

# *Mass Media Participation in Democratic Process in Nigeria: From 1999 – 2011*

Aniefiok Udoudo

Elizabeth Titilayo Aduloju

University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

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**ABSTRACT:** Before 1999, Nigeria had had intermittent democratic process, with the military controlling the administrative machinery of the country for a greater part of her existence. In each of the regimes, mass media played a significant part. Since 1999, print media ownership has been predominantly in the hands of private citizens. While the government at the center does not own any print medium, the few which are owned by the state have limited circulation and are mainly public relations organs of the owner-states. The ownership monopoly of broadcast media which hitherto was that of governments has been broken. Thus, media ownership may have contributed to media participation in the ongoing democratic process in the country. This article examines the level of media participation in the democratic process in Nigeria between 1999 and 2011, given the use of the media in enhancing the relevance of the military government in the past. A step-by-step analysis of media contribution even before the advent of the current democratic dispensation is carried out. The paper argues that the media in the country have learned to be more mature and pro-democratic in their coverage of politics. If this practice endures, the trend could bring the mass media in Nigeria to a level of democratic collaboration with the political class as witnessed in model democracies in the world.

**KEYWORDS:** Media ownership, participation, democratic process, Nigeria, state

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## **Introduction**

**N**igeria is a multi-ethno-religious state. All of its ethnic groups—over 450 in number—are brought together by the amalgamation of the colonial administration of Sir Lord Lugard in 1914 (Tamuno 1999).

These ethnic entities in the country—some very large and some very small—scramble for national attention and recognition (Ashong and Udoudo 2010). Although the various ethnic nationalities have agreed to remain together as a nation since the amalgamation, much allegiance is paid first to the ethnic groups to which they belong (Udenwa 2011). Nigeria is broadly divided between the north, which is predominantly Muslim and larger in land area but less developed, and the south, which is predominantly Christian (Gbadamosi and Ade Ajayi 1999). Before the return of democracy in 1999, Nigeria had had ten different administrations—eight military and two civil administrations—of which eight were led by northerners and two by southerners of the Yoruba ethnic groups. Upon the return of democracy in 1999 until today, Nigeria has had three administrations, one led by a northerner and two led by southerners. Its current leader comes from a minority in the south, the first of its kind since the independence in 1960 and the amalgamation in 1914.

The mass media, especially the newspapers in Nigeria, were partly instrumental in the achievement of the country's independence (Udoudo 2010). Various newspaper owners, editors and their newspapers closed ranks and formed a common front in 1960. Uche (1989) reports that one of the newspapers, *The Comet*, was so national in coverage that its national appeal led the founders of the anticolonial political movement to come together to fight for the attainment of a single goal— independence. Indeed, much of the war for the country's independence was fought on the pages of newspapers (Ufuophu-biri 2008). However, while the Nigerian press successfully contributed toward the country's independence, it was faced with the challenge of sustaining the democracy it facilitated (Udoudo 2010). The challenge arose from the journalists' and nationalists' limited knowledge of democracy, compounded by the Nigerian people's having more profession for ethnic than national loyalty. It was not surprising then to see that even the nationalists who fought for the country's independence turned ethnic loyalists to the detriment of the nationalism they fought for.

Similarly, Nigeria's mass media, acting on the basis of the interests of their owners, did not work for national cohesion during the post-independence era but for ethnic interests. While the government at the

center used its own broadcast and print media to defend its position, the regional governments used their broadcast and print media to foster their respective regional interests. All these were made at the expense of the unity of the entire Nigerian state (Edeani 1990). The crisis in the country in which the mass media participated led to military seizure of power in 1966. With the military in control, all democratic structures were dismantled. The crisis climaxed during the Civil War in which the media were also used as instruments of war, being aligned with warring sides, promoting propaganda and facilitating deep ethnic biases and animosity. It can be said then that the democracy that the mass media in the country helped to bring about was short lived. The media could not facilitate the sustenance of democracy in the Nigerian First Republic.

