ROMANCING THE GUN
The Press as a Promoter of Military Rule

NDAEYO UKO
Romancing the Gun

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Ndaeyo Uko

Africa World Press, Inc.
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contents</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part I: The Source of the Power</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Word of Man, Word of God</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Press Bashing, Colonial Style</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: The Press under Colonialism: A Case Study of Australia and Nigeria</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part II: Victim of Democracy</strong></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: First Republic – Colonial Lessons</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Second Republic – Flogging the Press</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part III: Sleeping with the Enemy</strong></td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: A Peculiar Press-Military Relationship</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: The Media and the Baby Dictators: Generals Ironsi, Gowon, Muhammed and Obasanjo</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8: The Media and the Medusa: The Buhari Regime</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9: Evil Genius: The Babangida Years</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 10: The End of the Affair – The Abacha Years</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 11: Reporting (to) the Military: Journalists as Coup Plotters</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part IV: The Press: The People’s Friend or Foe?</strong></td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 12: Better Life under Military Rule.................... - 145 -

Chapter 13: The Devils Advocate: The Power and Irresponsibility of the Nigerian Press .................... - 161 -

APPENDICES.................................................... - 169 -

Appendix 1: Diary of Major Changes in Nigerian Leadership since Independence.............................. - 169 -

Appendix 2: Full Text of Select Coup Broadcasts .......... - 171 -

A. Lt. Colonel Gowon after a Successful Coup.............. - 171 -
B. Brigadier Murtala Muhammed after a Successful Coup... - 174 -
C. Lt. Colonel Bukar S. Dimka during the Botched Coup... - 178 -
D. Brigadier Sani Abacha after his Successful Coup........ - 178 -
E. Major General Ibrahim Babangida after the Successful Palace Coup........................................ - 180 -
F. Major Gideon Orkar before the Coup is Crushed ........ - 185 -

Appendix 3: Laws Against Press Freedom in Nigeria.... - 191 -

A. Colonial Era............................................. - 191 -
B. First Republic........................................... - 193 -
C. Second Republic......................................... - 193 -
D. The military............................................... - 194 -
E. Press Freedom Violations after Military Rule (1999 – 2000)...................................................... - 197 -
In every country, the role and freedom of the press depend largely on the attitudes of the country’s leadership to press freedom. Other significant factors are the history of the country’s media and the expectations of the media audience.

The relationship between the press and the government is an index of the freedom, power and influence of the press. More importantly, this relationship is an indication of the health of democracy in a given country. This is because a major role of the press is to provide the public professionally processed information essential for members of that society to operate as safe, motivated, informed, good and accomplished citizens under just governance. But does just governance essentially mean western democratic governance?

Not necessarily. Yet conventional wisdom, canvassed by western communication and media scholars, dictates that the press operates better under a western multiparty democracy than under dictatorships. To question the age-old theory would be to question one of the canons of modern communication scholarship, and conventional wisdom. Questioning existing knowledge is one of the vital attributes of good scholarship. Testing this theory is particularly critical because attempts by researchers to judge the press of nonwestern countries using western libertarian criteria can generally lead to the propagation of suspect and academically untenable theories. As information technology and other trends shrink the world into a tiny global village, a fuller understanding of the disparate components of this village becomes an urgent necessity for our collective growth and survival.

Each society operates a government that best suits its socio-political needs or realities. And the journalistic perception of just governance and the role of the press differ from civilization to civilization and from country to country, depending on the country’s peculiar circumstances. The failure to take into account the peculiarities of a country’s social dynamics and the political, cultural and historical realities of nonwestern countries, has led western researchers into thinking that the role of the press is
essentially the promotion and preservation of a western-type democracy and that the press cannot operate effectively in a political setting other than the western democratic model. The best known findings in this area come from the west and not from the regions in question. There are reasons for this.

