

## Old Wine in New Bottle: The Nigerian Press in the Era of Constitutional Democracy, 1999-2009

A.O. ADESOJI\*

### Abstract

That a significant section of the Nigerian Press is vibrant is not in doubt. Obviously a major feature which colonialism nourished and which prolonged military rule sustained, the Nigerian Press has remained a significant part of the democratic process by virtue of its vibrancy. Its differentiation notwithstanding, the ability of the Nigerian Press to either project and promote constitutional democracy or write its epitaph derives from the performance of its roles as an important stakeholder in the democratic enterprise. But to what extent has the Nigerian press been able to play its part since the return of civil rule in 1999? Has the Nigerian press been a partner, supporting and projecting democratic rule or silently singing its *nunc dumitis*? What role has the differentiation of the Press or its proliferation played in sustaining or hindering the new democratic experimentation? To what extent has the orientation of the Press and its disposition to colonial rule and prolonged military role continued in the new democratic experimentation or informed its perception? This paper appraises the functionality, perception, disposition and role of the Nigerian Press in the new democratic experimentation in Nigeria between 1999 and 2009 to make a case for its being either a partner in or an undertaker of constitutional democracy in Nigeria.

**Key words:** Nigerian Press, Democracy, Elections, Corruption, Fourth Republic

### Introduction

Since the attainment of political independence in Nigeria in 1960, the latest effort at democratic experimentation which started in 1999 is remarkable for some reasons. First, it is the longest so far in the history of the country. Second, despite its obvious shortcomings, it has been characterized by the change of baton from one civilian government to another both in 2003 and 2007. Hitherto, this was not the case, as the attempts at transiting from one civilian government to another had generated crises leading to military takeover in the past. Related to this was the resolve of the political parties, politicians and Nigerians to make democracy work irrespective of the challenges involved. Significantly also, the dispensation witnessed the efforts at checkmating problems/challenges that could threaten constitutional democracy. A very good example is the anti-corruption war. This is not to say that there were no challenges to the establishment and institution of constitutional democracy in the dispensation. Rather the challenges as well as the responses to them have become part of the democratic experimentation.

As an important stakeholder in the process of nation-building in general and the entrenchment of democratic rule in particular, the Nigerian Press has remained a force to reckon with. Its resilience, obviously a product of its sustained struggle with colonialism and prolonged military rule, not only marked it out as an important pillar of democracy, it also prepared it for the roles it is playing in the era of constitutional democracy. Evidently however, some basic features which the Nigerian Press developed in the course of its evolution and growth have continued to impact on its performance. This paper seeks to probe into the extent to which these basic features have impacted on its perception of, and disposition to issues in the era of constitutional democracy. It also seeks to find out the extent to which the changing political climate and changing ownership structure have impacted on the basic features of Nigerian Press and its response to issues and problems emanating from the attempts at entrenching democracy. Beyond providing a basis for its assessment either as a partner collaborating to entrench democracy or an undertaker digging its grave, it will also provide a basis and justification for the evaluation of the Nigerian Press whether as the stale old wine poured into new bottle or a brand new media playing old roles and seeing things from the same old perspective.

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\* Ph.D, Department of History, Obafemi Awolowo University

### The Nigerian Press before 1999

Beginning from 1859 when the first newspaper, *Iwe Irohin fun Awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba* was published and 1999 when the Fourth Republic was inaugurated, the Nigerian Press has been part and parcel of the nation-building process. As observed by Omu, the real founding of the Nigerian press did not take place until the 1880s<sup>1</sup>. This was despite the emergence of the *Iwe Irohin* and the *Anglo African* in 1859 and 1863 respectively. According to him, the establishment of the *Lagos Times and Gold Coast Advertiser* on November 10 1880 marked the beginning of the indigenous newspaper movement.

Importantly, the press right from the beginning has been differentiated due perhaps to the motives of the proprietors, the mode of operation, language and style of writing, disposition to people in government or even the government itself as well as the duration or regularity of publication. Consequently, the press has been categorised into different arms or sections such as pro-establishment or conservative newspapers, anti-government newspapers, electioneering newspapers, government founded and funded newspapers, privately owned or independent newspapers as well as radical or activist press. Observably, the dividing line between and among these sections of the press is very thin hence their overlapping nature<sup>2</sup>.

