

Revisiting Press Freedom in Nigeria: The Buhari Years (2015-2023)¹

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Abstract:

Six and half decades after independence, political journalism remains endangered in one of Africa's largest democracies- Nigeria. The key battle revolved around transparency in public office, its reportage and people's right to know. This two-pronged study probed press freedom under President Muhammadu Buhari's watch between 2015 and 2023. Specifically, it examined the political, legal and physical context in which the press operated and explored its consequences, if any, on Nigeria's democracy. It investigated the power of incumbency against the nuances of a political press. Using the normative theory as its theoretical framework, it adapted Reporters Without Borders' press freedom indicators for its analysis. Findings reveal an enduring pattern- the political wing of Nigeria's supposedly liberal, plural and commercial press has become dysfunctional. Its operational context now lies in a highly contested space; shaped by political affiliations, illiberal regulations, state interference and self-censorship. Buhari's relations with the press reflected his militarist ideology, evoked ethnic tensions; and exposed the impotence of Nigeria's state agencies. A perilous path lies ahead for press and politics when shackled this way.

Keywords:

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Introduction

Press freedom in sub-Saharan Africa is threatened by two major actors: firstly, populist leaders who

“...treat rights as an impediment to their conception of the majority will, as a needless obstacle to defending the nation from perceived threats and evils. Instead of accepting rights as protecting everyone, they privilege the declared interests of the majority and encourage people to adopt dangerous beliefs” (Roth, 2020, 1).

These leaders repress civil liberties and weaken state institutions. In so doing, they target the political press, impede independent journalism, fuel distrust of the media, hinder free flow of information essential for public participation in the democratic process and erode the constitutional protection of the press (Campbell & Quinn, 2021). The second actor is Africa’s liberal press- an adversarial, ideological, privately owned and influential socio-political force. They are driven by libertine principles of unrestricted freedom to gather, analyze and disseminate information they deem worthy of public interest. They shape public opinion and hold institutions of government to account yet; they are private and only accountable to their owners and shareholders. Both claim to act in public interest but with divergent interpretation of press freedom. While populist leaders prioritize national development and situate the press within it, the liberal press is keen to assert its independence from state control, censorship and political correctness. This tension is at the highlights of the shifting nature of the interplay between press and power in Africa.

This paper examined press freedom in Nigeria under President Mohammadu Buhari's watch between 2015 and 2023. It interrogated his administration’s relation with the political press, and the implication on Nigeria’s consolidating yet fragile democracy. Major General Mohammadu Buhari- a northerner by birth and military officer by training, first came to power in Nigeria through a military coup in December 1983. His takeover terminated the democratic administration of President Shehu Shagari and ended Nigeria’s Second Republic (1979-83). Buhari usurped power during an intense political transition when civil rule was consolidating in the post-Civil War era. In his maiden speech as Nigeria’s fifth military Head of State, Buhari identified corruption and bad governance as identical problems deserving immediate government attention, noting that his regime had dutifully intervened to save Nigeria from imminent collapse. 20 months later, precisely in August 1985, Buhari was overthrown through another military coup. His brief stint in power was, however, notorious for his unprecedented hostility towards the press. Though he initially promised to accord the press the freedom they deserved, Seng and Hunt (1986) noted that he was swift to promulgate Decree No. 4 in 1984 through which he criminalized the publishing of any message, rumor, report or statement which is either false or calculated to bring the Federal Military

Government or the government of a state or a public officer to ridicule or disrepute. To detain violators for an indefinite period without legal proceedings, he promulgated Decree No. 2 that same year. Consequently, detention of journalists without trial increased and so did censorship, official secrecy, police brutality, proscription and blacklisting of non-compliant news organizations. In his speech in August 1984, he hinted at what he believed the role of the press should be:

'A basic duty to perform is ensuring the peace, unity, progress and stability of this country.

All other interests, serious, business, or mundane, must be subordinated to this basic duty. To

accomplish this goal, it is the primary duty of your newspapers to strain all nerves in

interpreting, explaining, analyzing, debating, assessing and offering suitable alternatives to

government policies and objectives. Our nation is too young for her newspapers to indulge in

destructive sensationalism, deliberate mischief and purposeless slants which will only set us

back from the path of progress and development.'

(New Nigerian Newspaper August 8, 1984).

Two decades later, Buhari presented himself as a converted democrat, ready to operate under democratic norms and to subject himself to the rigors of democratic elections. After three unsuccessful attempts in 2003, 2007 and 2011, he was overwhelmingly elected president in 2015. During his inaugural speech and all through his two-term, eight-year rule (2015-2023), President Buhari stressed the link between press freedom and democracy and pledged to consciously work the democratic system as enshrined in the Constitution (Buhari, 2015). But how did a former military dictator navigate the murky waters of a powerful political press, largely located in the Lagos-Ibadan axis and mindful of Buhari's anti-media history? Without decrees and military fiat, did President Buhari and his government resist/restrict or allow the liberal press to gather, process and disseminate information independently? Although a few studies (Ekwunife et al 2023, Olomjobi & Okoro 2022) are critical of Buhari's heavy handedness, but did the liberal press, majorly located in the South and historically critical of rulers from the North misrepresent the president? Did ethnicity, economics and ideology influence how the liberal press framed President Buhari during his time in office? What was the nature of the relationship between the president and the press during political upheavals, the fight against militant insurgency, COVID-19 restrictions and economic uncertainties thereafter? And of what consequence to Nigeria's evolving democracy?

