

## The Transition and the Media

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### Abstract

*This essay examines the role which the Nigerian media played in the transition from military rule to elected civilian government. It observes that the immediate political context of the transition was a post-Abacha liberalizing military administration as well as a resurgent civil society. This context meant that the media was able to play a relatively robust role in reporting and influencing the transition although the fact that the Abdulsalami Abubakar regime refused to repeal several "death decrees" targeted at the media remained a key constraining factor on the boldness and imaginativeness of the press in its reporting and monitoring of the transition. Furthermore, while the media, in all its plurality, offered coverage to all of the political parties, it was equally clear that the better financially-endowed People's Democratic Party (PDP) which also emerged as the dominant party was able to win greater advantage over the two other political parties, namely, the All People's Party and the Alliance for Democracy, through the purchase of advertisement space in the print and electronic media. On the whole, the Nigerian media played its role in the transition with credit and whatever weaknesses are observed in its performance and in the skewing of the outcomes of the transition owe more to the shallowness of the transition itself and less to the shortcomings of the media.*

### Introduction and Overview

Although radical and orthodox political scientists have long recognized the centrality of the media to governance and political change, they have paid surprisingly scant attention to studying the linkages between them.

The current wave of democratization has reaffirmed the importance of the media, as a vital artery of civil society in delegitimizing autocracies, in fostering transition projects, as well as in consolidating and sustaining, infant democracies

(Olukotun & Omole, 1999). International Election monitoring, to take an instance, has very often zeroed in on the unequal access of competing parties to media coverage. For example, the Commonwealth Observer Group to the Presidential, Parliamentary and Civic Elections in Kenya in 1992, observed that;

Even before the opening of the official campaign, opposition parties began to complain that they were being denied reasonable access to the media in general and to the publicly-owned radio and television in particular ... Indeed this became one of the most contentious issues during the campaign. (Reproduced in *Media Rights Agenda/Carter Centre workshop publication*, p. 25).

As scholars like Jackobowicz (1995) have shown, the media in transitory politics are also in transition, and cannot be viewed as neutral references standing above society. Drawing on the experience of the Eastern European transitions, Jackobowicz posited that;

The less democratic a state the more it is likely to perceive all the media as playing a political role and therefore requiring strict supervision. Such a state is prone to use administrative methods and possibly coercion (Jackobowicz, 1995:127).

Given that authoritarian governments, military or civilian are more anxious to determine the representations of reality conveyed by the media, or at least skew them in their favour, it should surprise no one that the media are enlisted in the fray during election periods.

The Nigerian transition took place under a liberalizing military regime, which acted as the umpire of the transition, and more or less determined the political and cultural space within which the media could report, the elections. Given that the transition itself eventually came about after several failed attempts, and as a result of pressures by the international community acting in tandem with a resurgent civil society, there was understandable care to present an acceptable face and come up with a passable outcome. Thus, the government put no overt pressures on the media prior to, during and after the various elections.

Indeed, it relaxed the siege under which the media operated in the dark period of the Abacha days by freeing journalists detained by General Abacha. The situation, however, fell short of a level playing field in that General Abubakar "... enigmatically held on to those decrees under which a violent siege was laid on the media and free expression" (Olukotun, 1999a:3), although he did not enforce those decrees.

It could be argued, therefore, that election reporting and coverage by media would have been bolder and more imaginative had Abubakar abrogated the "death decrees" on the statute books; as he was repeatedly urged to do. While the plural nature of the media, and their resilience deriving from several anti-dictatorship struggles, made it difficult for any group state or non-state to control them, in the end the media obeyed an economic logic by on the average giving more prominence and attention to the People's Democratic Party, (PDP) than the other two parties, the

Alliance for Democracy (AD) and the All People's Party (APP) which ran the presidential election on a single ticket.

As we shall see, however, no simple conclusion can be drawn from that fact since bandwagon effect, bigger advertising-spending, better professional campaign methods and money politics, are all competing explanatory variables.

Within its several constraints the media did a creditable job of informing the electorate, uncovering abuses, raising awareness, refining policy, and sustaining discourse on post-election democratic development. As is well known, however, the transition was a shallow one, witnessing several abuses and logistical hitches.

