It is a view commonly acknowledged that the mass media have a crucial role to play in the development and maintenance of democracy. It is a matter of greater controversy as to whether the media's influence upon democracy is as constructive as it might be.

This collection explores the various impacts upon democratic structures and processes of different media forms in different parts of the world. It examines the very different influences of the press in democratic Nigeria and post-Leveson Britain; it looks at how social media are used by politicians, voters and revolutionaries in the UK, Poland and the Arab Region; it investigates the political impact of media ownership in Britain, Italy and Argentina; and it asks whether we can ever hope to develop from being passive consumers of the mass media to active participants in modes of democratic citizenship underpinned by those media.

Alec Charles is Principal Lecturer in Media at the University of Bedfordshire. He is the editor of *Media in the Enlarged Europe* (2009), the co-editor of *The End of Journalism* (2011) and the author of *Interactivity: New Media, Politics and Society* (2012).

978-1-4438-4839-8
www.cambridgescholars.com

Alec Charles

Media/Democracy

CSP

Media/Democracy

A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Edited by

Alec Charles

Media/Democracy: A Comparative Study,
Edited by Alec Charles

This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-4839-5, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4839-8

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER SIX

THE PRESS AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA

MERCY ETTE

Nigeria's relatively peaceful and successful transition from military dictatorship to civilian rule in May 1999 marked a watershed in the country's political history. After almost three decades of rounds of transitions between civilian and military regimes, the country's pattern of carefully staged, but unsuccessful, transition-to-democracy programmes ended with a transfer of power from the military to a seemingly acceptable civilian administration. Although it was a hastily arranged compromise between the military elite and the political class, by 2013 three multi-party elections had followed that initial transfer of power. Based upon a somewhat minimalist definition of democratic consolidation, Nigeria could now be regarded as an entrenched democracy. However, measured against a more comprehensive framework, the country falls short of some standards of consolidation. This chapter assesses how the press coverage of a critical presidential election by a newspaper of record mirrors the prospects and challenges for the entrenchment of democracy in Nigeria.

Nigerian Democracy

Towards the end of the last century Africa, like many other parts of the world, witnessed the so-called "third wave of democratization" when authoritarian regimes and one-party governments gave way to civilian administrations. Nigeria, one of the strongholds of military dictatorship in Africa, and the continent's most populous country, was caught up in the snowballing effect of this wave. As a result, after eleven governments and six successful military coups, the civil-military cycle was again broken when a civilian administration was installed on 29 May 1999 as a major step towards liberal democratic rule. However, it was one thing for a transition programme to end successfully and another for the new political system to survive, given the country's previous experience of civilian rule

and the extent of the militarisation of civil society. While the country's political structures have not disintegrated despite persistent ethnic, economic and political storms, a reverse wave is not improbable. However, the existence of such facets of a democratic infrastructure as a free and pluralist press, a vibrant civil society and an expansion in communication facilities justifies hopes for the future of democracy in Nigeria. For example, the press, now free from a repressive environment engendered by military rule and state censorship, is positioned to select, shape and define issues in ways which support democracy. It has the power to expand the democratic space and provide a forum for political participation. It can serve as an information-broker for its audience, set the political agenda and facilitate democratic consolidation. In principle the constraints that curtailed press freedom during periods of military dictatorship have been eliminated.

This chapter examines prospects and challenges for democratic consolidation in Nigeria, as reflected in the coverage of the 2011 presidential election by *The Guardian* newspaper, a Nigerian prestige newspaper and a publication of record. *The Guardian*, like some other publications in Nigeria, still exercises considerable influence on policy-making, despite dwindling newspaper circulations, and, as a "favourite of the intellectuals", is one of the most influential national titles. It is "respected for its independent, sober views" (Olukoyun 2004, 71). Founded in February 1983, *The Guardian* claims to be the flagship of Nigerian journalism. Unlike most privately owned newspapers in Nigeria, *The Guardian* was set up purely as a commercial venture and not to serve as its publisher's political megaphone. Although it is owned by a family with diversified political leanings, the paper manifests allegiance to no political party or ethno-religious position. It is widely regarded as an independent newspaper. When *The Guardian* takes a stand on an issue, its readers take notice and the government often responds, because of its degree of public influence. Its coverage of democratisation programmes during the military dictatorship, for example, was extensive and went beyond simply relaying information towards a contextualization of its narratives.

As a paper of record, *The Guardian* has the discretionary power to set the agenda for public debate, to give salience to issues of national significance and, during an election campaign, can be expected to provide a credible and critical account of the state of democracy in the country. The paper could also be expected to scrutinise the policies and promises of political parties and politicians, to explain to its readers what the parties stand for and to assess the credibility of their representatives. This is

particularly important in an emerging democracy where voters' electoral choices are not informed by their experience of past performances of the political parties competing for their support.

This analysis of *The Guardian*'s coverage of the 2011 election is aimed at identifying the issues that the paper selected and signposted as important and primed for the attention of its readers during the election campaign. The focus is on the front page of the newspaper and this choice was determined by its accessibility to readers and its relevance to the political process. Accessibility was defined as having a high probability of being seen by casual readers. As the increasing cost of newspapers continues to limit the purchasing power of many readers, access is sometimes limited to what is readily visible at the newsstands or displayed by newspaper vendors. A front-page headline could in all probability have been the main source of information about the presidential election for some readers. As Eleazu (1977, 205) has argued, "in a country such as Nigeria where most of those who 'see' the papers will not have the time to actually read them, many people form their impressions about the topic of the day by front page headlines supplemented by hearsay from those who read the papers."