Research into the media in Third World countries is hampered by two major factors. Third World scholars generally lack the research facilities and the finance to conduct research on their institutions and culture. Consequently they often rely on the findings of western researchers whose insights can be, at best, shallow. This problem is magnified by justifiable fears of reprisals from the regimes in power that may not be pleased with the findings of their own citizens. Though many of the observations made by western scholars about nonwestern life have been misleading, they are valuable for research in the sense that the errors provide material for reference and debate.

Using Nigeria as a model, this book takes into account factors often overlooked by traditional western scholars and illustrates that the press and people preferred military rule to democratic governance in Nigeria. The book also determines that given certain historical, social and political factors, the press can fare better under military rule than under "democratic" governance. I chose this topic and Nigeria because Nigeria, Africa's political giant, has the largest and most vibrant press on the continent. The Nigerian press is considered one of the freest in Africa, and indeed the world, although by 1998 the military ruled the country for 29 out of 38 years of independence. Like most Third World countries that encountered colonial rule, Nigeria experienced the type of unstable democracy that usually results in the installation of military governments. The relationship between Nigeria's military governments and the inconceivably vigorous press even under military rule, have been a subject of keen interest internationally. I also chose Nigeria because of my familiarity with its media and government. As a practicing journalist and academic in Nigeria and in the west, I have watched Nigeria attempt everything from a multiparty British parliamentary government and an American styled executive presidential model to many years and many shades of military dictatorship. As a reporter, editor and media critic for 20 years, I have reported and commented on two of Nigeria's three postcolonial democratic experiments and most of
the military regimes. And I have met most post-independence Nigerian heads of government.

In the formulation of the ideas for this book, I have had to rely selectively but extensively on the analyses and observations of both western and nonwestern historians, scholars, advocates and journalists. Even when these works miss the point, they have generated doubts and therefore engaging questions that help advance scholarship. Otherwise, I relied on firsthand information obtained while on the job, from interviews and informal encounters with Nigerian military and civilian leaders, content and textual analyses of newspapers, official documents and deep sources within the media establishment that for security reasons or precondition of anonymity cannot be quoted.

This book is divided into four main parts. Part I establishes the origin, growth and phenomenal powers of the Nigerian press under the intolerant, press-bashing British colonial dictatorship. Part II portrays the press as a victim of democracy under the first two of Nigeria’s three democratic experiments. Part III exposes the romance between the press and the military and the effect that peculiar relationship has had on the military, the press, public institutions and the people. It also highlights the role of the press in Nigerian military coups. Part IV explains the dynamics and perplexity of the press-military romance and the benefits the Nigerian press establishment and practitioners derived from this relationship.

Ndaeyo E. Uko
Cairns, Australia, August 2004
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I am grateful to Captain Sunday Kazi and Lt. Colonel Audu Kaka who initiated me into the psyche and culture of the Nigerian military even before I became a journalist. I am also indebted to senior military officers, intelligence chiefs, military governors and ministers, military service chiefs and heads of state who discussed their work and ideas with me. In particular, I’d like to thank the following military chiefs whose discussions with me while they were in office provided excellent insights to the press military relationship: Military President Gen. Ibrahim Babangida, military Head of State Gen. Sani Abacha (late), Air Marshall Ibrahim Alfa, Chief of Air Staff (late), Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Murtala Nyako, Colonel U. K. Bello (late, ADC to President Babangida), Major Debo Bashorun, press officer to Babangida, military governors Colonel Lawan Gwadabe, Brigadier Godwin Abbe. Most other officers would, for varying reasons, rather not be named in this book. I also acknowledge the insights of civilian presidents and ministers, high ranking civilians serving both military and civilian regimes, civilian governors, ministers and ambassadors.
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Part 1
The Source of the Power

Chapter 1:
Word of Man,
Word of God

The book starts with the exploration of the peculiar origin of the Nigerian press, establishing that its divine birth conferred on it enormous influence, authority and credibility, and a formidable tool in the fight against colonial rule.