As at July 2000, the democratic regime falls short of consolidation, and is assailed by centrifugal divisions, religious polarizations, communal violence and debilitating intra-governmental conflicts. It is more properly categorized, following (Diamond, et al, 1999:2) as "a low quality democracy" where the regime tends to "remain shallow, corrupt vulnerable to plebiscitarian styles of rule, and incapable of guaranteeing basic civil liberties".

The next section offers a contextual and historical backdrop, while a succeeding section discusses election reporting. We conclude by tying the issues together and looking at the future.

### **The Media—Backdrop and Context**

In an election, the media, conceived here, broadly as print and electronic organs of mass communication play the role of providing information to the voters about candidates, the electoral process, actual voting dates, rules of the game, and much else. Concerning the candidates, for example, it is important for voters to know their qualifications, opinions, voting record, where they exist, and personality traits. Voters, in order to make a clear choice rely on the media for information the policies and manifestos of the respective parties. Finally, the media monitor elections by reporting their conduct (sometimes through live coverage on television), unearthing abuses and rigging, as well as by publishing results. In short, they are part of the apparatus for vetting and legitimizing elections.

How the media perform the roles enumerated above, is obviously a function of their antecedents and culture; the regulatory environment (legal, political and economic) in which they operate, as well as traditions and standards of journalism in the country.

Nigeria has the biggest and most virile press community in Africa followed by South Africa and Kenya (Park, 1993:1). One source put the number of publications (weeklies, dailies and magazines) at 116 (Ogobodu, 1986:81), although a number of these are fickle and are at the margins of survival. Indeed, one consequence of the economic downturn of the 1980s and 1990s and specifically a consequence of hostile authoritarian economic policies towards the press, is that as at 1999, the combined circulation of all newspapers do not reach half a million, in a country of 100 million or so citizens. If we add the circulation figures of the magazines and other publications, to those of newspapers, they barely hit the one million mark.

*The Punch*, a privately-owned newspaper is perhaps the most widely-read newspaper and its print run is between 60,000 and 80,000 copies per day. *The Guardian*, a favourite of the intellectuals and respected for its independent, sober views, had a print-run in 1999 of between 50,000 and 70,000 copies per day. Other newspapers such as the privately-owned *National Concord*, *This Day*, *Post Express*, *The Vanguard*, as well as the state-owned *Daily Times*, and the *New Nigerian*, do less well in circulation terms than *The Punch* and *The Guardian*. The magazine market is dominated by three giants, namely, *Tell Magazine*, *The News* and *NewsWatch*, and have circulation figures of about 100,000, 80,000 and 50,000, respectively.

One under-reported, but increasingly assertive newspaper genre are the vernacular newspapers, which in the Yoruba-speaking region made a rebound in the closing years of military rule. A rash of vernacular newspapers have sprung up in recent years, trying to build on the success of Alaroye whose circulation competes favourably with the most successful national dailies (see Olukotun, 1999b; Dare, 1999). In broadcasting, there are close to 45 television stations, with about 10 of these in private hands, while of the 44 or so radio stations, a handful are privately owned following the deregulation of broadcasting by the state in 1994 (Bankole, 1995; Olukotun, 1996). The most successful private electronic media are AIT and MINAJ televisions as well as RayPower Radio, all of which offer refreshing contrasts to the heavily state-controlled contents of state electronic media. (Olukotun, 1997a, 1997b).

As in Kenya, publications rise, fall and are sometimes reborn with dizzying regularity. This is particularly true of the genres of afternoon newspapers, soft-sell magazines as well as newspapers owned by sub-national authorities. Take *The Diet* newspaper, for example. It was founded in 1997 by Mr James Ibori, a close ally of the late dictator, General Sani Abacha. In 1999, most of its staff had walked out as a result of the non-payment of salaries for several months—a typical syndrome in Nigerian press culture. The paper virtually grinded to a halt in late 1999. In 2000, its publisher, now Governor of Delta State, relaunched *The Diet* as an attractive, technicolour publication.

