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AGENDA-SETTING ROLE OF THE NIGERIAN PRESS: A CASE STUDY OF THIRD TERM AGENDA.

by
Andrew Asan ATE,

Abstract

The press is one of the powerful forces of social engineering in any society. The potency of the press is hinged on the fact that it has the power to appeal to a relatively large, heterogeneous and anonymous audience almost simultaneously. The press is an effective tool in policy formulation and execution. The press is often looked upon by many people as purveyors for good governance. This paper x-rays the agenda setting role of the press in Nigeria in the aborted "Third term agenda" of President Obasanjo's administration. The paper appraises the contributions of the Nigerian media which mobilized public opinion against the ill-fated third term project.

The paper recommends that mass media practitioners in Nigeria must always be carried along at all levels of decision making for the holistic success of any agenda.

Introduction

Media practice in Nigeria made its debut about 147 years ago with the establishment of the first Newspaper, *Iwe Irohin*, by a missionary- turned Journalist, Henry Townsend in 1859 in Abeokuta . The Nigeria Union of journalist (NUJ), a body that oversees the practice of journalism profession in the country was established in 1955, that is, 52 years ago. The Nigerian Constitution of 1999, Chapter II defines the role of the mass media thus: "mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people".

From the look of things, the Nigerian media has lived up to its constitutional responsibility over the years despite some daunting challenges it faced along the line. It is on record that the Nigerian press, in collaboration with other nationalistic forces, contributed in no small measure to the anti-colonial struggles that preceded independence. In other words, the press, among others, tirelessly fought for the attainment of the nation's independence in 1960. The post independence press focused on the task of nation building but later embarked on guerrilla journalism-fighting the ills of the past military regimes that hijacked the Nigerian polity during the nation's dark days. Today, the Nigerian media has been informing, educating and entertaining the populace on different socio-political and economic issues.

The media has been assiduously preserving the nation's rich cultural heritage, conferring status on individuals and institutions, and setting agenda for good governance in the new Nigeria among other roles.

Theoretical Framework

Agenda-setting Theory

This work is constructed on the agenda setting theory of the press which presupposes the fact that the media has the power to influence peoples thinking by taking a lead in the debate of important issues in the society. According to Okoro and Agbo (2003:31), the media can set agenda or ascribe importance to an issue through:

- The quality/frequency of reporting
- Prominence given to the report
- The degree of conflict generated in the reports and
- Cumulative media-specific effects over time.

Hypodermic Needle Effect Theory

The main thrust of this theory is that media messages, like bullets, have what it takes to hold the audience spell bound while controlling their minds.

The theory which is also known as "bullet theory" according to Daramola (2003) "simply states that if people listen to a message they will automatically comply. All that communication needed to do was to get the audience to listen and the deed would be considered done." This theory holds that people are vulnerable to mass communication messages.

These two theories, taken together, will form the kernel of this paper as the main thesis is bench-marked against them. Necessarily then, they provide the canvas upon which to paint the rest of the story.

African Leaders & Sit-Tight Syndrome

Africa's political firmament, in which Nigeria plays the role of the big "brother", is replete with cases of undue tenure elongation by power-loving leaders. The *Guardian* Editorial of January 6, 2006 laments on this sorry scenario:

From Cape Town to Cairo, African leaders with a tiny exception continue to manifest a desire to remain in power indefinitely. This weakness must be condemned wherever it occurs for it portrays our leaders as infantile, greedy and inconsiderate. The attitude undermines the main plank of democracy which allows a people to change what they do not like through a process of free and fair elections. Democracy enables a nation to rejuvenate itself through the regular infusion of new ideas and new people. Sit tight leaders, even when benevolent, are unhealthy for any polity. A man who sits long enough on the saddle of power will no sooner become a slave driver. Sadly in Africa, there are still so many sit tight leaders.

