ESTIMATION OF ABACHA'S AUTHORITARIAN REGIME THROUGH THE EYE OF NIGERIAN PRESS

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Abstract: After Abacha held the reins of power in November 17, 1993 some political analysts erroneously described his policies as having brilliant goals. Few months later, his rash of probes and act of press repression exacted mixed reactions as people in the media profession started to pontificate about his indiscriminate closure of media houses and arrest of their staff. Based on the above statements this researcher has given a thoroughgoing analysis of the data that showed how the Nigerian press makes a judgment about the value of Abacha's regime within the context of authoritarianism and soviet communism. The purpose of this study is to make a judgment or opinion about some brutish behaviour that Abacha's regime brought to the fore in the annals of Nigerian military governance. Important as Abacha is in the contemporary Nigerian military and politics, his rash attitudes towards the press have not been given sufficient scholarly attention. Thus, this work attempts to fill the obvious gap in existing literature and to break the silence on his cruel, harsh and unusual violent treatment of media practitioners in Nigeria. Data were collected through content analysis research method in which manifest content of communication in some Nigerian tabloids and magazines had been described objectively, systematically and quantitatively. The result revealed that the estimation of General Sani Abacha's regime by the Nigerian press was never very high. Few months after his military coup d'état, he began to behave dictatorially and the press resented his harsh, dictatorial manner of leadership. It is concluded that the closure of media houses and the seizure of their products by the regime was an indicator that Nigeria was "back to the barricade" and members of the press vowed to monitor the junta before it becomes another full blown dictatorship. It is recommended that the press should continually focus on its watchdog function and realize the facts that while the political power is transient, the press vigilant operations no matter under what condition should be sustained for all eternity.

Keywords: Press repression, Media profession, Media houses, Nigerian press, Political power.

1. INTRODUCTION

Historical records have shown that General Sanni Abachawas born on the 20th of September 1943 and died on the 8th of June 1998. He was "a Nigerian Army officer and a military cum political figure who served as the de facto President of Nigeria between the year 1993 and 1998" (Tamuno, 1998:19). A Kanuri from Borno, he was bred in Kano, Nigeria. "He attended the Nigerian Military Training College, in Northern Nigeria and Mons Officer Cadet School overseas before being commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in 1963" (Paden, 2005:240).

His military career is distinguished by a string of military coups. He is by some records the most successful coup plotter in the history of Nigeria's military. He took part in the July 1966 counter coup "from the conceptual stage then as a Second Lieutenant with the 3rd Battalion in Kaduna" (Siollum, n.d.:97). There are possibilities that "he participated in the Lagos or Abeokuta phases of the first ever military coup that took place in January that same year" (Oyewole, 1987:385). He was also a prominent figure in the 1983 coup d'état, which brought General Muhammadu Buhari to power and in the August 1985 coup, which removed Buhari from power. When General Ibrahim Babangida was named President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in 1985, Abacha was named Chief of Army Staff. He was appointed Minister of Defense in 1990. In the same year, he became the first Nigerian soldier to attain the rank of a full General without skipping a single rank. On the 17th of November 1993 he toppled the short-lived interim government of Chief Ernest Shonekan. As indicated above, he suddenly took over the government through violence in November 17, 1993. However, Lewis (2007:178) made assumption that his administration is the first in Nigerian to record an epochal economic achievement by increasing the country's foreign exchange reserves from \$494 million in 1993 to \$9.6 billion as at the middle of 1997; by reducing the external debt of Nigeria from \$36 billion in 1993 to \$27 billion as at 1997; by bringing all the controversial privatization programmes of the Babangida administration to halt; by reducing an inflation rate of 54% inherited from Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida regime to 8.5% between 1993 and 1998 and all these occurred while the nation's primary commodity in oil was at an average of \$15 per barrel. Despite these initial accolades he attained it is still evident that his regime generated one of the most destructive storm in recent history of Nigeria. Allen (1998:7) also described his economic policies as "having brilliant goals", but few months after assuming the position of leadership his rash of probes and act of press repression exacted mixed reactions as people

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in the media profession started to pontificate about his indiscriminate closure of media houses and arrest of their staff.

