

The Press, Military Coups, and the Nigerian Polity: A Historical Perspective

Olughenga J. Kalejaiye

*Journalism Department, Adebola Adegunwa School of Communication, Lagos State University,
21, Olufemi Street, Off Nathan Street, Surulere. Lagos 23401, Nigeria
Telephone: 234-08033630690; 234-1-8056917454 E-mail: kalejayeolughenga@yahoo.co.uk*

KEYWORDS Press. Democracy. Government. Law. Civil War. Journalists. Struggle. Power

ABSTRACT The press in Nigeria has remained one of the most vilified, debated, and acclaimed institutions in recent time. Some have commended it for its tenacity and doggedness especially in the struggle against colonialism and military misrule. Others have condemned it for irresponsible, reckless, and sensational journalism. This paper examined the role of the press in military coups in Nigeria. It found that the press played a strategic and significant role before, during, and after military coups. Before the coup, the press serves as a “barometer” by which the performance of the government of the day is measured. Whenever an incumbent government is receiving negative press coverage or “bashing”, the press is inadvertently preparing the ground for coup plotters to strike. It was discovered that the coup plotters used the negative press coverage as an excuse to take over the government. During the execution of military coups, plotters always seize available broadcast stations to announce the change of government and the policy thrust of the new government. After the coup, the plotters need the press to win legitimacy. The paper also discovered that the press has a significant role to play in the entrenchment of democracy in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian press has remained one of the most vilified and acclaimed institutions in the country in recent time. While it has been commended by some, others have seriously condemned it for irresponsible, reckless, and sensational journalism (Akinfeleye 2003).

The press, it has been argued, was in the forefront of the struggle for enthronement of democracy or better still, the return to civil rule (because not a few Nigerians believe that we do have democracy yet). Many in this group will point out that the press was also in the vanguard of the independence struggle. To them while other countries in Africa fought for their independence on the battlefield, that of Nigeria was fought for, and won on the pages of newspapers expending millions of words, instead of ammunitions, in the process.

On the other hand, many have accused the press of being responsible for everything bad in the Nigerian polity. To this group, the press was behind or responsible for the major national crises the country has witnessed. Sobowale (2002) states:

Sadly, however, the media tended from 1960, to destroy that which they labour so hard for so many years to build. Having gain political

independence, petty jealousies, occasioned by political and ethnic differences, beclouded the vision of media proprietors and media practitioners. Rather than promoting national integration and national consciousness, the media became sectional and a potent agent of disunity. They promoted inter-ethnic hatred as well as inter-ethnic distrust and acrimony that eventually led to the collapse of the first republic.

Still on the same era, Unah (1995) stated that the “press activities during this period were characterized by cultural stereotypes and primordialism”. In essence, the media can be said to have fuelled the crises of the 1960s.

If the press is guilty as charged above, (that is, fueling the crises), then, it stands to reason that the press had a hand in crises of the 1960s and subsequent crises in Nigeria, especially, the coup of January 15, 1966, and subsequent coups in the country. This paper focuses specifically on the role of the press in military coups. So, the objective of the paper is to find out the role of the press in military coups. The historical research method was adopted for the study.

Conceptualisation and Theoretical Framework for the Study

For the purpose of this study, the press and

the mass media (media for short) will be used interchangeably to include newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and to a lesser extent film and books. Now, let us see coup.

In the words of Obi (1999), A coup d'etat is a political act directed at the unauthorized seizure of power through the direct use of, or the threat of the use of violent force. It is often clandestine, involving a small band of conspirators plotting in secret and often taking advantage of existing social grievances or a vacuum in political power. Coup d'etat often targets existing office holders either for elimination (assassination) or forceful removal from office.

Consequently, coup d'etat may be described as an attempt (which may be successful or not) to illegally seize power or topple the government in power. Coup, especially in Nigeria, may be "fathom" or "phony" or even "stage-managed" by the government in power to get at some perceived opponents of the government. The word coup and coup d'etat shall be used interchangeably with military intervention.

The military in the study consists of all the armed forces. It includes the Nigerian Army, Nigerian Navy and the Nigerian Air Force but excludes the Nigerian Police Force (Obasanjo and Mabogunje 1992).