These questions, tackled in this mini study are critical for Nigeria and the sub-region. As Africa's most populous nation and one of the continent's biggest economies,

regression and democratic de-consolidation can reverse two and half decades of political progress at home with negative reverberations across West Africa. This contribution therefore unpacked the context within which the political press functioned during Buhari's regime and analyzed the experiences of journalists as they steer through political pressure, economic realities and public expectations. Findings and recommendations in this paper will add to the growing body of literature on press freedom in sub-Saharan Africa and aid policymakers, politicians and scholars interested in exploring the press/politics nexus in Nigeria.

Press Freedom: Tensions and Contradictions

The importance of free press rests on the belief that it has positive effects on freedom and democracy (Sen, 2003). Whether as mediators between the government and the governed, investigators that hold the political class account or reporters of fraud, systemic inadequacies and institutional inefficiencies; a free press is central to elections, reform and policies (Keane, 1991). Ward (2014) traced the emergence of a free press to England (1695) and Sweden (1766) where the shift from censorship to freedom was first constitutionalized. In the US, the First Amendment states that: 'Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances (Congress, 1791).' By the late nineteenth century, the concept of free press, dominated by private capital, acting as a watchdog of the state had formed in the West.

In the twentieth century, this freedom expanded beyond state censorship. Journalism turned to ethics to win back public trust that had been eroded due to overtly commercial and sensational practices of the previous decades. Objectivity in journalism curbs unprofessional excesses. By the 1970s, the concept of press freedom again expanded to include freedom from non-state actors, including media owners, in acknowledgement of the pivotal role of owners in influencing editorial decisions and in shaping news content. According to Lowenstein (1970) a completely free press is not only independent of the state but also free from owners' political and commercial pressures. Weaver (1977) conceived freedom as absence of government restraint, absence of non-governmental restraint and absence of operational restrictions. In the 1980s, Piccard (1985) and Hachten (1987) added concepts of economic freedom, public literacy and national development. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, studies extended to the political economy of the media (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), citizen's participation and information democratization (Hagen, 1992), and mediation in the structure of social inequality and protection of human rights (Curran, 1996). At the turn of the century, the focus shifted back to protection from monopoly and concentrated ownership (McQuail, 2000) and media imperialism, globalization and cultural domination (McChesney, 2011). Rozumilowicz (2002) summed up the concept of free press as what exists in a system, demonopolized from state control, political actors, media owners and commercial interest.

Two strands of press freedom are apparent: on the one hand is the all-encompassing and all-inclusive freedom. In this view, journalists have little ethical or legal responsibility to make sure their reports and opinions are objective, balanced and fair. On the other hand, is socially responsible journalism- one that includes adherence to ethics, objectivity and social responsibility. Both strands converge on the constitutional rights of the press but diverge on the extent to which this freedom is used. Tambini (2021) highlighted the above distinction as negative right or freedom from (the absence of state control, emphasized in the American concept of press freedom) and positive right or freedom for (public good, peace and democracy, common in Europe). Either way, Herman & Chomsky (1988) in *Manufacturing Consent* argued that market forces, corporate ownership and political pressure have increasingly constrained and questioned earlier concepts of a liberal press. According to McChesney (2008), America's corporate media is incompatible with a viable democratic society by reason of degradation of journalism and the hyper-commercialization of culture. Outside the US, particularly in Africa, claims that a free and liberal press is essential to democracy and is not only contested by Africa's ruling elite but also questioned for its vulnerabilities to sectional and oppositional forces. This is particularly important in post-colonial societies with a history of ethnic, religious, regional, sectional and political tension. A case in point, according to Shaw (2012) is the instrumental role of the liberal media in the Rwandan genocide of 1994 when a controversial Hutu radio station urged Hutus to 'go to work' and attack the Tutsi population.

In Africa, the concept of press freedom remains contentious. The liberal and/or socially responsible press, inherited independence, are not free from market forces and corporate greed. Similarly, the authoritarian and Soviet media systems (visible across the continent during military regimes and one-party government) that aims to integrate the press as an extension of the state are not exempt from political control, state propaganda and overbearing civil restrictions. The groundbreaking work by Siebert et al (1956) and McQuail (1983) on media systems did not fully reflect the unique political, economic and media environments in Africa and as such, leaves room for further studies to navigate the complexities of Africa's press/politics landscape. This paper therefore investigated press freedom between 2015 and 2023, probing if Buhari's government helped or hindered Nigeria's supposedly liberal press and of what consequence to democracy.

State/Press Nexus in Nigeria since 1999

Press freedom as enshrined in the 1999 Constitution guarantees the right of Nigeria's press to gather, process and disseminate information freely, yet, this freedom is contested. After three decades of suppressive military rule between 1965 and 1999, Olusegun Obasanjo- Nigeria's first democratically elected president in the Fourth Republic was vocal about the centrality of this freedom to democratic stability. Across the political spectrum, a free press was also seen as instrumental to the effective functioning of Nigeria's new democracy. However, mid-way into Obasanjo's first term,

he was accused of ‘borrowing repressive tactics from Nigeria’s past to intimidate the press’ (CPJ, 2005). Authoritarian decrees of the military era were also enforced, albeit in subtle ways. His administration deployed police officers to threaten, arrest and remand his critics, including journalists in prison. By the start of his second term in 2004, his government had attacked *Insider Weekly*, *Global Star*, *Island News*, *Silver Bird*, *DAAR Communications* and *Africa Today* over allegations that these publications disparaged and humiliated the person and office of the president. After eight years in office and a failed third term bid, Obasanjo and the press were driven by distinct, almost parallel priorities (Sklar, Onwudiwe & Kew, 2006). The latter sought to protect democracy while the former considered the press as overtly critical.

