

The Mass Media and the Struggle for Democracy in Africa: The Nigerian Experience

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of the mass media in the struggle for civil democratic rule in Africa with a special focus on Nigeria from 1993 to 1999. The paper argues that Nigeria for the most part of her post-independence existence had been under military rule. But 1993–1999 was marked by an unprecedented military dictatorship leading to the suppression and muscling down of democratic forces and the eventual annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections presumably won by Chief M.K.O. Abiola, which was generally believed to be free and fair. The mass media having fought for the nation's independence stood diametrically opposed to continued military rule and insisted on the country's return to civil democratic rule. To achieve this, the mass media extensively and effectively employed anti-military publications and reportage mostly at the risk of losing their lives to expose the evil and misrule of military rule in order to mobilize the civil societies against the military juntas. This resulted in series of episodes of mass protest, industrial strife, and civil disturbance across Nigeria by various civil society groups and labour unions.

In spite of the hostile environment created by the military such as arbitrary arrest and detention of journalists, political assassination, extra-judicial killings, abuse of human rights, closure of media houses, seizure of publications among others, the Nigerian media kept its resilience in the anti-military struggle. This paper concludes that the struggle by the mass media against the military regime between 1993 and 1999 extensively tarnished the image of the Nigeria military junta and resulted in both international and domestic pressures that eventually forced the military to cede power to a democratically elected government in 1999.

Keywords: mass media, democracy, struggle, military dictatorship.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term mass media has been described differently by various authors and commentators. It has been variously defined to mean channel, vehicle, medium, conduit or “any agency, modern or traditional”, that is used by practitioner to inform a “wide and diverse audience” for the purpose of influencing the government or the people (Janda et al. 1998: 96; Ngoa 2010: 3; African Leadership Forum 1991: 2). It includes the print media such as newspapers,

magazines, journals, books and other forms of publications and the broadcast media transmitted through sound and visual images such as the radio and television (Janda et al. 1998: 96). Breakthrough in technology has introduced new medium such as the internet, fax among others. In Africa, it may include traditional media such as oration, poetry, folk music etc. In the context of this paper, the term mass media refers to medium of communication such as the newspaper, magazine, radio and television.

The mass media has long been a vanguard of social struggle and change in the African continent. It played a crucial and active role in the anti-colonial struggle and was instrumental in the eventual attainment of political independence of many countries on the continent. During the colonial period, the mass media was particularly useful in exposing the misrule, exploitation and evil of colonial rule to the international community and the mobilization of the civil society groups to mount pressure on the colonial government that eventually culminated in the independence of African colonial territories (Adesoji 2006: 38). In Tanzania, Ghana, Namibia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Gambia, and much more lately in South Africa, the successes recorded by nationalists such as Julius Nyerere, Kwameh Nkrumah, Obafemi Awolowo, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Nelson Mandela in their struggles against the colonial governments were very much tied to the resilience and vibrancy of the anti-colonial press. For example, the African National Congress (ANC) virile propaganda machine personified in Nelson Mandela and the anti-apartheid press (the alternative press) became an arrowhead of the liberation struggle (Ngoa 2010: 9). Similarly, in Ghana, the late Kwame Nkrumah's independence struggle successes were attributed to a vibrant anti-colonial press (Ngoa 2010: 9). In the specific case of Nigeria, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe anti-colonial campaign was very much associated with his media organization *The West African Pilot* (Malaolu, 2004; Ngoa, 2010; African Leadership Forum, 1991). Other mass media outfits such as *Lagos Weekly*, *The Daily Comet* etc. became the voice of African nationalists.

