

# THE MILITARY AND THE PRESS: REFLECTIONS ON THE NIGERIAN SITUATION

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## Abstract

The relationship between the military and the press has been and still is a subject of monumental intellectual discourse. It is this wise that this paper attempts a post-mortem exposition of the relationship between the military and the press with specific reference to the Babangida (IBB) administration. The paper critically examines the activities of that administration in relation to the press especially how many newspapers and magazines were completely banned from circulation. It also examines the arrest and detention of many journalists. The paper concludes that the IBB administration brutally repressed the press. Worse still, a frontline journalist and editor of Newswatch Magazine, Dele Giwa lost his life in very suspicious circumstances.

## Introduction

A new page was opened in the history of Nigeria on August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1985 when the Buhari administration was brought to an end in a military coup that was led by Major General Ibrahim Babangida (IBB) who was then the Chief of Army Staff for that administration. The new administration was not unmindful of the fact that the Nigerian populace wanted the enthronement of a new order as Brigadier General Joshua Dongayaro declared in the broadcast announcing the coup:

*The ruling body, the Supreme Military Council, has progressively been made redundant by the actions of a select few. The government had distanced itself from the people and the yearnings and aspirations of the people as constantly reflected in the media had been ignored (Arinze, 1993:12).*

The Buhari administration was known for its brutal repression and suffocation of the civil society, human right abuses and general high-handedness in the management of the affairs of the country. The general populace then saw the Babangida administration as a better alternative.

Babangida himself seemed to have understood the above feelings when he declared that his administration will not stay a day longer than is absolutely necessary (Arinze, 1993:13). Unfortunately, he did not live up to his promise. He manipulated the direction of political activities in Nigeria in such a way that it became clear to all Nigerians that he was not in any way ready to hand over power to a democratically elected government. More fundamentally, he

repressed and suffocated the Nigerian press, an institution he had earlier claimed he was ready to protect. However, his downfall came when he annulled the June 12, 1993 presidential election that was popularly acclaimed to have been won by the SDP's candidate, Chief M.K.O. Abiola. That election was also popularly adjudged as free and fair.

The annulment and subsequent events made it practically impossible for Babangida to continue to direct the affairs of the country. He had to hand over power to an Interim National Government (ING). The ING lasted only about 83 days as the Abacha administration took over from it.

This paper takes a post-mortem analysis of the Babangida administration with special emphasis on his relationship with the press.

### **The Press and its Relevance: A Nigerian and Diagnostic Perspective**

The role of the press generally in the society and specifically in championing democratic struggles and desires cannot be over-emphasized. In fact, the press in any political system is expected to initiate, protect and strengthen democracy. It is this that made some persons to refer to it as playing a guardian protective role. The press acts as the link between the government and the governed. It constitutes itself into a constructive instrument of check on the political leadership of the country. In this wise, it acts as a check to those in power who would ordinarily have degenerated into authoritarian or dictatorial leaders. This has however earned the press the appellation "fourth estate of the realm".

However, the degree to which the press can successfully perform the above function is dependent on some other variables. The most important of these variables that is germane to this paper is the degree to which press freedom exists in a society. It has been well recognized that the press cannot be expected to adequately perform the role assigned to it without a considerable degree of freedom. In other words, the press cannot be an advisory one unless it is free. There is no doubt that the press gives expression to the views, aspirations and desires of the public. One of the principal ways of ascertaining the degree of press freedom that exists in a society therefore is the extent to which it provides the people or the general public with the various views, opinions on issues and problems that exist in the society. The press must therefore make available to the citizens the widest spectrum of views, opinions and facts so that they can make more rational judgment on important issues.

The press can be seen as any form of information disseminating organ, be it print or electronic media for the purpose of informing and entertaining. Freedom on its own can be traced to the Declaration of the Right of Man (1989). According to that declaration, the freedom that man can enjoy is the "power to do everything that does not injure another" (Appadorai, 1968:68). Laski (1948) also conceives of freedom as the absence of restraint upon the existence of those social conditions which in modern civilization are the necessary guarantee of

individual happiness (Laski, 1948:18). Appadorai then helps with a definition of press freedom. According to him, press freedom is the right to say or write what one chooses provided that this is not blasphemous, obscene, seditious or defamatory of various reputation (Appadorai, 1968:4). Hardfield sees press freedom as freedom to also criticize the government but limited by published laws of treason, slander and libel (Hardfield, 1965:52). Whatever else may be said, press freedom is clearly the ability of the press to publish what they want to in as much as it is factual and not injurious to anybody or group of persons.