President Umaru Yar’Adua (2007-10) and his successor, Jonathan Goodluck (2010-2015) improved on Obasanjo’s records with the 2011 Freedom of Information Act which liberalized access to state-held information and strengthened rights already protected in the 1999 Constitution. They also abolished oppressive laws such as Decree 4 of 1984 (Cheeseman et al, 2020), giving way for new publications and a resurgence of old ones. However, government’s intolerance of press criticism remained. Examples include efforts to suppress demonstrators during the #Bringbackourgirls protests in 2014. Jonathan’s government was also complacent when military officers invaded and confiscated newspaper copies in Lagos and Abuja over allegations that news reports compromised their war against Boko Haram (Suntai, Agbu & Targema, 2018). Ojo (2016) found that Jonathan’s regime tightened control over state-owned broadcasters-Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Voice of Nigeria (VON) and the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN). Efforts to keep corruption hidden from public scrutiny, starve news organizations of state advertising revenue and blacklist radical press outlets also endured.

On their part, the press operated at the confluence of political affiliations, ethnicity and commercialization (Ojo, 2018). At one end, owners influenced news content based on ethnic bias, regional preference and political alignment. Olasupo (2022) found that owners of the press in Lagos used their titles to criticize the North and its politics. These newspapers sacrificed objectivity, neutrality and accuracy to support their owners’ preferences (Adekunle, 2021). At the other end, Abegunde & Fajimbola (2019) found that the political press was also pressured by declining advertising revenue, dwindling circulation figures and the presence of free information online to act without due regard for objectivity. In addition to the above, Kperogi (2020) explored how digitization enabled Nigerians at home and abroad to disrupt the news and political landscape with forward and backward linkages to legacy media, political participation and governance. Yusha’u (2017) however observed that online news platforms are not the exclusive preserve of defenders of democracy and public interest. Digital spaces are also melting pots of disinformation, misinformation and propaganda (Babaleye, 2020).

Existing literature on Buhari’s relationship with the political press is predictable. Egbon’s (2023) comparative study found serious press freedom violations during Buhari’s rule compared to his predecessor’s government and concluded that the press

operated in a more liberal and freer context during Jonathan’s regime. In their study, Ekwunife et al (2023) found that Buhari’s first term in office was littered with multiple civil rights violations. Suleiman’s (2024) quantitative study examined Buhari’s second term and found significant human rights violations, including censorship, intimidation of journalists and denial of access to state-held information. Buhari’s Twitter ban generated more critical scholarship. Anyim (2021) investigated the implications of Twitter’s ban on the economy, freedom of speech and information sharing while Ridwanullah et al (2024) explored the politicization of hate speech in the context of Nigeria’s Twitter ban. Olomjobi & Okoro (2022) examined the constitutional complexity of the ban on free speech. Nigeria became “one of West Africa’s most dangerous and difficult countries for journalists, who are often spied on, attacked, arbitrarily arrested or even killed” (RSF, 2022, 1). Buhari’s clampdown on journalists and his administration’s proclivity for intolerance for press freedom was also highlighted by CfR (2021). Freedom House (2023) ranked Nigeria as ‘partly free’ with incessant police attacks on the press (CPJ, 2022). Nigeria dropped 18 points on the global press ranking between 2015 and 2022 (RSF, 2022).

Year	Ranking	Gain/Loss
2014	112	+3
2015	111	+1
2016	116	-5
2017	122	-7
2018	119	+3
2019	120	-1
2020	115	+5
2021	120	-5
2022	129	-9

Figure 1: World Press Freedom Index (2014-2022). Source: Nigeria: RSF world press freedom ranking 2015-2022.

This paper challenges the above findings and contends that the political press in Nigeria are not mere bystanders whose reportage is free of bias and sensation. It therefore questioned the role of the liberal press play in speaking truth to power. This paper’s contribution is that it explored the tension between the power of incumbency by a Northern president against a vocal southern press in a post-colonial African nation grappling with significant socio-economic challenges and declining trust in the press. It examined the nuances of a complicated relationship.

Methodology

To investigate press freedom during President Buhari’s administration, this research focused on the political, legal and safety context within which the press functioned (RSF, 2024). The key questions included: Did the state allow the press to function, without obstructing journalists from holding government to account (political)? Were the press free to work without legislative sanctions and excessive regulatory bottlenecks (legal)?



And finally, were journalists protected from physical attacks, harassment, and maltreatment in the line of duty? I used semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences of practicing journalists between 2015 and 2023. This method not only aligns with the purpose of the study but is in sync with measures used by The Press Independence and Critical Ability (PICA), International Research and Exchanges Board (Becker, et al., 2007), Reporters Without Borders (RSF, 2022) and Freedom House (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022).

