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THE NIGERIAN PRESS UNDER MILITARY RULE: 1966-1999

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Abstract

The press constitutes a very important arm of every nation's life because its capacity to influence and shape public opinion is recognised all over the world. The press serves as a vital link between the government and the governed and constitutes the watchdog of the society. The freedom to receive and impart information and ideas through any medium is a fundamental right. This right is articulated in Article 19 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Other international and regional bodies have issued similar declarations affirming the right of individuals to have access to information. However, despite the globally recognised fundamental latitude granted the press, the disposition towards the press by past military governments in Nigeria has been historically adversarial. Indeed, from 1966, the Nigerian press perpetually came under unimaginable bout of the military antagonism worth documenting. The scenario undermined the process of accountability on the part of the military rulers and the right of the citizens to be adequately informed and ventilate their opinion. The paper therefore examines the press under the successive military regimes in Nigeria between 1966 when the military made its first incursion into the nation's political space to 1999, when the current democratic dispensation was established. It acknowledges the fact that without the efforts of the press, the return to democratic rule would have been a mirage. It adopts a historical narrative methodology and relies on secondary sources.

Keywords: Nigeria, Press, Military rule, Press freedom, National development

Introduction

Military rule is the involvement of the armed forces as a direct and active participant in policy making and governance in a state. It is the unconstitutional take-over of the machinery of administration of a state by members of the Armed Forces based on martial laws - Decrees and Edicts. The Military usually comes to power through a military coup d'état i.e., when members of the armed forces overthrow the machinery of government in the state through a bloody or bloodless military change of government. All military governments are authoritarian and they make no pretensions of being democratic even though they hinge

their intervention on the basis of serving democracy. It is believed that military regime is an aberration no matter the pretence or the appearance (Udokang, 2006).

Nigeria passed through seven military regimes between 1966 and 1999. The first military era, which comprised three regimes, lasted for 13 years (1966-1979). The second military era which was made up of four successive regimes lasted for 16 years (December 31, 1983-May 29, 1999) (Bassey, 2005). By implication, the military had ruled Nigeria for 29 out of the 64 years life span of the Nigerian nation, a period that this paper examines while the civilians have ruled for 35 years.

Under the successive military regimes, the Nigerian psyche was moulded into a frame of militancy and respect for the use of force. Indeed, force replaced the rule of law. The course of “jungle law” was promoted by the state through brutal force, torture, murder etc. The emergence of the military led to militarised political culture and the erosion of civic culture. Thus, the rule of operation became that of order, combat, rather than dialogue, disregard for court orders and violation of human rights (Eyo, 2016).

One of the institutions of the Nigerian society which was highly vilified by the military was the press, which has been the greatest instrument within a state for disseminating ideas (Alli, 2001). Like in every society, the press has basic responsibilities towards the people. One of such is to hold the government of the day accountable. In that respect, wide latitude of freedom is required by the press to function effectively. This is usually permitted to a large extent under civilian administrations, but experience has shown that under military rule, freedom of the press does not thrive. Indeed, for every military regime that emerged in Nigeria, series of conflict with the press became inevitable. As a way of curbing the press excesses, the successive military regimes often employed arbitrary anti-press decrees, whimsical harassment, arrest and detention of journalist, proscription of media houses etc., (Mabadeje, 2004).

The Military

The armed forces are made up traditionally of the army, navy and air force and these together constitute what is generally referred to as the military. The military is a bureaucratic organisation that utilises and manages violence. There is high emphasis on hierarchy, centralisation, discipline and obedience to higher commands. The military institution otherwise is the instrument of national security that is charged with the responsibility of defending the country from external aggression. It is used to put down internal uprising depending on the intensity of the aggression. Constitutionally, the military has no business in politics (Eyo, 2016).

Like most other institution in the country, the Nigerian military is an “inherited force”, a legacy of the colonial experience. The military as an organisation is subject to the vicissitudes of the Nigerian society just as any social institution within the country. Indeed, the ideological cleavages in the Nigerian society are reflected in the positions of various factions of the military on salient political issues. It is in the political realm that the military left their indelible imprint on the Nigerian society. They introduced administrative reforms, re-drew the country’s political map, made concerted attempts to restructure the political system and even determine the mode of post-military political behaviour and gave the country a brand of foreign policy (Tyoden, 1985). Despite some of the positive contributions to the society, the military extensively undermined the functionality of the press by curtailing its freedom to discharge its constitutional responsibilities.

