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PRESS REPRESSION IN NIGERIA'S EVOLVING DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT: The issue of "freedom of the press" vis-à-vis the right to gather and disseminate information without undue restrictions has become a major challenge to the practice of professional journalism in Nigeria. The 1999 Nigerian Constitution (as amended) although makes provision for a free press or freedom of expression, however, the provision is constantly infringed on by the successive administration. For that reason, journalists in Nigeria have not been finding it easy to perform their professional duties freely. They have continued to be subjected to intimidations, assaults, abuses, unfair arrests, and unlawful detentions, even many of them have died untimely in the course of performing their lawful duties. The quest towards a free press recently suffered another setback with the introduction of two obnoxious bills – the Internet Falsehood Manipulation Bill and the Establishment of National Commission for Prohibition of Hate Speeches Bill. The two bills portend danger, as one proposes the death sentence, while the other permits the government to shut down social media at will. The study concluded, that the continued repression of the press by the government is a threat to the country's evolving democracy, as well as undermine its socio-economic and political development.

KEYWORDS: Press, Repression, Media, Democracy and Development

INTRODUCTION

The declaration by the United Nations General Assembly which was termed the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (UDHR) on December 10, 1948, was a watershed in the anal of world history. It was a year that freedom of speech was first recognized as a fundamental human right across the world. Article 19 of the declaration state that:

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Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).

Thus, freedom of opinion and expression is all about the right to speak out without fear of being restrained by any individual, group of people, or the government. Freedom of opinion and expression could be said to be linked or connected to freedom of the press, this is because expressing one's opinion could be by speaking and by writing. The importance attached to the freedom of speech or freedom of expression made Nigeria to equally make provision for it in its constitution. To this extent, Section 39(1) of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution (as amended) under "freedom of expression and freedom of the press", emphatically states that "every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including the freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference". It can be inferred from this, that freedom of expression is a fundamental human right. Freedom of expression is neither the prerogative of the politician nor the privilege of the journalist. The politicians, particularly those who hold political offices are only custodians of the constitution which they are also expected to obey, while the journalists in the course of performing their daily work are only exercising citizen's right to free speech (News Media Association, n.d.).

A free press remains a supportive pillar of good governance in a democratic setting, for social and economic growth. This is because freedom of expression and a free press agree to unrestricted information and ideas that are essential for the country's advancement. It also through the freedom of expression and a free press that the practice of journalism can be interesting as journalists can go all out to seek and circulate news, spread information, and ideas, as well as make comments and opinions that are capable of holding those in public offices and place of authority to account. In other words, freedom of expression and a free press have the capacity of boosting accountability and transparency in governance, as the press can provide a medium through which a multiplicity of voices could be heard.

The importance of the press in a democratic setting notwithstanding, cursory scrutiny of the events in Nigeria's Fourth Republic shows flagrant repression of the press. This is manifesting in the areas of limiting and halting the press activities, and freedom of expression as a whole. It is for that reason that the study becomes imperative to x-rays the press activities in Nigeria's Fourth Republic vis-à-vis examines the roles of the press in a democratic setting, analyses the extent to which the press is playing its watchdog roles; investigates cases of abuses of press freedom, and examines challenges facing the press in Nigeria.

THE PRESS AND DEMOCRACY

The importance of the press to democracy and democratic governance cannot be overemphasized. "The press remains a cornerstone of democracy and popular participation worldwide" (Akinwale, 2010, p.49). Press freedom or freedom of expression is indispensable for public participation in democratic government. While democracy has to do with the people's consent or agreement, yet people need to be informed in order to participate, to be informed they need information, and information can easily get to them through the press that has the power to disseminate information freely without restriction. Freedom of the press is also essential to have information about the government and its activities. Freedom of expression gives room for the open exchange of information and opinions among political parties, governments, groups, and associations, as well as ordinary citizens of the state (USAID, 2013). Tocqueville (1835) states that the press remains a powerful force for the promotion of democracy. According to him: the press

causes political life to circulate through all the parts of that vast territory. Its eye is constantly open to detect the secret springs of political designs and to summon the leaders of all parties in turn to the bar of public opinion. It rallies the interests of the community around certain principles and draws up the creed of every party; for it affords a means of intercourse between those who hear and address each other without ever coming into immediate contact (Tocqueville, cited in Graber, 2003, p. 139).