To recruit participants, two techniques were used: purposive sampling and snowballing technique. For the former, I email the political editors at *Punch*, *Guardian*, *Daily Trust* and *Tribune* newspapers. For the latter, I asked each editor to connect me with potential others. Both techniques enabled me to reach several journalists from different organizations with varied interests and experiences. I used WhatsApp video calls to conduct interviews for three reasons. Firstly, it gave participants the flexibility of fitting the interviews into their busy schedules. Secondly, it allowed time follow-up questions that would have been impossible through surveys. Finally, WhatsApp helped to overcome restrictions imposed by time, resources and space. In total, 19 interviews were conducted in June and July 2022 with three newspaper editors, nine reporters (Punch- 3, Guardian- 2, Tribune- 2, and Daily Trust- 2), four bloggers in Abuja and three freelance reporters. The newspapers are leading national dailies based on on-and offline circulation. All participants were based in Lagos and Abuja (Nigeria's former and current capital states respectively). Both locations represent Nigeria's two major press hubs- the Lagos/Ibadan press axis in the south and the Abuja/Kaduna axis in the north. Lagos and Abuja symbolize Nigeria's political, ethnic and religious melting pots. In line with best practice ethics, participation was voluntary. I assured participants of confidentiality and anonymity before the interviews commenced. Each participant was made aware of their right to withdraw from the interview at any point.

As practicing journalists, it was difficult to ascertain their political leanings or ideological biases. However, 13 men and six women participated. This disparity reflected the disproportionate overrepresentation of men in journalism in Lagos and Abuja. Similarly, only four participants identified as northerners while the rest were from the South (five from the East and 10 from the West). Again, this reflected the concentration of news organizations in Lagos and evidences the high number of Southerners in the industry. I used open-ended questions that probed the regulatory, political and economic factors that shaped Buhari's relations with the press. I also used the newsgame research tool, prescribed by the Glasgow Media Group (Kitzinger, 2008). Newsgame allowed the use of news content such as the 2015 Cybercrimes Act, Anti-social Media Bill, EndSARS protests, Twitter ban and Covid restrictions events as trigger points for discussion. All participants opted to remain anonymous for fear of reprisal. Comments and quotes are therefore presented in several ways throughout this paper to ensure anonymity.

I used thematic analysis to scrutinize gathered data to understand participants' divergent perspectives of press freedom under Buhari's administration. As indicated by

Bernard (2010), data was first transcribed before repeated sifting and rigorous synthesis into four silos- political, digital, regulatory and security. These were further scrutinized and developed into themes presented in the next section. Finally, findings were situated within the central purpose of this study- to understand the relational dynamics between press and politics during President Buhari's two-term tenure.

Analysis and discussion

Nigeria's reputation as possessing one of Africa's freest political press regressed during Buhari's eight-year rule. Although press freedom was precarious and fragile before 2015, this fragility deepened thereafter. Three agencies shaped the context of press freedom: firstly, the political press and its adversarial reporting, secondly; President Buhari and his political ideology; and finally, Nigerian factor, cut by authoritarianism, propaganda and violence. This section examined these intersections. Thereafter, I present the consequence on Nigeria's democracy. Although delineated by specifics, the analysis overlaps but provide a comprehensive understanding of state/press relations in Nigeria from 2015 to 2023. I shall thereafter summarize and conclude.

The Political Press in Lagos

Nigeria's political press is historically adversarial and largely based in Lagos. Their contributions included strong opposition to colonial rule and demilitarization of national politics in the 1990s. However, since democratization, their role has been contested. A few participants from Abuja navigated the political economy of the political press and situated its essential characteristic within three contexts. First, is the long tradition of adversarial journalism in Lagos, especially against national leaders generally and particularly those from the north. This combative nature developed after independence and matured during decades of military rule. A participant noted that 'Since 1999, the press in Lagos have remained overtly critical of government- be it Obasanjo's, Yar Adua and Jonathan's administration.' Another said, 'The press in Lagos is unsympathetic to the plight of the North. They'll rather criticize than put issues in context'. If these comments are accurate, they indicate a deliberate bias towards government, calculated at discrediting state policies and programs in the public sphere. While there is a broad mix of newsprints in the South, the point made by journalists based in Abuja is that the political press in Lagos has formed an editorial alliance against the north or any other part of the nation. 'This' according to her 'is why news coverage on any issues within Nigeria takes on a northern versus southern perspective.

Second, participants flagged up the cutthroat competition in the press in the southwest and noted that news organizations generally and particularly in Lagos are driven by market demands that shape their content. A reporter said, 'The decision of Lagos-based newspapers to antagonize any government without objective reporting is not only historical but also linked to their commercial success.' The suggestion here is that commercial success is directly linked to critical views of government. Essentially, nothing sells in Lagos like bad news about the state! Another participant said:

‘The Lagos press print what sells in Lagos and the South. They publish content that aligns with the perception and ideology that the South is superior to any other part of the nation. In so doing, they are not only adversarial but also sensational and condescending’.

Finally, and closely linked to the above, is the intersection of ethnicity and political ambitions. As noted by a participant, “Politicians from the South often use the vocal Lagos press as the conduit pipe through which they discredit sitting governments and position themselves in the public space as better alternatives.” Another added that ‘Media ownership extends beyond using the medium to educate, inform and entertain. Politics is at its core and influence is the priority. Put differently, the goal of owning a news title or controlling one is essentially political. It gives owners soft power that has political consequences. Whether in support of a political cause or to discredit another, media owners are not naïve, neutral or uninvolved. Though proprietors claim to have no role in shaping the content of their titles; just as news editors claim to be independent of editorial control, several participants assert that owners, editors and shareholders have invisible hands through which influence news content. With regards to the press in Lagos, the view from their colleagues in the north is that the political class in the South divided between the East and West have strong alliance with the Lagos press to the extent that both politicians and the press are beneficiaries of the union. The former contest and win elections while the latter are compensated with appointments in government.

Commercialization, the invisible hands of owners and overt adversarialism shapes the modus operandi of the political press significantly. It can therefore be argued that, to stay profitable, relevant and as a decisive moderating force, the press must act as an opposition party, attack state policies and expose government’s shortcomings without adequate objectivity and context.