As stated earlier, General Abacha forcefully held the reins of power through military coup d'état and afterwards he began to take a more hardheaded approach to solve Nigeria's socio-political problems. For example, in September 1994, he issued a decree that placed his government above the jurisdiction of the courts, effectively giving him absolute power to govern the country. Another decree gave him the absolute right to detain anyone for up to three months without trial. Due to historical exigencies this researcher has garnered some significant data in order to support a great deal of evidence of his misrule before reaching a verdict on the phrase: **Estimation of Abacha's authoritarian regime through the eye of Nigerian press.**

The purpose of this study is to make a judgment or opinion about some brutish behaviour that Abacha's regime brought to the fore in the annals of Nigerian military governance. Important as Abacha is in the contemporary Nigerian military and politics, his rash attitudes towards the press have not been given sufficient scholarly attention. Thus, this work attempts to fill the obvious gap in the existing literature and to break the silence on his cruel, harsh and unusual violent treatment of media practitioners in Nigeria. Going by the above submission, this study may be justified not only for the inadequacies of materials on Abacha's maltreatment of Nigerian press, but also for his very different and difficult approaches to the governance of the Nigerian people. This researcher would have included more materials on his rash approaches to governance, but space limitations made that impossible.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars who have done related works on this present study include: Fawehinmi (1987), Oloyede (1990), Fagbohunge (1993), Adebajo (1994), Adesokan (1994), Ibitola (1994), Orogun (1994), Ebisemiju (1994), Oloyede (1996), Akinkuotu (1999), Ofeimun (1999), Onanuga (1999), Oluwanike (2011) and Elebute (2015).

Fawehinmi (1987) referred to the Nigerian press as an instrument that is used to estimate the feelings of the public and to disseminate the feelings to the public court when a case is pending before them. This allusion came to the fore in his book while trying to argue that it was the irate of the public discourse championed by the press on the celebrated case of Dele Giwa's: a journalist assassinated by government agents through parcel bomb in 1986, that influenced the decision of the Supreme Court that granted the right of private prosecution to him (Fawehinmi) to handle the murder case of his journalist friend.

Oloyede (1990) revealed the primary importance, fundamentality and inevitability of communication to man and of freedom to communication. He established the absolute necessity for both the press and press freedom in the modern world and prescribed seventeen compulsory prerequisites for humanity's attainment of a freely communicating press and society to the effect that a majority of men will not only fully understand the fundamental freedom of communication, but also be ready, armed, fortified and equipped to defend it at all times.

Fagbohunge (1993) traced the development and the travails of journalists and the press freedom from A.D. 35 when Odysseus was banned in Rome to 1997 when some notable journalists were jailed by the military juntas under the leadership of General Sanni Abacha in Nigeria. He also traced the origin as well as the developmental and/or evolutionary progression of newspapers since 1859 when the first tabloid was published in Abeokuta, Nigeria by Revd. Henry Townsend. The book also contained the chronological order of the suppression of the press in the entire world.

Adebajo (1994) historicized the return of tyranny in the man called Abacha. He narrated what happened on Sunday January 2nd in the year 1994 when the acting head of Tell magazine sales and circulation department went to collect 50,000 copies of the week's edition of the magazine at the Academic press in Lagos. He recorded that the man was approached by a contingent of security operative and armed policemen who were on a "snatch and impound operation". According to him, the acting head of Tell magazine and other staffers of the press were subsequently put on "interim detention".

In his article titled: The Muffler Returns Adesokan (1994) talked about Abacha's repressive style of putting journalists on trial and how he began a revival of press suppression. He averred into how Abacha, 'in a fashion reminiscent of Babangida's abrogation of Decree 4 of 1984 in August 1985', ordered the re-opening of all shut news media and the voiding of Decree 43 of 1993, which legalized the proscription of newspaper titles. He observed that the Decree 43 of 1993 and his own Decree 48 were never quashed as it took a court verdict secured by The Guardian to annul the former decree.

