Professionalism and Unionism, Journalists, Human Rights and Democracy in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper assesses the role and activities of the Nigerian Union of Journalists, as professional body and as a trade union. It also reviews the contribution of Nigerian journalists in defending human rights and democracy. The study used the survey researeh and questionnaire as the instrument of data collection. Eighty copies of the questionnaire were administered and retrieved. The sample population was journalists based in Kaduna. The Council Chairman, Secretary and a veteran member of the NUJ Kaduna Council were also interviewed. In terms of the obligation to its members, many respondents rated low the activities of the union in the area of salary, retirement benefits and protection against harassment by security agencies. However, respondents scored high the activities of journalists in the area of human rights and defense of democracy. Recommendations were made to improve union activities working conditions and its efforts in the protection of human rights and defense of democracy.

Keywords: Professionalism, Unionism, Democracy, Human Rights, members welfare

Introduction

Everywhere in the world, the mass media, through (heir operations have been given the obligation of serving as purveyors of information and relevant knowledge to members of the society in which they operate. Every society, whether democratic or otherwise recognize and appreciate the critical role of the media in sustaining social cohesion and harmony and serving as middlemen between the rulers and the ruled. In Nigeria, right from the pre-independence, colonial, the press has been the very word of the struggle for independence and since then, the press, including broadcast media, has contributed immensely in enlightening the people and propagating the ideals of democracy.

Just as Americans are always proud to stress the freedom guaranteed in the first Amendment of the American Constitution, the Constitution of the FederalRepublic of Nigeria contains sections which explicate the responsibility of the mass media to the Nigerian State. Thus, Chapter n, Section 22 of the 1995 Constitution stipulates that:

> The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold, the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people.

The Nigerian press and especially has always played a glorious role at critical point, in the country's history. During the long difficult years of military rule, the Nigerian press was in the vanguard of the crusade for the termination of military rule and restoration of democracy. In the

process, many journalists suffered harassment, intimidation and some ultimately paid the supreme sacrifice.

Again, when former President Obasanjo attempted to use the guise of constitutional review to extend his tenure, it was again, the press that championed the fight against the move, mobilizing civil society organizations and principled politicians to rally against the move. As Opeibi (2002) observes, even in the so-called western democracies:

> It has been discovered that proper dissemination of information, political education and enlightenment through political communication have played crucial roles in facilitating the development of the advance democracies in the western world.

No wonder, the immortal words of the former American President, Thomas Jefferson capture the significance of the press in the affair of state. According to Jefferson,

> Since the basis of democracy was opinion of the people, the vei7 first objective was to keep that... if it were left for me to decide whether we should have government without the press, or the press without government, I should not hesitate a moment to choose the latter.

Statement of the Problem

The Nigerian journalists and indeed their umbrella unions, the NUJ, have historically championed the cause of freedom and democracy since colonial era. Now, with more than eight years of civilian administration, what is the state of human rights and condition of democracy in the country, how much is the NUJ doing to protect the interest of its members and thereby ensure the sustenance of democracy and human rights? Are the journalists themselves conscious of theirresponsibility to sustaining the hard-earned democracy and protection of human rights?

Researeh Questions

1. Is the NUJ a trade union or a professional body?
2. What has been the role/contribution of the NUJ in protecting the interest of its members?
3. What has been the contribution of journalists/NUJ in promoting human rights in Nigeria?
4. What has been the contribution of journalists/NUJ in sustaining democracy?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives are to:

i) Determine, through the responses of journalists themselves, how much NUJ isdoing in protecting their welfare,
ii) Examine what journalists think of their activities in the defense of democracy andprotection of human rights.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press. The theory emerged as the outcome of the United States'Commission on the Freedom of the Press otherwise known as the Hutchins Commission. Hutchins was the Chairman of the Commission.

According to McQuail (1994), social responsibility involved the view that media ownership and operation in contrast to the other normative theories like Libertarian, Authoritarian, Social Responsibility appears to enjoy acceptance in many parts of the world. Certainly, the Nigerian media environment manifests the theory in practice. McQuail (2006) listed the main thrusts of the theory as follows:

- Media have obligations to the society and media ownership is a public trust.
- News media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant.
- The media should be free, not self-regulated.
- The media should follow codes of ethics and professional conduct.