Buhari, underperformance and the press

After a decade and a half of democracy, discontentment and critical news reporting, President Buhari was elected in 2015 to fix high inflation, high unemployment and a crooked public system. His landslide electoral victory reflected public trust in his promise to end the war on terror, curb corruption and revitalize the economy. However, falling oil prices on the international market were partly responsible for his government's inability to meet its financial obligations and fulfil its electoral promises. This not only drove poverty incidence up by 69%, but it also increased unemployment to 24% (Animashaun, 2020). Although Buhari was initially seen as a better alternative, based on his anti-corruption campaign, his administration’s inability to convert promises to tangible gains became problematic. One year into his government, the press picked on three defining issues and turned against his administration. Firstly, insecurity. Bandits and Boko Haram’s attacks on state institutions and public spaces increased within Maiduguri (the epicenter of insurgency) and extended into other states in Northern

Nigeria, as far as Abuja- the nation's capital. According to a participant, 'A few months into Buhari's first term and all through his rule, banditry and violence continued across the North. Whatever Buhari did was ineffective'. Secondly, corruption. The state security apparatus- including the Nigerian Police Force as well as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission were seemingly active in uncovering fraud and financial crimes, most interviewed participants noted that such probes were politicized. They were used to prosecuting members of opposition parties. As noted by an Abuja participant, corruption doubled during Buhari's first year in office. By 2020, Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index ranked Nigeria 146th out of 180 countries, a ten-point drop from 136th place when Buhari was inaugurated in 2015. Finally, Nigeria's economy which had performed well between 2000 and 2014 had shrunk by 2020. A female participant said: 'The economy was not only stagnant but fell into recession just before Covid-19. His economic policies proved inadequate to improve Nigeria'.

Buhari's performance became the centerpiece of press reports in Abuja and Lagos. As noted by a participant, 'Public mood towards Buhari's government shifted from enthusiasm to disappointment and anger. Critical voices within the press also grew louder.' Though Buhari had warned, during his inaugural speech of the rot left by previous administrations and appealed to Nigerians to have realistic expectations and hopes, these did not matter much to the press, especially those in the South. Unable to keep pace with unrelenting media critics, Buhari's government resorted to ignoring the press. One participant noted that 'Unlike his predecessors who held media chats with journalists and often granted interviews, Buhari avoided the press. In six years, he did not grant a single presidential media chat. He occasionally spoke with foreign journalists but mainly communicated to local reporters through third parties and spokespersons.' As suggested by another participant, Buhari's unwillingness to speak to the public or grant press interviews was interpreted negatively. An Abuja-based participant said 'Buhari was either incompetent or overwhelmed or both'. It is on record that Buhari was out sick for lengthy periods during his first term, the president's silence and delay in appointing federal ministers fueled conspiracy theories in Lagos and beyond. A participant from Lagos said news reports that the president is unfit to govern or incapacitated became widespread.

On top of political underperformance and extended periods of non-engagement with the local press, a few participants highlighted factors peculiar to Buhari that shaped his government. Although his military record and reputation as a disciplined ruler in the 80s gained him public approval during his 2015 campaign, these attributes worked against him when in government. According to an online editor in Abuja, "Buhari is not a converted democrat. He is part of a privileged northern ruling class whose authoritarian ideology and disdain for human rights is deeply rooted in his background and military past. As a northerner, he believes he is destined to rule Nigeria. And as a former major general, he thinks little about civilians and civil rights.' Another participant said, "Buhari and his ministers were no newcomers to Nigerian politics. Although he

pretends, he is for freedom. He is not. He rules by fiat, fear and intimidation”. One said, ‘He is an old politician trapped in the 70s command and control mindset. He is unable to elevate his politics to accommodate contemporary realities such as press freedom and civil liberties’. Another said: ‘Buhari was desperate for power but ill-prepared for the demands of public office in 2015 Nigeria. Rather than surround himself with technocrats, he mainly appointed Northerners.’

According to a Lagos-based participant, ‘Buhari claimed to be a ‘converted democrat’ ready to follow the democratic process; in power, he used legislative, digital and police intimidation to curtail freedom’. Another participant said: Buhari is uncomfortable with criticism and will do almost everything to contain dissent, whether on- or offline”. The overwhelming view among participants is that Buhari’s performance fell short of expectations. They claim he was quick to disregard a core pillar of liberal democracy—press freedom. Rather than defend democracy, participants asserted that the government attacked activists and journalists because they deemed the press unsympathetic and disruptive. These comments and others like them point to a perception held by participants that Buhari was too conservative and rigid. His government’s actions (or inactions) were interpreted as a deliberate, calculated and systematic attack of any individual and/or organization that questioned their underperformance. Buhari’s government conceived the political press as intrusive and invasive.’

By the end of his first tenure in office, the political press and the president were at war. To some Abuja-based participants, press criticism of the president as well as the combative nature of the Lagos/Ibadan press was confrontational. One participant from Abuja noted that there was evidence of state underperformance, but the press in Lagos was relenting in their critique of government. One participant questioned why most Lagos newspapers resorted to calling a sitting president, ‘a military general!’ He referenced *Punch* newspaper’s editorial of Dec. 11, 2019, that said:

“As a symbolic demonstration of our protest against autocracy and military-style repression, PUNCH (all our print newspapers, Punch, Saturday Punch, Sunday Punch, Punch Sports Extra, and digital platforms, most especially Punchng.com) will henceforth pre Buhari’s name with his rank as a military dictator in the 80s, Major General, and refer to his administration as a regime, until they purge themselves of their insurable contempt for the rule of law.”