Examples abound in Africa concerning the diabolical syndrome of sit-tight leaders. In Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni had secured a third term by changing the constitution of his

country. He came to power in 1986 and nobody knows when he will get out of it. Museveni is following the footsteps of Idi-Amin of Uganda who became intoxicated with power during his evil days as the **Field Marshall** of his country.

The 69-year old Omar Albert Bernard Bongo of Gabon also has an intimidating record of over staying in office. He has been in power for 39 years. He too, has changed the constitution of his country to prosecute his inordinate ambition of a life - time leader.

President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt seized power since 1981 and is still there doing what he knows best. The Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi has ruled his country for over three decades. He came to power in 1969 and he is not in a hurry to leave the stage.

Blaise Campaore of Bukina Faso came to power through the gun since 1987 and he is still there.

Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe became the leader of his country in 1980 while his camerounian counterpart, Paul Biya came to power in 1982. The duo are still driving the affairs of their countries.

Back here in Nigeria, General Yakubu Gowon reneged his hand - over date during his days as the country's head of state. General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida who annulled the nation's, perhaps, freest and fairest election of June 12, 1993 believed to have been won by Chief M.K.O Abiola, attempted to over stay in power but was compelled to step aside due to certain exigencies of the time. Later, the maximum ruler, General Sani Abacha, during his regime manipulated the polity for life time leadership but his satanic ambition was punctuated by death.

Under President Olusegun Obasanjo, some political gladiators in the country in 2006, attempted to manipulate the polity in favour of a third term but the development was halted by the press through its excellent agenda-setting initiative.

Methodology

This study is purely based on desk research. The researcher made use of secondary materials for data collection from newspapers. In terms of data processing, the study content-analyzed some relevant editorials and columns on the "Third term agenda". The editorials and columns were intentionally selected and reviewed to appreciate the agenda-setting dimension by the press on the "Third term" debate. The selected editorials were from **This Day, Daily Independent, the Punch, and The Guardian** Newspapers to have divergent views on the third term issue. The columns were from **Saturday Sun** and **The Guardian**. Apart from editorials and columns, the study also captured the views of some media practitioners on the controversial issue that bedeviled the nation's polity in 2006.

Data Analysis from Editorials

Obasanjo & 2007

This Day, June 24, 2005, Editorial.

The editorial recalled Paul Wolfowitz, World Bank President's question to President Olusegun Obasanjo on whether or not he will leave office in 2007. "If so, what will happen to his administration's reform programme after his office? Finally, what would he do after quitting the presidential office?"

The Editorial argues that Nigerians see any attempt by President Obasanjo to extend his maximum tenure of eight years beyond 2007 as sounding the death knell of the democratic process.

The opinion piece, observes that President Obasanjo's "solemn affirmation before the World Bank that he would indeed quit office in 2007 is like a testimony of his ultimate faith to the world. His answer to Wolfowitz's second and third questions that 'change of baton will not slow down the race (reforms)' and that he was only too eager to return to his farm are like the seal on his irrevocable commitment to leave office on schedule".

The editorial was optimistic that given Obasanjo's stature both at home and abroad, he cannot afford to give less worthy example of remaining in power beyond 2007.

Obasanjo's Third Term: Perish the Thought!

Daily Independent, August 11, 2005, Editorial.

The editorial established the fact that news media have been awash with reports of "nocturnal meetings all geared towards securing a third term for the Obasanjo administration".

It described the move as unholy an agenda and wondered why a country like Nigeria should, in the twenty-first century, be seen as championing what it described as "uncivilized and retrogressive ideas and moves whose only merit is their capacity to attract various degrees of isolation from forward looking and civilised nations".

The editorial also wondered why a nation that currently speaks for Africa would subscribe to obsolete and primitive ideas.

The opinion piece warned President Obasanjo not to take the self-serving assessment of professional jobbers and perennial parasites as representative of the views of the citizenry.