Media and Politics

The core argument of this chapter is located in the intertwining relationship between the news media and democracy and the understanding that the press has a defining and vital role in democratic societies. At the normative level, the press is considered an essential element in the process of democratic politics because it has the power to provide an arena and channel for wide debate, make candidates for office widely known and distribute diverse information and opinion (McQuail 2000, 3). The press can signal to voters what the important issues are and construct political reality; it can facilitate political participation by making accessible to citizens information they need to make informed decisions; it can strengthen democracy by holding political actors accountable through its watchdog role, and by providing a forum for public debate on important issues, especially during election campaigns. As Tettey asserts, the media can serve as a "conduit for democratic expression and consolidation" (2001, 5). To play such a critical role, the press is expected to maintain surveillance of the political scene in order to curtail abuses of power, and gather, interpret, contextualise and disseminate information in a meaningful and accessible form (McNair 2010). The provision of reliable information that can empower citizens to understand complex political,

economic and social issues and make informed political choices is one of the key responsibilities of a democratically relevant press. As Stephen Cushion (2012, 44) explains, news is "the informational fuel considered vital for a democracy to remain healthy." Or as Neil Washbourne (2010, 5) puts it, democratic politics requires the provision of a full and diverse coverage of politics: "media coverage has to be adequate to both make the political system intelligible and accountable to voters, and interesting enough to encourage voters of different social and cultural backgrounds to fulfil their democratic duties."

The media should ideally represent an arena in which a mass democracy communicates with itself. This involves a whole range of activities: informing, arguing, questioning, reflecting, investigating and exposing. Without a set of media institutions that perform this role, the nation is deprived of its collective street corner, market square and notice-board. If deprived in this way, the quality of its democracy suffers (see Wright 1998, 20).

Elections provide useful testing grounds for the capacity of the press to play its democratic role effectively. The press is expected to play a critical role during what Negrine describes as this "hallmark of a democratic political system" (1994, 152) because coverage of an election can have a significant impact on voters' understanding of issues and influence their engagement in politics (Cushion 2012). Moreover, the press can serve as a "mirror which reflects the general orientation of political life and the microscope which allows citizens to pay attention to different national activities" (Masmoudi 1992, 34). This role is critical because in a democracy, elections "serve as instruments through which the electorate can exercise some control over the actions of government" (Dode 2010, 189) and, as noted by James Curran (1991, 29), the press enables the people to shape the conduct of government by articulating their views.

Underpinning this understanding of the press-democracy paradigm is the assumption that information available to voters empowers them to exercise their democratic rights. As Jackie Harrison has noted, the media-politics relationship is based on the assumption that "those being governed in a democracy give their informed consent which occurs where there is freely available information in which such consent may be based" (Harrison 2006, 100). If citizens are expected to participate in the democratic process, it is important for them to have access to information that empowers and equips them to act out of knowledge and not ignorance; to monitor and scrutinise state action and to make informed choices during elections (Norris 2000). This is particularly important for

the consolidation of democratic values, especially where democracy is still a new game in town.

In Nigeria, antidemocratic behaviour and years of military rule had eroded democratic values and entrenched an authoritarian understanding of politics. Consequently, a large number of voters have little experience of democratic politics, and more than a decade after a successful transition programme, unstable democratic structures, limited knowledge and experience of democratic procedures and values, and a polarised polity are still posing challenges to the consolidation of Nigerian democracy. Against this background, the role of the Nigerian news media becomes more critical as they represent the only institutions that have been in existence through the different stages of the country's political history. Moreover, the press is the only institution empowered by the constitution to protect democracy. It therefore has the power to inform the electorate about important political issues and contexts that should determine their voting choices. Furthermore, the press can monitor democratic conditions and hold politicians accountable on behalf of the people.

Democratic Consolidation

Understanding the challenges of democratic consolidation in Nigeria requires an insight into the country's political history, especially in relation to democratisation. The post-independence political history of Nigeria has been dominated by military interference. But in spite of its critical role in politics, the military was never accepted as a permanent solution to the country's political instability. Rather, most military rulers legitimised their intervention in politics by promising to transfer power to democratically elected representatives of the people. As Osaghae has noted, "military regimes which did not have a transition programme or failed to carry through their transitions (Ironsi, Gowon, Buhari, Babangida) provided a justification for their own later overthrow" (1998, 55). After the country's first coup in January 1966, Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu, one of the leaders of the plot, made it clear that he and his fellow coup plotters had no interest in running the country: "we are soldiers and not politicians [...] we were going to make civilians of proven honesty and efficiency who would be thoroughly hand-picked to do all the governing" (Ihonvbere 1994, 154). Other military officers who overthrew civilian governments also promised to hand over power to elected politicians as soon as it was expedient, thus suggesting that self-perpetuation in office was not on their agenda. Four out of eight military heads of state embarked on transition-to-democracy programmes but only

two of these programmes resulted in civilian administrations. The first successful transition programme ended in October 1979 but the civilian government it produced lasted for barely four years before being terminated by a military coup in 1983. General Ibrahim Babangida's transition programme (1986-1993), the longest and most expansive, produced a semi-democratic structure but the programme failed in 1993 when the General annulled a presidential election that should have resulted in a full transfer of power to elected politicians. In 1999 General Abdulsalami Abubakar's programme culminated in a civilian administration that, at the time of writing, has survived three multiparty elections. Interestingly, the first successful transition programme in Nigeria was implemented by General Olusegun Obasanjo; the second resulted in Obasanjo, now retired, being elected as president of the country in 1999.

