

The main issue for the media covering Nigeria's elections in February-March this year was the volatile shift from military to civilian rule. Yet while political power dynamics changed, the media did little to alter the status quo of women and minorities' political engagement.

Kwasi Gyan-Apenteng reports:

The legislative and presidential elections held in Nigeria in February-March 1999 were significant for a number of reasons. Obviously, they marked the end of a long period of military rule and the beginning of what may prove to be an enduring phase in the development of civilian rule. Less obviously, the elections were significant in that media coverage and civic participation indicated a new and emergent correlation of power in the country.

The Nigerian media has a long tradition of vibrant activism in the country's political process through its watchdog and advocacy roles. In the context of Nigeria's history, the proactive role of journalists was a natural consequence of developments leading up to the political transition.

In 1993 an earlier transition under former military President Ibrahim Babangida came to a sudden and uncertain end with the annulment of the presidential election that would have ushered in a new civilian administration after eight years of military rule. A short-lived, military-controlled interim civilian government was replaced by direct military rule again with General Sani Abacha at the helm. The winner of the annulled election, Chief Moshood Abiola, was jailed by the junta for attempting to claim the Presidency.

The first casualty of this move was any

reporting transition

Power shifts and status quos



Nigeria



semblance of national unity. Chief Abiola was a Muslim from the southwest while the military chiefs who jailed him were mostly from the north. Thus, the leadership of the political protest came mostly from the Southwest but was not limited to that area.

The repression unleashed by Abacha gave a sense of purpose to the political class, especially the activists within civil society and the media across the vast country. Many people went to jail, many more into exile and some, like Ken Saro-Wiwa, lost their lives. At the height of powers just before he died, Abacha was ranked by the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists as number

one in a list of the top ten enemies of the press: he had jailed 21 journalists on trumped-up charges and scores were in exile or operating underground within the country.

Themes and agendas in the transition and the elections were dominated by the fallout from the country's recent history. The two overriding issues were the need to preserve national unity and restore civilian control over all levers of power and government. Abacha's death had removed the most virulent supporters of military rule from contention. But even with consensus among the politicians and the people on the need to end military rule, there was no agreement on the

nature and source of power in the new dispensation.

Ideology itself was never an issue among the politicians – nor was it made one by the media. The three main political parties were created more or less along ethnic lines, and what passed for ideology were the specific historical characteristics of the leadership of the three main ethnic/political areas of the federation. Media reports and analyses were dominated by personalities in the absence of any clear ideological differences because that is the way of Nigerian politics. Personalities embody more than the individual; they make a statement of the past and the future.

Praise-singing for the politicians

In its coverage of Malawi's June elections, the country's media transformed journalism into something between politicking and public relations,



Malawi



media Mutations

Much of Malawi's sizeable rural population was excluded from the election process by absent or indifferent media coverage.

writes Raphael Tenthani...



The truth, according to the Malawian media, depends on where you are on the political spectrum. The June 15 elections in Malawi, the second round since the curtain fell on the country's veteran atavistic ruler of 30 years, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, exposed the media as a bunch of praise-singers ready to bleat according to the whims of their political masters.

Felix Mponda, a stringer for the Agence France Presse (AFP), believes that both print and the largely state-controlled electronic media in Malawi failed to articulate issues for the country's roughly 10 million people. "We do not have an independent media in Malawi," he says. "Almost all papers in

Malawi are either owned or controlled by politicians."

Mponda's assessment is not far-fetched. The country's most influential reads, its two dailies – *The Nation* and the *Daily Times* – are controlled by big shots in the country's two main political parties, the ruling United Democratic Front (UDF) and the former ruling, now main opposition party, the Malawi Congress Party (MCP). The MCP's most powerful politician, party vice-president John Tembo, chairs the all-important board of Blantyre Newspapers, which publishes the *Daily Times* and its weekend sister paper, the *Malawi News*.

Mabvuto Banda, a senior reporter at the *Daily Times*, admits journalists at the paper would like to be more independent. But it is all about who is feeding you. "We can't write anything good about the government – otherwise we will be fired," he told a roundtable debate chaired by BBC's Josephine Hazeley recently.

But journalists-cum-PROs work not only for the opposition. Anderson Fumulani, director of the Media Council of Malawi, says higher-ups in the UDF hierarchy, including the President, pooled resources together to fund campaign tabloids whose only mission was to portray the government as achievers and the opposition as villains up to no good. "We had a bunch of characters masquerading as journalists who could only go up to their offices, cook up just about



PHOTO: CORNIE DUPIN/REUTERS

Lagos, Nigeria, February 1999. In covering the elections, the media touted 'inclusiveness' but women were displaced from the political scene and most of the media kept mute on the subject.

The one issue on which the media appeared to have taken the lead was the suitability of former head of state, retired General Olusegun Obasanjo, as a civilian head of state. Gen. Obasanjo had been imprisoned by Abacha and was released only upon the dictator's death. The media reflected a general feeling that he would play a leading role in the country, but perhaps as an elder statesman, befitting a former head of state.

When Obasanjo eventually made up his mind and joined the People's Democratic Party (PDP), sections of the Lagos media concluded that his move revealed two signif-

icant things: one, that the PDP was the party of the northern generals; and two, that Obasanjo would be a pawn in the hands of those same generals. This became the defining issue of the election campaign.