The pro-establishment or conservative newspapers were mainly those that either supported the government of the day or saw things from its perspective. Such newspapers often deployed their arsenal to project such government and what it represents and could sometimes criticize opposition newspapers for being critical of the government and its policies. Included in this category were the *Eagle and Lagos Critic* inaugurated in 1883, the *Nigerian Pioneer* founded in 1914 and the *Daily Times* particularly after its take over by the Federal Government in 1975. Included also in this category were government newspapers founded to project government image and policies as well as to counter opposition newspapers. The *Morning Post*, the *Daily Sketch*, the *New Nigerian*, the *Nigerian Herald*, the *Nigerian Tide* and the *Nigerian Observer* established at various times between 1960 and 1970 are examples<sup>3</sup>. Interestingly, some anti-government newspapers emerged at different times perhaps in response to or to challenge pro-establishment newspapers. The *Lagos Weekly Records (LWR)* founded in 1891 blazed the trail in this direction. The emergence of nationalist newspapers which climaxed in the founding of the *West African Pilot* in 1937, built on this tradition<sup>4</sup>. The flourishing of the radical press could not be completely divorced from this development.

Beginning with the introduction of democratic elections in 1922, some newspapers were purposely formed to give effective expression to the political opinions of their proprietors. This led to the birth of the *Nigerian Spectator* and the *Nigerian Advocate* in May and August 1923 respectively<sup>5</sup>. Slightly related to this category were some of the independent newspapers. Although they were not founded to expressly or purposely promote the electoral fortunes of their mentors, their activities betrayed their use for the promotion of the political interests of their proprietors. This was the case with the *West African Pilot* beginning from the 1940s, the *Nigerian Tribune* from the 1950s to the 1980s and the *National Concord* from 1980 to mid 1990s<sup>6</sup>. There were however, independent newspapers that did not serve the political interest of their mentors nor were they involved in partisan politics except that some of them were very vocal in condemning the evil that military rule at its peak represented. These included the *Punch* (1973), the *Guardian* (1983), the *Vanguard* (1984)<sup>7</sup>. Others were *This Day* (1995), *Post Express*, *Daily Sun* (2001) and the *Daily Independent*. The list keeps growing everyday. They are so called because they are free from overt government control and in most

<sup>1</sup> Fred I.A. Omu, *Press and Politics in Nigeria, 1880 – 1937* (London: Longman 1978), pp. 7, 19-29.

<sup>2</sup> Abimbola O. Adesoji, *The Press and Ethnic Politics in Nigeria, 1960-2003* (Unpublished Doctor of Philosophy Thesis, Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, 2007)

<sup>3</sup> Omu, *Press and Politics*, pp.246-251; Dayo Duyile, *Makers of Nigerian Press: An Historical Analysis of Newspaper Development, the Pioneer Heroes, the Modern Press Barons and the New Publishers from 1859-1987*. (Lagos: Gong Communications Nigeria Ltd., 1997), pp. 113-124.

<sup>4</sup> Increase H.O. Coker, *Landmarks of the Nigerian Press* (Apapa: National Press Ltd, 1968), pp. 32-34, 39-42.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 16-19, 11

<sup>6</sup> Omu, *Press and Politics*, pp. 247 – 248, Duyile, *Makers of Nigerian Press*, p. 207

<sup>7</sup> Mathews A. Ojo, "Religion, Public Space and the Press in Contemporary Nigeria" in Toyin Falola (ed.) *Christianity and Social Change in Africa: Essays in Honour of J.D.Y Peel* (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), pp. 236-238.

cases, profit maximization is central to their establishment.

The radical or activist press comprises newspapers and news magazines that held strong views about issues and were non-conformist to the established order. In most cases, their emergence was influenced by the need to project, defend or popularize a cause. Sometimes, it was also borne out of reaction to prevailing situations or circumstances. Duyile sees the *Anglo African* which existed between 1863 and 1865 as the first radical newspaper in Nigeria, perhaps because of its critical appraisal of the problem of the time<sup>8</sup>. Other examples of the radical press were *Hotline Magazine* published in Kaduna by Mallam Hassan Kontagora and the *Analyst* published by Abdulkadir Balarabe Musa also in Kaduna. There was also the emergence in the 1990s of *Tell*, *The News* and *Tempo* magazines and their radical transformation, due to the misrule that characterized the military adventure into politics which peaked in the 1990s. The same factor possibly led to the transformation of the *Guardian* from a supposedly pro-establishment newspaper to an avowed critic of military rule<sup>9</sup>.

There was also the emergence and proliferation of human interest magazines as well as sport newspapers and magazines. Furthermore, an emerging trend is the growth of online newspapers. There are websites that publish materials on-line only. Obviously, these sites are used to propagate specific causes, react to issues or monitor government policies generally. Examples include *Ganji*, *Nigerian Village Square*, *Nigerian News Service*, *NewsDiary Online*, *Elendureports*, *ViewNaija*, *Nigeria Today*, *Pointblanknews*, *Nigerian News world*, *Desert Herald*, *Amana Online*, *Arewa Online* and *Al-Mizan* among others. Generally, the newspapers and magazines are broadly categorized based on duration or regularity of publication. This brought about the idea of dailies, weeklies, evening papers, fortnightlies, monthlies and quarterlies. In the same vein, the base of their publication led to their categorization as either national, regional or provincial or vernacular newspapers or magazines.