Ibitola (1994) veered into the arrest of Dapo Olorunyomi by the military junta and described the arrest as another assault on press freedom in Nigeria. He asserted that the arrest was a violation of the promise made by Abacha's regime that it would not muzzle the press or impair its ability to perform its duties. He concluded that the latest chain of arrest by security agents showed that contrary to the publicly avowed position of the government on press freedom, the standard policy in reality is armed at stifling the press and promoting a monolithic press culture in a pluralistic society as Nigeria. Orogun (1994) peeped into the day that Abacha shed his mask. He avowed that

Abacha and his cohorts were being utterly hypocritical when they seek to invest a controversial constitutional conference with a magical potency for amicably resolving the avoidable crisis brought about by the murder of hope on November 23rd in the year 1993. He wondered if Nigerians were convinced that Abacha's nine-year apprenticeship in power has adequately equipped him to correctly articulate the goals of the country and move it toward its manifest destiny.

Ebisemiju (1994) interrogated the Abacha's regime for sealing off Punch and Concord newspapers and queried why all efforts to keep afloat their publications were scuttled. He was so disturbed that some operating media houses with printing machine had refused to help print the publications and that even independent printing houses were reluctant to do so while those who finally acceded had their premises raided by security agents.

In another work, Oloyede (1996) used the libertarian yardstick to assess the authoritarian decrees and acts of the military and to show how the Nigerian nation has been denied the full blessings of an unfettered press. He undertook a critical examination of the salient issues on which press freedom revolved in Nigeria under both democratic civilian and autocratic military rules. The themes treated by Oloyede in his book have been very carefully selected to make the analyses very broad. He explored in-depth the origin, perception, theory and practice of press freedom in all socio-political systems of the world without losing sight of the apropos background for the main issue of discourse: the Nigerian situation, while examining the unique aspects of press freedom in Nigeria.

Akinkuotu (1999) quoted that "at the time when the legitimacy of the Abacha junta rested on raw fear, there can be no doubt that Tell magazine underground operations were made possible only by an appreciative and committed Nigerian public who made enormous sacrifices to see the magazine through its darkest hour...it was these Nigerians who struck a mortal blow at the heart of the junta's brutality". He pointed out several events in 1997 that indicated most poignantly that Abacha wanted to succeed himself. "The most instructive", according to Akinkuotu, "was the humiliation of Don Etiebet, the former oil minister and sponsor of the NCPN party...Etiebet nursed a presidential ambition, but he had to abandon this ambition and subsequently joined Abacha's political machine the UNCP party: an indication that there was no vacancy in Aso Rock".

Ofeimun (1999) picked a strand or a slice by reviewing the 1986, 1995 and 1998 transitions to democracy organized by Generals Babangida, Abacha and Abubakar respectively. His focus included, inter alia, General Abacha's destruction of the structures of the Third Republic and his campaign for self-succession that crashed when he died on the 8th of June, 1998. According to him, "Abacha's transition took time to take off two years after he came to power, but the building blocks were laid from the inception when he scrapped all democratic structures and promised a constitutional conference".

Onanuga (1999) reiterated that when Abacha seized power in November 1993, the impression he gave to Nigerians was that his stay in power would be the shortest ever in Nigeria's epic, but several weeks after his regime started he began to consolidate his hold on power and it became crystal clear that he has planned to dig in and hang on to power as long as Nigerians and God allowed.

Oluwanike (2011) delved into cases of illegal arrests and detention of journalists during the military rule in Nigeria through the use of obnoxious decrees. He cited the case of Tunde Thompson and Nduka Ibor of The Guardian newspaper who were arrested under the abrogated decree 4 of 1984 during the regime of Generals Mohamodu Buhari and Tunde Idiagbon for publishing a story that was regarded as sensitive to national security.

Elebute (2015) examined the issues on the gagging of Nigerian press with obnoxious laws and he investigated the rate at which the Nigerian media had been prevented from expressing opinion freely by dictatorial leaders who enacted draconian laws to suppress facts and figures. He also identified the major activities of Nigerian press in fighting authoritarianism and in upholding the philosophy of rationalism and natural rights and in checking the excesses of government in power by separating judgments of truth from falsity. He established that the Nigerian press has been so uncompromising and very zealous in exposing the evils perpetrated by people in power and that the military leadership in Nigeria had engaged several state apparatus in suppressing the truth.

