting began in Nigeria in 1992 when the then military government promulgated Decree 38 of 1992 (now an Act of Parliament), which replaced the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) with the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and paved the way for private ownership and control of radio and television in the country (Akeem, Oyeyinka, Qasim, Lateef, Omolayo and Onyinyechi 2013; Osazee-Odia and Ijeh 2017). The emergence of private broadcasting in Nigeria made it possible for it to join the predominantly private-controlled newspaper industry in the delivery of relatively politically-balanced contents. That is the reason behind the earlier description of Nigerian mass media as generally vibrant and politically active. In the views of Adegbola and Gearhart (2019), Nigeria's mass media industry is one of the most robust and diverse in Africa.

EVOLUTION OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

Democracy in Nigeria has not had a smooth sail from its arrival at political independence in 1960. Until the return to democracy in what is popularly tagged the Fourth Republic in 1999, democratic governance in Nigeria had, within thirty-nine years after independence, lasted for only about eleven years while military interregna took up about twenty-eight years. Even within the eleven years of democracy in the country before 1999 and the now twenty-four years of uninterrupted Fourth Republic, the ideals of democracy were missing. This is because the majority did not seem to have had their 'say' and 'way' in governance as cabals of very few persons often hijacked the state of affairs at all levels of governance (Santas and Ogoshi 2016).

There is evidence that almost all general elections in Nigeria, which are essential features of democracy, have been characterized by myriads of irregularities and malpractices such as bribery of election umpires, interference from incumbent government officials, vote buying, ballot box/paper snatching, fraudulent thumb-printing of ballot papers and stuffing them into confiscated ballot boxes, destruction of election materials and voting centres, disenfranchisements of voters, orchestrated illegal replacement of candidates for elections and heightened insecurity among others (Onojeghwo and Ijeh 2022; Onojeghwo, Ijeh and Oji 2023).

The above are indications that Nigerians are yet to fully enjoy the dividends of ideal democracy. As noted earlier, there is no perfect democracy because it is an ongoing process. In fact, political scholars believe that a perfect democracy is utopian (Brown 2013). It is therefore safe to assume that every society would get the kind of democracy it works towards because it is constantly evolving. In the case of Nigeria, it could get better or worse, depending on the efforts Nigerians put in. The central thrust of this discourse re-echoes again: "What is the role of the mass media in an evolving democracy in Nigeria?".

THE MASS MEDIA IN AN EVOLVING DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

A democratic system of government advocates for the existence of three independent arms: the executive; legislature and judiciary and their responsibilities are usually delineated in the constitution. Incontrovertible socio-politico realities have made it necessary to add a fourth arm, otherwise known as the 4th Estate of the Realm and that is the mass media (Ojo 2013). The term "4th Estate of the Realm" was coined in the late eighteenth century by Edmund Burke of England to describe the mass media as the fourth arm of government (Kadiri, Muhammed, Raji and Sulaiman 2015).

Similarly, the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, in delineating responsibilities for all arms of government provides role for the mass media in Chapter 2 Section 22 viz: "The press,

radio, television and other agencies of the media shall at all time be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people". This is a clear indication that much is expected from the mass media for the survival of democratic society.

Several studies have identified reasons why the mass media are sine qua non for the productive evolution of democratic culture. Notable among them is that the mass media are very effective channels of political communication. They are also very good at societal "watchdog" functions; setting of societal agenda and serving as societal documentation resource.

Political Communication Function

This is a special dimension of applied communication. It has been described as a planned, systematic and sustained process of communicating political information to the electorate, mass media coverage of politics/political parties/processes, impact of mass media contents on politics and the interpersonal exchanges of political information among political actors and members of the public (European Consortium for Political Research 2019).

The mass media can contribute significantly to Nigeria's evolving democracy through political communication because they are political resources and have been recognized as part of most effective instruments that influence the political consciousness of the public. The mass media have the capacity to keep the citizenry sufficiently informed in a democracy and this makes it easy to take enlightened decision on political issues (Ojo and Adebayo 2013). The mass media are expected to serve both the elite and the masses by dedicating sufficient time and resources to sensitive political issues that matter most in the society. They are laden with the responsibility of informing the society on important political issues, explaining their implications and educating the people on the best way forward and it would be catastrophic for any democratic society to exist without efficient political communication from the mass media (kadiri et al 2015).

Societal Watchdog Function

"Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely". This is a very popular dictum among political scholars. This holds true in a democracy where there is absence of effective monitoring of government functionaries. Section 22 of Nigeria's constitution stipulates that the mass media should uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people. The mass media are therefore expected to serve as watchdog in the society and raise alarm whenever irregularities are perceived or spotted. According to Ibagere (2013), effective coverage of political issues and actors is a good way to check corruption since the masses would be equipped with media information and education necessary to be actively involved in political processes and resist attempts to corrupt them.
The mass media monitor government through constant objective coverage of its activities, in-depth analysis of its policies and policy implementation as well as periodic evaluation of its performance. These are in a bid to hold government accountable to the people (Aghamelu 2013). The watchdog function of the mass media over government in a democracy was recognized as far back as in the seventeenth century when enlightenment theorists postulated that publicity and openness were the best safeguards against tyranny and the excesses of arbitrariness in government (Garba 2016).