The imposition of value added tax on inputs into newspaper production by both the Abacha and Abubakar administrations, and the consequent skyrocketing costs of production, forced many newspapers to downsize, cut back on circulation, increase cover price or simply capsize. The years, between 1994 and 1999 were harsh ones for the press, not just because of censorship decrees and frequent detention, but because of hostile economic policies. The imposition of 5 per cent Value Added Tax on newspapers in the 1999 budget by General Abubakar, stiffened further the climate in which many newspapers found themselves. Increases in cover price and advert rates by *The Guardian* and other publications in 1999 made the press even more of an elitist product than it ought to have been in an election year.

Feeble capacity of media meant that reporters lacked, often the necessary

infrastructure and ancillary materials to do an in-depth coverage of the election and resort to dubious survival strategies. For doing a live coverage of the PDP President election primaries, held in Jos, the African Independent Television (AIT), a medium on the edge of bankruptcy, presented a bill running into several thousands of Naira to the party.

As at election year, various newspapers state-owned and private were owing their staff several month of salary, ranging from 3 months to 8 months, as a result of the distress in that sector of the economy. One senior journalist observed correctly that the Nigerian journalist "goes out to work armed minimally despite today's electronic age. Side by side with his foreign counterpart he is equipped like a stone-age communicator amidst the clusters of sophisticated gadgetry presided over by his Japanese equivalent. Under these conditions, the Nigerian journalist is an unsung hero ... deplorable low wages and delayed salary payments are common" (cited in *Daily Times*, 9 June 1994, p. 20).

Most journalists are not computer literate, much less own personal computers, in spite of the arrival on the Internet of *The Post Express*, *The Guardian* and *The Vanguard*. In an age in which "electronic networks connect data bases and video cameras around the world" (Cairncross, 1997:237); one survey informs pertinently that;

A visit to *The Guardian* newsroom does little credit to its place and influence in journalism. Besides being a long clutter of tables and chairs, reporters still go through long-hand production. Very little information technology presence is felt here (*Media Review*, March/April 2000, p. 23).

As mentioned earlier, all the anti-media decrees promulgated by Generals Babangida and Abacha were on the statute books as at the time of the Nigerian election. These include, for examples; Offensive Publications (Proscription) Decree No. 35 of 1993; State Security (Detention of Persons) Decree No. 2 of 1984, under which, for instance, journalists can be detained and held incommunicado for security reasons; The Treason and Other Offences (Special Military Tribunal) Decree No. 1 of 1996; as well as The Constitution (Suspension and Modification) Decree No. 107 of 1993, which annuls a citizen's right to public apology or compensation, if he was unjustly or unlawfully detained (*see Media Rights Agenda* 1998 report; Olukotun and Osuntokun, 1999; Olukotun, 2000A).

General Abubakar, as pointed out did not enforce these decrees, unlike his predecessors Generals Abacha and Babangida; they nonetheless hovered like a sword of Damocles over journalists and other civil society groups throughout the transition. Furthermore, occasional skirmishes such as the seizure in February 1999, the month of the presidential elections of the *News Magazine* edition of 8 February, apparently due to police over-zealousness, suggests that the atmosphere was less liberal than it could have been for media work. Although the media are well known for their combative tenor and disposition and for surviving several dictatorships from the colonial times, it is clear that the military still determined the boundaries of free expression as at the time of the election and beyond it.

Another feature of the media worth noting is their overwhelming concentration in the South-west area due to historical and economic reasons. This itself has spawned a debate on media and federalism amidst allegations of a "media monopoly" by a section of the country (*see* Olukotun, 1999C, 2000B & 2000C).

Two influential media genres active in Nigeria are the international press and the emergent telematics sector; as well as the alternative press consisting of indigenous artists, orature and social criticism (Olukotun, 2000D) BBC, VOA and CNN are quite popular, in view of an esteemed higher credibility rating. They, in fact, increasingly shape the content of Nigerian media (Olukotun, 1996; Owens-Ibe, 1997). There is also a tiny but growing telematics sector featuring E-mails, Internet messages and the whole province of new information technology in which the country remains peripheral. The 1999 presidential election at a stage moved to the Internet as presidential aspirants opened up web sites to send and to receive messages.

