

Proscription as a Tool of Military Dictatorial Means of Conflict Management in Nigeria: The Case of Newswatch Magazine Proscription

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ABSTRACT--- *This study is about Government –Media relationship. It is a fact that the media, as purveyors of information, perform certain ascribed roles and functions in the society. They provide information and keep watch on activities of the government and its functionaries, and correct uncomplimentary occurrences; they interpret information about events in the environment; they transmit knowledge, values, and social norms from generation to generation; and they also entertain their audience. In exercising these responsibilities, the media have often found themselves on collision course with the government and its functionaries, thus creating conflict. This situation is most apparent during authoritarian regimes, of which military dictatorship is the most obvious form. Nigeria and its media have experienced this. The study drew its data entirely from Secondary sources and discovered that the General Abacha led government was the most repressive of all military regimes in Nigeria, and can only be compared to General Buhari's and Babangid's clamp down on the media and its personnel. The study shows that the media in Nigeria passed through horrible periods in the hands of military regimes beginning with the first military government to General Sani Abacha and General Ibrahim Babangida regimes. It concluded that journalists who find themselves and the mediums they work for as a party in conflict should cultivate and develop attitude, belief and power through which they will develop resilient posture for enduring pains and taking risks as demanded by journalism practice.*

Keywords--- Proscription, Conflict, Resolution, Tool, Newswatch

1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict is an inherent phenomenon of any environment. In any situation where two or more living beings exist there is bound to be conflict. While conflict, where and when it may occur cannot in itself be altogether bad, destructive or damaging, but the mood through which it is managed could be destructive and damaging. In a democracy which professes a free environment, freedom and respect for the fundamental rights of the individuals, groups or organizations conflict is bound to occur. Conflicts occur as a result of disagreement in any aspects of the social structures that affect the inter-actors adversely.

In a democracy, the mass media are the voice of the voiceless; the guardian of the down-trodden's fundamental human rights. In trying to fulfill its roles of an opposition to bad rules where an authoritarian and dictatorship rule is practiced, the media always or sometimes get involved in a confrontation with the government which leads to conflicts between the government and the press. In developing societies with their fragile, underdeveloped social, political and economic structures conflicts between the media and the government is always alarming and sometimes destructive (Garba 2002).

In operating under this situation and environment, Journalists in developing states are facing peculiar policy dilemma in their day-to-day operational activities. The African media systems is faced with its operational policy dilemma due to its origin in the colonial past Ugboajah (1976) clearly attested to this when he says that it was the effects of the pre-independence struggles of the African press, the philosophy of post-colonial political leaders and the nature of national politics in individual countries that were among the variables that led to the evolution of two broad political systems in Africa. One was termed "national or collective populism" practiced in Uganda, Ghana, Tanzania and Guinea, while the other was termed "the pluralist model" practiced in Nigeria and Kenya.

Whatever model was in operation each was an embodiment of conflicts. According to Udomisor (2002) politics in developing states is the very essence of existence and survival which generates conflict too frequently in developing democracies. The press which is expected to discharge its role in such an environment is certain to face certain problems which it must develop ways and means of solving.

This study examines the divergent roles of the media and government in Nigeria and the usual conflicting relationship between them. It explores the need and appropriateness of the use of proscription as a tool of conflict resolution and how the media should act to survive the tools of proscription in a conflicting environment.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF NEWSWATCH MAGAZINE

Newswatch as a news magazine was established in Nigeria 1984 by a group of internationally trained and experienced Nigerian Journalists. They were Ray Ekpou, Dele Giwa, Dan Agbese and Yakubu Mohammed. The aim of establishing the magazine was to introduce a brand of journalism that would lift the standard of the profession of journalism from the portal of permissivity to the level of civilized practice as it is obtainable in developed societies.

By so doing, this group of journalists hoped to satisfy the yearning Nigerian appetite for more detailed and factual information. This, it was hoped, would propel the wheels of development faster and quicker in the country.

According to Uko (2004) Newswatch magazine published by Newswatch communications Ltd. Had its first maiden edition introduced to the Nigerian public on January 28, 1985.

