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## Media and Underdevelopment in Anglophone West Africa

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### Abstract

Africa's colonial legacy is often blamed for her failure to modernize. This paper argued that post-colonial legal and political structures constitute greater obstacles to development in contemporary Africa. Using archival data and interview methods to investigate the connection between media suppression and political volatility in West Africa; the findings indicated that successive and contemporary governments in Ghana, Nigeria and the Gambia are hostile to media criticism; routinely target radical press organisations, deny access to state-held information and use legislation and security agents to hinder journalists from freely gathering and fully disseminating information required for public participation in politics. Media oppression hinders the political process from openness, reform and transparency required for modernisation. The paper argued for a sub-regional framework for implementing and enforcing freedom of information within Anglophone West Africa.

**Key Words:** West Africa, democracy, development, press freedom, political process

### Introduction

Democratization in Africa around 1990 was shaped by internal agitation and international pressures. These were consequent upon decades of colonial and military rule that resulted in political, social and economic underperformance. Fundamental shifts in politics and press laws were designed to allow the continent change its course and reverse its history of disasters, conflicts and underdevelopment. The consensus, built on two assumptions was that democracy, according to Keane (1990), empowers citizens to participate in political decision making, enhances accountability and transparency, and leads to progress on one hand while on the other, press freedom was central

to a functioning democracy. A free press shapes public opinion, mediates between government and the governed; ultimately resulting in inclusion, sound policy formulation and reforms.

In Anglophone West Africa, democratisation effectively ended decades of one-party regimes and military rule in Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Gambia. In Ghana and Gambia, serving military heads of states (Jerry J. Rawlings and Yahya Jammeh respectively) hurriedly put in place transition programmes in 1992 (Ghana) and 1994 (Gambia) that ensured their re-election. In Nigeria, the first successful multiparty election in two decades ushered in Olusegun Obasanjo- a retired military general as the new president in 1999 but in Liberia and Sierra Leone, efforts to reform, demilitarize and democratize were too little and too late to prevent pockets of civil rebellion that escalated into widespread conflict, internal displacements of people and consequent war.

Two decades on, all former British colonies in West Africa are democratic- they individually hold periodic multiparty elections, align with American-style presidential system, and have written constitutions that guarantee rule of law, separation of power and independence of the judiciary. In 1991, they all adopted Windhoek Declaration on press freedom and guaranteed non-state intervention in press freedom. Democratic consolidation in each of these countries have become somewhat enduring- Ghana (since 1993), Nigeria (1999), Gambia (1994), Liberia (2006) and Sierra Leone (1998). However, efforts at modernisation have either been disappointingly slow or stagnant. Respect for free speech, human rights and press freedom have seemingly increased across the region but they remain precarious. While reasonable progress has been made across the media landscape, the definition and interpretation of press freedom is largely based on the discretion and benevolence of the incumbent government in each nation and its enforcement varies widely within the sub-region. Although power-sharing and decentralization have increased within the polity, a subtle pattern of restrictions, limitations and tension by governments on the media have persisted. The covert and overt framework with which national governments across the region either regulate or control information have become more sophisticated and complex with the overarching aim of keeping the press in check.

As a consequence, the expectations of modernization upon press freedom in Anglophone West Africa remains slim. With the exception of Ghana, other English-speaking countries remain bottom performers on the United Nations Human Development Index: Nigeria ranks 152, with 90 million people trapped in multidimensional poverty, life expectancy is pegged at age 53 and 54% of the total population lives below the poverty line of \$1.90 a day; Gambia ranks 173, with 50% of its population in intense deprivation and multidimensional poverty; and Liberia ranks 177 with 51% of its population in multidimensional poverty and 69% living below income poverty line of \$1.90 a day (UNDP, 2017). This sharply contrast with the Scandinavian experience. Finland, Norway, Denmark and Sweden rank high on the World Press Freedom Index (RSF, 2018) also do well on the United Nations Human Development index (HDI, 2018); thus, suggesting a strong correlation between freedom of expression and human development such that free speech in a democracy has become a cornerstone (Rossi, 2011).