The proposition of the social responsibility theory is germane to this study. The theory emphasized the need for an independent press that scrutinizes other social institutions and provides objective, accurate news report (Baran and Davis 2000). According to Baran and Davis (2000) the most innovative feature of the theory was its call for media to be responsible for fostering productive and creative "Great Communities" by prioritising cultural pluralism "by becoming the voice of all the people" and "not just elite groups or groups that had dominated national, regional, or local culture in the past." The theory's expectation is that the media would be pluralist and encourage diversity within the society. Media operators are expected to be responsible and accountable to the society as a whole and not to a section of the society.

In the words of Baran and Davis (2000), "social responsibility theory challenged media professionals' ingenuity to develop new ways of serving their communities." They argue further that the "theory encouraged them (media operators) to see themselves as front-line participants in the battle to preserve democracy in a

world drifting inexorably towards totalitarianism." To them, "by helping pluralistic groups, media were building a wall to protect democracy from external and internal foes." This study found that the Nigerian media have always been in the forefront of the struggle for enthronement, entrenchment, and survival of democracy in Nigeria. In doing this, media owners/operators have suffered untold hardship while some lost their lives, others were maimed.

Another theory that is of particular relevance to the study is the functionalist theory (or what some scholars simply refer to as functionalism). Functionalism tends to explain social practices, and institutions in terms of the needs of the society and of individuals (Merton 1957 cited in McQuail 2000). The society's needs as it relate to the mass media include the need for continuity, order, integration, motivation, guidance, socialization, adaptation etc. The functionalist theory sees the mass media as essential to the society for integration and co-operation, order, control and stability; and continuity of culture and values (McQuail). The main "gist" of the functionalist theory is that "the society is an ongoing system of linked working parts or subsystems, of which the mass media are one, each making an essential contribution to continuity and order."

According to McQuail organised social life is said to require the continued maintenance of more or less accurate, consistent, supportive and complete picture of the working society and of the social environment. The Nigerian media, it was discovered have done well in this regard. The media are expected to monitor "happenings", especially activities of the government, and report it to the entire society, which they have been doing. In addition, they are expected to uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the society (See section 22 of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution).

The proposition of the agenda setting theory is also germane to the study. The theory assumes that "the media may not always be successful in telling us what to think but they are, in telling us what to think about." According to Rodman (2006) "the main thrust of agenda setting is that media content might not change your point of view but it will change your perception of what is important." He argues that the amount of attention given to an issue in the media affects the level of importance the public assigns to that issue.

As noted earlier, the press in Nigeria has

actively been performing the surveillance and correlation functions. However, in the process it usually exposes the inadequacies of the government in power. This expose, most times are damning and were used by coup plotters as excuse to overthrow the government in power.

THE PRESS AND THE NIGERIAN STATE: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

“Traditionally”, according to Sobowale (2002), “the role of the mass media is to inform, educate, and entertain members of the society.” It is also expected to propagate the cultural heritage of the people. The role of the mass media in “creating political awareness, engendering empathy and mobilizing people for social change” had also been recognized (Sobowale 1993 cited in Sobowale 2002). “The press” according to Akinfeleye (2003) “is to watch-dog, check-on-to *uncover* and never to *cover up* corruption and/or wrong doings by the other three estates. They are also to monitor governance and make the other three estates accountable to the people at all times.”

These functions, the Nigerian press has been performing since 1859 when the first newspaper (mass medium), *Iwe Irohin*, was published. The press has done creditably well especially in the area of surveillance and correlation. In the words of Akinfeleye (2003), “as a journalist and media educator (Prof. Ralph Akinfeleye is a foremost professor of Journalism, at Nigeria’s leading journalism school, University of Lagos, Department of Mass Communication), I wish to commend the Nigerian Press for a job well done in its constitutional role of monitoring governance and making public officers accountable to the people.”

