

POLITICIZATION OF THE BROADCAST MEDIA: AN EXAMINATION OF 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

There cannot be democracy without elections, nor can there be elections without the presence of vibrant media. They are constitutionally responsible to educate the populace with up to date information that is qualitative in nature to transform them into meaningful mindsets for better participation. However, the way and manner the media conducts its affairs during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria necessitates the need for this paper. The paper examines the nature and character of the broadcast media on the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. Authoritarian theory of communication is employed to set the pace. The paper utilizes secondary source as a method of data collection. It concludes that broadcast media have been politicized to a large extent during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, reporting unethical issues and attacking the personality of the opposition candidates which is against the journalistic best practices across the globe. The paper recommends that the media should be professional in the discharge of its social responsibility in educating the people with truthful information without fair or favor. This will no doubt equip them with qualitative information to make informed choices during the electioneering activity, thereby, improving the quality of the elections in particular and democracy in general.

Key words: Democracy, election, political party, politicization, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy cannot thrive anywhere in the world without the presence of vibrant media. Media serves as the engine that propels any democratic dispensation by disseminating vital, truthful and objective information for the populace to make informed choices in the democratic settings. The presence of vibrant media outlets is critical to the sustenance of any democratic polity. It is lamented that “A responsible nationwide democratic system requires a media system which is coterminous with it and which can generate discussion of issues of public concern in a way which does not favor partisan interest; whether these can be the interests of a particular political party, the interests of media bosses or media professionals” (Boyd-Barret, 2001). In discharging its role faithfully in any democratic setting, the media is expected to be up and doing in reporting relevant political issues. The media in any democratic system mostly focus its activities on the government of the day through gathering relevant information, analyzing such information objectively and disseminating same for

public consumption which empowers the citizens with the relevant informative power to informally supervise the government (Aalberg & Curran, 2012).

The role of the media in any democratic dispensation is of crucial importance, it serves as the watchdog of the public interests by checkmating the activities of the government and relating same to the people. A Nigerian journalist describe the media “as a body charge with the role of holding governments accountable and guarding against the abuse of power, hence the need to raise countervailing structures of surveillances to monitor government activities and stem an inherent disposition towards excess” (Oseni, 1999). This in line with Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria which mandated the media “to monitor governance and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people” (1999 Constitution). The presence of media in any democratic politics is necessary not only in the cause of championing electoral process in particular but also in democratization process in general, by mandating elected representatives to stand on their toes and act within the purview of the law.

One of the central pillars of any democratic system like that of Nigeria is ‘election’. Election is said to be a system and a process of selecting or electing those that will represent the people at the helm of the affairs of the state/country. For democracy to stand the test of time, elections must be conducted and organized in a free and fair manner with the presence of vibrant media that will inform, educate and hold government accountable. The relevance of the media in any competitive election is central to survival of the democratic regime. This is because, the media educate the people about the true character of those vying for elective positions in the society, as well as examines and report back to people the policies and programmes of the competing political parties (Pate & Bashir, 2012) to enable them make the right choices in the election process. Through the constitutional role of the media during elections, the people become in charge of their destiny indirectly, by voting those that will represent them, thereby, making their voices heard and as such in charge of the source of legitimate power in any democratic setting. The political parties and the power seekers of the various governmental positions do recognize the influential role of the media in an election. The media shape and influence the direction of the voting process by frequently setting the agenda for the audience in their daily and weekly programmes. As McCombs and Shaw discovered in their empirical study of 1968 US presidential elections, they provided that, there was a significant relationship between emphases placed on issue based campaign by the media and the outcome of the election results (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Invariably, the media set the agenda for any campaign by communicating to people the important of a particular political issue to the detriment of other issues resulting to shaping their thought to vote in the direction of the media. All these attest to the important role of the media in electioneering campaign. It is in view of the central role of the media in electoral democracy that this paper intends to examines the media role in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, with a view to understand how the broadcast media outfits in preparation for the election conducted its affairs.

CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE

Democracy

The concept of democracy has no precise meaning, it means different thing to different people. **Fitile and Adejuwon (2010)** laments that, democracy has been conceived differently by different people, depending on people's political orientation. Democracy denote a system of self rule, where the majority of the people decides their own destiny either directly or through electing representatives that will represent them in steering the affairs of the society. It entails peaceful coexistence between and among different entities that made up of a society. Added to this, it involves pluralism and a search for a workable, balanced and equitable means of resolving societal conflicts (Hegre, 2014). However, any organization or a state can be termed democratic, if it voluntarily distributes or shares the fundamental human right of decision making between and among its members. Participation is at the very heart of any democratic system. The people must be provided with all the avenues necessary to participate freely in all the activities affecting them. They should be made to understand that their participation is central to the survival of the democratic system and such participation must be free without compulsion or any form of inducement/intimidation. The simplest and the commonest form of participation in the democratic set up could be achieved through voting during electoral process. As Negudu (2015) argues, citizens are always encouraged to come out in mass and participate in voting their representatives during election period. This bring to the fore the central role of election in any democratic settings.

Election

In line with this paper, election is conceived as the process of selecting or electing those people that will represent the majority at the helm of affairs in the society. It equally refers to a process through which peaceful change of government occurs between the competing parties as the opposition party or candidate winning the election by majority vote and constituting the government in a free and fair manner. In line with this, (Gusfield (1999) argues that "the prime purpose of elections will remain the legitimation of whatever regime that currently holds governmental power...(and) are far from being autonomous operations: they reflect the character of the political order and especially the degree of risk incumbents are willing to tolerate". Therefore, for election to truly answer it name as a process of change of government, it depends to a large extent on the quality and composition of some institutions such as the media and the electoral commission. Sundhaussen (1998) added that, the most important political institution is the electoral commission and the media which are constitutionally charged with the responsibility of communicating election related information and preparing, organizing and conducting elections. It was further maintain that, the commission must be independent of the ruling government to fully discharge its role without interference on one hand and the media on the other hand must communicate truthful and objective information relating to the conduct of the elections. Therefore, modern democratic government cannot be sustained without the conduct of credible elections that will serve the interest of the majority. In addition, election cannot be complete without the active participation of the media serving as a channel of informing, educating and

entertaining the public about the electoral process on one hand and democratic process on the other hand.

Media

The term media is conceived within the purview of this work as channel of communication of information between and among diverse groups in the society. These information sharing is carried out by gatekeepers in the media industry such as the pressmen, reporters, publishers, producers, journalists, newscasters among others. The media is saddled with the responsibility of educating, informing and entertaining the public. However, such information should be held and communicated to the public with utmost responsibility. The information is expected to be truthful, objective and balanced capable of transforming the uninformed citizens to an informed citizen leading to a more informed decision in the society, capable of bringing the needed development in the country.

The Political Environment of the media in Nigeria: an Overview

No society can exist and function effectively without relating, communicating and disseminating information between and among the populace. Information is power as such qualitative information is needed in any polity for the development of such system. Nigeria as a country is not an exception. The media market place in the country serve as the major avenue through which information is communicated and received between the people on one hand and the government on the other hand. Pate (2012) is of the opinion that different channels of communication exist in the country such as print, electronic and the newly social media with the main aim of creating awareness about what transpires in the country of more than 160million people. The diversities of the country cut across different entities, with different language, culture, tradition, religion, political orientation, social groups among others. However, before the advent of the conventional media in Nigeria, the traditional system of communication was utilized in various entities that made up the Nigerian state. Town criers were employed to communicate information via different instruments such as fire, drum, bell, woodblock, ritual rattle among others. Other areas of sourcing for information in those days included family meetings, women association, trade unions among others (Wilson, 1987). The traditional rulers were the custodians of these instruments. However, ownership of these traditional instruments of communication was vested on the society, the community leaders were serving as the gate keepers. This point is central in the subsequent discussion of this paper, as the position and utilization of the mass media has changed to serve the interests of one class against the other.

The birth of the conventional media outlets in the country started in 1859, with the establishment of a newspaper (Iwe Iroyin) by a Christian fellow called Rev. Henry Townend. The motive was to educate the people on cultural, religious and political aspect of life that bothers the Nigerian people at that time. Not only that, it was equally meant to encourage the people to cultivate the habit of reading in sourcing for relevant information in the society. In 1880 a group of concern Nigerians established another newspaper Lagos Times which confronted the colonial masters on their policies and programs. In 1930's, the British colonial government established the first Radio Distribution Service (RDS) to transmit colonial programs emanating from Britain (Sulaiman in James & Abubakar, 2017). In 1951, The RDS

was transformed to National Broadcasting Service (NBS) and in 1957 there was a lot of criticisms against the NBS, as serving as the mouthpiece of the colonial government. It was later changed to a full pledge corporation called Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC). However, the NBC was fully controlled by the central government; the Colonial government of Sir Mcpherson accused the leader of the Western regional government (Chief Obafemi Awolowo) through the NBC and when Awolowo wanted to respond via same medium he was denied access to the media outfit, leading to the establishment of the Western Nigerian Television Service (WNTS) in 1959 as the first of its kind not only in the country but in the whole of West Africa (Santas & Ogoshi, 2016). Thereafter, the Eastern and the Northern regions established their media outlets independent of the federal government. However, this trend of media establishments continues year in year out.