This paper contended that though national development is not contingent on a free press, especially in non-democratic and politically monocratic states that have witnessed recent rapid industrialisation; however, in emerging and established democracies, an independent press- free from legal and political impediments plays fundamental roles in facilitating information-free flow between the electorate and the elected to the extent that major political, policy and economic decisions are collectively made (Howenstine, 1991; Nam and Oh, 1973 and Lee, 1991). This study focused on the nexus between law and politics in Anglophone West Africa in the context of press

freedom. Specifically, it analysed the extent to which the media, particularly privately-owned news organisations within the sub-region are constrained from performing their role and its consequent implications on social cohesion and political development. Subsequent sections explored the literature on press and politics with a focus on West Africa. The study navigated current but subtle means of media control within the sub-region. The paper thereafter concluded that an investigation of this nature can help an understanding of the challenges associated with modernisation on one hand while on the other hand, it reveals blind-spots in the political process, thus providing insight into issues relating to policy, reform and governance in West Africa.

## **Literature Review and Conceptual Clarifications**

### ***Press Freedom, Democracy and Development***

The concept of freedom of expression is broad and all-encompassing. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference, and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers.” (UN, 1948). Free speech and press freedom aim to legally protect opinions and ideas in whatever form and platform; whether they oppose or contradict. Freedom of expression therefore necessarily includes absence of political, legislative and legal restraints on individuals or institutions and the presence of conditions necessary for open and free dissemination of diverse opinions and views (Weaver, 1977).

Restrictions on press freedom, including slander, libel, copyright and national security notwithstanding, five striking components of press freedom are noteworthy: (1) freedom from legal and quasi-legal control (2) freedom from political pressure, censorship and coercion (3) freedom from state security apparatus (4) freedom to access, process and disseminate information, and (5) freedom from proprietorial control over editorial independence. These freedoms will allow open discussion between different layers of society, facilitate a platform for sharing ideas and enhance system-wide accountability in the political process (McQuail, 2000).

Sen (2013) pointed four critical relevance of the press in a democracy: first, they provide constitutionally guaranteed functions that is fundamental to democracy; second, they provide information required for participatory politics; third, they give voice to the neglected and disadvantaged and finally, they open up spaces for public debate and discussion. Olukokun (2000) added that the media, through its watchdog, investigative role can function in a mediatory capacity through which the state as well as the electorates can connect openly in a space that will facilitate meaningful dialogue among all stakeholders, cross-fertilisation of ideas, civil conversation that promotes mutual understanding and collective decision making. This mediatory role is a fundamental pillar of democracy in order to protect basic human rights. In a democracy, government is based on the consent of the governed, people are sovereign in that they constitute political authority.

Chomsky, McChesney and others have questioned the media/democracy assumption. Using the propaganda model, Herman and Chomsky (1988) in *Manufacturing Consent: the political economy of mass media*, argued that the corporate media in the United States is systematically structured to further the interest, not of the public, but of their owners, shareholders and their political and corporate allies. In essence, America's corporate media manufactures public consent through propaganda. It is however noteworthy that the propaganda narrative is not a one-size fit all model. In African nations and emergent democracies, the propaganda model overlooks colonial, political, imperial and economic forces that pitch news organisations in different ethnic, religious and regional

camps. Additionally, political transitions in former colonies in West Africa is yet to recast the press into the corporate media described by Herman and Chomsky.

Importantly, the ethnic diversity inherent in most states in West Africa- a colonial legacy- necessitates the press to act as a galvanizing force; able to bind together, people of different religious, political and cultural persuasions residing in a single nation-state. As Anderson (2012) puts it, nations are “imagined political communities- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign... It is imagined because the members will never know most of their fellow members... yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 1932, p.6). The press therefore functions as a national public square in which citizens of a nation, though geographically widespread can interact and associate.