It concluded that the general impression on ground is that "this nation could do with a breath of fresh air and an Obasanjo administration after 2007 is certainly not part of that fresh air".

So, the editorial urged Mr. President to perish the thought of third term.

Ali and the Third Term Debate

The Punch, January 10, 2006, Editorial.

The editorial quoted the chairman of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Dr Ahmadu Ali, as saying that the Obasanjo's government needed not be changed for change's sake. According to Ali, "This man we identified before for good leadership, he has come and we have seen evidence of good leadership again. Do you just change a gown when it is not dirty?"

The editorial described those clamouring for tenure extension as a powerful clique and urged the opposition parties, civil society groups and Nigerians in general to decide whether or not the thickening plot is acceptable to them.

Salute to Thabo Mbeki

The Guardian, February 16, 2006, Editorial.

The editorial applauded the decision of South African President, Thabo Mbeki, who was quoted to have declared that he was opposed to the extension of his office beyond the constitutionally allowed two terms.

The piece also celebrated Nelson Mandela, the first president of the post apartheid South Africa, who left office after one term, pleading age and availability of capable lieutenants.

The editorial bemoaned the tenure elongation clamour by some praise singers and sycophants in Nigeria arguing that "Nigerians have been declaring as loud as their feeble voices would carry them that they are opposed to the idea of a third term".

The editorial urged President Obasanjo to hearken to public opinion and quit office after completing his second tenure. The piece warned against the evil of tampering with the nation's constitution contending that the "Nigerian union, if it can be called so, is a fraction amalgam. There is no knowing what will happen if the constitution is subjected to a traumatic jolt" the editorial observed that tenure extension in Nigeria always has failed and would continue to fail and therefore advised President Obasanjo to join in the search for his successor.

Data analysis from columns**Head or tail, Obasanjo loses**

Saturday Sun, March 11, 2006.

The opinion column written by Femi Adesina, Editor of *Daily Sun* observed that the third term issue has become "so germane, so apposite to the political fortunes of the country that whatever decision Obasanjo takes now, he will equally lose". Sounding like a prophet of doom, the columnist philosophically thundered: "Head he loses, tail he loses. If the constitution is finally amended and Obasanjo comes into office by hook or crook, he loses at the end of it all. And if the third term project runs into brick wall, and he quits in May, 2007, Obasanjo still

loses”.

To lead a nation, Adesina said “demands integrity. To fight corruption demands integrity. To consolidate reforms needs integrity”.

Taking a stern position on the third term issue, the columnist warned: If Obasanjo remains in power beyond May, next year, his integrity would have been shot to ribbons. Punctured. Perforated. Ruptured. And what is leadership without integrity? It’s like a flag flying at half mast. Nobody can trust such a leader again”.

This day, the press and the third term campaign.

The Guardians, Sunday, April 23, 2006.

Reacting to *This Day’s* recent advertisement which urged Nigerians to “Vote for Greatness.... Vote for Tenure Extension”, a celebrated columnist, Reuben Abati, in his *Cross Roads* argued that a “substantial segment of the population particularly the middle class is opposed to the idea of tenure extension for President Obasanjo”.

Dismissing *This Day’s* editor’s explanation of defending free speech and allowing shades of opinion as a justification for the controversial advertorial, Abati passed his verdict: “when the Newspaper subordinates its own identity to another group, and another message in its window pages, it is unwittingly making an editorial statement”.

The columnist faulted *This day’s* decision on the advert and argued that it was not signed by identifiable group but only referred to a group known as “Private Sector Supporters for Good and Transparent Governance”. The column therefore raised some fundamental questions: “who are these supporters? Is the group registered? If it is, who are the principal officers?”

Abati logically reasoned that “*This Day* should have insisted that one of the officers should sign the advert, otherwise, and in this case, *This Day* could be easily accused of being a member of the group since it is also a private sector organization”

The Press’s Verdict

From the review of four editorials and two columns pertaining to third term agenda, it is clear that the fourth estate of the realm – the press in Nigeria was negatively disposed to the idea of elongation of tenure by the administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo either through legitimate or illegitimate means.