Methodology

The study adopted the survey researeh. It also used questionnaire as the main instrument for collecting data. Interview was used as a supplement to gather data. The study used the non-probability sampling method. All journalists in Kaduna, who were available, were selected. According to Wimmer andDominick (2004), non-probability sampling is used to select subjects haphazardlyon the basis of appearance or because they seem to meet certain requirements. The Chairman, Secretary and a veteran member of the Kaduna Council of the NUJ were purposively interviewed in order to ascertain the efforts the union has put in providing welfare, fighting for human rights and the sustenance of democracy.

The study was undertaken in Kaduna metropolis, Kaduna State. Kaduna has always been a strategic town in Nigeria since the colonial period. It was the headquarters of the former Northern Region, which now constitute the 19 Northern States, including the areas of the present Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Before the transfer of the Federal Capital to Abuja, Kaduna was regarded as the most politically strategic town in the country, outside Lagos. It was the base of the northern elite the military, technocrats and politicians. Many important decisions that affected the whole nation used to be taken, by what was then tagged the *Kaduna Mafia.*

With the citing of the Federal Capital in Abuja, barely two hours drive time away, Kaduna seems to have lost some of its awe and aura. In spite of this, Kaduna still continues to retain its glory as the meeting point of the states' from the former Northern Region. Northern emirs and chiefs regularly meet in the town. It is also the meeting point of the Northern Governors' Forum. The Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and the Jamatul Nasirul Islam all have their headquarters in Kaduna. This is not to mention the strong presence of the Armed Forces. Kaduna is the headquarters of the one Brigade of the Nigerian Army; it also has a strong Air force base.

It is therefore not a surprise that virtually all the nation's media of mass communication, print and broadcast, have correspondents in the town. The presence of journalists representing different media establishments across the country and many of them, non indigenes of the area, provides adequate representativeness of the nation's journalism community.

One hundred copies of the questionnaire were prepared. In the end, eighty (80) were administered and retrieved.

Literature Review

As mentioned earlier, the press and indeed, the mass media as a whole, is generally accepted as the 4th Estate of the realm, coming after the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary. Indeed,

more than the others, the press is obliged to oversee the operation of the others and report to the citizenry.

In this regard Opeibi is of the view that the acquisition of information by the citizens through the media allows for political participation and exercise of political will necessary for stable democracy. The mass media have thus been recognized as another powerful agent whose role can either make or mar the democratic system.

Particular in the democratic electioneering process, the mass media are called upon to play a guiding role in societies like ours with large illiterate population and ravaging poverty, the responsibility of journalists in that condition is to be educator and guide the masses, so disenfranchised and ignored by the greedy selfish political class. Championing the course of democracy is obviously linked to reporting the activities of politician and political offices holders. In the words of Schudson (1998):

> .... The news world has long been the unheralded patrons of the polity, giving most citizens more political information than they know what to do with. A large problem with the process is not that it fails democracy, but that democracy is already in trouble and the media mirror its weaknesses and are entrapped in them.

While Professor Schudson was referring to the American press, his views are beginning to manifest in the Nigerian Media. Studies have shown the preponderance of political news is relation to other subject matters in the coverage of national media like Health, Agriculture, Education, etc.

In the context of human rights, the Nigerian media have been active in the protection of citizen rights. The problem of human rights is the tendency of law enforcement agencies, equally the police to assume official role of approval for violators of human rights. There is also the propensity of government to keep silent on such violations, unless there is strong protest through media The incident involving the *Boko Haram* group is a case in point. The extra-judicial killing of the group leader and others, including a former Commissioner in Borno State would have gone unchallenged, without the vigilance and persistence of the media, which was further exposed by the attention of the global media and the attendant global reaction. In fact, it is this massive media attention and focus that forced the government, and the President in person to apologize for the gross violation of human rights.

