

MASS MEDIA AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA: THE FOURTH REPUBLIC IN PERSPECTIVE

¹Ozekhome Igechi and ²Peter Egielewa

*Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Edo University Iyamho
Department of Mass Communication, Edo University Iyamho*

Corresponding Author's email: igechi.ozekhome@edouniversity.edu.ng



Abstract

The mass media is central to democracy and democratic consolidation as modern democracy is actuated, in part, by the watchful eyes of the fourth estate of the realm. In Nigeria, there has been a consistent attempt at strengthening the nation's democratic ethos in much of the post-independence era. This paper scrutinizes the mass media and democratic consolidation in Africa's most populous state. It examines the Fourth Republic with special reference to the President Muhammadu Buhari's administration. Adopting secondary data and conceptual themes within historical comparative methodology, the paper queries the position that political leaders have been conscientious in the quest for democratic consolidation. It argues that prolonged military rule in Nigeria has desecrated core democratic principles. The paper concludes that if Nigeria's democracy is to be effectively consolidated, the nation's critical political institutions must allow the media to play their role without let or hindrance.

Keywords: Democratization, Democratic consolidation, democracy, mass media, Nigeria.

Introduction

The Nigerian state in much of its Fourth Republic history has been pursuing the strengthening of democratic and liberal norms. This is perhaps due to the authoritarian and military history of Africa's most populous enclave. The nation has experienced several military interregnums which led to the militarization of state-society relations and the legitimization of despotic methods in the conduct of state affairs. The military regimes of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s conducted governmental affairs without recourse to the rights and privileges of the citizens. This situation inevitably presented a herculean task when the nation returned to civilian rule in 1999. It thus became imperative that the Nigerian state inculcates into its governance process certain democratic norms to strengthen human rights, free speech, rule of law and similar liberal tenets. This process is on-going and it is hoped that the nation continues to improve on its democratic credentials.

One of the major ways through which the nation can improve on its democratic credentials is in the area of citizens' freedom of speech and the enthronement of a virile media environment. The media, which is often, and rightly, referred to as the Fourth Estate of the realm is crucial for democratic consolidation whether in the general context of democratic governance or in the specific domain of elections (Iredia, 2007). It is in this light that Iredia (2007: 4) contended that

“the people must be assisted to premise their choices of rationality and vote wisely during elections. They must have the necessary evidence needed to elect the right candidates who can ensure good governance. Where such public awareness is lacking, those of us in the media must accept a share of the blame of failed elections in Nigeria”. The value which the media add to the democratic life of a nation is immense and its contribution to the entire governance process can hardly be overemphasized.

Mass media in Nigeria have historically contributed to the quest for democratic consolidation. Indeed their contribution dates back to the colonial times with the proliferation of Newspapers like Herbert Macaulay’s Lagos Daily News and Nnamdi Azikiwe’s West African Pilot and this trend continued well into the post-colonial era as Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Chief M.K.O Abiola established The Nigerian Tribune and The Nigerian Concord respectively (Santas & Ogoshi, 2016). Thus in the post-independence period, the mass media did not rest on its oars as there has often been a strong desire to continue to strengthen the democratic credentials of the nation. There has been a proliferation in the number of Newspaper Houses as well as private Television and Radio stations. These media dared the authoritarian military regimes of the 1980s and 1990s and a number of them had their operations shut down as they formed a coalition with civil society organisations (CSO) to reject military dictatorships (Osaghae, 2002; Santas & Ogoshi, 2016).

This is not to suggest that the media in Nigeria have not been faced with crises. As Dukor (1999: 287) opined, despite the substantial gains, the fourth estate of the realm has made on the democratic front, it is bedeviled with certain problematic: Ethnic loyalty, cronyism, and sectional interests often affect in negative ways media reportage and coverage. There has also been the historic attempt by governments, both military and civilian, to close the media space when it appears that their activities threaten national unity and integration. While some may view the latest attempt by the government to regulate the media and to legally criminalize fake news and hate speech in this context, others perhaps see it as hatred for criticism. This provides some challenges for the media. It is in light of these issues that this paper explores the mass media and democratic consolidation in Nigeria’s democracy. At the outset, the paper engages some relevant conceptual issues and then scrutinizes essential literature on the substantive discourse as they relate to mass media and democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Conceptual Discourse

Mass Media

Abubakar and Fadeyi (2017: 3) see the mass media as “agents of information communicated to large groups of people through a group of corporate entities, publishers, journalists, reporters, pressmen, newscasters and others who constitute the communications industry and profession”. This view portrays the mass media as essentially information and communication medium which deals with a variety of information in the context of whole populations. The heterogeneous and plural nature of modern society means that information needs to be disseminated strategically. The mass media present a vehicle with which this information dissemination is achieved. According to Afamuefuna (2007) mass media involve some form of technical devices that help to transmit information across space and time. Santas and Ogoshi (2016) deployed the notion of a communication tool to conceptualize mass media. This idea of communication channel embraces the thinking that mass media transfer information to a large audience within the society.

