



## NIGERIAN MEDIA AND THE ERADICATION OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CRISES: LESSONS

### FROM RWANDA

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#### Abstract

**T**his paper examines peace at a macro level in two Sub-Saharan Africa countries; Nigeria and Rwanda. It explores the relationship between the political system and the media system relative peace experienced in Nigeria and Rwanda. Based on the tenets of libertarian and development media theories, this paper explores the historical and social peculiarities that shape the prevailing political and media paradigms in both countries. Based on a comparative analysis of secondary data on each country, the paper suggests that the Rwandan political and

media model offers greater political stability, social cohesion, peace and development than the Nigerian political and

media paradigms. It therefore recommends

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for a collaboration between Nigerian media and government for the eradication of ethno-religious tension because it peaceful co-existence among the constituent groups could be a platform for national development.

#### INTRODUCTION

**P**ace is a crucial ingredient for national development. Although peace and development are highly desirable, human acts of omission or commission often make it difficult to achieve them. Nigeria and Rwanda are countries with similar experiences in history and

remarkable differences in development trajectories. Both of them have experienced bitter civil wars which have shaped their political landscapes. While Nigeria experienced the Biafra War between 1967 and 1970, Rwanda experienced a genocidal civil war in 1994.

The civil wars in both cases were caused by ethnic suspicion in their respective polities. In Nigeria, the Igbos led by Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, who was the Governor of the defunct Eastern region sought a break from the Nigerian federation following the widespread killings of Igbos resident in the Northern region in the aftermath of the second military coup in Nigeria (which was a retaliation by northern military officers following the first military coup which was largely carried out by officers of Igbo extraction).

The Rwandan civil war of the other hand was caused by the assassination of President Juvenal Habyarimana of Rwanda and President Cyprien Ntaryamina of Burundi through a plane crash on April 6, 1994 (Kellow & Steeves, 1998, p. 106). The Hutu majority accused the Tutsi minority of the assassination and the Hutu elites used the media (especially radio) to call for revenge on the Tutsis. The revenge was carried with almost one million Tutsis and moderate Hutus killed in the country. Radio was the mass medium used to mobilize the Hutu extremists for the “national duty” of exterminating the Tutsis.

It is important to note that no Nigerian of Igbo extraction has risen to the presidency of Nigeria since the end of the civil war. Similarly, no Rwandan of Hutu extraction has attained the presidency of Rwanda since the end of the Rwandan genocide. The systematic exclusion of the Igbos and the Hutus from the presidency of Nigeria and Rwanda suggests that the politics of exclusion and patronage are practiced in both countries.

There are 371 tribal groups in Nigeria (Vanguardngr.com, 2017). Rwanda on the other hand has three ethnic groups. However, while the ethnic/tribal groups in Nigeria have mutually indecipherable languages, the three groups in Rwanda speak the same language. The official narrative is that Hutu, Tutsi and Twa are not ethnic categories but social categories (Hartley, 2015, p. 54). Nigeria and Rwanda have striking population differences; the “Rwanda Population and Housing Census in 2012 put Rwanda’s population at 10,515,973 people” (UNDP, 2015), while

the population of Nigeria is about 198,000,000 (Adeyemo, 2018). While Nigeria was colonised by Great Britain, Rwanda was colonised first by Germany and then Belgium (after the Germans were defeated in the First World War).

There has been several ethnic and religious crises in Nigeria since the end of the civil war. The perennial ethno-religious crises indicate a lack of trust and social cohesion among the various ethnic and religious groups in the country. Therefore, violence or the threat of violence has been a tool for the negotiation for portions of the proverbial national cake. Rwanda on the other has been very cohesive on the social front following legislation against ethnic, religious, and gender discrimination. While Nigerian media make allusion to ethnicity and religion in the framing of media messages, Rwandan media are forbidden from writing in such manner and the result is that there is greater peace, social cohesion and national development in Rwanda than Nigeria.

### **Methodology**

This study uses the narrative method. Data on the political, historical and media systems of Nigeria and Rwanda were gathered from secondary sources and they were comparatively analysed for similarities and differences.