The objective of the paper is to examine the ways in which the Nigerian mass media have participated in the country's democratization. It looks into the role of mass media in Nigeria's struggle for democratization particularly the period between 1999 and 2011, while at the same time tracing its participation before the current democratic dispensation. The paper argues that over time Nigeria's mass media have learned to be more mature and pro-democratic in their coverage of political events and if this trend continues, it could bring the mass media to a level of democratic collaboration with the citizens as is the case in other modern democracies. The paper is premised upon the Democratic Corporate Model of Hallin and Mancini as expatiated in McQuail (2005), which emphasizes the coexistence of commercial media and politicized media in a society where the state still has some role in media functions.

### Mass Media Ownership

Mass media ownership is one of the determinants of the effectiveness or non-effectiveness of socioeconomic and political relationships between the state and its citizens. The reason is that the mass media have the ability to create and nurture vivid images of events in people's minds through the amount and style of coverage they give to events. Through their coverage, the mass media confer importance on events—both prominent and not

(Edeani 1990). Sometimes, the status conferral functions of the mass media can be attributed to the interest of their owners, both governments or private individuals, turning the mass media into their megaphones (Sobowale 1985). Before 1999, the mass media in Nigeria could be portrayed in this light. Ownership of the mass media then was largely concentrated in the hands of both the federal and state governments and a few individuals who were financially able to float few newspaper outfits. It was not surprising then that government-owned mass media in Nigeria during the military era promoted the interest of the government more than the interest of the entire Nigerian society. As Edeani (1990, 19) observes:

Ownership of mass media is an issue which has generated a great deal of public attention and heated debate, and that factor is likely to be important in determining the extent and kind of coverage the country's mass media are able to give... Previous research has shown that government-owned media houses usually pay attention to national development issues than do privately owned media.

The mass media in Nigeria serve as public relations organs of the government to make the people see its efforts, which expects to receive the goodwill of the people. While it cannot be denied that government-owned mass media have educated the citizenry on major issues of national interest, they were largely used as propaganda instruments for the state and the political party in power. This was hugely the practice of the media from the Gen. Gowon military administration in 1966 to the mid-Babangida administration in 1992. Consequently, despite the huge corruption that went on in the country in that era, reports of corruption were very limited.

Private ownership of the newspapers and magazines had been in existence in Nigeria since the pre-independence era. However, it suffered significantly during the administrations of Gowon (1966-1975); Murtala/Obasanjo (1975-1979); Buhari (1983-1985); Babangida (1985-1993); and Abacha (1993-1998). A few privately-owned newspapers and magazines that operated in these administrations were, most of the time, faced with a lot of persecution in the hands of the military administrators (Ufuophu-biri 2008) mainly because of their reports' daring nature. Various decrees were promulgated

and implemented, namely Newspaper Decree No. 2 of 1966; Defamation and Offensive Publication Decree No. 44 of 1966; Newspaper (Prohibition from Circulation) Decree No. 17 of 1968; The *Sunday Star* and *Imole Owuro* (Prohibition) Edit No. 19 of 1968; the Printer and Publishers of *The Sunday Star* and *Imole Owuro* (Declaration as unlawful Society) Edit No. 19 of 1968; The Public Officers Offence (Protection Against Accusation) Decree No. 11 of 1976; The Newspaper Prohibition from Circulation (Validation) Decree No. 1 of 1978 and Public Officers Protection Against False Accusation Decree No. 4 of 1984 (Udoakah 1988; Ufuophu-biri 2008).

It is interesting to note that with the advent of democracy in 1999 all the newspapers owned and run by the federal government have been completely privatized, leaving the federal government with no print media. State-owned newspapers are likewise hardly seen at the news stands. Of those still operating, some are either published weekly or biweekly. They equally have very limited circulation—mainly circulated around government ministries and offices (Udodo 2008). This is a clear indication that both the federal and state governments no longer have strong ownership of print media in the country. A similar case is also happening in broadcast media.

Nevertheless, the fact that the government did not own print media anymore does not mean that it did not have some traces of control over them. Udodo (2008, 122-123) asks: "Can one therefore say that since the federal government does not own any newspaper in the country, the country's national newspapers are free to perform?" He observes that many media owners in Nigeria have interests which often involve the government. In many countries, just like in Nigeria, many media owners are so close to the ruling political party that it is difficult to know whether it is the government or the owner who takes decisions in running the media outfit (Lovitt 2004).