Significantly also, the Nigerian Press is one of the most vibrant in Africa. As attested to by Olukotun<sup>10</sup>, the Nigerian Press is only followed by those of South Africa and Kenya in terms of its size and virility. Obviously a product of its prolonged and articulate struggle against colonialism beginning with the emergence of the *West African Pilot* in 1937<sup>11</sup>, the Nigerian Press has remained vibrant its differentiation notwithstanding. One measure of its vibrancy is its resilience in the face of daunting challenges which spanned colonial and post colonial period. These challenges ranged from withdrawal of patronage like placement of advertisement, promulgation of draconian rules and regulations guiding the operation of the press, confiscation of newspapers and magazines as well as harassment, arrest detention and trials of journalists mostly on trumped up charges. Another proof of the resilience of the Nigerian Press is the refusal to be limited by poor returns from sale. As far as Dare is concerned, the motives of profit maximization in the press up to the 1990s was a mirage and that it is the capacity of a publisher to sustain losses continually that sustains a publication<sup>12</sup>. Arguably, the fulfilment or satisfaction derived from exercise of tremendous power and influence within the media organization also explains the resilience of the press. So also is the usefulness of the newspapers in serving or prosecuting a particular cause, promoting an agenda or ideal or popularizing the proprietors' philosophy which in most cases dwarfed or lessen the impact of losses arising from/associated with newspapers' sale.

The political inclination of the Nigerian Press has also marked it out. Evidently, one important area in which the press has proved its all time relevance is politics. Its involvement in politics became so tremendous that it has become difficult separating the press from political developments. Not only has this involvement earned the press accolades as seen in the struggle against colonialism and for self rule, it has also brought vilification to the press particularly with the level of partisanship that the press degenerated into,

<sup>8</sup> Duyile, *Makers of Nigerian Press*, p. 219

<sup>9</sup> Duyile, pp. 218-225; Ayo Olukotun, *Repressive State and Resurgent Media under Nigeria's Military Dictatorship, 1988-98* (Ibadan: College Press and Publishers, 2005), pp. 37-40

<sup>10</sup> Ayo Olukotun, "Media Accountability and Democracy in Nigeria, 1999-2003," *African Studies Review* vol. 47 no 3 2004 pp. 69-90.

<sup>11</sup> Omu, *Press and Politics*, pp.47-98

<sup>12</sup> Olatunji Dare, "The Press" in Larry Diamond, A. Kirk-Greene and Oyeleye Oyediran (eds.) *Transition Without End: Nigerian Politics and Civil Society under Babangida* (Ibadan: Vantage Publishers, 1997), pp.535-551

beginning from the period towards the attainment of self-rule. Although there could be other agency through which politics could be articulated, the press appears to be one important agency hence the commonly held notion that political issues or developments cannot be discussed without appraising the role of the press. Observably, one important aspect of the link between the press and politics is that the dispensation in which the press operates, the *dramatis personae*, the developments that occur under different dispensations as well as the purpose which a particular section of the press sets out to achieve, all combine to influence the outlook of the press and its disposition.

As a major source of wealth and influence in a third world country like Nigeria, the involvement of people in politics could be understood. So also is the involvement of the press in politics whether at the level of press ownership and control, its use to propagate, project or promote political cause, idea or personality or even in terms of its location or base. The establishment or transformation of such newspapers as the *Nigerian Tribune*, *West African Pilot*, *New Nigerian*, *Daily Times* and even newspapers established by federal and state governments at different times is a major proof of the link between press and politics<sup>13</sup>. Similarly the emergence of such newspapers and magazine as *The Nation*, *Nigerian Compass*, *Westerner* as well as Online media and dedicated sites even when they claimed to be independent attest to the involvement of the press in politics whether as direct participants, fronts, disinterested or neutral observers or active watchdog<sup>14</sup>. Essentially, the characteristics which the press exhibited in about 140 years of its existence up to 1999 continued to characterize it in the new democratic dispensation that started in 1999. What remains to be seen is how these features influenced the media coverage, perception and disposition in the evolving Fourth Republic. Besides, given the pervasive influence of these features, what contribution did the media make to promote democratic experimentation or to undermine it in the new dispensation?

### **The Nigerian Press and Constitutional Democracy, 1999--2009: Partner or Undertaker?**

In appraising the role of the media in the new democratic experimentation which commenced in 1999, this paper focused on the media coverage of two major issues that dominated media discourse in the last ten years. These issues were elections, electioneering and governance, and corruption and anti-corruption campaign. Significantly, the impacts of these issues on either the sustenance or derailment of democratic development make a study of the media coverage of them pertinent.

