

Chapter 9

Public Sphere, Development, and the Challenge of Media Censorship in a Dictatorial Democracy: The African Dilemma

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ABSTRACT

The post-independence mantra of most African states signaled a continent with varied ability to advance her developmental frontiers. However, this has remained elusive owing to many factors among which is the disillusionment with the 'public sphere' by the ruling class because the public sphere presupposes and guarantees the consent of the governed in policy formulation, better governmental process, and the possibility of sustainable and true development. This makes the idea of public sphere very important and a normative concept, as it is an ideal for good/accountable governance. On the contrary, the absence of the public sphere, à la media censorship, has resulted in a leadership failure in its entirety, which in turn has truncated and subverted development. Through critical textual and qualitative analysis, the authors advance the argument that there exists a nexus between public sphere, good governance, and development. And the connection has almost been rendered a nullity through the actions/inactions of the political class whose hatred for the public sphere necessitates its negation.

INTRODUCTION

The context of this work is the many years of postcolonial rule in Africa, when most African countries

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and their leaders claimed to have achieved ‘independence’ and hence self-rule. The outcome of such claim ought to be an embrace of civil democratic rule which is considered the best governmental system. Best system, because, it ideally comes with perks and inherent tenets (such as self-reliance, free speech, right to govern and to be governed, etc), that make it unique from other systems, (Gilley, 2009, p.114). However, more than six decades after political independence and despite her numerous endowments, most of these goals have remained unrealized because of some intractable problems. Among these problems is the disillusionment with the ‘public sphere’ by the ruling elites because the public sphere presupposes and guarantees the consent of the governed in policy formulation, better governmental process and the possibility of sustainable and true development (Ake, 1996).¹ Without functional and democratic public sphere, government officials cannot be held accountable for their actions and citizens will not be able to influence political decisions. This makes the idea of public sphere very important and a normative concept, as it is an ideal of good and accountable governance. Still, its normativity specifies the “ideal characteristics of public communication, as well as conditions conducive to their realization, and help to evaluate critically existing communication”. Public sphere hinges on the following essential features: free flow of information, free expression, and free debate. It is a buffer against power abuse as it is truly participatory. In actualizing these objectives, therefore, the role and function of the media cannot be overemphasized.

The media is the purveyor of the contents (opinion) of the public sphere better called the public opinion. Its bound is marked by the transcendence of the private sphere in its involvement in the revealing and/or uncovering of the contents of the private sphere. This runs on the assumption that though there is a distinction between the public and private realms, one cannot be tightly secluded from the other in the contemporary social discourse since what is public has an implication for the private order and vice versa. In the engagement with the media, the destination is generally the entire society but specifically the government as it (media) acts like the Socratic gadfly that wakes everyone to his/her respective responsibilities. This work, therefore, raises socio-philosophical issues that bother on unity of purpose by participants in a polity, the relation between part and whole, the connection between individual and state, and the nature of reason. It investigates the governmental agentive role and reason in narrowing the public sphere through media censorship; and so, acts as a clarion call to every member of the society to the antics of the ruling class in stifling their ‘voice’.

THE CONCEPT OF A PUBLIC SPHERE

The concept of the public sphere, developed by Jürgen Habermas, is at the core of (participatory) democracy. Public sphere, originally a German term, ‘*Öffentlichkeit*’, connotes a public arena where citizens gather to exchange views regarding public concerns, carry out discussions with the aim of forging public opinion.² In the words of Habermas (1997), it is “a domain of our social life where such a thing as public opinion can be formed [to enable] citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion; with the guarantee that they may assemble and unite freely, [to] express and publicize their opinion freely” (p.105). It essentially includes all channels of communications through which citizens can send and receive information and where if the two-way-flow of communication is absent, it implies that a public sphere does not exist.

The public sphere can be a physical arena as community square, town hall, etc., but does not necessarily need to be so, as it can be any forum or infrastructure (virtual), other than physical, for com-

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