Kadiri et al. (2015) defined the mass media in the context of traditional media, submitting that it involves the services rendered by outlets like newspapers, magazines, radio and television. This position is contentious because, beyond the traditional media, social media or new media also

carry out the functions that traditional media performs. They disseminate information on an even faster speed and to an even greater audience and more heterogeneous audience thus constituting a unique form of mass media. Beyond the controversy involved in the conceptualization of mass media, it is apt to contend that the mass media refers to all those means through which effective information is disseminated to the generality of the public. It is as Nwanne (2012:62) argued made up of "all the gadgets, tools, instruments of mass communication, professionally deployed to reach heterogeneous audiences spread across disparate geographical areas. These he went on include "newspapers, magazines, television, radio, outdoor and the recent wonder of our times, Internet, among others".

Democracy

Democracy as a concept has to do with the ability of the ordinary citizens of a state to determine, to some extent, the direction that governance takes. In the opinion of Appadorai (1975), it affords the people an avenue through which they can exercise the governing power either directly or through representatives periodically elected by themselves. This conceptualization with a representative tinge is quite apt in the modern era as a direct democracy of the ancient Greek type has become anachronistic. The growth and complexity of the modern state have made it politically expedient that states everywhere adopt representative democracy. For Przeworski et al. (1996) democracy refers to a governmental arrangement in which political offices are shared through a continuous process of free and fair elections between and among political parties that contest elections to win and occupy political offices. This conceptual paradigm has been referred to as the minimalist interpretation of the concept of democracy as its fixation is mainly on procedures.

The liberal notion of democracy goes beyond these rudimentary issues to argue for political pluralism, group and individual rights and such other ideals like civil liberty, free speech and freedom of association all of which encourage equality (Sklar, 1996; Diamond, 1999a). These ideal constitute the very essence of democracy and are emblematic of western democracies. In societies where there have been historical tendencies for repression and authoritarianism, these ideals become very difficult to meet and sometimes may remain completely elusive. It is in this light that the media becomes a very important mechanism for the consolidation of democracy especially in developing countries where the concept appears to be alien and requires the concerted effort of whole societies to deepen the critical tenets of the concept.

Democratization and Democratic Consolidation

The concept of democratic consolidation is about the strengthening of democratic norms in hitherto authoritarian spheres. Diamond (1999b) refers to it as the process of achieving broad and deep legitimization such that all significant political actors believe that popular rule is better for their society than any other realistic alternative. Realizing this ideal has been the quest of most developing democracies. Ademola (2011) sees democratic consolidation for a phase in the quest to transit from authoritarian governance milieu to a democratic framework which is critical to establishing a stable institutional policy environment. Indeed, the attempt at ensuring a stable democracy is a process by which means state institutions carefully imbibe the core tenets of the democratic ideal in the attempts by the state to deepen the institutional and behavioural dimensions of democracy. Ogundiya (2009) brings in the notion of continuity and maintenance of the mechanisms for political participation within a competitive arena as the major desideratum of democratic consolidation.

In the opinion of Oluwole (2014), democratic consolidation reflects a phase in the movement from authoritarian rule to the civilian rule which in democratic systems that are important and central to the growth of stable institutions and governance mechanisms within democracies. Thus democratic consolidation entails midwifing the critical ideals of democracy such as rule of law, free speech and credible elections. When these tenets are properly nurtured and consistently protected, then there can hardly be a reversal to dictatorial tendencies. The discussion above clearly shows that without democratic consolidation, aspiring democracies can hardly strengthen their democratic institutions to catch up with western democracies which are more grounded as they have been in existence for centuries. Developing societies must deliberately set out to pursue the strengthening of their democratic credentials to create the enabling environment that can prevent tyrannical tendencies which often dilute and frustrate democracy. In doing so they create a situation that will aid governance and accede to the demands of the electorates.