The years before 1999's successful transfer of power from a military government to a civilian administration were notable for transition programmes that appeared to be more successful at entrenching autocratic regimes than at producing democratic governments. But as Diamond (1988) has noted, democratic aspiration was kept alive and sustained despite the military dictatorship. Diamond attributes this partly to the "vigour of the Nigerian press" and argues that "despite repressive decrees and continuous threats, harassment and arrests" the press "managed to preserve its freedom and integrity to a considerable degree" (1988, 46). Although other scholars (Ette 2000; Uko 2004; Pate and Bashir 2012) have challenged this notion of the vanguard role of the press in the context of democratisation, there is no doubt that the Nigerian press kept liberal democratic rhetoric on the agenda through their coverage of the transition programmes. Moreover, Nigerians have always manifested a strong commitment to democracy and have consequently never accepted military rule as the norm. Although their politicians did not enjoy overwhelming public support, Nigerians still clamoured for opportunities to choose who could exercise political power over them. Democracy was the preferred system of government, notwithstanding the past failures of politicians, failures which had justified military coups. However, by the end of the 1990s, the military had lost its claim to its self-assigned role of saviour and guardian of the nation because of what Nwabueze (1993) describes as "lawless autocracy." A clamour for a transfer of power supported by the "third wave" made democratisation inevitable and by 1999, Nigeria was once again under civilian rule and democratic consolidation was a possibility.

It is worth noting that democratic consolidation is a contested concept. Andreas Schedler, for instance, describes it as "an omnibus concept, a garbage-can concept, a catch-all concept, lacking a core meaning that would unite all modes of usage" (1998, 101). But despite its fuzzy nature, most scholars accept the original understanding of the concept as being associated with the challenge of securing and extending the life expectancy of new democracies, of building immunity against the threat of regression to authoritarianism and "reverse waves" (Schedler 1998, 90). Or as Frimpong-Mansoh noted, it is a "descriptive term to refer to a firm establishment and successful completion of the process of political democratization" (2012, 4). For Mainwaring et al., a notable characteristic of democratic consolidation is the acceptance by all "political actors that democratic procedures dictate government renewal" (1992, 3). Put differently, democratic consolidation entails the widespread acceptance of rules that guarantee political participation and competition. A consolidated democracy is not at risk of ending suddenly or abruptly through unconstitutional means such as a military coup. Dode (2010, 189) asserts that consolidation "implies established stability in governance. This consolidation of democracy involves behavioural and institutional changes that normalise democratic politics and narrow its uncertainty." Although elections provide a framework for testing the durability of a democracy, as Bratton (1998, 52) argues, "elections do not, in and of themselves, constitute a consolidated democracy; they remain fundamental, not only for installing democratic governments, as a requisite for broader democratic consolidation."

Democratic consolidation begins where the "transition to democracy" ends but is a long and complex process (Beetham 1994; Abdulai and Crawford 2010). Moreover, as David Beetham (1994, 159) argues, the democratisation process "is always and everywhere an unfinished business" – it is "not an all-or-nothing affair, but a matter of the degree to which the basic principles are realized." Larry Diamond, a leading exponent on the politics of transition to democracy, has also observed that "democratisation is bound to be gradual, messy, fitful and slow, with many imperfections along the way" (cited in Randall and Svåsand 2002, 30). Generally, as Beetham (1994, 160) supposes, "establishing democratic electoral arrangements is one thing, sustaining them over time without reversal is quite another. Not all who make the transition will be able to sustain it." While views of what constitutes democratic consolidation may vary, there is a broad understanding of features that characterize entrenched democracies. To Mainwaring et al. (1992, 3) the most obvious characteristic of consolidation is when "all major political actors take for granted the fact that democratic procedures dictate government renewal." Adrian Leftwich (1997, 524) meanwhile notes that

"the politics of liberal democracy may be said to be consolidated where people, political parties and groups pursue their interests within an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote."

In addition to this broad understanding of democratic consolidation, certain specific defining features have also been identified and these range from the "two-election test" to the measure of simple longevity. The former emphasises the significance of the transfer of power when a government that was inaugurated at the end of the transition is defeated at a subsequent election and accepts the result without seeking to retain or retake power by unconstitutional means (Huntington, 1993). Beetham (1994, 160) explains that this acceptance of electoral defeat signals that "powerful players, and their social backers, are prepared to put respect for the rules of the game above the continuation of their power." The longevity measure presupposes that, after a number of years of successful competitive politics, a democratic system could be considered consolidated. This measure, however, is problematic when the transfer of power from one party to another is not a feature of the political system. In South Africa, for example, the African National Congress (ANC) has been in power since 1994 and while it may not be as popular as it was when Nelson Mandela was in office, it is unlikely that the party will lose a presidential election soon. The implication of this record is that the leaders of the ANC have not had an opportunity to prove their democratic credentials through the loss of an election to an opposition party. Thus longevity alone may not necessarily test the durability or sustainability of a democratic system (Beetham 1994).

