

From Dictatorship to Black Man's Democracy: How has Freedom of the Press Improved in Nigeria and Cameroon?

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Abstract

The third democratisation wave that swept across Black African countries in the 1990s has paradoxically engendered "strange" forms of political system which have variously been described by political ideologues as "democratic dictatorship", "African democracy" or "Black's man democracy"; this, in clear contrast with western conceptions of liberal democracy. In the specific cases of Nigeria and Cameroon, this "African democracy" has consisted in upholding few democratic precepts (notably the theoretical institution of political pluralism and the promulgation of liberty bills), while retaining various forms of autocratic cultures. Some of these autocratic cultures have included the passing of anachronistic and restrictive laws, the covert intimidation/elimination of opposition parties and the systematic gagging of the anti-government press among others. Using a critical exploitation of secondary data and a comparative methodology, this paper explores the extent to which the pro-democratic reforms of the 1990s and 2000s in Nigeria and Cameroon have been conducive to freedom of the press and freedom of expression. The paper equally examines the extent to which these political reforms have reduced aspects of the authoritarian media theory in the two countries.

Keywords: *Autocracy, Authoritarian Media Theory, Democracy, Political Pluralism, Press Freedom, Democratic Dictatorship*

Introduction

The years 1990s witnessed the emergence of multiple forms of pro-democratic movements in the African continent. The fall of the Soviet Union - symbolizing the triumph of capitalism and liberalism over communism in the world - enabled the birth of anti-authoritarianism policies in almost all Black African states. In effect,

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the liberalist current spread like wildfire in Black Africa, inspiring both exogenous and indigenous sources of political pressure aimed at compelling most African dictators within this period to envisage a revision of their philosophies and positions *vis-a-vis* the respect of human rights and civil liberties. From Zaire (present days' Democratic Republic of Congo) through Mozambique to Zimbabwe, most of these dictators came to understand that they could no longer wield power simply by force of arms; but that, they imperatively needed the voice and blessings of the populace to claim the legitimacy of their power. In other words, the African political elite came to the understanding that democracy was to be given greater credence. This understanding was the product of various forms of activism. A consequential form of activism was conducted by the West, which used economic relief programmes such as the Structural Adjustment Plan (SAP) or financial aid programmes to pressure African states and compel them to adhere to democratic principles (notably multiparty politics, freedom of association and freedom of expression). Another source of pressure came from a plurality of internal forces (notably political activists, opinion leaders and the civil society organizations), which engineered serious agitations in favour of political liberalism, media deregulation and many other sweeping socio-political reforms.

These internal and external political agitations yielded considerable dividends. Although technically incomplete, the political activism/agitation, at least, engendered the adoption of bills, constitutions and other policies which, on paper, granted a wide range of freedoms including liberties of expression, liberties of thought and a degree of freedom of the press. It is popularly

assumed that grace to these 1990 political agitations, almost all contemporary African states have, in the course of years, at least enacted constitutions that provide for freedom of the press and freedom of expression (Howard & Hussain 2013; Sahoo 2014; Myers 2014; Endong 2017). Many African countries have equally ratified international instruments (treaties and declarations) which seek to protect civil liberties and freedom of the press.

However, several decades after these domestic bills, policies and international declarations were either adopted or ratified, most Black African states continue sadly to be rated (very) low by international media and political observatories such as Freedom House, Transparency International, Journalist in Danger, The European Union, The UNO and *Reporteurs Sans Frontieres* (Reporters Without Borders) among others (Freedom House 2017a,b; Freedom House 2016; European Union Observation Mission 2015; United States Department of State 2016).

According to these observatories, the press in most African nations is either *not free at all* or at best, *partly free*. Even in countries such as Ghana and Kenya which have sometimes demonstrated impressive efforts towards democratization, the press freedom index is not strikingly different (The Guardian 2016). Therefore, from many indexes, there is still much to be done for “true” democracy and effective freedom of the press to blossom or prevail in most African nations. This situation inevitably calls for a number of interesting interrogations some of which include the following: how different have periods of dictatorship been, compared to post-democratic periods in Black African countries? How objective or credible have international observatories been in their various

assessment of press freedom in African countries? And is “perfect” press freedom an attainable ideal in Africa? Using critical observations and secondary sources, this discourse sets out to provide some answers to these research questions with close reference to the political history of modern Nigeria and Cameroon.

Theoretical Framework

This study is principally anchored in the authoritarian media theory. In principle, this theory is applied in countries in which there is a direct governmental control of mass media or in countries where government is in the hands of a tyrant or a small ruling class which exercises repressive power over the people, and lays down the laws determining what the media can communicate. Under this theory, the press is viewed as an instrument of propaganda and an agent of public enlightenment on government programmes and ideas. Additionally, the media are believed to exist exclusively on the authority of government and therefore are not allowed to print or broadcast anything which could undermine the established authority; that is government or its allies.