In harmony with the above submission, the Managing Editor of *The News*, Babafemi Ojuda, concurs: “One is happy to see that virtually every Newspaper is united against third term. People are writing against the idea of somebody wanting to manipulate the constitution and Nigerians to have the third term. I have not seen a write-up or editorial anywhere justifying the third term and that is a good thing”. (*The Guardian*, Monday April 10, 2006)

Both the editorials and columns in their measurement of public opinion established the fact that the general Nigerian populace were against tenure elongation of any colouration. They were therefore optimistic that the "evil" will not succeed in Nigeria as the people will fight it to a stand still.

Even *This Day* which published a pro-third term advertorial in its June, 2005 editorial agreed that "Nigerians see any attempt by President Obasanjo to extend his maximum tenure of eight years beyond 2007 as sounding the death knell of the democratic process".

It is important at this juncture to stress that by taking a stand against tenure elongation, the press, through editorials and columns influenced the thinking of Nigerians on the third term agenda and perhaps the development that consequently led to the collapse of the ill-fated project by the National Assembly.

This gesture indisputably showcases the supremacy of the press as an agenda-setting institution.

Recommendations

Based on the holistic success of the press in setting a robust agenda for the annihilation of the third term project, I recommend as follows:

- That the media must always be carried along at all levels of governance or policy making in Nigeria. This is because the media acts as a clearing house for society. Any policy or agenda that fails to receive the endorsement of the press will likely nose-dive.
- Nigerian leaders should learn to interpret the position of the media on burning issues of the day as the stand of the general populace. A time has come in the country for people to acknowledge the press as the court of public opinion.
- That both the government and governed should cultivate the habit of looking up to the press for direction on every socio-political and economic issue. The media should never be sidelined or taken for granted on issues relating to policy formulation and execution.
- That the Nigerian media in collaboration with other civil societies should rise up to the daunting challenge of defending democracy and the rule of law by setting positive and constructive agenda for good governance.
- That Journalist should have integrity and clean hands if they are to lead in setting agenda that would put the society on the part of progress. Peter Enahoro in Ate (1997) asserts that "whether journalists admit the truth or not, the fact today is that many men in the street see the press as their protector and vindicator."

TENURE ELONGATION AND THE EMERGING SCENARIO OF POLITICS

That media bodies like Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Nigeria Guilds of Editors (NGE), Nigeria Press Council (NPC), Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN), etc, must always ensure that media practitioners operate within the purview of ethical boundaries. Every aspect of unprofessional and unethical act should not be condoned by the professional bodies. Again, they must make sure that unhealthy media laws are reviewed in favour of smooth practice of the journalism profession in the country.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the data in this study, we can conclude that the Nigerian press has come of age and has occupied its place of pride by setting the agenda for the nation's good governance. The "magic bullet" of the press is indeed creating an overwhelming impact in the leadership structure of Nigeria.

Introduction

When the President gives the impression that only him, in a country of around 150 million people, has the capacity to lead the people to the promised land, he definitely reveals a false image of himself (Nwachigwagwu, 2006:69)

That is more corrupting, more dubious, when a self-proclaimed president, who happens to be the anti-corruption gladiator and crusader, watches uncomprehending as a brazen attempt is being made to change the constitution for the express purpose of legitimizing his extended stay in power (ibid, Dec.5, 2005).

In the 46 years of Nigeria's statehood, three rulers with messianic disposition and mentality, for varying reasons, seen themselves as indispensable to the political development and progress of the country and they sought to elongate their rule using all manners of serpentine guile, trickery and in most cases treachery to achieve.

Generals Yakubu Gowon, Ibrahim Babangida and Abacha tried to elongate their rule with varying outcomes. In attaining the task they set for themselves, the generals individually

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