The coming of the Newswatch magazine with its new style of journalism which embodied detailed facts and investigative approach to reporting was greatly appreciated by the Nigerian public particularly the educated elites. In its online bulletin, the Nigerian investment journal said that the weekly print run of the new magazine was as high as 100,000 copies in each week. Infact, Newswatch was described as a publication which changed the format of print journalism in Nigeria through its bold, factual and investigative style of news reporting in the country.

Expectedly, this new approach to information gathering and dissemination did not certainly go down, well with some sections of the society. It was little surprise to many people, particularly the down-troddens of the society when the Editor-in-Chief and Co- founder of Newswatch magazine, Dele Giwa was assassinated by a parcel bomb at his break fast table in his home at Ikeja on October 19, 1986. Again, the magazine was shut down on April 6, 1987, following a proscription order by the Babangida administration because Newswatch magazine in its pursuit of its watchdog responsibility pre-emptorily published a government white paper.

The proscription of the magazine lasted till August 26, 1987 (Uko, 2004). At the beginning, Newswatch-government relationship was a cordial one. When Ibrahim Babangida took overpower from Buhari in 1985, the general's face made Newswatch cover story four times. During this time the magazine even saw itself as a self imposed defender of the junta's regime. According to Graybill and Thompson, (1998) anyone who attempted to make life unpleasant for Babangida would be criticized by Newswatch.

However, the down-turn in the Newswatch –Babangida's government relationship came in 1987, a period that Newswatch magazine was banned for six months because of its unauthorized publishing of a government white paper.

In an effort to amend the damaged relationship, Newswatch magazine in 1989 named Babangida "Man of the Year" while government on its own made Alex Akinyele a director in Newswatch a Minsiter of information.

It is on record that in its first twenty-five years of operation, the magazine has had a mix bag of experiences in the difficult and sometimes uncertain terrains of investigative journalism. Perhaps, the best way to say it all is that experience is the best teacher. This much was attested to in a book titled: "Jogging in the Jungle". The Newswatch story which Newswatch magazine operators, distributed to its numerous audience who attended its Silver Jubilee Ceremony in Lagos in December 2010.

It should be observed that Newswatch travails in the hand of government expectedly adversely affected the magazine operation in some ways. On May 8, 2011, the directors of Newswatch reached a decision to cede 51% shares as part owners of the establishment to Global Media Mirror Ltd which was owned by Jimoh Ibrahim (Ajaero, 2011). This position was taken because, according to Akoni (2011) Newswatch was at this time owing a backlog of seven months of staff salaries which was to be paid off by Global Media Mirror Ltd that was owned by Jimoh Ibrahim.

3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aims and objectives of the study were the followings:

- a. to examine the relationship between the media and the military governments in Nigeria.
- b. to examine the sources of conflict between the media and military government in Nigeria.
- c. to examine the use of proscription as a tool of conflict management by the government.
- d. to examine the qualities journalists must posses to be able to work in a conflict situations.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study would be useful to government particularly military regimes as they would learn to evolve a good method of relating with the media for more productive results in governance.

The people would benefit from this study as it would lead to parties in conflict controlling their selfish ambitions and pursuing the right course for peace that would bring about development in the society for the benefits of all. The government would examine the tools it uses for conflict management. The media personnel would benefit from this study by learning the qualities a good journalist should acquire and develop to be able to function successfully in a conflicting environment.

5. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in generating data for analysis in this study was historical or documentary survey. Here data were obtained through visit to libraries, to consult books, journals and other documents relevant to the subject of investigation. Materials were also obtained from the internet for analysis.

6. LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the social responsibilities of the media is to provide the right information and keep watch on the activities of government and those in public offices. The media are to alert the public on uncomplimentary occurrences and also interpret information about events in the society. It should be noted that in trying to go about fulfilling this obligations to the society, the media, more often than not found themselves on collision course with the government, its agents and functionaries, which often leads to conflict.

Nigeria and its media have passed through this experience whether in a democracy or military dictatorship.