A major mechanism through which the concept of democratic consolidation is realized is via the media. Free speech is an essential aspect of democracy and the ideal democracy requires that individuals, businesses and other organizations within the state are habitually able to air their views without let or hindrance. The media in the modern democratic state provides a platform for the actualization of this democratic ideal. It provides that neutral arena through which citizens can ventilate their grievance and constructively criticize the government in power. The media also play the role of enlightenment. It educates citizens, for example during elections, on how to make informed choices by providing critical and relevant information to the masses. It also creates an avenue through which political parties and their members can reach out to the people, detailing their philosophical and ideological leanings as well as their grand plans on how to improve the existential conditions of the people. Finally, as the Fourth Estate of the realm the media rightly mediates in the complex interaction of the three arms of government, Executive-Legislature-Judiciary, ensuring that their operations, agreements and disagreements are appropriately brought into the public domain.

Nigeria's Democratization History

The literature on media and democratic consolidation in Nigeria is extensive. Some writers have emphasized the constitutional role of the media in democratic governance (Dukor, 1999; Aghamelu, 2008). This discourse deploys the classic Fourth Estate of the realm model to argue that the media is an integral aspect of the governance structure in Nigeria as well as in other countries. It draws from the United Nations Declaration of the Right of man and its African version, The African Charter of Human and Peoples Right. These noble ideas were subsequently inculcated into the constitutions of African governments, such that at present the media became eventually recognized as part and parcel of the governance structure. Democratic liberalism embraces these precepts and Nigeria as a member of the comity of nations duly keyed into the entire idea. Historically, the nation's constitutions have recognized the media as essentially the Fourth Estate of the realm. While it provides citizens with the platform to commend or criticize government policies, it also clarifies issues arising out of the complex interrelation of the three arms of government.

While there is evidence to the effect that free press has been surviving in Nigeria (Dukor, 1998), there is nevertheless substantial truth in the assertion that post-colonial authoritarian regimes have distorted and stymied the growth process of liberal media. In this respect, Dare (1985) enumerates several despotic decrees and edicts which often frustrated the emergence and growth of free press in Nigeria. Some of them include the Defamation Act of 1961, the official secret Act of 1962, Newspaper Amendment Act 1964, Newspaper Prohibition Circulation Act

1967, Public officers Act No 11 1976, and the so-called decree 04 of 1984 which is also referred to as 'protection against false publication decree'. Dukor (1998) on the other hand eulogized the Nigerian democratic environment for historically creating the conditions necessary for the blooming of a virile press. He, however, sadly isolated those unsavoury behaviours of the Nigerian political space which exacerbate faulty media reportage like sectional political parties, ethnic politics and primordial sentiments.

There is substantial evidence which suggests that the media has been involved in reporting crises and controversies as they have occurred in Nigeria. Santas and Ogoshi (2016) report that in the early 2000s following the advent of the Fourth Republic the media was at the forefront of exposing series of Senate scandals as politicians struggled to get accustomed to the accountability requirement that comes with political offices. The media also played a central role in the certificate scandal that ultimately consumed the political career of the pioneer Speaker of the federal House of Representatives (Jibo & Okoosi-Simbine, 2003). *The Newsmagazine* employed professionalism and diligence to put pressure on Mr Salisu Buhari, who eventually resigned his position and was convicted for perjury. This is not to suggest that the media have always been given free rein by the political class to contribute to the political process. Lately there have been attempts by some governing authorities to criminalize some social media contents as fake news.

Theoretical Underpinning: Social Responsibility Theory

The media, traditional and new, has the responsibility of conscientiously reporting socio-economic and political happenings so that the larger society is kept abreast with state-society transactions and relations. This is crucial as there is information that remains critical to the workings of democracy. For example, a better-educated citizenry is in a prime position to elect quality leadership. These are mainly supported by a responsible, neutral and conscientious press. The Social Responsibility Theory is adopted as the theoretical lens to situate this study and to properly make prognosis and X-ray this issue to explain the nature of the Nigerian media, its relationship with the state and society, and the overarching influence it has over political power within the state. The foundation of the theory is traced to the middle of the 20th century with the report of the Hutchins Commission of 1947 (Santas & Ogoshi, 2016). The Commission, in its report, emphasized the idea of press freedom and that the press has the obligation to effectively and conscientiously disseminates information to the people.