### **Content/Coverage**

For analytical convenience, it might be worthwhile to divide media coverage of the transition into two phases: The period up till the 5 December local government elections; and the period after it. The first period was taken up mainly with foundational activities such as the setting up of the Electoral Commission; Registration of Voters and the production of a voters' register; Formation of political associations whose graduation into parties was made contingent upon their performance in the local government elections; the revision of the 1995 Draft Constitution midwived by a committee set up by government and other activities. In the second phase, we had the governorship and state assembly elections of 9 January 1999; the National Assembly Elections held mid-February, the presidential elections of 27 February and its aftermath.

First of all, let it be said that all aspects of the transition were extensively covered and intensely reported on by the media. Nigerian media culture is overwhelmingly political in its reportage and emphasis, often at the expense of other beats such as environment, human rights, gender issues, business and other aspects of life. In a campaign and transition season, newspapers and electronic media attempt to outdo one another in offering the readers up to date information and even exclusive stories as part of gaining a market advantage or at least preserving their market share, in a keenly competitive milieu. Readers are offered, however, a somewhat predictable fare of straight political reporting, day after day by ten or more newspapers, relying on broadly the same sources for their information. Analysis and commentaries are made, too, but there is little in-depth analysis, investigative feature stories and candidate scrutiny such as might have made the papers and broadcasting media more imaginative and more focused.

There is, in sum, a predominance of the tabloid culture of direct, salient reporting offering little in the way of analysis, qualitative feature stories, backgrounders and research-based monitoring and prediction of trends. As a

chronicle, the reach of the media is constrained not just by low circulation and an overwhelming urban concentration, but also by, as noted earlier, media geography, arising from their preponderance in the Lagos–Ibadan axis. The derisive epithet “Ngbati Press” has been coined as a censorious description of an allegedly Yoruba-dominated media. It is not that there are no newspapers located in other parts of the country; it is that they have been distinctly less successful, in view of a less developed reading culture, and their failure to insert into the advertising and commercial opportunities offered by the big industrial coastal cities of the South-west where most publications derive close to 80 per cent of their sales and advertising revenue. With the growing commercial importance of Abuja, it is possible that there might be a shift in that trend in the foreseeable future (Olukotun, 2000 C/D).

#### A. Between July and December 1999

After some initial dithering and public debate, General Abdulsalami Abubakar announced on 20 July 1998 that, “After all necessary consultations government has decided that the election of a civilian president will be held in the first quarter of 1999. The newly-elected president will be sworn into office on 29 May 1999” (cited in Oseni, 199:7). The populace suffering from transition fatigue moved in slowly and warily to embrace Abubakar’s programme. The apprehension and initial scepticism, which lasted well into December, was fully captured in the media. Ray Ekpu, publisher of *Newswatch* and a long-standing columnist wrote that

29 May 1999 is the 7th disengagement date that various governments have fixed since 1985. None has so far been fulfilled. We must hope that the 7th will be Nigeria’s lucky number (cited in *Liberty*, Sep.–Dec. 1998, p. 25).

Similarly in his “A Few Prescriptions for Transition Fatigue”, this researcher counselled that:

The military must distance itself, this time around, from a well-heeled tribe of political contractors, temporarily unemployed, whose lucrative business it had been to “persuade” serving military heads of state to “accept” or contrive a further tenure, beyond the terminus of the transition programme” (*Sunday Times* Column, July 1999).

More to the point, a senior journalist, Mr Tunji Oseni, organized a national seminar in August 1998 on the media and the transition, with the declared aim of getting journalists to reflect on the new transition programmer, in the light of the nation’s tortuous experience of previous transitions, and to set an agenda for journalistic coverage. Oseni himself set the ball rolling by listing the responsibilities of the media in a transition as: keeping the administration to its word of promise; being strong in the face of danger; offering where necessary, alternatives to the transition agenda; serving as a feedback on government policies as well as expanding the scope of the transition to areas such as morality, accountability, management of national economy and the amelioration of poverty (Oseni, 1999:16).

Within the constraints iterated earlier, there is evidence that a section of the

media at least, tried its best to play the role of transition watchdog suggested by Oseni. For example, *Tell Magazine* did week after week a countdown to the hand-over in every single issue it published between July 1998 and the hand-over of power in May 1999. It reads in its 7 November edition (p. 7) "31 more weeks for Abubakar to hand-over to an elected civilian president"—in bold letters and boxed. This was a kind of advocacy advertising for the transition programme and the elections.