This stand, he believed, is proof of an ill-disposed, confrontation and combative press. A few Abuja-based participants also expressed concerns about unrestricted press freedom— one that they believe was responsible for setting the polity alight. Quoting Buhari, a participant said:

“...disinformation has the potential to rupture relationships, sow seeds of discord, and set on the path to destabilization. When fake and hate news is added

unabashedly, it can only signpost doom.' Another participant said: that Buhari at the NBA 2018 national conference said the rule of law must be subjected to nation's security and national interest."

Both comments indicate the dangers of what they perceived as unfettered freedom within the Lagos press in a country with a history of ethnic suspicion, civil war and ongoing calls for cessation in the Eastern part.

Buhari's frosty relationship with the press can therefore be interpreted as a sign of his disagreement and displeasure. Several participants noted that Buhari expected the press to join forces with his administration in his version of national development, but the press had other ideas. A participant said: 'Buhari's main objective was to make the press downplay the government's shortcomings and present a narrative of steady progress and development but that did not happen. According to another participant, 'We were on his side for a few months but when the economy did not improve, insecurity did not decrease and progress was slow and inconsistent, we (journalists) had to voice our concerns'. Another said, 'Our allegiance is to the public, not to any government or special interest.' In retaliation, participants said the government resorted to old military tactics of repressive censorship, police brutality, restricted access to state-held information, intimidation and silencing radical news sites. I unpacked these below.

Digital Surveillance of Political Journalism

In 2015, Buhari's government introduced the Cybercrime Act as a legislative instrument to prohibit, detect, prosecute and punish cybercrimes. On the surface, it empowered law enforcement to act decisively using surveillance and intervention when required; and allowed the state to clamp down on agencies deemed suspicious and malicious. In practice, however, participants noted that it gave government sweeping powers to infringe on free speech and press freedom. Most participants said Section 22 criminalized online defamation of character, while Section 24 penalized 'cyber-stalking'. A Lagos-based participant said 'Cyber-stalking was vaguely defined while news, even if factual, was labelled by the state as 'offensive', 'intimidating' or 'hateful' and used to haunt journalists. Another said, 'Section 22 was used to justify my arrest twice. They claimed my articles were defamatory, but I was accurate and factual.' A third participant added that his colleagues were picked up and locked up without due process. Evidence of his claims was reported in the press: (*Premium Times*, 12/1/18 & 22/7/22). The Act also legalized the interception of electronic messages of any citizen and mandated internet service providers to 'monitor, store, intercept, block and provide customer's information to state security operations upon request. A few participants said it was used to spy on them and block news sites deemed offensive. One said, 'I know of several news sites that published factual news about IPOB but were deleted by their internet service providers acting on strict instructions from above.' According to a blogger, "People Gazette was blocked for publishing a damning article that implicated the upper echelons of Buhari's administration over mishandling classified information." Most

participants added that digital clampdowns on activists and sites deemed radical were carried out on a large scale. Although the state did not exercise technical control over internet infrastructure, they used Internet Service Providers to monitor controversial content, especially in 2020. In June 2021, Buhari's government banned Twitter (now X) for six months in retaliation to the platform's temporal suspension of the president's account. Twitter alleged that Buhari violated its community's guidelines while Buhari accused Twitter of infringing his right to free speech. (see Guardian, 12/1/22).

Regulatory Authoritarianism

A significant number of participants said press regulators were empowered to censor and punish news organizations that criticized the state. In 2019, the Nigerian Broadcast Commission ordered the indefinite suspension of Daar Communications PLC over an alleged breach of the broadcasting code (See Punch, 6/6/19). Specifically, Daar was punished for airing a pro-opposition interview. A participant said 'The move showed the dangerous extent to which the state went to stifle free speech'. They also agreed that the Nigeria Communications Commission (NCC) with oversight responsibility over telecommunications was weaponized to punish the press. After Twitter's ban, the NCC Act was amended to enable NBC to impose license fees on all online broadcasters. A participant said news organizations were instructed by the state in 2021 to stop reporting details on the war against Boko Haram and bandits because giving such details would fuel public anxiety and harm national security (See World Report, 2021). That same year, NBC fined Channels TV and Arise TV for covering EndSARS demonstrations (See ICIR, 2021). It again, fined Channels TV in Lagos following an interview it granted Nnamdi Kanu, leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). NBC also fined MultiChoice Nigeria for airing a BBC's Africa Eye documentary titled, "Bandits Warlords of Zamfara (ThisDay, 5/3/22). By contrast, participants noted that news organizations, whether the state or privately owned who supported government were protected. According to a participant, 'Put plainly, those who served state interest, served as government's mouthpieces were untouched.' In 2019, the National Assembly introduced the Anti-Social Media Bill, designed as a regulatory measure to criminalize the use of social media in peddling 'false' or 'malicious information'. Participants queried what "What falsehood is" "Whose definition?" "In whose interest?" Pressure from the Nigerian Union of Journalists, Nigerian Guild of Editors, Newspaper Proprietors Association Nigeria, international press freedom agencies and social-justice activists made legislators put the Bill on indefinite hold in 2021 (See Premium Times, 19/11/19).

