

**THE MASS MEDIA AND THE 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Any critical analysis of the role of the media in the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria would no doubt return a verdict of poor performance by this unique modern social institution. This is with respect to the tone or content and the extreme partisanship of the Nigerian media, without exception, that is, whether one is talking of the publicly or privately owned media organizations. It is not that in electioneering campaigns even in the advanced democracies, issues that would favour a candidate and/or disadvantage an opponent may not be resorted to as such, but there is always an established boundary in journalistic practice. The established boundary shall, among other things, abhor issues such as the portrayal of blatant lying or falsehood and a breach of professional ethics. In point of fact, the media is expected to respect such “no-go areas” at all times. The paper would seek to, *inter alia*, analyze the role of elections in democratic politics; the nature of the Nigerian society, especially as it relates to its politics during the 2015 General Elections; interrogate the professional competence of the media as may be enshrined in their code of ethics; expose the basis for the blatant unprofessional behaviours of the media during the elections; to prove that in spite of the hate campaigns, the Nigerian electorate was not misled, especially given the outcome of the election; and, as a result or in spite of the outcome of the General Elections, to recommend the need to strengthen the professional code of ethics of the media, on the one hand, as well as the necessity for the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) – as one of the foremost arbiters in electorally related misbehaviours – to also flex its muscle in order to nip in the bud the ugly trend, if we are not to see its repetition with gusto in future elections, on the other hand. The paper shall equally be concerned with how the rule of law, particularly the judiciary that is the ultimate interpreter of the law, could be strengthened so that its potency could also impact on the professional competence of the media.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The 2015 General Elections in Nigeria shall go down in the country’s annals of electoral process as the most historic and revolutionary. The elections are historic and revolutionary and, in my estimation, shall ever remain so for a long time in

many respects: firstly, they were devoid of so much premeditated violence,<sup>1</sup> especially in their post-elections experience and analyses. Secondly, which is what many an analyst has been focusing on, the elections led to the comprehensive defeat of incumbents at both the federal and state levels (professor Utomi, in his uncanny way has described the outcome as a “loss by the incumbent and not a defeat.”<sup>2</sup> Leaving this debate for another time for a more crucial issue is the following: Perhaps, what may not have been looked into also because not many people have been pre-occupied with understanding what would both be the immediate and the long-term impact of the results of the elections, this paper would choose to prognosticate and to assert more or less authoritatively that the future of elections might have been significantly altered for the better for the country. This third scenario is however not the pre-occupation of this paper at this point in time.

Rather, the paper is much more concerned about the role the mass media had played. In most cases, the role was negative, condemnable, utterly and blatantly partisan as well as unpatriotic. That, in spite of such an unwholesome role, the emergent result tended to affirm the foregoing third reason that has been adduced as one of the manifestations of long-term impact of electoral politics in the country. What is being said, in other words, is that Despite this futuristic plausibility, it is still necessary to probe into why the media could be so reckless in the way it handled the process of informing, educating, and entertaining (its core mandate) throughout the electioneering campaigns as well as why it should not

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that there were no reported cases of violence before and in the course of the campaigns and/or as the elections were being carried out. The analysis of the spate of the violence shall have to await chronicling at some point in the nearest future.

<sup>2</sup> We could afford the luxury of and/or to be liberal with fanciful language; but the bottom line is the comprehensive defeat of an incumbent. It is this attitude of playing with words that is also largely responsible for the general and fashionable description of the concession made by Mr. Jonathan, which was dubbed unprecedented. The questions were and still are: Did he have an option? Could he have re-written the figures or have them doctored to favour him, especially given the charged atmosphere in the country at the point of the Presidential Election, or could he have resorted to the use of the military to fight his way back to office? Both the objective and the subjective factors on the ground did not give him any leeway other than what he did when he called General Buhari to congratulate for having won the election. For the text of Professor Pat Utomi’s interview, see *Daily Trust*, Sunday, June 28, 2015, pp.44-45.

be so henceforth, since the result has conclusively demonstrated that, one, if there is an honest election administration institution, free and fair elections could be organized; and, secondly, that the media in particular should no longer toy with the level of political sophistication of the Nigerian voting public.

The structure of the paper is as follows: first, we shall look at the role of elections in democratic politics. Second, we shall also analyze what should be the role of the mass media in the national development. This shall be followed closely by the analysis of the role of the mass media in electoral politics, as the third section. It is within this section that a sample of the negative mass media stuff during the elections shall also be analyzed. Though the stuff the mass media handled may be defined as the campaign materials of the political parties that paid to air or print them, wouldn't it, however, still be necessary for the mass media organs to impose on themselves some form of critical self-restraint in line with social ethics of morality, decency, and moderation? This line of inquiry would naturally lead us to the next (fourth) section, which is to examine extant restraints on the mass media organs that operate in the country. The fifth section shall be devoted to admonitions for such bodies that have anything to do with the electoral process, to demonstrate or embark on some proactive measures to ensure restraint on the part of the mass media outfits. These bodies include the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the judiciary, and the law enforcement agencies, particularly the Nigeria Police Force (NPF). The sixth section shall conclude the paper.