Constitutionally, the Nigerian federation has made sufficient provision in the constitution to protect the rights of the press. The 1979 Constitution which ushered in the Second Republic expressly stated in section 89 that the individual can hold opinions and receive/impact ideas, information without interference. Despite this provision, there have been great intellectual controversies as to the status of the press in relation to press freedom. This is because the constitution that provides and guarantees the freedom of the individual to uphold and express opinions without interference often turns out to be the same constitution that does not give the press any protection towards the execution of its constitutional obligation. This has led to agitations over the years calling for a separate constitutional provision to safeguard the interest of the press and the whole concept of press freedom. This is because, it is arguable whether the freedom granted to the individual with regards to the issue of expression is enough to guarantee the freedom of the press in the discharge of the onerous task with which it is concerned.

However, some scholars are of the opinion that there is no need to give the press a special attention in the constitution. Osibanjo and Forgan, (1986:42) argue that freedom of expression provided in the 1979 Constitution is adequate and wonder why the press should be treated specially. This perception was further supported by Justice J. Balogun in the case of Adiku Vs Federal House of Representatives (Balogun, 1992:14).

The above opinion is however not shared by Obe (Obe, 1992:15). For him, the Nigerian constitutions since independence have not given press freedom its proper and desired position. It is his view that the mere freedom of expression as enshrined in the constitution is not solid enough to take care of press freedom. He then recommends that there should be clear stipulation of press freedom in the text of the constitution and this should be preceded by a statement of the obligation of the press upon which the exercise of the freedom is predicated.

Whatever else may be said, constitutional provisions no matter how much they are constructively supportive of press freedom, may not at the end of the day truly guarantee press freedom in any society. There are other dynamic social-political variables that could even be said to be of greater relevance than the issue of press freedom that can help ensure press freedom or if negative in any society destroys its realization. These variables are government attitude, ownership influence and the attitude of some journalists.

It has been recognized that the government of any nation-state has a greater role to play in ensuring that constitutional provisions are carefully respected. In Nigeria, one can safely argue that various governments have helped to reduce press freedom. In a bid to ensure that the press does not dig deep into the bad activities of government, it is the usual practice to find various governments promulgating harsh laws that are most often than not detrimental to press freedom. This has thus created an impression in the minds of most Nigerians that government makes and unmakes press freedom in Nigeria. In fact, this belief has now grown into a “myth”. Commenting on the above myth, Ake lucidly stated that:

*this myth is harmful enough as it is, for it has caused a great deal of fuzzy thinking and misdirection of energy. Worse still, it nurtures an even more harmful myth, namely that press freedom (or any other freedom for that matter) is given and enjoyed through good graces of government (Ake, 1984:17).*

There is no doubt that over the years many clear instances can be cited in Nigerian history where the press has been deliberately troubled by various governments. The notorious Decree No. 4 of the Buhari/Idiagbon administration for example, sought to punish professional errors in journalism while exempting other known professions. Little wonder, Nsan wonders why post independence government still continue to enact laws to bridge the freedom of the press in spite of the pre-colonial draconian laws which greatly restricted press freedom (Nsan, 1984:14).

Apart from the above, various governments in Nigeria have inflicted direct acts of damages on the press. Under the Second Republic and the Buhari/Idiagbon regime, a wide spate of frictions and face-offs were recorded between government and the press. For example, journalists were harassed, sacked, brutalized, intimidated, meted with dehumanizing treatment and in most cases unlawfully detained (Balogun, 1992:14). Nwankwo (1993) reviewed the case of Tony Momoh Vs Senate. Tony Momoh, then editor of Daily Times was summoned by the state during the Second Republic to explain the source of a “Grapevine” story published by the Daily Times. The publication allegedly embarrassed members of the National Assembly. In a more pathetic case, Vera Ifudu lost her job as an NTA reporter during the Second Republic. She was sacked by Chief Olu Adebayo, Shagari’s Minister of Information for broadcasting details considered unsavory over scandal alleging the disappearance of N2.8 billion from the account of the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC). Friction and skirmishes between government and the press were more frightening and disturbing under the Buhari/Idiagbon regime. It was the era of decrees.

Under the notorious Decree No. 4 of the Buhari/Idiagbon administration, it became an offence punishable by imprisonment for any person to publish or

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report any message, rumour or statement which is false or which embarrasses the government or a public officer or bring him to ridicule or disrepute. Decree NO. 4 did not make provision for considering whether the said published information was true or false. A few months after the said decree was promulgated, two journalists with the Guardian Newspapers fell victims of its hammer. They were Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor, Political Correspondent and News Editor respectively. They were found guilty of publishing reports on diplomatic postings and they were consequently arrested and jailed for two years.

