

Chapter 14

Media Regulation and Freedom of Expression in Black Africa: A Comparative Study of Nigeria and Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, Black African states have been subjected to endogenous and exogenous political pressures which have compelled them to variously adopt a number of pro-democracy reforms. Though lauded in a number of quarters, these sweeping political reforms have merely been on paper. This is so as, cardinal democracy indexes such as freedom of expression, press freedom, freedom of thought and political pluralism among others, have remained more a myth than a reality in these countries. Using a comparative analysis of the political situation in Cameroon and Nigeria, this chapter argues that press freedom and liberal democracy are still mere ideals, not yet backed by evidential political will in both countries. The same multifaceted abuses of the press still prevail in the two states. This chapter however, underscores the vibrancy and political maturity of the Nigerian press which differentiate it from its counterparts in other African countries, notably in Cameroon.

INTRODUCTION

The 1990s are generally recognised as a turning point in Black African nations' rise and march towards democratisation, economic liberalisation and civil rights promulgation. The decade actually witnessed a serious wind of socio-political and economic revolutions, manifested by the adoption of sweeping political reforms and economic adjustments in almost all Black African countries. From Senegal to Djibouti, and from Kenya through Bissau Guinea to Mozambique, each sub-Sahara African country officially professed its dis-enchantment with the awful idioms of military rule, obnoxious legislations, one-party system and other forms of authoritarianism; through prompt adoption of legislations which, to a relatively moderate degree of pertinence, was friendly to multi-party elections, freedom of expression, freedom

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of association and freedom of the press (democracy and political plurality). This “sudden” tendency by Black African nations to reverse themselves on their models of political and economic administration was however, not by chance. The aftermath of the Cold War had brought up a number of realities which subtly made them (African countries) to have no other options than conceding to this wind of change: the Structural Adjustment Plan (SAP) – developed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to economically “rescue” Third Worlds – coupled with some other factors became avenues through which external political pressure from First World countries was systematically mounted on Black African countries to embrace democratisation. This external pressure was complemented by internal agitations staged by critical university students, pertinacious human right activists, prominent political and pressure groups and other socio-political watchdogs, in the name of advocacy for political pluralism. This complex mix of pressure sources made Black African rulers to come to the realization that they could no longer hold power by sheer force of arms and authoritarian tools. They saw themselves compelled in some sense, to key into the US-led West advocacy, momentum and razzmatazz for democracy.

The socio-political reforms engendered in the 90s continue to be biding precedents for African rulers, more than a quarter century after their occurrence. In other words, almost all present African rulers and political ideologues recognize – at least officially – that political pluralism is not just an ideal but an imperative for the effective development of the continent in all sectors. Kumar cited by Amlon (2016, p. 41) captures this axiom when he concedes that; “there has not been a substantial famine in a country with a democratic form of government and a relatively free press”. Even Black African rulers who still manifest relative degree of authoritarian/totalitarian affiliation in their methods of administration always claim to be democratically inclined. Such rulers non-hesitantly claim to be strong advocates of political pluralism and some other ideals such as freedom of thought, freedom of expression and of the press (Bongyu, 2008; Ngomba, 2010; Oladipupo, 2011; Omotola, 2009, 2010; Soola, 2009; Voice of America, 2016). In tandem with this, you will hardly find an African ruler who will not laud multi-party elections, freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of thought and all the other integral components and indexes of democracy. It is therefore, not surprising that even the worst dictators among Black African leaders have, with much trepidation, ratified international conventions and treaties conceived to consolidate democracy and civil/people’s rights in the world or in Africa. Some of these international/continental conventions and treaties include (i) The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights; (ii) International and Civil and Political Rights, (iii) The Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press; (iv) The African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights; (v) Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa; (vi) African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance and (vii) the African Charter on Broadcasting among others.

Additionally, most African nations boast of having constitutions that support multi-party elections, freedom of expression, of thought, of association and of religion among other civil rights. However, can we, in view of the democratic indices exposed above, say without fear of contradiction that African states are effectively democratic? Can we confidently affirm that the famous political reforms engendered in the 1990s have phenomenally yielded a dramatic political development and enhanced the social and economic life of the average man in the Black Continent? Can we say there is actually freedom of expression, freedom of thought and freedom of the press; as well as solid mechanisms to ensure free and fair elections in (all) African countries?

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