The Nigerian Press and Press Freedom

The press could be viewed as the path-way or means through which messages are disseminated. It is a channel through which information is passed across. Since communication involves a two-way process, the press makes provision for feedback between the encoder and the decoder of the messages across distance or

time to accomplish mass communication. Alaga (2010) states that the term “press” can be used synonymously with the “mass media”.

The word “media” is the plural form of the Latin word “medium”. It is a collective noun for television, radio newspaper, magazine, films and the International Network (Internet), among others. The media is either a broadcast (electronic) or a print media. A medium is described as hot if it has a high-definition channel of communication such as print or radio which focuses on a single sensory receptor. It is cool when the definition channel of communication is low such as the television which stimulates different senses and requires high sensory involvement (Alaga, 2010).

Perhaps, owing to the fact that the electronic media – the radio and television, used to be overwhelmingly and exclusively owned and controlled by the state, the print media pioneered the emergence and development of news media in Nigeria. Until the deregulation of broadcasting by the Babangida regime in 1992, the existing radio and television stations in Nigeria were owned and controlled by the Federal and State governments. Therefore, the paper is concerned mostly with interactions between the military regimes and the print media.

The New Standard Encyclopedia explains freedom of the press as “the right to publish and disseminate information without restraint”. It further states that it means the national government shall not prevent people from expressing their opinion in published writings, and that it has been extended to photographs, motion pictures, television, radio broadcast and recordings. The concept of freedom of the press developed first in England and the English Colony of North America where, by 1640, the idea that men should be free to express opinions in publication, even those unfavourable to the authorities, gained strength. However, in modern times, the conception of press freedom or freedom of information can be traced to the Empire Press Union of 1909, to the United Nations efforts to promote fundamental human rights. Article 9 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights guarantees the right to freedom of expression to every citizen of the world from 1948. Prior to that date, on the 14th of December 1946, the United Nations General Assembly understood the relevance of the freedom of information by declaring that: freedom of information is a fundamental human right, and is the touchstone to all freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated” (Chiefe, 2001).

In the search for a common understanding of the concept of press freedom, the Commonwealth Press Union established a committee in 1965 to define the term. The Committee came out with this concept which attaches press freedom to human rights thus:

The freedom of the press is not a special privilege of newspaper but derives from the fundamental human right of every person to have full free access to the facts in all matters that directly or indirectly concern him, and from his equal right to express and publish his opinion thereon; and to hear and read opinion of others. In protection of these fundamental human rights, it is essential that the press should be free to gather news without obstruction, to publish the news and comment thereon (Cited Chiefe, 2010: 122-123).

From the above construct, it is obvious that press freedom goes beyond mere freedom to acquire information or gather news. It covers the right of the media man to collect information, publish the information and comment on the information so collected and published. With the position of the UN on freedom of the press as a fundamental human right, it is obvious that the right of the press to discharge its natural responsibility was extensively curtailed under the successive military regimes discussed in the paper.

The history of the evolution of the Nigeria press is divided into three phases: the colonial phase, the immediate post-colonial phase and the phase of Second Republic and beyond (Anyaeibunam and Obasi, 2000). However, military rule in Nigeria transcended the last two phases.

The Nigerian press prior to 1960 was a tested, united and nationalistic institution. Nigeria owed the quick attainment of her independence to the dedication and dynamism of the Nigeria press during the years of nationalism. The press educated and enlightened the mass of the public of the necessity of self rule and highlighted the evils of colonial rule. The press served as a potent tool in the hands of the nationalists. With the newspapers, the nationalists had ready channels through which their positions on issues reached out to the colonial government (Mabadeje, 2004).

With independence in 1960, the journalists and publishers lost their common foe. In the final months of colonial rule, the publications had become more interested in running purely geo-ethnic battles. The adversarial posture of an opposition press was largely maintained, particularly by *The Tribune*, *Daily Express* and *Daily Service*. The Tafawa Balewa's administration, unable to put the *Daily Times* in the same use, because of its domination by British journalists, responded by establishing *The Sunday Post* and *The Morning Post* in 1961. This opened the flood-gate of government-sponsorship of the press (Anyaeibunam and Obasi, 2000).