Freedom of the press can improve people's confidence in government; can make government bodies work better. A free press is a basic tool for promoting and supporting democracy, it has been used to pull down the apartheid regime as well as to eradicate other forms of colonialism (as cited in Panday, 2009).

According to Neustadt (1980) through the press, politicians, as well as political candidates, have been able to reach and address large audiences. Politicians, as well as political candidates, have been used the media to exercise their power of persuasion, and the elected and appointed politicians have equally able to reach a member of their constituencies and interact with them effectively through the media. Similarly, Strömbäck (2005), cited in Trappel & Maniglio, (2009) emphasizes the relation between the media and modern democracy. To him, the relationship is a sort of symbiotic one. It is through mass media that the governor converses easily with the governed, while mass media can only function effectively under democracy, which guarantees freedom of speech, and expression, where there is the dissemination of information and free access to information.

Apart from the foregoing, the media are equally significant in the areas of creation and development of a democratic culture in any country. The information provided by the media can influence, shape the opinions, attitudes of the people in making political choices (Parliamentary Assembly, 1999), a democracy needed the media to press for accountability, for deliberation, for representation in governance (Street, 2001).

The media have helped in making the political information to reach those who are even disinterested in political activities. This is achievable through making use of digital public squares where opinions are shared as well as allow avenues for engagement where the public is easily connected with the government. Media have also assisted in transforming the pattern of operation of governmental institutions, the electoral processes vis-à-vis the citizen engagement, and political leaders' manner of communication (Owen, 2019). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) chronicled the importance of the press to democracy thus:

Free and open media systems give voice to citizens, truth test
candidates and political parties during elections, inform policy debates

in legislatures, investigate corruption, hold public officials accountable, enable democratic governance and facilitate more effective development (USAID, 2013, p.1).

According to Roy (2019), there is always a need for active and intelligent participation of the people in a democratic system, where people are adequately informed from time to time about socio-economic, political, and other arising issues about the country. This is important, for the people to form a broad opinion on the way they are being governed. This can only be achieved when people have access to clear and honest information about events in the country where they are residing. Thus the key function of the press in a democratic setup is to keep the people adequately informed about all aspects of the country's governance activities. In addition, where there is a higher degree of press freedom, there will be a high level of political participation, with a reduction of corruption, a more lively civil society, while the elected representatives will reflect the preferences of citizens more adequately (Roy, 2019).

Despite the importance of the press to democracy, the pressmen's "right to seek and disseminate information through an independent press is under attack". Those who are attacking and assaulting the press more are none other personalities than the elected political leaders, who ordinarily should be a defender of press freedom, giving the fact that most of them got to their different offices through the assistance of the press and media in one way or the other (Repucci, 2019).

BARRIERS TO PRESS FREEDOM AND THE PRACTICE OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM IN NIGERIA

The issue of “freedom of the press”, in respect of, the right to gather and disseminate information without undue restrictions, or being subjected to any form of threats, assaults, or blackmail among others, has been a major challenge against the practice of professional journalism in Nigeria. Although the Nigerian constitution like many other constitutions across the world

expressly gives room for a free press or freedom of expression, however, the provision of the constitution is constantly infringed on in many countries including Nigeria. It is not news again that journalists in Nigeria have not been finding it easy to perform their professional duties as they have continued to be subject to intimidations, assaults, abuses, unfair arrests, and unlawful detentions, while many of them have died untimely in the course of performing their lawful duties.