A free and plural press is also vital for protecting rights of freedoms, especially for competing and divergent groups and interest. These rights are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948), the European Convention of Human Rights, American Convention of Human Rights and the African Charter of Human and Peoples’ Rights. It is believed that through the press: information is democratised, the private and often critical press is free, censorship is reduced, public access to information, enhances freedom of expression, leads to democratic consolidation, participatory politics, transparency and accountability in government, and effective policy formulation (Keane, 1990). A free press enhances the voice of the poor, generates more informed opinion and policy choices, challenges systematic, institutionalized and privilege structures and political options at election. In addition to constitutional guarantees, an unfettered press facilitates the openness and transparency that development requires. Through investigative reporting, critical policy analysis and representation of minority groups, the media serves a means through which society includes unrepresented groups in collective decision making (Keane, 1990).

### **Press and Politics in West Africa**

After three centuries of trade in slaves across the Atlantic between European traders and African middlemen, the 1807 Abolition of Slave Trade Act by the British Parliament facilitated increased missionary activities in West Africa (Ajayi, 1965) and ultimately ended trade in humans. These missionaries penetrated the hinterland and initiated the spread of Western literacy, the establishment of modern schools and the publication of religious news-sheets within the context of Christianizing native inhabitants. Omu (1978) commented that these news-sheets, with limited circulation, became the forerunners of a more political press that evolved after Britain amalgamated Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914 to create Nigeria. The early missionary press encouraged the spread of education and Western civilisation across Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria and the Gambia. Missionary publications paved the way for first generation newspapers published around 1850 in Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Liberia (Rosalynde, 1966).

Colonial rule also facilitated the growth of newspapers. On one hand, colonial authorities accommodated political criticism and allowed local elections in Ghana and Nigeria from 1920 (Faringer, 1975). On the other hand, Crowther (1962) asserted that oppressive colonial laws and conflicts of interest between British and West African commercial and political concerns, in a setting that favoured the former than the latter, further strengthened the African resolve to run a locally-owned press. Newspapers across West Africa- *Accra Evening News*, *Nigerian Tribune*, *West African Pilot*, *Ghanaian Times*... were seen as the most potent weapon in the fight for expanding local inclusion in politics and an important vehicle for nationalism and decolonization (Coleman, 1963).

From 1920, local ownership of the press with a particular focus on politics had become an unusual feature of newspapers across British West Africa (Faringer, 1975).

Political independence swept across Africa in 1960 that by 1976, all former British colonies in West Africa had gained independence- Ghana (1957), Nigeria (1960), Sierra Leone (1961) and The Gambia (1965). State inheritors of power in post-independent West Africa were obsessed with what Chessman (2015) described as developmental journalism- a focus on reporting issues that promoted national development with minimum scrutiny. Developmental journalism essentially prioritized nationalism above criticism. This was especially so in Ghana where Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first elected president monopolised control of all newspapers in the state (Amoakohene, 2006).

Unresolved political and ethnic tensions amplified by a repressed press led to the collapse of elected governments through military coups in Benin (1963), Togo (1963), Nigeria (1965), Burkina Faso (1966), Ghana (1966) and Gambia (1994). Military rule was accompanied with constitution suspension, human rights abuses and violations of democratic ideals. For over two decades (late 60s to early 90s), the press in Nigeria, Liberia, Ghana and Sierra Leone were suppressed through punitive decrees, proscription and outright attacks, including but not limited to forceful closures and seizures. Many non-compliant journalists were detained, imprisoned or killed. Military rule however radicalized the press to the extent that the press became combative, irrepressible and confrontational. Adesoji and Hahn (2011) have argued that the press showed courage and resilience that by 1990, internal resistance and international pressure led to political reform across the continent. The new wave of democratisation across the sub-region was designed to permanently dismantle centralization and accelerate economic development. Why therefore has modernization remained elusive in Anglophone West Africa? Why is it that the press is yet to open the democratic process through reporting?