At independence, the 1960 Independence Constitution provided the first constitutional basis for press freedom. Section 24 of the constitution provided thus:

Every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression including the freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference (Cited Mabadeje, 2004: 10).

The Emergence of Military Rule in Nigeria

The military coup d'etat of the 15th of January 1966 marked the advent of the Nigerian military class into the nation's political space with Major-General Agui-Ironsi, who was in the saddle till the 29th of July 1966. The first direct effect of the new political dispensation on the Nigerian press was the proclamation of a state of emergency and the suspension of the 1963 Republican Constitution. With the situation, the rights of the Nigerian press, *vis-à-vis*, the rights of Nigerians, as guaranteed in the 1963 Republican Constitution, were put in abeyance (Mabadeje, 2004; Eyo, 2016).

In his broadcast on the 29th of January 1966, Major-General Ironsi roundly fingered corruption, nepotism, inefficiency and regionalism as the bane of the nation. He mentioned in the broadcast that "all Nigerians want an end to regionalism". His government also indicated its intention of introducing a unitary system of government. *The Daily Times* cautioned the government against such a retrogressive venture. The press vehemently countered the idea. The opinion generated by the press influenced the government's decision to call a press conference where the Head of State emphasised the need for cooperation of the press in nation building. Mabadeje (2004) notes that apart from the proclamation of a state of emergency and the suspension of the constitution, no decree, which directly impinged upon the rights of the press, was promulgated by the Ironsi regime.

Agwu (2010) notes that the disposition of the military towards moving in contradictory direction with respect to press freedom became obvious. He observes further that:

...the very first act of the military on assuming power was to suspend the constitution and proclaim a state of emergency. But the new regime spared Sections 24 and 25 dealing with Fundamental Human Rights, Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Conscience. This may have been a little more than an empty gesture of commitment to fundamental freedoms, for...the Emergency Decree rendered a decree superior to the constitution, since it made it clear that "nothing shall render any provision of a decree void to any extent whatsoever, (and) further military regimes would follow this precedent (Agwu, 2010: 138).

Following the counter coup of the 29th of July 1966, General Yakubu Gowon emerged as the Head of State. The political crisis resulted in the Nigerian Civil War between July 1967 and January 1970. In the wake of the crisis, the Gowon administration promulgated the Newspaper (Prohibition of Circulation) Decree No. 17 of 1967. The Decree targeted the *Biafran Sun*, a newspaper published by the secessionist regime (Mabadeje, 2004).

The Nigerian press during the Civil War years was divided and subjective. The *Biafran Sun*, tried to project the war as a religious one. Newspapers on the Nigerian side, especially the Government owned *Daily Times*, maintained that Gowon was fighting to preserve the nation. However, under the regime, the rights of individuals, journalists and media houses were violated, especially through the instrumentality of the Armed Forces and Police (Special Powers) Decree (Decree No. 24) of 1967. It was aimed at arms control and generally at “acts prejudicial to public order”. The Decree was however used more against the press than any other section of the society.

The creation of 12 states following the Civil War encouraged the proliferation of government dailies as well as local radio and television stations. Soon, there were four dailies, four weeklies and two magazines controlled by the Federal Government. Also in the 1970s, each state government was determined to set up its own newspapers to act as a propaganda outfit for the Governor and the administration. Some of the state owned newspapers which were located in the respective state capitals included *The Observer* (Benin), *The Nigerian Chronicle* (Calabar), *The Statesman* (Owerri), *The Star* (Enugu), *The Tide* (Port Harcourt).

During Gowon’s regime, there were some clashes between the two tiers of government and the press. Some of the cases included the arrest and detention of Lateef Jakande, Editor of the *Tribune*, arrest of Stephen Okorie, a correspondent of *New Nigerian*, Mineire Amakiri, Port Harcourt correspondent of Nigerian Observer, Kanayo Esinuola of *African Report*, Mike Omoleye of *Sketch*, Ebenezer Babatope, Editor of *Lagoon Echo*, Henry Onyedike and Agwu Okpanku of *The Renaissance*, Jibade Thomas Editor of *Express Newspaper* and Victor Izekor of *Daily Times* etc. Agwu (2010) recalls that as the Military Governor of the defunct Western Region, Brigadier Adeyinka Adebayo, on the 9th of September, 1968 had cause to pass an Edict proscribing *The Sunday Star* and the *Imole Owuro* (Mabadeje, 2004; Oso, Odunlami and Adja 2011).