In another development, the Military government of Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (Rtd) under decree No. 38 of 1992 created and mandated the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) to issue license to qualify applicants to enable them own a private media outlet in the country. In view of this, the Ray Power was the first private radio station in the country to be given the license to operate, since then, many more came to the fore. At present, the European Union Election Observer Mission (EU EOM) in its reports of the 2015 general election in Nigeria provided the number of the media outlets in the country as follows: “there are 200 radio stations, 150 TV stations and close to 400 private print media” (EU EOM, 2015). Thus, with the pluralistic nature of the media outlets in the country which were publicly and privately owned, political gladiators in the country resort to establishment of media outlets to propagate their political agenda. The establishment of the private media was more political than commercial.

In the long run, the Nigerian media was believed to have performed credibly since the colonial period when it championed the course of Nigeria’s independence to the point of criticizing the dictatorial regimes of the Military. In addition, the media outlets equally ensure the return of the country to democratic dispensation and finally have played extensively on democratic consolidation of the system. It must be noted that, the history of the activities of the media in the country has been dictated, dominated, controlled and manipulated mostly by the government and few of their cronies to serve their selfish political interests.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is anchored on the Authoritarian theory of the press. The theory is one of the four normative theories of the press. It was recognized by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956). It was one of the oldest theories of the press. It began in the 16th century, when the philosophy of absolutism was the system of the day. A classical example was what obtained in the 16th century England, where sovereign authority resides with the Monarch. It was argued that the “those who control the government have the monopoly of the truth and of information (McQuail, 1987). It was added that recognition of the truth was in the absolute control of the very few people who constitute the governing elite, who were able to control the society with absolute power in a top-down approach (Kunczick, 1988). This signifies that, media ownership, whether public or private has to play in line with the dictate of the government in power. The media under this theory is absolutely controlled by the power

holders. They postulated that, the media must be employed at all cost to champion the course of those in Authority, as the governing elites are acting for the best interests of the people. Therefore, anything possible must be employed to enhance the sovereign power of the government (men, resources and media). The Authority concern under this theory have the unquestionable power to issue licenses or not to any media outlets in the political domain that would enable it to operate and discharge it expected social responsibility of disseminating vital and truthful information to the people. Information under this theory is restricted and regulated. As such there is no absolute freedom of the press as the people and the press is not always free to criticize government policies or hold government accountable. The media can only exist to propagate and boost the image of the government; anything short of this would not be tolerated by the Authority concern.

The governing elites under this theory perform the functions of gate keepers, they set the agenda for the citizens, and all that is required from the people is to receive the information without question or critics. The government dominate the media environment, they decide on what to communicate, how to communicate it and when to communicate such information, all in the name of boosting the image of the government. They base their argument on the supremacy of the state/government above any person or group of persons. They further argues that man can only prosper and achieve all that it takes to develop in a well organized environment which is the state and as such censorship of the press is always resorted to under this theory to protect and ensure full development of the state. In preparation for the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, the broadcast media has been dominated and controlled by the ruling government (PDP) to the detriment of the opposition parties. This can be attested by looking at the way and manner the media outfits conducted their affairs which was against the journalistic best practices across the globe. It was reported by Adepoju (2015) that during the political campaigns of the 2015 general elections, the broadcast media in the country such as NTA, FRCN, AIT among others were openly unethical in the discharge of their professional duty of covering and reporting objective information relating to the conduct of the election. They were completely one sided, supporting and propagating anything that propels that image of the ruling party (PDP). They were used as theaters for character assassination, blatant laying and attacking the personalities of the opposition candidates particularly the Presidential aspirant (General Muhammadu Buhari Rtd) throughout their campaign releases and documentaries, which was against the provision of the electoral Acts, code of election coverage, National Broadcasting Commission and other rules of the game. Therefore, considering how political they became in the discharge of their duty, they have attested and align with the major concern of the Authoritarian theory, as the government under the theory dominates and controls the activities of the media for their selfish interests as what obtain under the Nigerian 2015 general elections. The broadcast media were politicized to a very large extent by paying more attention in their political coverage to the ruling party (PDP).