### **Methodology**

The use of digital technology has revolutionised information gathering, processing, storage and retrieval to the extent that access to secondary data for fresh studies has become prevalent. For this study, data was collected from multiple secondary sources: *Committee to Protect Journalists*, *Freedom House*, *Reporters without Borders*, *United Nations Human Development Index*, *World Press Freedom Index*, *Transparency International*, *World Bank reports*, *Mo Ibrahim Index*, *Africa Media Barometer* and published journal articles. Collier (1997) in "Bottom Billion" noted that his research is the result of connecting dots from existing data that formed the groundwork of his findings. Similarly, Durkheim took official statistics of suicide from different countries and analysed them to see if he could identify variables that would mean that some people are more likely to commit suicide than others. He used previously collected data for the purpose of his own work (See Haralambos, 1995, for details of Durkheim's work).

Secondary data are useful for their cost-effectiveness and convenience (Johnson, 2014). They are not only time saving but also further research; leading to replication, re-analysis and re-interpretation of existing research. Other benefits include validity, reliability and generalisability especially when they are comprehensive. Importantly however, the use of secondary data requires systematic methods with procedural and evaluative steps. Smith (2008) added that original research rarely uses all of the data collected and this unused data can provide answers or different perspectives to different questions or new issues. The key consideration is to find a good fit between the new research question and existing data set. If there is a correlation between the question(s) and the data,

then, a fit exists. The most significant concern of secondary data is that data was gathered for a different purpose and as such, key elements might be missing.

To overcome these shortcomings, 13 Semi-Structured Interviews (SSI) were conducted with reporters and journalists working in privately-owned news organisations in Nigeria (6), Ghana (4) and the Gambia Africa (3). As observed by Blandford (2013), SSI in general are useful in collating a variety of well-rounded perspectives; and in particular valuable for accessing participant perspectives. Okwuchukwu (2014) employed SSI in exploring media ownership and agenda setting in Nigeria. SSI proved useful in gathering required data for the study. The overarching goal was to gather recent and independent views. This is especially important in the context of political changes within the sub-region. In Gambia, the exit of former president, Yahya Jammeh in 2016 could have, if any, implications on state/media relations. In Nigeria, elections in 2015 ushered into power-Mohammed Buhari, a former military ruler with a history of force and autocracy. Ghana's news president- Nana Akufo-Addo has been part of the establishment since 2001 and may have pro-elite views

For this study, SSI were facilitated by collaborating with researchers in Nigeria and Ghana. The Skype-conducted interviews happened between January and June 2018. Each interview explored similar themes and used broadly the same questions. They each lasted for at least 30 minutes. Minor challenges such as technology disruptions and schedule mismatch on both sides did not hinder the outcome of the study. Overall, the interviews proved useful and insightful. The gender mix of interview participants was proportional: male (65%) and female (35%). This mirrored the gender dynamics in the profession in the countries under study. As part of the criteria for selecting participants, each journalist was involved in political or current affairs reporting with two or more years work experience. The justification for this criterion was to ensure that participants added fresh perspectives to the discussion. The identities of all interviewed journalists were deliberately kept anonymous for fear of reprisal attacks and/or victimization either by the State or the organisation they work in. Their views were however individually included, sometimes aggregated in the findings and discussion section.

## **Findings**

### ***Political censorship and Media Censorship***

In Ghana and Gambia, the dominance of state-owned print and broadcast media have overshadowed the critical role of the private press. Government-owned and controlled media are the main conduit of public information; leading to state-media monopoly and suppression of alternative and critical views. In Ghana, multiparty elections and a new constitution in 1992 heralded a new political order- a radical departure from military dictatorship. With seven successful presidential elections, spanning 28 years of political stability and peaceful transition of power, democracy in Ghana has somewhat consolidated (Amoakohene, 2017). However, one of the most enduring legacies in Ghana's politics/media sphere is the almost exclusive control of the press by the state- a system flagged off in 1962 when Nkrumah's government launched an offensive against *Ashanti Pioneer* of Kumasi- an independently-owned radical newspaper.