The Nigerian Press Under Mohammed/Obasanjo Regime, 1975-1979

Maringues (2001) states that that the Mohammed/Obasanjo regime (1975-1979) blazed the trail of repression by taking control of radio and television stations, making it an offence to publish information “which embarrasses the government or a public officer or brings him to ridicule or disrepute”. Agwu (2010) points out that for being critical to the regime and for daring to publish an interview with Emeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, the Chris Okolie *Newsbrerd Magazine* was proscribed on the 4th of June, 1979 with the aid of a draconian decree. The proscription order lasted for two years.

Mabadeje (2004), Oso, Odunlami and Adja (2011) recall that *The Daily Times* was rocked with a crisis in 1975. Aware of the reach and influence of the newspaper on the people, the Federal Military Government decided to take over the ownership of the group. Thus, on the 1st of September 1975, the Federal Military Government published a Decree titled “The Daily Times Nigeria Limited (Transfer of Certain Shares Decree 1979)”. Although the paper was taken over in 1975, the instrument legalising the action was made public in 1979, hence, the decree is dated 1979.

Apart from retaining the ant-press freedom decrees that were enacted before it came to power, the regime enacted new ones. It promulgated the Public Officers (Protection Against False Accusation) Decree 1976 and the Newspaper Prohibition of Circulation (Validation) Decree No 12 of 1976. Also, the regime promulgated the Nigerian Press Council Decree No 13 of 1978. The decree was perceived and interpreted to be against the interest of the Nigerian press. Consequently, it was vehemently rejected and condemned by the press. However, an important development as it affects the press occurred during the Obasanjo regime. This

was the establishment of the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) on the 2nd of October 1978. (Akabogu and Anyagebunam, 1993).

The Nigerian Press Under Buhari Regime (1984-1985)

Few days after he took over the mantle of leadership as Nigeria's Head of State, General Muhammadu Buhari told some senior editors of *The Concord Newspaper* in an interview, published in *The Concord* of February 1984 that he would tamper with press freedom. In another interview with *West Africa*, published in the magazine's February 27 1984 edition, Buhari spoke at length on his plans to gag the press (Agedah, 1993).

When asked General Buhari by an editor of *West Africa Magazine* why he felt strongly that the Nigerian press should be controlled more than it was then, he replied thus:

...I have told the press in one of my interviews that we do not stop anybody from publishing the truth – you cannot suppress the truth in any way, but what we are not going to accept is a deliberate attempt by some members of the press to publish stories that are absolutely untrue where they know it is untrue. They can check, it would not take them more than five minutes to ring a ministry, a department, a parastatal – anybody concerned with information to cross-check the information and publish it. Instead they would rather publish what they want, to damage public officers or individuals and the Nigerian press know which of their category are consistent on that and if they cannot discipline them, then the Government has to come in. We are not stopping them from printing anything, but you would stand to prove it. If you damage a person, a person's character, or publish what is not consistent with the security of the state, then you stand to explain. We are not stopping anybody from publishing anything (Agedah, 1993: 73-74).

Brigadier-General Tunde Idiagbon, then Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters at a briefing with media executives on February 9, 1984 was also quoted to have remarked about the press thus:

.... I wish to end by reminding you that it cannot be in the interest of the general public who you so often claim the right to inform, for you to publish sensational stories by fugitives who are only out to embarrass the government from where they regard s safe hiding places. Any person who publishes or reproduces in any form, any statement, rumour or report being a statement which is proved to be false has himself to blame for the consequences. This administration believes that the press should be allowed to publish facts but it would not accept obvious untruth intended to cause disaffection. We have a task to perform. We will not like to be diverted from our state objectives (Agedah, 1993: 74)

While Buhari's regime did not tamper with Sections 21 and 36 (1) of the 1979 Constitution, it went on to promulgate a Decree which heavily censored the Nigerian press. Section 21 of the Constitution state 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". Section 36 states that: "every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference".