## **THE PLACE OF ELECTIONS IN DEMOCRATIC POLITICS**

Elections have a very central role to play in democratic politics if we define democracy as a procedure for electing or selecting leaders, especially in many a modern polity. Elections vary as much as there are many necessary institutional correlates that are required to be put in place, to make the entire process credible and acceptable. Elections could be held in one day or could run over a number of days. Elections going beyond one day may be due to the size of the electorate as much as they could have resulted from some administrative bungling and tardiness. India is one democratic setting in which popular elections normally go beyond one day because of the huge number of voters. Whether the number is large or small, the bottom line is that voters everywhere would like to be given the assurance that their votes would ultimately count.

While the number of registered voters is quite significant in determining the time frame within which elections are to be held, as we have argued earlier, there is also the need to have other necessary preparations and logistics to be put in place to ensure success. The logistics would include the size of the ballot papers to be printed and distributed; what means would have to be used for the distribution as well as their security. It is also instructive that efforts must be made to hire staff (both ad-hoc and permanent) to ensure the efficient handling of the processes of counting, recording, collation, and the final announcement of the results.

We mentioned above that elections vary. There could be direct or indirect elections. A direct election is one in which the voters might be asked to line up behind the picture of a contestant as the signification of their preferred choice. The election officials would merely count the voters, record the tally and declare the winner. The direct election could be by simply asking the voters to stand up, if everyone is seated, and they are counted and recorded for the candidate of their choice or be required to remain seated and merely raise their hands when the candidate of their choice is called out or identified. This kind of election can only take place in a largely rural setting, in a situation where literacy is low, and/or where the population of the voters is insignificant. Sometimes, it is the danger inherent in direct elections that does not make them amenable to wider use; otherwise, it could be very cheap to operate for a poor country.

On the other hand, what may be referred to as an indirect election is that in which some forms of secrecy are cherished. In this instance, the voter is given a ballot paper after accreditation and is required to go into a booth to make their choice before coming to drop the ballot paper in a designated (ballot) box or any material that is meant for the collection of same. The highly bureaucratic modern world makes an indirect election system a *sine qua non*. This is particularly imperative in the Third World context in which it is much easier to debase or expose the electoral process to abuses. In the event of litigation against debasement, there would be the need to bring the records for the examination for possible areas of amends.

Elections in a democracy are not always all geared towards leadership selections. Some elections are indeed conducted to either adopt a constitution or the amendment of a new *grundnorm*; or they could have been staged to resolve a

central political issue such as it is being expected that the newly elected Conservative Party Government in Britain may in the nearest future conduct a referendum whether or not the country should continue to remain a member of the European Union. The same process was what the Scottish people of Britain should continue to be part of the Kingdom or should declare its independence. In Nigeria's political history, a referendum (which is what this electoral process is technically called) was used to determine, at the morrow of Nigeria's independence from Britain, whether or not the parts of colonial Cameroon that were Trusteeship Territories should remain in Nigeria or should revert to Cameroon. While the southern part of Cameroon decided to be merged with Cameroon, Northern Cameroon voted to remain part and parcel of Nigeria. This has been the case till date.

## **ROLE OF MASS MEDIA HISTORICALLY AND IN THE COMPARATIVE NIGERIAN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES**

Mass media is conceptualized as "...the totality of organizations and agencies that provide information for the members of the public....The role of the mass media lies in making information a common knowledge or facilitating effective communication of ideas."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore and according to Ekeanyanwu (2007):

...the media exists as an organ of information sourcing and dissemination, educational promotion, surveillance, social enlightenment and mobilization. These functions set the media apart as an important link/factor in the relationship between the government and the governed and make them a sine qua non to societal growth and development.<sup>4</sup>

Finally Olukotun defines the media very broadly to include:

not just newspapers and electronic organs of communication, but the total ensemble of popular culture, which encompasses, for example, mobile

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<sup>3</sup> Iruonagbe, T. U., D. Imhonopi, and F. O. Ahmadu, "A Conceptual Review of Mass Media in Nigeria Between 1999 and 2013," in *New Media and Mass Communication*, Vol.20, 2013, pp.12-13.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p.16.