### **National Communication Policy and National Media System**

National Communication Policy refers to a set of established principles guiding a nation's communication system. It is the foundation on which the totality of a country's internal communication system is based. It also provides guidelines for interaction of citizens of a country across territorial borders as well as the interaction of the government with other governments and organizations (Anaeto & Anaeto, 2010). Although policy thrust of a nation would determine the operational dynamics of a media system in a country, events have shown that there are differences between policy development and implementation. This suggests that the personality of individuals at the helm of affairs in a state can determine the operational paradigm of a media system irrespective the policy thrust. Although the media policy in Nigeria is

libertarian, the practice is a mixture of authoritarian, libertarian and developmental.

The first conscious effort at creating a national communication policy for Nigeria can be traced to the national stakeholders' communication summit held in Lagos in 1987 (Adekoya & Ajilore, 2012, p. 17). The cardinal objective of the summit was to examine and recommend ways through which communication can be used to drive Nigerian national development. This was a recognition of the crucial place of communication in nation building. The Nigerian constitution also forms part of the media policy of the country as it stipulates the duties of the media in the society.

### **Theoretical framework**

This work rests on the theoretical foundations of the libertarian theory and development media theory. The relevance of both theories to the study is discussed herein.

### **Libertarian Theory**

The libertarian theory of the press was born out of opposition to control of the early press by the Church and the Crown in medieval Europe. Libertarians opposed authoritarian thought that humans were irrational and they need to be guided on major decisions in their life. Libertarians therefore hold firm that people are “good and rational and able to judge good ideas from bad” (Baran & Davis, 2012, p. 94). The libertarian theory therefore holds that the media should be free from all forms of restraint and censorship because the people have the ability to discern between good (truth) and evil (falsehood). They are therefore going to choose truth over falsehood in the long run. Proponents of libertarian thought “believe there shouldn't be any limit on the press since individuals have the capacity to discern good ideas from bad ones — with the former carrying the day” (Kayumba, 2017).

It is pertinent to note that press freedom, from the libertarian perspective is very close to property right. In other words, it refers to the freedom of the owners of the means of production (McQuail, 2010, p. 151). The total removal of censorship would grant absolute powers to publishers in the field of public opinion formation and agenda setting.

This indicates that undue influence could be in the hands of the publishers and that could lead to further problems because absolute power corrupts absolutely.

The media system in Nigeria theoretically operates under the libertarian theory. Although the ownership pattern and structure reveal heavy government involvement in the media sector in Nigeria, there are multiple outlets for the expression of all shades of opinion. This scenario offers platforms for all ethnic, religious and socio-cultural groups in Nigeria to create awareness about their ideals, convert citizens of the country into their schools of thought and make their demands on the government and other sectional groups in the polity. The unguarded nature of the media coverage of the activities of these groups often lead to social instability across the country. Some of the groups which have leveraged on the libertarian operations of the Nigerian media system are Arewa Consultative Forum, Ohaneze Ind'Igbo, Afenifere, and South-South Peoples Assembly; others are Boko Haram, Indigenous People of Biafra, Niger-Delta Avengers and O'odua People's Congress.

The proliferation of ethno-religious and socio-cultural groups and the attendant media coverage of their activities has led to tension and crises in the polity. Members of religious groups like the Islamic Movement of Nigeria and the Ombatse cult of Alakyo village in Nassarawa state have had violent clashes with the Nigerian military while Christians and Muslims have also fought bitter battles in states like Kaduna, Taraba and Plateau. The theoretical position of the media system in the country (libertarianism) is a contributing factor to the ethno-religious fracas across the country.

### **Development Media Theory**

The development media theory is aimed at facilitating growth in under-developed countries. It is an advocacy theory which recommends “media support for an existing political regime and its efforts to bring about national economic development” (Baran & Davis, 2012, p. 126). In other words, there should be no unnecessary criticism of government policies which are aimed at facilitating development in a country. Media workers and owners must ensure they support government efforts to facilitate development. Rather than make destructive criticism of policies

which they estimate to be poor, they should make recommendations as to how it could be improved upon. Development media theorists contend that “until a nation is well established and its economic development well under way, media must be supportive rather than critical of government” (Baran & Davis, 2012, p. 127).