Udomisor and Anayo (2013) say that the media are an integral part of every society and wield enormous influence on every aspect of a nation, (see also Okafor, 1987; Olarunsola, 1993). They are an important vehicles in structuring the activities of the various arms of government as well as the society in general. Due to this crucial responsibility of the media and more so, because of the postulations of the early advocates of development media theory, it was acclaimed rightly or wrongly that in the interest of development the state has a right to intervene in or restrict media operation. On the basis of this "proposition, devices of censorship, subsidy and direct control were justified. Due to this mistaken notion the media in developing countries have at various times been subjected to undue recriminations from the government and its officials (Folarin, 1998: 31-2) Ekwelie, 1979, Barton, 1979) Akinfeleye, 1988).

According to Daramola (2003) the pursuit of the collective national aspirations and interest which are over and above any parochial interest, ethnic or individual interest should constitute the goals of the media in any nation.

Therefore the media institutions and practitioners must subordinate their interests and those of any particular section or group to national interests which revolves around national prestige, national security as well as the unity and welfare of the generality of the people.

Despite all, the contradictions that have been experienced in media-government relationship beginning from its colonial history, the Nigerian media have successfully established the fact that in all forms of governments the media must be the voice of the people at all times.

The relationship between the Nigerian media and the military governments has been anything but cordial. It is an established tradition of force men that military dictatorship does not have any room for opposing views. The orientation of the men in arms does not have respect for the rule of law. It is sad to note that in Nigeria its political history had experienced a prolonged period of military rule which by implication has affected all democratic institutions and socio-political activities of the nation on all tiers.

Military dictatorship has been known to significantly hinder media operations and performance in Nigeria. All military regimes in Nigeria have promulgated stringent decrees as well as employed other harsh measures such as harassments, closure of media houses and in some cases physical torture of journalists as means of resolving conflicts between journalists and the government. In this act, the regimes of General Buhari, Sani Abacha and Ibrahim Babangida were most severe and harsh.

Ofor (2004) says that General Buhari was the military head of State that trimmed the tentacles of the press through his decree No. 4 of 1984. His public Officers protection against False Accusation decree signed into law on March 29, 1984 became the most singular and significant barrier to freedom of speech and freedom of the press in Nigeria.

According to Adeyemi (1995) the provisions of the decree made free speech and opinion encumbered to the extent that any report or publication in the press even if it is true but which embarrassed any public officer became an offense punishable by up to two years imprisonment without the option of a fine and in the case of a corporate body, a

fine of not less than ten thousand naira. On July 4, 1984 Messrs Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor of the Guardian Newspaper became the first victims of this obnoxious decree.

General Babangida, the military president as he designated himself took over power from general Buhari, through a military coup in August 27, 1985. His first act with the press was to release all journalists who were detained by General Buhari and went further to abrogate decree No. 4 of 1984. He went out to publicly assured the press unreserved freedom in the discharge of its professional duties.

The cat and mouse relationship that existed between the press and the military government in Nigeria was short-live. On April 6, 1987 the military dictators came out with their full colours when general Babangida's government proscribed Newswatch Magazine for publishing excerpts from the political Bureau reports. In 1988 the same government arrested and detained the editor of the "The Republic Magazine" Paxton Idowu, and in 1989 another editor Femi Aborishade was detained for several months. In August 1990, five media houses the Vanguard, Punch, Lagos News, Champion and Newsbreed were closed down. In April 9, 1992 National Concord Newspaper was also closed down.

7. MEDIA-GOVERNMENT RELATIONSHIP IN NIGERIA

In attempting any analysis of media-government relationship in Nigeria one can best describe it as hegemonic with the government particularly the military always the dominant partner. In term of being tactical and making provision for tolerance, at least in the short term military junta's governments, particularly Abacha's made no effort at wooing either the people it was out to govern or the media it needed as an ally.

Military governments remained the most ruthless as they witnessed the highest number of cases of harassments, arrests, detention, prosecution and imprisonment of media personnel. The conflicts that ensued between the military and the media started because of the press dislike for extreme and dictatorial manner that these regimes handled their reformation programmes. This forced the military to clamp down heavily on any journalist or media institution that dared them.

