DEMOCRACY AND NIGERIAN JOURNALISM OF THE 90s

Elo Ibagere

Abstract

That democracy has become the fashionable political system in the world is indubitable. The enthronement of democracy in Nigeria has been a perennial struggle which some people and some professions have been fully involving. One of the most significant professions involved in this struggle is journalism. Members of this profession have been lost to the struggle. It is the bitter struggle for democracy, including the adverse consequences of the struggle that this paper focuses upon. It is concluded that journalism having won the struggle, has come of age and can, therefore lead the nation into the new millennium. The paper, however, admonished journalists not to feel complacent for the evolution of the current nascent democracy, as the system can only be consolidated with the sincerity of purpose of the government of the day as well as the desire of a succeeding one to build on the little gains we have made.

Introduction

Nigerian journalism, like that of other African countries, has a history characterized by an unending struggle for freedom. The fight for freedom has been without prejudice to the fact that successive regimes have consistently proclaimed the press as one of the freest in the world.

Right from its humble beginning with the establishment of ***Iwe Irohin*** in 1859, journalism in Nigeria has had to battle with press laws which have sought to mulct the power of the press, muzzle journalist into subservience and reduce the practice of journalism into mere purveyance of government policies and announcements. The dogged fight for press freedom has claimed many casualties, as journalists have remained steadfast in the hope that there are better days ahead during which journalism would regain its pride of place as a true fourth estate of the realm. Thus we have seen journalists becoming even more recalcitrant despite the massive repression that characterizes every military regime. Many of them have been subjected to dehumanising humiliation. A few have died. Yet successive regimes continue to claim that journalism in Nigeria is one of the most edified in the world. It becomes more disturbing of one considers the fact that though the military had been in power for more than twenty-eight years of the country's forty years of independence there has always been the clamour for democracy. This a makes mockery of the slogan that military regimes are corrective. Each military regime forces its way to power purportedly to correct the misadministration of the one before it and stop the country from disintegrating into several inconsequential fragments. One, therefore, would have expected that the purported efforts of the military to midwife a sound democracy would include freedom of speech, which is an essential ingredient of democracy. But the military rules by decrees, which are arbitrarily enacted, mostly to perpetrate its authoritarian and despotic characteristics. The fight therefore by Nigerian journalism had constantly been for freedom of speech. At no time has this fight been as intense as in the 1990s.

This essay examines the fight by Nigerian journalism for freedom in this last decade of the twentieth century. This fight has become quite significant in view of the socio-political changes pervading the entire globe in which journalism enjoys a new lease of life. It is also important to examine this fight against the perspective of the effort by the entire Nigerian society to install a lasting democracy, which should usher the country into a new millennium of peace and progress. The essay assumes that the country has never operated a true democracy at anytime.

Thus it has been a perennial struggle for the enthronement of a true democratic system. The consequences of this fight for freedom on journalism and journalists, therefore, constitute the crux of this paper. This is expatiated upon with solutions proffered for a smooth practices of journalism in this new century.

Antecedents

The fight for freedom of speech, as has been noted, became most intense during the last decade for the twentieth century. Several events led to it. Prior to this intense concern for freedom, there had been cases oT harassment and even incarceration of journalists who have had to suffer untold humiliation to atone for the diligent performance of their duty as ifdiligence was a grievous sin.

Although journalism was practiced with relative peace in the 1960's and 1970's a few cases of harassment were recorded. The most celebrated case was that of Minere Amakiri, the ***Nigerian*** Observer corespondent in Port Harcourt Rivers State. He had written Governor, Alfred Diette-Spiff that they would go on strike if their demands were not met. The Governor's Aide de camp (ADC) obviously acting on instructions, got Amakiri arrested, flogged and locked up in a disused toilet after shaving his head. This celebrated case were eventually put to rest after a High Court of Justice awarded Mr. Amakiri the sum of N 10,000.00 for his unlawful treatment. Amakiri also toured the country and was received in each state by his colleagues who expressed their solidarity for him.