However, it should be pointed out that the press has its own shortcomings too. It has been accused of “fueling” the crises of the 1960s. The press that was nationalistic during the independence struggle, that provided nationalists arsenal from which they drew their literal arms and ammunition, and served as launch pad from which they launched vitriolic attacks on colonialists, suddenly became a parochial, primordial, and tribalistic press at independence. The firebrand press suddenly became ‘tribal-brand’ press. The press of the First Republic aligned with the three major political parties which themselves are ethnic (or tribal) based (Uche 1989). Consequently, “they

(the press) could not perceive issues beyond the confines of party ideologies or ethnic boundaries... because none of the three major political parties had a firm footing in any region other than where it was based, even though each had considerable following in the other regions, the media could not promote national goals” (Sobowale 2002).

This trend was to repeat itself again especially during the months preceding the civil war and during the civil war (1967-1970). The press was polarized into two – those supporting the Biafran cause and those against it. During the Second Republic (1979 – 83) the press witnessed a “phenomenal growth”. Many newspapers, radio and television stations were established. Though, “this sharp increase in the number of mass media establishment was, as in the part, motivated by political considerations, it cannot be disputed that these media performed the traditional functions of informing, educating, and entertaining their audiences...and contributed in no small measure to the economic, political and social development of the country” (Sobowale 2002).

During the Second Military interregnum (December 31, 1983 – May 29, 1999) and the runoff to the Fourth Republic (or is it Third Republic?) the Nigerian press had a “running battle” with the various Military Juntas. The regime of Generals Muhammadu Buhari and Tunde Idiagbon (December 31, 1983 – August 27, 1993) set the tone for subsequent regimes on how to relate with the press. The regime remained one of the harshest military regimes in the country, for it had no respect for human rights including that of the press (Popoola 2003).

Other military regimes followed the footsteps of Buhari/ Idiagbon and even surpassed them, in their maltreatment of the press. Under the Babangida and Abacha regimes newspapers/ magazines were proscribed and media houses were shut at will for daring to “inform the public of their dubious activities.” As if closing down would not do, arsonists, hired killers and hit squad (Strike Force) were let loose on the press, to burn media houses (arsonists were caught setting Guardian Newspapers office on fire in 1996 or thereabout), kill journalists (Dele Giwa got ‘parcel-bombed’ in 1986 while Baguda Kaltho of the *News* magazine is still missing till today (2007) about twelve years after he was declared wanted by the police) and to maim (Alex Ibru, the publisher of Guardian newspaper may not have fully recovered

from the gun shots he received from the agents of General Abacha). To crown it all, journalists, both males and females, were arraigned before Military Tribunals on “trump up charges” and many of them were jailed.

At this juncture, it is important to note that the “war” of attrition against the press was not limited to the press men; their families – wives, children and relations – were not spared. Many at times, families of newsmen were held hostage in their stead. Guns were pointed at their little kids, their offence, being related to journalists.

In all these, according to Kalejaiye (1999) “the Nigerian press though harassed, pursued, bombarded...yet...remained undaunted in the pursuit of its watchdog role. The press was beaten but not intimidated. It was humiliated but not cowed.” It was this same press that led the “struggle” for the enthronement of “democracy”. The Nigerian press literally led the “peoples’ army” that fought the military to a standstill leaving them with no choice but to hand over to elected “civilians” on May 29, 1999. The press deserves a “locomotive” pat on the back (Akinfeleye 2003) in this regard.

Since the advent of the 4th Republic on 29 May 1999, the Nigerian press have been up and doing. They have to their credit great exposes such as the one that swept Salisu Buhari, the First Speaker of the House of Representatives in the current civil dispensation out of office, and the Toronto certificate saga involving Senator Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the governor of Lagos State, Southwest, Nigeria. The good news here is that “since the return to civil rule on May 29, 1999, the Nigerian press has not witnessed too much official harassment.” But there are few reported cases of isolated official high-handedness against the press. The one that readily comes to mind is the brutalization of the Vanguard newspaper’s photojournalist by security operatives attached to the Vice President, Atiku Abubakar, early 2005. The journalist was beaten to a state of coma and almost lost his life.

However, lately, the government seems to be after the press again. Two journalists, Gbenga Aruleba and Rotimi Durojaiye of African Independent Television (AIT) and Daily Independent newspaper respectively, were arrested and arraigned in June 2006 for calling the recently purchased Presidential Jet a fairly used or *Tokunbo* (second-hand) jet while the Federal government claimed the jet is brand-new.