Politicization of the Media: an Examination of 2015 General elections in Nigeria

Nigeria as a country witnessed several elections from the colonial period to the present democratic dispensation. As captured by Akinwalere (2015) that the citizens of the country

have been voting at different point in time since 1922 when the first opportunity was granted to the nationalist at that time to participate in the colonial government under Sir. Clifford as the Governor General, the participation to vote was limited to only those with an annual income of £100 and the representation was also limited to Lagos and Calabar. It was a positive development for the nationalist who were clamoring for inclusive governance and opportunity was given to them in the year 1922. Thereafter, several elections took place both under the colonial authorities (1954 & 1959), Military regimes (1979, 1993 and 1999) and under the civilian administrations (1964, 1983, 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015). In all these elections in the history of the country, the 2015 general elections happens to be the most contested elections ever in the political history of the country. This was attested by looking closely at the volume of interests generated prior to the conduct of the elections, which was from both within and outside the country. The elections witnessed heavy presence of media activities and observer groups in order to ensure openness and accountability of the process. On this note, the European Union Election Observer Mission (2015) captured that, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and Nigerian Press Council (NPC) provided that there was heavy presence of both print and electronic media during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. It further maintains that, there were 200 radio stations, 150 TV channels and close to 400 private print media outlets that covered the election. In view of the competitive nature of the 2015 general elections, the two contending Presidential aspirants of the major political parties (PDP & APC) were advised to sign a peace pact prior to the election to ensure compliance with the rules of election coverage, by using decent language during the campaigns among others. They were reminded on the provision of the Electoral Act 2010 as amended, NBC Code, and Code of election coverage among other rules of the game to ensure peaceful compliance during the campaign exercise. For instance, Section 22 of the Nigerian Constitution provides as follows 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”. This signifies the role of the media by the constitution in providing information to the people. However, such information is expected to be sieved with some utmost responsibility in ensuring that it will enhance peaceful coexistence between and among the Nigerian people. On the contrary, the media on the eve of 2015 general elections made themselves available at the hands of desperate politicians who resort to all means necessary at their disposal to capture political power. They became highly political reporting unethical issues capable of generating conflict in the political environment.

It is equally expected of the media to be fair to all contending parties and candidates by giving them equal access to the media houses to campaign and attract supporters. This is in line with a statutory body (NBC), which is responsible to register, monitor, supervise and regulate the activities of the media outlets in the country. Article 3.3.3 of the NBC Code provides that “all sides to any issue of public interest shall be equitably presented to ensure fairness”. However, despite the provision of this Section, politicians and aspirants via media outlets resorted to all forms of unprofessional attitude of giving unfair and unequal access to the contending parties during campaigns. The ruling party (PDP) was always giving special attention to the detriment of the opposition parties, which was against the provision of the

law. This is on account of the fact that, the government owns and control the regulatory body of the media outfits (NBC), the President has the final say when it comes to approval or renewal of licenses of the media outlets. Therefore, the NBC is not fully independent of the government to discharge its responsibility of sanctioning and in some cases cancelling the license of those media outlets that goes contrary to the provision of the stipulated rules of election coverage. Another point of worry during the 2015 general elections campaigns was the used of indecent language, employment of abusive words, highly provocative comments and personal attacks of the opposition candidates openly via the media outlets, which is equally against the NBC Code (2006), section 5.2 and Section 7.6 deals with matters affecting political broadcasting in general and political advertisements in radio and television respectively. The former provides among other things that “political broadcast shall be in decent language; stations shall provide equal opportunity and airtime to all political parties or views with regard to amount of time and belt during electioneering period” in (Omoera, 2010). However, of all the provisions of the law, the Nigerian media went ahead to cover and report campaign related issue contrary to the stated rules of the game. In supporting the above, few examples will be highlighted as part of the unethical reportage and used of foul language by politicians in preparation for the 2015 general elections through the Nigerian media industry.

