

# THE PRESS: A FACTOR IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

The duty of the press is stated in chapter 2 of the Nigerian constitution of 1999. It is the watch dog of the society. As the watch dog of the society, it encourages the development of democracy in Nigeria through enlightenment on the factors that will help achieve such a goal. The development of democracy which aids national development and integration can not be achieved in a society where government is unaccountable to the people, her activities not monitored, the people unenlightened about democratic ideals and unwilling to protect democracy. The press has a role to play in this regard to avoid such hindrances to the development and sustenance of democracy in Nigeria .It must help to create consciousness in the people to nurture democracy and be prepared to protect it whenever it is threatened this role the press must perform for democracy to be developed in Nigeria.

Democracy in Nigeria has been at its embryonic stage since independence in 1960. This is due to frequent military intervention and ethnic rivalries in the body polity of the nation. The attempt to sustain the present democratic rule in Nigeria is still an uphill task because majority of Nigerians had accepted ethnocentrism, suppression of the opposition and the minority groups and corruption as a way of life. Democratic ideals therefore became unholistic, mere paper work and an instrument for self enrichment. The press in spite of these intimidating obstacles to the practice of democracy in Nigeria has a great role to play in order for democracy to survive and be sustained. The role of the press in the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria is guaranteed by the 1999 constitution.

It is from the constitution, that those who make law, those who enforce law and those who interprets law, derive their powers. The constitution is therefore a pre-requisite for the exercise of power in Nigeria, and it is on the basis of this that the duties which the system imposes on the press under chapter 2 of the 1999 constitution would be performed. The press cannot therefore fail in the duties assigned to her by the system and people of Nigeria through chapter 2 of the 1999 constitution because the consequences would be much. If it fails democracy will be destroyed, anarchy will reign and the press will die through neglect and active boycott by the people. The press as an institutionalized agency is generally considered to be at a vantage position to help institutionalize democracy and democratic ideals in Nigeria. Having pointed out the fact that the press has a role to play in the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria, the question then is what are the roles of the press in this regard? This is what the paper addresses below.

## **Monitoring of the Government.**

The press in Nigeria is to monitor governance. This duty is imposed by the system and by the people of Nigeria through the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. As stated in chapter 2 section 22 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, "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”.

In monitoring the government, the press systematically follows the actions and activities of the government which it reports to the people. In monitoring governance, the press ensures that government actions are not detrimental to national unity and integration. It ensures that government distribution of the ‘national cake’, jobs and the conduct of the affairs of government are done with fairness, justice and without ethnic colouration. It also ensures that the security and welfare of the people becomes primary purpose of the government. The press not only monitors governance in order to criticize and point out areas of weakness but also makes suggestions for better governance. According to Oseni (1993:41), “The society has become increasingly complex and problematic but that simply presents new challenges and the need for more creative approaches”. The aim of the press, monitoring governance according to Momah (1987:62-63). “is to ensure that the political objectives of Nigeria are achieved in accordance with its motto which is unity and faith, peace and progress and not to be pre-occupied with any law that would inhabit it”.

### **Accountability in Government**

A government fails if it is allowed to operate at will. It will operate outside the law and the constitution of the nation, if the press fails to call such a government to order. This is why the press is critical of government actions and inactions. Man’s paramount objective today is to survive and to make the government accountable by practicing democracy and upholding democratic ideals. The press holds the government accountable to the people. Through this means, the government takes responsibility for her actions and inactions. When a government knows that it could be held for her actions, such government becomes mindful of the actions she undertakes. When this happens, it therefore means that such a government is being responsive. However, because direct accountability to the public is impracticable, the responsibility for ensuring that accountability does take place is assigned not only to the parliament which is part of government but also to the press which is not part of the government. The press is therefore at advantage to report objectively government actions to the people. It is not surprising that in recent times, the press has greatly exposed corruption in Nigeria with particular reference to public office holders. It is the press’s efforts today in making government accountable to the people that made the late Head of State, President Yar’Adua and his successor President Goodluck Jonethan to hinge their government actions on the rule of law and it is only on the rule of law that democracy can survive.