The case of Kano State Government versus Pfizer over illegal and unauthorized testing of drugs on innocent citizens is also another case in point. It is the persistence and vigilance of one of the national newspapers that kept the issue on the front burner of national and international attention. Besides, the media have also been known to ensure that legitimate victims and beneficiaries of the compensation are in no way shortchanged

Professionalism

The issue of who is a professional or specifically, whether journalism is a profession has remained elusive and inconclusive. According to Sirajo (1999:73), a former National President of the NUJ, it is still today conjectural, whether the founding fathers (of the union) succeeded in providing journalists with the definition of their professional status. The founding fathers so

extended the scope of membership of the union and by implication, the various status of the journalist to be so vast and all-encompassing. Sirajo concludes that what ought to engage our attention is not our vocationalism versus professionalism, but superior performance versus sloppy performance... (P.96).

McQuail (1994) reviewed Burn's study of the BBC; especially his discussion on professionalism in broadcasting. Among other factors, he discovered certain attitude to professional task. One attitude is manifested by a deep loyalty to the traditional goals of Public Broadcasting as an instrument of cultural and social betterment and for the defense of standards. Another manifestation of "professionalism" according to Bums, is sometimes seen as "television for television sake" but always involving a deep commitment to the task and the craft making, "good television". According to McQuail, this concept of media professionalism has several components-standing opposed to "amateurism" and to external interference, resting on the judgment of work by fellow professionals and leading to some insulation from the pressures of both public and management.

Max Weber (1994), the sociologist is reported to have referred to the journalist as belonging to a "sort of pariah caste" and like the artist lacking a fixed social classification. Schudson (1978) is reported to have aptly characterized journalism as an "un-insulated profession" because of lack of clear boundaries. Also, Tuchman (1978) in a study of news works as quoted by McQuail came to the conclusion that professionalism in news has largely come to be defined according to the need of the news organization itself. In her view, the height of professional skill is the exercise of a practical craft which delivers the required informational product, characterized by a high degree of objectivity, keymarks of which are obsessive facticity and neutrality of attitude (1987). According to Tuchman, the objectivity of news has become the equivalent of professional ideology.

McQuail thus concludes that this analysis is consistent with other indicators from media work that professionalism is a degree of accomplishment which can't be measured by test and examination and can only be recognized by fellow professionals (P.198). Abel, a member of UNESCO commission that produced the work *Many Voices, One World* on a personal note observed the problem of the relationship between professionalism in the communication process and democratization of communication exchange seems to be that of striking a fair and fruitful balance between professionalisation and democratization. The democratization of communication does not mean that development mediated communication should be curbed or that professionalism in the field should not be encouraged.

From all these, it can be deduced that professionalism in journalism or mass communication has more to do with craftsmanship and an attitude of sticking to the high professional practice, ethical standard and skill proficiency. To sum up this review, it is obvious that the press indeed, the mass media as a whole, have significant role to play in promoting and sustaining democracy as well as defending human rights, not only against state arbitrariness but also against its instruments of defense and civil order protection.

As Islam (2003) rhetorically posits: Do media promote greater democracy or does a functioning democracy promote free media? He concludes that the level of freedom of the media varies

between countries and that even relatively undemocratic states may differ in their tolerance of media freedom.

Data analysis and Discussion of Finding

1. Educational attainment
   The result of the analysis of the data gathered shows that 26 of the journalists/respondents have tertiary education -National Diploma and/or Bachelor degree. This represents 65.7% of the valid respondents.
2. Sex
   Data under this variable show that 57 (78%) of the respondents are male while 20 (21.9%) are female. The data actually reflect the reality in the Nigerian media scene, which is largely male dominated.
3. Marital status
   Fiftyeight (76.3%) of the respondents were married while 18 (23.7%) were single.
4. Years of working as a journalist
   Twenty-six (32.5%) of the respondents had 1-5 years, working experience in the profession. 11 (13.8%) 6-10 years, 12 (15%) have 11-15 years experience as working experience while 31 had 15 years and above.
5. Is NUJ a professional body?
   Sixty-one respondents constituting 78.2% indicated yes, while 17 (21.8%) indicated No. This is corroborated by the Kaduna NUJ Council Chairman and Secretary respectively that the Union is a trade union as well a professional body because it is affiliated to the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and its members are professionals registeredwith the union and also pay professional dues annually and it has laid down rules and regulations guiding the conduct of members.