Chapter 2:
Press Bashing,
Colonial Style

Chapter 2 captures the stormy relationship between the belligerent Nigerian press and the colonial administration. In addition to its responsibility as public watchdog, the Nigerian press also played the role of the political opposition. The key people crusading for independence and for personal political power were journalists who would emerge as leaders of independent Nigeria. The chapter examines the struggle of the press against the many colonial laws and other attempts to muzzle the press.

Chapter 3:
Two Colonial Experiences:
Nigeria and Australia

The third chapter compares the circumstances of the birth of the press in two former British colonies, Nigeria and Australia. The comparison explains the enormous power and influence of the Nigerian press and the considerably weaker and less influential press in Australia. It also highlights the confounding resilience and combat potentials of the Nigerian press.
INDEX

Abacha, General Sani ix, 27, 57, 64, 68, 85, 87, 96, 107, 111-125, 127-131, 141, 142, 153, 162, 165, 167, 170, 178, 196, 197
Abacha, message of solidarity for 123
Abbe, Brigadier Godwin ix
Abiola, Moshood 27, 50, 51, 73, 107, 112, 113, 122, 139, 141, 142, 165, 170
Abo Call 23
Abuja 85, 114, 166, 200
Abuse 38, 53, 70, 85, 102, 114, 138, 144, 176, 197
Accomplices 131
Accountability 21, 37, 111, 188
Action governor 154
Action Group 14, 43
Adeniyi, Tola 98, 165
Adewusi, Sunday 59
Administrative vacuum 37
Advertisement revenue 60, 157
Africa vi, x, 2, 6, 7, 16, 17, 36, 43-46, 50, 60, 61, 85, 115, 155, 157, 160, 161, 162, 168, 184, 199
Aggression 11, 59, 109, 164, 173
Agitation 6, 22, 25, 34
Aikhomu, Augustus 91, 95, 97, 102, 103
Ajabide, Kunle 142, 196
Ake, Claude 152
Akuilu, Halilu 105, 106
Akinfeleye, Ralph 17, 160
Akintola, S.L. 5
Alfa, Air Marshall Ibrahim ix
Alli, Major General Chris 163
Ambassador ix, 166
Amnesty International 115, 162
Antagonism 10
Anti corruption campaign 79
Anti establishment 22
Anti white 22
Anti-Abacha press 113, 114
Anyanwu, Christine 142, 196
Argentina 120
Assassinations 48, 132, 136
Attack 16, 43, 70, 162, 167, 194
Australia vii, x, 1, 19-22, 24-26, 28, 29, 33, 87, 161
Awolowo, Obafemi 5, 14, 16, 41, 43, 48, 56, 164
Azikiwe, Nnamdi (Zik) 5, 10, 26, 35, 40, 47, 48, 132, 164

Babangida boys 109
Balewa, Abubakar Tafawa 5, 39, 42, 47, 129, 137, 155
Bali, Domkat 125, 188
Romancing the Gun

Barton, Frank 7, 12, 13, 16, 17, 46, 77, 88
Bedu-Addo, Kojo 4, 5, 7, 10, 17, 54
Benin 60, 85, 115, 172
Biafra 44, 48, 78, 80, 87

Birth, circumstances of 21, 29
Bloodshed 112, 172, 174
Bloody coups 48
Bomb, letter 100, 105, 106, 140
Bribery 37, 55, 59, 73, 81, 106, 108
Bribes 54, 55
British army 146
British Home Office 13
British West Africa 6
Broadcast 60, 83, 84, 89, 95, 101, 128, 133-136, 139, 140, 195
Brutality 111
Buhari junta, vileness of the 101, 102
Bungled 136
Bureaucratic rituals 166