Mgbejume (1991) argues that the major challenge confronting pressmen is the growing hatred between them (the journalists) and politicians. The hatred led to undue government control of the mass media, which continues to whittle down or even freeze out the watchdog role of journalists on government activities. Mgbejume's position is corroborated by one of the interviewees³ who states thus:

The successive government in Nigeria through obnoxious laws has continued to exercise excessive control over the press and the practices of journalism in Nigeria. The government from time to time does restrict the press from gathering and disseminating detailed information on the activities of the government. What can you say about President Buhari banning top media houses from covering his visit to Benue State following the incessant killings of innocent Nigerians by herdsmen in the middle belt region of Nigeria in March 2018?

Another barrier to press freedom is the direct censorship of its activities by the government. In achieving censoring of journalists' activities, the government at times threatens, harasses, and intimidates them in order to restrict their freedom. On several occasions, journalists were brutalized in the course of performing their duties (Apuke, 2016). To this extent Agbaje (1992) avers that undue censorship, remains a great challenge jeopardizing the free press in Nigeria. This position is corroborated by another interviewee⁴ who states, that censorship of press activities and unnecessary punishment meted against journalists is another challenge against the freedom of the press. According to him

Censorship has to do with various legislations by the government of the day targeted at limiting the free flow of information to the public through

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the press. As a result, the government can term some pieces of information as "classified" or "sensitive" and thereby restricting the press from broadcasting such information. In short, arbitrary laws are guiding the extent to which media could transmit a certain piece of information. Regarding punishment, many journalists have been killed untimely, maimed, incarcerated, and tortured in the course of carrying out their legitimate duties.

Economic or financial sustainability also constitutes a challenge to press freedom in Nigeria. Apart from the fact that financial challenges make the press activities difficult, it also makes the pressmen vulnerable to political pressures in their bid to sustain and maintain their press business (Ojo, 2010). This has made some journalists publish stories in support of the politicians and government. The challenge of meeting up with payment of registration fees to the government which is relatively high, without which the media house will not be given an operation license to operate can make the press dance to the tune of the politicians and the government of the day. This practice is seen as a compromise of press freedom. One of the interviewees⁵ states thus

Most press houses are not financially stable and thereby relied heavily on political patronage for sustenance. The political patronage could come in the form of advertisement, public relations, branding, and rebranding as well as "image polishing" where the battered image of a politician is laundered to be able to contest for political office. The government capitalizes on this to dictate the modus operandi of the press.

The issue of ownership is another challenge to freedom of the press. In Nigeria, some of the media houses were government-owned, and so, the government did set limitations on the nature of the information they should make available to the people. The press under this condition becomes a mouthpiece of the government. They can only broadcast only information that promotes the government of the day. They must also as a matter of compulsion promote government policies, whether the policies are right or wrong, they must always be at the side of the government. In supporting the aforementioned, an interviewee⁶ avers

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What are you expecting from the Nigeria Television Authority and Radio Nigeria? You want them to tell you the true story of the government? You must be joking then. I have a colleague in the NTA who says before they can broadcast or capture any news it must pass through different *Ogas* who will scrutinize the news draft, and then take permission at times from the people in government before such news could be passed to the people.

Secrecy and military legacy is another hindrance to press freedom. There are some information which if reveals can constitute a threat to the country's security, national peace, and unity, such information may not be allowed to be carried by the media. Apart from this, is the military legacy and mentality of some of the political leaders with a military background. This set of people still considered some of their actions unquestionable. Thus, they hinder the press from having access to information to their governance system even as civilian public officials. They do evade journalists from garnering information from them and about the offices they head. Concerning military legacy an interviewee⁷ states

Military legacy, the military principle of poor accountability, and the belief that the military is superior to other citizens that were carried on to democratic dispensation, hinder the press freedom. Most of the supposed democratic leaders parading in public offices in Nigeria's Fourth Republic are products of the military either as former military officers or benefactor of military activities. As a result, they see themselves as being superior and above every other citizen in the country. For the pressmen to question them, literary connotes an act of disrespect. To this extent, they continue to put forward different policies to prevent the press from holding them accountable and to perform their professional duty freely.

In a similar vein, another interviewee⁸ states that lack of democratic culture is another challenge halting the press from performing their duty optimally.