### **The Military and the Press: Reflections on Nigeria under IBB**

There is no doubt that under the Babangida's regime, the Nigerian press had a hard time. When Babangida came into power, the Nigerian press was happy considering the problems it encountered with Decree No. 4 of the Buhari's administration. In a conscious bid to gain popularity and capture the sympathy of many Nigerians, Babangida in his maiden broadcast of August 1985 assured Nigerians that he was going to adhere to the rule of law and that he would recognize the responsibility of the media to disseminate information without hindrance.

However, events that happened not too far from that declaration went to show that he was only playing the green snake under the green grass. He, perhaps more than any other leader, destroyed press freedom in Nigeria. In 1987 he proscribed the Newswatch Magazine and all copies of the April 6, 1987 edition of Newswatch were seized and the magazine was completely banned from circulation. Also, Dele Giwa, the founder of the magazine was brutally assassinated by a parcel bomb believed to have been sent by the military. As if this was not enough, the accounts of the magazine were frozen and its editor, Ray Ekpu, Dan Agbese and Yakubu Mohammed were arrested. By this time, it became clear to Nigerians that the Babangida administration was not in any way different from that of Buhari when talking about their human rights posture. However, the ban on Newswatch Magazine was lifted forty days ahead of its expiration date after the editors had apologized to the government. The calamity that befell the Newswatch Magazine by its closure was soon to fall on many other media houses. The Nigerian Observer, a Benin based newspaper company was sealed up to October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1988 and its workers forcefully ejected from their offices by the police (Balogun, 1993).

The closure of these media houses was swiftly followed by the arrest and detention of many journalists. Not only were these persons arrested, they were brutally treated by law enforcement agents. Certainly, these law enforcement agents were carrying out the instructions handed down to them by the military administration of General Babangida. On June 14, 1988, Nduka Obaigbonna, Editor-in-Chief of defunct This Week was arrested and detained for two days by the State Security Service (SSS) over a story in the magazine on the power tussle among close aids of the President at the seat of power, Dodan Barracks, Lagos.

Other journalists that were arrested and dealt with during the Babangida administration included Chris Okolie, publisher of the resuscitated *Newbreed Magazine* (Ebisemigu, 1993), Femi Aborishade, editor of a trade union inclined publication, labour militant who was detained for seven months without trial, Paxton Idowu, editor of the *Republic Newspaper* (Ebisemigu, 1993), Ikpe Etukudo and Tunde Ogunbile of a monthly magazine, *New Horizon* who were arrested and detained on July 4, 1989 in connection with the March edition's cover story titled "This Government has AIDS" in which the radical lawyer Gani Fawehimi criticized the government's economic and political direction (Ebisemigu, 1993).

Certainly, the list of journalists that had inhuman and brutal treatment from the Babangida administration in their bid to tell the truth is endless. The publisher of the *Vanguard Newspaper* Sam Amuka Pemu and its Deputy Editor Chris Okogie were arrested on April 4, 1990. In May 1991, the Guardian Newspaper's premises were shut down on the orders of the military Governor of Lagos State Raji Rasaki. The offence that the newspaper committed was just that it published the story of the shooting down and brutal killing of a student of Yaba College of Technology by the police (Ebisemigu, 1993).

From the above few examples, it is clear that the Babangida administration did not in any way create the enabling environment for the proper functioning of the mass media. Little wonder Ekpu argued that:

*Military regimes are bad for journalism because they are arbitrary in their action. They have the capacity for ousting and flouting laws and when you take them to court the court says, "I don't have jurisdiction". I don't think with a civilian government with parties, with opposition, with a vivid press – all these are not possible in a military regime (Quoted in Johnson, 1993:15).*

## **Conclusion**

This paper has so far been dealing with the military and the press with specific reference to Nigeria under IBB. The paper first and foremost examines the relevance of the press theoretically and practically in the Nigerian situation. It also chronicles the activities of the IBB's administration in relation to the press. It reveals that the administration brutally repressed the press by its actions. Some newspapers and magazines were completely banned from circulation. Some media houses were closed down and some journalists arrested and detained. By and large, the paper came to the conclusion that the activities of that administration were a clear negation of its claim that it wanted to return the country to civil rule. Little wonder the administration annulled the June 12, 1993 presidential election that would have completed the task of the transition programme.

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