Canberra 28, 30
Castigate 80
Casualty 82, 128, 129
Censorship 22, 28, 29, 57, 58, 70, 98, 115, 149, 197
Champagne 58
Christianity 3, 6, 23
Church Missionary Society 3
Circulation 24, 41, 60, 74, 76, 85, 122, 131, 156, 194, 195, 197
Civil governance 127
Civilized 11, 24, 45, 97, 160
Classified 128, 193
Clique 67, 186, 188
Colonial dictatorship vii, 145
Colonialism 4, 5, 19, 22, 26, 45, 66, 164
Colonist 10-12, 14, 24, 34, 36-38, 89
 Colony 12, 14, 16, 22-26
Columnist 102, 104
Common enemy 36
Complicity 64, 74, 168
Confiscate newspapers 13
Confrontation 31, 42, 83
Conspiracy 106, 163
Conspiracy theory 106
Constituent assembly 152
Constitutional barriers 160
Contempt 13, 191, 192
Convict 21, 40, 126, 195
Corrupt 59, 81, 82, 84, 103, 133, 137, 144, 154, 165, 167, 178, 185, 189, 195
Corruption 19, 37, 38, 45, 46, 53, 57, 61, 65, 74, 76, 79, 81, 82, 84, 103, 114, 131, 133, 155, 179, 182, 186
Corruption, his trial for 114
Countercoup 75, 120, 132
Coup announcement 128, 139, 141
Coup announcer 113, 114
Coup broadcasts 120, 142, 171
Coup experts 87, 138
Coup lexicon 134
Coup plotter ix, 64, 66, 69, 85, 114, 115, 119, 121, 128-130, 136, 139, 140
Coup stopper ix
Index

Coup, bloodless 129, 169
Coup, financier of the 139
Coup, military 47, 60, 64, 65, 72, 74, 73, 84, 102, 103, 118, 127, 128, 133, 136-138, 140, 142, 156, 165, 169
Coup, palace 93, 113, 130, 131, 142, 180
Coup, phantom 114, 131, 142
Credibility 1, 48, 56, 60, 157, 188
Criminal Code 191, 192
Criminal libel 11
Crisis 52, 116, 154, 173, 184, 198
Criticism, raging 59
Critics 24, 91, 96, 97, 98, 117, 121, 123, 128, 142, 148, 165
Crudeness 98
Crusade 10, 38, 61, 79, 82, 84
Crusading journalists 40
Cunning 89, 93, 95, 139
Curfew 136, 137, 178, 179, 190

Daily Service 10
Daily Sketch 43
Daily Telegraph 10, 25, 28
Dawn to dusk curfew 146
De facto opposition party 145
“Decree 1” 75
“Decree 11 of 1976” 90
“Decree 2” 75
Decree Number 4 70, 90, 152, 165
Decrees, draconian anti press 93
Democracy, victim of vii, 31,
Democracy, western libertarian 28
Despotism, enthronement of 32, 160
Detain 95, 101, 193
Detention 38, 70, 95, 99, 101, 114, 122, 142, 153, 182, 195
Diamond, Larry 33, 36, 46, 53
Dictator, venomous military 95
Dictatorial 69, 75, 89, 101, 109, 123, 185, 187
Dictators, full blown 89
Dikko, Umaru 50, 51
Dimka, Suwa (Buka) 48, 72, 86, 128, 129, 130, 135, 136, 169, 178
Directive 13, 98
Directorate of Military Intelligence 121
Discretion 74, 78, 193
Diya, General 115, 118
Dodan Barracks 69, 74, 79, 101, 120
Draconian laws 11
Drumming and dancing 60
Drummond, William 152
Drunkenness 134, 136
Dudley, Billy 37, 46, 88
Economic sanctions 13
Editor vi, x, 23, 26, 27, 41, 56, 57, 90, 91, 95, 98, 100-102, 104-106, 107, 113, 142, 158, 196, 199, 200
Ejoor, David 82, 175
Ekpu, Ray x, 57, 107
Ekwelie, Sylvanus 6, 7, 14, 17, 40, 46, 147, 160
Elias, Taslim 41, 46, 160
Elite 10, 23, 38, 85, 164
Embezzlement 57, 81, 92, 97, 131
Emergency Decree 75
Emergency Powers Act 40, 193
Empire 11, 138, 141, 165
Enahoro, Anthony 41, 163
Ethical conflicts 60
Evangelistic tool 65