theatres, pamphleteering, neotraditional chanted poetry, and other infrapolitical vehicles of popular mobilization.<sup>5</sup>

The working definition of the mass media we would like to adopt for this paper is excluding what is popularly referred to as the “social media.” This pattern of media that has or is creating tremendous impact in networking and the sharing of information and other forms of entertainment is not yet amenable to the Nigerian audience on a large scale. Probably because of the limited scope that the “social media” has had, the average Nigerian politicians do not make use of them to project to publicize their political programmes. Reference to the mass media in the paper is therefore premised on the conventional understanding of the phrase. Put succinctly, we define mass media to include all means of communication that are both modern and are, at least, sophisticated and technologically driven. These would comprise the newspapers and electronic mass media institutions such as the newspapers and the television stations.

The mass media institution is rightly identified as the purveyor of information, enlightenment (education) and entertainment. This identification does not say anything about how accurate, relevant and necessary that description is. This is the crux of the matter, especially when the role of the institution is to be examined in relation to the electoral process, as we intend to do in this paper. More often than not, the media organizations tend to reflect the wishes and aspirations of their owners and where the owners are notable political figures, either as candidates or as influential financiers of the political parties, the objectivity that should be the hallmark of the papers and even the electronic media type tends to suffer from credibility problems.<sup>6</sup> Issues about the credibility

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<sup>5</sup> Olukotun, A., “At the Barricades: Resurgent Media in Colonial Nigeria, 1900-1960,” in A. Oyebade, Ed., *The Foundations of Nigeria: Essays in Honor of Toyin Falola*, Trenton, N. J.: Africa World Press, Inc., 2003, p.229.

<sup>6</sup> The country witnessed this scenario in the Second Republic when late Bashorun M. K. O. Abiola founded the Concord Group of Newspaper. As a leading member of the defunct National Party of Nigeria (NPN), he put all the resources of the paper at the disposal of the party, to the extent possible, to attack the opposition party – the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN). When his political ambition was later frustrated in the former party, he not only resigned from the party, but made sure that the support to the NPN was also withdrawn.

of the mass media shall be looked into when latter we assess its performance below, with regard to the 2015 General Elections.

In the foregoing quotation, mention is made of the unintended but clearly inevitable role of the mass media as an instrument of “societal growth and development.” Just like any social institution, mass media has a role to play in the development of society. This role is more pertinent with the mass media because of the tomes of information available and how such knowledge in itself is power. The manner of deployment of the enormous powers the mass media institutions possess is a major desideratum of the developmental trajectories of societies. Where such powers are deployed to chase shadows instead of the encouragement of nobler values that would more beneficial to societies, such societies in question would be worse for it.

The uniqueness of the mass media in the use of the “information power” can only be appreciated if it is put in the context of how, even low literacy level country such as Nigeria, many people tend to spend some quality time to listen to news, watch features such as drama programmes, comedies, political talks, etc., and, on the basis of the message passed through such outlets, people form their opinions about the goings-on in the country. It is instructive that some of these talks either in the electorate component of the mass media are translated into the vernacular, which makes possible to relate to them most effectively. It could therefore be imagined what could be the outcome in an electoral setting if the organs of disseminating information are mere purveyors of negativities, half-truths and character assassinations. It is therefore necessary that there exist mechanisms that could help check recklessness and bias in the manner the mass media carry out the responsibility of informing, educating, and entertaining its audience.

We shall come back to look at such kinds of mechanism to check excesses of the mass media in the Nigerian setting. At this point, it is pertinent to stress that, historically, the mass media institution has come a long way. The origins of this so-called Fourth Estate of the Realm in Nigeria are now traced to the modest effort made by Reverend Henry Townsend – a Christian Missionary – when on December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1859, he published the first edition of *Iwe Iroyin Fun Awon Egba ati Yoruba*, which could literally be translated to mean “A Newspaper for the Egba

and Yoruba Nations.”<sup>7</sup> Since then to date, the mass media in Nigeria has grown in leaps and bounds, even if some had died along the way. In terms of ownership, the trajectory, over the years, has appeared to be from heavy involvement of the private sector, at the beginning, to the period when there was an overwhelming and overbearing presence of the public sector. This was irrespective of whether we are looking at the print or the electronic media components.

A further analysis of ownership pattern would indicate that the preponderance of private ownership at the beginning was a result of the seemingly ambivalent attitude of the colonial masters to the role the mass media could play in the development of society, especially a dependent colonial one for that matter. To a large extent, they did not show much keen interest in owning and operating newspapers. But, the colonial government was reported to have sponsored one Sir Kitoye Ajasa to launch the “Nigerian Pioneer” in 1914, a pro-government newspaper.

