
Combating Political Assassination In Nigeria: The Role Of The Mass Media

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Abstract

The 'do-or-die' approach that has become the lot of Nigerian 'money politics' of "loot and warfare" has left in its trail a spate of serial assassination incidents that now scare the citizens away from political participation. Since 1999 when Nigeria returned to civil rule after years of military dictatorship, she has become one huge human abattoir where desperate politicians who must rule at all cost butcher opponents perceived as obstacles to their inordinate ambitions. In most civilized countries, success in politics is determined by ability to muster superior solutions to national challenges rather than by eliminating opponents through hired killers. Barak Obama, the current president of the United States of America demonstrated that knowledge is power. This enabled him to achieve a landslide victory over his political opponents despite the racial bigotry prevalent in that society. He did not resort to assassination of opponents. The spate of political killings in Nigeria since 1999 is mind-boggling. Now that elections are around the corner, we advocate that the mass media namely newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and traditional institutions, opinion leaders turn their attention towards public education and re-orientation of political aspirants on the evils of political assassination. For if this culture of killing with impunity is allowed unchecked, we may end up in anarchy and truncate the fledgling democracy. We are all tired of military rule and political upheavals that undermine national development. For as we cry and wail about prominent politicians being killed a new dimension involving the use of bomb for mass killing is on the increase. Which way Nigeria?

Introduction

The desire for power and the attendant good things of life have from time immemorial, been one of the greatest sources of evil in human society. At the state or national level, it has led not only to the invasion of one state by another, but at times full blown inter-state war has ensued. The climax was the First and Second World Wars, and of course the Nigerian Biafran war all of which resulted in great havoc of destruction of lives and property.

At the individual level, the quest for political power and the goodies associated with it has led to political assassinations in different parts of the world. For instance, in his

celebrated work, the Prince, Niccolo Machiavelli recorded the case of Oliverotto da Fermo, who became ruler of Fermo by killing off all the leading citizens of the city at a banquet that he had cleverly arranged for that purpose (see chapter 6 p14). We also recall the cases of John F. Kennedy, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. all of the United States of America. In that list are also Indra and Rajiv Ghandi of India, Anwar Sadat of Egypt, Patrice Lumumba of Congo, Aquino of Philippines, Olympio of Togo and Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso to mention just a few.

But in those countries, such cases of political assassination are few and far between: an isolated aberration rather than the norm. In Nigeria, especially from 1999, the recurrence of high profile political assassinations have generated a feeling summed up by one network executive thus: “Little by little, everybody has gotten a little less afraid of the old taboos...” (McNamara, 1999, p. 23). The value and sanctity of human life now mean nothing to Nigerian politicians, with the culture of impunity exacerbated by the inefficiency or collaboration with law enforcement agents. This scenario is worsened in periods of election. Nnoli (1988, p. 44) summarizes the situation thus:

Apart from the irrelevance of elections to the improvement of the socio-economic well-being of the vast majority of Nigerians, elections have brought untold hardship to the people. The violence and thuggery which are always associated with these elections have caused havoc to the lives and property of the people. The general electoral atmosphere of intimidation, victimization, abuse, hostility, and denial of the rights of opponents... increase the insecurity of the population. In another respect the moral values of the country are corrupted by the blatant disregard of cherished rules, norms and regulations by political competitors obsessed with power at all costs. Under conditions in which the politicians regard elections as warfare and in which all is fair that brings victory, pervasive indiscipline is inescapable and the clarion call for the moral regeneration of the country can only fall on deaf ears.

Similarly Igbafe and Offiong (2007, p. 12) lamented that political assassination has become one evil that walks the streets of Nigeria not only unmolested, but aided and abetted. This, they noted, is due to “the ineffectiveness and inefficiency of the national security outfits, particularly the police that have failed to live up to its duties by apprehending the culprits and their collaborators”.