Development media theory sees the media and governments as partners in progress. Although there may be areas of disagreement in the partnership, the disagreements must never be allowed to spill into the public sphere to the extent of derailing the goals of the partnership. Therefore, disagreements between governments and the media must be resolved behind the curtains so that the masses can reap the development benefits inherent in government plans and policies.

Proponents of free press are critical of the developmental theory of media operation. They regard it as a reincarnation of authoritarianism which must be resisted by all means and at any cost. While libertarians may not be totally wrong in their position, it is important to appreciate the place of history and politics in the development of media theories. Libertarianism in its purest sense aims at taking power and influence away from the monarchs, clergy, and politicians and putting them in the hands of media owners. Press freedom is not the freedom of the journalist to report the truth but the freedom of the media owner to shape public opinion and make profit through the publication and dissemination of information which are beneficial to the cause of the media owner.

In relation to this study, the operating media paradigm in Rwanda is the development paradigm. This is due to the peculiar experiences of the country in the recent past. It was evident that the Rwandan genocide was caused by sectional loyalty and there was a need to depart from the values that led to the genocide. Consequently, the new government had to take development approach to national life. All sectors of the country were mandated to key into the developmental vision of the government. The media was instrumental to the genocide and it is only natural that it should be used to correct the problems caused by the genocide. At the moment, Rwanda is one of the fastest growing economies in Africa and it has made huge gains in the area of gender equality and education. It is

the country with the highest female representation in government in the world.

### **Political Systems**

There are certain similarities and differences in the current political systems in Nigeria and Rwanda. Both of them practice democracy with periodic elections. However, while Nigeria has been ruled by four presidents since the return to democracy in 1999, Rwanda has been ruled by only Paul Kagame since 2000. He has won every election conducted in the country since then. The Rwandan constitution has been amended to allow him continue in office without term limits. Kagame has muscled out all serious political opponents of his presidency through overt and covert means. However, his approval rating by the citizens of Rwanda is very high when measured through the results of presidential polls.

The message is that President Kagame is a man that is in charge of every aspect of Rwandan politics. He has arguably been in charge since the end of the genocide in 1994. As leader of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (the rebel group that defeated the Hutu extremists), he became the Vice President of the country after the war. As Vice President, he simultaneously held the position of Defence Minister thus putting him in charge of the instrument of coercion. It is unlikely that any contender would defeat President Kagame in a presidential contest in Rwanda in the near future. While critics have accused the president of Rwanda of suppressing the media and human rights, it can be said that the political situation in the country is a product of the experiences and needs of the country. Rwanda is a democratic country with a totalitarian government. Nigeria is a democratic country with a greater freedom of expression in comparison to Rwanda. The political landscape of Nigeria is dominated by regional godfathers who give directives to their banner men and foot soldiers. Although there is huge concentration of power in the hands of the federal government, the ascension to the presidency is always a product of elite consensus facilitated by the regional godfathers. This unwritten arrangement is the basis of regional, ethnic, and religious loyalty among Nigerian politicians. Ethno-religious loyalty and the stranglehold of regional godfathers is arguably one of the reasons for the recurring ethno-religious crises in Nigeria.

Nigeria and Rwanda are theoretically multi-party democracies, the realities are different in practice. Nigeria is effectively a two-party state because there are two dominant political parties in Nigeria. At the return to democratic rule in 1999, there were three political parties in Nigeria and each of them had a sphere of influence. Over the years, there has been a proliferation of political parties, but most of the smaller political parties exist only on paper. Similarly, Rwanda has been technically a one-party state even though there are 11 registered political parties in the country (Golooba-Mutebi, 2018). The ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front has dominated the political landscape since the end of the genocide. Although the Rwandan constitution allows for independent candidacy, the process is cumbersome and dangerous.