It must be noted that all military dictators in Nigeria particularly Abacha did not cherish the idea of the media meddling into the affairs of government. For this reason Ofor (2004) says that some of them went about promulgating decrees while others like Abacha simply chased after media institutions and their personnels like a lion after a herb of cattle.

However, the Nigerian media, breed in the traditions of British nationalism and radicalism did not succumb to oppressive and intimidating weapons of the military. Therefore, despite all the suppressive and brutal acts of intimidation and harassments, the resilience of the Nigerian journalists made them to survive these dangerous moments in their professional history. Today, democracy has been established in Nigeria however fragile it may seem. This accomplishment is mostly through the efforts of the media.

8. THE MEDIA AND BABANGIDA'S GOVERNMENT RELATIONSHIP

The military was in government between January 1966 and 1979, and between December 1983 and May 29, 1999, a period of nearly 30 years since Nigeria's independence in 1960. During this period the relationship between the media and the military government was conflict-ridden. For example, againstbabangida.com reports that the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida from August 27, 1985 through August 26, 1993 had the dubious distinction of having closed down or proscribed more newspapers and magazines than any other government in Nigeria's media history. Again, a corroborative report by Media rights Agenda revealed that a total of 41 newspapers and magazines were victims of Babangida's high-handedness. A report by againstbabangida.com revealed that 25 newspapers and magazines were either shut down or proscribed by the Babangida's administration in 1993 alone.

The table below is an excerpt of some of the media houses that were either shut down or proscribed by the Babangida's government for what the military termed an act of irresponsible by the press. Newswatch magazine was one of them.

Magazine Proscribed	Publishing Company	Period of Proscription	Government Responsibilities
Newbreed	Newbreed Organization Limited	Jan. 1978 to March 1978	Admin. of Lt Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo
Newswatch	Newswatch Communications Ltd.	April 6, 1987 to August 26, 1987	Admin. of Major Gen. Ibrahim Babangida
African Concord	African Concord limited	April 9, 1992 to April 26, 1992	Admin. of Major Gen. Ibrahim Babangida
African Concord	African Concord limited	July 22, 1993 to Nov. 19,	Admin. of Major Gen. Ibrahim

		1993	Babangida
African Concord	African Concord limited	June 11, 1994 to date	Admin. of Major Gen.Sani Abacha
African Guardian	Guardian Newspapers	August 15, 1991 to date	Admin. of Major Gen.Sani Abacha
African Science monitor	African Concord limited	April 9, 1992 to April 23, 1992	Admin. of Major Gen. Ibrahim Babangida
African Science monitor	African Concord limited	July 22, 1993 to Nov. 18, 1993	Admin. of Major Gen. Ibrahim Babangida
African Science monitor	African Concord limited	June 11, 1994 to date	Admin. of Major Gen.Sani Abacha
The News	Independent Communications Network Limited	May 22, 1993 to Sept. 21, 1993	Gen. Ibrahim Babangida
Africa Economic Digest	African Concord limited	April 9, 1992 to April 23, 1992	Gen. Ibrahim Babangida
Africa Economic Digest	African Concord limited	July 22, 1993 to April 18, 1993	Gen. Ibrahim Babangida
Africa Economic Digest	African Concord limited	June 11, 1991 to date	Admin. of Major Gen.Sani Abacha
Tell	Tell Communications Limited	May 10, 1993 to May 17, 1993	Gen. Ibrahim Babangida

Source: //againstbabangida.com/babangida-as-a-friend-of-the-press.htm/

9. PROSCRIPTION AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

One of the aims of this study was to examine proscription as a tool of conflict management. Conflict is an inevitable phenomenon of plurality and cannot in its entirety be avoided. Therefore conflict is to be managed where it occurs. However, management of conflict should not be unilateral nor embed in the whims of selfish consideration if the goal of development is to be secured and assured.