Freedom of speech became a little sacrosanct thereafter. But Mr. Tony Momoh, then editor of the ***Daily*** Times was harassed by the legislature of the Second Republic, as noted by Bello-Imam (1985 :543) A resolution was passed in 1980 summoning him to appear before the Senate for daring to write about the moral laxity of some senators. The two incidents were mere precursors of a worse era for journalism. When the military came to power again on December 31,1983, the press fell under its severe hammer, as the new regime of General Mohammed Buhari and Tunde Idiagbon became ruthless with anybody expressing any opinion contrary to the regime's thinking. The regime promulgated the Public Officers (Protection Against False Accusation) Decree, also known as Decree 4 of 1984.

Although general Buhari claimed the decree was to check the excesses of the press, the major covert reason for the promulgation of the decree "was to gag the press and muzzle public opinion form questioning the source for the military's power to rule, its policies and actions" (Ogbondah, 1992:11). The Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) protested the enactment of this decree and having failed to convince the government to abrogate it took its case before the court, seeking a perpetual injunction restraining the government from enforcing it. It lost the case as the military government had also usurped the power of the judiciary. Before long, the decree claimed its first victims - Messrs Nduka Irabor and Tunde Thompson, both of ***The Guardian*** who were jailed one year each in July, 1984 for publishing what the government felt was inaccurate.

Another decree of the period was the Detention of Person's Decree (Decree 2 of 1984), which conferred on the government the power to detain anybody without trial for six months and is renewable for another term. This was an indirect gag as any journalist could be picked up and detained under the decree.

The overthrow of the Buhari regime in August 1985 was thought to usher in a more benevolent era, as General Babagangida abrogated Decree 4 immediately. But the oppression continued (more so when decree 2 was retained). One of the most tragic events of Nigerian journalism happened during the period. Dele Giwa, who was about the most prolific journalist, was assassinated with a letter bomb on October 19,1986. Then in April 1987, ***Newswatch,*** which Dele Giwa had co-founded, was closed down for six months for publishing the report of the Political Bureau before the government issued a white paper on it. This closure was backed with a Decree 6 of 1987. But then, ***Newswatch*** was merely involved in what could be regarded as "democratic journalism". Before 1990 then, the battle for press freedom and freedom of speech had been well entrenched into the political system, as the General Babangida regime had, through subtle dictatorship repressed journalism which had concerned itself with the entrenchment of democratic ideals, especially since Babangida was in the frenzied moments of his deceptive transition programme. It was quite incompatible with the ideals of the sociopolitical atmosphere then for there to be press gags and absence of freedom of speech when the return to democracy was the most topical issue of the period.

General Babangida had started his fruitless transition programme in 1887 with local government elections. The process was to culminate in presidential elections in 1990 the year he was to hand over power to an elected government. But with self-perpetuation as the subterranean motive, he reneged on

that date and shifted it to 1992 which was shifted again to January 1993 and finally to Augu£'JHl|jip$ transition eventually ended in a fiasco as he annulled the elections of June 12, 1993 to finally transition programme on which he had expended over forty billion Naira. The political transgressloKttf Babangida were definitely enough to bring the fearless Nigeria press into collision with the fedMd Government. The scenario was therefore set for the bloodiest fight for democracy by Nigerian joumalisil in the nation's mass media history.

June 12 and its Aftermath

The climax of journalism's fight for democracy was realized with the June 12 1993 presidential elections between Bashir Othman Tofa of the National Republican Convention and Chief M.K.O. Abiola of the Social Democratic Party. Unofficial results showed that Chief Abiola won the election, which was globally acclaimed to be the freest and fairest election ever conducted in the country. But democracy further slid down the abyss at the point where it was nearest, as the Babangida government, which had midwifed the democratic process up to the last stage aborted it by annulling the elections for some inexplicable reasons, on 23rd June 1993 thereafter, it became a vicious fight for democracy, until Babangida was forced to abandon power on August 27, 1993, leaving a nondescript arrangement called Interim National Government under Ernest Shonekan to administer the country. This emasculated contraption lasted only 84 days. Lacking all credibility, it was easy for General Sanni Abacha the most wicked dictator Nigeria ever had, to step into power on November 17, 1993 Already, the press had eroded all that was left of whatever credibility the Interim National Government possessed by its campaigning for the

illegal.

validation of the election results. The press therefore bestowed on it the tag of illegitimacy. This was further accentuated by the declaration by a court of law that the Interim National Government was

significance as June 12, became a symbol of freedom from the tyranny of the military. It became a struggle for the validation of the election results and for Abacha to vacate the seat of power. This fight

After the intrusion of General Abacha to power, the battle for democracy assumed a higher

took a fiercer turn with the arrest and detention of the winner, Chief Abiola in June 1994. He remained in detention until General Abdusalam Abubakar took over government after Abacha died suddenly on June 8, 1998. General Abubakar's vacillation finally ended the June 12 debacle as Chief Abiola who symbolized that struggle died on July 7, 1998 before he could be released from jail.