After a meeting of the Supreme Military Council (SMC) on the 6th of March 1984, a communiqué was issued by the government in which the SMC ordered the promulgation with immediate effect, the Public

Officers (Protection Against False Accusation) Decree 1984 Number 4 (Public Officers Protection Against False Accusation Decree). (Agedah, 1993; Oso, Odunlami and Adja, 2011).

According to Agedah (1993), the Decree states in section 1(i) as follows:

(i) “Any person who publishes in any form, whether written or otherwise, any message, rumour, statement or report which is false in any material particular or which brings or is calculated to bring the Federal Military Government or the government of a state or public officer to ridicule or disrepute shall be guilty of an offence under this decree”.

Agedah (1993) also states that the punishments for the contravention of the Decree was stated in the relevant section were as follows:

Any person found guilty of an offence under this Decree shall be liable on conviction to be sentenced to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years without the option of a fine and, in the case of a body corporate, to a fine of not less than ten Thousand Naira”.

(2) “Where an offence under this Decree has been committed, by a body corporate, every person who at the time of the commission of the offence was a proprietor, publisher, director, general manager, editor, secretary or other similar officer of the body corporate, or was purporting to act on any such capacity, shall be deemed to be guilty of that offence committed without his consent or connivance and that he exercised all such diligence to prevent the commission of the offence as he ought to have exercised, having regard to the nature of his functions in that capacity and in all the circumstances”.

(3) “where a body corporate is convicted of an offence under this Decree, the Tribunal may, in addition to any other penalty, order all or any of the equipment of the newspaper or wireless telegraphy station, with which the offence was committed, to be forfeited to the Federal Military Government”.

(4) “No appeal shall lie from a decision of any Tribunal established under this Decree”.

There was widespread condemnation of the Decree which was drafted by the then Attorney-General and Minister of Justice, Chief Chike Ofodile by some prominent members of the society. On the 4th of June 1984, Chief M.K.O. Abiola, in an address to the Association of Mass Communication Students of the Ogun State Polytechnic, Abeokuta, noted that the Decree was the “last of the meantime” in the long list of “legal or illegal” measures taken by the Buhari regime to impose themselves on the rest of the populace (Agedah, 1993).

The first victims of the Decree were Messrs Tunde Thompson, then a Senior Correspondence and Nduka Irabor, an Assistant News Editor both with *The Guardian*. The two journalists were arrested and brought before a four-man Tribunal set up under Decree No. 4 on the 4th of June, 1984. Two charges were brought against them in respect of stories on the closure of Nigeria’s foreign missions and ambassadorial appointment which were published in *The Guardian* of the 31st of March and 1st April and the 8th of April 1984, respectively.

The two journalists as well as *The Guardian* Press Limited were tried on the following charges:

- (i) Publishing a false statement that “11 foreign mission to be closed”.
- (ii) Publishing a false statement that “Eight military chiefs were tipped for ambassadors”
- (iii) Publishing a statement with the caption “Haruna replaces Hannaniya as United Kingdom Envoy”.

The then Permanent Secretary in the External Affairs Ministry, Mr. George Dove-Edwin, who was in-charge of ambassadorial postings based on directives from the government, testified before the Tribunal that a significant percentage of the stories were correct. On the publication in the March 31, 1984 issue of *The*

Guardian, with the headline “11 foreign missions to be closed down”. Dove-Edwin told the Tribunal that the newspaper got 10 of the 11 names right (Agedah, 1993).

On the story “Eight Military Chiefs Tipped as Ambassadors”, Mr. Dove-Edwin said that *The Guardian* published seven of the names while five were correct. He declined confirmation or denial of the remaining two names, contending that they were “classified matter”. On the “Haruna replaces Hannaniya as new UK Envoy” story, the Permanent Secretary explained that at the time of the newspaper publication, General Hannaniya was appointed and not Haruna

The trial was held between the 4th of June to the 4th of July 1984, when judgement was delivered. In the ruling, the Tribunal discharged the two journalists and their publisher on the first and second counts, but found them guilty on the third count based on the “Haruna replaces Hannaniya as new UK envoy” story. Thompson and Irabor were then sentenced to one year imprisonment each (a jail term they fully served), while *The Guardian Press Limited* was asked to pay a fine of N50, 000 (Fifty thousand Naira) only within 24 hours.