Although privately-owned print, broadcast and online news platform have proliferated and clustered in Accra and Kumasi since 2010; state-owned media- *The Daily Graphic*, *Ghanaian Times* and *Ghana Television* remain the primary source of information in Ghana. These media outlets have extensive access to government adverts, state funding and official inside-information; and as such, they enjoy monopoly that favours government propaganda. A Ghanaian journalist noted that

... state-owned newspapers in Ghana enjoy privilege because they speak on the state's behalf. Most journalists in other organisations face the danger of being blacklisted, imprisoned and harassed by the police. Opposition journalists are therefore cautious, non-controversial and careful not to annoy the powers that be in modern Ghana.

Nigeria's government no longer owns a national newspaper but still wields enormous influence on the media in general. More than any other nation in West Africa, Nigeria holds the worst record on inhuman treatment of journalists (CPJ, 2017). While relations between the state and the media has relatively improved since 1999; security personnel continue to intimidate, harass and arrest journalists. According to *ThisDay* newspaper (19/05/13), the names of murdered journalists to include: Godwin Agbroko (2006), Paul Ogundeji (2008), Bayo Ohu (2009), Edo Sule (2010) and Enenche Akogwu (2012). In 2014, Nigeria's "democratically elected" government confiscated and stopped the distribution of four national newspapers (*Leadership, Trust, The Nation* and *Vanguard*) for criticising the military's failure to rescue 200 schoolgirls abducted in North-eastern Nigeria (CPJ, 2004). An interviewed Nigerian journalist observed that, "the police as well as officers of the State Security Service still frequently beat up, deny access and arrest journalists; and these have become normalised to date." A Nigerian reporter noted that, "when you work in an organisation that is deemed unfriendly and critical by the state, you are constantly threatened by police officers."

CPJ have contradicted claims by Nigeria's incumbent president- Mr Buhari; arguing that reporters are still being victimised and abused. An interview participant commented that: "intimidation, arrest and gang up against journalists is on-going in 2018."

For over five decades, Gambia's political leaders had zero tolerance for radical journalists and non-compliant press organisations. Past governments- Jawara Dawadu (1965- 1994) and Yahya Jammeh (1994- 2016) since independence in 1965 have used legal and political means to intimidate the opposition press with varying success. State and media relations have been topsy-turvy as they kept the press in check through censorship and ownership. As indicated by a Gambian journalist, "In 1999, the *Daily Observer*- Gambia's largest newspaper- was purchased by a supporter of Yahya Jammeh's ruling party. Thereafter, censorship from within was used to control journalists. The purpose was largely to still radical voices within the organisation." She went on to add that by 2001, eight journalists including the editor-in-chief Pascal Eze resigned in defiance to internal editorial censorship. Since 2011, *The Daily Observer* newspaper have largely transformed from a radical daily into a state-friendly newspaper. By an Act of Parliament in 2002, the state established of the National Media Commission with broad ranging powers that included license issuance, imposition of fines and jail term for journalists. Other measures aimed at stifling the press include, new laws, specifically, the Criminal Code (Amendment) Bill 2004 and the Newspaper Amendment Act 2004 that imposed higher licensing fees on all media organisations. These Bills widened state definition of libel and expanded the powers of state media agencies.

Another Gambian journalist indicated that:

for fear of being prosecuted or harmed; hundreds Gambian journalist went into exile during the reign of terror by Jammeh. Private newspapers including the *Independent, The Point* and the *Gambian news and Report Weekly* magazine struggled with excessive fees and taxes levied by the court for criticising the government.

He further added that: "the culture of silence, self-censorship and repression is still intact even though Jammeh is out of the picture. It will take at least a decade for civil society and the media to fully take-in this freedom."