He concluded that the past governments in Nigeria had used their privileged position to forbid criticism and they had invoked absolutism under extreme conditions. He recommended that the incumbent government should eschew autocracy and avoid exploiting the obnoxious laws enacted by the military 'boys' in the guise of providing security for the state.

This present study is not exactly the same as the works that have been reviewed above, but it is obvious that some deeds have been derivable from them to verify and validate issues that have originated from data gathered through the secondary source. The discourses of interest are on how some media practitioners have fought and survived so many battles on the altar of repressive Abacha system and how the voice of reason in media group has been able to make judgments about the value of Abacha's regime within the context of authoritarianism and soviet communism.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two Normative Theories of the Press: Soviet Communist and Authoritarian will be used to explain media performance and structure during the regime of General Sanni Abacha. First, let us conceptualize the phrase:

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normative theory. It is a theory that seeks to locate the media structure and performance within the context of the environment in which they operate.

The **Soviet-Communist Theory** originated in the Soviet Union from Marxist, Leninist and Stalinist thoughts. The theorists who postulated this have stated that in the operation of this theory the state owns or in some way controls all forms of mass media directly. The postulators have averred that media's authority falls in the hands of a small group of party leaders. The theorists hammered that the role of the media in countries applying the Soviet-Communism is to act as an instrument of the ruling government to unite people of the state, and to carry out plans of the regime and state, bringing about societal change.

Also, the theorists claimed that under the Soviet-Communism the media report less on the bad things that happen under repressive regimes, but emphasize the bad things that happen in democratic regimes. The theorists have cited the example of Russian's media of early 20th century who, when it was still under the Soviet-Communist system of Stalin and during the time of official communist paper Pravda, propounded an ideology that "Communism is good" by praising Stalin's non-aggression pact with Hitler, but it avoided reporting about the deadly Chernobyl disaster as it may raise concerns about the safety of Soviet nuclear plant.

In this theory, the press was mandated to promote socialist system and to maintain sovereignty of the working class through communist party. The press was under direct state control and treated as an arm of government. Outside the government authority, only the orthodox and legal members of socialist party could use the media. However, the media were used to support development and change towards attainment of goals of communist party.

An example of this type of goal attainment strategy is derivable from section 39 subsection (2) of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution, which states that **ownership of the electronic media: radio and television** shall be by special license from the president and in this arrangement the government owned stations staffing is being controlled by government agents and these types of media stations are being used to attain the goals of governments in power in Nigeria most especially during military rule.

According to soviet communist theorists no country's media are fully under the Soviet Communist system currently, but they pointed to the fact that certain countries' media possess characteristics of a Soviet-Communist media system. One example they gave is the North Korean media that is very much if not entirely controlled by the government. It is a world-wide observation that for a really long time, there were no independent journalists in North Korea as radio and television receivers have been locked to specified frequencies allowed by the government. It is in this type of structure that the North Korean media have been used to cover up on the negative things that happen under the communist leadership and they were not permitted to expose all hidden dangers and hardships that North Korea citizens are encountering at the moment. This is explicable in the harrowing situation in which the government suppressed news of a deadly famine that has devastated lives of millions of people in the country.

Authoritarian theory was developed in the 16th and 17th centuries. It arose from English state philosophy of **absolutism** in which recognition of the truth was entrusted to only a small clique in royal family and religious circle. The Authoritarian Theory is operationalized under strict control and media content is censored by the state. It is operated in a situation where there is a general lack of freedom for the public to criticize state policies. Under an Authoritarian media system, ownership of the media can be either public or private. Ownership of printing media is mostly private, while broadcast and cinemas usually remain in the hands of the government. The authoritarian theorists have described the situation where the government views the mass media as an instrument in its hand.