Fawehinmi, Gani 98, 105
Federal legislator 124
Felony 41, 196
Financial fiefdoms 121
Financier 139
Firing squad 128, 130
First Republic 31, 33, 36-38, 45, 48, 49, 51, 131, 146, 155, 163, 193
Flamboyance 81
Flinders Chronicle 22
Freedom Forum 162
Fright, expression of 109

Garba, Major General Joe ix, 129, 130
Ghana 15, 115
Giwa, Dele 57, 100, 105-108, 140, 186
Gospel 4-6
Government propaganda organ 79
Governor 10, 16, 21, 22, 25, 26, 47, 49, 56, 67, 71, 74, 77, 80, 81, 83, 84, 89, 101, 103, 110, 115, 130, 131, 133, 134, 137, 138, 154, 155, 164, 165, 172, 173, 175, 178, 179, 191, 192, 197, 199
Governor General 10, 16, 24, 191
Gowon, Yakubu 47, 49, 50, 63, 68, 75, 77-84, 86, 91, 102-104, 108, 109, 124, 129, 130, 133, 134, 147, 149,

Romancing the Gun

151, 153, 156, 158, 169, 171, 174, 175, 194
Great Britain 4, 9, 20, 33, 39, 169
Gwadabe, Colonel Lawan ix, 131

Hachten, William 6, 7, 11, 16, 17, 19, 29, 37, 40, 43-46, 88
Haruna, Mohammed 57, 58, 61, 122, 125, 150, 160
Hausa 36, 120
Heavy hand of authority 12
Henningham, John x, 28, 30
Heroism 14, 15, 24
Hideouts 114
Homosexually-centered 185
Hooper, Alan 146, 159
Hunged 114, 118, 121
Hypersensitive officials 12

IBB 99, 165
Ibrahim, Waziri 48
Ibru, Alex 27, 56
Ideological threat 14
Idiagbon, Tunde 61, 90, 95, 130, 135, 181
Igbo 47, 132
Ikoyi 99, 105, 139, 140
Illegitimate 64, 73, 166
Immediate effect 134, 135, 175, 177, 179, 186
Imperial Majesty 11
Independence vi, viii, 1, 4, 5, 9, 10, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20, 22, 24, 27, 33-38, 40, 41, 44, 45, 46, 54, 60, 69, 101, 127, 129, 156, 163, 164, 169, 184
Indigenous press 7
Mendacious 11, 122
Middle belt 163, 185, 186, 188, 189
Militant nationalism 15
Military despots 89
Military government, undermine the 158
Military might 158
Military rule vi, 14, 19, 29, 31, 46, 47, 49, 60, 63, 66, 67, 68, 72, 73, 76, 77, 81, 88, 97, 98, 124, 141, 142, 143, 145, 147, 149, 152, 153, 156, 158-160, 162, 163, 166, 167, 197
Military rule, implications of 158
Military strongman 117, 127, 167
Military takeover 49, 60, 65, 69, 73, 163, 181
Military, return of the 59, 60, 158
Millionaire publishers 27
Misapplication 103
Mismanagement 53, 81, 97, 103, 180, 186
Missionary 3, 11, 20, 22
Mobile Police Force 59
Momoh, Tony 17, 104
Morning Post 42, 43, 158
Mozambican People's Liberation Army 86
Murderer 105
Music, martial 128, 133, 134
Mutineers 128, 129
Mutiny 129, 172

Romancing the Gun

Muzzle and harass the press 69
Muzzle the press 1, 89, 116, 153, 159
Mytton, Graham 17, 51, 52, 61