Its objective was to protect the colonial government against the onslaught of the burgeoning Nigerian Press. It defended the government against all protests and protest movements, and opposed movements and leaders who earned government displeasure. In fact, it was generally believed that it was, in effect, a government newspaper. It sought to divide the Nigerian petty bourgeois[ie] and create a different mindset from that propagated by the Nigerian press. In the end, however, the viewpoint of the agitational [p]ress prevailed.<sup>8</sup>

The beginning of broadcasting media was witnessed when a relay a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) relay station was established in 1932.<sup>9</sup>

Since the newspaper was the much easier and cheaper to own and operate, the nationalists who were acutely aware of the tremendous role of mass media in

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<sup>7</sup> Aro, O. I., “The Nigerian Press: The Journey So Far,” *Continental Journal of Sustainable Development*, Vol.2, 2011, pp.8-19.

<sup>8</sup> Nnoli, O., *The Struggle for Democracy in Nigeria*, Enugu: Pan African Centre for Research on Peace and Conflict Resolution, 2011, p.73.

<sup>9</sup> Olukotun, A., “At the Barricades: Resurgent Media in Colonial Nigeria, 1900-1960,” in A. Oyebade, Ed., *The Foundations of Nigeria: Essays in Honor of Toyin Falola*, Trenton, N. J.: Africa World Press, 2003, p.240.

mobilization, conscientization and awareness raising against the evils of colonialism seized the initiative and establish newspapers, to do precisely that. The likes of Herbert Macaulay Ernest Ikoli, Chief S. O. Akinsanya, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Chief Anthony Enahoro, Alhaji Raji Abdallah, Abubakar Imam, etc., floated or immersed themselves in newspaper production and/or took to the journalistic profession, at least or among others, to advance the nationalist cause. This phase of the development of the mass media in Nigeria could not only be described as golden, proactive, and exhilarating, but certainly was a precursor to national development in several respects. Among the newspapers in existence before even the amalgamation of the country in 1914 and also within this period of the ferment of nationalist agitations were the *Lagos Observer*; *Nigerian Chronicle*, *Nigerian Times*, *Lagos Weekly Records*, *Lagos Times*, *Eagle*, *Lagos Critic*, and the *Nigerian Pioneer*. Others included *The Dawn*, *Nigerian Observer*, *Nigerian Echo*, and the *Nigerian Eastern Mail*.<sup>10</sup>

There has also been a period when state intervention in the mass media institution became dominant. Starting with the development of the first “Television Station in Africa,” that is, the Western Nigerian Broadcasting Service (WNBS), established by the government of Chief Obafemi Awolowo in 1959 to the post-independence era when all governments without exception took it up as a challenge to set either a radio station or its combination with the television and coupling all this with the establishment of newspaper production company. The whole idea then was the assumption that these institutions would not only help to explain government programmes to the citizens of the state (region) concerned, but that they could generate the momentum for the mobilization of the people to embark on state-wide development and, in the process, their self-actualization and improvement. At this point, especially in the seventies when the country was awash with “petro-dollar” revenues from the boom in oil production and sales, the public sector literally crowded out private sector initiatives in ownership and control. It was pervasive such that the military regime of General Murtala Mohammed had to nationalize the *Daily Times*, one of the oldest and largest independent newspaper groups in the country at that time.

Perhaps, the effervescence of the mass media institution in Nigeria was given a boost in the wake of the structural adjustment programme of the late eighties

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.236 and 240.

when, in the process of commercialization and privatization of a number of state parastatals by the General Ibrahim Babangida Administration, private interests saw a vista of opportunities and decided to invest in many private companies, including the mass media business. This time around, private initiatives went as far as or upped the ante and began to invest in radio and television stations, for the first time. The pioneers and/or the major players in this regard have included High Chief Alegho Dr. Raymond Dokpesi, John Momoh, Ben Bruce-Murray, Mrs. Chris Anyanwu, etc. Community radio stations have also sprang up and it appears the kaleidoscope is changing and changing fast.

It may be that there is huge profit to be made in mass media business; what is irrefutable is that the industry has generated a lot of employments for the Nigerian workers even if remuneration is still generally poor and unedifying. In spite of this drawback, in over 100 years of mass media development, one can assert that the institution has contributed to the development of the country. In several respects, mass media has opened up the country; it has enlightened Nigerians about our differences, similarities, the potentials of the country and the factors militating against the optimization of such potentials; it has integrated the country as much as it is also capable of disintegrating the country or setting one section against the other through sensational reportage, particularly in periods of electioneering campaigns; in short, the mass media in Nigeria, probably more than any other place on planet earth, is a “necessary evil.” In the next section, we shall embark on an analysis of this veritable institution in the electoral development cum politics of the country. In the process, most probably we shall endeavour to unearth the devil in the details of this necessary evil conceptualization.