In a political campaign rally in Calabar, the Wife of the President (Patience Jonathan) was quoted to have instructed the supporters of the ruling party (PDP) to stone anybody who chanted the political slogan of the opposition party (APC) which was Change. In a similar situation, the highest traditional ruler of Lagos State (Oba of Lagos) on the 5th April, 2014 threatened the Igbo’s residing within his domain, that if they vote for PDP in the next coming election they will die in lagoon. Added to this, was the use of religious and ethnic sentiments during campaign rallies by the major contending political parties (PDP & APC), accusing one another on trying to divide the country along religious line (European Union Election Observer Mission, 2015). These and many more are capable of igniting violence that will destruct not only the conduct of peaceful election but also capable of destroying the corporate existence of the country. Inciting comments are detrimental to peaceful coexistence of any democratic polity across the globe.

In view of the activities of the broadcast media in Nigerian 2015 election campaigns Olaoluwa (2016) added that:

“...the media allowed themselves to be compromised by desperate politicians and political parties rather than making them answerable to the electorate. The political gladiators went beyond stipulated and acceptable norms and practices, casting aspersion on political opponents beyond the realm of decency with the active support of the mass media, especially the broadcast media. The media became highly partisan in their broadcast, which is against the code of professional practice” (p.19).

In a related development, the media in the 2015 electoral campaign did not perform to the expectation of the majority of the Nigerian people, as the political campaigns were hijacked and misused by political parties and political contestants through misinforming the public on several subject matter of national interests. The media outfits in most cases were not

objective in the discharge of their professional duty; they tend to be politicized, supporting the course of a political party or candidate, which is against the journalistic best practices across the globe. It was added that “most broadcast media organizations aligned with one politician, political party or region against another. They acted as the mouthpiece of some of the political parties they aligned with” (Olaoluwa, 2016). However, with this development, the central issue of objectivity and fairness in covering and reporting campaign related issues has been compromised. This unwholesome attitude of the media has been attached to the relationship of the media owners with the political parties on one hand and the political system on the other hand. This is possible especially when a media outlet is publically owned, in this case, it will definitely be one sided supporting the ruling party alone as what obtained in the 2015 electoral campaign in Nigeria. The PDP was the ruling party before the 2015 election and as such FRCN, NTA who happened to be public media outfits were completely supporting the ruling party (PDP), given unequal access against the major opposition party (APC). On the other hand, other private stations such as AIT, Alheri Radio in Kaduna State among others were supporting PDP and APC respectively, as the owners were closely related to the machinery of the parties.

Abdallah (2015) supported the above when he submitted that European Union (EU) in its report of the 2015 general election in Nigeria argues that the media stations in the country were mostly biased and unfair in reporting election related matters in preparation for the 2015 general elections in the country. The report further added, the major public and private media outlets in the country that included the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), African Independent Television (AIT) and Ray Power’s election coverage were tilted more in supporting the incumbent government of People Democratic Party (PDP) and President Jonathan. Considering the overall time frame allotted to the two contending Presidential candidates General Muhammadu Buhari (Rtd) of the opposition party (APC) and the incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan of the ruling party (PDP) of 77% to APC and 85% to the ruling PDP by FRCN and NTA respectively. This is a clear indication of the breach of one of the manuscript that provides guidance on the conduct of election and activities of the media in covering and reporting election matter. The Electoral Act 2010 as amended under Section 100 paragraph 2, 3, and 4 provides that: State apparatus including the media shall not be employed to the advantage or disadvantage of any political party or candidate at any election; media time should be allocated equally among the political parties or candidates at similar hours of the day and at any public electronic media, equal time shall be allotted to all political parties. However, despites all the above provisions that tend to guide the activities of the media in any electoral democracy in the country, the media and the desperate politicians went ahead to violate these guide lines for their selfish interests. The leadership of the country tended to be authoritarian in nature by controlling the activities of the media outfits to its advantage, which is against the rules of election coverage in the country.

CONCLUSION

The media anywhere in the world, Nigeria inclusive, have been playing active role in the political development of the country. They contributed positively in educating and informing

the Nigerian people on different matters affecting the society. The media have historically been influenced by the political environment within which it found itself. It was politically oriented from the colonial period to military regimes to the present democratic dispensation along power holders, mainly serving their political interest to the detriment of those of the majority who constitutes the bulk of the Nigerian population. It has been politicized to a very large extent reporting unethical issues during political campaigns of the 2015 elections, capable of instigating conflict in the country. It is therefore, suggested that, the media should be professional in the discharge of its constitutional duty by disseminating truthful, factual and objective information without fair or favor. By doing this, it might contribute to the conduct of free, fair and credible elections in the country and also can contribute to the peaceful coexistence in the country, thereby resulting to a stable political system.

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