The period immediately after 1960 when many African countries got independence saw a gradual drift towards military dictatorship as many of the elected governments that took over political power from the departed colonial masters were ousted out of power in a wave of military coup d'état that swept through the continent. Within the first two decades of independence, the soldiers forcefully removed [most] of Africa's ...first set of post-colonial [elected] political leadership (Ngoa 2010: 10). According to Chazan et al., "virtually every African state has been subject to an attempted coup, until recently the armed forces ruled in almost half of the continent. At least a third of the countries in the Sub-Saharan region have had military takeovers" (Agbese 2004: 58) thereby setting the stage for prolonged and protracted military dictatorship across the continent. The mass media having fought very hard for African independence could not close its eyes to Africa's slide into protracted military autocracy, corruption, bad governance, economic exploitation and all

manners of misrule meted on the African population by indigenous military leaders and in some cases in conjunction with Western imperialist class. The Africa media quickly took up the responsibility and constituted itself in opposition to military rule insisting on democracy and democratization. This position was succinctly captured by Oyovbaire (2001: 2) when he asserts that:

In the period leading to independence, the "watch-dog" enterprise was against the "British-colonial masters and colonialism". After independence, that enterprise logically shifted focus away from the perniciousness and arbitrariness of colonial rule to the inadequacies, fractiousness and excesses of the Nigerian political class which had replaced the "British colonial masters"

In many African countries, the military, in their desperate effort to cling unto power, became highly authoritarian and adopted unpopular measures to quell dissenting views and suppress opposition. In spite of the harsh and hostile atmosphere created for the media by successive military leaders in Africa since independence through the promulgation of censorship laws, closure of media houses, seizure of publications, arrest, detention and killing of journalists among others, the media kept its resilience in anti-military struggle. The African mass media played critical role in inspiring and galvanizing the popular demand for democratic reforms that occurred in many parts of Africa in the early 1990s which gave way to the wave of democratization that swept through continent in that decade.

In Nigeria, the period 1993–1999 witnessed unprecedented military dictatorship characterized by brazen autocracy, wanton human rights abuse, suppression of political opponents, corruption, bad governance, economic mismanagement, expensive and deceitfully crafted but failed transition programmes when other regions of the world were progressively headed towards democratization. The frustration and apathy that followed this development terminated the aspiration of a possible transformation to a civil democratic rule in Nigeria. The military ensured that it succeeded in subduing almost all opposition against it except a courageous mass media which sustained strong opposition against military rule until May 29 1999, when the military formally handed over power to a democratically elected government in Nigeria. The courageous role played by the media earned her the respect and commendation of many across the world including Prof. Wole Soyinka (a celebrated Nigerian playwright, poet and social critic), who described the Nigerian mass media as the 'hero of Nigeria's democracy'. It is against this background that this paper examines the mass media and the struggle for democracy in Nigeria between 1993 and 1999.

2. A SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY PRESS

The social responsibility press perspective owes its origin to a project requested by the founder of Time Magazine, Henry Luce in 1942. At this time, it was believed that the First Amendment freedoms were being increasingly threatened by the rise of totalitarian regimes throughout the world (Middleton 2009: 3). The project was led by the then-president of the University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins (Middleton 2009: 3). Robert Hutchins and his colleagues consequently produced the report of the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press of 1947. The first formal theory of social responsibility of the press was developed by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm about a decade later in 1956. The authors were clearly inspired by the Hutchins initiative (Middleton 2009: 4).

The social responsibility model is based on the idea that media have a moral obligation to society to provide adequate information for citizens to make informed decisions (Ostini and Fung 2002: 42). The main assumption of this perspective is that independent press will serve as a watchdog over societal institutions through objective and accurate reportage, and are expected to inform the citizenry of what goes on in the government, which, in a way, keeps rulers in check (Owens-Ibie, 1994). In so doing, the mass media would serve as the voice of the people particularly the less privileged. The theory presumes that the practitioners of mass media, by the privilege conferred on them by their profession, should be socially responsible to serve public interest (Baran and Davis 2006: 113). This virtue, the theory holds must be upheld even if it affects profit and antagonizes the interests of the ruling class.