One major fall-out of the imprisonment of the two journalists was that the Buhari regime became very unpopular among the journalists and the Nigerian press. Besides, by sentencing them, the regime unwittingly made heroes of the two journalists and carved out an image of the villain for itself. Buhari underrated the power of the Nigerian press. The regime unfortunately translated and misinterpreted the acclamation and goodwill it received, unsolicited, from the Nigerian populace as a passport to toy with the fundamental human rights of the people, as well as other laws regulating the idiosyncrasies of the citizenry (Agedah, 1993).

In its editorial comment on “The Death of Decree 4” *The Daily Sketch* of August 31, 1985 wrote thus:

The press, unjustly and cruelly kept in irons for 16 dehumanising months, has finally been manumitted. It was, however, not the press only that had its voice box crushed. It was the whole country. The press exists for the people, their blunt unflattering mirror, the faithful articulator of their joys, sadness, wants and desires. It is the bridge that links the rulers to the ruled, a bridge that allows both sides to understand each other perfectly, a situation, without which no progress can be made (Cited Agedah, 1993: 76).

.Decree 4’s main purpose was to maliciously punish and not even to teach a lesson. That explains why it was so ambiguous. A journalist stood to be jailed if his report embarrassed a public officer, irrespective of the fact that the report was factual and accurate. The Buhari regime did not believe in the free flow of information nor in building and sustaining a huge market place of ideas.

The Nigerian Press Under Babangida Regime (1985-1993)

One of the first actions of the General Ibrahim Babangida was the dumping of the Buhari’s Decree No. 4. However, Babangida also severally harassed the Nigerian press, first through the proscription of *Newswatch Magazine* on the 6th of April 1989, for publishing the recommendations of the Political Bureau led by Prof. S.J. Cookey. Even the Lagos State Military Government closed down *The Guardian Newspaper* in April 1992, a year before the annulment of the 1993 presidential election that ushered the Nigerian press into full collision course with the Federal Military Government (Agwu, 2010).

The regime embarked on the enactment of “a series of anti-press legislations, notably the Offensive Publications (Proscription) Decree No. 35 of 1993; Treason and Treasonable Offences Decree No. 29 of 1993; and the Newspapers Registration Decree No. 43 of 1993. In fact, in one fell swoop, *The Concord*, *The Punch*, *The Sketch* and *The Observer* group of newspapers were in July 1993 all proscribed by dint of Decree 48 of

1993. Also, when the ill-fated Major Gideon Orka coup took place against General Babangida regime in 1991, the “press community” was targeted and hard hit for its perceived role in the failed plot (Agwu, 2010).

The Introduction of Professional Ethics: The Role of the Nigerian Press Council

Press Council the world over is either established by government or as independent organisations set up by journalists. In some cases, governments, facing serious criticisms have sought to muzzle the press indirectly by establishing institutions that would closely monitor the press. In Nigeria, the debate on the desirability of establishing a Press Council dated back to the 1960s. In the 1970s, an attempt was made to establish such a body with the setting up of the Ekineh Commission by the General Gowon regime. The Commission was mandated to carry out a study on the future of the Nigerian press. It turned out to be a wasted effort as the findings of the Commission was never made public (Olugboji, Aigbogun, Nwankwo, 1994).

An attempt was made in 1978 by the General Obasanjo’s regime to set up a Press Council. This attempt failed. In 1988, General Babangida signed into law, the Media Council Decree. As with the Decree promulgated in 1978 during General Obasanjo regime, journalists and professional organisations raised objections to some sections of the 1988 Decree. The 1988 Council Decree met the same fate as the one it repealed (Olugboji, Aigbogun, Nwankwo, 1994)

Prince Tony Momoh, General Babangida’s Minister of Information, who was at the forefront of the process of establishing a Press Council said journalists should have supported the (1988) Decree, because all the objectives set forth in the code of conduct drawn up by the Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE). Some of the objections to the Decree raised by the Nigerian Press Organisation (NPO) were as follows:

1. The term “Media” is nebulous; it should be named “Press” (Council) as such organisation are named elsewhere:
3. The Decree has awesome powers
2. The composition is unacceptable
4. The Council should not have the final say on the training and registration of journalists.