To Akamere (2001), these assassinations take various forms such as the use of ‘professional assassins’, food poison, calculated or planned or arranged accidents i.e. plane or car crash” and in recent times, the use of bombs. Nigeria, he said, is dripping with blood. According to him, our record of orderly transfer of power has not been a particularly happy one as it has been marked most times by violence and death. He observed that political violence, epitomized by assassinations, has become a feature of Nigerian politics since the days of uncontrolled mayhem in Western Nigeria during the First Republic (1963) to the later-day version of warring political brigades, fronts and vanguards. Many illegally held guns are used to terrorize the citizens and experience has shown that quite a number of these armed groups and their collaborators are prepared to settle ‘political scores’ with immediate effect. (Igbinoia, 2000, p. 30).

To Edemodu (2002), assassinations have become the norm in Nigeria. For example, he said in 1995 alone fifty cases of assassination were recorded in Lagos within a period of twelve months. Since then, the malaise has increased in alarming proportions as we shall see below. This prompted the late legal icon, Chief Gani Fawehenimi, to describe the spate of political assassinations in Nigeria as the darkest and saddest event in Nigeria, while Audu Ogbe, former PDP chairman referred to politically motivated killings as ‘a height of insecurity’.

Gani Fawenimi cited in Ajani (2001) lamented that what we have been witnessing is not democracy but a mindless display of craziness by members of the political class, and unless quickly checked, the democratic edifice will surely collapse and we would blame ourselves for the unprecedented flow of blood that will follow. In a similar vein, Igbafe and Offiong (2007, p. 17) regretted that political assassination has impacted negatively on the political system. To the duo, when politicians become targets for killing and assassination, the political system or structure of such a nation becomes affected in that criticism and opposition would fizzle out and room for constructive criticism which is vital for good governance would cease to exist. They concluded that “since the inception of democracy in 1999 till date, there is hardly any year that has rolled by without the nation recording at least seven cases of political assassination and the perpetrators roam the streets of Nigeria freely, probably waiting for their next ‘hit’”. This, they explained is because in Nigeria, politics is seen as a form of business enterprise, a quick way of making money with less effort. During

the electioneering process, some rich men somewhat invest by way of sponsoring candidates and would go to any length in ensuring that their candidates win the elections even if it meant assassinating their opponents. The belief is that it is only when their candidates win that they would be able to reap the dividends of their investments. This is evident in the cases of Joshua Dariye, and D.S. P. Alamiyesegha, former governors of Plateau and Bayelsa states respectively. It is also true of Anambra State where Chris Uba, a political godfather claimed it was agreed that Chris Ngige, a former governor of the state was to pay him an undisclosed amount of money on assumption of office as governor of Anambra state. The purported refusal of Chris Ngige to comply with the illegal contract led to his abduction on July, 2003.

It becomes clear that one of the causes of political assassinations and other violent behavior is the frustration of those desires for good things of life, as observed by Saint Augustine in his theory of the “Earthly City.” Infact, Machiavelli adopted this Augustinian view of human nature when he noted:

Despite their pious mouthings, the only things that men really want and which determine their behaviour are the good things of the “Earthly City” – power, glory, and material well-being. Their hunger for these things is insatiable, and desire constantly outruns the power of attainment hence, perpetual dissatisfaction with their lot resulting in animosities and conflict.

He added: “Men are ungrateful, fickle, and deceitful, eager to avoid dangers and avid for gain. It must needs be taken for granted that all men are wicked and that they will always give vent to the malignity that is in their minds when opportunity offers.”

It is for this reason that Nigerian politicians need serious political education. This will condition their minds to understand that the game of politics is not a ‘win win’ affair. Barak Obama, the present president of the United State lost several times in elections before he finally succeeded. The need for such political education was highlighted by Asobie (2007, p. 1) who noted that in Nigeria, politics is practiced mostly by those who are not exposed to or who have no knowledge of the science of politics. According to him, not being trained in either the academic discipline or the practical profession, politicians do what intuitively comes to them as the practice of politics. He added:

Before serious minded people engage in the practice of any profession, in any discipline or field of endeavour, they usually undergo thorough training; this applies even to the playing of the game of soccer as a profession.