Criticisms against government ideology, as well as any offence against existing political values are strictly avoided as they may be severely reprimanded. In view of this situation, the press is mostly expected to be the servant and mouthpiece of government. Government censors the press to the letter and even foreign media are subjected or subordinated to the established authority in that, all imported media products are controlled by the state. Authoritarians used various mechanisms to enforce the cooperation of the press including licensing, censorship of material before publication, the granting of exclusive printing rights to pro-government players

within the press, and the swift, and harsh punishment of government critics.

It should be noted that the application of the authoritarian model of media control used to be justified in the past with the controversial idea of divine rule of kings (Soola, 2009). In other words, most authoritarians or partisans of this political system justified their media philosophy with the need to protect or preserve a divinely ordained social order. However, contemporary adepts of this theory (many of whom are of the Black African ruling class) seem to endorse and apply the theory for purely dictatorial, materialistic and selfish purposes (Okei-Odumakin, 2013, Effiom 2005). Given the fact that most Black African countries (including Nigeria and Cameroon) answer democratic and that the political system most often determines the exact relationship between the media and the government in a country, one may, at first sight, think that the theory (the authoritarian theory) chosen for this discourse is just irrelevant to articulate analyses.

However, it will be expedient to note that, although the dominant political rhetoric in the two countries under study non-hesitantly profiles Cameroon and Nigeria as democratic nations, many aspects of autocracy/authoritarianism remain visible and constantly decried by local and exogenous civil society organisations. Besides, it must be underscored that research has demonstrated that countries hardly – nay never – apply political theories and models of media control in a clear-cut manner (Dominick 1996, 2011; Njankov et al 2003; Endong 2017, 2018). It has, in effects, become common in countries across the world to combine both aspects of libertarianism and authoritarianism in their

political and media regulatory systems. Recent empirical investigations by Freedom House (2018 a,b) and Fuchs (2017) have for instance demonstrated that authoritarianism is remarkably on the rise, even in western countries such as Britain and the USA which have traditionally been considered as symbols of democracy.

Freedom House (2018) pointedly notes for instance that:

Until very recently, the spread of the [authoritarian] methods and strategies described in this report has largely been greeted with complacency and indifference in the democratic world. Even as it became clear that the rejection of liberal values by Russia, China, and other authoritarian states was a permanent fixture of global politics, democracies convinced themselves that although modern authoritarianism posed a challenge to the spread of freedom beyond its current reach, their own freedoms were in no jeopardy. In the aftermath of the stunning events of 2016, it is apparent that the post-Cold War democratic order is in fact facing an unprecedented threat. Britain's vote to leave the European Union (EU), the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, and the emergence of populist demagogues across Europe have all raised questions about the future of democracy in its traditional bastions. (p.94)

In view of this truism, it may be argued that, inasmuch as few indexes of democracy and libertarianism may be observed in the two countries under study (Nigerian and Cameroon), authoritarianism remains entrenched in their political system albeit in an insidious manner. Going by this premise, the use of the authoritarian theory to drive analyses in this discourse is more than

valid.

The Press during Periods of (Overt) Dictatorship in Nigeria and Cameroon

Compared to its Cameroonian counterpart, the Nigerian press has had quasi-similar experiences with dictatorship. Perhaps, the only difference lies in the fact that the artisans and adepts of dictatorship in Nigeria were principally constituted of successive military juntas while in Cameroon, dictatorship was driven by a succession of civilian governments (Ahidjo's administration and the early portion of Biya's government). Another small difference may equally lie in the fact that periods of overt dictatorship appear to be longer in Nigeria than in Cameroon. Indeed, the era considered as the reign of dictatorship in Nigeria could be said to cover the period going from 1966 to 1979 and from 1983 to 1998, engulfing the country's numerous military rules. Dictatorship in Cameroon could be said to have officially commenced in 1972 (during Ahidjo's regime) and to have, on records, ended in the 1990s with the adoption of a number of pro-democratic reforms. However, this has only been on paper as up till date, there still various insidious forms of authoritarianism prevailing in both countries. This will be explored in greater details in subsequent sections of this essay.

During periods of dictatorship, the press in both Nigerian and Cameroon was subjected to the same kinds of restrictive bills as well as the same typologies or systems of intimidation, repression, censorship and gagging. In effect, like the military juntas in Nigeria, Cameroonian authoritarian rulers multiplied series of obnoxious laws and adopted various unofficial censorship mechanisms to attempt to literally stultify and cow the (anti-government) press. In

Nigeria particularly, the military juntas masterminded the promulgation of such bills as The Seditious Publication Laws, the Criminal Defamation Laws, Newspaper (Amendment) Act, Official Secret Act, Newspaper Prohibition From Circulation Act, Public Officers Protection From False Accusation Act, State Security and Detention of Person Decree 2 and the Newspaper Registration Act, which were all conceived to keep the press under perpetual subjugation. Similar restrictive laws were promulgated by the Ahidjo and Biya's governments. These include the 1966 press law (amended five times: in 1968, 1975, 1976, 1980 and 1981) which were visibly aimed at intimidating and getting rid of the (anti-government) press. The 1966 law and its various amendments were governmental artifices visibly aimed at gagging the press while protecting specific entities at the centre-stage of power. Under this law, Cameroonian newspapers were subjected to censorship and subtly tailored to suit the whims and caprices of those parading the marble corridors of power.