The social responsibility perspective encourage the mass media to see itself as frontline instrument in the struggle for and the preservation of democracy in conjunction with civil society and other progressive groups in the society. Baran and Davis (2006: 113) argue that by helping pluralistic groups, media were building a wall to protect democracy, from internal and external foes. Iyare (2004: 207) summarized the main thrust of social responsibility theory as follows:

- (a) Servicing the political system by providing information, discussion and debate on public affairs.
- (b) Enlightening the public so as to make it capable of self-government.
- (c) Safeguarding the rights of the individual by serving as the watchdog against government.
- (d) Serving the economic system primarily by bringing together of buyer and sellers of goods and services.
- (e) Providing entertainment.
- (f) Maintaining its own self-sufficiency so as to be free from the pressure of special interests.

This perspective is useful in explaining the role of the Nigerian mass media in its struggle against military rule in Nigeria from 1993–1999. The struggle started

when General Babangida annulled the June 12, 1993 presidential elections which should have concluded the transition to the Third Republic (Ibagere and Omoera 2010: 70). General Sani Abacha, having forcefully seized power from the Interim National Government which he was part, further prolonged military rule in Nigeria. To perpetuate himself in power, General Abacha embarked on a brazen elimination of perceived and imagined opposition against his rule particularly the mass media and pro-democracy groups who opposed the continuation of military rule.

Under the Abacha self-succession programme, the emasculation of political opponents and civil society was dramatic (Aiyede 2003: 11) such that the military successfully overwhelmed all elements of opposition against it leaving the mass media as the last line of defense. The Nigerian mass media took up the social responsibility to engage in a courageous anti military struggle in spite of the hostile environment created by the military regime. The mass media despite loss of profit, the risk of arrest, detention and loss of live maintained its anti-military posture by continuously informing the public on the misrule and demerits of military rule and the merits and virtues of democracy. During this period, the media lend itself to use by pro-democracy, human rights and other civil society groups. This was critical in the mobilization of local and international support that mounted pressure on the Nigerian military government that eventually led to the handover of power to a democratically elected government in May 1999. The role played by the mass media in the struggle against military in Nigeria between 1993 and 1999, is thus seen as socially responsible.

3. SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

The end of the Cold War symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Bloc (Edoho 1997: 1) ushered in a new international atmosphere based on the supremacy of western liberal ideology of democracy, human rights protection, good governance, economic liberalization, women empowerment among others. More importantly, this development brought to the fore “free and fair multiparty election... as the test of government’s legitimacy” (Ellis 1996: 6). As a result, democracy and its corollary principles became the yardstick to measure the credibility of national government as well as a defining factor for Western nation’s interactions with the rest of the world. Thus, compliance with these principles became a precondition for Western nation’s economic aid programmes and political cooperation. While the international political climate was favourably disposed towards the promotion of democracy and good governance in most regions of the world, particularly in Africa (especially after the fall of Apartheid regime in South Africa), Nigeria remained

under military rule with the consequent non-observance of these Western values particularly democracy.

The annulment of the June 12 1993 presidential elections adjudged by local and international observers as free and fair, after several failed transition to civil rule programme raised doubt on the sincerity of the military rulers to return the country to civil rule. This also frustrated the collective aspiration of a possible future democratic rule in Nigeria. Akinboye and Anifowose (2008: 252) trenchantly observed that:

The annulment of the June 12 1993 Presidential election was the climax of political intrigues and manipulations embarked by Gen. Babangida in order to realize his self-succession bid through a process of transformation from military to civilian president.

Sklar rightly observe that General Babangida's decision to annul the June 12 presidential elections and to terminate a six year transition programme that was near completion only succeeded to draw the ire of the international community and raised domestic hostility (Ngara 2002: 43) towards the Nigeria military government. The consequent tension and public restiveness that greeted this development compelled General Babangida to abdicated power to an Interim National Government (ING) headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan on August 27 1993 (Harriman 2006: 11). The ING, lacking in legitimacy to govern was bedeviled with similar opposition and agitation to revalidate the June 12 presidential elections.