## **THE MASS MEDIA AND NIGERIA’S 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS**

As a result of the traditional role of the mass media with respect to disseminating information, educating and entertaining its audience, the institution is the primary organ through which the politicians shall attempt to reach the optimal number of their supporters, which could also be the critically significant number required to win many an election. The connection between the politician and mass media should therefore be contextualized from the perspective of the politician who wants to win an election, whether by hook or by crook. In the process, they would work hard to capture the attention and

interest of the audience that the mass media controls. Somehow, this logic may have to be extended to the interest of the mass media institution, particularly the owner, as well: the primary interest of mass media, especially the more commercially oriented ones, is to remain in business and make good money; mass media business is not a charitable organization by any stretch of the imagination. The only caveat one would however have to enter into here is that as an organization that has financial interest, it must at the same time be conscious and appreciative of the mores of the society in which it operates and, to that extent, should be able to reflect those mores as and when it enters into the symbiotic (business) relationship with the politicians. The same admonition, naturally, should apply to the (Nigerian) politicians, as well. In other words, the politician must also realize that there is always the highest value of societal solidarity, which makes it imperative that the contest for power against other political opponents should not be a licence for mischief, national destabilization and anarchy.

Thus, in examining the role of the mass media during the 2015 General Elections, what comes out clearly is the utter neglect of not only the cardinal principle of journalistic practice (see below) by all the stakeholders – the politicians and mass media institutions and their owners – but also there was a palpable assault on the above-mentioned homilies about societal solidarity and harmony. For example, brazen lies were issued out by the organizations, as much as the politicians so long it was assumed that they would score a huge political point. Before we list the glaring negativities that characterized the political campaigns and electoral processes, it is pertinent to note that the ultimate essence for the acquisition of political power is not for its own sake, but for the higher and nobler objective of rendering services, adding value to the existential conditions of the people that may have given the mandate to the political leadership. Simply put, acquisition of power is for national development.

The 2015 General Elections could easily be described as the most rancorous, most threatening to Nigeria's territorial integrity, and the most empty of ideological content, but full of personal abuses as well as the potentials for personal vendetta. This scenario was particularly between the presidential candidates of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC). The two candidates were obviously the leading candidates

during the elections and it was estimated that, if the pendulum would swing, it was going to be between the two of them and this was eventually confirmed by the results of the elections, at the end of the day. For the presidential elections, the following constitute a small sample of some of the negative statements credited to some of the politicians, which the mass media, by definition, publicized, echoed and/or subscribed to during the electioneering campaigns:

- “Buhari is brain dead,” by Patience Goodluck Jonathan on a campaign trail;
- “Buhari shall die in Office,” paid advertisement in a number of newspapers and other such provocative outbursts by the Governor of Ekiti State, Ayo Fayose;
- “Buhari is a bloody dictator,” by Dr. Ahmadu Ali, the Director General of the President Goodluck Jonathan Presidential Campaign Organization;
- “Buhari Forged His Secondary School Certificate,” by Chief Femi Fani-Kayode, the Director of Publicity of the President Goodluck Jonathan Presidential Campaign Organization; and
- Quite a number of advertisements were aired by such electronic media such as the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and the African Independent Television (AIT) Network and in other television stations owned by the federating states that depicted General (as was then addressed) Muhammadu Buhari in lurid and negative lights.

This selection should not be seen as being partial as if there were no negative commentaries made about Goodluck Jonathan, which, as expected, the press should have carried as well. There would certainly be such commentaries; but these were more likely to be feature articles that some authors might have contributed stating their opinions about the Jonathan’s lack-lustre administration.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the Buhari Camp was wont to refer to the former’s

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<sup>11</sup> One evidence that could be cited in order to debunk equivalent smear campaigns by the Buhari Camp is most probably to ask if there is litigation from the Jonathan Camp against the Buhari Camp in respect of absurd negative campaigns. So far, none. That is the case with respect to the subsisting litigation instituted by Senator Ahmed Bola Tinubu against, among others, the Management of the African Independent Television (AIT) with regard to the slanderous commercial programme against his person during the electioneering campaigns.

administration as incompetent, clueless and corrupt; and it largely fell short of being personal.<sup>12</sup> This type of approach and form of campaign was, to a large extent, very correct, especially in such areas as the threat to national security posed by the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast Region of the country as much as the general insecurity that the citizenry was forced to go through, all the time and throughout the presidency of Jonathan. It was generally acclaimed by the voting public and even the international groups that picked up interest in the 2015 electoral processes that the Jonathan Administration was corrupt and, either by accident or design, encouraged corruption and impunity; and that it should not be re-elected. That wish was granted on the 28<sup>th</sup> March, 2015 Presidential Election when Jonathan was humiliatingly defeated.