The example of the up rise of democracy in Myanmar and transition to a civilian government comes in handy. The recent situation in Burmese media negates the spirit of authoritarianism. The government has been walking away from extreme authoritarian approach by releasing imprisoned journalists. From June 2011, half of Myanmar's privately owned publications were allowed to publish without submitting page proofs to censors in advance. Also, the government has promised to allow private daily newspapers. According to theorists, other countries whose media are still practicing the Authoritarian Theory include North Korea, China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.

The authoritarian media theorists have also propounded that when this theory is in operation in any country the leadership power is always exercised in **hierarchical** or top-down approach and media will be used to service the government in power. The press will be forbidden to criticize government and its functionaries and the people in power mostly used the following instruments of control: heavy taxation, repressive laws, and control of media staffing, ban on printing materials, closure of media, murder and imprisonment of journalists under harsh laws. The traces of these controls still exist mostly in the third world countries where press is controlled by repressive military system. A good example of this is derivable from the Nigeria's military regimes of Generals Sanni Abacha, Ibrahim Babangida and Idiagbon/Buhari.

The main traditional role of the media is to educate citizens, and not to act as a propaganda tool for the ruling government. Abacha's regime was guilty of this propagandist offence. At first it portrayed itself as supportive of the country's media, but when news reports gushed over his regime there were attacks on its unfriendly policies and the press stood critical of his military leadership. Journalists who wrote reports that threatened his regime were

imprisoned. Stiff censorship regulations were put in place as well and only state controlled media that were propaganda compliant were allowed to publish without any form of harassment. Then, privately owned news publications went underground due to his stifling censorship requirements.

The main difference between the Authoritarian theory and the Soviet-Communist Theory is that while the former allows both private and public media ownership, the latter allows strictly only public media ownership. Another difference is that while the Authoritarian media are mainly used to maintain societal status quo, a Soviet-Communist media is often used to bring about societal changes.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data were collected through content analysis research method in which manifest substance of communication in some Nigerian tabloids and magazines had been described objectively, systematically and quantitatively. The key methodological concepts adopted in the content analysis study are: unit of analysis; content categories; sampling and coding.

The units of analysis used in the study are newspaper and magazine headlines, news stories, feature articles and opinion materials. In the content categories, the issues on Abacha's repressive measures are categorized into: Press, Politics, Military, Security, Government, Violence, Law and Regime. In constructing the content categories these researchers have ensured that the categories are pertinent to the objective of this study and that they are functional and manageable.

The sampling involves taking a part of a population that these researchers were interested in studying. Because all the elements cannot be studied some were selected: as it is not possible to study the content of all Nigerian newspapers and magazines some materials were selected for content analysis. In doing this random sampling method was adopted to sample certain months of the year and certain days of the month. The purpose for this is to reduce the quantity of newspapers and magazines and stories to be looked at to a manageable size. After this, the occurrence of the content to be measured was listed under appropriate content categories in a prepared coding sheet and it was ensured that the sampled elements are representative, relevant and manageable.

In the coding exercise there was a surety that all evidences observed in the newspapers and magazines were well recorded. Content categories from dailies and magazines were prepared and a coding sheet that was showing content analysis exercise on press estimation of Abacha regime over a period of time was designed with the following: **Titles:** Guardian newspaper, The Punch, Tell magazine and The News magazine; **Date (Months):** January, March, April and August; **Year:** 1994; **Type of Brutality:** Journalists were injured, maimed and detained and death occurred; **Place of Occurrence:** Lagos, Ibadan, Abuja; **Nature of Arrest:** Journalists arrested, Media houses closed, Newspapers and Magazines confiscated; **Sex of Victim:** Male/Female; **Conviction:** jailed, fined, cautioned, discharged and acquitted. The data were later subjected to scrutiny in order to ascertain their veracity and validity. After verifying and validating the genuineness of these materials, they were then synthesized and interpreted using descriptive analysis method.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

The results that were generated from this study have been limited to three discourses that this researcher is best acquainted with in his desk work and these are: (1) media suppression under colonial power and military regime (2) Abacha's systematic repressive measures against the Nigerian press and (3) narratives of Abacha's atrocities by four convicted media practitioners.

