Chapter 1
Mass Media, Elections, and Good Governance:
Implications for National Development

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the tripartite relationship between the media, elections and good governance in the contemporary Nigerian politics. It examines the growing impact of the media (especially with the emergence of the new media) on the various ways in which Nigerian political parties, politicians as well as governments present themselves to the electorate both for the purposes of electioneering campaigns and promotion of government policies as agenda for development. The paper foregrounds the critical roles that the media have to play in order to open up the public sphere and facilitate mass participation in governance with the implication of enhancing democratic values and cultures in Nigerian democracy. In this regard, particular focus is paid to reporting the 2007 general elections and the influence of the Nigerian newspaper proprietors and the government on the editorial stance of the media on the elections. It was noted that the government owned newspapers tended to reflect the position of the authoritarian model, while their private owned counterparts operated along the lines of the libertarian perspective while reporting on the elections.

INTRODUCTION

The field of political communication explores the interface between the media and politics with a focus on how societies can effectively use the media to enhance public participation in governance and entrench the principles and values of democracy. Democracy ideally creates the enabling environment for peace and development, while the media provide the platform where the government and citizens meet to exchange ideas on how to advance and preserve the peace and development of society. Chaffee (1975 cited in Sanders, 2009, p. 18) broadly defines political communication as the role which communication is made to play in the political process. Political actors are very much interested in the activities of the

media since it is almost becoming impossible for any government to get the public support it requires to implement its policies and programmes without the involvement of the media. The need to ensure public participation in government is one of the factors leading to the evolution of political communication as a branch of media and communication studies. Communication scholars are constantly making enquiries through their research activities to ascertain better ways the media could enhance the quality of public participation in government and ensure that public officials are accountable to the people. This is because, the purpose of democracy will be defeated if members of the public are separated from their elected representatives in government and parliaments.

Nevertheless, there is an assumption in some quarters that it is the duty of politicians to provide leadership for the state and to run the affairs of government. People who hold this view tend to avoid having anything to do with politics. This is the case among certain elites in Nigeria who believe that it is the responsibility of politicians to run the affairs of the state. One of the consequences of this assumption is that many voters would prefer to participate in the political process through party affiliations. Blumler and Kavanagh (1999, p. 211) observed that was the situation when political system was regarded as the prime source of initiatives and debate for social reform. Moreover, the party system was closely articulated to entrench cleavages of social structure where many voters related to politics through more or less firm and long-lasting party identifications. This might probably account for why political parties are seen as the only organisation that have the mandate to recruit candidates for governments and parliaments. The ruling elites in Nigeria, for example, are the major sources of information on public affairs, whereas the rest of the society is assumed to listen to and obey the government on every issue. The priority of most government owned media houses in Nigeria is to support the ruling party to win elections, and thereafter, help the government to solicit public support to implement its policy agenda for development. However, the government may expect the media not to comment and criticize any of its policies that fails to meet public needs and expectations.

It is rather unfortunate that some African leaders having used the platforms provided by the media to dismantle the colonial structure began to enact unfriendly policies to gag the press and ensure that journalists without questioning comply with government's position on every issue. According to Ogundimu (2008, p. 162): "Most of the restraints on the [African] press remains despite the new climate of openness in the region either because the states have failed to erase repressive colonial-era statutes or because media practitioners still suffer harassment because of their coverage of the political and business arena." Even the military regimes that succeeded the failed civilian administrations in Africa also treated the more obtrusive journalists with contempt and imprisoned many of them that insisted on reporting on the poor performance of government. In the same manner, African leaders advocated a new role for the press, where the government would expect the media to support its policy agenda for development and refrain from criticizing the government for whatever reason (the re-emergence of the Authoritarian Media Theory). Most government officials believed that media criticism of government policies and programmes is counter-productive and has the potential to erode public confidence in the ability of the government to fulfill its leadership mandate to the people. This perhaps is the reason why the Nigerian government tends to ensure that the public media do not give enough opportunities to the members of the opposition parties to express themselves on the issues that the opposition members feel the government has failed the people. For example, the members of the ruling party in Nigeria use the public media for electioneering campaigns. This is similar to the way the military leaders used the government owned media to counter the criticism of the private media regarding government programmes not serving the

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