The 1966 press law and its subsequent amendments were basically anchored in the ideology of preventive press. This was so as they all facilitated the tradition of a scrutinized ownership of the press besides instituting forms of pre-publication control by the people in government. The law – or its skewed interpretation – ended up favouring a host of draconian actions against journalists who dared display an adversarial attitude towards the government *du jour*. The law systematically entrenched the tradition of arresting, harassing, torturing and incarcerating journalists without trial. Journalists were subjected to punitive actions simply for discharging their watchdog responsibilities. Additionally, the

1966 restrictive laws instituted a regime that made journalism one of the most dangerous (or risky) professions in Cameroon. Journalists who were deemed to be too critical of government often died in mysterious and questionable circumstances while similar anti-government media outlets were prohibited and sometimes vandalised.

The press in both Nigeria and Cameroon was regarded by government as “war enemies”; that is entities to ruthlessly neutralise. No doubt most governments in the two countries often used quasi-martial tactics to “bring the press back to order”. In Nigeria particularly, the military junta often threatened journalists and media organizations openly. On countless occasions, Nigerian dictators publicly announced measures to brutalize the press, this, in guise of calling it to order or disciplining some of its “apostles” or members. A case in point is General Yakubu Gowon’s threat addressed to the press in 1974. By this threat, he vowed to ruthlessly deal with the press following journalists’ continual adversarial postures against various members of his government. Gowon’s threat was the fruit of a fury born out of the fact that, many Nigerian press men chose to major in exposing the excesses of the President’s governors. The fury was equally rooted in the fact that journalists’ reportage unfailingly underscored the President’s visible inability to deal with his governors’ excesses (Endong 2017).

Still during Gowon’s reign, the forces of order were given ample latitude to molest the press for the least incidence of perceived indiscipline. An egregious illustration is Inspector-General of Police Kam Salem’s threat against the Nigerian press on August 27, 1974. This threat was materialized by a strongly worded

address to the press which stated that: “the Federal Military Government might be compelled to take drastic and unpleasant measures to curb the excesses of the press and some cranks who profess to be journalist [...] Government would no longer tolerate press indiscipline and calculated attempts to undermine the government’s authority” (cited in Ekpu, 1999, p.59).

Based on the evidences presented above and many other palpable factors, it could be argued that each military leader who ruled Nigeria had his personalized formula to intimidate and severely chastise the press. Each of them tended to view acute brutality against the anti-government journalists as the only working solution to press’ unwelcomed or unsolicited “watchdogging”. Thus, each of the Nigerian dictators often marshalled all its resources to ultimately kill the least adversarial act by the press or by the opposition. With close respect to three of such former military dictators, Obi (1999) succinctly notes that:

We [Nigerians] are witness to the brutality, and myopic deception of the discredited Abacha Junta. Under that devilish regime, the clamp-down on journalists and opinion-moulders was unprecedented in the history of our great nation. Nigeria under Abacha’s regime was indeed a theatre of the absurd. Buhari and Babaginda chastised the press with whip, but Abacha whacked us with scorpion. He schemed, kidnapped, framed, tortured and imprisoned journalists. (p.226)

A similar reading of the political situation could be made over Cameroon as Ahidjo’s regime is today known to have been worse than that of his successor Paul Biya, in terms of brutality against the press and political opponents (Article XIX 1999; Tumi 2006. Endong

2017). During Ahidjo's regime, the 1966 press law was passed and severally amended purposively to ruthlessly deal with any adversarial spirit in the press. This law enabled the government to terribly brutalise the press at will and protect all those at the centre-stage of power. The press law instituted an aggressive form of censorship which was aimed at tailoring all papers to suit the whims and caprices of the governing elite. Under this law, journalists were arbitrarily incarcerated, harassed, physically attacked and even assassinated under mysterious circumstances (Nyamnjoh 2005; Tumi 2006; Endong 2017).

Under ("avowed") authoritarian regimes in Nigeria and Cameroon, the press suffered various blows from the government. This uneasy situation was accentuated in instances of adversarial journalism. In effect, each time the press in the two countries adopted an adversarial posture, it was viewed as an anathema by the government *du jour* and was accordingly, brutalized with the highest possible rigor. As noted by Idowu (1999), almost on regular basis, the press and the military government in Nigeria have been on collision course, "with the military always aiming at usurping the press' most cherished freedom" (p.94). In Cameroon, the situation has, in no way, been different. As suggested by Tumi (2006), Ahidjo had through a wide range of draconian and marshal tactics entrenched a culture of manhandling and incarcerating political journalists who hazardously dared to criticize government. Even perpetrators of rumours that were politically offensive to the Ahidjo administration were severely punished and brutally discouraged using the military and police apparatuses.