According to Olugboji, Aigbogun, Nwankwo, (1994), following the objections raised on the Media Council Decree, a series of meetings were held between the Government and different interest groups in the media. The result was a Press Council that was agreeable to both government and journalists.

Eventually, the Nigerian Press Council (NPC) was inaugurated in December 1992. The Press Council consist 17 members, which according to its statutes, must include four representatives of the Nigerian Union of journalists (NUJ), two members of the Guild of Editors (GE) and two from the Newspapers Publishers Association of Nigeria (NPAN), two representatives of the Ministry of Information, who must be a working journalist. The Head of State remains the right to appoint chairman after consulting the Nigerian Press Council (Olugboji, Aigbogun, Nwankwo, 1994; Maringues, 2001).

The Council has a wide range of functions which include fostering the maintenance of high professional standards by the press, reviewing the achievements and maintenance of high professional standards of the press, reviewing developments that may restrict the supply of information of public interest, ensuring the protection of the rights and privileges of journalists, researching into contemporary press development, updating press documentation, enquiring into complaints about the conduct of the press and the conduct of any person or organisation towards the press. The Council also adopted the code of conduct of the Nigerian Union of Journalists “to guide the press and journalists in the performance of their duties”. The

Council is also empowered to publish in its *Press Journal*, the Code of Conduct “which shall be binding on every journalist in Nigeria (Olugboji, Aigbogun, Nwankwo, 1994; Maringues, 2001).

However, there were allegations that the military government deliberately sidelined the NPC when it sought redress. For instance, the Constitutional Rights Project (CPR), claimed that rather than approach the NPC, the then military government increasingly resorted to extra-judicial methods, such as the arrest of journalists and the closing down of newspapers. In spite of its limitations, the NPC remains as one of the mechanisms of resolving conflicts between the press and the government (Olugboji, Aigbogun, Nwankwo, 1994; Maringues, 2001).

The Military Government closed down *The Newswatch Magazine* for six months. The magazine’s editors, Ray Ekpu, Dan Agbase and Yakubu Mohammed were arrested and charged with sedition, a charge the government later dropped. In July 1993, the Military Government confiscated 100, 000 copies of *Tell Magazine*. In fact, the death, by a parcel bomb of Mr. Dele Giwa, Editor-in chief on October 19, 1986, will long remain a reference point in state-press relations during the Babangida regime.

The camel’s back was broken when Gen. Babangida annulled the June 12 1993, Presidential Election. The press response was not nationally uniform and coherent; geo-ethnic alliances were reactivated. Journalists went back to their geo-ethnic trenches to either attack the regime or support it. One noticeable phenomenon from the later part of the Gen. Babangida’s regime and during the Abacha years, was the active collaboration forged between a section of the press and the pro-democracy and human rights groups. The press became an active participant in the democratic struggle with many journalists being members of the opposition civil society groups particularly the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO).

The Press Under General Abacha Regime (1993-1998)

In its battle against the opposition press, the Abacha’s regime adopted a range of methods such as brutal repression to bringing out fake newspapers. In 1993 alone, some 300,000 publications were seized, 54 journalists were arrested, more than 20 of them were summoned to appear in court, six reporters or photographers were assaulted or injured, four publications were suspended or put under pressure by authorities, 17 titles were banned by decree and 17 journalists were dismissed or disciplined for political reasons, 10 of them resigned in protest (Bach, Lebeau, and Amuwo, 1998).

According to Olugboji, Aigbogun, Nwankwo (1994), the onslaught against the press worsened during General Abacha regime. Between February 1993 and September 1994, more journalists were arrested and detained in Nigeria than in all the years since political independence from Britain in 1960 put together.

Although the aim here is not to draw up an exhaustive list of all the infringements of press freedom in Nigeria, four main types of repression often used can be distinguished.