Udodo (2008) says that some newspaper owners are well connected to the government, either directly through the politicians or indirectly through some businessmen whose contracts come from the government and from the friends of the government. Others may be affiliated to one ethno-political interest or another. These are issues that put into question the supposed freedom of the mass media, its free and selfless functions to the society.

Whether or not the federal government controls the mass media indirectly is not within the scope of this paper. What is of interest here is that since 1999 no newspaper or magazine establishment in Nigeria has been closed down for any anti-government publication. Equally, no privately-owned broadcast station has been shut down for airing anti-government news or programs. There was, however, a case where *Adaba FM* station was shut down and fined because of its violation of the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) code. *Adaba FM*, a privately-owned radio station in Akure, Ondo State was fined for transmitting on 25 April 2009 broadcast “materials that were capable of inciting members of the public to violence and consequently leading to breakdown of law and order” (Udeorah 2009, 6) while covering the Ekiti State Governorship Election. When the station failed to pay the fine of N5000,000.00, the broadcast license was suspended on 11 May 2009. The station took NBC to court for a redress (Udeorah 2009). This chance to seek redress in court is an improvement on media ownership relations with the government. The improved relations hold better performance for the media in the country.

### **Intermittent Attempts at Democracy**

#### *From 1970s to mid-1980s*

Various attempts had been made at returning Nigeria to democracy after the first military seizure of power. Each of these attempts was faced with unfulfilled promise of returning the country to democratic rule resulting to premature termination of democratic existence, or democratic stillbirth. Each military administration became a correction of the previous regime. Because many Nigerians did not have enough experience in democratic governance, they were called upon to give their support each time a new military administration came to power.

For example, when Gen. Gowon came to power in 1975, he promised to return the country to democratic pathway but did not really fulfill it. During Gen. Murtala Mohammed’s administration, which succeeded Gowon’s through a bloodless coup, he also intended to sanitize the system and make it corruption-free. It was his regime which announced the handing-over date of 1979 to a

democratically elected government. Gen. Mohammed did not, however, live to fulfill this promise as he was killed in a counter coup spearheaded by late Col. Dimka. His successor, Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo honored the declaration as he handed power over to a civil government on 1 October 1979.

During Gen. Gowon’s administration, the media, chiefly owned and controlled by the government, were in support of the military regime. Udoudu (2010, 37) argues that this is not debatable owing to “the use of force-to-rule attendant upon military government.” He adds that the military understood the importance of the mass media as one of the powers in politics and so decided to make use of them so that the military government would remain relevant to the Nigerian public. The military set aside the constitution of the country and promulgated decrees that would make it almost opposition-free. As a result, press freedom virtually did not exist during Gen. Gowon’s regime. Despite this lack of freedom, however, a few newspapers and magazines were bold enough to expose the misdeeds of the military. Mohammed (2003, 36) gives an example of such instance:

The mass media decried widespread corruption among public officers under General Gowon. Notable here was the publicity given to the allegation of corruption against the then Military Governor of Benue Plateau State, Police Commissioner J.D. Gomwalk and the then Federal Commissioner for Communications, Mr. Joseph Tarka. The latter had to resign from his job under pressure from public-spirited individuals and the mass media.

Strangely, however, the little effort of the press in exposing the corruption of one military regime gave credence to the forthcoming military regime (Udoudu 2010).

The second attempt at democratic governance in Nigeria hardly outlived the first four years as the transition from the Second Republic to civil governance lasted just about three months. On the eve of New Year’s Day in 1984, another bloodless coup led by Gen. Muhammadu Buhari toppled the democratic administration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari. Nigeria’s mass media contributed largely to this military takeover by exposing the corrupt practices and other “evils” of the politicians which the military saw as an opportunity to “salvage the corrupt society.”