Although Nigeria as a country confesses to being practicing democracy, however, those in public offices, that is, the elected and non-elected public officials at various levels of government could be referred to as autocratic, given the mode of their operations in various governmental offices. The failure of these public officials to adhere strictly to democratic

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principles is a major factor militating against press freedom in Nigeria. Many of these officials do not give adequate recognition to the press and keep them away from monitoring the activities of their various offices.

Other barriers to press freedom are lack of objectivity in reportage and partisanship. These are no doubt major hindrances to the smooth operation of the press activities in Nigeria. According to one of the interviewees⁹

Act of neutrality and objectivity in the practice of journalism goes a long way to benefit society, however, this is not the case in Nigeria due to pressures. Although many news media in Nigeria performed their duties professionally before the return of democratic governance, however following the country's return to democratic governance, the majority of the news media became partisan and thereby lending their support to one political party or the other. This perhaps was due to financial predicament, as some of these media outlets receive low patronage in terms of advertisement and are not enjoying wide circulation as well. These media outlets are thus directly funded by the political leaders, or by owners with political ambitions, or by rich allies of a political party or group. Some of the journalists are offered money to cover a specific story and continued to be remotely sensed by the rich and ambitious politicians.

Another issue that was raised by another interviewee as being factors hindering the press freedom in Nigeria is “government benefaction” and “political corruption”. The interviewee¹⁰ states that

Many news media are surviving on the government's so-called benefaction or support. To favor these set of media, the government usually give them adverts and publications that are full of cosmetic stories, propagandas and to sell unpopular government agenda. In return, the government pays the news media heavily. Journalists in this category do not give fair reportage! Those journalists in this category are called "brown envelope journalists". It is a serious issue undermining good governance.

REPRESSING THE PRESS: SELECTED CASES IN NIGERIA’S FOURTH REPUBLIC

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¹⁰ A Deputy Director, Federal Ministry of Information, Nigeria

There is no denying the fact that the 1999 Constitution of Nigerian (as amended) made provisions for fundamental rights of which freedom of expression was paramount. However, the successive government in Nigeria's Fourth Republic has continued to halt the activities of the press from performing their duties freely. To this extent, this sub-heading discusses cases of maltreatment meted against pressmen and media houses in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (2001) for instance, Stanley Yakubu a correspondent with *The Punch*, was threatened by the Sokoto State administration on February 8, 2000. Yakubu was accused of carrying negative coverage of the Sokoto State government. The Sokoto State Director of Press Affairs was said to have threatened and warned Yakubu that he should be careful if he wanted to live a long life. Other cases of press attacks include that of March 2, 2000, where armed security agents numbered up to twelve stormed the headquarters of the African Newspapers of Nigeria, publishers of the *Nigerian Tribune*, in Ibadan. The security agents sealed off the entire premises of the media house, thereby, interrupted its production for the day. Similarly, on April 4, 2000, State Security Agents raided the office of *ThisDay* in Abuja and arrested Mr. Obaigbena, the paper's editor. Before the period of raiding, Obaigbena said that he had been receiving several anonymous phone calls threatening him against publishing stories about President Olusegun Obasanjo's National Security Adviser, Aliyu Mohamed Gusau, on allegations of corruption. Three days after the raid, he was released, Obaigbena resigned his appointment from *ThisDay* for fear of being attack again.

On May 29, 2000, Akwa Ibom State Governor Victor Attah's security guards assaulted Daniel and Etim, correspondents with *The Punch* at the Governor's office in Uyo, where the two reporters have gone to attend a press briefing. Daniel and Etim on their arrival at the Governor's office were prevented by the security men from entering the arena. Daniel then identified himself as an accredited reporter, this infuriated the security agents who pushed Etim from the staircase and dragged him outside the lobby. Daniel, however, tried to intervene and he got beaten of his

life at the hands of the security agents, the two reporters consequently sustained varying degrees of injury (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2001).