Well, as stated in the abstract, political opponents in any democratic politics would always like to, as it were, shop for and publicize each other's weakest point(s) in order to score huge political point. But, the big question is: are there no sanctions or codes of conduct that should or could be brought about to temper excesses of the mass media, the type that was witnessed in the 2015 General Elections? Couldn't the mass media on its own exercise self-restraint, even if political opponents are dagger-drawn to inflict maximum political harm on one another? In the following section, we look at extant regulations to curb the excess of the mass media with a view to underscoring whether or not they are effective or ineffective; and, if it is ineffective, what could be done to improve on their performance.

## **REGULATIONS AGAINST POSSIBLE EXCESSES OF THE NIGERIAN MASS MEDIA**

Given the enormous powers of mass media generally, it should be expected that regulations would be put in place to check possible excesses. This may have to be done by an overarching authority – say the state – if the stakeholders could not muster the courage to do so. Indeed, there have been regulations in the Nigerian

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<sup>12</sup> There was the instance when the Jonathan Camp ran so unabashedly negative campaigns against the Buhari's person that prompted Alhaji Lai Mohammed – the Publicity Secretary of the All Progressives Congress – to respond by drawing attention that APC was aware that Patience Goodluck Jonathan – the President's wife never gave birth to a biological child. In other words, that she was a barren, but that never featured as a campaign issue throughout the election.

setting. The legion of regulations was actually started by the colonial authorities given the adversary nature of the origins of the mass media institution in Nigeria. Thus, the colonial authorities enacted the sedition law called the Seditious Offences Ordinance in 1909,<sup>13</sup> long before one could characterize the role of the mass media to have already become a thorn in the flesh of the colonialists. As Nnoli saw it, the law was “Designed to stifle [Nigerian] criticism of the colonial order [and] it effectively curbed freedom of the press.”<sup>14</sup> There were also other more subtle ways the colonial state sought to gag the media from being or becoming radicalized or openly anti-government. According to Olukotun, one of such ways was “...by withholding advertising to sanction opposition newspapers as well as actively courting and possibly subsidizing friendly newspapers such as *The Pioneer*,”<sup>15</sup> which actually Coleman opined, “defended the government on most issues and opposed leaders and movements that earned government displeasure.”<sup>16</sup>

The spate of regulations on journalistic practice did not end at the terminal point of colonialism in 1960. Since independence, the laws/decrees enacted or promulgated especially during the military era to gag mass media practice have included the following: the Defamation Act 1961; the Official Secrets Act 1962; the Newspaper (Amendment Act) 1964; the Newspaper Prohibition and Circulation Act 1967; Public Officers (Protection against False Accusation) Act No. 11 of 1976; and the Public Officers (Protection against False Publication) Decree No. 4 of 1984.<sup>17</sup> Merely looking at the titles of the laws/decrees, it is clear that the Nigerian state or its public officials, like the colonialists they replaced, were more interested in securing their positions than improving the welfare conditions of the

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<sup>13</sup> Other regulatory mechanisms on the press put up by the colonial authorities included the 1903 Ordinance which required the registration of all newspapers and another in 1917 that demanded the bonding of all editors. See Nnoli, *op. cit.*, 2011, p.71.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*: pp.70-71.

<sup>15</sup> Olukotun, *op. cit.*, p.239.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, p.239.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in F. C. Aghamelu, “The Role of Mass Media in the Nigerian Electoral Process,” in *Ujah: Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities*. It could also be downloaded as a PDF from <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v14i2.8> Downloaded on 27th June, 2015.

people who might have put them in office. It does not even show, also from the headings, if the territorial integrity of the country has been of concern to them while conceptualizing and/or enacting the string of laws and decrees. From the analysis that has been made, we have so far argued that the mass media could also be an organ of national development and national integration; the latter was demonstrated beyond any doubt during the Civil War the country went through in 1967 to 1970, that, apart from military arsenal and the fighting spirit of the men and women at the war front, the mass media was also a very veritable instrument that secured the country's territorial integrity.