Why was there a desire of the people to have military takeover after civil governance? Why the great expectation that the military would soon take over the reins of power each time there was an attempt at civil governance? The reason for this was probably because in the civil administration, the mass media were freer to expose the misdeeds of the politicians. On the contrary, the mass media during the military regimes were always censored and coerced to publish what was not against the government or else they could face the sanction of being closed down (Udoakah 1988). The misdeeds and corruption of the military regimes were not also exposed by the media because their ranks were broken, owing to the fact that some professional journalists were given juicy jobs in the military administration. For example, Mohammed (2003) points out that journalists and other media personalities benefited from Gen. Ibrahim Babangida's administration by being appointed to the positions of directors of press affairs, press secretaries, directors of information, commissioners, ambassadors and even ministers. Undoubtedly, these appointments did not only make them image painters of their military master but also gave them the opportunity to canvass the support of their professional colleagues.

#### *From mid-80s to 1998*

Notwithstanding all the image-painting of media professionals, Nigerian mass media and the Nigerians themselves started to acknowledge seriously the level of military misdeeds and corruption when the military axe fell vehemently on the media and their practitioners. With more independent newspapers and news magazines in circulation between 1984 and 1999, the mass media, especially the press, became more daring and more prepared in installing democratic machinery in the country. Although the Babangida administration was the one which paved the way for private ownership of broadcast media in the country in 1992 (NBC 2006), ownership of the latter was largely within the purview of the federal and state governments before the civil rule in the country in 1999. Licensed privately-owned broadcast media could not make any significant impact since they were closely monitored and their prescribed roles were limited. The situation was not the

same with the defiant ones which operated in exile. They were very daring and bold to confront the military government. These media outfits included *Radio Freedom*, *Radio Democracy* and *Radio Kudirat* (Jegade 2011). Privately-owned newspapers in the country were exposed to military brutality due to a common position adopted by the press to report on opposition against perpetuation in power. One of such emotional brutality experienced by top executives of *Newswatch* magazine is expressed below:

Ordinarily, only Agbese should have been arrested since the issue that led to their arrest was an editorial matter, but Ekpu and Mohammed were hurled along as well although they had stepped aside from the editorial department of NCL. "They apparently wanted to make it bigger than it was," Ekpu observed last Tuesday. Prison life reminded the chief executive that "all military regimes have the same complexion. None is humane." It also sensitized him to the need to fight for democracy that will make all freedom possible (Ette 1994, 18).

Decrees were promulgated in retrospect. Many newspaper and magazine organizations were forced to shut down and journalists were imprisoned and assassinated. The unpopular Public Officers Protection Against False Accusation (Decree 4), No. 4, 1984 was hurriedly promulgated in retrospect by the Buhari regime to try and imprison two of *The Guardian* journalists, Nduka Irabor and Tunde Thompson, for publishing the names of shortlisted diplomats before it was officially announced by the federal government. *The Guardian* newspaper was fined N50,000.00 (Uche 1989). Dele Giwa, a founding editor of *Newswatch* magazine, was assassinated in 1986 during Gen. Ibrahim Babangida administration for revealing the secret of the military government (Udoakah 1988).

In the face of all the tribulations, some privately-owned newspapers and magazines in the country remained resolute and undaunted in their advocacy for the return of democracy. Corruption in government circles, no longer a hidden practice in the Babangida administration, was reported by the daring newspapers and magazines. Every attempt at trying to procure self-succession by Gen. Babangida was met with the press setting agenda for opposition. As a result, Gen. Babangida had to prepare grounds for a presidential election in

1993 after several disappointing attempts that showed that Nigerian politicians were not ready for the highest political office in the country. Babangida was able to set up democratic structures at the local council and state levels while he still remained the military president. Due to pressure from various sectors of society, made possible by the mass media, the Babangida administration organized a presidential election on 12 June 1993, adjudged to be the freest, the fairest and the best before 2011 elections. However, the election had a stillbirth, and the winner was not declared; known but dead, he was Chief Moshood Abiola.

Many Nigerians were not happy about the manipulation of Babangida administration. The mass media stepped up their performance and the issue of 12 June 1993 election whose winner was not declared became a recurring decimal discussed everywhere in the country. The daring press was able to pick hole on these military lapses and publicize all evils associated with the military regime. Nigerians, therefore, turned averse to military government in the country, majority of whom called for the installation of a democratic governance that would allow politicians the time to learn from their mistakes and better their performances.