On June 9, 2001, Eseni and Fatoye, a reporter and a cameraman, respectively, with the television network Minaj Broadcasting International (MBI), got attacked, brutalized, and beaten by police on the course of performing their assignments in Abuja. Eseni and Fatoye were attacked while recording a group of protesters who were protesting a fuel price hike then. The duo was consequently arrested and interrogated at a police station in Wuse, Abuja. They sustained serious injuries and later admitted to the Iduma Specialist Hospital in Abuja (Refworld, 2020).

In November 2002, the office of the *National Pilot* in Ilorin was shattered with an explosion. The incident which was believed to be politically motivated occurred while the Monday edition of the newspaper was being prepared. The blast which caused the roof of the building to collapse, left five staff of the media house seriously injured, while production equipment was seriously destroyed (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2003).

According to the Human Rights Watch (2003), in July 2002, journalists were barred by the government from carrying any story on the incident that occurred in Kano on July 29 where police clashed with a crowd of protesters, opposing President Obasanjo's visit to the city. In the course of protesting, several people lost their lives as a result of a bullet attack from the policemen in the president's entourage. Another case of repression of the press was that of the Organising Committee of the All Africa Games (COJA) in June 2003, who tactically and forcefully bought all printed copies of the June 30 edition of the weekly *Tell* magazine. This was in their antic to cover up the corruption being perpetrated by the COJA which the magazine covered under the title "Scandal in Aso Rock [the presidency]; Anti-corruption campaign, a fraud" (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

In November 2002, some media houses including *The Argus*, *The Beacon*, and *The Independent Monitor*, all based in Port-Harcourt have their premises sealed up. Besides, several journalists working with them were arrested by the police under the claim that they published stories considered "critical" to the Rivers state government. In a similar vein, on September 17,

2003, Cyril Mbah, who was a statehouse correspondent for *The Monitor* newspaper, was escorted off the premises of the President's villa in Abuja and warned not to return to the premises, following an article he wrote and perceived to be critical of the President. Also, Haruna Acheneje, state correspondent of *The Punch* newspaper was threatened to leave Akwa Ibom State, because of the article he wrote about the State House of Assembly (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (2005), Emmanuel Ujah, a correspondent with *The Sun* was assaulted by police officers and have his camera and tape recorder destroyed on July 24, 2004. Ujah was attacked at the Benue State police headquarters along with other local correspondents who went there to investigate the illegal detention of *Nigerian Tribune* Benue state correspondent, Johnson Babajide. *The Sun* reported that the Assistant Commissioner of Police of Benue State told Ujah that his reports regarding the politically induced violence in Kwande, Benue State portrayed the state police as being incapable of handling the crisis. On July 21, 2004, Babajide was detained at his home in the early morning and beaten by a group of supporters of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), in central Benue State. Babajide was forcefully taken to the house of Benue State Governor George Akume, by political thugs that were loyal to the governor, he was again beaten and later handed over to police.

On September 4, 2004, *The Insider*, weekly magazine employees were arrested, and equipment used for the production of the magazine was seized by the Nigerian State Security Service (SSS) when the media office in Lagos was raided. The Nigerian State Security Service agents were said to have broken into the magazine's offices using sledgehammers and seized documents, equipment, and money belonging to the magazine. They equally arrested the production manager, Mr. Raphael Olatoye, and confiscated the September 5 edition of the magazine (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2005).

On December 6, the Department of State Security (DSS) stormed into the courtroom in Abuja and illegally detained a journalist with Sahara Reporters Omoyele Sowore. The Department of State Security DSS openly violated the rule of law as well as the sanctity of a courtroom by forcefully and violently manhandling Sowore inside the courtroom, thereby forced the judge to

flee the chambers for fear of been attacked. Sowore was been attacked following his regular reports and stories exposing anomalies in the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari. Sowore then organized a protest against the maladministration of Nigeria which he dubbed "Revolution Now," and called for "Days of Rage," he was arrested and charged with treason (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019).