On November 17 1993, General Sani Abacha, who was the Minister of Defence of the ING in what was popularly described as a palace coup toppled the ING and assumed power as the head of state. General Abacha's government faced consistent and sustained opposition by a section of the mass media, pro-democracy and human rights groups for failing to return the country to democratic rule. In his desperate effort to cling to power, General Abacha, became highly authoritarian and embarked on massive and brutal suppression and elimination of all perceived and imagined opponents to his rule through crackdown on critics, promulgation of draconian decrees inimical to press freedom, arrest and detention of journalists, closure of media houses, seizure of publications as well as assassination of key opposition figures. Abubakar (2001) described the Abacha era (1993–1998) as Nigeria's dark days because of massive corruption, gross abuse of human rights as well as the total absence of the rule of law in the conduct of state-society affairs.

On October 1 1995, Abacha announced a transition time-table to return the country to democratic rule. The transition programme which was expected to end in October 1998, with a formal handover of power to a democratically elected government became a repetition of Babangida's aborted transition programme (Akinboye and Anifowese 2008: 255). He registered five political parties namely the United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP), Congress for National Consensus (CNC), Democratic Party of Nigeria (DPN), Grassroots

Democratic Movement (GDM) and the National Centre Party of Nigeria (NCPN) all of which adopted him as consensus candidate to run for the presidency on their platform. To completely subdue his political opponents in order to realize his plan of transiting from military to political leader, General Abacha allegedly uncovered two coup plots against his government (believed by many to be a frame-up). The first was in 1995 involving General Olusegun Obasanjo (former military head of state), General Musa Yar'Adua (his deputy) and 38 other Nigerians and the second in 1997 involving General Oladipo Diya and 11 others who were subsequently sentenced to various jail terms.

At the height of these intrigues, the military government sponsored several organizations to perform public jamboree to beg General Abacha to contest in presidential election. According to Momoh and Thovoethin (2001: 4) the Abacha transition programme like the Babangida episodes was a political fraud designed to entrench General Abacha in power, but became inconclusive due to his sudden death. It is noteworthy that Abacha's self-succession bid almost became a reality, but for his sudden death in June 8 1998.

The demise of General Sani Abacha on June 8 1998 ushered in the regime of General Abubakar Abdulsalam (Momoh and Thovoethin 2001: 4) as the new head of state. He immediately unfolded an 11 months transition programme to terminate on 29 May 1999. General Abdulsalami given the enormous tension and pressure on the military government pursued policies different from his predecessor and quickly put in place machineries for transition to civilian rule. Within 11 months, he concluded the transition programme with a formal handover of political power to a democratically elected government.

4. THE MASS MEDIA AND THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA (1993–1999)

Since the military coups that terminated the life of the first and second republics in 1966 and 1983 respectively as well as the inconclusive military transition programme of General Babangida that ended with the annulment of the June 12 Presidential elections allegedly won by M.K.O. Abiola, the military has come to be seen as the major obstacle to democracy in Nigeria. Originally hailed as corrective, as helping to reset the democratic clock, military rule in Nigeria has always been personal rule, but the dictatorships of Ibrahim Babangida (1985–1993) and Sani Abacha (1993–1998) represented its culmination (Ifidon 2002: 111).

The annulment of the June 12 1993, presidential elections by General Babangida, an election widely believed to be free and fair, was construed by many particularly a section of the Nigerian mass media as a ploy by the military to perpetuate itself in power. The mass media responded by organizing itself in opposition to the Babangida's government who quickly bow to pressure and

handed over power to an ING. General Sani Abacha who toppled the ING also faced similar opposition from the mass media which demanded for the immediate handover of power to Chief M.K.O. Abiola, the presumed winner of the June 12 1993 elections. To achieve this objective, the media engaged in extensive reportage and publication of anti-military news and articles. The constant flow of information supplied by the media about the misrule of the military regime and the need for democratic rule proved decisive in the mobilization of the civil society as well as the international community to pressurize the military government to relinquish power. The media campaign paid off with the proliferation and activism of opposition groups such as the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), Constitution Rights Project (CRP), Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CDHR), National Association of Democratic Lawyers (NADL), National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), Campaign for Democracy (CD) and the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) (Obi 2000: 77). The activities of these groups gave further inspiration to the struggle resulting in widespread anti-military demonstrations, strikes and other forms of public protests to demand the revalidation of the June 12 presidential elections mandate.