### **Media Landscape in Nigeria**

Media ownership is relatively deregulated in Nigeria. Governments at both the federal and state levels are the biggest investors in the broadcast sector (Onifade et al, 2017, p. 65) while the print sector is largely left in private hands. Although the Nigerian constitution allows for private ownership of media organizations, it limits restricts the establishment and operation of private broadcast stations to those individuals permitted by the president on the recommendation of the National Broadcasting Commission. This legal framework makes it difficult for individuals to own and operate broadcast stations in Nigeria. Consequently, only those who are in the good books of the government of the day would get licences to operate broadcast stations.

At the base of the politics of media ownership is power relations. Radio and television are effective tools for the mobilization of the masses towards collective actions. This is because radio and television messages require little effort on the part of the receiver. The messages are often served in simple formats requiring little mental or financial effort from the audience. This is unlike newspapers and magazines which require money and average literacy skills on the part of the readers. The importance of control over the broadcast media in Nigeria is better appreciated when the fact that Nigeria is currently the poverty capital of the world with about 50% of her population living in extreme poverty (Kazeem, 2018). If politics is indeed a game of numbers, it becomes easy

to mobilize a mass of uneducated people towards a sectional political cause.

One of the agencies tasked with media regulation in Nigeria is the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC). The agency is in charge of broadcast media operations in the country. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria empowers the National Broadcasting Commission is to revoke the licences of broadcast stations which violate the national broadcasting code and the interest of the public. However, the law does not explicitly define public interest neither does it specify how to seek redress thus allowing “the NBC to provide licences in perpetuity only to withdraw them at their whims and caprices” (Ojo et al, 2013, pp. 24-25).

Other regulatory bodies include the Nigerian Press Council (NPC), Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON), and the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR). However, it must be said that there has been more direct regulation by the Nigerian state, through the security agencies, than there has been by the regulatory bodies. Rather than allow the regulatory bodies do their work by calling erring media organizations to order, the government of Nigeria often send security agencies to storm media houses to seize their working tools and detain their staff.

### **Media Landscape in Rwanda**

The government is the largest investor in Rwandan media sector. Consequently, media operations in Rwanda is heavily restricted. There are certain red lines which must not be crossed; ethnicity must not be mentioned in a manner that stokes division, and the atrocities committed during the genocide must not be narrated in a frame that would arouse bitterness and vengeance in the mind of anyone. These red lines buttress the point that there is no absolute libertarianism in any country. With the famed freedom of expression of the Western world, it is an unwritten crime to deny the persecution of the Jews during the Second World War. Doing so is regarded as anti-Semitism. Any medium that discusses the extermination of the Jews in across Europe during the Second World War in unfair frames could be blacklisted by the public.

A similar situation plays out in Rwanda. Journalists are encouraged to exercise self-censorship in order not to re-open old wounds. This is important because the country has relatively forgotten its past and it has embarked on a long journey to forgiveness and reconciliation. Reporting on the past in hurtful manner could reopen the wounds and possibly lead to another war. There is a body of professionals regulating the operations of the mass media in Rwanda; it is the Rwanda Media Commission. The body was established in 2013 to reduce government censorship and increase socially responsible media practice in the country (freedomhouse.org, 2017). Due to the peculiar experiences and needs of the Rwandan society, the leadership of the Rwandan Media Commission has been a banana peel for media practitioners in the country. The Commission had been “without permanent leadership since its previous leader, Fred Muvunyi, fled Rwanda in 2015 after learning of ambiguously worded threats against him” (freedomhouse.org, 2017). Despite assurances from the government, press freedom is seriously restricted. There are various restrictive laws under which journalists could be arrested and jailed. They are also intimidated either subtly or blatantly by government officials and security agents. Consequently, many journalists have fled Rwanda to preserve their lives and their freedom. Interestingly, the Rwandan government seemingly has long hands stretching beyond their physical borders. Some dissident journalists have received threats even in exile. Consequently, most of the media organizations have been in support of the Rwandan government. Private media outlets generally avoid controversial topics although a handful of “radio stations have shown a willingness to criticize government policies” (freedomhouse.org, 2017). The operations of some critical media organizations in Rwanda raises questions on the narrative that the Rwandan government and the Rwandan president are intolerant of opposition. The fact that some people have remained in the country to criticize the government indicates that there is enough room for constructive criticism. It is important to state that the Rwandan legal system provides room for the redress of legal infringements and individual rights. However, due to the sensitive nature of political activism, a journalist must be morally above board to overcome government persecution. For instance, in