The Press during the Post-Democratic Period in Nigeria and Cameroon

In the context of this paper, the democratic period in Nigeria and Cameroon is arguably situated from the 1990s (with the introduction or re-introduction of pro-democratic dispensations in both countries) till present. In 1990, Cameroon adopted the “Liberty laws” which introduced multi-party elections, political liberalism, freedom of expression and freedom of association among others.

The “liberty laws” equally liberalised the audio-visual sector, albeit only theoretically. Nigeria, on the other hand, effected an acclaimed return to democracy in 1999 with the election of Olesegun Obasanjo to the presidency after many years of military rule. The country equally witnessed the adoption of a new Constitution (the 1999 Constitution) which, among other provisions, re-iterated the country’s adherence to freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Article 22 of this Constitution states that the press, radio, television and other forms of mass communication shall at all times be free. Additionally, Article 38 of the same Constitution states that “every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief”. Furthermore, Article 39 of the Constitution stipulates that “every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including to hold opinions and receive and impart ideas and information without interference”.

It goes without saying that the democratic dispensation in Nigeria and Cameroon enabled the institution of a number of freedoms namely freedom of expression and freedom of the press. The adoption of the “liberty laws” in Cameroon has thus been

considered by most critics as a laudable initiative and a preliminary step to a number of welcomed bills – notably Prime Ministerial Decree No. 2000/158 which has enabled the birth and development of private audio-visual media outlets in the country. Today, a plurality of private radio and television stations operate in the country, even though only few (5) of such audio-visual broadcasters are duly licensed (BBC World Service 2010; Open Society Foundation 2012; Endong 2017). Private media broadcast has theoretically been enabled in the country and this has irrefutably constituted a pro-democratic development in the country. A similar situation is observable in Nigeria with the adoption in 1992 of Decree 38 which led to the deregulation of the audio-visual media in Nigeria and the emergence of many (hundreds of) radio and television outlets. The liberalisation or privatisation of audio visual media in the two countries facilitated ownership and access to the media as it led to the birth, growth and relative vibrancy of many private and opposition-controlled radio and television outlets in the two countries.

Besides enabling the emergence of many private media voices in the two countries, the advent of procedural democracy in the countries has permitted a relative reduction of state official and unofficial censorship. For instance, many critics and witnesses (of the periods of dictatorship) have enthused that, in both Nigerian and Cameroonian, media persons have since the beginning of the 2000s been enjoying an amount of freedom of expression which could never – or at least hardly – be possible during the dark days of dictatorship.

In today's Nigeria for instance, dailies such as *The Guardians*,

This Day, *The Sun* and *Punch* and weekly newsmagazines such as *Newswatch* and *Tell* (just to name a few) non-hesitantly criticise government and other iconic Nigerian leaders such as Obasanjo, Umaru Mussa Yar'Adua, Goodluck Jonathan, Mohamadu Buhari and are left relatively untouched by restrictions. Meanwhile, such acts of criticism could only be viewed by the military junta as unpardonable aberrations and strong excuses to embark on punitive/brutal actions against the (entire) press. In the same line of argument, critics agree that the kind of "audacity" and even libertarianism displayed by some anti-government critics in today's Cameroonian private press could hardly have been tolerated by the Ahijo government. Such audacity and libertarianism would simply have been considered blunders and highly reprehensible acts. The head of the Catholic Communications in Cameroon and political activist Cardinal Christian Tumi shares corollaries as he posits that:

The most important change has been liberty of expression. Formerly, newspapers were censored before they were printed, but today many newspapers have liberty - not to insult, but liberty to say what they think, and say it in a gentle way. When I look at what newspapers today say about the president if it was during the period of Ahmadou Ahidjo, many journalists would be in prison (Cited in BBC World Service Trust, 2010, p.26)

Post democratic governments in Nigeria and Cameroon have been manifesting a degree of political tolerance and an apparent will to abrogate some of the punitive, restrictive and obnoxious bills promulgated by their authoritarian predecessors. The passing of the liberty laws of 1990 in Cameroon has - at least on paper - put an

end to the anti-democratic press law of 1966 and its subsequent amendments. No doubt the 1990 law together with Decree 2000/158 (on conditions and procedures for the establishment of private broadcasters) have been hailed in some quarters as landmarks. The two bills have given some political ideologue and media pundits a degree of optimism. They have, to some extent, represented evidences of the partial success of political activists' efforts towards democratization in Cameroon.