Apparently and with some twist of irony, the initiative for regulating the practice of journalism in the country has been at the instance of the Nigerian state, as the Nigerian Press Council met in Ilorin from March 18 to 20, 1998, as a result of which the Nigerian Press Organization formally ratified a Code of Ethics tagged *Ilorin Declaration*.<sup>18</sup> The document contains 15 Codes covering issues such editorial independence; accuracy and fairness; privacy; privilege/non-disclosure; decency; discrimination; reward and gratification; and children and minors. Other codes include access of information; public interest; social responsibility; plagiarism; copyright; and press freedom and responsibility. In order for this paper to be really fair to the Nigerian mass media given the misgivings of the general public to the awful performance in the 2015 General Elections, it was found expedient to isolate for closer analysis the following Codes: 2, Accuracy and Fairness; 3, Privacy; 5, Decency; 6, Discrimination; 8, Violence; 11, Public Interest; 12, Social Responsibility; and 15, Press freedom and Responsibility.

- Accuracy and Fairness: i) The public has right to know. Factual, accurate, balanced and fair reporting is the ultimate objective of good journalism and the basis of earning public trust and confidence. ii) A journalist should refrain from publishing inaccurate and misleading information. Where such information has been inadvertently published, prompt correction should be made. A journalist must hold the right to reply as a cardinal rule of practice. lii) In the course of his [*sic.*] duties, the journalist should strive to separate facts from conjecture and comment.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://rjionline.org/MAS-Codes-Nigeria-Journalists> Downloaded 03/07/2015.

- Privacy: As a general rule, a journalist should respect the privacy of individuals and their families unless it affects the public interest. A) Information on the private life of an individual or his [*sic.*] family should only be published if it impinges on public interest. B) Publishing of such information about an individual as mentioned above should be deemed justifiable only if it is directed at i) Exposing crime or social misdemeanor; ii) Exposing anti-social conduct; iii) Protecting public health, morality and safety; [and] iv) Preventing the public from being misled by some statement or action of the individual concerned.
- Decency: i) A journalist should dress and comport himself [*sic.*] in a manner that conforms with public taste. ii) A journalist should refrain from using offensive, abusive or vulgar language. lii) A journalist should not present lurid details, either in words or picture, of violence, sexual acts, [and] abhorrent or horrid scenes. iv) In cases involving personal grief or shock, enquiries should be carried out and approaches made with sympathy and discretion. v) Unless it is in furtherance of the public's right to know, a journalist should generally avoid identifying relatives or friends of persons convicted or accused of crime.
- Discrimination: A journalist should refrain from making pejorative reference to a person's ethnic group, religion, sex, or to any physical or mental illness or handicap.
- Violence: A journalist should not present or report acts of violence, armed robberies, terrorist activities or vulgar display of wealth in a manner that glorifies such acts in the eyes of the public.
- Public Interest: A journalist should strive to enhance national unity and public good.
- Social Responsibility: A journalist should promote universal principles of human rights, democracy, justice, equity, peace, and international understanding.
- Press Freedom and Responsibility: A journalist should strive at all times to enhance press freedom and responsibility.

From the sample of negative electioneering campaigns that we listed earlier and going by the foregoing codes, one cannot but arrive at the conclusion that the mass media performed woefully. Muhammadu Buhari's privacy as well as the

privacy of those who were the underdog at the lower levels of competition was assaulted. Collectively, too, they were wrongfully accused and not given the right to reply. It is quite shameful that a professional body would sit down to draw up a very sound Code of Ethics and, almost without remorse, flout the code at the most crucial point – election time, especially the 2015 Elections, that were full landmines for the country. (Remember that 2015 is the year in which it was predicted Nigeria would disintegrate?) What could have been responsible for the woeful performance of the mass media: financial poverty due to poor pay packets; the poverty of conscience; or the fact that the Codes themselves do not contain punitive measures against a breach? Without any iota of doubts, journalists are among the poorly paid workers in the Nigerian labour market; but that should not be an excuse, because, if they think the most poorly paid in the labour market, they should think of their less lucky brethren who do not even have jobs. An attempt to better their working conditions is, in any case, never going to be effective if it is not carried out within the interstices of industrial relations. Seeking to cushion or ameliorate the effects of poor working conditions by mortgaging the conscience of an entire professional group to the lucre of politicians and the moneybags is not going to be the way out. The major lacuna that needs to be seriously looked into by the journalists themselves is the inclusion of punitive measures in order to rein in those with weak moral firmament to withstand intimidation and undue forms of inducement from the politicians and the moneybags.

Is there anything that could be done beyond the professional group to bring about professional integrity to those in the mass media business as well as the workers seeking fulfilling and rewarding careers? We would like to briefly talk about the Nigeria Press Council Act, which, ideally, is supposed to take up the issues of a breach of professional conduct by both the operators of the mass media organizations and their workers, to see how far it is able to discharge its obligations.