This explains the reason for Plato's advocacy for elaborate educational curriculum for political leaders especially the Guardian class, if they are to legislate well. He prescribed, for instance, a ten-year course of pure mathematics to develop their faculty for abstract reasoning, to prepare them for this experience. The objects of mathematics, he said, are independent of the material world, pure thought and so are fitting preparations for one who seeks to apprehend the Forms. According to Plato:

This is followed by five years of training in dialectic, which leads the soul into the world of Forms and toward the idea of good itself. Then come fifteen years of practical experience in lesser positions in the service of the polis. Following this, the few who have excelled both in thought and in action will find themselves ready to enter the presence of Good itself. And after this ultimate moral and intellectual experience, they take seats in the legislative council and lay down norms for the society. (See Republic 7p540).

Though Plato's position is purely prescriptive, it goes to show the urgent necessity of political leaders to be properly trained before aspiring to lead. This will reduce the inordinate and unwholesome approach to politics and the attendant cases of resort to political assassination as a norm to political success.

Cases of Political Assassination in Nigeria since 1999

One of the most dastardly high profile political assassinations that has worsened the moral condition of Nigeria was that of the former Minister of Justice and Attorney-General, Chief Bola Ige. He was a member of the Alliance for Democracy (AD), one of the registered political parties in Nigeria. Ige was killed in his home Ibadan Oyo State on the 23rd December, 2001. He apparently came home to spend Christmas with his wife when a group of gunmen came into his house and shot him. Though the motive of the murder was not confirmed, it was alleged that his murder was not unconnected with the political crisis between the Governor and Deputy Governor of Osun State from where Ige hailed, and which Ige was perceived as supporting the Governor Ogunsoye Oyinlola's faction. The circumstances of his death have remained a mystery and the judicial process designed to

unravel the perpetrators frustrated thereby deepening the sense of insecurity in the country (Igbafe and Offiong, 2007, p. 14).

While the nation was still in grief over Ige's brutal murder, the country was on 7th January 2002 rudely confronted with another gruesome act of barbarism. This time, it was that of Mr. S.A. Awoniyi, the confidential secretary to a former Chief Justice of Nigeria, Justice Muhammadu Lawal Uwais. Awoniyi was killed in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. According to Igbafe and Offiong (2007, p. 15) though Awoniyi was not manifestly involved in politics, it was believed that his position as the confidential secretary to the Chief Justice of Nigeria posed a threat to certain individuals.

Also, in August 15, 2002 Ahmed Pategi, chairman of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), and his police orderly were murdered by unknown assailants on a high way near Ilorin. On August 29, 2002, Victor Nwankwo, the younger brother to Arthur Nwankwo was murdered in cold blood at Enugu.

As if the above were not enough for the year, on September first, 2002, a vocal critic of former Governor Chinwoke Mbadinuju of Anambra State and local chairman of the Nigerian Bar Association, Barnabas Igwe and his wife, Abigail were gruesomely murdered in the commercial city of Onitsha. The killers used a truck to repeatedly run over their dead bodies (Dowodu, 2007p1). Human rights Watch Press Release (2002) said there was strong and credible evidence that the murder of the couple was politically motivated as the NBA chairman was said to have openly called on the governor to resign following his inability to pay government workers for several months.

Earlier in 1999, one Sunday Ugwu, elder brother to Nwabueze Ugwu, a legislator representing Nkanu East Local Government Area in Enugu State was killed in a case of mistaken identity. And on October 20, 2002, Professor Chimere Ikoku, former vice-chancellor of the University of Nigeria, was killed in his residence at Enugu, while on 25 November of the same month, a staunch member of the PDP, Dele Orojo, was assassinated by unknown gunmen. On the 6th of March, 2003, the Daily Trust newspaper reported the gruesome murder of Marshal Isokrari Harry, the South-South presidential co-ordinator and the national vice-chairman for the South-South Zone of the All Nigeria Peoples' Party (ANPP). Marshal was said to be a strong supporter of Sergeant Awuse, an ANPP governorship candidate for Rivers State and a bitter opponent of Governor Odili. He was

killed a few weeks to the 2003 elections and his murder was linked to the bad blood between him and the Rivers State government. Marshal was murdered in Abuja on the 5th of March, 2003.