The struggle by the mass media against military rule was not limited to the domestic front, the media extensively campaigned for the imposition of international sanctions on the Nigerian military government in order to make governance difficult for the military and force it out of power. Some influential American media such as the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Washington Times* frequently featured anti-military articles and editorials against the Nigerian military regime. The mass media, which saw the pro-democracy struggle in Nigeria as an all-out war, employed several unorthodox and unethical methods in order to dent the image of the military government. According to Ray Ekpu, this tactics was necessary “to put pressure on the enemy, rally the public, local and international opinion against it, in the hope that this combine pressure would bring down the walls of dictatorship so that a new architecture can emerge from the ruins” (Iyare 2004: 217). Iyare highlighted some of the unethical tactics adopted by the mass media in its anti-military struggle as follows:

- (a) Exaggeration, sensationalism and outright fabrication.
- (b) Refusal to publish stories favourable to the military.
- (c) Denial of rights of reply to the promoters/supporters of military rule.
- (d) Denial of media access to views sympathetic to the prolongation of military rule.
- (e) Outright propaganda in favour of democracy and against military rule (Iyare 2004: 217).

Ray Ekpu observes rightly that in normal time, these strategies would be considered unethical in the practice of the profession. But those times were far from normal and even if those strategies were unorthodox, the justification for

their use was that you need abnormal strategies to deal with an abnormal situation particularly since the enemy employ dirty tricks (Iyare 2004: 218). It should be noted that the extensive and sustained media reportage of the events in Nigeria, apart from exposing the misrule, poor human rights records, monumental corruption and bad governance that characterized the Nigerian military government, it also tarnished its credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of local and international public. This helped in galvanizing and strengthening the pro-democracy movements and resistance against the Abacha military government.

In the course of this struggle, the mass media effectively mobilized the civil society to protest against the programmes and policies of the military government. The civil unrest that characterized this period led to profound domestic political and economic instability. Also, numerous international sanctions were imposed on the country such as economic and trade blockage, travel ban and visa restrictions on all top government functionaries as well as other scandalous diplomatic crisis. For instance, the U. S. government declared Nigerian airports as unsafe for flight operations. For that reason, it stopped direct flight and so did the British government. This cost the nation significant loss in revenue generation (Newswatch 1994: 12). Similarly, Nigeria's bid to host the 1995 Cocoa-Cola Junior World Championship was scuttled. Nigeria withdrew as defending champion from South African Nation's Cup as response to South Africa's withdrawal of Nigeria's invitation to the SIMBA four Nation's Tournament at the wake of the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni environmental activists. The Confederation of African Football (CAF) also imposed sanctions on Nigeria for failing to participate in the 1995 African Nation's Cup. *The Guardian* reported that no fewer than 150 companies pulled out of Nigeria. These include textile giants like President Industries Ltd., Western Textile Mills Plc, Unilever Nigerian Ltd., Pfizer International Incorporate (Ngara 2002: 84-5). The tremendous domestic and international political and economic instability created by these struggles made the Nigerian state almost ungovernable for the military regime.

As the mass media and pro-democracy groups continue to press for democratic reforms, the Abacha regime also worked very hard to weaken the movement by undermining their cohesion and ability to mobilize the populace against the state" (Aiyede 2003: 5). In 1997, *the Guardian* reported General Abacha to have lamented that the Nigerian media had become unpatriotic institutions which tended to misinterpret the notion of free speech and freedom of the press to mean a license of defiance to defame individuals and governments and to destabilize society (Olutokun 2004: 63). The Abacha military government thus resorted to the use of excessive violence to clamp down on the media through frequent harassment, seizure of publications and closure of media outfits. According to Ajebode (2010) in 1993 alone, 70,000 copies of *Tell* magazine, 50 copies of *Tempo*, 50 copies of the first edition of *The News* and thousands of copies of *The Sunday Magazine* (TSM) were seized

by security agents. Similarly, in 1994, the government closed down the *Guardian*, *Concord* and *The Punch*. On these occasions, all the publications of these media houses (spanning twenty titles) were seized (Olukotun 2004: 32). Journalists were also targeted for arrest and detention and sometimes killed. This forced many of them to flee out of the country for safety. For instance, Godwin Agbroko (*Week*) and Dapo Olorunyomi (*The News*) were detained and beaten with rods and electric batons. Nosa Igiebor and Onome Osifo-Whiskey (both of *Tell*) spent six months in detention. Babafemi Ojudu (*The News*) was detained for eight months without being allowed a change of clothes (Ajobode 2010: 11).

