

Elections and Media Constraints in Sub-Saharan Africa



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"Free and fair" elections depend not only on factors like adequate election management bodies, transparency and the absence of coercion. For elections to be truly free and fair citizens must also have access to sufficient information about the parties, candidates and voting procedures to ensure the making of enlightened and valid choices in the voting process.

Access to sufficient information can only occur in a milieu where all the players, including candidates, political parties, citizens, civil society and journalists, can openly provide facts and express political positions. Without a doubt, the media play a vital role in this process, to the extent that democratic elections are simply unthinkable without free media.

Over the past 20 years, the media landscapes throughout Africa have accompanied and reflected the ups and downs of broader democratisation processes. At the beginning of the 1990s, the media in Sub-Saharan Africa grew exponentially thanks to political liberalisation grounded in democratic transition or to the voids left by weak states. Even though media growth in some countries was hindered by incumbents resisting reform, the new private media opened up spaces for public debate, for denouncing abuses by the authorities and for freeing information from the yoke imposed by

the political power. During elections, where the ties between democratisation and media are most evident, the media became the main platform through which candidates and parties can make their views and programmes known. Therefore, the media are essential in giving voters practical information on electoral processes, voting operations and the unfolding of campaigns.

Nevertheless, just as doubts arise regarding the democratic commitment of the ruling parties that organise these elections, questions arise about the capacity of the actors in the media landscape throughout Sub-Saharan Africa to actually play their part in elections. The basis for these doubts has its background in the constraints that prevent the media from offering realistic opportunities for democratic power alternations, leading them instead to reinforce dominant party systems.

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MEDIA AND POLITICAL PARTIES IN AFRICA: DANGEROUS LIAISONS

Private newspapers and political parties emerged hand in hand during the reforms that started in the early 1990s. A case in point is Zambia where the independent newspaper *The Post* since it was established in 1991 was an important voice in the struggle for the creation of a multi-party political system. Particularly in Francophone Africa private newspapers and political parties have kept close ties. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal, the media landscapes are often characterised with phrases like “one party, one paper” or “one minister, one paper.” The private radio stations that emerged in the mid-1990s are also widely linked to political figures. During the DRC election in 2006 for example, 7 out of the 33 presidential candidates owned their own radio and television stations in Kinshasa. Many candidates running for national or provincial assemblies also created their own radio stations in their hometowns. Such media were undeniably propaganda instruments rather than providers of balanced and credible information.

In the countries where the return to political competition resulted in instability or civil war (Burundi, Rwanda, Côte d'Ivoire for instance), newspapers and radio stations were enlisted as combatants for the various political movements and are now accustomed to being used as propaganda tools. Elsewhere, poverty and threats to press freedoms led many media to seek protection and support from influential politicians and businessmen. In unfavourable economic environments, media fragility heightens the scramble to sell airtime or space to the highest bidder. In these circumstances, the spectrum of media actors simply reflects the varying financial means of the different political parties. Thus, the media tend to reproduce unfair electoral competition, as incumbents are quick to exploit their monopolised access to state resources to secure tenure.

PRESIDENTIAL OR GOVERNMENTAL PUBLIC MEDIA

Government control over state media is a well-anchored tradition in most African

countries, despite the growth of civilian rule and the evolution of public media as more administratively and financially independent “public corporations”. Regimes continue to have direct influence on the role these media play during elections. Reports from the EU, UN and local media monitoring centres demonstrate that, while new electoral regulations usually recognise that all candidates and parties should benefit from equal access to public media, in practice the imbalance in favour of contending incumbents is flagrant and systematic. In the DRC for instance, the monitoring centre of the broadcasting regulation body showed that, during the first round of the 2006 presidential election, national television (RTNC) news devoted nearly 2 hours to the incumbent President Joseph Kabila, versus some 22 minutes to the remaining 32 candidates. For the election runoff between the two remaining challengers, national television newscasts devoted nearly two hours to Kabila and only ten minutes to the main opposition candidate Jean-Pierre Bemba. In some cases, opposition media outlets use executive confiscation of public media as an excuse to justify their own radical and unbalanced positions.

REGULATION AUTHORITIES: INDEPENDENT REFEREES OR POLITICAL INSTRUMENTS?

A relative new development is that during election periods in parts of Africa the activities of the public media, and sometimes also private radios and televisions, are regulated by independent communications or broadcasting authorities. These regulatory bodies are in charge of organising the media's involvement in the election campaigns, enforcing media regulations and dealing with complaints lodged against media outlets.

These authorities emerged in the wake of media sector liberalisation or in the course of peace processes. Overall, they are institutionally fragile, underfinanced and ill-equipped, often inactive and sometimes incompetent. Generally, they also are too politicised. Regulating the media is perilous and faced with a number of challenges. Journalists distrust media regulatory organisations because they just don't want to see any intervention from the public authorities in their daily work. Moreover, governments often use these regulatory bodies to restrain the influence of the media that are giving a voice to the opposition, while having no power to force the public media into being more balanced. Therefore, these bodies are widely accused by opposition parties of being yet another political instrument of the dominant party to restrict the freedom of the press. Unable to force the public media to be balanced and fair, they are sometimes viewed as useless institutional elements in a “democratic kit” exported by donor countries to African countries. After all, how can elections be fair when there is no referee to insure that all political programmes can be presented to the public?