The irony of it all is that the journalists were charge under a moribund law, the Sedition Act, a law that has been declared null and void by a competent court of law, the Court of Appeal, since 1983.

Military Coups and the Mass Media Factor in Nigeria

The role of the mass media in military coup has been and remains a subject of controversy among scholars (political scientists, historians, sociologists, mass communicators etc), mass communication practitioners, politicians, members of the armed forces, civil society, and social commentators. In this section, we shall attempt an exploratory analysis of the said role.

The role of the mass media (press) in military coup can be examined under three stages, before, during and after military coups. These classifications, especially the last two, are not mutually exclusive or iron clad. They are used here purely for convenience of discussion sake.

The press, as noted earlier, serves as the watchdog of the society. Once it “barks” the society runs to see what has gone wrong (Obasola et al. 2001). Obasola et al, also note that the press serves as a “barometer” by which the performance of the government of the day is measured. In carrying out this constitutionally assigned role the press prepares the ground for the military coups. Obasola et al. argue that whenever an incumbent government is receiving negative press coverage or bashing from the media, the media ... is preparing the ground for coup plotters to strike. They argue further that the coup plotters, most of the time, use the negative press coverage as an opportunity or excuse to take over the government. So, with the media, society’s feelings, thoughts, pains, anguish, agony, sufferings and what have you were/are made known to those who were eventually motivated to carry out the coup (Durodola et al. 2001). For instance, Major Nzeogwu in a “broadcast” on the coup day (15th January, 1966) stated unequivocally:

Our enemies are the political profiteers, the swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand ten per cent; those that seek to keep the country divided permanently so that they can remain in office as minister or VIPs at least, the tribalists, the nepotists...

(Igbokwe 1999).

While Major Gideon Okar in his 1990 coup

broadcast described General Ibrahim Babangida regime as dictatorial, corrupt, drug baronish, sadistic and deceitful, to mention but a few. (Durodola et al 2001). Most, if not all these terms and allegations used by these coupists have been in the press before their respective coups. In fact, the press created some of the terms used by the plotters. In addition, some sections of the press have been known to have openly canvassed for military intervention, “to save the country” from chaos and disintegration. This was done at least before the January 1966 and November 1993 coups respectively. The military was called upon to seize power from the Interim National Government to resolve the June 12 crises.

During the execution of military coups, the mass media, especially the broadcast media, radio and television, usually played fundamental role. Because of the strategic importance of the broadcast or electronic media to the success or otherwise of the coups, coup plotters from the days of Nzeogwu (January 15, 1966) always make it a point of top priority to seize available radio/television stations especially the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation now Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN – Radio Nigeria) stations and other influential stations. Coup makers or plotters without exception usually announced their coups on the media (radio/television). They broadcast their take-over of government over the radio and television. Although the coup planning and execution might have been on for quite a while, the general populace will get to know about it: the major actors and victims of the coup, the new government and its policy direction, if any, from the coup broadcast.

After the coup, the military depends on the media to pass their “message” across to the general populace. The coup plotters need the media to win legitimacy. There are ample evidences to suggest that they “used” the media to legitimatise their regime. Without the media, it is doubtful if the plotters can gain the acceptance of the public, and win legitimacy for their new government. No wonder after the coup, every regime always solicits the support of the press knowing fully well that once the media make any move to discredit a regime (Durodola et al.), it would result in a rejection from the society. Such regime will have serious image crises to contend with even, if, it elect to remain in power.

From the foregoing, we cannot but agree with the assertion of Durodola et al, that coup plotters,

more or less, had their fate embedded in the palms of the press. Their acceptance or rejection by the populace, is largely dependent on how the press portrays them, heroes or villains?

In a nutshell, the mass media played strategic roles before, during and after military coups in Nigeria. Even after a new regime, has been installed, the media “never lowered her guard”. Rather she kept mobilizing against military rule and canvassing for return to civil rule. The media was also in the forefront of the struggle for the restoration of “democratic governance”. At every opportunity, the media never ceased to “let all who care to listen” know that military intervention in Nigerian politics/ polity was/is an aberration.