Media Suppression under Colonial Power and Military Regime:

The result revealed that the Nigerian press had suffered through considerable hardship under colonialism. Duyile (1984:45) asserted that "the first newspapers to suffer victimization of executive power in the hands of colonial masters were The Pilot and The Comet". These newspapers were banned in 1945 by the colonial Governor General, Sir Bernard Bourdillon for taking sides with striking workers and for giving Michael Imoudu the Nigeria's union leader 'undue publicity'.

During the advent of the military regimes in the late 1960s General Yakubu Gowon began to enact obnoxious decrees that were used to suppress the freedom of speech/press and to punish erring journalists. His government promulgated the Decree 24 of 1967 otherwise known as the Police Special Power decree that gave the executive arm of government unnecessary powers to arrest any person that disobeyed this draconian law.

The decree granted the then Deputy Inspector General of Police the power and authority to detain and punish Henry Onyedike the editor of Renaissance newspaper and his correspondent Agwu Okpanku for publishing an article titled: Killing Biafra. "In 1973, E. Amakiri a journalist was maltreated and humiliated by the government of Rivers State under Diette Spiff for carrying out his constitutional obligation when he reported that teachers in the state were threatening strike action to press home their basic demands" (Oloyede, 1996:23).

During Buhari/Idiagbon regime (1984-1985) a policy statement was issued to reduce the importation of newsprints and the military rulers mandated newspaper and magazine producers to concentrate on the purchase of the low quality newsprints that were produced locally at Jebba, Oku Iboku and Iwopin. The press started to suffer greater abuse during the regime of Buhari/Idiagbon in 1984 when the draconian decree 4 was enacted. The first victims of this decree were the duo of Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor of The Guardian Newspaper who were jailed for writing offensive article against the regime.

On the 19th of October, 1986 during Babangida regime a government agent presented Dele Giwa of Newswatch Magazine a letter bomb that shattered his body. In 1987, Newswatch was proscribed by the military regime of Babangida and this was followed by sundry arrests, intimidations, harassments and detentions of media practitioners. Beside this many journalists received anonymous telephone calls and letters bearing the message: Beware of what you write.

The issues of banning newspaper houses and killing of journalists for political reasons were rampant during the regimes of Generals Babangida and Abacha. Okonta (1998:9) has revealed that “the journalists engaged these two generals in what is called Press War and they succeeded in pulling down their tyrannical regimes”.

Abacha’s Systematic Repressive Measures against the Nigerian Press:

It is worthy of note that the estimation of General Sani Abacha’s regime by the Nigerian press was never very high in a five-year period. Few months after his military coup d’état, he began to behave dictatorially and the press resented his harsh, dictatorial manner of leadership. There was also no love lost between the junta and the independent press. To begin with, “the Newspapers Decree No 43 of 1993, once voided by a Lagos High Court, was resurrected by the junta in July 1995” (Diamond, Kirk-Green and Oyediran (1997:2). There could be no better evidence of an anti-press action than this.

It is not an understatement that he adopted a systematic approach to suppress the Nigerian Press. For example, during his totalitarian regime, a journalist by the name James Baguoda Kaltho paid a supreme price for telling the truth and for exposing the shady activities that were being perpetrated in Aso Rock. He was subjected to inhuman treatment and eventual death. Baguoda Kaltho of The News had to be reported missing when there was no trace of him. In January 1994 two staffers of The Guardian newspaper Harry Awurumibe and Patrick Bodu incurred the wrath of members of Lagos state environmental task force who brutally assaulted them for daring to record the demolition of illegal structures at Mushin Lagos. The two press boys were tied together and left in the sun for three hours before being taken to the office of the governor to be severely reprimanded.

Under his regime many journalists were subjected to various forms of human rights abuses. Animashaun (1999) has reflected on how the regime dealt with his publication: Monthly Life by making it to pay the sum of N80, 000.00 for writing offensive cover stories. Mbah (1999) and Ajibade (1999) have equally recounted their harrowing experiences in Abacha gulag subsequent to the June 12 political impasse.