The press thus becomes an essential element in the democratic process and as such is an integral body within the democratic framework (Ojobor, 2002). In doing so the theory argues that the media must remain abidingly loyal to the society and the entire citizenry (Baran & Davies, 2003). The press has the duty of holding the government of the day accountable while also providing a platform for opposition parties and civil society organizations to air their views and criticize the government of the day. The press pursues accountability on the part of the government with investigative reporting which may unearth behind-the-scene operations and other clandestine activities of the most powerful segments of political leadership. Indeed, the basic motive of the Social Responsibility theory, as McQuail (2005) states, is to encourage the mass media to deploy objectivity and fairness in reportage to ensure democratic consolidation. This is especially critical for developing democracies where the idea of democratic consolidation is very important. In the specific situation of the Nigerian state, the media have often been muzzled and intimidated by the hegemonic segments of the ruling class. Prolonged military rule in Nigeria has desecrated core democratic principles such that the National Assembly comes up with suspicious legislations that clampdown on the ability of citizens to freely express their opinions.

Media and democratic consolidation within Nigerian governance milieu

At the moment the media in Nigeria is grappling with some environmental challenges bordering on the restriction of the space for the complete airing of free speech. At times altruistic criticisms have been interpreted by those who control political power under the administration of President Muhamadu Buhari as hate speech and fake news. The Human Rights Writers Association of Nigeria (HURIWA) has criticized this calling on well-meaning Nigerians to mount pressure on the Presidency to rectify this anomaly (Saharareporters, 2020). This tends to frustrate the right of citizens to ventilate their grievances freely in the context of open society and freedom of speech. A democratic government ought to be able to support free speech and enable the media to act in reality as the fourth estate of the realm. It often amounts to injustice when the people are prevented from having a say in the democratic process, because if they are compelled to pay taxes and if they are forced to obey all other state regulations, then they naturally should also have their voices heard through the media.

It is in this context that the Minister of Information, Mr. Lai Mohammed, was criticized by HURIWA for illegally arresting a journalist, Mr Rotimi Jolayemi, who had published a poem that the minister deemed too critical of him (Saharareporters, 2020). The minister, according to Saharareporters (2020), deployed state apparatus in the institution of the office of the commissioner of police in Kwara state to gag the press by first arresting the journalist's wife and two brothers until the latter showed up. This represents a negative aspect of democracy especially as it involves the free press. Under this circumstance, it becomes difficult for the Buhari administration to lay claims to being the harbinger of core democratic tenets and other ideals that can aid in the consolidation of Africa's biggest democracy. Democracy thrives and is strengthened only when the people are habitually able to stand up for their rights, and the greatest enabler of this is a conscientious leadership that truly welcomes criticism.

Furthermore, at present President Muhammadu Buhari's media aides are openly supporting the bill proposing the wide-scale regulation of social media. The President's chief spokesperson, Mr. Garba Shehu, has severally backed the bill before the National Assembly that envisaged the strict censorship of social media platforms (Premiumtimes, 2019). The Anti-social media bill was sponsored by Senator Mohammed Sani Musa on the 5th of November 2019 to criminalize people who deploy social media to spread false or malicious information.. That is why civil society organizations and several concerned Nigerians have been campaigning against the passage of the bill since it is believed that it will roll back the democratic gains the nation has made since 1999.

Conclusion

The nation's democratic credentials can be further strengthened if the political leaders at all levels make conscientious efforts to support state institutions which over the years have had their core democratic ethos desecrated. Indeed, prolonged military rule in Nigeria led to a situation in which the operations of key establishments and government agencies developed strong tendencies against criticisms. The media has often become the target whenever any government of the day becomes uncomfortable with critics and civil society organizations who often ask questions and push for good governance. In the Fourth Republic, these crises have continued to endanger democratic consolidation. While there has been considerable improvement in media-governance relations viz-a-viz the military era, there is nevertheless the need to effectively inculcate the media into the traditional three-pronged arm of government-executive, legislature and judiciary. It is only under such circumstances that we can overcome the persistent conundrum of weak institutions. As such, further reforms, institutional and behavioural, are germane.

The media must continue to mediate in the political process by feeding political leadership with the pulse of the citizenry while also strategically engaging the political system by constructively criticizing the programmes and policies of the government across the three tiers of government. The media must also increase support for the building of an environment that is conducive to democratic consolidation. Thus it must strive to nurture such ideals like human rights, equality and justice, social welfare and credible elections. Furthermore, the media must up the ante on its neutrality to be able to assert its independence to prop up such important aspects of media governance like the Freedom of Information Act which constitutes a bulwark in the quest to consolidate Nigeria's democracy. On the part of the government, the needed behavioural and attitudinal changes must be geared towards mustering the necessary political will to develop strong media outlets which can effectively play its role as the fourth estate of the realm.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing, the following can be recommended.