While *Tell* magazine was at the forefront of this struggle with bodies such as National Democratic Coalition (NADCO), the *Afenifere* (A Yoruba sociopolitical group) and others, like *Newswatch* magazine, *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, and *The Pinch* contributed to the return of democracy in the country despite the deadly disposition of the regimes of Babangida and Abacha to such pressure. The media were able to let the military know the wish of the Nigerian people. This was one of the reasons why the military then also became agitated. While some of those who were controlling the power wanted to hold on to it, others saw the need for the military to relinquish power to the people. The military no longer had one united house. There was no total loyalty among the military officers. This agitation led to Gen. Sani Abacha's framing up of his second-in-command, Gen. Oladipo Diya with the aid of "a clique" within the "clique" in the military administration of the day (*Newswatch*, 2 March 1998; *Tell*, 2 March 1998; *Newswatch*, May 1998). Just like what the media did to Babangida, they did not relent in exposing all the strategies adopted by

Gen. Abacha to seize power. The mass media were defiant of every kind of threat from the military as the country was agog with the news of military attempts at metamorphosing into a civil administration.

The military government, on the other hand, made use of the broadcast media of the military regime which as a propaganda instrument in countering the picture the press was able to present to the Nigerians. Uche Chukwumerije, the minister of Information in the Abacha administration, heightened the machinery of propaganda to enable Abacha to succeed to power. But there was a great deal of tension in the country as many Nigerians developed apathy for military regimes for the first time (Ojewale 1998).

Having understood that the Nigerians were earnestly longing for a democratic government, Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar, who took over the reins of government after the death of Gen. Abacha, reconvened another constitutional conference in 1998. Such conference produced the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. On 29 May 1999, Nigeria had another democracy when Chief Olusegun Obasanjo was sworn in as the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Clearly, between 1984-1998, the mass media played actively in Nigeria's political affairs, giving rise to democracy in 1999. Though predominantly privately-owned, the media formed a common front, attacked evils in military leadership and the politicians, exposed those evils but de-emphasized attack on personalities of the politicians as well as ethnic sectionalism. This was a refocus of the same spirit of nationalism that was exhibited during the pre-independence press in the country.

### **The Nigerian Mass Media between 1999 and 2011**

Atim (2008) stresses that the first fundamental role of the media for an open society is to gather, process, and disseminate the news and information through which people in the society can be guided. He reiterates that "in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the media opportunities are expanding. The masses of any society, particularly a democratic society need information about polity to be able to make contribution towards their own governance" (Atim 2008, 477).

Ochonogor (2008) believes that the Olusegun Obasanjo civilian administration between 1999 and 2007 did not accord the mass media their well-deserved regards. However, while Ochonogor may have had a point to make here, it would be necessary to point out that across the world, the media are often seen by those in government as antagonistic, even when they know that they cannot do without the media because of the power that they wield.

Beyond every personal misgiving, the Obasanjo civilian administration must be commended for not tampering with the constitutional foundation upon which the mass media in the country have operated since 1999. Section 39 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) on “Right to freedom of expression and the press” states:

- 1) Every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference;
- 2) Without prejudice to the generality of subsection 1 of this section, every person shall be entitled to own, establish and operate any medium for dissemination of information, ideas and opinions:

Provided that no person, other than the Government of the Federation or a state or any other person or body authorized by the President on the fulfillment of conditions laid down by an Act of the National Assembly shall own, establish or operate a television or wireless broadcasting station for any purpose whatever.

Because the democratic administration has allowed the media a constitutionally assigned role, the media in the country have been able to function in line with the expectation even though there are sporadic lapses.

Licenses given to eligible Nigerians to own and run broadcast media, sales of all print media belonging to the federal government to private owners, non-shutdown of media houses even in the face of provocation, non-trial and non-imprisonment of journalists while discharging their lawful duties are a great deviation from the past. This has also contributed to media handling of political issues differently from the past. The recent enactment of the Freedom of Information Law by the country’s National Assembly is expected to boost media performance in the country as the media are vested with more

freedom to gather information from any government offices in the country hitherto claimed to be classified.