National coffers 37
National Concord 50, 57, 72, 101, 164
National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) 14, 39
National Guard 186, 187
National Party of Nigeria (NPN) 48, 50, 58
Nationalism 6, 11, 15, 17, 33, 34, 36, 163
Nationalist press 11
Newbreed 96, 97, 101, 195
Newspaper closures, wave of 116
Newspaper ordinance 40, 191, 192
Newspapers, ebullient and iconoclastic 45
Newspapers, government controlled 56, 72
Newswatch 27, 100, 101, 104, 106, 110
Nigerian journalists, an indictment on the current crop of 123
Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) 60, 89, 90
Nigerian press, grouse against 60, 137
Nigerian press, the naivety of the 147
Nigerian Television Authority 56, 139
Nkrumah, Kwame 15
Non commissioned officers 72
Non-inflammatory journalism 87
Northern Advocate 10
Northern People's Congress 39
Northern reprisal, the fear of 133
Nwuneli, Onuora 7, 17, 159, 160
Nyako, Admiral Murtala ix, 136
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nzeogwu, Major 47, 72, 129, 131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obaigbena, Nduka 97, 101, 104, 105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obasanjo, Olusegun 48, 49, 57, 58, 63, 68, 75, 86, 87, 90, 98, 106, 114, 118, 124, 131, 142, 149, 156, 169, 170, 176, 194, 197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obi, Ben 142, 196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obi, Chike 38-40, 142, 196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ofeimun, Odia 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offence 76, 90, 91, 191-196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ogre 11, 24, 116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olgate 90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oilgate Affair 90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okocha, J.J. 120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onabanjo, Bisi 49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onabule, Duro 141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppressive measures 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppressors 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of African Unity 177, 184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orka, Major Gideon 72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ownership, concentration of 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxbridge arrogance, almighty 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oyovbaire, Sam 4, 7, 9, 16, 34, 35, 46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plateau State 56, 103, 187, 200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PM News 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political opponents, gunning down some 118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political prisoners 173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political transition 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politico-military routines 89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power, excessive show of 158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President, hybrid 168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press bashing vii, 9, 53, 70, 89, 99, 109, 114, 116, 117, 153, 165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press bashing, elements of 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press censor 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press freedom v, 11-13, 20, 21, 24, 40, 44, 45, 53, 58, 60, 70, 71, 76, 78, 89, 93, 98, 100, 107, 115, 133, 146, 149, 150-153, 157, 159-162, 165, 168, 191, 197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press freedom, curb 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press freedom, erosion of 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press freedom, tradition of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press indiscipline 82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press, campaign to destroy the 111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press, chain the 145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press, fellowship with the 96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press, harassment of the 108, 131, 158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press-government relationship 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime Minister 5, 28, 39, 41, 42, 47, 48, 129, 137, 155, 169, 171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison 14, 15, 74, 78, 91, 115, 142, 162, 194, 196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy 151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prohibition 192, 194, 195, 197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Propaganda, adverse national 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proscription 100, 196, 197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitute 104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public officers 90, 133, 138, 182, 195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public officials 90, 189</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Public Relations machinery 16
Public suspicion 57
Publication 22, 24, 25, 41, 71, 74, 86, 98, 100, 105, 107, 122, 190, 193, 196, 199
Publicity stunts 85
Publisher 12, 22, 26, 27, 29, 56, 77, 96, 97, 101, 104, 105, 112, 115, 122, 131, 138, 142, 165, 192, 195, 196
Punch 49, 50, 60, 73, 83, 101, 109, 154, 163, 168, 197, 198
Punishment 12, 69, 193, 196
Puppet 87, 112, 131, 167
Purge 98, 134, 135, 163, 187

Queen Victoria 11, 14

Rampaging excesses 124
Refurbished anachronism 67
Reggae 154
Regime, loyal supporters of 98
Reneged 48, 102
Revenge 122
Ringleader 48, 135
Riot 91, 121, 157
Rumors 41, 193