The killing of Ogonnaya Uche, the All Nigeria Peoples' Party (ANPP) senatorial candidate and a former commissioner in Imo State government was yet another mind-boggling high profile political assassination in Nigeria. Uche was shot in his home in Owerri on February 8, 2003, and died two days later (Igbafe and Offiong, 2007, p. 16). Speaking to reporters on his hospital bed before he died, Uche said he believed his attack was politically motivated and explained how, two days to his attack; he had been trailed to the party secretariat by a group of armed men who had asked his driver where he was. Uche was said to be preparing to contest the April 2003 election for the Orlu Senatorial zone (Nkwopa, 2003).

On February 6th, 2004, Aminasoari Dikibo, chairman of Peoples' Democratic Party, South-South Zone was accosted and murdered on his way to attend a meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Party. And on July 16, 2005, Lateef Olaniyan was felled by the assassin's bullets. He was reported to have been trailed by some unknown men to the party secretariat some days preceding his assassination. A family source linked the murder to the feud between Governor Rashidi Ladoja and Lamidi Adedibu and Olaniyan was said to be an acolyte of Lamidi Adedibu. And on August 11, 2005 Peter Eboigbe, a Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) chieftain, was killed in Benin city by hired assassins shortly after he had declared his intention to run for the chairman of Oredo Local Government Area in Edo State. The youths took to the streets in protest and sealed the secretariat alleging that the killing was not unconnected with Eboigbe's declared intention to contest the local government chairmanship position (Okhomina, 2005, p. 5).

Included in the list of such serial assassination also were those of Andrew Agom, former Kogi State Electoral Commissioner, Chief Philip Olorunnipa, Alhaja Sa'adatu Abubaka Rimi, Jesse Arukwu, Engineer Funso Williams and Dr. Ayo Daramola, the last three who all were said to be gubernatorial aspirants in their respective states. (See Rafiu, Owolabi and Najeem, 2009, p. 1).

Role of the Media in abating Political Assassination in Nigeria

In his authoritative piece, the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides probed and located “the ultimate springs of political behavior” in what he called the ‘irrational, or impulsive’, non reflective part of the psyche those parts which some modern psychologists call “drives.” Three impulses in particular, observed Thucydides cited in Blum (1948, p. 30) move all men to engage in political activity namely:

- (1) the desire for security or safety;
- (2) the drive for honour, prestige, or glory and
- (3) the desire for wealth-gain or profit – and material well-being which it brings.

Many writers since Thucydides time, (Machiavelli and Hobbes for example), have recognized the political importance of these drives, According to Blum (1948, p. 12), the most recent reformulation of the Thucydidean triad was probably that of Harold Lasswell, an American Political Scientist, who has referred to “Safety, income, and deference” as “representative values.”

It is on the strength of the above philosophical discovery, that the motive force of political actions, the irrational part of the human psyche that the role of the media as an agent of societal change, a teacher and reformer can be invaluable in correcting this malady, political assassination, in Nigeria. According to Okigbo cited in Nwosu (1990, p. 343) “... the effects [of the media] cannot be discounted..., as there is abundant evidence of learning and behavioral effects arising from specific communications.” The conditioning and counter conditioning phenomenistic power of the mass media as a teacher is never in doubt. Hence, Albert Watson cited in Okafor (1984, p. 44) would boast:

Give me a dozen healthy infants, well formed and my own special world to bring them up in, and I’ll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select – doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes even beggar man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestry.

This fact agrees with the agenda setting theory of the media which ascribes to the media the ability to tell the society what to think about. Originated by Cohen (1963, p. 13), the agenda setting theory posits that the press may not be particularly successful in telling

people what to think but it is stunningly successful in telling its audience what to think about. Similarly, researchers like McCombs and Shaw cited by Okigbo in Nwosu (1990, p. 345) concluded that “media emphasis on an event influences the audience also to see the event as important.” To many people, the belief is if the media said so, then it must be true: And if we accept the media’s role in social learning, public education and agenda setting, we must have faith and confidence that the media can re-educate the society, especially Nigerian political office seekers that assassination is not a good path to political office. What goes around comes around, as success is a multifaceted quality. As the 2011 elections are underway, the media will do a world of good to us if they start on time through callers programme, editorial articles, cartoons, feature articles and other social networking approaches to educate politicians on the need to avoid spilling blood in their quest for political office.