After three post-transition multi-party elections, Nigeria's democratic system has met the primary two-election test requirement to be considered consolidated. However, the party that won the 1999 polls has yet to lose an election and its powerful players have not faced the challenge of demonstrating their willingness to accept electoral defeat. This is particularly critical given the poor performance of the party in government. Against this backdrop, it can be argued that Nigeria's political system cannot be said to have been consolidated to a practically irreversible level. Although the 2011 general election marked another milestone in the country's progress towards consolidation, it also raised a number of questions about the institutionalisation of democratic structures and the effectiveness of the press to defend democracy.

Election 2011

The 2011 general election and the presidential race in particular were contentious for two key reasons. Some of the controversies that had emerged during and after the 2007 polls were still unresolved as the country prepared to go to the polls for the third time since the 1999 transfer of power from the military to politicians. The ruling People's Democratic Party's (PDP) victory at the previous polls was still controversial four years later because of the level of election malpractices during that earlier exercise.

Local and international election monitors had been unanimous in their criticism of the 2007 election and its outcome. The European Union, for example, reported that the polls had "fallen far short of basic international and regional standards for democratic elections and [...] cannot be considered to have been credible." Max van den Berg, head of the EU's 150-strong monitoring team, described it as "one of the worst elections the EU had observed." Peter Lewis (2011, 63-64), a leading commentator on Nigerian politics, described the 2007 election as a "low point for electoral integrity" and "the most compromised and disorderly [election] since the inception of the Fourth Republic, and possibly since Nigeria became an independent country." Jean Herskovits (2007), a specialist in Nigerian history and politics, spoke of "Nigeria's rigged democracy." The PDP's landslide victory, Omotola (2010, 549) argued was "unimaginable" because the party had not earned the support of a majority of Nigerians and its success was attributed to "unprecedented rigging, ballot stuffing, falsification of results, intimidation of voters, and direct assault on the people." In view of this dire record, the PDP-led government had to conduct a more acceptable election in 2011 if it wanted the outcome of the exercise to be credible and legitimate.

As the third multi-party election after the 1999 transfer of power, the 2011 election was also significant because it had the potential of resulting in "an important departure from the familiar trajectory of politics in the country" (Lewis 2011, 60). Dr Goodluck Jonathan, the incumbent president, and the ruling party's presidential candidate had become president in 2010 following the death of his predecessor, President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua. However, Dr Jonathan's elevation from the vice-presidency had triggered intra-party conflict by challenging a deeply entrenched policy on the distribution of important political positions and offices. The policy of "zoning" had represented the ruling party's strategy for the sharing of political offices along ethno-geopolitical lines. In 2007 the office of the president had been zoned for two terms to the Muslim

north and that of the vice-president to the Christian south. When Jonathan, a southern Christian, succeeded President Yar'Adua in 2010 the party's ethno-geopolitical alignment was jeopardised. To core supporters of the zoning policy, the north still had full claim to the presidency. Consequently, Jonathan was not considered eligible to contest the next election after completing what remained of Yar'Adua's four-year term. Some commentators argued that it was unacceptable to discard the rotational presidency policy of the party in favour of Jonathan. Dan Agbese, a veteran columnist and editor-in-chief of *Newswatch*, Nigeria's foremost news magazine, wrote on 27 July 2010: "I believe the president can see that those who support zoning are merely asking the PDP to respect its own constitutional provision until a court strikes it down as inconsistent with the constitution of the republic. I believe he can see that if a party cannot respect its own constitution, there is not much hope, as the PDP has repeatedly demonstrated, of its ever showing a modicum of respect to the country's constitution. Obedience to the rule of law and the constitution should, I believe, begin at the party level."

Against this backdrop, Jonathan's decision and announcement in September 2010 that he intended to seek his party's nomination to contest the election generated conflict within the PDP and in wider Nigerian society. As Agbese noted (*Newswatch*, 27 July 2010), "a simple matter of what to make of zoning and rotational presidency [...] degenerated into ethnic and geopolitical fist fights with no room for prisoners [...] the issue has degenerated to the absurd level of polarising the country into pro-Jonathan and anti-Jonathan groups." Jonathan's decision also challenged the "ethnic arithmetic of the presidency" – "his decision not step aside for a Muslim northerner, while constitutional, went against the informal power-sharing arrangement that had stabilised elite politics for more than a decade" (Lewis 2011, 66). With several northern Muslim politicians laying claim to their right to contest the nomination on the basis of the zoning policy, Jonathan's candidacy pitched the north against the south. Atiku Abubakar, a former vice-president (1999-2007), was endorsed by the northern political elite as a "consensus" challenger for the PDP presidential nomination. But, despite the backing of the northern establishment, Abubakar lost his challenge and Jonathan won the party's presidential ticket.