Similarly, the publisher of *Razor Magazine*, Mr. Moshood Fayemiwo, Tony Irolade and Alex Kaba of the *News/Tempo* were also arrested and detained at different times, while others like Chris Anyanwu, publisher of *TSM*, Kunle Ajibade, executive editor of *The News* magazine, George Mba of *Tell* magazine and Ben Charles Obi of *Classique* were sentenced by a secret military tribunal to various jail terms over alleged involvement in the 1995 phantom coup (Malaolu 2004: 22). Also, several members of human rights groups, such as Tunji Abayomi, leader of Human Rights for Africa, and Beko Ransome-Kuti, Chairman of the Campaign for Democracy were either arrested or arraigned (Mustapha 1995: 15). Media organizations, such as *Newswatch*, *Tell*, Radio *Kudirat* as well as pro-democracy and human rights groups like NADECO, CD, NADC, and JACON, CLO, CRP and CDHR were demonized in the government-owned media as being externally funded to destabilize Nigeria (Obi 2000: 77). In extreme cases, Bagauda Kaltho (*The News*) was abducted and killed, and Tunde Oladepo (*The Guardian*) was killed in his house, while Alex Ibru, publisher of the *Guardian* was shot but escaped with injuries (Ajobode 2010: 11–12).

To counterweight the independent media, the military government bankrolled several media organizations to openly canvass for the prolongation of military rule and counter the democratization pressure (Aiyede 2003: 7). Ethnicity and religion was craftily manipulated by the regime to divide the ranks of the Nigerian media especially between the northern media (pro-military) and southern media particularly the Lagos-Ibadan axis (anti-military). In this face-off, the southern mass media were accused of pursuing a southern agenda other than democratization. Jibo and Okoosi-Simbime (2003: 183) recognized this tendency when they assert that “when a national issue enters the public domain for debate, the Nigerian media often, though not all the time, takes a North-versus-South position on it” For instance, *Daily Times* and *New Nigeria* newspapers (with northern ownership) were extensively used by the Abacha regime to counter the Lagos-Ibadan axis press. This section of the press widely reported and published articles that either eulogizes the person of General Sani Abacha, support his self-succession bid or engage in outright attack on the southern press; and in some cases engage in destructive criticism of democratic government. For example, an article published in *Daily Times* underscores this point:

The principles of patriotism and compassion have been the driving force behind General Abacha's several populist programmes in government. In fact, he is the people's general who had always made himself available for national service in moments of travails even at the risk of his life... History bears witness that it was General Abacha's timely intervention in the government of the country on November 17, 1993 that save the country from total disintegration... No other person would have managed Nigeria better (Animasaun et al. 1997: 6).

Similarly, in November 1997 when an interview was granted to Walter Carrington (then US ambassador to Nigeria) on the state of Nigeria which featured mostly in the Lagos-Ibadan axis press, an editorial published in the *New Nigerian* responded as follows:

The Nigerian media to me seem to be oblivious of the reality on the ground that, the administration of General Sani Abacha has recorded significant achievement in the last four years... some of us see the recent series of interviews in virtually every Lagos newspaper granted by Walter Carrington as trying to run Nigeria from American embassy in Lagos and through the pages of *Guardian*, *This Day*, *The Punch*, the *National Concord*, the *Nigerian Tribune* and a few others, within the dictate-to-them concept of American imperialism. When the attempt to run Nigeria by Carrington... failed, the media did the failed ambassador's bidding by attempting to set agenda for General Sani Abacha... (*New Nigerian* 1997: 5).