(i) Obstructing Distribution: The type of repression was disrupting the process of circulation of independent press, confiscating copies before they are distributed and persecuting street vendors. Between August 1993, state security agents raided the Lagos Office of the *News* several times and seized thousands of issues. *Tempo Magazine* was also seized from the time it was banned in June (aware of the threat, the publishers took the precaution of having several titles commercially registered). In early January 1994, policemen ransacked the Academy Press printing works in Ilupeju and carted away 50,000 copies of *Tell* with the headline “Return of Tyranny: Abacha Bares his Fangs”. Police also harassed street newspaper vendors in several parts of Nigeria such as Akure, Kaduna, Owerri, Calabar, Abuja and Warri several of them had their

wares confiscated and were arrested, threatened and ordered to appear in court for daring to sell some papers (Maringues, 2001).

(ii) **Blurring the Picture with Fake Editions:** Another subtle method adopted by the Abacha regime was the parallel circulation of fake editions of opposition titles. The security service produced these newspapers, using the anti-establishment image of the originals to put across a message favourable to the government and create confusion in the readers' minds. *Tell*, *Tempo*, *News* and *TSM*, were often subjected to this tactic which the regime began to employ in March 1994. The management of *Tell* had to issue a press statement denying that it was connected with a fake version of its 24th March 1994 edition. Several reports had been cut and the false front page sang the praises of the military as "new messiah" (Olugboji, Aigbogun, Nwankwo, 1994; Maringues, 2001).

(iii) **Stoppage of Production:** The military authorities also tried to prevent the production of the independent press, for example by systematically disrupting the work of the Academy Press printing works in Ilupeju. Until its owner capitulated to pressure in 1995, the Academy Press printed no fewer than five anti-establishment magazines. The police constantly seized the plates and films of the magazines. However, the smaller, mobile teams of journalists managed to escape surveillance, but the larger newspapers were much vulnerable to repression. In June 1994, *The Concord Group* and *The Punch Group* were cordoned off by the police on the pretext that weapons and ammunition were hidden in their premises. In August, it was the turn of *The Guardian Group* – whose owner, Chief Alex Ibru was Interior Minister, despite the protest of the activists and a ruling by a Lagos court, the government stood firm and in early September issues a decree banning a total of 19 titles belonging to these three press groups. The ban lasted more than a year and was only lifted in October 1995. It was the longest press ban ever imposed in Nigeria and had a noticeable effect on the press (Maringues, 2001).

(iv) **Arrest and Threat of Journalists:** Another method of repression used to silence journalists was by arresting them or physically threatening them. Many journalists spent months in detention in very inhumane conditions. In some cases, the police arrested the wives and children of some journalists that escaped arrest. In 1995, the military regime set a new precedent by sentencing to life imprisonment – later commuted, under international pressure, to 15 years – four journalists charged with plotting to overthrow the government of General Abacha. They were tried in camera by a military court in July 1995 alongside several dozen Nigerian army officers. The journalists were: George Mbah, Deputy Editor of *Tell*, Ben Charles Obi, Editor of *Weekend Classique*, Kunle Ajibade, Editor of *The News* and Christie Anyanwu, Editor of the *Sunday Magazine* (Olugboji, Aigbogun, Nwankwo, 1994).

General Abdulsalami Abubakar Regime (1998-1999)

General Abdulsalami Abubakar came to power on the 9th of June 1998, following the death of General Abacha. His regime was brief and was rather a transition period. because of the tension in the country following the annulment of the June 12 Presidential election and the high-profile killings the was associated with the Abacha regime, General Abubakar quickly facilitated the transition to civilian administration which was realised on the 29th of May, 1999.

Conclusion

The Nigerian press as a creation of the Christian missionaries came into being in the pre-colonial Nigeria. The press consistently registered itself as a major institutional actor before the formation of political society and the state, hence, the press looms large in the nation's political landscape. Undoubtedly, the press has played positive role in the development of contemporary Nigeria.

Military regime is usually a dictatorship. Under such regime, press freedom is an anathema. Indeed, during the respective regimes, beginning from 1966, every paraphernalia of military dictatorship was involved in the oppression of the press. The methodology included the threat, arrest, detention and imprisonment of journalists, seizure of the publications considered offensive to the regime, closure of the media houses, etc.

Despite the authoritarian character of the military and the various attempts made to cow the press and limit its freedom, all military regimes did not succeed. Being able to forge alliances with various geo-ethnic and religious power blocs, the press criticised issues and concerns that were divergent from those promoted by the various military regimes. Eventually, the Nigerian press maintained its resilience and has outlived military dictatorship.

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