Police Brutality

Routine harassment of journalists is a constant in Nigeria. A few participants shared their first-hand experience of police violence throughout Buhari's rule. Some evidenced police brutality by showing images of their damaged cameras and destroyed equipment. A Lagos reporter said 'Reporting the pandemic was fraught with complications with the use of excessive force on me and my colleagues without bringing perpetrators into

account.’ A journalist from Abuja said, ‘strong-arm tactics were used to enforce compliance during lockdown’. She added further that, “It was nearly impossible to work during the pandemic due to unprecedented threats by the police. In some cases, I was beaten and detained.” Another participant said, her life was threatened by gun-wielding police officers. A Lagos journalist said, ‘In 2020 alone, more than 60 journalists were arrested and prosecuted; three were killed, 34 were assaulted, three press organizations invaded and four television stations were fined.’ Another participant said ‘A public examples of police brutality included the unlawful arrest of Omoleye Sowore- founder of Sahara Reporter- an online investigative news platform. Sowore was unlawfully detained for 125 days.’ (see Campbell, 2021). In October 2020, the Nigerian Army used live ammunition on peaceful demonstrators including reporters at Lekki toll gate- a suburb in Lagos state. A Lagos-based participant noted that ‘Over 25 demonstrators lost their lives with many more missing and/or injured. More than 50 youths, including journalists, were arraigned in courts in Lagos and Abuja over their alleged involvement in the Lekki demonstration’. At first, authorities in Lagos and Abuja denied local reports of casualties and accused CNN’s report of Lekki as irresponsible. A month after Lekki, all parties, including the military admitted to using excessive. In the immediate aftermath of the Lekki shooting, portions of *The Nation newspaper*, *TVC television station*, *African Independent Television (AIT)* and *Ray Power* radio station in Lagos were set ablaze. According to a participant: “This recklessness at Lekki is a direct attack on the rule of law, press freedom and public right to demonstrate’. News organizations attacked in Abuja included *Premium Times* and *Daily Trust* (See RSF 2021, Premium Times 12/1/19). A participant noted that “... these assaults were linked to reports that the Nigerian Army suffered heavy casualties against Boko Haram’ (*Premium Times*, 23/9/18). Another said, ‘Rather than fight insurgents, the military resorted to raids, arrests and intimidation... rather than win the war against Boko Haram, the Nigerian military is fighting the press.’

Why and of what consequence to Nigeria’s democracy?

Buhari’s eight-year rule was characterized by an intolerant state against the nuances of a sectional political press. Despite existing legal and international instruments as well as extensive commitment by his administration to enforce press freedom, the press was neither free nor independent. They operated in a heavily contested space cut by authoritarianism and clampdowns. The press on their part engaged in disinformation, misinformation and sensational reporting aimed at destabilizing the state. This section presents two consequences of tension between the press and power.

The major consequence on democracy of Buhari’s complex relations with the political press reveals the impotence of Nigeria’s state institutions, particularly of regulators, legislators and the judiciary. Despite explicit constitutional instruments that spell out the limits of power, boundaries of authority and separation of duties; executive office holders, with the president at the top, arrogated to themselves, excessive, largely unchecked authority. Although this is not new to Nigerian politics, Buhari’s administration took it to a new level. One participant called it ‘military-style



democracy.’ His party’s (APC) majority seats at the National Assembly (upper and lower legislative houses in Abuja from 2015 to 2023) allowed his government to act with minimum accountability or checks and balance. Another participant said, ‘By proxy, the presidency controlled the National Assembly and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). He single-handedly appointed the Independent National Electoral Commissioner- Mahmood Yakubu, handpicked the Chief Justice of the Federation- Ibrahim Tanko Muhammad, directed government-owned broadcasters- NTA, FRCN... and had the national security apparatus at his behest.’ While these were not outrightly illegal, his control over these institutions allowed his government to treat civil liberties, including press freedom with disregard. He placed his actions and his party’s interest above the public’s need to know. And his silence in the press was unprecedented.’ Several attempts by what was left of press to engage Buhari’s administration were met with silence or rejection. .

Nigeria’s politicized state bodies- the Nigerian Police Force, Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, the Nigerian Judiciary and Federal Ministries were subservient to the executives. The criminal justice system was at the beck and call of the government and was conditioned to protect the incumbent government. A participant noted that ‘the 2019 election was controversial majorly because the president appointed the Independent National Electoral Commission commissioner which amounts to a case of conflict of interest’. Other participants expressed similar concerns. Another said, ‘Nigerian politics is loyalty politics. Your loyalty to the party in power or to a particular ‘big politician’ determines your experience. If you are with the ruling party, you are sorted.’ A few participants warned of the dangers to Nigeria’s democracy when legislators either take sides with executives or are complacent to illiberal practices by executives. Others expressed concerns over the Independent National Electoral Commission’s vulnerability to executive pressure.

Second and consequent upon the first is the widespread culture of self-censorship within the press. A blogger called it, ‘the deliberate effort to stay politically correct to avoid state reprisal. It was the unwritten law of self-preservation.’ During Buhari’s time in office, self-censorship was driven home by three main developments. First was the government’s attack on activists in the southeast region and the Southwest. Leading critics like Nnamdi Kanu and Sunday Igboho were arrested, detained and charged for inciting public disorder. Second was the attack on free speech. Twitter’s ban evidenced the government’s intolerance. The state’s reaction to youth protests and public demonstrations during and after ENDSARS was intimidating. According to a participant, ENDSARS protests in 2020 and pocket of demonstrations before it was construed by the government as anarchy, disintegration and rebellion that must be contained’. Another blogger said she lost two friends during ENDSARS to stay-police bullets. Deadly reprisals by the state indicated that the government preferred journalists to focus elsewhere. Organizations such as Twitter and Channels TV that reported these events were suspended and/or fined. Finally, coverage of state inefficiency and corruption was deemed out of order. A reporter said: ‘News about the president’s bad health, his

excessive foreign travels, ethicized ministerial appointments, reporting of COVID cases, palliative disaster and northernization of key political offices were met with aggression.’ Whether it was reporting the pandemic, open grazing policy, insurgency or unemployment, the regime was not only uncomfortable but also, keen to retaliate.