This is what Etunmudor (2005:143) had in mind when he wrote that “democracy is deeply rooted in the rule of law”. This view is also supported by Sagay, as quoted in Etunmudor (2005:143), that

*“there can be no democracy without the rule of law”. A government that is accountable to the people, operates within the frame work of the law, is responsive and sensitive to the people. These are what democracy needs to survive in any given society.*

### **Safe Guarding Democracy.**

The process of nation building can be very slow and complex as it entails changes needed to establish the foundation of viable nationhood. The process of nation building can not be completed without democracy being firmly entrenched in the political system of the nation. Egbon (2006:155) observed that,

*The beauty of democracy is the degree of liberty people enjoy in expressing themselves freely whether speaking, writing or publishing. This factor is considered a natural right in any democratic dispensation. Thus democracy permits the availability of options as well as the freedom of the people to make their choices. There is no doubt that democracy empowers the mass media of communication and conversely they also in turn help in the sustenance of democracy.*

Democracy is more than freedom to the people or the government of the people, by the people and for the people. It involves the moral and political norm that leadership must be responsible and accountable to the people with the implication that failure to do so, would be counter productive. This stimulates the people to make other choices that may be to the detriment of such leadership. The beauty of any political system is the level of democracy and democratization of the polity. The greatest destroyer of democracy in Nigeria is the military closely followed by the politicians. The press in safe guarding democracy in Nigeria also protects her sovereignty which could be threatened by civil disorder. As Momoh (1985:17) observed,

*Disorder may be defined as the breakdown of the legal order which occurs when persons in authority engage in the covert manipulation of the constitution or the overt subversion of its provisions so as to sustain personal or sectional advantage to the disadvantage of other persons or groups within the state. Disorder therefore, arises from the lawless behaviour of private individual or public authorities.*

The presses in defending democracy popularize social and human values which are instrument of humanism and progress and whose banner is peace and peaceful co-existence in plural society as Nigeria. The press should encourage the growth and sustenance of democracy in Nigeria by exposing the forces that threatens it. It should point out the factors that are likely to hamper democracy in Nigeria. The press is equipped for this task because it has the constitutional powers to do so under chapter 2 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It will therefore be a great disappointment to Nigeria if the press fails to perform her constitutional role of helping to protect and nurture democracy in Nigeria.

### **Protection of Human Rights**

The fundamental right of Nigerians is stated in chapter 4 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The press must play a great role in the defense of the people's right. The press is at liberty to do so by the provision of section 39 of chapter 4 of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The press must point out to the public where it exists, all forms of oppression, intimidation; treat to life and property, ethnic cleansing, cheating and all negative forces that curtail the rights of the people. The press would have to lead the people to fight the abuse of Human Right. The degree with which the government keeps faith with the tenet of the provision of Human Right is a major

evaluation of the performance of government. It is a means of measuring the performance of government against its fundamental objectives and directive principles. The protection of the peoples Rights as contained in the constitution by the government is part of nation building.

### **Enlightenment / Mobilization**

The press is to inform and educate the people on the activities of government. The press in Nigeria as it is well known operates under a harsh press law and poor financial environment. In spite of these hindrances, it must continue to inform and educate the people objectively on government activities and events in the society. The press in Nigeria in view of this working condition had words of encouragement from Kubka (1987:30) when he wrote that,

*We are fully aware that the press live and work under the most diverse social, economic, professional, and day-to-day conditions. However, regardless of this, we believe that the sacred duty of every journalist worthy of the name has been, is, and must be to serve good not evil, truth, not lies; concord, not enmity; freedom, not violence; peace, not war.*

The press must enlighten the people on the affairs of government because their report largely reflects the actual state of affairs, particularly as it relates to governance. The press explains and disseminates information about events taking place both at the local and the national scenes. This helps to create socio-political consciousness amongst the people. The scientific and technological revolution has turned the media into an effective universal instrument sharing the thinking and consequently, the behavior of the people. The press is therefore well equipped to encourage national integration, formation and spread of new socio-political thinking, which is necessary for preserving democracy. The new socio-political thinking will bring changes in our polity and hasten the process of nation building. The press is therefore the source of that change. According to Nwanunobi (1992:201), "The impetus for change derives from source both internal and external to given societies. At each period, one of these sources may assume greater importance than the other as a change-motivator".

The Nigerian press remains the major source of public enlightenment on the affairs of the state. It also remains a motivator and mobilizes for national development. It has continued to mobilize the public against the forces of anti-democracy. It did it against the military over the years. It led the people to defend June 12 mandate of Abiola. It led the people against constitutional breaches of Obasanjo between 1999 and 2007 as well as against all anti-democracy forces and actions in the fourth republic. The people in the recent times have seen the tremendous mobilizing power of the press as it continues to shape public opinion. The press therefore enlightens and mobilizes the public for the sustenance of democracy as it is only democracy that brings about rapid transformation of the society and hastens the process of nation building and integration.

### **Conclusion**

The press as its role is stated in chapter 2 and chapter 4 section 39 of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, is the watch dog of the society. The press monitors the government for effective governance, encourages the growth of democracy and democratization of the political system, protects the peoples' rights as contained in chapter 4 of the nation's constitution as well as educates and enlighten the people on the affairs of government and events in the society. As it

educates the people, it helps to inculcate in them moral and ethical discipline that make them responsible citizens. It also teaches the people civic education which equips them to become responsible leaders that will govern according to the rule of law which will in turn, protect and sustain democracy in Nigeria.

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