Scary coup 121
Scholars v-vii, x, 11, 23, 37, 56, 146, 162

Scrutinize 80
Scrutiny 37, 68, 76, 78, 79, 81, 85
Second Republic 29, 47, 48, 50, 51, 53-55, 60, 74, 92, 146, 155, 157, 158, 193
Secretary of defense 112, 131
Security agents 96, 101, 114, 115, 118, 194
Security chiefs 114, 121
Sedition 11, 12, 13, 25, 38-41, 192
Sedition Ordinance 13
Seditious Offences 12, 191
Seko, Mobutu Sese 59
Self actualization 35
Self censorship 108, 159, 160
Self determination 35
Selfrule 6, 9, 10, 22, 33
Sensational lies 122
Shagari, Shehu 48, 49, 51, 53, 54, 57, 58, 59, 92, 130, 155, 156, 163, 170, 179
Shonekan, Ernest 112, 113, 131, 141, 170
Shopping 81, 138
Show trials 14
Sokoto 48, 187, 189
Solarin, Tai 97
Soldier, unknown 117
Songs 76, 133, 194
Soothsayer 102
Soyinka, Wole 97, 98, 102, 110
Special tribunal 90, 91, 196
Spying 100, 118
Spying charges 100
State of emergency 40, 77
State Security services 121
Stifle all dissent 98
Strike 13, 42, 52, 80
Index

Structural adjustment program 96, 104
Subversive force 10
Successful coup 72, 128, 171, 174, 178
Sunday Post 42
Sunday Standard 56
Sunday Telegraph 25
Suppression 11, 16, 28, 38, 70, 73, 82, 95, 118, 149, 181
Supreme Commander 47, 132, 172, 173
Supreme Military Council 132, 170, 176, 181
Surreally rich 118
Surrender 117, 179
Sydney 22, 25, 29, 30
Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser 22

Tamper 60, 76, 89, 90, 137
Tell 27, 114, 142, 200
The African Messenger 10
The Australian 25
The Comet 10
The Defamatory and Offensive Decree 76
The Examiner 23
The Guardian 7, 16, 27, 46, 55, 56, 58, 73, 74, 90, 91, 97, 100, 103, 112, 113, 116, 119, 125, 136, 156, 160, 164, 197
The Nationalist 55
The New Nigerian 27, 35, 49, 83
The News 27, 30, 51, 56, 101, 102, 113, 142, 159, 167, 197
The Nigerian Constitution 69, 117, 150, 153
The Nigerian Spokesman 10
The Post Express 72
The press, role and status of 33
The Rock ‘N’ Rule Years 98
The Southern Nigerian Defender 10
The Star 70, 71
The Wall Street Journal 120
The Week 27
Third World vi, 19, 29, 146
This Day 27, 164
Thompson, Tunde 90, 91
Timidity 119
Togo 72
Tolerance 11, 80, 108, 117
Townsend, Henry 3
Trial 41, 57, 91, 96, 114
Tribalism 35-38
Tribunal, secret military 142
Tribune 43, 51, 102

Uganda 102
Ugboajah, Frank 46, 158, 160
Uko, Ndaeyo viii, ix, 105, 110
Underdog 23, 123
Underground presses 114
Undue radicals 96
Unitary government 67
United Kingdom x, 41, 51, 161, 192
Unlawful 76, 190-192, 194

Vanguard 27, 101, 164, 200
Vatsa, General 118, 186
Victim vii, 28, 32, 154, 162
Victimization 13
Victory 40, 42, 71, 79, 80, 123, 124
Violence 33, 36, 45, 47, 49, 131, 133, 137, 156

War against dissenting newspapers 121
War Against indiscipline 74, 185
War commander 85
Washington Times 57, 61, 111, 120, 149, 160
West Africa 50, 60, 155, 157
West African Pilot 10, 41
Western democratic model vi
Western Region 16, 36, 40, 45, 49, 67
Williams, Rotimi 39
Wilmot, Patrick 96
Word of God 1, 3-5, 65, 145

Yar'Adua, Musa 87
Yoruba 3, 22, 48, 65, 87, 113

Zaire 59, 72