The new administration of Adam Barlow, though saddled with inherited economic and social challenges, seems committed to press freedom, "*about 30 journalists have returned from exile as a consequence of the political shift in Gambian politics.* New and independent online, print and broadcast organisations have joined the growing list of media stations in Gambia. The country now ranks 122 in the 2018 World Press Freedom index, a significant gain within one year. Critics are however suggesting that Barlow's administration is currently up against long-standing political structures and people who profited from and are loyal to Yahya Jammeh. To reverse decades of media suppression in Gambia, Barlow needs to do more. A Gambian journalist noted that: "*time will tell if this administration is really committed to press freedom.*"

### **Contested Freedom of Information**

The right of citizens to seek, access and acquire information held by state agencies is both central to democracy and protected by the constitution. It is believed, particularly in Western democracies that freedom of information facilitates accountability, transparency and openness. This not only enrich the political sphere but also enables the media to investigate state affairs with minimum restrictions (Keane, 1990).

In Ghana and Gambia, public access to state-held information is still a privilege and not a right. In Ghana, Freedom of Information bill was first proposed in 1992, however, in 2018, over two decades later, it has neither reached critical stages in parliament nor has it gained the attention and prominence it deserves. In 2015, citing "irresponsible journalism" as its *prima facie*, the parliament in Ghana instructed all media organisations to submit their content to the National Media Commission (NCM)- Ghana's media regulatory body for approval before they disseminate such to the public. Non-compliant media outfits will be fined or temporarily suspended if in breach of legislation. According to an interview participant, "*this was another un-needed form of censorship of the media, as libel and slander are already enshrined in Ghana's constitution. The real goal is to silence the press*". Parliament also legislated that the publication of "false news" against politicians or public office holders could result in libel suits with exorbitant compensation request. The definition of false news is often all encompassing, leaving news organisations with the heavy burden of proof that can be denied or dismissed at will by the state. Although criminal libel and sedition laws were repealed in 2001, censorship and lawsuits against the media are instituted to serve as deterrent to radical journalists and non-compliant media organisations.

In Gambia, access to official information is also not protected by law. Although Gambia is a signatory to the United Nations Human Rights Convention; just as her constitution makes provision for freedom of expression; the public, particularly journalists are still denied access to state-held information. The Gambian government under Jammeh used arbitrary arrest, detention of journalists and closure of independent media organisations to silence or weaken alternative news sources. According to interview participants, "his systematic and institutionalised legacy is yet to be fully dismantled". A decade ago, *Article 19*- a public advocacy group published a report in which they indicted the Gambian state of using force to suppress the media; citing the murder by unknown assailants of Deyda Hydara- a newspaper editor. Also, in 2010, Halifa Sallah- board member, *Foroyaa Newspaper* and a leading opposition politician, was arrested for many days and charged

with sedition and spying. *Reporters without Borders* observed that the use of murder, arson, unlawful arrest and death threats against journalists is subtle and deadly effective in the Gambia (RWB, 2012). This study found no evidence that the system has radically changed.

Unlike Ghana and Gambia, Nigeria passed the Freedom of Information Act in 2011; however, significant setbacks bedevil the Act. These include: failure to implement as well as a lack of jurisdictional clarity. The Act remains un-enforceable in northern Nigeria on grounds that it is yet to be enacted as state law. Importantly, the unwholesome attitude of public officials who, notwithstanding the passing of FoI Act are still reluctant to comply and supply requested information. These obstacles, including the lack of public awareness of the Act has hindered access to official documents and limited public demand for accountability. In theory, it is said that the business of government is open to public scrutiny, open to fair and just procedures in the conduct of public affairs and open to accountability; however, in practice, official secrecy, corruption and unconstitutional discretionary powers are institutionalised in Nigeria.

### Implications

Just as political independence in Africa failed to fully address the wrongs of colonialism; democratization and deregulation of the media in the 1990s is yet to reverse the negative legacy of military rule in West Africa. The belief that a free press can be effective in evaluating state policies and political decision-making processes to the extent that un-viable and misconstrued projects that constitute waste of public resources can be nipped in the bud is yet to materialize. It was hoped that by decentralising power, deprivatizing state resources, emancipating civil society and opening up the political process to reform; development would follow an upward trend. However, subtle attack on press freedom, critical media organisations and investigative journalists have continued with varying degree of success.