The foregoing summary of the political context of the 2011 elections highlights how challenging the coverage was bound to be for the press. In Nigeria democratic party politics has always been divisive because the people's primary allegiances follow ethno-geopolitical lines and politicians are perceived to be representing their own ethnic groups and

competing for access to the spoils of office to be shared with their groups. In the absence of a strong sense of national identity, ethnic rivalry has become a driving force in political competition, a situation that was made more complicated by the emergence of a southerner as the presidential candidate when it was still the turn of the north to lead.

As a primary source of information, especially about issues beyond the direct experience of voters, *The Guardian* had the power to explain and contextualise the significant events and issues of the election campaign. It was the principal means of mediation, a process which entails "standing between the people and the world and reporting to them what they could not see or experience themselves" (Nimmo and Combs 1983, 12). *The Guardian* as a paper of record had the power to inform its readers of what the main issues were during the election campaign and to determine what the public would consider to be significant. But, perhaps more importantly, its coverage could also give an insight into the extent of the nation's democratic consolidation.

As a prestige newspaper, *The Guardian* is a recognised mediating agent in the construction of Nigeria's political reality. Its position on issues is authoritative and influential. As a source of cognitive knowledge, it can inform, explain, simplify and contextualise complex issues in ways that can structure political reality. Its position on significant or even on insignificant issues reflects its symbolic power to influence public opinion. As a prestige newspaper, *The Guardian* was also an authoritative source of information about the government because of its access to official spokespersons. Its reporters were "licensed agents of symbolic power" – a position that Meikle (2008, 70) describes as having a "central role for the media within democratic political system." This defining role is even more critical in democracies because "it is difficult to conceive of any consolidated democracy which does not include a widely valued and efficacious party system and communications media" (Sandbrook 1996, 70).

The Guardian and Democratic Consolidation

The analysis in this chapter is located within a multidimensional framework based on Adrian Leftwich's (1997) conditions for democratic survival and Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan's (1996) definition of democratic consolidation. Leftwich's conditions for consolidation include legitimacy, consensus about the rules of the game, and policy restraint by winning parties. Legitimacy, like democratic consolidation, is a contested concept but, to simplify it, Leftwich operationalises it into three

components: geographical, constitutional and political legitimacy. Geographical legitimacy refers to a general acceptance by all who live within a state of the "territorial definition and the appropriateness of their place within it or, at least, [that] they do not positively oppose it, except by constitutional means" (Leftwich 1997, 525). Constitutional legitimacy refers to the acceptance of the "formal structure of rules whereby political power is competed for, organised and distributed" while political legitimacy "refers to the extent to which the electorate [...] regards the government in power as being entitled, procedurally, to be there" (1997, 526). For Linz and Stepan consolidation has been achieved when democracy has become "the only game in town." Expanding on this definition, they explain that consolidation can be demonstrated behaviourally, attitudinally and constitutionally (Linz and Stepan 1996, 5).

Behaviourally, a democracy is consolidated when "no significant political groups seriously attempt to overthrow the democratic regime or secede from the state" and the threat of democratic breakdown no longer dominates the behaviour of the elected government. Attitudinally, democratic consolidation is achieved when "even in the face of severe political and economic crises, the overwhelming majority of the people believe that any further political change must emerge within the parameters of democratic formulas." This dimension extends the understanding of consolidation beyond the behaviour of political leaders to citizens' engagement with democratic ideals and procedures. Constitutionally, democracy is consolidated "when all the actors in the polity become habituated to the fact that political conflict will be resolved according to established norms." "In short," Linz and Stepan (1996, 5) conclude, "with consolidation, democracy becomes routinised and deeply internalised in social, institutional, and even psychological life, as well as in calculations for achieving success."

Measured against some of these conditions, there are indications that Nigeria has achieved a certain level of consolidation behaviourally in that there were no reports of attempted secession by any significant political group or of a credible threat of a military coup plot during the campaign period. However, *The Guardian* reported that former vice-president Atiku Abubakar had made inflammatory comments that suggested a threat to the stability of the country. On 28 December 2010 the paper observed that the former vice-president's warning that "those who make peaceful change impossible make violent change inevitable" had been widely condemned by the State Security Services.

A week after President Jonathan had won his party's nomination, the paper reported that the government had started "taking steps to douse

tension caused by the bitter campaigns that preceded the Peoples' Democratic Party presidential primary as well as the coming elections" (*The Guardian*, 24 January 2010). While this could have been seen as an indication of the instability of the country, it did not necessarily suggest imminent secession by any group. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that secession has been a constant threat in Nigeria since as far back as 1967 when the eastern part of the country attempted to secede from the republic. Moreover, the political elite from the oil-rich Niger delta and the northern parts of the country often speak openly about secession. In an interview with this author, on 26 August 2012, Casmir Igbokwe, a former editor of the national newspaper *The Sunday Punch*, attributed this to ethnic conflict: "Many people do not believe in the entity called Nigeria. The different ethnic groups that make up this country do not see themselves as belonging to it." Emeka Izeze, editor-in-chief of *The Guardian*, has also confirmed that there were muted secession talks among some ethnic groups during the election campaign. It seems the paper did not report such threats because it was not in the interest of the country to validate them.