A similar situation has been observed in Nigeria with the elimination (by post democratic governments) of many restrictive media laws enacted by the military junta. Some of the bills that instituted the proscription of media contents have been scrapped off. The apparent reduction of government's brutality on the critical or anti-government press in the two countries makes some indigenous and exogenous observers to have a fairly positive or mitigated image and assessment of the media-government relation in the two countries. Many critics are of the persuasion that the demise of frontal dictatorship in the two countries paved the way for a new deal for the press. Optimistic schools of thought even describe the media-government relation in the post-dictatorship period as one not based on hostility but understanding (Tumi 2006; BBC World Service Trust 2010). Many members of such optimistic schools of thought thus believe that, issues such as the arbitrary arrest of journalists, the proscription of media as a regulatory instrument, the assassinations and incarcerations of journalists (just to name a few) have either become old stories; or have at least, remarkably reduced to a significant magnitude (Idowu 1999, Obi 1999). However, scratching beneath the earth reveals that freedom

of the press remains in perpetual threat in both countries.

Though incidences of government's brutality against the press arguably seem to have remarkably reduced (or become less evident), they remain prevalent and perceptible to the critical observers. It can even be argued that government's brutality against the press has, over the years, morphed into a more complex and subtle phenomenon. In other words, the pro-democratic movements that occurred after the periods of dictatorship in the two countries are somehow, still incomplete. Both Nigeria and Cameroon still need to make serious steps to have the kind of democratic culture observed in the west (the ideal model in terms of political system). Journalists in post-democratic Nigeria and Cameroon continue to suffer the same abuses perpetrated by government in the times of dictatorship. Servant (2003) alludes to this situation in his interesting assessment of President Obasanjo's government. He posits that:

One thing is sure in today's Nigeria: since President Obasanjo was voted into office in May 1999, it has become easier for all [Nigerian citizens] to speak freely, even about covered-up subjects like the dark days of the military dictatorships under Babaginda and Abacha. Western diplomats insist that President Obasanjo has distributed a sort of blank check on free speech, reflected in his policies of *realpolitik* and good governance.

[...]Democracy promoted by President Obasanjo remains, for many, a dead letter. With their typical black humour, many Nigerian citizens have dubbed it democracy. This reality confirms the belief that the political

and legislative institutions are still hijacked by an oligarchy that clings to a disastrous vision of the economy and maximizes profit generated by the incredible underground mineral wealth of this country. (p.13)”

The same appraisal may be offered in relation to the rule of Obasanjo’s successors namely M. Yar’Adua, Goodluck Jonathan and Mohamadu Buhari (Hassan 2009, Endong 2017, Ifreke 2017, Nonso 2016). Democracy and freedom of expression have, in one way or the other, perpetually remained “under siege” in the country; and the host of liberalising policies which, to optimist observers, had one time augured future positivity have instead turned out to constitute a subterfuge to keep the press in constant and subtle subjugation. This could beautifully be illustrated by the adoption of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act of 2011 which, besides being boycotted by some Nigerian States, has been flagrantly and unrepentantly violated by government officials. This questionable act by government officials has made the bill (FOI Act) a dead letter in many instances within the Nigerian Federation. Besides limiting journalists’ access to information (official sources), the assassination, incarceration and multiform intimidation of press men continue to be an ugly reality in Nigeria. CrossRiver Watch’s founder, A. Jalingo attests to this fact, when he posits that:

We started on a hostile note and people [government officials] thought we had come to look for trouble [...] We have received all manner of threat, even death threats. We have people saying that: “we are going to kill you if we catch you”. As a matter of fact, our laptop is still been detained by the police in Calabar [a Nigerian city] after they invaded the home of our reporter who

was arrested on the orders of the deputy Governor over a report that we did. [...] We thought that the right thing to do if anybody published [or broadcast] anything that scandalizes anybody as was claimed, the best thing was to go to court and not send the police after him in the dead of night to harass him. (CrossRiver Watch, 2013, p.21)

Jalingo's contention is an index pointing to the fact that despite the pro-democratic bills passed by the country, authoritarianism continues paradoxically to be the order of the day. There is therefore a kind of contradiction/confusion or striking paradox here, as authoritarianism seems to co-habit with some pro-democratic bills in Nigeria. As a number of observers even enthused, many indexes in the Nigerian political landscape suggest that dictatorship is rather on the rise in the country; this, in spite of constitutional provisions which preach democracy. As remarked by press freedom advocate Peter Nkanga, "the impunity with which Nigerian security forces have recently attacked the press is reminiscent of Nigeria's darkest days of military rule" (cited in Snoddon 2016).

A similar scenario is observed in Cameroon with the government's tricky stifling of the procedure to obtain broadcast licenses in the country; as well as with government's covert tactics to technically disenable free competition between the private or opposition-controlled media and the state-owned media outlets. In effect, though Cameroon adopted Law No. 90/052 on Freedom of Social Communication in 1990, it did not, by the same act, establish modalities of the allocation and use of licenses for private broadcasters in the country. Those interested in investing in media

broadcast in the country had to wait ten years for government to issue Decree 2000/158 of April 3, 2000, which sets conditions and procedures for establishing private broadcast media outlets in Cameroon.