### **Elections, Electioneering and Governance**

Arguably, the nature of the different sections of the media played a major role in determining their perception and influencing their disposition. As far as the *Daily Times (DT)* was concerned, the transparency and openness that characterised the implementation of the Abdusalami Abubakar Transition Programme had helped to restore credibility to the transition process and shore-up confidence in the anticipated democratic governance<sup>15</sup>. The *DT* also commended the conduct of the election monitors and stressed that to view the elections as the be-all and end-all of the democratic process would be a great mistake<sup>16</sup>. Other issues covered by the paper included the need for politicians to play by the rule, accept election results in good faith, shun ethnicism and avoid alliances that had the capability of derailing the country<sup>17</sup> while also stressing the need for national unity<sup>18</sup>. For the *Vanguard*, the presidential election was the litmus test for the overall success or failure of the democratization attempt. It therefore highlighted the criteria and standards that should inform the choice of a president<sup>19</sup>. Besides, it appraised the emergence of two southern presidential candidates as

<sup>13</sup> Adesoji, *The Press and Ethnic Politics in Nigeria*, pp. 112-116

<sup>14</sup> Wale Adebani, "The Nigerian Press and the Idea of Nigerian Nation" in Toyin Falola (ed) *Nigerian in the Twentieth Century*, (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2002), pp. 143-153

<sup>15</sup> *Daily Times* (Lagos) 25 Feb 1999

<sup>16</sup> *Daily Times* (Lagos) 1 March 1999

<sup>17</sup> *Daily Times* (Lagos) 3 March 1999

<sup>18</sup> *Daily Times* (Lagos) 4 March 1999

<sup>19</sup> *Sunday Vanguard* (Lagos) 21 February 1999

being epochal and politically expedient<sup>20</sup>. Also it challenged all the stakeholders including the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), political parties, candidates, security forces and the press to play their part creditably well<sup>21</sup>.

The *Nigerian Tribune (NT)* saw in the return of democratic rule after almost sixteen years of military rule, the enactment of positive history. To the *NT*, the total mismanagement of the economy and the anti-people disposition of the military produced lack of confidence of Nigerian in the governmental processes<sup>22</sup>. While it saw democratic rule as being more than just substituting civilians for the erstwhile military overlords but rather a departure from the path of governmental irresponsibility, the *NT* advocated a genuine sense of purpose, accountability and the use of dialogue in resolving national issues<sup>23</sup>. *The Punch* identified the myriad of problems that the new civilian government of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo was inheriting and advocated better responses as a way of enhancing the development of the country and safeguarding the new democratic experimentation<sup>24</sup>. The issues that featured prominently in the *New Nigerian (NN)* coverage were appraisal of past transitions<sup>25</sup>, the legal tussle between Chief Oluyemisi Falae and Chief Olusegun Obasanjo over the February 1999 presidential election<sup>26</sup>, and the perceived conspiracy against the North in terms of appointment<sup>27</sup>.

As it was in 1999, the media also focused on different aspects of elections, electioneering and governance in 2003. The *NT* saw the 2003 general elections as being very important because it was the first time a civilian administration would conduct such elections. Beyond seeing the elections as an opportunity to freely give fresh mandate to new political leaders and/or renew that of some incumbents<sup>28</sup>, it criticized the fixing of the election for Holy Saturday though unknowingly by INEC and over which it should have apologized. In addition, it stressed the importance of people to the success of the electoral process. It therefore advised all stakeholders to play the game by its rules to avoid a repeat of the 1964 and 1983 experiences<sup>29</sup>. Other issues covered by the *NT* were the overwhelming victory recorded by the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) among the Yoruba of the South-west leading to the displacement of the Alliance for Democracy (AD), due to varied reasons<sup>30</sup> as well as the need to avoid plunging the country into an avoidable chaos. This was in response to complaints of large scale electoral fraud in the elections<sup>31</sup>.

Like the *NT*, the *Guardian* saw the elections as a major test of the capacity of politicians to successfully manage civilian succession politics. It stressed that the controversy over the Holy Saturday date was not necessary and cautioned that the elections should not be a do or die affair, urging winners to be magnanimous and losers to be humble<sup>32</sup>. With the rejection of the National Assembly poll result by the opposition, the *Guardian* argued that "elections are one aspects of democracy; the rule of law is another. But where people take law into their own hands, democracy suffers thereby, because then might becomes right. This should not be so"<sup>33</sup>. It therefore advised the aggrieved parties and candidates to seek redress through legal means. Besides, the *Guardian* in a comprehensive appraisal of the 2003 elections commended the commitment of Nigerians to a new democratic experience and stressed that the electoral process could not be expected to mature overnight like the negative elements of our behaviour<sup>34</sup>. *The Punch* unequivocally rejected the call for the postponement of the elections and the installation of an Interim National Government by the

<sup>20</sup> *Sunday Vanguard* (Lagos) 21 February 1999

<sup>21</sup> *Vanguard* (Lagos) 24 February 1999

<sup>22</sup> *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan) 31 May 1999