Lagos hosts the majority of the Nigerian media; Lagos was the seat of the pro-democracy and anti-military campaigns during military rule. Lagos politicians and journalists generally expected the first President of the post-Abacha civilian government to be as different from Abacha (and Babangida) as was humanly possible. But in one respect Obasanjo reminded them of their arch-enemies: he was a soldier. However, in the context of the national unity consensus the Obasanjo factor presented a particular difficulty that called for subtlety on the part of the media.

Obasanjo comes from the south, from where the next President was to emerge, the northern leaders having ceded or 'zoned' the Presidency away from their dominance as a gesture to national unity. Even more crucially, he was from the southwest, the seat of the clamouring for 'power shift', the code for demanding a southwestern President. How could they reject Obasanjo when he satisfied that one critical condition?

This theme of 'civilians vs. military', under the umbrella of national unity, remained the primary media focus throughout the election process, with 'north vs. south' as its subtext since the north was equated generally with control of military power. The media's justification appeared to be the need for 'inclusiveness', to help ensure that power was not monopolised forever by

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the military in civilian garb.

But the 'inclusiveness' argument cannot be sustained, because there was scant mention of the need to include other groups within the civilian population that had been excluded from power since independence. The most glaring case is the virtual absence of women from the political scene. In spite of the fact that women outnumber men in Nigeria, there were few women contestants for political office. In an article published in *African Topics* magazine, Raheem Momodu, a former executive member of the Nigerian Association of Women Journalists, bemoaned the fact that no woman was elected a state governor and out of 36 deputy governors there were only two women.

Yet despite the best efforts of women journalists this virtual exclusion of women was never an issue. The majority of Nigerian editors and producers are men, who were more concerned with the possible undermining of national unity by one of the major ethnic regions or the military than with the non-representation of women – and certain minority groups – in the political process. So women and minorities never moved to the media's centre stage. This wasn't a male conspiracy – merely a sad reflection of prevailing socio-cultural attitudes which the media reinforced.

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anything and about anybody to advance their masters' electoral chances," Fumulani says. He adds that at the end of the day it was the reader, the end user of the product, who suffered – subjected to untruths which they were expected to use when making their choices on election day.

ise of protecting press and other freedoms, so if it started jailing scribes its credibility could have been tainted.

While all these electoral gymnastics were going on minority groups were suffering. AFP's Mponda says small parties, numbering more than ten, went to the polls without

country's women's rights activists started buying time on national radio to promote women in the election campaign that women's issues came to the fore.

Stella Mhura, president of the Media Women Association of Malawi, says female journalists mobilised among themselves to

journalists have no excuse for not being professional.

Fumulani says that the Media Council wants to organise a series of workshops to sensitise journalists on the need to keep up with ethical tenets. "The Media Council cannot stop anybody from practising journalism because the democratic dispensation we are enjoying upholds freedom of expression," he says. "But we are saying that we must exercise that freedom with responsibility."

But, Mponda argues, as long as politicians control media houses most journalists will continue to bring the profession into disrepute if that is what their masters want them to do. "We are in a situation where we do not have enough outlets for our journalists, so if one gets fired for not conforming to the master's whims, one will not feed his family," he says.

Practicing journalism in Malawi has thus become a bread-and-butter issue with little regard for media ethics. When it comes to election reporting, as evidenced in the election in June, journalism in Malawi mutates from journalism into something between politicking and public relations.

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But **now**, five years into democracy, Malawian journalists have **no excuse for not being professional**.

The government funded a sizeable number of papers, most of whom have gone into hibernation, perhaps sharpening their daggers in readiness for the next elections in 2004. These papers included the *Weekly Times*, *The Citizen*, *Malawi Today*, the *Saturday Post* and a horde of others.

But government was not the only culprit in this 'misinformation campaign', according to the Media Council's Fumulani. The opposition had its own weapon, *The National Agenda*, which thrived on sleaze. As with the government propaganda papers, *The National Agenda* writers hid behind pseudonyms. D.D. Phiri, Malawi's most notable political and social commentator, says that while what these papers printed was outright libelous, government was caught in a web: it took office on the prom-

enough media coverage of their policies. "It was a question of who has the money," says Mponda. "The big three parties (the UDF, the MCP and its alliance partners, the Alliance for Democracy, or AFORD) had the money and the people to sing their praises while most of these small parties had none."

Women, a largely trampled-upon group of people, suffered most. Malawi is a male-dominated society, despite women making up more than 52 percent of the population. Penelope Paliani, who writes a weekly column on gender issues in the *Daily Times*, says newspapers gave women a raw deal in the run-up to the elections. "Because most editors, and indeed journalists, in Malawi are male, a newsworthy women's article has to do with women involved in scandal," she says. Paliani adds that it wasn't until the

fight for a fair shake for women candidates. But according to Mhura, female journalists discovered too late that male politicians were using underhanded tactics – manufacturing sordid 'scandals' and peddling them to the tabloids – to knock their female competitors out of the campaign. "We discovered too late into the campaign – otherwise we could have devised a counter-attack," Mhura says.

The elections are over and done with. But the soul-searching among journalists has just begun. Many commentators forgave Malawian journalists for going off track soon after the first multi-party elections in 1994. They were, after all, just coming out of a 30-year dictatorship under Banda who did not tolerate an independent press. But now, five years into democracy, Malawian