Since 1999, the mass media in the country have been handling sensitive political issues but careful not to whip ethnic sentiments. Although the media mainly mirror the society, they also have the power to confer ethnic status on any figure of their choice if they so wish (McQuail 2005). If the mass media in Nigeria were to toe the line of the old ethnic politics, they would still have done that. But, they did not. It is because the mass media in the country need to protect the democracy they have helped to bring about, and when they bark at evils in politics, they do so to protect the polity.

There are six sensitive political issues that the mass media in Nigeria have participated. These include: 1) Exposure of corrupt practices of politicians and political office holders; 2) democratic transitions of 2003 and 2007; 3) illness/deaths of late President Umaru Yar’Adua; 4) constitutional amendment; 5) unnecessary cost of running the country’s National Assembly; and, 6) the democratic transition of 2011.

#### *Exposure of corrupt practices*

Since 1999, the mass media in Nigeria have not taken side with corrupt politicians and political office holders. One of such instances was the coverage of the pre-conviction and conviction of Olabode George who was from Lagos State where over 90 percent of all the national dailies and magazines published in the country are based. Most of the owners and editors of these media are of Yoruba ethnic nationality to which George also belongs. When George was convicted of corruption, the news filled the newspaper headlines. When members of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) in Lagos rejoiced over his release, the Yoruba people including former President Obasanjo were the first to condemn such jubilation. Both broadcast and print media gave a chance to those who condemned such act to air their views (Gbadegesin 2011). As such, ethnicity was not a major issue in the politics of the current dispensation of the mass media in Nigeria. When Mrs. Patricia Ete, the first female speaker of the House of Representatives, was involved in questionable

house furnishing allowance, she was not also defended by the media, the owners of which mostly come from the Yoruba ethnic nationality to which she also belongs. Both broadcast and print media consistently reported on the issue, making it a major topic for public discussion which eventually led to Ete's resignation as speaker.

However, although the mass media in Nigeria hardly try to cover up or defend the corrupt practices of politicians based on ethnic cleavages, the same does not apply in cases where direct owners of such media are involved in corruption. The worst the media can do is to remain silent over the issue. For instance, the *Daily Independent* would not report either for or against the extradition of James Ibori, owner of the newspaper and former governor of Delta State, from the United Arab Emirates to Britain, to face corruption charges. Similarly, the *Daily Sun* would not report against or for the detention of Orji Uzor Kalu, former governor of Abia State, who is the direct owner of the media outfit. The same situation also applies to broadcast media. The mass media can subtly protect their owners' political interest by taking a different angle of the story in a way that would not obviously portray them defending their owners' corrupt practices. This, perhaps, they do to remain relevant in the current trend of mass media participation in the democratic process of the nation.

#### *Democratic transitions of 2003 and 2007*

The democracy which ushered in Chief Olusegun Obasanjo to power for four years was to terminate in 2003, giving room for a second four years of governance if the president so desired to contest. Unarguably, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo contested and was reelected. There were many irregularities surrounding the results of all the elections in that year as reported by the mass media in the country. Before the 2003 governorship election in Anambra State, the media consistently reported the suspected involvement of the governor in a murder of a couple which took place there. This incident made the governor unpopular among his people, making him unable to secure a second mandate to govern the state. His party refused to present him for a second term. Also, with

the help of the media coverage and election reportage, some of those who lost in the 2003 election as a result of fraud regained their mandate. A case in point was that of the Anambra State governorship election which was fraudulently won by Dr. Chris Ngige of the PDP but was restored to Peter Obi of All Peoples Grand Alliance (APGA) after two years. The media, especially the television and radio, were misused by some political office holders to misinform the electorate as airtime could be bought by some governors to stage-manage their so called development projects/programs. One of such was the *Ebe ano* project of Chimaroke Nnamani of Enugu State that was projected on the national network of the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) owned by the federal government for the entire nation to watch. Many people who were not from Enugu State were surprised when the former governor was arrested and detained by the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) even after he had won the 2007 senatorial election that was generally characterized as fraudulent. The media also reported the corrupt practices of the former governor.