Attitudinally, democracy is consolidated when the majority of the people are not deterred from the pursuit of democracy even in the face of severe or economic pressure. Consolidation requires full acceptance of the rules of the democratic process. *The Guardian*'s account of the election demonstrated and reinforced voters' commitment to the electoral process. A large voter turnout was indicative of support for democracy. Despite a spate of bombings in different parts of the country during the election period and a change in the polling timetable, the paper reported on 10 April 2011 that these problems did not "dampen the enthusiasm of Nigerians to perform their civic responsibility [...] They came massively out to vote for change, which is evident in the results." The political elite also demonstrated their commitment to democracy when the leaders of some opposition parties decided to support the candidacy of President Jonathan. On 14 April 2011 *The Guardian* reported that "it was a last minute mobilisation for President Goodluck Jonathan's victory in the election. It was a harvest of endorsement of Jonathan and defection of members of the opposition to PDP in a move to ensure victory for the president at the polls." (It should be pointed out that this support for the president was not as altruistic as it sounds. The defectors were aware that given the nature of Nigerian politics and the power of incumbency, President Jonathan was most likely to win the election and that it was therefore in their interests to identify with the likely winner. The tradition of distributing rewards described by Richard Joseph as "prebendal

politics" is endemic in the Nigerian political system and, with the office of the president being the most powerful in the country, support for Jonathan was informed by a resultant client-patron relationship.)

President Jonathan predictably won the election, beating his closest rival, General Muhammadu Buhari, into second place. On 18 April 2011 *The Guardian* announced the result with the enthusiastic headline "Hail to the Chief! Jonathan." The paper reported that the president had won more than 25 per cent of votes in more than 24 states, as required by the constitution to be declared winner. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) announced the official result on 18 April. The following day Professor Attahiru Jega, chairperson of the INEC, told *The Guardian* that President Jonathan had in fact achieved at least 25 per cent of the vote in 31 states out of 36; Buhari had won in 16 states. Although the president won decisively, receiving more than 99 per cent of the votes in his home state, it could be argued that the large turnout in the south was driven by ethno-geopolitical interest, rather than any deep-seated commitment to democracy. But the outcome of the election was accepted as reflecting the will of the people. Lewis (2011, 70-71), an observer from the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute, has noted that "among the most positive elements of the elections were the remarkable strong citizen engagement and oversight by civil society groups. Energetic civil-education campaigns clearly paid off, as voters seemed well-informed about polling locations and procedures and eager to keep watch over the process." These campaigns were indications of the nation's commitment to democracy. However, this achievement was marred by outbreaks of violence in many parts of the north where supporters of the candidates who had lost the election did not accept Dr Jonathan's victory. Violent conflicts had erupted in the northern parts of the country and cast a shadow over what many observers acknowledged as an acceptable electoral exercise. The post-election violence could be an indication that democracy has not become perfectly routinised to a generally high level of acceptance.

The constitutional dimension of democratic consolidation holds that a democracy is entrenched "when all the actors in the polity become habituated to the fact that political conflict will be resolved according to established norms" (Linz and Stepan 1996, 5). According to this measure, Nigeria has made some progress towards democratic consolidation because politicians routinely use democratic institutions to resolve political conflict. All presidential election results in the country since 1979 have been challenged in court. The 2011 result was not an exception. *The Guardian* reported that "as it was in previous presidential elections, the

winner of the April 16, 2011 polls, would finally be determined by the Supreme Court." A few days after the INEC declared President Jonathan winner of the election, General Buhari, the presidential candidate for the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), who had come second in the polls, announced that he would go to court to seek a judicial review of the conduct of the election. Buhari and his party "accused the PDP of colluding with security agents to cook figures to fraudulently win the election" (*The Guardian*, 22 April 2011). Choosing to contest the outcome of the election through constitutional means was a demonstration of the progress that the country had made towards the consolidation of democratic values and procedures, and Buhari's recognition of democratic procedures as the only legitimate way of resolving electoral disputes was reinforced by the newspaper's normalizing acceptance of this process. As Omotola (2010, 550-551) argues, "the resort to the courts to seek electoral justice signals the gradual acceptance of the rule of law as the most viable option for those seeking redress [...] This shows that the political class is gaining increasing confidence in the judiciary as an important democratic institution."

Such sympathies with this recourse to the courts were not, however, shared by aggrieved voters who chose illegitimate means to challenge the outcome of the election and embarked on violent protests in many parts of the north. Although Buhari and other northern Muslim elites distanced themselves from the violence, *The Guardian* reported that "thugs believed to be championing the cause of the Congress for Progressive Change, CPC, presidential candidate, Maj-General Muhammadu Buhari, who lost the election to the Peoples Democratic Party's candidate, President Goodluck Jonathan" were involved in the rampage (23 April 2011).

The opposition to the candidacy of President Jonathan by the northern political elite and the outbreak of violence in some parts of the north when he was declared winner of the election indicate that the institutionalisation of democratic structures and procedures has not yet been entirely achieved. Although the outcome of the election was decisive for the PDP, its victory sharpened ethno-religious tensions that threatened the stability of the country. The post-election violence in Muslim-majority states in the north was an indication that some Nigerians were unwilling to accept political change achieved through the ballot box. Thus, the attitudinal and constitutional dimensions of democratic consolidation have not been fully realized in Nigeria.