Roberts (2005, p. 22) defined the mass media as those media of communication which are channeled toward an undifferentiated audience, by methods which preclude personal modification of the message by sender or receiver during transmission. They include “...radio and television, broadcasting, newspaper production, the cinema and poster advertising.” According to Severin and Tankard (1979) “By media of mass communication, we mean radio, television, newspapers, magazines, films and such other means of reaching a mass heterogeneous audience simultaneously.” On his part, Defleur and Dennis (1991) defined mass communication as “a process in which professional communicators use the mass media to disseminate messages widely, rapidly and continuously to arouse intended meanings in large and diverse audiences in attempts to influence them in a variety of ways.”

To Loyd (2005, p. 107) different types of media exist. He distinguished those he called the basic media from the composite media. The basic types include (i) person to person, (ii) radio and television which he said have the widest influence, (iii) printed work, (iv) photographs, and (v) films. The composite media consist of (a) press relations, (b) special events (c) exhibitions, (d) conferences. As observed by Okunna (2002, p. 274) the functions of these types of media range from serious informational and educational to lighter functions like entertainment.

Moemeka (1991) observed that these media of mss communication serve the society through:

- (i) Surveillance function – the provision of a constant stream of information about events in society and about the society itself.
- (ii) Correlation (interpretation). This is the function of appropriately interpreting news and information in such a way as to avoid over-sensitization and induce appropriate or necessary reaction.
- (iii) Socialization (education). For our discussion here, it is the education function that is of utmost concern.

According to Okunna (2002, p. 275) the mass media help to unify society and increase social cohesion by upholding and teaching a broad base of common social norms, values and collective experiences. She posited that this transmission of culture and social norms is achieved through informal education (unconscious learning) and non-formal education (conscious attempt to impart knowledge outside the formal school system).

From our study of the principles of education, it is clear that there are three domains in which education can take place. They include: the cognitive domain, the effective domain and the psychomotor domain. According to Scott cited in Okigbo (1990) the cognitive aspect embraces those “attributes by which the person understands the object (political assassination) in an intellectual way. This is the view of its ‘inherent’ characteristics which he regards as “independent of his own response to them.” It must be observed that those inherent characteristics of political assassinations are arrived at through direct, experience or sources such as the mass media and other people.

The affective domain is concerned with liking or disliking of the focal object while the psychomotor is the action component. As observed by Okigbo (1986, p. 5) there is a causal link between what we know (cognitive) which can influence what we feel (affective), and both or either can lead to a definite reaction or response (action) to the object in question, which is political assassination in Nigeria. What we are saying is that the mass media both basic and composite, traditional monarchs, opinion leaders can all focus on the mind of the people, especially politicians, to urge for a moral regeneration through campaign aimed at attitudinal change towards political contest in Nigeria.

Through editorial comments, feature articles, letters to the editor, radio and television commentaries, the town criers, conferences and town hall meetings, the issue of

political assassination could be made a serious topical issue for study and discussion as the 2011 draws nearer.

We have observed election years in other parts of the world and in Africa and none have been as bloody as what we experience in Nigeria. This made Oyediran (1988, p. 114) to caution that “This view of electoral politics should be re-examined before pessimism and apathy sound the death knell of elections in Nigeria as a means of democratic legitimacy.” It is for the forgoing reasons that Nigerians should not fold their arms and watch the nation state degenerate into the Hobbesian world of the state of nature, homo homini lupus. This is attested to by the fact that the ogre of killings does not appear to be abating. For instance a national daily, the Daily sun (8 Oct. 2010) recently reported the assassination of an ANPP political heavy weight, together with two others in Maiduguri. According to the paper, two policemen were earlier killed before Alahaji Ngala, the ANPP member was shot.