On NUJ efforts in working for the interest of journalists:

i. As regards salary package, 28 (35.4%) of respondents considered NUTs effort fair, 51 (63.8) considered its efforts as poor. This is a very serious negative assessment for a trade union. For what else is a trade union for, if it cannot or is not working for the economic welfare of its members? Certainly, the leadership of the union needs to wake up to their responsibility in this regard. To this end, the Chairman and Secretary of the NUJ Council, Kaduna stated that the present National leadership of the union in collaboration with Radio, Television and Theatre **Workers** Union (RATTAWU) is working on this, following negotiations with the Federal Government and the private sector on the need for salary increase for media and cultural workers.

ii, ***Security of employment***

Nine respondents (11.4%) felt NUJ's performance is good, 30 (38.0%) felt its efforts is fair while 40 representing 50 percent of respondents consider NUJ's efforts as poor. Again, this is a strong message especially to the new leadership of the union at the centre. The inability of the union to secure employment of members was stated by the Secretary of the Kaduna Council as due to lack of cooperation from private media owners. This, he said the National leadership is working on.

On NUJ's effort in protecting its members against harassment by security agencies
Two respondents (2.73%) considered its efforts excellent, 11 (15.1%) considered its efforts good, 38 (52.1%) considered it fair, **while** 22 (30.1%) considered it poor. Again, the data indicates the **feeling** of members that NUJ as a trade union is not doing enough in protecting its members in cases of harassment by security agencies. This is not to say that the union is not doing enough, after all, more than 60% of **respondents** considered its efforts good or fair.

On efforts for retirement benefits
Forty-two (53.2%) of the respondents considered NUJ's efforts poor. This represents more than half of the total respondents and reflects members' concern about life after retirement. One observable trend among Nigerian Journalist is the highmobility-hopping from one employment to another, in seareh of greener pasture. Because of the nature of the pension and retirement regime hitherto in operation, it was almost impossible for those affected by such movement to carry their gratuity and pension contribution to their new place of work. Hence, one sees many journalists, after working so hard for so long, retire into penury and poverty.

This should not be so, The NUJ need to take up this issue seriously with both government and private employers. Clearly, it is not fair to allow journalists after serving the nation to with so much dedication and commitment to end their lives in misery.

On NUJ's effort of enhancing professional performance
Thirty-one (39.8%) of respondents considered its efforts good and excellent. Thirty (38.5%) considered its efforts fair, while 17 (21.8%) rated its efforts poor. Whatever it is, the leadership need to work out opportunities for training and retraining and performance enhancement strategies for its members.

On the efforts of the Nigerian Journalists at protecting human rights in the country
Forty-four (55.7%) considered their efforts excellent or good, 33 (41.8%) considered it fair, while only 2 (2.5%) respondents considered the efforts of journalists in protecting human rights poor. The veteran journalist, the Chairman and Secretary of the Kaduna Council of the NUJ also averred that journalists and the NUJ have contributed to the protection of human rights in Nigeria. Clearly, there is no doubt that Nigerian journalists/NUJ are doing their best in this regard. The problem, though, is the tendency of not following up incidents of human rights violation, while it is one of the challenges of the mass media to set agenda for national discourse. They also have the responsibility to follow such agenda to a logical conclusion.

On the performance of Nigerian journalists in sustaining democracy in the country, an overwhelming majority of the respondents, 60 (77.9%) rated Nigerian journalists' role good or excellent, 17 (21.8%) considered it poor, while only 1 respondent considered for Nigerian journalists' role, poor. This was affirmed by the interviewees who agreed that journalists and NUJ have done well in sustaining democracy which they contributed in achieving.