According to Premium Times (2019), there were several attacks on journalists during the Nigerian Presidential and National Assembly elections held on Saturday the 23rd of February, 2019. There were reported cases of the arrest of pressmen including, Nwanosike Onu of *The Nation*, Geoffrey Anyanwu of *Sun*, David-Chyddy Eleke of *ThisDay*, Vincent Ujumadu of *Vanguard*, and Tony Okafor of *Punch*, by armed police officers in Anambra State where the said journalists had gone to cover the voting exercise. In a similar vein, journalists were prevented from covering and monitoring the collation of the election results in Ugheli North, Delta State; some parts of Bauchi and Kebbi State, and the Amuwo/Odofin area of Lagos State. In Edo North, a reporter who was trying to record illicit activities during the election was attacked and got his working tools smashed (Premium Times, 2019).

On March 9, 2019, some journalists who were covering the gubernatorial and state assembly elections were detained and brutalized by security agents and consequently denied further access to report the electoral activities. Some of the journalists who have taken some photographs of the activities and those that have recorded some of the activities were forced to delete the photographs previously taken, and activities that were already recorded. According to the Committee to Protect Journalism (2019), Nonso Isiguzo, a news editor with the *Nigeria Info*, a privately-owned radio station, and other five journalists were delayed and barred from covering elections in the Ahoada West local government area of Rivers state. Musa Mingyi a journalist with the *Blueprint* newspaper and Hamisu Kabir Matazu, of the *Daily Trust* newspaper, were detained by some military officers in Damatuzu's local government area of Yobe state and prevented from covering the election activities in the area. Shindong Bala, a reporter with the *Radio Nigeria* station, and Amos Tauna, a reporter with the *Daily Post* newspaper, were attacked by a group of

people with stones and wooden sticks in Kaduna state while trying to investigate election-related crises around Zonkwa. Bala's phone, recorder, and car keys were seized and during the attack got his body bruised and clothes ripped.

Similarly, Kunle Sanni, a reporter with the *Premium Times* news website was held hostage for about 30 minutes and was forced to delete all photos of underage voting he has already taken in his camera, and images recorded on his phone were also deleted. A reporter with the *Channels Television*, Mr. Collin Ossai, and his cameraperson, as well as a journalist with *Speed FM* were prevented from covering the polling activities in the Esan Central local government area of Edo state (Committee to protect Journalism, 2019).

In essence, Musbau (2020) avows that of all the administrations in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, Buhari's administration is scored low in terms of freedom of the press and respect for fundamental human rights. According to Musbau (2020)

The current Buhari regime started with the abuse of a journalist. On June 1, 2015, police officers in Abuja, attacked Muhammad Atta-Kafin-Dangi, a journalist with Radio Nigeria, for attempting to cover a protest staged by commercial motorcyclists (Okada). On June 25, the publisher of Prime Magazine, Yomi Olomofe, was severely beaten inside the Nigerian Customs Service office in Badagry, Lagos. He was reportedly investigating reports that customs officials at the Nigeria-Benin border were assisting smugglers when more than 15 men attacked him and another journalist in front of senior officials, who did not intervene. Olomofe was beaten until he lost consciousness (Musbau, 2020).

Another setback to a free press in Nigeria was the introduction of two obnoxious bills, that is, the Internet Falsehood Manipulation Bill and the Establishment of National Commission for Prohibition of Hate Speeches Bill. The bills were been sponsored by Senators Sani Musa (APC Niger East) and Aliyu Sabi Abdullahi (APC Niger North). The bill proposes that any person who commits an offence of the kind described could be jailed for life, or be sentenced to death by hanging if the actions of such person are found to have caused the loss of life. To this extent, some civic groups protested and kicked against the bill due to its narrow and unclear definition of what constitutes hate speech. Besides, the provisions in the bill ran contrary to the Nigerian Constitution

which gave the citizens' rights to unhindered speech, freedom of expression, and association. Nigerians fear that, if the bills are signed to laws, it will further empower the government to clamp down on critics, as well as allows the shutdown of the Internet at will (Akubo, 2020). According to Sunday (2019), there is looming danger in Nigeria with the proposed bills, while one proposes the death sentence, the other empowers the government to shut down social media at will.