1. The Media should be allowed to play their essential role in society. This will be possible if political leadership summon the necessary will to properly govern information dissemination.
2. Political actors should desist from disguising by using laws to muzzle the media. The hate speech policy, for example, should be better applied.
3. The National Assembly should positively deploy its powers to churn out more pro-media legislations like the Freedom of information Act.
4. Civil Society Organizations (CSO) should continue to lobby and push for a more open space for the media as the more the media the better for democracy in Nigeria. This can happen if advocacy is increasingly geared towards ensuring that extant laws relating to the free press are well applied.

References

Abubakar, M. & Fadeyi, T. (2017). Media and Democratic Imperatives in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. *Journal of African Studies and Development* 9(1),7-14.

Ademola, A. (2011). Endangering Good Governance for Sustainable Democracy: The continuing struggle against corruption in Nigeria. *Journal of Research on Peace, Gender and Development*, 1(11),307-314.

Afamuefuna, C. A. (2007). Democracy and Good Governance in Nigeria: The Place of the Mass Media. *International Journal of Communication*, 6, 253- 264.

Aghamelu, F. (2008). The Role of the Mass Media in the Nigerian Electoral Process. *Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities*,14 (2), 154-172.

Appadorai, A. (1975). *The Substance of Politics*. London: Macmillan.

Baran, S.J.& Davis, D.K. (2003). *Mass Communication Theory: Foundation, Ferment, and Future*, Canada: Wadsworth.

Dare, L. (1985). *Politics Since Independence*. Hong Kong: Longman Group Ltd.

Diamond, L. (1999a). *Developing Democracy: Towards Consolidation*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University.

Diamond, L. (1999b). Rethinking Civil Society: Towards Democratic Consolidation. *Journal of Democracy*, 5(3),4-17.

Dukor, M. (1998). *Philosophy and Politics Discourse on Values and Power in Africa*. Lagos: O.O.P. Ltd.

Iredia, T.O. (2007). Information Dissemination, Voters' Mobilization and Election Monitoring in Nigerian Electoral Process. In M. Ogun (Ed), *Improving the Fortunes and Destiny of Nigeria through the Ballot Box*. Abuja: Catholic Laity Council of Nigeria.

Jibo, M & Okoosi-Simbine, A (2003) The Nigerian Media: An Assessment of its Role in Achieving Transparent and Accountable Government in the Fourth Republic, *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 12(2), 180-195

Kadiri, K. K., Yinusa, A. M., Addullateef, R. & Abdul-Rasheed, L. S. (2015). Mass Media for Sustainable Democracy and Development in Nigeria. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa* 17(2), 52-64.

McQuail, D. (2005). *Mass Communication Theory* (5th Edition). London: Sage Publishers.

Nwanne, B.U (2012) The Mass Media and Development Communication: Emerging Issues in Nigeria, *Journal of Social and Management Sciences*, 7(1), 61-67.

Ojobor, I. J. (2002). *Teaching Mass Communication: A Multi-Dimensional Approach*. Enugu: New Generation Books.

Ogundiya, I.S. (2009).Decade of Democratic Governance in Nigeria. In I. S. Ogundiya et al. (Eds),*A Decade of Re-Democratization in Nigeria:1999-2009*. Ibadan: Ayayayugu Publishers.

Oluwole, O.O. (2014).The Challenges of Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria, 1999-2007. *International Journal of Politics and Good Governance*, 5(5), 1-29.

Osaghae, E. (2002).*Nigeria Since Independence: Crippled giant*. Ibadan: John Archers.

Premium Times. (2019,December 9). Buhari's Aide Backs Social Media Regulation. Premiumtimes online.Premiumtimes/news/topnews/367417-buharis-aide-backs –social-media-regulation.html.

Przeworski, A., Alvarez, M., Cheibub, J.A., & Limongi, F. (1996).What Makes Democracies Endure? *Journal of Democracy*, 7(1), 39-55.

Saharareporters. (2020, May 26,). HURIWA Demands Arrest of Lai Mohammed over Arrest, Detention of Journalist. Sahara Reporters Online. sahareporters.com/2020/05/26/huriwa-demands-arrest-of-lai-mohammed-over-arrest-detention-of-journalist.

Santas, T. & Ogoshi, J. (2016).An Appraisal of Mass Media Role in Consolidating Democracy in Nigeria. *African Research Review*, 10(1), 73-86.

Sklar, R. (1996).*Democracy and Development: Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.