In a treatise on Abacha’s atrocities, M’bah stressed that “having been in Abacha’s gulag, he realized that freedom means not just to escape from the military tyranny, but to have the capacity and opportunity to realize one’s professional potentials... Freedom must, therefore, reflect the right and responsibility to share in the collective power of one’s government”. In his own case, Charles-Obi reiterated that “despotic leaders sooner or later find out, more to their frustration and disappointment, that they do not have the nerve to suppress the press. In most cases they are humiliated and forced out of office. The Nigerian condition is a good example of this... In the Nigerian perspective the media, to put it succinctly, have performed wonders”.

Following the humongous attack on the practitioners the media body sought redress against what can be called militant-political injustices through the courts and “demanded financial compensations and public apology to the journalists whose human rights were violated and media houses whose newspapers were proscribed” (Akinola, 1998:12).

Increased press resistance triggered a chain reaction in the regime. The next line of action of the junta was to put in place several provisions that were apparently meant to curtail and restrict the independent press, if not altogether chain it. These included payment of a deposit of N250,000.00 and a non-refundable fee of N100,000.00 that the board may review from time to time furnishing of evidence character, competence and integrity of the directors or of other persons responsible for or in charge of publication.

His regime paled into relative insignificance in the aftermath of the unprecedented secret trial and ultimate conviction by a special military tribunal of four senior journalists: Kunle Ajibade, Chris Anyanwu, Ben Charles-Obi and George M’bah. These four prolific journalists from the independent press were incarcerated on grounds of being accessories after the fact of a coup. This is sequel to their respective articles that were raising doubts about the genuineness of the alleged coup of 1995.

Narratives of Abacha’s Atrocities by the Four Convicted Media Practitioners:

Myriads of decrees were made available to Abacha regime to avert what was regarded as unlawful journalists’ repeated criticism of the actions of his kitchen cabinet officials. This led to the promulgation of (1) Detention of

Persons Decree No. 2 that allowed indefinite incommunicado detention of citizens (2) the Offensive Publications Decree No. 35 of 1993, which allowed the government to seize any publication deemed likely to "disturb the peace and public order of Nigeria" and (3) the Treason and Treasonable Offenses Decree No. 29 of 1993, which was used in 1995 by a special military tribunal to convict Kunle Ajibade, Chris Anyanwu, Ben Charles-Obi and George M'bah as **defacto** accessories to treason for reporting an alleged coup plot. The four journalists who were released by General Abubakar have been able to write a detailed narrative of their experience in Abacha's gulag.

Kunle Ajibade was arrested by the State Security Service (SSS) on May 23, 1995. They interrogated him about a story that his publication did on an aborted coup. The entire trial was done hastily and the judgment was given summarily. The hearing and judgment of the matter was an unfortunate charade that took the lackadaisical approach of a military tribunal that is mostly used to suppress the rights of an accused. Ajibade has interpreted the three year he spent in jail as a professionally fulfilling episode because he got to know through the experience that the pen is mightier than the sword. His interpretation has supported the fact that soldiers are always afraid of the power of the pen. No soldier likes to be frightened which is what they feel the critical press has been doing to them. That is why they have been so ferocious in the suppression of the truth. The press always exposed the truth by revealing what the military has potentially destroyed in the society. In his narrative: *The Pen is Still Mightier*¹, he jubilated at the news of his release and saw Abacha's death as a relief that would afford Nigerian citizens the opportunity to address the political problems of the country.

Chris Anyanwu was implicated in the coup charades because she had a fore knowledge in the widespread speculation of attempted overthrow of Abacha government in March 1995. In her narrative: *Rats on Two Legs*² she described coups as big news in Nigeria. This is because coup d'état has been the traditional mode of power succession that jolt Nigerian society. A military coup d'état has always been seen as a major factor in reordering the affairs of the nation and the individual. In fact, there is no other major agenda setting programme that gives a more compelling issue on public debate than a coup. She was taken aback when Abacha and his band used gender-specific language to refer to her as a weak link in the chain of humanity and, therefore, put the squeeze on her to break the media chain. According to her, "the cheap blackmail the team fabricated was meant to pull the wool over the eyes of the fickle-minded persons who would rather believe in the junta's fable". However, it was not so easy to blackmail the male journalists, but they imprisoned them by using her case as a benchmark for the trial of all journalists.