Press Suppression: Implication for the Socio-Economic and Political Development

Being the fourth estate of the realm, the press is bestowed with the responsibility of keeping an eye on the activities of government, as well as holding the government accountable to the people. To perform these tasks effectively, the press needs to go on investigative journalism. This will help the press to have deep information about the activities of government, and be able to expose any form of anomaly noticed or discovered in various public offices in course of the investigation. By continuing to expose the irregularities in the operation of government's businesses, the public officers, the elected leaders inclusive are put on their toes to render their stewardship to the people. In essence, media is expected to "set agenda for accountability, transparency, openness" (Arogundade, 2010) that will bring about good governance for the benefit of the populace.

A free and independent media keep the citizens informed and can hold leaders accountable for democratic sustainability and socio-economic and political development. For that reason, a restricted press may not be able to adequately inform the people about government actions and inactions, and may not be able to expose areas where the government needs condemnation and where it needs commendation (Repucci, 2019). Lack of free media without a doubt has considerable effects on the socio-economic and political development of any given country.

For Alam & Shah (2013, p.5), "a free press contributes to economic growth and prosperity of a country". To them, a press that is independent easily midwives between the government and the people and thereby can provide a fact-based picture of the society. This will enhance the level of accountability of the public officials who are representing the people in different public offices. In addition to this, a free press can be a rightful source through which the government can get

feedback regarding its policies from the people. The feedback from the press is necessary for the government to adjust bad policies or continue with good ones. Feedback also has the potential of serving as a driving force for the economic growth of the country, as the government through feedback is guided along making good policies for development (Roll & Talbott, 2003, cited in Alam & Shah, 2013).

To Pal, Dutta & Roy (2011) an independent media could facilitate and enhances socio-political stability. A stable polity with a conducive and favorable environment for investment is essential for greater investment and economic growth. Thus, a free press can promote peace and socio-political stability by pursuing and trailing the government to act in the interest of the people. When the government act in people's interest, the people will be at peace with the government. This will accordingly provide a favorable business climate which in turn promotes investment for development. According to The Africa Report (2012), a free press, apart from promoting democratization and economic development, can also be a key instrument for socio-economic development. The African Report further states:

A free press always has a positive influence on poverty and governance. It holds the government accountable and makes their actions transparent and expands participation in the political decision-making beyond a small inner circle...No country in the world has a free press and a high percentage of its population living below the poverty line. The weaker the constraints on the press the more developed the country will be. No country has a low GDP or High Inequalities and a free press. A free press has a positive influence on the provisions of social services for the public. No country has a free press and a very high percentage of people with no access to safe water or a high percentage suffering from malnutrition...By allowing debate and different opinions to be heard the country becomes more stable, less violent, and more democratic (The Africa Report, 2012).

In Nigeria, the imperativeness of the press in the socio-economic development of Nigeria is brought to the fore following the roles its plays recently in the area of exposing devious economic deals of the Nigerian government with China. Following the economic meltdown, the government of Nigeria has approached China's government at different times for loans for development. However, there was a lot of controversy regarding the loan, and the agreement that

was signed with China. For instance, one of the loan agreements which was signed on September 5, 2018, has a clause undermining the sovereignty of the country. In the agreement, the clause read thus:

[T]he Borrower [i.e., the state of Nigeria] hereby irrevocably waives any immunity on the grounds of sovereign or otherwise for itself and its property in connection with any arbitration proceeding pursuant to Article 8(5), thereof with the enforcement of any arbitral award pursuant thereto, except for the military assets and diplomatic assets (cited in *The Diplomat*, 2020).