The struggle for democracy as symbolized especially by June 12 claimed many victims. Those who lost their lives for the struggle include Chief Alfred Rewane and Alhaja Kudirat Abiola who were directly involved in the struggle. Yet the intrepid Nigerian press was unrelenting in its fight for democracy. This also led to many harrowing experiences (better imagined) in the hands of agents of Abacha's government. But for the fearless disposition of Nigerian journalism, the profession would have been sentenced into silence and left with nothing worthy of its calling. The Abacha junta dealt with the antagonistic press in a number ways just to cow pressmen into mere marionettes that would act as the junta's megaphone merely purveying the information volunteered to them by agents of the junta. These include harassment, arrests (which were de-facto abductions), detention, assassination as well as seizure of copies of newspapers and magazines and closure of unfriendly media organizations.

Under harassment, an editor could be picked up and questioned variously on his source of the information, which forms the content of a particular story. This may be accompanied by open surveillance by security operatives of the premises of perceived unfriendly media organization. Surveillance may be followed by regular raids, which usually resulted in the disruption or disorganization of the operations of such an organization for the period. This was the case with ***Tell and The News*** which remained under virtual siege from September 1997 till Abacha died in 1998, with "Security agents carrying out random raids o their premises in search of their editors or other journalists working there" (Ebisemiju (1), 1998:36) Journalists who have suffered arrests and detentions continued to increase in number after the democratic struggle had resulted in Abiola's incarceration in 1994. Those who were regular guests of Abacha's agents (that is the Directorate of Military Intelligence, State Security Services and the Police), include Nosa Igiebor, Onome Osifo-Whiskey, Dare Babarinsa and Osa Director, all of ***Tell;*** Kunle

Ajibade and Dapo Olorunyemi of ***The News;*** Babafemi Ojudu of ***P. M. News*** as well as Gbenga Alaketu and Henry Ugbolue of ***Tempo,*** and very many others. These people among other were regular guests of the security agents of the Abacha junta. In certain cases, other members of their families have had to suffer for the supposed sins of their journalist siblings. Arit Igiebor, for instance, was arrested in 1997 when her husband, Nosa Igiebor could not be found. The same was the case with Dapo Olorunyemi whose wife was equally arrested the same year.

None of these arrests and detentions, however is as traumatic and horrendous as that suffered by Moshood Fayemiwo, published and editor of ***Razor.*** Kidnapped from the Republic of Benin through the help of the Nigerian Embassy in Cotonou as well as the betrayal of the Beninois authorities. Fayemiwo, on his release in late 1998 became completely depersonalized. His harrowing experience completely turned him to a different person, as he became a pastor, thereby abandoning journalism. But for revelations of Edun Olu Adegboruwa, a lawyer, who was also a victim of the evil machinations of Abacha and his cronies, perhaps he might have been forgotten and left to pine away to an agonizing and miserable death in the dungeon of Colonel Frank Omenka at the Directorate of Military Intelligence According to Olu Adegboruwa, who was also Omenka's guest:

> **Fayemiwo is being kept in an underground tunnel and chained permanently to an iron bar in a sitting position. He has not seen daylight since February 1997 when he was arrested. He does not know whether today is Sunday or Monday. I learnt that he is a replica of Nebuchadnezzar. Each time he needs attention, he hits his chain against the bar. We called him the tunnel man'.** ***(Tell. August 3, 1998:8)***

Although politically motivated elimination of journalists is not common in Nigeria, a pertinent case remains unsolved. Bagauda Kaltho, Northern correspondent of ***The News*** was reported to have been arrested in late 1996. He has remained incommunicado since then. In January 1999, the police concluded that the man blown to shreds by a bomb in Dubar Hotel in early 1997 was Bagauda Kaltho who had wanted to plant the bomb and blow up the hotel. How a man who was supposed to be in police custody became the bomber blown up by his own bomb has become the weird question that has defied all answers. But as days lengthen into months and months into years every hope that Bagauda Kaltho will ever be seen alive (or even dead), continues to pale into the gruesome fact that he is gone for good.