At the conference on media and transition, Charles Obi, who had just been released from a three-year detention on framed-up charges of aiding the planners of the phantom coup of 1995, suggested that "Journalists must play their watchdog role even more effectively by monitoring and investigating aspirants to public office to enable the electorate to make reasonable decisions". Obviously, Nigerian journalists, no stranger to democratic transitions, and having been traumatized by successive dictators who clung to power through governance by transition were in no mood to brook another dummy transition project. Still on the perceptions of the journalists, Ray Ekpu had said at another forum that he hoped that:

The Independent Electoral Commission (INEC), the Nigerian Press Council (NPC), the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and the Nigerian Press Organization can work out a way for the equitable treatment of all political parties and candidates by the print and electronic media, government owned and private. That way the level of partisanship in the media can be curtailed and the dramatis personae in the political drama can have something close to a level playing field. South Africa did it, why can't we? (*Liberty*, Sep.–Dec. 1998, Vol. 9, p. 25).

Ekpu here was showing awareness of the linkage between the differential access of parties and candidates to media and the outcome of elections. Even in a more mature democracy like Britain, the role of the tabloid press in the 1992 General Election, became a subject of scholarly and popular interest. Guidelines were issued on fair coverage in the Nigerian transition by the Broadcasting Commission, the Press Council and other bodies, but there is no evidence that they were enforced or that erring newspapers or television stations were sanctioned. However, as pointed out earlier, except for a few excesses and partisanship here and there, there is no evidence to suggest that any medium actively denied any candidate or political group access to its medium. As we shall see however, that is not the same thing as saying that no party enjoyed better coverage, on account of, for instance, higher campaign spending. That the PDP had much more money to play around with had already been evident in the controversy over General Obasanjo's donation of 130 million Naira to the party for the 5 December council election (see *The Tribune*, 24 November, p. 8). Various newspapers criticized the donation and attempted to hold Obasanjo down to a cogent explanation and "a full disclosure of the identities of those involved in [in aiding him] ... to help members of the public in establishing the real character and motives of the contributors—in the final analysis, however, the authorities must seriously consider setting a ceiling on the amount on individual



aspirant could spend in the course of seeking public office" (*Tribune* Editorial, 24 November 1998, p. 8).

That this donation and other ones by financially endowed members of the PDP translated into enhanced media coverage can be easily demonstrated. Between 1 December and 5 December (just before the council elections), the PDP placed 18 full-page adverts; the APP and the AD placed 3 in 6 privately-owned newspapers (Maja-Pearce, 1999:86).

Any student of media sociology knows that advertisers exert subtle and unsubtle pressures on content—a fact more obviously so in a depressed newspaper industry. The linkage between advert-spending and news coverage is borne out by the fact that in *This Day*, a privately-owned newspaper, and one of the six which enjoyed PDP's advert-spending, for the month of December 1999 there were 90 stories on PDP; 51 on APP; and 48 on AD. Similarly in *The Guardian*, also one of the six papers referred to earlier, there were, for December 1999, 56 stories on PDP, 39 on APP and 44 on AD (MRA scorecard, January 1999). Of course, higher advert-spending is not the only variable for explaining better visibility but it is certainly a conducive factor.

When we turn to broadcasting we find that some programmes such as Political Diary on MINAJ, a privately-owned television station was sustained by commercial spending, and therefore open to politicians who had money to spend. Unsurprisingly, PDP chieftains such as Chief James Ibori and Dr Alex Ekwueme featured prominently in the month of December, especially in the week before the council polls. This fact is partly compensated for by the fact that MINAJ also had other programmes such as Election Watch, which was made open equally to all candidates (MRA Airwaves Scorecard, January 1999, p. 20). In general, if we isolate the influence of commercial spending, the media coverage was, on balance, even-handed.

The media both print and electronic paid meticulous attention to the role of INEC, the electoral regime and the content of the transition. In this, it kept the authorities on their toes and prevented the programme from derailing or tolerating gross abuses that could delegitimize the entire exercise. This remark should be taken, in the context of the fact that Nigerians were eager to get rid of the military, while the military itself having exhausted its political bag of tricks was eager to leave office. Consequently, some irregularities in the voting process and in the electoral regime were overlooked or not strongly protested about.