The Decree provides for the issuance of renewable licenses for radio and televisions, stating that such issuance is to be done by decision of the Minister in charge of Communication, after a reasoned opinion of the National Communication Council (the country's media regulatory organ). Unfortunately, neither the law on Freedom of Social Communication nor Decree 2000/158 provides substantive criteria to guide the Minister's decision on the viability of a license application. This makes conditions favourable for subjective and politically bias decisions made by the Minister in charge of Communication. Because of this factor and several other similar irregularities, many broadcast media in Cameroon are not licensed and are thus made to operate under precariousness and fear of summary or sporadic closures. In effect, up till today, only about five private broadcasters (namely STV1 & 2, TV Max, Canal 2 and Radio Veritas) are licensed; while the rest are illegal though tolerated. At the slightest display of adversarial posture against the government, they are most often threatened and summarily closed according to the degree of adversity against the powers. A case in point is Government's closure of Equinox TV and her sister radio station Swiss FM in 2008 for non-possession of a broadcast licence. In effect, the government capitalized on the fact that these two media outlets were not issued licences to chastise them for censuring President Paul Biya's amendment of the country's Constitution, to facilitate the dissolution of the clause limiting the

number of presidential terms.

The government has thus entrenched the unlawful tradition of granting only provisional authorisation; and of allocating frequencies to radio and television stations which it deems apolitical or politically innocuous to the government. This has caused many private media outlets to operate without legal certainty and to be vulnerable to any authoritarian action by the government. The private audio-visual media is thus, visibly “condemned” to be clandestine and liable to be intimidated, cowed or closed at government’s will. As noted by Varenik and Pavli (2004), this complex system of provisional authorisation is instigated by government to covertly tailor private media broadcast in favour of government and government officials. By such a questionable system, private broadcasters are made to operate under legal precariousness and constant threat that their reportage may accidentally test the nerves of the government and occasion brutal retributive actions against them. This system represents a serious threat to the idiom of freedom of the press in Cameroon.

Another index evidencing the abuse of press freedom in the two countries, is the adoption or amendment of bills which tend to undo or downplay the benefits of initial pro-democracy policies initiated in both Cameroon and Nigeria. In the two countries, there is a strange co-existence of mutually antithetical media bills. While some laws are in favour of press freedom, others intrinsically or extrinsically institute various forms of impediments to press freedom. One notes for instance that, in Nigeria, while the 1999 Constitution and the 2011 FOI Act theoretically guarantee issues like freedom of information, the public’s right to know as well as

the freedom to own and operate media organs, other stringent bills such as the laws on libel technically neutralise the above mentioned constitutional provisions and FOI Act's clauses. Additionally, government has been in firm support of anachronistic bills such as "Cyber Security Law" and "the Social Media Abuse Bill" designed to hound bloggers and other online investigative journalists. Many citizen Nigerian journalists have been hounded under the former bill. Unfortunately for government, the Nigerian senate was forced to withdraw the latter bill (the Social Media Abuse Bill) in May 2016 after it went through public hearing twice.

A similar scenario is perceptible in Cameroon with the apparent conflict existing between some constitutional provisions and the 1990 law on one hand, and governmental edits such as the Penal Code, and the rules and regulation governing the Cameroonian public service on the other hand. This conflict can be illustrated with the following instance: while the Constitution recognizes the public's right to know, Section 41(1-2) of Decree No. 2000/287 of 12 October 2000 on the general rules and regulation of the Cameroonian civil service continue to represent serious impediment to the public's access to public information. By the above mentioned Section, civil servants are urged to conceal certain types of information from the public; this, in the name of upholding professional discretion. The Section *stricto sensu* states that:

All civil servants shall be bound to observe professional discretion in respect of all facts, information or documents of which they have knowledge in the performance or in the course of the performance of their duties. Apart from the cases expressly provided for by the regulations in force a civil

servant may not be released from his/her obligation except by an express decision from the authority under whom (s)he works. Any unlawful possession or removal of service papers or documents shall be strictly forbidden. The same shall apply to the disclosure or copying thereof, except for service reasons and in the manner prescribed by regulations in force.

It goes without saying that the institution of such rules and regulations in the civil service makes it herculean for anti-government journalists to gather unbiased information from the civil servants – which are, theoretically and technically speaking, considered as government's *must-be* "political allies". In keeping with this Decree No. 2000/287, civil servants are most often under serious apprehensions to release sensitive or scandalous information which are liable to damage the image of government and its officials. Such a scenario seriously limits journalists' access to official and public sources.

Beside the existence of decrees which systematically hamper private journalists' access to government sources, the Cameroonian government has amended the 1990 law relating to Freedom of Social Communication (through Law No. 66/04 of 1996). This has once again, given immense powers to government authorities to seize and ban newspapers. Articles 13 and 14 of this bill require all newspapers to deposit copies of each edition of their production with the Public Prosecutor and administrative authorities within two hours of publication. Additionally, Article 17(1) empowers administrative authorities to order the seizure of any newspaper considered to be a "threat to public order or to good morals". This scenario is a good illustration of the prevalence of multiple

regressive moves in the country, as far as freedom of the press and democracy are concerned. In effect, the passing of Law No. 66/04 is just a re-introduction of some aspects of the 1966 press law which were earlier deemed obnoxious and undemocratic.