However, one of the most harrowing experience of Nigerian journalism is its fight for the installation of democracy in the country is the seizure of whole editions and sealing off of premises of media organization by agents of the government. This practice started during the Babangida regime. It however became a norm when it assumed the status of punishment for mild offences against the government during the Abacha regime. While the Babangida regime was in its death throes, it still bared its fangs by closing down all the publications from the ***Guardian, Punch, Concord, The Observer, and Sketch,*** along with the Ogun State Broadcasting Corporation in July, 1993, over their defiant condemnation of the annulment of the June 12 elections. ***Tell, The News, and Tempo*** are the magazines which have suffered this obnoxious practice more than any other publication. For example, ***Tell*** started the year 1994 with the seizure of 50,000 copies of its January 10 edition. That edition had been titled "The Return of Tyranny", and had examined Abacha's decrees and warned the nation about the government's deceit. Mid December 1995 saw the seizure of about 55,000 copies of the same ***Tell*** when security agents raided Academy Press where the magazine is printed. Later, Another 50,000 copies were again carted away in January 1996. ***The Guardian*** also had its premises sealed up in May 1994.

In addition to these serious abuses of fundamental rights, some journalists lost their jobs for fighting to install a lasting democracy. The editor of Ilorin-based ***Sunday Herald,*** owned by the Kwara State Government was sacked in October 1994 for publishing an editorial comment supporting the call on the constitutional conference to adopt rotational presidency as a clause in the constitution. Similarly, the studio manager and a presenter of the Kwara State owned Radio Kwara lost their jobs for allegedly playing Fuji music considered anti-government on the radio, in 1995 (***Vanguard***, June 19, 1995:3). The

said music by Fuji exponent, Adewale Ayuba had called on the Federal Government to **release Chief** Abiola from detention and install him as president. While journalism groaned under the **heavy yoke** imposed by the tyranny of Abacha, the junta unrepentantly continued its pulverization of the **mass media.** This it did with its flagrant abuse of the rule of law. For example, in 1994, instead of respecting **a court** order to pay damages to the ***Punch*** editor for unlawful detention, the Abacha junta rolled out **a decree** proscribing ***Punch, The Guardian*** and ***National Concord*** for six months. The decree was a **mere** replication of what had become the trademark of Nigerian Military Governments in their relationship **with** the press. The ban placed on ***The Guardian, National Concord, Sketch, Punch and the Nigerian Observer*** by Babangida in 1993 was backed with a Decree 48 of that year. About the same time, newspapers and magazines published in the country to be registered with N250,000.00 and a non-refundable deposit of N 100,000.00. The press fought unsuccessfully for the abrogation of the decree till General Abacha's demise. But while journalism was Fighting for the installation of democracy, little did journalism know that the most dangerous threat to the existence of the profession was yet to come. This the novel form of framing up of journalism in military coups with the risk of the summary sentence to death by firing squad.

The Phantom Coups

By 1995, the battle line had become fully established between the press and the military junta of General Abacha. The gulf between them continued to widen. Early that year, the announcement of an unsuccessful attempt at toppling the government of Abacha was made. Expectedly, several arrests were made. Significantly, however, the entire country was unanimous in doubting the authenticity of the infoirnation that a coup was actually panned. The military itself had thought the news to be mere rumour. Even then, when the press first broke the news that some military officers had been "arrested" over an alleged coup plot, Fred Chijuka, a one-star general and director of Defence Information chided the press for spreading mere rumors" (***The News,*** 29 May, 1995:18).

For writing about the coup, four journalists were arraigned before a military tribunal along with the alleged planners. This was an unprecedented event since the business of coup making was largely that of military. But the special military tribunal headed by (then) Brigadier General Patrick Aziza, in a cruel disregard of this fact, sentenced the four journalists - George Mbah, ***Tell's*** Senior Assistant Editor, Kunle Ajibade, Editor of ***The fyews,*** Ben Charles-Obi of the defunct Classique magazine and Mrs. Chris Anyanwu of the ***The Sunday Magazine*** (TSM) - to life imprisonment. The Provisional Ruling council agreed with Aziza but "magnanimously" reduced the life sentences to 15 years imprisonment for each of them, it is pertinent to mention here that the only offence of these journalists was that they published stories about the coup. The case of George Mbah is even laughable as he was said not to have written the story for which he was arrested and tried. Yet they were all tried for being "an accessory after the fact of treason".