Press owners also enforced significant self-censorship in their titles, partly due to fear of state attack, commercial alliances and political connections. Self-censorship was therefore not just about the political state and professional expectations of blurring footage of murder, massacres and content deemed inappropriate for children; it was also out of deference to or fear of some owners. An Abuja based participant noted that ‘My editor made sure we are politically correct before we go to press. No more entanglement with the government was his mantra’. This according to her was after several unpleasant visits by the police to their press outfit. Another said, ‘In the private outfit where I work in Lagos, the owners have large ears and are listening. There is no room for political criticism, even when the facts point out the obvious.’ Market expectations may have also played a role. Whether to avoid advertisers’ backlash or the displeasure of shareholders, a large portion of newspaper owners, especially mainstream news organizations were influenced to place their bottom line above the public’s need to know. Overwhelmingly, however, the government’s attack on press freedom shaped self-censorship the most. Participants agreed that Buhari’s intimidation entrenched a culture of passivity across legacy press outfits and attempted to replicate the same on social media. To avoid jail, fines or lengthy court cases, news was redacted, deselected, concealed, falsified or outrightly ignored by some reporters. A newspaper journalist said, ‘Several of my critical reports were not published. I had to drop the ‘critical’ in my reporting when my job was threatened. She cited the limited coverage of bandit attacks and Boko Haram insurgency as the outcome of an official directive by the broadcasting regulator- NBC.

Self-censorship has detrimental consequences on democracy. Although difficult to quantify in the Nigerian context, it limits the power of the press to act as the Fourth Estate when shackled in this way. A reporter said, ‘A caged press is complacent with democratic authoritarianism and accommodates information blackouts. The press can hardly bark, talk less bite.’ Self-censorship robs the public of vital information required for democratic citizenship. This deficit may have allowed Buhari and his executive allies to function with little scrutiny. Democracy empowers elected public servants to steer the state in specific directions, but the press should play its constitutional, watchdog role. As noted by Sen (2003), journalism performs a critical political role. Without critical journalism, democracy is starved of information flow, dialogues, debates, ideas, critics and reform. Democratic consolidation is at risk in Nigeria or elsewhere if self-censorship remains a survival tool kit.

Conclusion

This paper examined press freedom in Nigeria under President Mohammadu Buhari's watch from 2015 to 2023. As its starting point, it situated Nigeria's fragile democracy

within the context of democratic decline across West Africa. It linked the emergence of populist leaders and democratic dictators to declining press freedom. It also highlighted the dangers of unrestricted freedom of the press and its complexity in ethnically polarized nations in Africa. It thereafter turned its attention to the evolution and theory of press freedom, noting the distinction between the American liberal system and the socially responsible press traditions common in Western Europe. Using three of Freedom House's indicators as a methodological prism through which the extent to which Buhari's government helped or hindered press freedom was probed, data was gathered through 19 semi-structured interviews with reporters, editors and bloggers to unpack press freedom between 2015 and 2023. Findings indicate a significant decline in press freedom during Buhari's eight-year rule. External proofs of this decline included Nigeria's 18-point decline from 111 in 2015 to 129 in the global press freedom ranking in 2022 (RSF, 2022) and reports of extensive crackdown on journalists by CPJ (2023). This study found evidence of persistent digital authoritarianism, increased regulatory surveillance and incessant attacks on journalists and news organizations. While these are not new in Nigeria, Buhari conservatism and militarist leadership style further stifled freedom. Similarly, the press in the Lagos/Ibadan axis also operated with a combative, ideological, regional and editorial agenda that was overtly critical of Buhari and the North and its leadership in general. While both sides (Buhari and the press) claimed to act in public interest in their capacities as elected representatives of the people and as society's watchdog, tensions between the two revealed the impotence of Nigeria's state agencies, namely the justice system. The weakness of the courts, police force to act in a depoliticized manner point up their vulnerability and fragility. Therefore, self-censorship not only became the survival toolkit within the news industry but also a subtle way through which the press avoided controversies, even when such cases were of public interest. Shackled this way, Nigeria's democracy is at risk of information blackout, disinformation and misinformation. Importantly, cleavages in the interpretation of what press freedom is between the state and news professionals may further complicate an already complicated relationship between executive office holders and the liberal press. Importantly, an Afrocentric definition of press freedom, one that questions Western liberal notions of freedom on one hand while on the other hand, understanding the needs and peculiarities of post-colonial, democratic Africa is of crucial importance. Importantly also, state agencies that are institutes enforce constitutional guarantee and protect rights and privileges needs to be strengthened.

Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that they have no financial interest in this manuscript.

Notes on Contributors

Dr. Victor Jatula's research is located in the general field of press and politics. He explores media studies, democracy and development. It is problem-based and relies on

qualitative and empirical data collection methods. The key research focus is economic and political development with a particular emphasis on the political economy of the mass media. Specifically, it investigates factors that foster or hinder democratic processes, political participation and social development. It also examines the role of communication in such spaces and societies. His overarching focus is press and politics; and how this interconnection underpins social changes and development in emerging democracies.

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