Beyond Elections

After three multi-party elections, Nigeria's political history has changed and significant elements of democratic consolidation are apparent in the political system. These include a vibrant press, an independent judiciary and a budding civil society. There is widespread acceptance of elections as the means by which to choose political leaders. But as in many new democracies, the process of democratization has created and exacerbated other problems in the country. While the overthrow of the civilian government by the military is not a major threat, because of the record of the military in office, the possibility of the erosion of democratic values – "the intermittent or gradual weakening of democracy by those elected to lead it' (Huntington 1996, 8) – cannot be ruled out. Based on Leftwich's geographical legitimacy perspective, consolidation is still problematic because many Nigerians share the view that *Nigeria* is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not (cited in Onwubu 1975, 399). A lack of consensus among the political elite on national issues, especially on the distribution of spoils of office, has bred a sense of exclusion. Emeka Izeze, editor-in-chief of *The Guardian*, observed in 2012 that "many Nigerians feel aggrieved and excluded and want to leave." But the traumatic memories of the thirty months of civil war that followed the attempt by the eastern region to secede generate a certain degree of restraint.

The foremost challenge to democratic consolidation in Nigeria is probably the political structure, which has led to a degree of apathy because political parties exercise power over the selection of election candidates to the point of imposing their choices on voters. Consequently, voters do not have a key connection with the democratic process. Dan Agbese, a veteran journalist and public affairs commentator, argued in a personal interview of August 2012 that in a strict sense Nigeria does not have a democratic system: "in a democracy the people must have the right to choose election candidates. Here, the people do not have that right. That right is denied them by leaders of political parties." Casmir Igbokwe, former editor of the *Sunday Punch*, one of Nigeria's most popular national newspapers, shares Agbese's views. Igbokwe has argued that Nigeria has yet to experience a truly democratic government and can therefore not be regarded as a consolidated democracy. He asserted in a personal interview of August 2012 that the country's level of corruption had impeded democratic development because politicians had "made wealth accumulation a centre piece of politics." Emeka Izeze, the editor-in-chief of *The Guardian*, has taken a slightly different position. He has argued (also in a

personal interview of August 2012) that Nigeria has a democratic structure but lacks democrats: "the system is still fragile but we are making some progress." He has blamed politicians for their failure to understand democracy and its tenets. But Agbese has been more optimistic, arguing that since the country is experiencing its longest spell of civil rule, some elements of consolidation are bound to emerge: "we have had four elections since 1999 and none gave the military cause to return. That is significant."

Another critical threat to democratic consolidation is the ongoing political violence in the northern part of the country. Although the activities of the Islamist sect *Boko Haram* appear to be informed by religious values, the underlying tension could be linked to a sense of marginalisation and alienation that seems to pervade some parts of the country. The fissures of the 2011 election underscore the fact that "democratisation has done little to advance the rule of law, governmental accountability, effective institutions, or broad public welfare" (Lewis 2011, 62). The ethno-geopolitical divide that was emphasized by the response to President Jonathan's decision to contest the 2011 election has continued to widen.

But there is room for some quiet optimism about the future of democracy in Nigeria. Six Afrobarometer surveys conducted between 2000 and 2008 indicated consistent popular support for a democratic political system, although the level of satisfaction with democracy has been on the decline. While 15 per cent of respondents said Nigeria was not a democracy, 68 per cent said it was a democracy with major/minor problems. Asked how satisfied they were with the way democracy worked in Nigeria, 84 per cent of respondents in 2000 said they were fairly/very satisfied – while only 26 per cent were so in 2008. But when asked about the future of democracy in Nigeria, in 2007 31 per cent (down from 42 per cent in 2005) said it was not likely to remain a democratic country. Overall, the surveys showed that support for a multi-party political system is slowly climbing and a rejection of military rule has been consistently high. In 2008 72 per cent of respondents said democracy was preferable to military rule and 74 per cent disapproved of military rule. Against that backdrop, the prospect for a return to military autocracy seems limited. As Raphael Njoku (2001, 94-95) argues, there is at least "an equal probability for democratic consolidation as for a reversion to dictatorship" and the continued survival of the democratic structures that were installed on 29 May 1999 point to a certain level of consolidation. Nigeria's fourth cycle of civilian government has already changed the political trajectory of the country. As Peter Lewis (2011, 62) observed, "the most democratic

dispensation in Nigeria has shown considerable resilience as well as serious shortcomings." This is the country's longest spell of civilian administration – an indication that democracy is becoming entrenched.

Future Prospects

The Guardian's coverage of the election reinforced the understanding that the news media play a pivotal role in the preservation of social order by serving as a mirror that reflects (and thereby reinforces) the state of political life. The newspaper demonstrated its commitment to supporting democracy through its inclination to provide a platform for the ruling party and its representatives, thus presenting a unified picture of the country during the election campaign. This might however be considered as much a weakness as a democratic strength. Overall the contribution of the paper to democratic consolidation is decidedly mixed because of its tendency to index power. While it served as a megaphone for the powerful, it rarely attempted to deepen political communication by widening the public space to accommodate the non-elite. There was no evidence of democratic participation by the less powerful and those outside the political class, nor any attempt to include marginalised voices in its coverage of the election. The newspaper could have done more to strengthen democracy by disseminating political information and articulating opinions that were not generated by the ruling party. In other words, the paper could have facilitated the development of a more informed electorate through its coverage of the election campaign.