The incarceration of these diligent journalists led to a united fight for their freedom. Of course, whatever hope they had in the judiciary to secure their freedom had been long mulcted by a hideous Decree 14 of 1994, which ousted the power of any court of law to issue a writ of habeas corpus. Even then, they were tried by a special military tribunal, responsible only to the Provisional Ruling Council, presided over by General Abacha. Just when the world was waking up to the stark reality of journalism in chains, a further assault was unleashed on the profession through yet another frame up in another phantom coup allegedly organized by Lieutenant-General Oladipo Diya, the Chief of General Staff and second in the hierarchy to Abacha in the government.

Among those tried for this coup, allegedly slated for December 1997, was Niran Malaolu, editor of ***The Diet.*** "He was accused of having faxed details of the coup story to the embassy of a country regarded by the junta as its enemy'' ***(Tell,*** May 11, 1998:19). The military tribunal headed by Major- General Victor Malu handed a life imprisonment sentence to Malaolu in its judgement on April 28, 1998.

Both coupes established in clear terms the serious danger journalism has had to contend with in Nigeria. It was the very first time journalists were charged with coup plotting, not with arms and ammunition, but with their pen. It also showed the amorphous form of such danger, as any bodily gesture such as use of telephone, fax and other communication gadgets could earn one a death sentence.

But despite the grave danger journalism has had to contend with, the press had remained intrepid and like an old soldier who must fight until the battle is won, it has continued to march on. The press has refused to bow to tyranny and repression, remaining on its feet and serving as a model for other African journalists to adopt. How was journalism able to cope with the massive repression of the military in the last decade of the 20th century? This constitutes the focus of the subsequent sub-heading.

In the Face of Tyranny

The unprecedented repression of the press by the different military regimes in their bid for complete subjugation of pressmen resulted in an equally novel practice of guerrilla journalism. As the regular harassment intensified, the journalists went underground and began to issue their magazines from unknown sources. When security agents seized prints runs of editions of ***Tell*** in 1994, the magazine's editors issued such editions in tabloid format. By 1996, ***Tell*** had become the scourge f the late tyrant Abacha and his cohorts. Having suffered a number of detentions, with the constant harassment of other members of his family, Nosa Igiebor had to flee into exile in 1997 and continued to contribute his quota to the production of the magazine from his foreign base. Fayemiwo could not withstand the regular harassment that were geared towards his eventual incarceration, and had to flee to nearby Republic of Benin from where he continued to edit ***Razor,*** until his arrest in 1997.

By 1997, some publications such as ***Tell, The News, Razor and Tempo*** had become somewhat tabooed. It was therefore a kind of offence to be in possession of any of them. Vendors became afraid of selling them, as some vendors became guests of security operatives. It therefore became almost impossible to purchase any of these publications in the open. An avid reader to ***Tell*** narrates his experience with a vendor at the time in the following way:

> **... immediately I mentioned *Tell,* he hesitated, sized me up and maintained a studied silence. I encouraged him... showing him the money. He looked cautiously around; ready to bolt off if the need arose. When he was convinced there was no immediate danger, he put hand into his shoulder bag and quickly brought out *Tell,* which I quickly exchanged for the money and he melted away.**
> ***(Ebisemju (1), 1998:36).***

The massive repression by Abacha thus seemed to sound the death knell for Nigerian journalism. The Nigerian Media Rights Agenda, in its report of 1997 recorded-60 instances of attacks on journalists. It concluded that the year was a particularly bad one for journalism, as more journalists were arrested, detained, harassed and intimidated than any other year. The report, according to Ebisemiju (2) 1998:43 "recorded that by the end of 1997, 40 journalists had been detained for between 24 hours and four months, while several others received threat to their lives". Most times the journalists were paraded in manacles and hand-cuffs like common criminals who have committed felony. It was the same way those charged for the phantom coups were paraded before other journalists nosing around for news. The tyranny unleashed on journalism by the Abacha junta was therefore unprecedented. However, despite the repression, journalists remained the dogged fighters they are and continued to press for the exit of the military so that the process of evolving a true democracy can begin. It was therefore during the despotic administration of Abacha that Nigerian journalism revealed its fearless best.

