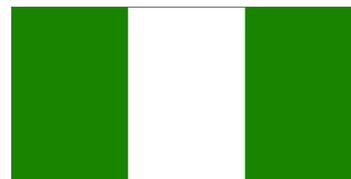


IFLA/FAIFE World Report: Libraries and Intellectual Freedom



Nigeria

12-07-1999

Nigeria returned to democratic rule on May 29, 1999 after having been under military rule for a cumulative period of twenty-nine years since the first military coup of January 1966. It is now widely hoped that democratic rule will endure and that it will guarantee a better protection of the human rights of Nigerians including their rights to freedom of information and expression.

Population:	115,020,000 (1996)
GNP per capita:	\$ 240 (1996)
Government / Constitution:	Republic
Main languages:	English, Yoruba, Hausa, Ibo
Main religions:	Muslim, Christian
Literacy:	57% (1995)
Online:	0,08% (July 2000)

It is true that even under military rule, the constitutional provisions, which guarantee Nigerians "freedom of expression including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference" and other human rights provisions of the overthrown democratic constitution were retained in the statute books. Similarly, the constitutional provisions for an independent judiciary and a free press were also retained.

However, in practice, there were inherent contradictions between the authoritarian ethos of military regimes and the liberal principles that formed the bedrock of the provisions of the universal declaration of human rights. Consequently, successive military regimes in Nigeria imposed restrictions on the retained human rights provisions of the constitution through military decrees and other measures. The operation of an independent judiciary and a free press were thus severely fraught under military rule as government evolved a variety of methods, some subtle, some not-so-subtle, in an effort to contain them. The critical press, in particular, from time to time were subjected to direct government pressure such as, for example, the seizure of entire stocks of issues of magazines, temporary closure of media houses, arrest and detention of journalists, etc.

There is no evidence to suggest that libraries or librarians came under such pressure during military rule, presumably because unlike their mass media counterparts, they were not considered to be a "threat". This should however not be regarded as a compliment since it raises fundamental questions about the effectiveness of libraries, particularly public libraries, in the Nigerian context as a proactive social institution for mass communication and the protection of intellectual freedom.

Public libraries in Nigeria are indeed severely flawed as agencies for mass communication and social development. They are virtually non-existent in the rural and urban marginal areas and even in the few urban centres where they exist, their orientation is narrow and book-centred and their services are undermined by poor funding and obsolete and inadequate stocks.

Structural rather than political constraints are thus the major impediments facing public libraries in the discharge of their responsibilities as a vital component in the provision of uninhibited access to information and freedom of expression to the Nigerian public. These constraints will persist under the new democratic dispensation unless urgent steps are taken to overhaul and strengthen the public library system in Nigeria. Such steps should start with a drastic review of the philosophy and goals of the public library in the Nigerian social milieu. It should also include the re-designing of the resources and services to enable them cater more effectively for the social, cultural and developmental needs of all sections of the Nigerian population; old, young; literate, non-literate; as well as rural and urban dwellers alike.