During the general election of 2007, the mass media in Nigeria reported the flaws which were also observed by both domestic and international observers. As a result, eight states in the country did not participate in the 2011 governorship election. Yet, Nigeria's election tribunal allowed them to have by-elections in their respective states, making possible different election timetables from the general elections (Radio Nigeria, 8 April 2011).

The late President Umaru Yar'Adua appreciated the fact that the 2007 general elections were marred with irregularities. Hence, he promised to give Nigeria credible elections in 2011. Although he did not live to actualize his hope and promise, President Goodluck Jonathan renewed the promise when he took over the mantle of leadership. The media kept on reminding him of the hope and promise in different ways.

#### *Illness and death of President Yar'Adua*

When former President Yar'Adua became too sick to continue in power in November 2009 and who eventually died on 5 May 2010, a political scenario never seen before took place in Nigeria. The supremacy of the constitution

was tested against the power given to a section of the country by a political party. While the president was severely down in his sick bed, his loyalists in the Executive Council of the federation and some political elite from the same group as the late president felt that their term was not fully exhausted. Some intrigues went on in the Executive Council, depriving the vice president of the chance to act in accordance with the constitution. After a long time of foot-dragging by the Executive Council, the National Assembly yielded to the voices of the people. It amended the provision of the constitution enabling the legislature to install an acting president in cases when the president becomes incapacitated. Consequent upon the amended provision of the constitution, the former Vice President Dr. Goodluck Jonathan was sworn in as the acting president on 9 March 2010.

The mass media maintained vigilance all throughout the entire situation. They stood firm and invoked the constitutional provision to accommodate an acting president (Omatseye 2010). The mass media did not only contribute to the installation of an acting president when there was constitutional *lacuna* but also helped remove such lacuna for smooth future transition (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 as Amended). When former President Umaru Yar'Adua died, the mass media reported the sad event. They also reported the swearing-in of the new president on that same day.

### *Constitutional amendment*

During the life span of the 2007-2011 National Assembly, unsuccessful attempts had been made at amending the constitution. During the second tenure of former President Olusegun Obasanjo, the country's National Assembly attempted to amend the constitution to enable the president to serve a third term. But because this move was in a bad taste, coupled by the fact that the mass media were committed to sustaining the country's democracy, the third term issue was a topic of discussion in the country until the Senate overwhelmingly voted to reject it on 14 May 2006 (Oso, Odunlami Adaja Rufai and Atewolara-Odule 2009). The mass media were able to do this because of their persistent coverage of the National Assembly

in session. Similarly, when the National Assembly successfully amended the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and did so in good faith, the mass media earnestly publicized the process of the amendment through which some Nigerians found a loophole. As a result, the National Assembly was taken to court by a former president of Nigerian Bar Association, Olisa Agbakoba. The court declared the amendment illegal until it was assented to by the president of the Federal Republic (Amokeodo 2010).

The amended constitution was thus subjected to the president's assent on Monday, 10 January 2011 (Ogbu 2011). This is another great feat by the mass media in their bid toward sustainable democracy in the country.

### *National Assembly issue*

Tendencies for corruption are an integral part of politics in many countries of the world especially in Africa (Igwe 2010). In Nigeria, this corrupt tendency, if unchecked, has the capacity of derailing the country's democracy. This is why the mass media have a great responsibility of making public any strand of corruption identifiable in the country's body polity. When the country's Central Bank Governor Mallam Sanusi Lamido announced that 25 percent of the federal government's recurrent expenditure for 2010 went to overhead cost of the National Assembly members, arbitrarily allocating it to themselves, the mass media did not waste time in making the Central Bank governor's statement an issue for public discussions. Although the National Assembly members denied the allegation, Sanusi stood his ground and said that his pronouncement was based on recorded facts from the Budget Office (Dare 2010). The outcome of this publicity campaign was the National Assembly's cutting down of its overhead cost in 2011.

### *Democratic transition of 2011*

Usua (2010, 31) has faulted the mass media in Nigeria for manifesting evident failure of Nigeria's political system. He adds that "they have not empowered the citizens to keep an eye on what goes on before, during and after elections in order to decide who should be their political leaders."

