

For all that is changing, free speech is still ‘under siege’ in Nigeria

Bill Snaddon discusses political reform in Nigeria and the prosecution of the killers of Nigerian writers and journalists.



At noon on Sunday 19 October 1986, Nigerian investigative journalist Dele Giwa was killed by a letter bomb. The charismatic scribe and founding editor of *Newswatch* magazine was assassinated in his Lagos home. Obfuscation and conspiracy still surrounds Giwa’s death. Needless to say, [justice has yet to be found](#) but more than 30 years on, resolute voices remain in [calling for the case to re-opened](#).

“I dare say that all the many problems and abnormalities of present day Nigeria are the consequence of un-redressed injustice of yesteryears, Giwa’s own, inclusive,” [writes Dele Ojogbede](#), a Lagos-based lawyer. The Committee to Protect Journalists, a New York-based press freedom advocate, would likely agree with Ojogbede’s assessment. In 2015, [Nigeria was awarded a place on CPJ’s unflattering Impunity Index](#), which lists nations that fail to bring the killers of

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journalists to justice.

With the 30-year commemoration of Giwa's ruthless murder in mind, it seems an appropriate time to take the pulse of free speech in Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and the [continent's second largest economy](#) after South Africa. To assist me in this, I approached Tade Ipadeola, an award winning Nigerian poet who, for good measure, is also a lawyer and [president of the PEN Nigeria Centre](#). "Despite the passage of time, the evolution of new media channels, and an increase in the number of professional and amateur reporters, freedom of expression is still under siege in Nigeria," says Ipadeola, winner of the [Nigeria Prize for Literature in 2013](#) for his collection of poetry, *The Sahara Testaments*.

It wasn't lost on me that the poet and I were communicating over email, after I had initially pestered him by sending a direct message through Twitter. Thirty years ago, I might have sent him a fax, or dialled an expensive phone call. But how would I have got to that stage? How would I know that this lawyer and free speech advocate in west Africa even exists? Chances are, I wouldn't unless I went there but now we have Twitter.

Despite the internet and the huge increase in flows of information and the availability of knowledge that it offers, freedom of expression in Nigeria is seemingly heading in the wrong direction. "For a while, since the return of democratic rule in 1999, there was a lull in attacks against free expression but the honeymoon is over," says Ipadeola. "From every indication, the beast of censure is back."

What's more, the beast has returned just at the time when free speech is needed more than ever. "If Nigeria is to rid herself of Boko Haram and every other incarnation of extremist religious groups, there has to be open and frank debate about what we want as a country," he says. "There isn't any other way in a democracy."

Boko Haram, the deadly Islamist group that has ravaged much of northern Nigeria, is a major obstacle in the way of Nigeria's true peace and stability. In a country that is often and too simply described as having a "Muslim north" and a "Christian south", religious tolerance that is based on a free exchange of ideas is critical to ensuring lasting cohesion.

I also asked Ipadeola about the role of China in Africa, and its rising influence with many cash-hungry governments. It's well documented that African nations are increasingly looking to China for inspiration, and treasure. It's equally well documented that the Chinese 'model' is no friend of free speech.

Earlier this year, Nigeria's president Muhammadu Buhari took a sizeable delegation of ministers to China to talk business. Buhari returned home with a ["\\$6 billion \(5.3 billion euro\) loan and a currency swap deal"](#), reported *Vanguard*, a Nigerian publication. On the intersection of free expression and foreign relations, Ipadeola says "the greatest danger to Nigeria is not president Buhari's affiliation with the Chinese model of governance". This alliance, he notes, is "a child of

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economic necessity”.



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Nigeria is a federal republic with a presidential system; its 1999 constitution provides for a bicameral national assembly. Ipadeola argues that “The real threat is a tendency to foist a Sunni theocracy on Nigeria through her alliance with Saudi Arabia. The foolishness of that kind of thinking should be clear to see for anyone who has been in power before”. Recently, a motion to have the Islamic sharia criminal procedure incorporated into Nigerian law passed the second reading stage of the House of Representatives.

If other countries’ experiments with sharia criminal procedure are any guide, the ability to protest and speak one’s mind in the face of such a legal regime is, putting it mildly, not particularly easy. A pile of research could be presented as evidence, or, you could take a glance at Saudi Arabia’s flogging of bloggers and treatment of women. Bangladesh’s blasphemy laws offer another instructive example of how strict Islamic legislation stifles free debate, and can be a death sentence for those who dare question the official wisdom.

Ipadeola, however, suggests a more humane way for Nigeria. “For there to be meaningful

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dialogue, everyone should be free to express their thoughts and convictions. It is that ambience which fosters constructive dissent, significant collaboration and even social and technical innovation.” Will Nigeria reverse its current course and follow a more open path? It’s difficult to say.

Worryingly, Ipadeola is concerned that another civil war may be “looming” for the nation of 180 million people and which is made up of over 400 ethnic groups. “The eye of the gathering storm is the intersection between the state and radical religion,” he says.

President Buhari, who came to power in May 2015 on the back of local and international goodwill, has struggled to maintain his popularity in his short time as leader. Writing in the [New York Times](#) in October 2016, acclaimed Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was succinct in her appraisal of Buhari. “He had an opportunity to make real reforms early on, to boldly reshape Nigeria’s path,” she writes. “He wasted it.”

It must be remembered that Buhari, while winning a democratic election in 2015, is a former military man who ruled Nigeria with an iron fist for a short and rocky spell in the mid-1980s; before yet another coup swept him from power. This time around, he still *could* prove to his detractors that he is in fact a [“converted democrat”](#), as he described himself on the eve of becoming president last year. But the winds seem to be blowing the other way.

Musing on Nigeria’s recent past, Ipadeola says: “I cannot recollect a single instance in which the state secured a conviction against the killer of a writer or journalist”. Perhaps as a consolation for not bringing anyone to justice, Nigeria’s government in 2008 named a street after Dele Giwa in the capital city, Abuja. Surely now, the government could go one step better and re-open his case in an effort to find some answers. With luck, it would be the first of many cases of killed Nigerian journalists and writers who have seen little justice and deserve much more.

Bill Snaddon is a freelance journalist. [Read his full interview with Tade Ipadeola here.](#)

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