INEC—its independence and impartiality was a critical test of the elections and the media devoted considerable space to discussing the institution and making suggestions. For example, *The Guardian* editorial comment of 19 August 1999 (p. 16) suggested that INEC should put in place measures to avert the spectre of rigging. It also admonished it to distance itself from manipulation by security agencies, state administrators and bureaucrats. Also, taking up the issue of "The Flawed Voters' Registration" in its editorial comment of 26 October 1998 (p. 8).

*The Punch* lamented the hitches in the exercise and urged that INEC fine-tune its

logistic to cope with the demands of running hitch-free elections. Similarly, *The Tribune* comment of 30 November 1998 (p. 8) welcomed the relaxation of some of the stiff guidelines put in place by INEC for the 5 December elections.

There was, therefore, an intimate dialogue between the media, often conveying "public opinion", and the electoral authorities, with the result that the system profited and avoided reckless excesses. Of the 21 editorial comments published by *The Guardian* in the month of November 1999, 5 of them dealt with the transition programme and dealt with such matters as the 1995 constitution; the new political parties; INEC guidelines for the December council polls and related subjects. A similar trend is noticeable in all other papers. And this brings us to the second phase of the transition, covering the period from January onwards.

### ***B. The Period from January 1999 Onwards***

Most of the trends identified earlier—the higher comparatively visibility of PDP in the media; overall balanced coverage of contestants leaving aside occasional partisanship and the influence of money; keen media monitoring of polling and electoral regime and so on—continued right till the end of the transition. For example, on the eve of the governorship/state assembly elections, between 5 January and 9 January in the six privately-owned newspapers identified earlier, the AD had 3 full-page adverts; the APP 9 while the PDP had 18 (Maja-Pearce, 1999:92). At this time, however, a bandwagon effect was already operating with PDP being increasingly viewed as the big party.

The media gave full coverage to the instances of abuses in the governorship/state assembly as well as the presidential elections. For example, in its report of 25 January 1999 (p. 27) *Newswatch* reported the findings of the Transition Monitoring Group—a non-governmental coalition of 56 human and civil rights groups about malpractices in the governorship/state assembly elections. These included underage voters in Katsina, multiple voting in Abia State as well as stories of bribery in Delta and Ekiti states. The report was extensively covered in newspapers and broadcasting stations.

The media weight of PDP is shown in the fact that the *New Nigerian* in the month of January carried 51 stories on PDP; 12 on AD; and 18 on PDP while the privately-owned *Punch* had 81 stories on PDP; 47 on AD and 34 on APP (MRA Scorecard, February 1999).

As is usual in Nigerian politics, however, most of the excitement, competition and spending power were reserved for the presidential elections. As late as 7 February 1999, an article in *The Guardian* described the campaign as relatively tame with candidates relying more on posters and newspapers rather than television and outdoor campaigns. Indeed, the article said correctly that one can easily count the number of TV adverts on one's fingertips. Most candidates could not afford professional marketing services, thus leaving the field to the big spenders.

Ray Ekpu in his write-up of 8 February (p. 6) captured the mounting excitement of the presidential primaries and campaign when he said that "all the elections

conducted so far fall, in a manner of speaking, into the minor league". Also in the same period of the presidential primaries two politicians, General Obasanjo and Chief Alex Ekwueme moved their campaigns to the Internet, opening a new page in Nigeria's electoral history (*Guardian*, 2 February 1999, p. 1).

The virulence and ethnic mobilization of the presidential primaries was captured and denounced by *The Guardian* in its editorial of 11 February. Entitled "Presidential Campaign Trivia", it lamented the exchange of diatribe and destructive lampooning instead of attention to issues such as the economy, the energy crisis, the liquidated federal system and the Nigeria Delta cauldron. Warned the paper; "An Electoral process that is not guided by solid ideas and progressive thinking can only produce incompetent and opportunistic leaders". One year after the transition to democracy, one can see the result of not heeding the agenda set by the newspaper.