<sup>23</sup> *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan) 31 May 1999

<sup>24</sup> *Saturday Punch* (Lagos) 29 May 1999

<sup>25</sup> *New Nigerian* (Kaduna) 14 March 1999

<sup>26</sup> *New Nigerian* (Kaduna) 1 April 1999

<sup>27</sup> *New Nigerian Weekly* (Kaduna) 17 April 1999

<sup>28</sup> *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan) 3 April 2003

<sup>29</sup> *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan) 11 April 2003

<sup>30</sup> *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan) 28 April 2003

<sup>31</sup> *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan) 29 May 2009

<sup>32</sup> *The Guardian* (Lagos) 9 April 2003

<sup>33</sup> *The Guardian* (Lagos) 18 April 2003

<sup>34</sup> *The Guardian* (Lagos) 28 April 2003

opposition parties on the ground of the breach of some sections of the electoral law. It used the breach of the 1999 constitution and the country gradual release from the long and firm grip of the military as its reasons. To the *Punch* therefore, the nation's leaders owe the country as well as the international community an obligation to ensure that the jinx of an unsuccessful transfer of power from one civilian administration to another was broken, which in effect meant ensuring that the election was 'peaceful, free and fair'<sup>35</sup>. The paper also commended the enthusiasm and orderliness of the electorates which it saw as an expression of their overwhelming preference for democracy. In addition to identifying some of the problems that almost marred the conduct of the elections, the paper advised INEC to ensure transparency<sup>36</sup>. Similarly, the *Punch*, like the *Guardian* and the *NT* condemned the mass action advocated by the All Nigerian People's Party (ANPP) presidential candidate General Muhammadu Buhari, stressing that there was no perfect election even in advanced democracies. While welcoming the ANPP decision distancing itself from Buhari's threat, it suggested recourse to legal option rather than foisting insecurity and instability on the nation<sup>37</sup>. The *Vanguard* was engaged by the significance of the National Assembly election, concern over the ability of the AD to repeat the feat it attained in the South-West in 1999 as well as the ability of the ruling PDP to still win a majority in the National Assembly. Similarly of concern to the paper was what the situation between the erstwhile political godfathers and their estranged godsons would be like as well as the quality of the National Assembly<sup>38</sup>. Similarly, the paper in a comprehensive appraisal adjudged the elections successful particularly in terms of their organizational content. Also, the politicians' inability to admit defeat and the do or die manner in which electoral victory was sought were seen as the bane of Nigerian politics<sup>39</sup>. Furthermore, the *Vanguard*, reviewed comprehensively, the Electoral Act, 2002, particularly the section dealing with how to seek redress after electoral defeat<sup>40</sup>. This was meant to provide information and the needed political education that could prevent candidates and their supporters from resorting to fermenting trouble after losing election. It was also meant to serve the purpose of enlightenment for those aspiring to occupy political offices.

The press coverage of the 2007 general elections was not radically different from what obtained in 1999 and 2003 except that the problematic nature of the elections including the preparation for it and its actual conduct generated so much heat which dominated the discourse in the press. Among the issues was the decision of the Nigerian Police to import billions of naira worth of arms and ammunition into the country which according to police source was to enhance the capability of the police to deal effectively with cases of insecurity during the electioneering period<sup>41</sup>. The disqualification of some candidates including the sitting Vice President from participating in the general elections beyond heating up the polity generated so much interest such that it was a major issue for a long a time in the press<sup>42</sup>. More importantly was the violence and widespread malpractices that characterised the conduct of the elections leading to the call for its rejection by the opposition politicians and larger segment of the Nigerian Society<sup>43</sup>.

### Corruption and Anti-Corruption War

Like it was with the press coverage of elections and related issues, the press coverage of corruption among political office holders and the anti-corruption war was remarkable. Beginning with the establishment of the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) in 2000<sup>44</sup> and the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) in 2002<sup>45</sup> the press appeared to have supported the

<sup>35</sup> *The Punch* (Lagos) 10 April 2003

<sup>36</sup> *The Punch* (Lagos) 16 April 2003

<sup>37</sup> *The Punch* (Lagos) 30 April 2003

<sup>38</sup> *Vanguard* (Lagos) 12 April 2003

<sup>39</sup> *Vanguard* (Lagos) 21 April 2003

<sup>40</sup> *Vanguard* (Lagos) 22 April 2003

<sup>41</sup> *Daily Trust (Kaduna)* 7 March 2007

<sup>42</sup> *The Guardian* (Lagos) 7 March 2007; *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan) 7 March, 2007; *Vanguard* (Lagos) 2 March 2007; *The Punch* (Lagos) 7 March, 2007; *The Guardian* 12 March 2007; *The Punch* (Lagos), 16 March, 2007

<sup>43</sup> See different Nigerian Newspapers published between 15 April and 23 April 2007

<sup>44</sup> Federal Government of Nigeria, *The Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) Act 2000*.