The clause according to some journalists is a compromised of Nigeria's sovereignty to China. The journalists further condemned the continuous borrowing by the government without a commensurate development in terms of capital projects and human capacity building. For instance, in its analysis of the loans that the country has taken, the *Premium Times* comments thus:

According to Nigeria's Fiscal Responsibility Act, (FRA) governments at all tiers shall borrow for only capital expenditure and human development at concessional terms (Section 41, 1(a)). By restricting new debt to concessional loans, the requirement guards against loans with expensive repayment terms, which could impoverish the country. Furthermore, Nigeria's procurement laws require that projects of this magnitude undergo a competitive bidding process to ensure that the government gets value for money (*Premium Times*, 2020).

The *Premium Times* further states that most of the loans taken by the government, including those taken from other lenders apart from China, negates due processes practice, as well as deviated from the constitution and other provisions of the government. It was clear that many loans taken by the government were not for capital projects or human development. Instead, “China provides huge project-related loans at market-based rates, without transparency, much less environmental or social impact assessments” (*Premium Times*, 2020).

In a similar vein, a journalist with *This Day newspaper*, Mr. Yemi Adebowale states, that Nigeria is not a sane clime, for the reason that the government of Nigeria can sign any loan agreement without the interest of the Nigerian citizens. According to him

Some critical things are signed away by our governments in these deals. Between 2010 and March 31, 2020, 11 of such loans have been obtained from

the China Exim Bank. They all have a seven-year moratorium, 20 years tenor, and obtained at a 2.5 percent interest rate, with varying maturity dates. The clarifications by Patience Oniha, Director-General, Nigeria's Debt Management Office (DMO) on Wednesday left many questions unanswered. First, the Chinese determine the cost of projects (whatever figure put forward is accepted), give us loans tied to the projects and the projects must be executed by Chinese firms alone. We don't have a say in anything other than to repay the loans (Adebowale, 2020).

The aforementioned instances bore eloquent testimony to the extent to which a free press can expose the anomalies in governance which can inhibit the economic growth and development of the country. Thus, the continued sensitization of the people by a free press has a tendency to check some of the challenges to the socio-economic and political development of the country. Suffice to say, without a free press, the country's efforts towards socio-economic and political development would be a mirage. In buttressing the above Guseva, Nakaa, Novel, Pekkala, Souberou & Stouli, state:

A free press always has a positive influence...on governance or violence and conflict issues. It creates a business-enabling environment, a climate conducive to more effective public affairs management, and so forth. A free press constitutes an instrument of development as such, in the same way as education or investment (Guseva, Nakaa, Novel, Pekkala, Souberou & Stouli, 2008, p.5).

Thus, in a country where the press is not independent, there is a possibility that such a country will be poor. There is bound to be violence and conflict in such a country. There will be misinformation when the media are not free to disseminate necessary information. There will be corruption, poverty, and extreme deprivation. The hostility will grow, the environment will be heated, and there will be no meaningful business to be transacted, consequently, socio-economic and political development will be halted.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The importance attached to the freedom of speech or freedom of expression has made Nigeria to equally make provision for it in its constitution. And so from Nigeria's Constitution freedom of expression is a fundamental human right. A free press is a supportive pillar of good governance in a democratic setting, for social and economic growth as a free press has the capacity of boosting accountability and transparency in governance. However, journalists in Nigeria have not been finding it easy to perform their professional duties freely. They have continued to be subjected to intimidations, assaults, abuses, unfair arrests, and unlawful detentions, while many of them have died untimely in the course of performing their lawful duties. Various challenges including the use of obnoxious laws to exercise excessive control over the press; direct censorship of journalist's activities; financial constraints and reliance on political patronage for sustenance; owners' control; military legacy or low level of a democratic culture; lack of objectivity in reportage and partisanship, limit the extent of press independent.

The study, therefore, concluded, that the continued repression of the press by the government and "other powers that be" in Nigeria is a threat to the country's evolving democracy, besides, the issue is capable of denting the image of the country before the international community, and can bring sanctions on the country, as well as undermine its socio-economic and political development. The study, therefore, recommended that the Nigerians should rise against any form of intimidation and repression of the press. This could be achieved by embarking on lawful protest and by rejecting political leaders who have in one time or the other intimidated or assaulted the press in the course of performing their duty.

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