One of the cardinal objectives of the press according to Yadar (2001) is to measure popular feelings and give expression to it, while at the same time the press must also arouse certain desirable sentiments among the people and fearlessly exposed popular defects in governance. Newswatch magazine, in its effort to serve the popular feelings of Nigerians and also to expose its fearless brand of investigative reporting published an excerpt from the 12 member political bureau report submitted to government in 1987 before the government released its white paper on the report to the public. This action by Newswatch magazine publishers generated conflict between it and the government. According to Udomisor (2013), communication could be misunderstood resulting in a conflict. Misunderstanding may be one source of conflict, but certainly not in a militocracy which has the least tolerance for civil breaches. It was therefore certain that non-compliance with military directives and decrees would result in misunderstanding and therefore conflicts between Newswatch publishers and the government.

Udomisor (2013) says that conflicts denote the dynamic of the environment. In other words society itself would be in quandary without conflict, or life itself will meaningless or static if communication does not bring up challenges around which man would task his intellect in order to bring forth solutions and forge ahead.

Therefore, while it is communication which brings about conflict, it sounds logical that communication can also be used to resolve conflict. According to Udomsior (2013) and Pate (2002) communication on several occasions has always been regarded as the most critical in-factor that could be used to resolve conflict amicably. But, this was not the case in the conflict between Newswatch magazine publishers and the Babangida government in 1987. Rather the military government headed by General Ibrahim Babangida unilaterally decided to proscribe Newswatch magazine for six months. The proscription order was enacted as (Newswatch proscription and Prohibition from circulation) decree No 6 of 1987. However, surprising to the waiting public the ban was curiously lifted on August 26, 1987, less than two months to the expiration of the six months period.

10. EXAMINATION OF TOOL OF PROSCRIPTION IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The proscription order on Newswatch was suddenly and unexpectedly rescind by the government on April 26, 1987. What facts actually prompted a military government, known for its die hard approach to civil issues to take this step? In analyzing this poser several variables are imminence. Firstly, proscribing Newswatch was a slap on the face of

civil liberty and the denial of the down-trodden of information which they need to order their daily life. This was certain to evoke a flurry of sympathies in favour of Newswatch, no matter how grievous government might consider their offence to be. Again, Newswatch as a vital organ of the society with its inherent fundamental rights was not granted fair hearing in an issue that was purely civil disobedient and not criminal act. Other organs of the media were also watching the unfolding proscription drama with sympathy toward Newswatch bearing in mind that they too could one day be victims of proscription and therefore a collective front to fight off the evil may become necessary.

The government on its part, might have seen reason to rescind the proscription order so as not to allow it to degenerate into civil unrest, having realized that the junta rode on the back of civil disturbance against tyrannical rules of his predecessor to the corridor of power. The government might have also learned that allowing the proscription order to linger would distract its attention from the goal of redeeming the economy and bringing about development to the masses, and this could be even more dangerous to the government than the saga of proscription.

Newswatch Executives might have felt the pains of the losses incurred for several weeks without publishing and the accumulated staff emoluments and other sundry bills. Therefore, Newswatch might have sent words to the government that it had learnt its lesson. These might have resulted in the resolution of the conflict two months before the official end of the proscription period. It is equally true that Newswatch media allies also helped to stimulate discourse on the pros and cons of the proscription, facilitating an early resolution of the conflict than was anticipated. From this point, it could be seen that it was not “proscription” but dialogue that led to the early and amicable resolution of the conflict.

11. QUALITIES FOR SUCCESS IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS

Journalism is one career that does not so much attract material gains and yet it is also a career that is so demanding, risky and very hazardous. It is conflict ridden and does not attract the least “thank you” from those the journalist is sacrificing for. What actually could be the reasons that people would opt for the profession. What are the qualities that would encourage practitioners to accept to stay in the profession in spite of the numerous risks that are trailing them in the course of their assigned duties?

In general term, the press goes through a lot of hazards while discharging its statutory duties to the society. Journalists and other media operatives have had to withstand arrests, tortures, threats, and deaths in order to still remain relevant in the profession. There are a number of attributes which journalists in conflict situations must possess in order for them to successfully function well and to see to the resolution of the conflict itself.

Newswatch journalists and publishers possessed these traits which enabled them to weather the storms of proscription and keep publishing in a volatile, conflict ridden environment such as Nigeria and in a period the military in power did not tolerate an alternative and opposing views. Udomisor (2013) list these attributes to include:

(a). ATTITUDE (b). BELIEF (c). POWER

According to Beltinghaus (1980) attitude is a feeling of liking and disliking which people have for things in the world around them. For some people their attitudes to a matter may be deeply intense while to others it may be light.