Newspapers such as ***Vanguard, The Guardian, National Concord, Punch and Tribune*** had various articles from contributors attacking the endless stay of the military in power with journalists performing their duty at grave risk. Nosa Igiebor sums up the seeming collective spirit of those who remained steadfast in the fight for democracy in this way:: even in our darkest moments under Babangida and Abacha, not for once did it occur to me that we could succumb" ***(Tell,*** April 12, 1999:12). With the sudden death of General Abacha on June 8, 1998 respite finally came to journalism. A conducive atmosphere was then created for the profession to now contribute meaningfully to the evolution of a proper democracy. General Abubakar made good his promise of organizing a transition programme to install a civilian administration. The elections under the programme were concluded and the process of achieving a true democracy is on. With the inauguration of General Olusegun Obasanjo as President, democracy has been brought nearer to the people. It is necessary at this juncture to examine the

 role of the press toward the realization of our dreams of evolving a lasting democratic system **in the new** millennium, which the election of Obasanjo seems to emblematise.

Transition to a New Millennium

The emergence of General Abdulsalam (promoted General on assumption of office) as Head of State provided the respite needed by the press to join in a genuine attempt to fashion a lasting democracy for the country. The important development in this regard remains the proclamation by Abubakar that the military would vacate the seat of power on 29 May 1999. He made good his word by organizing all the elections in the process with Obasanjo defeating Chief Olu Falae to become the President. During Abubakar's transition, the press contributed its quota to the evolution of democracy. Apart from reporting dispassionately, the actual events relating to the process, columnists reviewed the situation at various times, interpreting and predicting what would happen. In this way, various pieces of advice were made available to General Abubakar.

The press never forget to fight for the release of not just the journalists who were still in prison, but in fact, all those implicated in the phantom coups of 1995 and 1997 as well as those being held under the various draconian decrees. It was the general opinion that their release would pave the way for proper reconciliation and enable them participate in the transition programme. Such a development has created the enabling environment needed to galvanize the democratic process to its logical conclusion. It is no surprises therefore that all those released had to pay glowing tributes to the intrepid Nigerian press for contributing so immensely to their breathing the air of freedom once again.

The press, however, should now look forward to the new millennium as well as the challenges ahead. For journalists, then, it is not just a civilian administration as epitomized in the contested victory of General Obasanjo at the polls. It is also not the transfer of power to civilians by Abubakar that constitutes to democracy. The transition must consist in the prevalence of those ingredients, which should nurture a growing democracy. Such ingredients according to Nwabueze (1993:2-3), are:

(i) Multi-partyism under a democratic constitution having the force of a supreme overriding law;
(ii) a complete change of guards and the exclusion of certain other categories of persons from participation in democratic politics and government;
(iii) a genuine and meaningful popular participation in politics and government;
(iv) a virile civil society;
(v) a democratic society;
(vi) a free society;
(vii) a just society;
(viii) equal treatment of all citizens by the state;
(ix) the rule of law;
(x) an ordered stable society;
(xi) a society infused with the spirit of liberty, democracy and justice; and
(xii) an independent, self-reliant, prosperous market economy.

What need to be added to the catalogue of democratic ingredients are honesty and transparency as well as accountability on the part of public office holders. The press must consider these ingredients sacrosanct to the survival of democracy and the country as well. It must therefore fight to entrench and protect them in the political system.

The press obviously has realized this fact; hence some editorials and opinions started seeking their inclusion in the political scheme even before Obasanjo was installed as President. For example, ***Tell*** in its editorial, enumerating the challenges for Obasanjo, stated that:

> **We need to build social and political structures that will checkmate inordinately ambitious men like Babangida and lunatics like Abacha. We need to give every nationality in the polity, no matter how small and seemingly inconsequential, its own place under God's sun. *{Tell,* March 15, 1999:19)**

The above obviously suggests that the Nigerian press has started to look beyond the present. It is therefore poised for the challenges ahead. Such challenges include setting the agenda for national_discussion. Babarinsa (1999:5) echoes the feeling of the press towards the challenges before the Obasanjo administration thus:

> **Small ethnic groups like the Ogoni and the Isoko have a right to exist under God's sun. They also have the right to have more than a say in the running of their internal affairs. That is the whole essence of the National question**

and the call for a conference of ethnic nationalities in Nigeria.