Another index of these regressive moves is the recent governmental tradition of shutting down the Internet and social media where and whenever it deems such draconian action is necessary. This happened during the period of the Arab spring around 2011 and recently during the 2016-2018 Anglophone Crisis in the country. Government's act of shutting down the internet in 2016-2018 aimed visibly to sever the Anglophone communities (in the South-West and North-West Regions of the country) from Internet services and to *in extremis* avoid an Arab Spring-like scenario in the two Regions. The rationale advanced by government for its action has mainly revolved around the need to curtail irresponsible political propaganda driven by the social networks and secure public order/national integration. However, from a critical analysis, it is more than obvious that such draconian actions have had higher, secondary or un-avowed targets. In effect, shutting down the Internet has become one of the Cameroonian government's strategic actions to systematically hamper freedom of expression in the name of ensuring national security. It goes without saying that such muscled anti-cyber actions are mainly observed in autocratic states. They are incompatible with democratic principles.

Reduced Press Freedom in Nigeria and Cameroon: A Logical product of Covert Autocracy

It goes without saying that the prevalence of various forms of

abuses of freedom of expression in Nigeria and Cameroon give credence to the theory stipulating that dictatorship continues to be popular among the ruling class in the two countries. Democracy is merely preached in theory; meanwhile, in practice, dictatorship remains the order of the day. The western model of democracy is thus, still viewed by the governments of both countries as a danger or a “premature project” (a scheme they are not ready to support). In tandem with this, it has even been argued by many observers that far from reducing in level of prevalence, dictatorship has instead been on the rise in the two countries with oppositional voices being silenced or intimidated in various (subtle) ways (Nyamnjoh 2005; Snoddon 2016; Nonso 2016; Freedom House 2018a,b; Endong 2017). This could be illustrated with a diversity of evidences drawn from both Cameroonian and Nigerian experiences. One of such evidences is Nigerian President Muhamadu Buhari’s vindictive banning of the African Independent Television (AIT) shortly after his accession to power. Mr Buhari rashly banned the private media from covering his activities and those of his party the All Progressive Congress (APC) presumably following AIT’s bias reporting and anti-APC tone during the 2015 presidential campaign. What is ironic or paradoxical is the fact that the ban was instituted before the President even took oath of office and in total disregard of the latter’s repeated promises made during presidential campaign to be a “reformed democrat”. The ban was equally adopted in total violation of the principle of Freedom of expression enshrined in the country’s Constitution. Although it was later reversed, this restrictive action taken at the prelude of Buhari’s rule was mainly interpreted by Nigerian political critics and exogenous

observatories as a ploy to bring back overt dictatorship in the country through the back door (Snoddon 2016; Nonso 2016; Endong 2017).

In line with this negative reading of the Nigerian government policies, Mefor (cited in Nonso, 2016) mentions various other cases of APC's political opponents who were made to face extra-judicial ploys by the Nigerian government. He contends for instance that, President's Buhari crusade to fight corruption and recover government's looted funds, has progressively turned out to be a strategic instrument to silence opposition and institute a covert form of dictatorship in the country. Mefor particularly notes the case of Governor Ayo Fayose, whose Zenith Bank account was frozen, in total disregard of constitutional provisions which grant him immunity. He equates such gross and politically motivated violation of the law by the Nigerian government with a strong symbol of dictatorship. Through a rhetorical question, he enthuses that "how else does dictatorship come home to roost if not in fragrant disregard for the rule of law, due process, abuse of court process and violation of human rights and impunity?"

Another evidence strongly pleading in favour of the myth of dictatorship in Nigeria is the fact that forces of the law are circumstantially mobilized to chastise apparent enemies of the President using even of extra-judicial resorts. It is for instance alleged that a citizen of Nigeria was thrown in jail just for naming his dog after the President of the Republic (Buhari) (Snoddon 2016). The police disregarded the man's version on the motivation of his act and rather interpreted the dog's naming initiative as an offence liable to "cause a breach of peace". However, it remains evident that

such muscled response of the police is an overzealous effort aimed at fighting the liberal expression of (political) thoughts about the President. Corroborating this reading of the political situation in Nigeria, the President of PEN Nigeria Centre, Ipadeola Tade notes that:

Since the return of democratic rule in 1999, the country has been making slow and painful progress along the pathway of respect for human rights. But I'm afraid the country is suffering a relapse into a mono-logic, mono-cultural framework. We have a statist president at the moment and he has been shuttling to countries where the dominant ideology is for the cat to catch the mouse, whatever colour the cat is. I also worry that the emphasis right now is on retributive justice, when what we sorely need is distributive justice. (cited in Snoddon 2016)