January 2016, a critical journalist, William Ntwali was detained on rape charges but was released after some days due to lack of evidence. One month later another journalist “Ivan Mugisha of the East African weekly newspaper was arrested on legally dubious grounds, and interrogated about his reporting on a tax investigation into a Rwandan stone quarrying company” (freedomhouse.org, 2017).

It is important to note that Freedom House has consistently ranked Rwanda as “Not Free” on its press freedom index since the end of the genocide. Interestingly, the last time the organization ranked the Rwandan media better was 1993 (Kayumba, 2017). Ironically, this was at a time when some extremists persistently used media houses to call for the extermination of Tutsis. Local studies found that the regime of president Habyarimana was one of the more oppressive regimes in Africa at the time and it was characterised by “corruption of political surrogates, ideological and divisive propaganda, brain washing, networks of secret police and... the determination to kill any potential opponent” (Gatwa, 1995, p. 18). With this contextual picture, the critical mind would begin to question the validity of the instruments used by the international organization in its ranking of press freedom in countries of the world.

### **Gains of Developmental Approach**

In spite of the criticisms levelled against the Rwandan government, the developmental approach to political and media operations have paid dividends. According to Transparency International, Rwanda is the third least corrupt country in Africa. This is a result of the government’s war against all forms of graft. This has aided the improvement of service delivery in the country. The World Bank has also ranked Rwanda as the 29<sup>th</sup> easiest country to do business in the world” (Forbes Africa, 2018). This rating shows that Rwanda is more open than many countries in the developed world. Although Rwanda is a landlocked country with little natural resources, the government has grown and diversified the economy.

Nigeria on the other hand is regarded as one of the most corrupt countries of the world by Transparency International. Despite the abundance of natural resources in the country, Nigeria is one of the

poorest countries of the world in terms of per capita income. It is also one of the most difficult places to do business in the world due to the prevalence of bribery in both the public and private sectors. The political leadership has displayed a weakness in the implementation of the lofty policies existent in Nigeria. The inference is that political leaders in Nigeria have not been able to galvanize the citizenry towards collective development despite the abundance of natural and human resources.

### **Conclusion**

The correlation of the facts gathered for this study indicate that there is greater social cohesion in Rwanda than Nigeria. The social cohesion in Rwanda is a product the political will of the leaders in that country while the perennial social discord in Nigeria is suggestive of the dearth of political will of Nigerian political class. Although critics describe the prevalent peace experienced in Rwanda as coerced cohesion, it must be underscored that it takes more than coercion for a man to marry into a family that was responsible for the death of his own parents. It takes a lot of healing to attempt that.

Rwanda has made great political and legal efforts to build and sustain peace among the ethnic and social components existent in its geographical boundaries. One of such efforts is the effective legislation outlawing ethnic labelling in Rwanda (Hartley, 2015, p. 52). Several journalists and politicians have been detained and tried for violation of the legislation against ethnic and social division.

The current political system in Rwanda was designed to that past mistakes are not repeated. “A key mistake, the argument often goes, was unrestrained competition amid systematic use of sectarianism by those in pursuit of power to further their ambitions” (Golooba-Mutebi, 2018). Nigeria on the other hand has failed to learn from the bitter civil war which threatened her existence. There have been re-occurrences of the events which led to the civil war and the country has been on the threshold of implosion since the end of the civil war. There has been no serious effort at healing old wounds. Consequently, the Nigerian media has been a tool a tool for the widening of the social chasm instead of being a tool for national cohesion and development.

## Recommendations

This study recommends the adoption of the development media theory in the operations of the Nigerian media. There is a need for strict regulation of the media to facilitate development across all sectors of the Nigerian society. The media therefore must be an active participant in the drive towards development. Also, Nigerian elite and media owners must promote nationalism instead of sectionalism.

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