However, this view is unfair to Nigeria's mass media. Although it is true that the mass media have really not gone down to the grassroots to capture the profiles of the grassroots politicians, there persists an issue of community communication which is still lacking in Nigeria. The mass media operating in the country are either national or regional. As such, they only focused on the profiles of those vying for positions at the national levels as well as those governors in the country before, during and after 2011 elections.

Of course, it must be noted that the mass media are not the only means through which electoral education and campaigns could be carried out. Nigeria is largely a traditional society where traditional instruments of communication are greatly credible and respected. Politicians, political parties, and the electoral commission may decide to adopt any of the traditional modes of communication, such as for instance, direct consultation with the people in the communities in reaching out to the electorate as well as keeping them abreast of the democratic process in the country.

Through the mass media, Nigeria's electorate had been well informed of the political events before and after the 2011 elections. The ways through which major parties conducted their primaries were publicized by both private and government media outfits. Major political parties in the country used mass media to carry out their campaigns. However, despite the NBC Code which provides guidelines on how the various broadcast stations should give equal opportunities to all political parties to campaign, government-owned stations especially broadcast stations violated this guideline by allotting more airtime to government political parties (NBC Code 2006). Privately owned broadcast media, on the contrary, were moderate in their coverage as their allotment of airtime was dependent on ability to pay.

One aspect of voter education which needed to be addressed in 2011 elections in Nigeria was the inability of the electorate to know all the registered political parties in the country. By extension, this means that some candidates who were presented by the obscure political parties were not known by the electorate. There are sixty-five political parties in the country but only five were known to the electorate across the country.

Nigeria's mass media, however, should not be totally held responsible for the ignorance of the voters about party obscurity. It is the parties that should start the publicity campaign themselves and find ways to be reported in the mass media.

While covering the activities of politicians and political parties during and after the 2011 elections, the mass media brought to the fore existing excesses in the system without pointing to the direction of military takeover.

The coalitions of mass media practitioners organized political debates for the presidential candidates who, through live coverage, were able to inform Nigerians of their manifestos. During the elections, various media networks and private media houses ran 24-hour live coverage, analysis and announcements of results. They included *Nigeria Decides* by Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and *Mandate 2011* by *Radio Nigeria* network. Similar programs were organized by Africa Independent Television (AIT) and other privately-owned broadcast stations.

The timely reportage of the election results and the reports of the domestic and international observers helped to douse the usual tension that followed elections in the past. The post presidential election protest and killings which took place in Northern Nigeria seemed to be a premeditated attempt to scuttle the smooth democratic transition.

Because the process of the election was devoid of ethnic attachment, a president from a very minority ethnic group of the country was elected for the very first time in the history of Nigeria.

## Conclusion

The article has briefly examined the pre- and post-independence mass media in Nigeria and their relevance to the democratic process. After the country's first independence, the mass media lost their focus and played ethnic loyalty which contributed to the derailment of democracy. Also the paper examined the ways in which the military used the mass media for its cause. The audacity displayed by the mass media in calling for a return to democracy is a rare feat.

The paper has also discussed the performance of Nigeria's mass media during the current democratic dispensation. One of the mass media's outstanding features is that in any of the watchdog activities they carried out, they made no attempt at inviting the military to takeover despite the misdemeanor of the politicians and the political system. It is also interesting to note that the Nigerians have come to terms with democracy despite the drawbacks noticed in the system. They prefer to see the country undergoing a learning process leading the nation to greater democratic performance. Nigeria is fifty years old as a sovereign nation, but it is one of the very young democracies in the world with only twelve years of uninterrupted democracy.

However, there are rooms for the mass media to improve their participation in democratic process of Nigeria. Firstly, the mass media should, in collaboration with Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the political parties, carry out much more profound voter education. Secondly, there is a need for the mass media to carry out political enlightenment programs at the grassroots level. Private individuals in the rural areas and local government councils should be encouraged to use broadcast media using local languages for political education. Thirdly, the mass media should have the commitment to avoid ethnic affiliation in its practices. And fourthly, the NBC should check the excesses of government-owned broadcast media to give way to opposition parties to campaign in the same media. If there is only one political party allowed to use a broadcast station during elections, this obviously reinforces an undemocratic practice.

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