In pursuance of the need for transparency in public office, the press fought tenaciously in 1999, for the removal of the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Alhaji Salisu Buhari, who had forged not only his age, but also his educational certificates in order to qualify for the exalted office. He was eventually convicted for the crime of forgery. Shortly after the Buhari saga, it was the turn of the Senate President, Chief Evan Enwerem who had also claimed falsely to be called to the English Bar in 1963. Such a lie was incompatible with the expectations from one holding such an office. ***The News*** had championed the "impeach-Buhari" saga. The Enwerem episode had ***Tell*** at the vanguard. The September 29. 1999 edition (19-25), had published its findings from London to the effect that Chief Enwerem was never called to the English Bar. He was, thus eventually impeached and replaced with Dr. Chuba Okadigbo on November 18, 1999.

As if the press was on a crusade to cleanse the House of Assembly, it led yet another onslaught against the leadership of the Senate which culminated in the impeachment of Dr. Okadigbo, his deputy Haruna Abubakar and some other,high officials of the upper house, in September, 2000. This time, however, the issue was no longer forgery of certificates or falsification of age, but financial profligacy and highhandedness of the officials concerned.

It is, therefore, obvious that the press is worming itself back to the enviable position it should occupy as the watchdog of the society. Public officials must now realize that it is no longer possible to engage in financial recklessness with impunity without some adverse consequences. However, the months or respite derived form General Abubakar's sincerity in handing over power to civilians and Obasanjo's seeming friendly disposition towards the press must not be taken as an evidence of press freedom. Obasanjo could not have done otherwise since the press fought doggedly to secure freedom for him. The press must, therefore not go to sleep believing blissfully that the days of repression are over. Such days can only recede into oblivion depending on President Obasanjo's sincerity of purpose as well the desire by his successor to build on the little gains we have desired from the nascent democracy. This sincerity of purpose can be epitomized in a genuine democratic disposition regarding the enunciated ingredients needed to nurture a true and lasting democracy. Whatever the future offers Nigerian journalists and journalism, the fact remains that the profession has come of age and is ready for the challenges of the new millennium.

Conclusion

This essay examined the performance of the press in the evolution of democracy in Nigeria. In the course of perusing its performance, it was discovered that journalism witnessed its darkest days in the last decade of the twentieth century. The situation arose out of the inordinate ambition of two dictators who were inclined towards self-perpetuation in power. Their wish to remain in power compelled them to subvert the collective wish of the people and wage a war of attrition against the press, which had risen to defend the people and uphold their wish. This led to the most harrowing experiences journalism has ever had in the country.

Ranging from constant harassment to arrest (or kidnaps), and detentions well as even disappearances, the press never had it so bad. But it has remained steadfast in it duty to inform the people. Thus it has braced itself for the challenges of the twenty-first century. Such challenges include fashioning out ways of surviving the harsh conditions that may be dictated by unfriendly administrations as well as setting the national agenda. To survive and perform creditably is by no means an easy task. Journalism and journalist must therefore be well equipped to tackle these challenges so that they can occupy their pride of place in the information configuration of the word.

Works Cited

Babaribsa, Dare (1999). The Lesson form Kosovo" ***Tell,*** April 26, 1999.

Bello-Iman, I. B. (1985) "Democracy in Nigeria: A Myth or Reality" In ***Proceedings of the National Conference of Nigeria Since Independence,*** Zaria, March 1983, Vol. 1. (Ed) by Atanda, J. A.and Aliyu, A. Y.

Ebisemiju, Bankole (1), (1998) "Driven Deeper into the Guerrilla Pit." ***The Guardian Monday, February 2, 1998.***

Ebisemiju, Bankole (2) (1998,1 ''Different Strokes of Press Freedom Day" ***The Guardian*** Monday, May 11, 1998.

Nwabueze, B. O. (1993) ***Democratisation.*** Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited.

Ogbondah, Chris W. (1992) "British Colonial Authoritarianism, African Military Dictatorship and the Nigerian Press" ***Africa Media Review*** Vol 6. No. 3 Nairobi. African Council for Communication Education.

Tell, May 11, 1998.

Tell, August 3, 1998

Tell, March 15, 1998

Tell, April 12, 199.

Tell, September 27, 1999.

The News, 29 May 1995.

Vanguard, Monday, June 19, 1995.