Chapter 5


Tayo Popoola
UNESCO Centre of Excellence in Journalism and Media Training, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

The probing thesis in this study is premised on investigating why the mass media which are globally regarded as the playing field of politics as well as the road upon which presidential campaign travels every four years could suddenly develop contours, leading to the game of politics being devoid of convivial and smooth playing in Nigeria, especially between 1999 and 2011. The study observes that hardly was there any election in the post-independent era in Nigeria that did not end in serious disputations, crisis, violence and bloodletting such that academics across disciplines declared that since independence on October 1, 1960, the electioneering process in Nigeria has been an experience of tears, blood and sorrow. The study evaluates media compliance to reportorial code which demands factual, accurate, balanced and fair reportage of electioneering stories. Using historical research method which relies on primary and secondary data collected from 150 media professionals consisting of 44 political editors, 10 line editors and 96 political reporters, the study, using power and conflict theories found out that non-compliance to ethical code of conduct for media professionals as well as legal rules governing the practice of journalism as one of the major factors responsible for publication or airing of provocative stories capable of engendering violence during elections. The study therefore suggested how the existing plural media system could be exploited to grow democracy, engender peace and promote national development as it’s done in South Africa and other countries of the world.
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This study focuses on ethical and legal challenges of election reporting in Nigeria, with specific reference to the four general elections conducted in Nigeria between 1999 and 2011. The study notes that crisis has become a regular characteristic feature of virtually all the post-independent elections in Nigeria to the extent that academics across disciplines have concluded that since independence on October 1, 1960, the electioneering process in Nigeria has been an experience of tears, blood and sorrow, (Ologbenla, 2003; Akinfeleye, 2004; Akinboye, 2009; Ogbeide, 2010; Olurode, 2011; & Fadakinte, 2014).

Thus far, hardly was there any election in the country that did not end in serious disputations, crisis, violence and at times, bloodletting. The study is curious about this development especially why the mass media which are globally regarded as the playing field of politics could be fingered as contributory agents of electoral violence.

Electoral violence has been a major threat to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. From the 1959 general elections which ushered in independence on October 1, 1960 to the first post-independent elections of 1964/65 during Nigeria’s First Republic to the Second, Third and Fourth Republics till date, electoral violence has no doubt become a national malaise.

Thus far, hardly was there any organized election in the country in which tempers, fear and insecurity did not pervade the land with political tension at the highest level. Top pre-election stories in the media during electioneering periods are usually on the negative side. It is either some political aspirants have been killed, kidnapped, campaign rallies bombed or political thugs armed with charms and dangerous weapons attacked political opponents.

In a piece entitled: “History of political violence in Nigeria”, Ali (2003:32) states that before the attainment of independence, reports of political violence have been with us. Those who were old enough at that time would remember the myriad of political violence that attended the general elections of 1964”.

The defunct Western Region in Nigeria acquired the epithet – Wild Wild West due to violence which characterized the conduct of the October 1965 parliamentary election in the region. Prior to the election, Anifowose (1982: 206) observed that regional elections had taken place in 1951, 1956, and 1960 while Federal Elections were held in 1954, 1959 and 1964.

Quoting Mackintosh (1970), Anifowose (1982:201) described political parties in Nigeria as agencies for winning power but having taken hold of power at any level, they are reluctant to defend their position by argument and the creation of an electoral machinery.

Pre – voting utterances of political elites in the Region confirmed Mackintosh’s declaration. Quoting the Premier of the Region, Chief S.L. Akintola through a press statement, Anifowose (1982:201) noted that Chief Akintola pointed out to his critics the fact that in the previous fifteen years, no regional government had lost an election.

Anifowose contends further that during the campaigns which preceded the October 11 poll, the Premier, Chief Akintola and his Deputy, Chief Fani-Kayode were alleged to have boasted that whether the people voted for them or not, their party – the NNDP would be returned to power. The political tension in the region was so high before the day of election such that President Azikiwe as quoted by Anifowose (1982:207) warned that “the country was heading for troubles worse than the Congo”. While describing politics in the region as a ‘deadly’ serious business, Anifowose further states that “the abuse, violence, bribery and viciousness of the election campaign were so outrageous”. Ali (2003:32) further noted that “the general elections of 1979, those of 1983, 1993 and 1999 were not without bloodletting.”