There were some open-ended questions in the questionnaire. The first one sought to know from respondents what NUJ needs to do to promote human rights in Nigeria. Main trends include:
- The need for NUJ to be more proactive.
- Need for courage in reporting human rights violations.

- To press the National Assembly to pass the Freedom of Information Bill (FOI) Bill.
- Ensure fairness and balance in reportage and support for human rights advocates. The second open-ended question was more specific on what journalists need to do to enhance human rights in the country. The aggregate views of respondents include:
- Need to organize training/workshops in human rights to sensitize journalists.
- Provision of adequate legal backing/protection of journalists.
- Passage of Freedom of Information Bill.
- Collaboration with agencies on human rights.
- Awards to deserving journalists on human rights reportage.

What should journalists do to sustain democracy? Aggregate responses include:

- Constructive criticism of corrupt office holders.
- Objective and fair reporting on issues that sustain democracy.
- Reporting the truth.
- Projecting a positive image of the country.
- More efforts to promote national unity.

Another open-ended question sought to know what NUJ should do to promote professionalism. The responses include:

- Removal of "quacks" from the profession.
- Training and re-training
- Strict adherence to code of conduct by members.
- Sanctioning of erring members.
- Overhaul entry qualifications.

Discussion of Findings

Certain issues have become apparent from the findings in this study. The first has to do with the role of NUJ in terms of promoting the welfare of its members. In terms of salary package, retirement benefits, respondents show serious concern and actually gave poor rating to the efforts of the union in these aspects.

As regards the contribution of Nigerian journalists in defending human rights and defending the democratic dispensation, the respondents-journalists, gave good rating for the efforts and contribution of Nigerian journalists and the NUJ.

A constant response is the need for the Freedom of Information Bill to be passed by the National Assembly. On what constitutes the attributes of a professional body, some respondents gave the following:

Presence of a regulatory body, registration of members and issuance of certificate, mechanism for sanctioning erring members, specified entry point, professional examination, training institution, training and re-training, possession of a Gazette with the details of registered members.

Conclusion

The findings from the brief survey have revealed the efforts of the NUJ in promoting democracy and protecting human rights. It is obvious that NUJ, as a professional body and as a trade union, needs to do more especially as regards the welfare of its members -in terms of security of employment, life after retirement and opportunities for professional improvement. The

leadership of the union, at national and state levels, needs to take some of these issues seriously and urgently.

Recommendations

- The leadership of the union needs to sort out its identity problem. Does it want to remain a trade union or professional body? If it wants to retain both identities, then it has to forward a private bill to the National Assembly to amend the laws governing its present status as a trade union.
- The union needs to immediately insist on a commensurate remuneration package for journalist, whether working with government or private organisations. Journalists work longer hours, they face professional hazards and yet they are treated in most cases, like ordinary staff. It is time to stop begging. NUJ has the weapon to make its members live a better life. It should seek the support of the NLC, NUC and other powerful unions for a better life for its members. As a former Chairman of the Lagos Council of the MUJ Prince Oyedokun (2002) observed:

  > For any union to be meaningful, it must be able to maximize the welfare of its members and reduce their sufferings and pains to the barest minimum. This is the immediate and urgent challenge before the leadership of the union. It is when this is done that the generality of membership will feel committed to the ideals of the union and the challenges of the profession.

- The leadership, in collaboration with academic and professional institutions, in and outside the country, should begin to organize regular workshops and training for its members to improve their performance.
- The NUJ and Nigerian journalists as a whole need to be more committed to the protection of human rights and defense of democracy. As Wicker (1984) notes:

  > ... however unpopular the press is, and no matter how inept or rude or partisan or persistent to be in the eyes of the beholders, reporters arethe only instruments who can quickly call a president (or any other public officer) to publicly account for his actions and policies.

Nigerian journalists have demonstrated the capacity to do this and more. All Nigerians, not least, journalists, have sacrificed a lot to have the democracy we now enjoy. As it is said, eternal vigilance is the best defense of democracy. It is the journalists, with the power and reach of the mass media that should be in the vanguard of protecting this hard-earned situation of respect for human rights and the protection of democracy.

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