This is an unhealthy political scenario that should agitate the mind of all right thinking Nigerian given its threat to the nation’s nascent democracy.

Earlier in August 16, the Newswatch magazine reported that “... no less than 12 persons lost their lives in separate gun attacks in just one week in Bayelsa state. Violence in the state is probably connected with political happenings... as some politicians from the state have, at various times, been at loggerheads over political developments in the oil-rich state. There is suspicion that politicians in the state either fuel or sponsor the attacks”.

This scenario of insecurity once more reminds one of the appeals by the Anglican Bishop of the Niger, the Right Reverend Jonathan Onyemelukwe cited in Achebe (1983, p. 51) “to politicians to spare us violence and threats to violence at this year’s election. After all, you have told us that you want our votes so that you can serve us. If we get killed while you are getting the vote, who then will you serve.”

In addition to using radio, television, newspapers and magazines, there is need to involve the traditional institutions, the church, political parties, civil society organizations etc to re-orient political officer seekers to refrain from political assassinations and other forms of violence. It is also necessary to organize sensitization workshops, and conferences. The NBA had made an attempt, though feeble, to bring Dr. Chinwoke Mbadinuju to justice following his alleged involvement in the gruesome murder of Barnabas Igwe and his wife. It is also necessary to revisit section 308 of the 1999 constitution that provides immunity from

criminal prosecution while in office the president, the vice-president, governors and deputy governors. For without the provision, it would have been possible to prosecute Governor Peter Odili over his alleged murder of Dr. Marshal, and Governor Chimaroke Nnamani over his alleged murder of Sunday Ugwu. As observed by Rafiu, Owolabi and Najeen (2009, p. 1) “we are of the opinion that Nigerians and lovers of the country’s democracy globally should be concerned about the spate of suspected politically motivated killings that have been the hallmark of Nigerian’s body politic since the return to democratic rule in 1999 beyond emotional outbursts and impulsive empathies.” We add also that violence is an ill-wind that blows no one good. All the agents of social control must be employed to stem this ugly trend that is political assassination and the culture of impurity. All the security agencies, the judicial system must be fully activated in collaboration with both the traditional and modern media to fight the monster. Nigeria is not a jungle.

Conclusion

It has been observed that evil takes root in a society when good men fold arms and watch thing go wrong. According to Ndu (1998, p. 157) political assassination is prevalent in Nigeria because:

Political post is seen as a job to our political leaders rather than service to humanity and the fatherland. Leadership is about creating and establishing enabling and enduring socio-political and economic environment conducive for development and not about killing to stay in power.

To stem this tide of politics of blood-spilling for political self-advancement, the mass media must rise to the challenge as they did in mobilizing the people to see the evil in colonial rule and also in military dictatorship. The school system should also be made to catch them young by introducing early enough in child education the moral reprehensibility of this mindless feature of Nigerian politics, political assassination. The above two institutions can do much in reshaping the society. Their effort will be complemented by that of the traditional channels of communication. This is because of the inherent weakness of the western type media. Ugboajah (1979, p. 116) observed this when he posited that the traditional institutions must cooperate with the modern media for the latter to succeed in effecting attitude change. He cited Ghandi of India, Mao of China and Ayatolla Khomeini

of Iran to buttress his position and noted that these leaders relied on indigenous network in mobilizing popular support and that traditional media linked to the people's belief system have been more effective as mobilizing tools for government. He advocated use of popular satire, folk songs, religious leaders etc in social mobilization.

To fold our arms and watch the ugly trend of political assassination continue untackled is to endanger our hard won democracy. This should not be allowed to happen. The media, like the judiciary, provide the bulwark for democratic upliftment. The media are imbued with the capacity to detect ugly trends that threaten the environment of democracy, and as watch dogs should alert the people of the danger. We therefore recommend every available communication channels and systems namely the mass media, the traditional media such as the market place, town crier, the church, village square, entertainment, drama etc to campaign against political assassination because those assassins live among us. They are a threat to democracy and national development.

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