Demilitarization, Entrenchment of Democracy and the Mass Media in Nigeria

The handing over of power to an elected civilian government of Chief Olusegun Okikiolu Aremu Obasanjo on 29th May 1999 by General Abdusallam Abubakar marked a return to democratic governance, even, if in theory. The common enemy of the media, the military, is gone. This calls for a new orientation for the media so as to avoid the mistakes of the First Republic Press. The press that was used to “bashing” the colonial government and colonial administrators, suddenly woke up at independence to discover that there was neither colonial government nor administrators to bash. Left with no one to bash, the press decided to bare its “fang” on the polity taking sides with the then regional based political parties to “tear” the country apart, the result was military intervention.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper would not be complete if the issue of demilitarization and the entrenchment of democracy in Nigeria and the role of the media is not treated or discussed no matter how brief. This is because, in the final analysis, the success or otherwise of the current democratic experience will to a large extent be determined by how well and how far we are able to demilitarize the Nigerian polity. The mass media has an indispensable role to play here.

However, it should be noted here that the best guard against future military interventions or incursions into the body politics of Nigeria is a good and highly performing civilian government (Obasanjo and Mabogunje 1992). This is also the only sure way to ensure a total demilitarization of the political process. The mass media has a very

vital role to play here. More than ever before, the press must diligently watch over the country hard-earned democracy. The press must never forget how she fought, suffered and eventually triumphed in the battle for democracy. It is not *Uhuru* yet. The country, the press inclusive, has not gotten to the *Promised Land of democracy*, where human rights are not only respected but also held sacrosanct, "safeguarded through policies, actions, directives and most importantly through constitutional provisions" (Obasanjo and Mabogunje 1992). The danger of (military) coup still "lurks" around the corner. Nigeria still faces the risk of another cycle of military interventions, as long as our democracy remains fragile and the economy weak, if not very weak.

If the above is to be, then we need a strong, versatile, nationalistic, patriotic, enlightened and constructive press, a press that will not allow it to be led by the nose by unscrupulous politicians and political jobbers. *African Leadership Forum* in one of its *Farm House Dialogues* notes, "a strong, virile and constructive press is a *sine qua non* for the endurance of good government and keeping the military out of politics" (Obasanjo and Mabogunje 1992). But the question here is, who determines a good government, the coup plotters or their civilian collaborators or the elite or the masses? The mass media cannot do it alone. They must mobilize the masses to "serve as a bulwark for the defense of democracy". This, they can do by helping to inculcate in the masses the "democratic spirit" that will not only cherish but also value, appreciate and be ready to die for democracy, if the need be.

The Guide Dog journalism is recommended here. According to Tejumaiye (2005) guide-dogging journalism not only gives the people news and information but also helps them do their jobs as citizens. This form of journalism would not just watch, as is the case in watchdog journalism, but also would challenge the people to get involved. In his words, "guide-dog journalism emphasizes the powerfulness of the people and that the source of journalistic power is the people."

The press must, as a matter of "urgency and national importance" put in place a programme (campaign) for the demystification of the military (especially the so-called retired generals) and their civilian stooges and collaborators, who are bent on hijacking the whole democratic process, attempt to "reap where they did not sow". The

press will have to let the people know that they have got "nothing good" to offer the country. Let them be known for what they are, *spent horses*.

CONCLUSION

The Nigerian press has a long history of struggle behind it. Its forefather, *Iwe Irohin* was reputed to have "spearheaded the attack on slavery, which thrived clandestinely in what is now known as Nigeria ..." (Azikwe 1987 cited in Obasanjo and Mabogunje 1992). So, it was/is the case of "where the battle was/is, the Nigerian press was/is" there, ever ready to wage war against the forces of oppression. Whether the battle was against colonial oppression, colonialism generally, poverty, or against military rule, the press has always been in the vanguard and had performed creditably well.

However, the press has its own dark side. On few occasions, the press took sides with the "agents of darkness" that tended to "destabilize" the country for their selfish end. On such occasions, the country and its people were the worst for it. For instance, the country and her people are yet to recover from the evil consequences of military intervention. Never again should the press allow itself to be used maliciously. As it was in the days of old, "the press in Nigeria should place more emphasis on its use for the public benefit".

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