Newspapers such as *The Guardian* have on their editorial board intellectuals and academics—often a remedial virtue in the somewhat Philistine climate of Nigerian journalism. Following the emergence of Obasanjo and Olu Falae as presidential flagbearers of the PDP and the AD/APP alliance respectively, *The Guardian* editorialized pertinently that "Little Secret is made of the fact that behind Obasanjo's emergence is a formidable corps of retired, ... but ambitious and financially endowed military officers ... The nuances of the run-up to the Fourth Republic would, therefore, seem to suggest that the military and paramilitary class is creating a leverage for itself. In the future, it remains the challenge of civil society to reclaim its primacy of political authority". On 3 February 1999, *The New Nigerian* editorialized on "The Last Set of Elections", namely, the federal legislative and presidential, which it described as a "big test to INEC".

The month of February expectedly witnessed intense political commentary and coverage by the media on the elections of 20 February and 27 February. It also involved an unprecedented clutch of foreign reporters, observers and election monitors in the country. It was thus possible for Nigerians and the world to have full information on virtually every aspect of the election.

The irregularities reported by the Carter group and other observers in the presidential elections were well reported in the media. However, confronted with a choice between cancelling the election and grudgingly accepting its flawed outcome, most newspapers editorialized on a grudging acceptance—warts and all.

*The Punch* counselled editorially on 10 March 1999, in a typical comment that;

Unless the AD/APP alliance has overwhelming and incontrovertible evidence that the results as declared did not reflect the preference of Nigerians, they should be contented with documenting the atrocities of the election, making them public and sending copies to the Head of State, the PDP and General Obasanjo.

The cynicism of the international media on the more sordid aspects of the election, especially the influence of money was reflected in a comment in *The Economist* of late February 1999 entitled "In Nigeria, Who Pays Wins".

## Conclusion: Looking Ahead

As we have seen in previous sections, the media, drawing on their experience of reporting transitions (real or pretended) gave a passable account of themselves in covering the Abubakar transition. There were lapses here and there: The partisanship of *The Champion* whose publisher, Chief Iwuanyanwu, is an APP stalwart; unethical lapses as in unbalanced stories and pictures in some of the newspapers and so on. Nonetheless, as earlier broached the pluralism of the media; the traditions of professionalism in a broad section of the media; the guidelines issued by bodies such as the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission, all served to keep the media on course. In some of the quality papers, attempts were made to set agenda for the incoming civilian government, as well as for civil society.

We have seen, however, that one of the parties, the PDP received consistently better coverage than the other two parties. This as argued earlier partly relates to higher advertising-spending by the PDP which harbours a plethora of well-heeled individuals. It relates, too, to the professionalization of its campaign efforts and the use of better marketing strategies. The Obasanjo presidential campaign had a full-fledged media department at a well appointed building in Ikeja and was manned by a professional corps of public relations experts and former senior journalists. It was directed by Chief Onyema Ugochukwu, a former editor of the *Daily Times*, ably assisted by the managing director of *The Week Magazine*. By contrast, one of the early adverts placed by the Alliance for Democracy (AD) was paid for by a senatorial aspirant because according to him "there was no money in the kitty to pay for adverts" (interview).

Even if we discount such things as the brown envelope syndrome (bribe-taking to kill or publish stories), it is clear that the unequal commercial strength of the parties is an explanation for differential media exposure.

The media continue to play an active role in Nigeria's infant democracy. They have through exposure of abuses, forced the resignation of the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Alhaji Salisu Buhari, and the President of Senate, Chief Evans Enwerem. They created a crisis of legitimacy for the Lagos State Governor, Chief Bola Tinubu, which he narrowly weathered, over allegations that he had fiddled with his bio-data.

The power of the media in the polity goes beyond what their capacity and reach would have predicted. However, this power is celebrated by democratic activists and resented by others who criticize the media for selective justice—thus reopening the debate on the extent to which the media respond to ethnic, partisan and ownership drives, and the extent to which it caters to a trans-ethnic civic constituency.

Building media capacity, extending circulation, hooking to up to date information technology, encouraging the vernacular press are issues that need to be taken on board given the growing disparity between Africa and the industrialized countries of the North who are increasingly worried about information overload (Berger, 1998, Franklin & Love, 1998, Tedjabosu, 1998). Such concerns may also make the

media more alert to issues of mass poverty which throws up a legitimacy problem for Nigeria's still tender democracy (See Olukoshi in this edition).

## Note

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