# **Freedom of speech and the Nigerian Society**

“The liberty of the press is indeed essential to the nature of a free state; but this consists in laying no previous constraints upon publication and not in freedom from censure for criminal matter when published. Every man has an undoubted right to lay what sentiment he pleases before the public. To forbid this, is to destroy the Freedom of the press; but if he publishes what is improper, mischievous, or illegal, he must face the consequences of his temerity” -Sir William Blackstone

In Nigeria, the freedom of expression is protected by section 39 (1) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria constitution. Despite of this constitutional protection, the Nigerian media was controlled by the government throughout its much of its history, with some even to this day. Freedom of expression or freedom of speech or freedom of press is a notion that “every person has the natural right to freely express themselves through any media and frontier without outside interference, such as censorship, and without fear of reprisal, such as threats and persecutions” This right, though restricted and controversial “constitutes one of the essential foundations of a democratic society, one of the basic conditions for its progress and for the development of every man” . It existed since ancient times dating back to the Greek Athenian era and now recognized by all the international, regional as well as domestic human rights instruments. Unfortunately however, it took a long time for the right to be included in the Nigerian constitutions as a fully entrenched right.

In a democratic state such as Nigeria, full guarantee of freedom of speech by the government is as important as the government itself. According to the Oxford dictionary “freedom of speech is the power or right to express one’s opinions without censorship, restraint or legal penalty.” Wikipedia on the other hand, defines it as “a principle that supports the freedom of an individual or a community to articulate their opinions and ideas without fear of retaliation, censorship or legal sanction.” Simply put, freedom of speech refers to the right to speak on certain issues without fear of punishment. As earlier said, it is very important to ensure that freedom of speech is guaranteed in a country like Nigeria. However, the case has not always been so because press men and women are often being gagged and assaulted. Even the normal citizens and not left out. This is not without reasons some of the reasons are explained below.

One of the reasons why freedom of speech is poorly guaranteed is false accusation. There have been many cases where people have been wrongly accused for one reason or the other. For this reason people are somewhat limited in the expression of ideas or thoughts. In a situation whereby an individual, an highly placed individual gets into a scandal and after thorough investigation, the accused comes out innocent. The government may actually restrict the public's freedom of speech.

Quite contrasting one may actually infer that another reason why the government does not fully guarantee freedom of speech is because the bad eggs in government actually want to cover up their dastardly acts. Under normal circumstances, if freedom of speech is fully guaranteed people (politicians) that have skeletons in their cupboards may not be at ease. Therefore, they might want to use that to cover their tracks.

In my own opinion I believe that from the problems highlighted above, we can derive possible solutions also. Thorough investigation should be conducted as to ascertain properly if an individual is guilty or not. This will reduce drastically the instances of false accusation.

Also I believe that if politicians and highly placed individuals should keep clean records and keep off from incriminating activities, there would be no need to limit or deny freedom of speech.