### **The Nigeria Press Council**

Probably with a view to safeguarding and improving on the professional integrity of all the stakeholders in the mass media business, the Federal Government

enacted on December 10<sup>th</sup> 1992 the Nigeria Press Council Act No. 85.<sup>19</sup> The functions of the Council as spelt out in Section 3 include:

- enquiring into complaints about the conduct of the press and the conduct of any person or organization towards the press and exercising in respect of complaints the powers conferred upon it under this Act;
- monitoring the activities of the press with a view to ensuring compliance with the code of professional and ethical conduct of the Nigerian Union of journalists;
- receiving application from, and documenting the Print Media and monitoring their performance to ensure that owners and publishers comply with the terms of their mission statements and objectives in liaison with the Newspapers Proprietors Association of Nigeria;
- researching into contemporary press development and engaging in updating press documentation;
- fostering the achievement and maintenance of high professional standards of the press;
- reviewing developments likely to restrict the supply through the press, of information of public interest and importance or which are liable to present free access of the press to information and advising and remedy such development;
- ensuring the protection of the rights and privileges of journalists in the lawful performance of their professional duties.

Sections 20 and 21, respectively, enunciate the penalties for unprofessional misconduct and offences.

The Act appears to be what is needed to promote professional integrity for all the stakeholders, but, as usual with Nigerian brands, there is always a gulf between the letter and the spirit. In other words, the Act is well spelt out, but the political will or the will power to carry out what should be done is more often than not lacking. It has become necessary to take a hard look at what really needs to be put in a place and, if it is done, to see to it that it is implemented without caring a hoot whose horse is gored. Nigeria is a country that has not developed and it is not likely to do so if the trend continues and if all we do is to moan our inability to do what is imperatively necessary without any prevarication. Indeed, it is high

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<sup>19</sup> <http://lawinnigeria.com/LawsoftheFederation/NIGERIA-PRESS-COUNCIL-ACT.HTML>

time we asked ourselves whether we are serious as a people. To be a serious people means to be disciplined, well focused and avoid the shenanigans which make us to pander to subjective issues such as where we come from, what religion someone practices, etc. In a word, the Nigeria Press Council Act should be depoliticized and its Council constituted by men and women who have integrity and are driven by values more sublime as well as more enduring.

### **The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)**

As the preeminent election administration body, there is need to strengthen it through amending the law setting it up. INEC should not only register and deregister political parties, as the case may be; but it should also prosecute, especially if its laws are being broken. In the course of the 2015 General Elections, one noticed that the regulations of INEC as to when campaigns could start were blatantly flouted by, in particular, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and INEC appeared to be or was seen by many, including yours sincerely, to be helpless. Up to the time the election results were being authenticated and announced, people simply assumed that INEC was on the pay roll of the PDP and that the return of that party to power was just a question of when the elections would be held and the results announced. This paper does not believe that a prosecutorial power of INEC would compromise its neutrality as an umpire. If it does not have that kind of power, its law should be amended to incorporate it, with a view to strengthening it the more. Such prosecutorial powers would have allowed INEC to pounce on even some of the mass media organizations that equally flouted a number of decent behavioural and professional modes of carrying out their responsibilities with impunity. The fact of INEC's legal limitations allowed them to go scot-free. All the same, a major point that should be taken from the excellent performance of INEC in the 2015 General Elections is the fact a height has been attained in terms of the good conduct of elections in Nigeria such that the country cannot look back again. The singsong must now be that we need to do better than we previously performed. To be able to do so, all loopholes that people used to exploit and are still determined to exploit, must be blocked, willy-nilly.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The paper set out to examine the role of the mass media organizations in Nigeria during the 2015 General Elections. The paper stressed the pivotal role elections play in democratic politics and welcomed the gradual but steady progress being made in that direction. The paper was happy that the performance of the election administration body was acknowledged by all and sundry. Of course, the excellent performance should be regarded as work in progress, which, by definition, could and should be bettered the next time around.

It is the conclusion of the paper, therefore, that in order to attain that improvement, the next time around, it is imperative that all hands must be on deck. Starting from the mass media that could not be alive to its responsibilities in terms of reporting news factually, shunning hate campaigns, unable to stand by its code of ethics, and posing as potential agent of destroying the country; to the Nigeria Press Council that has a law it is diffident to implement; to the Independent Electoral Commission of Nigeria (INEC) that is limited by law to prosecute airing mass media and good-for-nothing political party that failed woefully in moving the country a notch higher than when it took over power after the previous (2011) General Elections, the paper advises that let all the weaknesses be addressed with seriousness, a sense of sincerity, focus and purpose, as well as the discipline that shall ensure the shenanigans that have held us up from developing shall be extirpated. In short, the success of the 2015 General Elections should actually be the defining moment for the quantum take off of the country to higher and nobler achievements.