Instances abound of government functionaries who were forced to resign or be sacked from elective and appointive offices because the mass media revealed something untoward about them. Similarly, some government activities and policies were jettisoned because the media raised alarm about their

counter-productive orientations. All these are fallouts of the watchdog function of the mass media in the society, which must be sustained in Nigeria's evolving democracy.

Agenda Setting Functions

The societal agenda setting function of the mass media refers to the ability of the media of mass communication to influence what people in any given society think and talk about at any given time. The idea is encapsulated in the Agenda Setting Theory of the mass media which postulates that even though mass media channels may not succeed in telling the audience what (how) to think, they are very effective in influencing what they think about (Ijeh 2012; Asemah, Nwammuo and Nkwam-Uwaoma 2017). The mass media are very good at setting social agenda on issues related to politics and governance given their ability to force public attention to them, create public images of government/political actors and their activities and consistently present contents that influence what their audiences think about, know about and form opinions on (Ijeh 2012). By extension therefore, Nigerian mass media can draw attention to important issues relating to governance and politics especially as they affect the operation of democracy in the country.

Agenda setting by the mass media in a society where democracy is evolving, like in Nigeria, provides opportunities for members of the public to the informed and educated on what ideal democratic practices should be and how the issue at stake conforms to or deviates from true democracy. It also requires the mass media to provide fora for the citizens to air their views on the matter. This way, the people are given the opportunity for effective participation in public discourse and reach consensus on standard democratic practices. In the views of Ugondo (2018), agenda setting by the media of mass communication goes beyond providing information on the matter of interest, but goes deeper to educate the audience with detailed interpretations, linkages, analyses, illustrations, interactions and demonstrations. In other words, the mass media not only set the agenda for the public but also stimulate the ensuing discussion through regular and systematic supply of additional updates with facts and figures necessary to aid members of the public arrive at useful conclusions that are in the best interest of democracy. This is achievable because the manner, direction, frequency and depth of media presentation of issues to the audience significantly determine the level of importance attached to such issues by the public as well as what it knows and thinks about them (Ijeh 2014).

Societal Documentation Resource

One of the vital functions of the mass media, which many scholars seem to gloss over, is the societal record keeping role they play. Mass media contents can be stored in hard or soft copy forms and retrieved with ease at future dates. There have been instances where what was published in newspapers and magazines or broadcast on radio and television were referred to in near or distant future and relied upon to assess the issues of the moment. For example, promises made at inauguration of new government have been recalled from time-to-time and used as yardstick to evaluate the performance of the government at different times under its administration.

The above reality is a crucial contribution of the mass media in an evolving democracy in Nigeria. It is one of the most important functions that can ensure the accountability of the government to the people as enshrined in the 1999 Constitution of the country. Since the statements, actions and inactions of government officials and key political players can be covered as mass media contents, disseminated widely and then stored in easily retrievable formats for future references, the society has a means of holding government accountable for its words or actions. This reality is also expected to provide reasons for any government or political actor to have a high sense of responsibility in

whatever they say or do since the mass media would publish them and document them for future references

CONCLUSION

Democracy is said to be the best form of inclusive governance because it is more likely to allow for running the government with a sense of responsibility, probity and equity than other forms of government. However, in spite of the wonderful attributes of democracy, it is a process and not a state hence it evolves. Nigerian mass media are vibrant and politically active and has been described as one of the most robust and diverse in Africa. Democracy has not progressed much in Nigeria since political independence in 1960 and although it is agreed that there is no perfect democracy since it is an ongoing process, every society would get the kind of democracy it works towards. In the case of Nigeria, experiences in democratic governance can either get better or worse, depending on how Nigerians choose to develop their own democracy. It is in the light of this need for Nigerians to put in individual and collective efforts to improve the country's democracy that this discourse focuses on the role of the mass media in an evolving democracy in Nigeria. The paper emphasizes the notion that Nigerian mass media are sine qua non for the proper evolution of democratic culture in the country because of their potentials in political communication, societal "watchdog" role, agenda setting capabilities and societal documentation functions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Arising from the conclusion in this discourse, the following recommendations are put forward:

- All Nigerians should to put in individual and collective efforts to improve the country's democracy.
- The mass media should join the crusade to guarantee the positive evolution of democracy in Nigeria through effective political communication, serving as societal "watchdog", setting social agenda on issues that promote democracy and serving societal documentation functions.

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