Available <http://www.nigeria-law.org> Accessed 08 February 2008

<sup>45</sup> Federal Government of Nigeria, *The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) Act 2002* Available

renewed efforts of the Federal government to tackle corruption in the country. Of particular interest was the press coverage of the travails of two senate presidents and the indictment of several others, either for inflating cost of cars and furniture purchased for them, reaping financial gains from contract awards to ghost firms (mostly owned by themselves or their associates) or from payment of salaries and allowances to non-existent personal aides<sup>46</sup>. Similarly the press coverage of the prosecution and subsequent conviction of Mr Tafa Balogun, the former Inspector-General of Police, was remarkable<sup>47</sup>.

Arguably, the two most celebrated corruption cases in the press were those of former governors of Plateau and Bayelsa States, Chiefs Joshua Dariye and Diepriye Alamiyeseigha. Beyond providing graphic details of their corruption acts, the newspapers also chronicled their travails including their arrest in London, their escape and their impeachment<sup>48</sup>. In a similar manner, the role played by the EFCC in masterminding their impeachment was not only widely reported but was also subjected to thorough debates<sup>49</sup>. Expectedly, the conviction of Chief Alamiyeseigha and the forfeiture of his asset to government also generated interest in the newspapers<sup>50</sup>.

Interestingly but worrisome, the press coverage of corruption seemed to have taken the pattern set by the government or through its agencies (EFCC and ICPC). Thus the concentration on or the shift of government focus from cases also determines the press position or disposition. For instance, the likes of Rev Jolly Nyame, former governor Taraba State and Dr Bukola Saraki of Kwara state were initially reported of being investigated by the EFCC<sup>51</sup> but nothing was heard about their cases thereafter either from EFCC or the press.

Just like the perceived excesses of Mallam Nuhu Ribadu as the chairman of EFCC did not escape the hammer of the press, the perceived slowing down of the Anti-Corruption campaign under Mrs Farida Waziri is generating serious debate and exposing the agency to serious criticism. For instance, the EFCC under Mallam Ribadu was seen as a weapon in the hands of former president Olusegun Obasanjo to deal with his political opponents. The case of Dr Bukola Saraki suffices. Despite the threat of EFCC to stop corrupt officials from contesting elective positions in the 2007 general elections, Saraki contested and was even re-elected as governor. It was also contended that not one official close to Chief Obasanjo or those in his good books was probed or tried even when there were serious allegations against them<sup>52</sup>. For Mrs. Farida Waziri, the perception of the vocal segment of the press about her tenure was a deliberate slowing down of the war against corruption. The EFCC was particularly accused of trying to sweep under the carpet the cases of former governors already tried and those penciled down for trial by deliberately misplacing their files or giving the impression that there were not enough evidence to prosecute them. This development the press traced to the manner of her emergence particularly as a candidate of the corrupt former governors, her antecedent as a former police officer and more importantly the war/fight back being waged by the former and serving governors against the anti-corruption campaign of the Federal Government<sup>53</sup>.

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[http://www.nigeria\\_law.org](http://www.nigeria_law.org)  
Accessed 10 February 2008

<sup>46</sup> Senators Adolphus Wabara and Anyim Pius Anyim were removed from office as Senate Presidents at different times on allegation of corrupt practices among others

<sup>47</sup> Bamidele Johnson, "Tafa's Sleazy Treasure" *The News* 7 February 2005

<sup>48</sup> Innocent Anaba, "How Dariye Looted Plateau's Billions – EFCC" *Vanguard* (Lagos) 3 February 2006; Tunde Oyedoyin "How Dariye Diverted Plateau Money" *The Guardian on Sunday* (Lagos) 25 December 2005; *The Sun* (Lagos) 20 January 2006; *This Day* (Lagos) 13 February 2006; *The Sun* (Lagos) 14 February 2006; *The Guardian on Sunday* (Lagos) 25 December 2000; *The Punch* (Lagos) 30 October 2008.

<sup>49</sup> *Saturday This Day* (Lagos) 10 December 2005; *The Guardian on Saturday* (Lagos) 28 April 2007

<sup>50</sup> *The Punch* (Lagos) 27 July 2007; *The Guardian* (Lagos) 27 July 2007

<sup>51</sup> *Saturday Vanguard* (Lagos) 10 December 2005; *Vanguard* (Lagos) 30 December 2005. *The Guardian* (Lagos) 10 February, 2006.

<sup>52</sup> Okey Ndibe "Alamiyeseigha for President". *The Guardian* (Lagos) 24 November 2005; Human Rights Watch, *Criminal Politics: Violence, "Godfathers" and Corruption in Nigeria* 19 (16) A October 2007, pp.35-48.