Ben Charles-Obi was imprisoned for writing the caption: Colonel Shauib: Man Who Betrayed Coup Suspects in an edition of *Classique* magazine. He used his narrative: *My Trial Was a Charade*³ to espouse unpopular view of a military tribunal member one Capt. Bashir Manuai who yelled to suppress him with gusto and military psychology while stating that the story he wrote had caused some security problems and discredited the government's coup allegation, prompting people to demand the release of the arrested suspects. He finally mandated him to disclose the source of the story at all costs, but he responded by dwelling on the ethics of the journalism profession that forbid a journalist from disclosing his source. He endured the travails that resulted from his attempt to sensitize the world to the plight of the arrested suspects. He saw that Abacha regime and the military he commanded have completely lost touch with reality. They have deviated from the civilized standards of military institutions worldwide and degenerated into a Gestapo institution. To Charles-Obi, Abacha was not only leading an army of occupation, but a terrorist institution that has become a killer and a torturer of the people they are paid to protect.

George Mbah was detained in Biu Prison where he had what he called Philistine restrictions because he was kept in a total news blackout. He prophetically predicted that he would definitely outlive his political captor by many years to come. This prediction has come to pass as Abacha met an untimely demise. In his narrative: *I knew I would outlive Abacha*⁴ he talked about how he was accused of worrying the government and how his accusers were deceiving him about a government plan to appoint his boss Nosa Igiebor (the editor in chief of TELL magazine) as the Minister of Information, and to appoint him to his position. They exploited his ignorance of not knowing the situation outside the prison yard and demanded that he should just give them his bank account as the government was planning to put money in it for him to buy a land of his choice; build a house that suits his taste; purchase Porsche cars and live comfortably. His response was swift in letting them know the truth that they would not find those kinds of journalists at Tell, because they are serious-minded professionals. They adopted myriads of bugging devices and lured him into saying what they wanted to hear, but he did not fall a prey and that was how he was arrested. He was sentenced, he was kept in chains. One thing he was sure of was that in the civilized world, this could not last. Abacha could not last forever. That was his only hope. So, he relaxed, because detention has always been part of the hazards of journalism profession. Journalists have gone through a lot of things in this society, because they only work in the public interest.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is concluded that the closure of media houses and the seizure of their products by Abacha regime was an indicator that Nigeria was "back to the barricade" and members of the press vowed to monitor the junta before it becomes another full blown dictatorship. At first the junta tried to muffle the noise made by the press, but all the muffling

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attempts boiled down to the crackdown on the media and this is reflective in a press release by Abacha's government that it would deal with journalists who step out of form.

Abacha returned as a military head of state after toppling the interim government of Ernest Shonekan in 1993 can be referred to as a return of tyranny in which this rattlesnake in army uniform came back to bare his fangs. His act of banning media houses and seizing their products is like entering the hornet's nest of angry press. The banning and seizure of media products had a déjà vu ring around it. It occurred at the inception of Ibrahim Babangida's dictatorship in which media staffers were constantly harassed, arrested, beaten and detained.

The stark reality of the whole suppression and depression of the press is that the first nine months of Abacha's free rein earned him a reputation for impudence and for pursuing policies towards the media which in myriads of ways resemble those of his totalitarian predecessor that he was part of anyway.

Abacha took up arms against the Nigerian press as the reigning diva of military governance. In his maiden address to the nation he called on journalists to exercise restraint and responsibility in the discharge of their duties. Many media practitioners, however, saw his political statement of responsibility and restraint for the press as an attempt at censorship. Every action that was taken by the junta after making the statement is now history. The truth of the lesson is that no erring government has never and would never like the press to publish its weaknesses and oddities.

It is hereby recommended that the press should continually focus on its watchdog function and realize the facts that while the political power is transient, the press vigilant operations no matter under what condition should be sustained for all eternity. The press should continue to focus on political leadership that must be sensitive to the rights and interest of the general masses. The press must fight for a political milieu in which it will be impossible for kleptomaniacs, egomaniacs, bullies and idiots to hold public office as is so rampant in the Nigerian political system.

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