Attitude and belief are products of the experiences of life and a single event or experience could lead to an attitude being formed. Once an attitude is formed, an individual will use it as a platform to canvas his stand on issues in his environment.

In a way, the practice of Journalism is an attitude. It is an attitude against what is abnormal and a position for positive change. Where journalism does not canvas for noble changes, it becomes an exception rather than the rule. It could be suggested that Newswatch came to effect some changes in the status-quo, at least to change from handout publishing to investigative and interpretative style of journalism with the hope and belief that it would have an accumulative impact on change and development in the country.

Moreover, the practice of journalism is embedded in belief. Belief is simply a proposition based on personal conviction about a matter. Thus, it is a matter of the heart or mind for someone to profess “I believe that” if he could conclude that a certain matter is this or that based on his conviction, and this is because he has noticed that there is a kind of relationship between two events or objects.

In the case of the pre-emptive publishing of the White Paper by Newswatch, the belief might have been that the people had a right to know and the journal had the right to publish the information. In journalism, “scoops” are celebrated. The medium which publishes an item before others will usually beat its chest and say, “we did it first” and that tends to garner a quantum of authority and respect when people say, “we saw it first in Newswatch”

Lastly, the practice of journalism requires and confers power.

Udomisor (1997) sees “power” as that potential which has a bearing on the physical state of things as well as on human and psychological conditions. Emmet (1954) categorises power thus:

- a) “Power” as the causal efficacy shown in psychological pressure or manipulations which provide people with the motive for choosing X rather than Y;
- b) “Power” for heightening or vitality or “will” or morale;

- c) "Power" as personal influence due to moral strength of character or prestige either of person or office;
- d) "Power" as "charismatic" quality

As a frontline publication campaigning for change, Newswatch certainly understood that it must have "power" to dominate, control, influence and direct events in the Nigerian environment in spite of the military ill-disposition to alternative views. To be able to do this, journalists working in Newswatch had to develop their intelligence through a continuous accumulation of knowledge. (Udomisor,2013). At the time, Newswatch boasted of some of the highly educated and trained journalists including Ray Ekpu, Dele Giwa, Dan Agbese and Yakubu Mohammed, who were former editors of some respectable newspapers and managers of information outfits in Nigeria. Apart from this, some of its journalists had been attending courses abroad. Moreover, Newswatch also had on board two celebrated academics, Niyi Osundare and Adebayo Williams, as guest-columnists. In addition, the journal had a board of directors which was financially capable and which, one believes, helped in no small measure in the de-proscription of the magazine two months ahead of the official ban.

On the whole, the acquisition of the above-mentioned attributes equipped journalists in Newswatch in the discharge of their professional duties despite severe press regulations, censorship, banning of some publications, closing down media houses as well as intimidating, arresting and detaining scores of journalists by the military authority.

Newswatch was able to survive these obstacles through the resilience acquired and developed by its journalists through attitude, belief and power.

12. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the media in Nigeria went through a horrible period in the hands of the military regimes beginning with the first military government to the period of General Sani Abacha. Some media faced hostilities such as arrest and detention of journalists and workers, closure of media businesses, proscriptions, etc. For instance *Newswatch* magazine, was proscribed for six months with effect from April 6, 1987 although it was de-proscribed two months to the end of the punitive measure. Despite this repressive measures, the magazine was able to explore alternative resolution measures whereby the conflict was resolved and Newswatch got back to business. Besides, the journalists on the staff of Newswatch were able to weather through storm in a conflict-ridden environment by cultivating and perfecting attitudes, beliefs and power through which they develop a resilient posture for enduring pain and taking risks as demanded by journalism practice.

Conflict should not inhibit a journalist from carrying out his duties, rather, a journalist who finds himself and the medium which he works for as a party in conflict, must develop the afore-mentioned attributes in order to withstand certain risks and dangers of the conflicting situation and come out triumphantly (Udomisor 2013).

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