Similar accusations have been made against the ruling class in Cameroon where President Paul Biya has used various subterfuges to indefinitely maintain himself in power. Such subterfuges have consisted in constant amendments of the Constitution (to prolong presidential mandate and ensure his re-election) as well as quasi-martial tactics which have caused the opposition and the public to dominantly remain under perpetual fear. Indeed, Biya's government has not hesitated to use crude brutality against the opposition or against movements which have questioned the legality of his rule. The army, particularly the "Rapid Response Battalion" (*Bataillon d'Intervention Rapide [BIR]*) has, on countless occasions, been deployed against pacific protesters who dared to question some of Biya's political actions. In 2008 for instances, this

dreaded unit was highly solicited to quench bastions of agitations against Mr. Paul Biya's intention to amend the Constitution (Soboth 2008; Open Society Foundation 2012). Recently in 2016, the same unit was again strongly solicited to brutally deal with university students' protest movements in the English-speaking part of the country. These university students' movements were protesting in favour of a reform of the educational system.

It is irrefutable that the BIR deserves some acclaims for valiantly fighting and dealing with a number of national security issues (notably the fight against armed robbery, poaching and terrorism in the country). However, its foci have these last decades, mainly bordered on serving as a weapon of government's political intimidation and autocracy in Cameroon. The battalion has increasingly been used these last years to silence the opposition and systematically neutralize/vilify political activism against the government.

Another weapon of political intimidation deployed by the Biya administration has been anti-corruption schemes initiated by government to target state fund embezzlers in the country. A case in point is "Operation Sparrowhawk" which led to the imprisonment of many Ministers and top governmental figures of the country. According to some (victimised) political entities (including former political allies and heavy weights of the Biya's administration), "Operation Sparrowhawk" has been a politically motivated ploy designed by the powers, to discredit and neutralise potential political rivals. One of the proponents of this thesis is former Minister of Health Oluanguena Awono. In his book titled "*Mensonges d'Etat*" (Lies of the State), Awono (2016) purports that the "victims'

of this "Operation Sparrowhawk" are simply "prisoners of conscience". To him, the operation is simply designed by stronger political entities who, in the spirit of political predators, fiercely "hunt" their weaker fellows in view of "crushing" them and perpetuate their political hegemony in the country. Other former dignitaries of the Biya's administration (notably former Minister of Territorial administration and Decentralization, Marapha Ahmidou Yaya) have laid similar political lamentations through letters published in the local media. In view of all these indexes and several other similar evidences, the popular culture among observers (particularly exogenous critics) has been to describe Mr. Biya's rule either as a form of modern dictatorship or a kind of "African democracy" which is no other thing than an aborted democracy.

The prevalence of dictatorship in both Nigeria and Cameroon has been so detrimental to the anti-government media. It has served as a serious obstacle to the "watchdogging" function of the press; and has also signalled the need for the press to be more resilient, vibrant and militant. Indeed, the present political situation of "democratic dictatorship" in the two countries calls for greater activism in favour of "genuine democracy".

Conclusion

The 1990s' wave of democratisation in Nigeria and Cameroon has brought about a considerable but "incomplete" political progress in the two countries' political and media ecologies. It has, in effect, given birth to a kind of political culture which by far, is "just a façade of democracy" or a kind of democracy which is too "diluted", compared to the western model of democracy – which to

many “esteemed” observers remains the most ideal. Observers and ideologues have described the political systems prevailing in both Cameroon and Nigeria as “African democracy” or “democratic dictatorship”. Such negative branding or labelling of the two countries’ political systems has followed the fact that, a good number of pro-democratic media bills have strangely been juxtaposed, with a panoply of anachronistic laws in the two countries. Such anachronistic laws are deployed to insidiously gag the press and intimidate the opposition. It is therefore not surprising that despite the pro-democratic efforts made in the countries, freedom of expression and freedom of the press continue remarkably to elude the two countries. It is also not surprising that liberal democracy continues to merely represent an ideal in the two countries. International observatories such as Freedom House, Reporters without Borders and Articles XIX among others, are therefore right to rate the countries not free.

It should however be underscored that though the two countries present a plurality of indexes of dictatorship, authoritarianism seems to be more accentuated or more perceived in Cameroon than in Nigeria. This could be illustrated by the fact that an insidious form of dictatorship has permitted President Biya to systematically hamper political alternation in Cameroon, thereby ensuring his prolonged stay in power. Mr. Biya’s questionable political manoeuvres have permitted him to systematically “confiscate” power for over 35 years. Such a situation has not been experimented in Nigeria where even dreaded dictators like General Sani Abacha were not allowed to enjoy eternal mandate. The prevalence of Black man’s democracy in the two countries has been

an obstacle to the growth and actual role of the press. The phenomenon has dealt a blow on the press, entrenching a novel form of authoritarian model of media regulation in the countries and making the need for the press to be more vibrant, and more pressing.

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