<sup>53</sup> Dayo Aiyetan, "A War Gone Comatose" *Tell* 1 December 2008; Dayo Aiyetan, "EFCC: Rest in Pieces" *Tell* 12 June 2008; David Mark, "Corruption War is Slowing Down" *Tell* 3 December 2007; Dayo Aiyetan, "Why They Are After Ribadu" *Tell* 16 July 2007.

Remarkably, the anti-corruption war entered a phase where a section of the press either did not focus on the war and the issues involved or sang discordant tunes on the necessity or otherwise of the campaign or in the extreme sought to counter the newspapers and magazines in the forefront of the anti-corruption crusade. A major factor for this development was the involvement of mostly former and serving governors in newspapers ownership or the deliberate cultivation of the sympathy or friendship of some newspapers with a view to securing favourable coverage in them. Such was the situation that the anti-corruption campaign has lost its steam, being more of a slogan or has been misdirected such that the goal which it was originally meant to attain has been truncated. The coldness of a section of the press or its inaction among other considerations accounted for this development.

### **The Nigerian Press: Old Wine in New Bottle?**

Arising from its coverage of election-related issues and anti-corruption campaign, the inherent nature of the press in Nigeria could be clearly seen. Significantly, the press by its coverage has proved its all time relevance as an important agency in the process of nation building. Remarkably, the ability of the press to play adequately its role of informing and educating and by extension its watchdog role has a lot to do with its characteristic features which it developed during the period of colonial rule and built on during the era of prolonged military rule. The emergence of the *WAP* in 1937 blazed the trail which other newspapers followed. Although, the use of such newspapers as the *WAP*, *NT*, *NN* for partisan purposes particularly with the participation of Nigerians in governance beginning from the 1950s impacted negatively on their vibrancy, the emergence of other newspapers and magazines as well as the transformation of old ones sustained the vibrant tradition. The emergence for instance of less overtly political newspapers like the *Guardian* the *Punch*, *Vanguard* and the transformation of the *NT* ensured that the press was able to play the watchdog role it was known for. It was this tradition that the press continued with in the new era of democratic experimentation.

Significantly, the press has succeeded in subjecting issues to objective and critical analysis commending where necessary, criticizing where inadequate and suggesting ways

of improving on what presently obtained. Also, with the benefits of hindsight based on what it had witnessed/experienced in the past, the press was able to counsel against re-occurrence. In particular its enthusiasm about the return of democratic rule and the need to safe guard it in addition to its attempt at agenda setting have portrayed the press as an important partner of constitutional democracy. A similar thing applies to the anti-corruption crusade of the Federal government in which the press was involved by publishing known acts of corrupt public officials and their travails as well as assessing the performance of the anti-corruption agencies.

Arguably, the press disposition to issues could not be divorced from its inclination to politics. This factor combined with the differentiation of the press has brought out clearly another aspect of the press, that is, its ability to really serve as an undertaker of constitutional democracy. As it was with the *NT* from the 1950s to 1980s and *Concord* from the 1980 to 1990s, some section of the press became actively involved in partisan politics either by virtue of their ownership or the use to which they were put or both. Of tremendous interest was the involvement of past or serving governors in newspapers business. Such newspapers included *Diet* (now defunct), the *Sun*, the *Nation* and the *Nigerian Compass* among others. Whereas *Diet* was founded by Chief James Ibori (former Delta State governor) even before he became governor, its usefulness in serving as the megaphone or mouthpiece of the founder and projecting his person would not have been in doubt except that its outing was epileptic despite attempts at sustaining it<sup>54</sup>. The *Sun* ostensibly has the backing of Chief Kalu Uzor Orji, former governor of Abia State and former presidential candidate of the Progressive

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<sup>54</sup> Two definite attempts were made to repackage it and present it to the public but they met with poor responses. See Omoyele Sowore, "As Ibori's Trial Begins, Startling Revelations Surface about His Two Convictions in London" *Nigerian Village Square* <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com> Accessed 16 May 2009; Jonathan Elendu & Omoyele Sowore, "Ibori in Oil Deals" *Elendureports* <http://www.elendureports.com> Accessed 16 May 2009



People's Alliance (PPA) in the 2007 general election<sup>55</sup>. The *Nation* had the backing of Senator Bola Tinubu, the former governor of Lagos State who is considered to be one of its financiers just like *Compass* and *Westerner* magazine have been linked one way or the other with Otunba Gbenga Daniel, the serving governor of Ogun State<sup>56</sup>. Interestingly, the *Nation* perhaps due to the interest behind it has tremendous sympathy for the Action Congress (AC), a political party that emerged in 2006 from a merger of a faction of the Alliance for Democracy (AD), Democratic People's Alliance (DPA) and Justice Party (JP). Quite not surprising, Senator Tinubu is a major pillar and financier of the AC. In a similar vein, *Compass* has deep sympathy for the ruling PDP. Beyond all other considerations, these two newspapers' reportage, features and editorials betray their sentiments about the political party which they had sympathy for and the one they oppose.