Despite these shortcomings, there is room for optimism because *The Guardian,* like other Nigerian newspapers, is no longer under the fetters of autocratic regimes. It is now in a position to play a more constructive role in the country's democratic life by providing information that can empower citizens to engage with political issues. The socio-political situation of the country offers *The Guardian* and other newspapers opportunities to play pivotal roles assigned to the media by liberal democratic theories and to be a potent force in the entrenchment of democracy in the country. Although Nigeria's democratic prospects are uncertain and its fissures along ethno-geopolitical divides continue to threaten national stability, Nigerians' commitment to and preference for democracy, and the conditions of press freedom necessary to support it, point to the likelihood of gradual democratic gains.

Works Cited

Abdulai, A. and Crawford, G. 2010. "Consolidating democracy in Ghana: progress and prospects?" *Democratization* 17 1: 26-67.

Agbese, D. 2010. "His visible presence." *Newswatch* 52 5.

Beetham, D. 1994. "Conditions for democratic consolidation." *Review of African Political Economy* 21 60: 157-172.

Bratton, M. 1998. "Second elections in Africa." *Journal of Democracy,* 9 3: 51-66.

Curran, J. 1991. "Mass media and democracy, a reappraisal." *Mass Media and Society,* ed. J. Curran and M. Gurevitch. London: Edward Arnold

Cushion, S. 2012. *The Democratic Value of News*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Diamond, L. 1988. "Nigeria: pluralism, statism and the struggle for democracy." *Democracy in Developing Countries*, ed. by L. Diamond, J. Linz and S. Lipset. Boulder: Lynne Reinner Publishers.

Dode, O. 2010. "Political parties and the prospects of democratic consolidation in Nigeria: 1999-2006." *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 4 5: 188-194.

Eleazu, U. 1977. *Federalism and Nation-Building: The Nigerian Experience 1954-1964*. Devon: Arthur Stockwell Ltd.

Ette, M. 2000. "Agent of change or stability? The Nigerian press undermines democracy." *Press/Politics* 5 3: 67-86.

Frimpong-Mansoh, Y. 2012. "Democratic consolidation in Ghana: the role of the news media." Africa Media and Democracy Conference, Accra, 15-18 August 2012.

Harrison, J. 2006. *News*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Herskovits, J. 2007 . "Nigeria's rigged democracy." *Foreign Affairs* 86 4: 115-130.

Huntington, S. 1996. "Democracy for the Long Haul." *Journal of Democracy* 7 2: 3-13.

Ihonvbere, J. 1994. *Nigeria: The politics of Adjustment and Democracy*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Leftwich, A. 1997. "From democratization to democratic consolidation."' *Democratization*, ed. D. Potter, D. Goldblatt, M. Kiloh and P. Lewis, 517-536. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Lewis, P. 2011. "Nigeria votes." *Journal of Democracy* 22 4: 60-74.

Linz, J. and Stepan, A. 1996. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Mainwaring, S., O'Donnell, G., and Valenzuela, S. 1992. *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: New South American Democracies in*

Comparative Perspective. South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press.
Masmoudi, M. 1992. "Media and the state in periods of crisis." *Media, Crisis and Democracy: Mass Communication and the Disruption of Social Order,* ed. M. Raboy and B. Degenais, 34-43. London: Sage.
McQuail, D. 1977. 'The influence and effects of mass media." *Mass Communication and Society*, ed. J. Curran, M. Gurevitch and J. Woollacott. London: Edward Arnold.
—. 2000. *Mass Communication Theory*. London: Sage.
McNair, B. 2011. *An Introduction to Political Communication.* London: Routledge.
Meikle, G. 2008. *Interpreting News*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
Negrine, R. 1994. *Politics and the Mass Media.* London: Routledge.
Nimmo, D., and Combs, J. 1983. *Political Communication.* New York: Longman.
Njoku, R. 2001. "Deconstructing Abacha: demilitarization and democratic consolidation in Nigeria after the Abacha era." *Government and Opposition* 36 1: 71-96.
Norris, P. 2000. *The Virtuous Circle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Nwabueze, B. 1993. *Democracy*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
Olukoyun, A. 2004. "Media accountability and democracy in Nigeria, 1999-2003." *African Studies Review* 47 3: 69-90.
Omotola, J. 2010. "Elections and democratic transitions in Nigeria under the fourth Republic." *African Affairs* 109 437: 535-553.
Onwubu, C. 1975. "Ethnic identity, political integration, and national development: the Igbo diaspora in Nigeria." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 13 3: 399-413.
Osaghae, E. 1998. *Crippled Giant*. London: Hurst & Company.
Randall, V., and Svåsand, L. (2002). "Political parties and democratic consolidation in Africa." *Democratization* 9 3: 30-52.
Sandbrook, R. 1996. 'Transitions without consolidation: democratization in six African cases." *Third World Quarterly* 17 1: 69-87.
Schedler, A. 1998. "What is democratic consolidation?" *Journal of Democracy* 9: 91–107.
Tettey, W. 2001. "The media and democratization in Africa: contributions, constraints and concerns of the private press." *Media, Culture & Society* 23: 5-31.
Washbourne, N. 2010. *Mediating Politics*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Wright, T. 1998. "Inside the whale: the media from parliament." *Politics and the Media,* ed. J. Seaton. Oxford: Blackwell.