Chapter 13

Boko Haram Insurgency in Cameroon: Role of Mass Media in Conflict Management

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ABSTRACT

Cameroon has recently become a target of deadly attacks including shootings, kidnappings and suicide bombings by the Islamic insurgent group Boko Haram. Cognizant of the fact that Cameroon has not experienced anything like this since independence, the Cameroon mass media is challenged as to how to appropriately report this insurgency in a manner that will result in conflict containment and management rather than escalation. The researcher set to examine the role of the media in managing this armed conflict through the critical analysis of documents as well as interviews and observations from the theoretical perspective of framing. Framing by the media has been a very effective strategy in managing the conflict by mobilizing the national population against the sect while maintaining calm and lessening panic and anxiety. This effort by Cameroon media is highly commended although more still needs to be done.

INTRODUCTION

Africa in the last decade has witnessed a sharp surge in insurgent attacks from groups like Al Shabab and more recently Boko Haram that has resulted in countless deaths, displacements and untold human suffering. Cameroon, the ‘island of peace’ in the Central African sub-region has since 2014 been the object of deadly attacks by the Northern Nigerian indigenous islamist sect Boko Haram. Although Northern Nigeria is no stranger to such deadly attacks such as shootings, suicide bombings, kidnappings, and the burning down of houses and property that frequently target innocent citizens in public spaces such as markets, bus stations, places of worship and media, this phenomenon is relatively new in Cameroon - a country that is highly reputed for the peaceful resolution of the conflict over the ownership of Bakassi

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peninsular with Nigeria. Since May 2014, Cameroon has suffered an unprecedented wave of deadly assaults and shootings by the gunmen of this sect. These killings were presumably heightened after Cameroon’s head of state publicly declared war on Boko Haram at a summit in France that brought together heads of state of the Central African Region with the aim of seeking ways to battle out the sect.

Cognizant of the fact that Cameroon has not experienced anything like this since independence, the Cameroon mass media is challenged as to how to appropriately report this insurgency in a manner that will result in conflict containment and management rather than escalation. Against this backdrop there is need for skilled and professional reporting with the observation of ethical norms that will hearten the nation to face this than throw it into greater panic. Given that media reporting of such conflicts can sometimes throw populations into deeper fears as a result of over reporting or spark a backlash from the terrorists as in the case of some Nigerian journalists that were killed by Boko Haram for their supposed bias (Ekwueme & Obayi, 2012), moderation is required. The reporting of the damages and human casualties by the mass media both national and international tends to cast a spell of fear that grips the entire nation. In the face of this assailing crisis, the role of the mass media cannot be undermined in either exacerbating or containing and resolving the conflict.

The following questions therefore arise; what role does the mass media play in the fight against Boko Haram in Cameroon, and how does framing of media messages shape the present perception of the crisis? It is along these lines that the researcher set to examine the role of the Cameroon mass media in the handling of this armed conflict through the critical analysis of documents as well as interviews and observations.

The researcher will begin by presenting terrorism and the mass media, theoretical framework for the analysis of the study, Cameroon media vis-a-vis Boko Haram reporting, anti-terrorism law and the media, role of media in conflict management, government’s response, national population’s response and finally conclusion.

Terrorism and the Mass Media

The terrorists and mass media both enjoy a symbiotic relationship in which terrorists seem to need the media more. It is in this light that Brian Jenkins (1975) asserts that “terrorist attacks are often carefully choreographed to attract the attention of the electronic media and the international press. The hostages themselves often mean nothing to the terrorists”. Walter Laqueur (1977) holds up Jenkins’ observation by postulating that “terrorists have learned that the media are of paramount importance in their campaigns and that the terrorist act by itself is next to nothing, whereas publicity is all”. This fits well with a widely quoted statement of Margaret Thatcher, a former prime minister of Great Britain which says “publicity is the oxygen of terrorism” (Muller et al. 2003; Vieira, 1991). This affirmation is factual in that terrorism is often aimed at the audience and not at the actual victims. This might inform the reason why terrorists desperately seek media attention following the popular adage that “if it does not bleed, it does not lead”. Terrorists take advantage of the media’s insatiable hunger for dramatic, sensational, unusual, and alarming human interest stories to gain cheap and wide-spread publicity for their actions. The mass media on the other hand usually tend to thrive in crisis reportage as it significantly increases viewership, listenership and readership – ad patronage and hence respond to terrorist attacks with undisguised zeal and enthusiasm (Ekwueme & Obayi, 2012). Putting it in another way, terrorism is theatre and the news media, for their part, are seen as unable to resist the chance of a good story, so they obligingly provide extensive coverage of terrorist bombings, hijacks, kidnapping and assassinations (Schlesinger et al, 1983).