This differentiation of the press as it was in the past has far reaching implications on the press disposition to and coverage of issues. Apart from projecting the parties and/or individuals which they are interested in and defending their interest as the *Nation* and *Compass* had done, it is also possible for the newspapers to keep silent or focus on other issues when the interest of their principal or financier is at stake or could be negatively affected. This perhaps was the case with the *Sun* and Chief Kalu<sup>57</sup>. The wider implication of this development would be the inability or the deliberate refusal of the affected newspapers to report accurately or comment objectively on issues as it affect their principals or patrons. The current trial of former governors on corruption charges readily comes to mind. Understandably, the perception of the anti-corruption war and the agencies involved from narrow viewpoint of those affected and the newspapers supporting them has the capability of derailing the anti-corruption campaign just like the use of the partisan newspapers to promote the electoral fortunes of their patrons could make the choice of candidates difficult by creating false popularity. This could be particularly true of the vocal segment of the press.

Related to the above but still showing that the press has remained old wine in new bottle is the general use of newspapers to promote political parties and candidates. Although this could be justified on the basis of newspapers selling spaces in order to make money to run their organization and/or the paper, the dangerous dimension of it is the attempt/effort by journalists and editors to feature politicians seeking to contest elective offices or promoting those already in office and crediting them with what they have not done ostensibly to secure the same or higher office for them in future. Obviously not a new development, its negative impact on sustaining, vibrant democratic culture, promoting accountability and good governance and generally safeguarding constitutional democracy is no doubt tremendous. Whereas, the issue of compromising the journalists and editors could not be completely ruled out, the ultimate victim is the growth and sustenance of vibrant constitutional democracy.

More importantly, the reluctance or the laziness of newspapers and journalists to engage in vibrant investigative journalism is a major minus in the quest of the newspapers to sustain democratic rule. The newspapers as they were in the past seemed to be content with merely reporting issues and events as they happened rather than going into deeper investigation of issues. Although *Newswatch* magazine blazed the trail with its debut in 1987, it eventually lost the steam. It however found worthy successors in *Tell* and *The News* which were established in 1991 and 1993 respectively. Significantly the duo have remained sentinel, exposing hidden motives and agenda, engaging in virulent criticism and subjecting government policies and programmes to critical appraisal. Rather than being proactive, the reactive nature of most newspapers in Nigeria particularly in the present dispensation has made it difficult to get to the root of many problems, the resolution of which would have strengthened constitutional democracy. Such issues include the controversy over the continued trial of former governor on corruption charges, arraignment of others whose investigation had been concluded, the plea bargaining arrangement, the alleged missing case files on those who had been investigated, the alleged assets of Mr Nuhu Ribadu, former EFCC Boss in Dubai, the alleged link of Mrs

<sup>55</sup> Seyi Oduyela, "The Media in Nigeria Part 2" <http://www.dawodu.com> Accessed 16 May 2009

<sup>56</sup> Che Oyimnatumba, "Ekiti Speaker Impeached, Governor Gbenga Daniel Hangs on a Loose Thread" *Which Way Nigeria* 9 July 2008 <http://www.whichwaynigeria.net>; Accessed 10 May 2009 "Nigerian Journalism: *This Day* Newspaper, Tinubu, Fashola and the Chagoury Tango" *Which Way Nigeria* 18 August 2008, <http://www.whichwaynigeria.net> Accessed 12 May 2009; See also Reuben Abati, "Walking a Tightrope" *Tell* (Lagos) 20 April 2009

<sup>57</sup> See Daily Sun of 8 August 2005

Farida Waziri with some of the former governors being investigated or tried, the issue of lack of evidence to try former President Olusegun Obasanjo on corruption charges, the issue surrounding the tenure of Mallam Nasir El-Rufai as Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Minister as well as the issue surrounding the health of President Umar Yar'adua. To a very large extent, all that is known about these issues or allegations presently are product of speculations.

### **Conclusion**

Despite its vibrancy, the differentiations of the press and its inclination towards politics have continued to influence its functionality, perception and disposition. Thus while the press remains an active partner in the democratic enterprise, it has not completely purged itself of the tendency and the capability to undermine democratic experimentation. The proliferation of newspapers particularly by those using it to cover their back, or defend their interest has not helped matters. By virtue of the issues surrounding its ownership and control or its sympathy, the press in Nigeria has remained essentially the stale old wine in new bottle despite all attempts at repackaging. Not even the demise of some old titles, the emergence of new titles or change in titles has changed anything tremendously. Whereas, its character may not change fundamentally because of its entrenched nature, it is important that the press becomes proactive while a segment that appears proactive now need to be more proactive. It is then the press would be able to play its role as a watchdog and a partner of constitutional democracy and more importantly as a significant stakeholder in the process of nation-building.