Media restrictions in Anglophone West Africa is having wide and far-reaching implications on democracy and modernization within the sub-region. Political and legal obstacles deliberately put in place in Ghana, Nigeria and Gambia will continue to make it harder to uncover political corruption and abuse of state privileges. The lack of openness, accountability and transparency in political offices have deepened in recent decades with some analyst estimating that Nigeria alone may have lost over \$400 billion oil revenue to corruption and embezzlement since independence in 1960 (Ezekwesili, 2016). In Gambia, former president, Yahya Jammeh was said to have

stole 11.4 billion and shipped out luxury vehicles by cargo planes. His exit in 2017 after 22 years in power is best remembered for its lack of transparency and unpredictable severity towards opposition parties and the media (Burke, Jason 2017 *Guardian newspaper*).

Similar allegations abound across the sub-region.

Systemic media repression has increased endemic political corruption in West Africa. Transparency International's corruption perception index report ranks Liberia as the 122nd most corrupt nation in the world. Sierra Leone, 130; Gambia, 130 and Nigeria, 148 (CPI, 2017). High level corruption not only drains investment in road, education, health and state security; it also makes public institutions less efficient, leading to less tax-take, declining foreign direct investment and widespread

generational poverty. A system that hinders press freedom will ultimately deepen corruption within the ruling bourgeois class.

The democratic gains of the last two decades that have somewhat led to stability, particularly in war-torn Liberia and Sierra Leone; and across the sub-region may be lost to ethnic tension, reverse development and political disorder. In the absence of a free, plural and unfettered press in Nigeria, recent agitation within the eastern states over resource marginalisation have raised fresh concerns about the fragility of Nigeria's unity. The effect of ethnic divisions, social unrest and civil war in the sub-region are clear reminders of the devastating impact of undemocratic practices. Wars in general and in West Africa in particular not only set nations back but also dent developmental efforts remarkably. As indicated by Collier and Hoeffler (2000), Africa's worrisome trend of conflict is mainly due to mismatched social integration which can only be addressed effectively by transparency and accountability.

### **Recommendations**

This paper recommends a sub-regional framework for "implementing and enforcing" freedom of information within West Africa. Media plurality and freedom of information are essential to any democratic system. Under its fundamental principles, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) should incorporate and mandate freedom of information as part of its "promotion and consolidation of a democratic system of governance in each Member State..." (ECOWAS, 2018). Specifically, a Communications Commission should be established to oversee and coordinate policy issues and strategies. It is not enough to adopt documents with good intentions without any legal and enforceable powers.

### **Conclusion**

West Africa's colonial past, imperialism and claims of foreign domination can no longer be solely blamed for the region's slow modernisation. Not that these are insignificant, internal factors such as deliberate political obstacles and intentional legal restrictions on the free press have complicated efforts at development.

Development are achieved when power is decentralised and democratised in an open and free environment. Development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states (Sen, 1999).

Decentralisation here connotes power sharing between the constituent parts of a federating unit while democratisation involves allowing all stakeholders within society to freely express their views (as enshrined in the constitution) without intimidation, fear or arrest. These ideals are yet to become fully integrated and institutionalized in West Africa's political sphere. In Gambia, Ghana and Nigeria, centralisation of power is still prevalent. Monopoly of power, often accomplished through media repression or control, creates a social space in which corruption, public discontent and political agitation festers. This is especially so in West Africa with a long history of ethnic divergence and confrontations.

The history of politics and the conduct of state affairs in the Global South, especially in post-independent Sub-Sahara African countries clearly indicates that in the absence of mutual understanding (vital prerequisite to development); ethnic, religious and political tensions will persist. Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone are vivid examples of the destructive forces that accompany

political unrests and civil wars. In these nations, the legacies of civil war are still manifest. The political and legal space in which the press operate in Anglophone West Africa needs further reform.

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