General Abacha regime also employed the use of state security agents to haunt and track down journalists. This led media practitioners to devise new strategy of operation from hideout-a strategy which has come to be termed as guerrilla journalism in which "banned news magazines [are] produced by plucky journalists who investigate, write, edit, publish, sleep, and eat in hiding, on the run" (Diamond 1997: 34). In the words of Ayo Olukotun the:

Sustained security siege on the opposition media and the outright closure and proscription of newspapers, forced a section of the media to develop an underground strategy to stay in business and to struggle against dictatorship. This was a notable departure in state-media relations and involved a hit and run operative style, in which journalists operating from hideouts continued to publish critical journals in defiance to the state (Iyare 2004: 216).

Leading media organization such as *Tell*, *The News* and private radios like *Radio Kudirat* had to publish and operate from unknown locations to avoid arrest and seizure of publications by coercive state agents. Olukotun notes that the guerilla media filled a crucial gap in getting people informed on goings on (sic) in government especially about those aspects which the government would

like to conceal and provided opportunity for pro-democratic movements to voice out and challenge the military authoritarian rule (Iyare 2004: 217). Due to the high level violence deployed by the Nigerian military government between 1993 and 1994, Amnesty International reported that no fewer than 200 pro-democracy protesters were killed by security forces (Imade 2001: 3).

As pressure on the military government to democratize heightened, the Abacha regime in 1996 unveiled a three years transition timetable, although the media earlier warned that the military government was insincere about its intention to handover power, two years later, it became clear that General Abacha wanted to succeed himself as civilian president. The five registered political parties (described by critics as the five leprous fingers of the same hand) all endorsed General Abacha as the sole candidate to run for presidency. On March 3, 1998, General Sani Abacha, who was bent on continuing to rule the nation as a life president, deployed state resources to back a youth rally tagged 2 Million Man March in the national capital of Abuja (Adagunodo 2003: 260). The rally was widely known to be inspired by some shadow political groups that went by the name Youths Earnestly Asks for Abacha (YEAA) and the National Council of Youth Association of Nigeria (NCYA). The rally was coordinated by one Daniel Kanu and Alhaji Iliya Ibrahim (Adagunodo 2003: 260). The two-million man march was to beg a purportedly reluctant General Abacha to run for the presidency and this public spectacle was widely broadcasted by government-owned media organizations across the country. In response, the United Action for Democracy (UAD) led by Olisa Agbakoba organized a five million-man march in Lagos to counter the Abuja march, demanding the termination of military rule, the release of all political prisoners... and the convening of a sovereign national conference. This was dispersed by the police and Agbakoba was arrested and detained (Obi 2000: 78). The independent media gave wide and extensive coverage to this event in order to show that there were more pro-democracy supporters in the country than pro-military followership.

In August, 1998 General Abacha suddenly died in office and General Abulsalami Abubakar took over power as head of state. Even though General Abdulsalam pursued reconciliatory policies by releasing all detained pro-democracy activists and journalists and normalized media-state relations with the promise to return the country to democratic rule, the mass media nevertheless continued to mount pressure on the military government until democracy was restored on the 29 May 1999.

5. CONCLUSION

The mass media played a key and leading role in the struggle for democracy in Nigeria from 1993–1999. The role played by the media shows that the Nigerian media just like in the colonial days remain an important agent of revolutionary change. The media, not only performed its traditional role of supplying the people with information about the daily events that affects their lives, but also assumed a responsive role of shouldering the burden of the Nigerian society by fighting an overzealous military dictatorship when virtually all institutions of the state have crumbled in the face of military oppression. The media through extensive anti-military articles, publications and broadcasts sustained an effective struggle against the Nigerian military government through the mobilization of pro-democracy, human rights and other civil society groups to demand for democracy. This struggle became successful with the historic transfer of power by the military to a democratically elected government on the 29 May 1999.

In view of the important role the mass media has played in enthroning the present democracy in Nigeria, efforts should be made by government and stakeholders to sustain the gains by creating an enabling environment that would strengthen the capacity, independence, and security of media practitioners as a way of safeguarding and consolidating evolving democratic institutions.

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