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CHALLENGES TO ACCESS TO INFORMATION

In order for citizens to be able to make well-informed choices, access to information is pivotal. In many Sub-Saharan African countries, two major challenges prevent the population from access to balanced political information during election periods. First, journalists face many constraints in their daily work, thus preventing them from accessing even the most basic data. In countries where states have monopolised the media landscape for decades, access is restricted by a strong tradition of withholding public information. Yet, free and fair elections require transparency and communication devoid of deliberate lies and propaganda. These requirements demand radical departures from the past, as administrations need to make information public and journalists need to learn where to find the data they need and how to demand it. Indeed, the lack of access to information can lead the media to report rumours, to voice fake opinion polls, and to make hazardous forecasts with devastating consequences. In the DRC's 2006 election and Kenya's 2008 election, the media on each side presented as a confirmed fact the victory of "their" candidate, preparing their militants to reject and distrust any other results that would later be published by the electoral commission.

The high frequency of press freedom violations also hampers the quest for information. Many African journalists are attacked and detained and thus forced to self-censorship to survive. This is especially true since attacks generally do not result in investigations or punishments. In countries like Burkina Faso, Rwanda and Togo, journalists' self-censorship has probably become the major obstacle to the right of citizens to access information.

The second challenge to citizen access to information is the limited reach of most of the media. In many African countries, the written press is limited to the capital city. Print runs are generally small. Even if newspapers circulate from one reader to the next, they still only reach a small number of the urban elite. Extreme poverty means that large portions of the population are illiterate or unable to purchase newspapers. Costly television set and expensive and unreliable access to electricity means that televised news also have a very limited reach. In places like the Central African Republic, Chad, Burundi and Republic of Congo, national television is not only monopolised, but also scarcely received outside the capital cities. As far as radio is concerned, private radio stations broadcast on FM and often have very limited reach (within a radius of 50 to 100 km), and very few are able to invest in short-wave broadcasting. In some parts of the Central African Republic, Mali and Chad, for instance, some voters might not have access to balanced and fair electoral information simply because they do not have access to any form of media at all.

A savoir
La procédure à suivre lors du vote

Les Congolais vont entrer aux urnes le 30 juillet prochain. Jusque-là pourtant, bon nombre d'électeurs ne savent pas encore la procédure à suivre lors du vote. Consciente de cette difficulté, la Commission électorale indépendante (CEI) éclaire l'opinion à travers le schéma ci-dessous.

- 1- A l'entrée de tout bureau de vote, un assesseur réceptionne votre passe pour gérer le file d'attente et transmettre les cartes d'électeur de l'assesseur n°1 à l'assesseur n°2.
- 2- L'assesseur n°1 reçoit la carte d'électeur, vérifie l'absence de l'encre indélébile sur les doigts et l'inscription sur la liste électorale.
- 3- Le (la) président (e) du bureau de vote donne le bulletin paraphé de l'élection présidentielle.
- 4- Une fois dans l'isoloir, l'électeur marque son choix sur le bulletin et le plie pour assurer le secret.
- 5- En quittant l'isoloir, il va introduire le bulletin plié dans l'urne orange, mobile pour l'élection présidentielle.
- 6- Il va se présenter, sur la table, devant le (la) secrétaire qui lui donne un bulletin paraphé pour les législatifs.
- 7- Dans l'isoloir, il fera de nouveaux choix avant de plier son bulletin de vote.
- 8- Comme pour la présidentielle, l'électeur va glisser son bulletin plié dans l'urne blanche destinée aux scrutins législatifs.
- 9- Après les deux votes combinés qui se déroulent en présence des témoins, des observateurs et des journalistes, l'électeur se pointe devant l'assesseur n°2 qui lui applique l'encre indélébile sur le doigt et lui remet sa carte d'électeur.

Comment noter sur le bulletin de vote

Il suffit, pour l'électeur, de marquer une croix (x) ou un signe d'addition (+), ou encore d'apposer une empreinte sur la case vide qui se présente à côté du logo et de la photo du candidat de son choix.

Le vote est secret

Le vote est secret. Tout électeur qui se rend aux urnes est libre d'exprimer son choix, mais cela doit se faire en toute discrétion dans l'isoloir. C'est pour cette raison qu'il est interdit de véhiculer ou de discuter ses idées politiques à l'extérieur ou à l'intérieur d'un bureau de vote. La Constitution en vigueur garantit, certes, la liberté d'expression à tous les citoyens en République démocratique du Congo. Le citoyen est donc libre de manifester ses idées, d'appartenir à un parti politique ou de le soutenir dans le respect de la loi. Mais lorsqu'il va voter, l'électeur doit éviter d'influencer les autres ou de divulguer son choix dans le bureau de vote. Le secret de vote est institué dans tous les pays démocratiques pour éviter toute menace, intimidation et la pratique d'achat des voix. C'est pour cette raison que dans l'isoloir, l'électeur se retrouve seul devant sa conscience et peut ainsi opérer librement son choix sur le bulletin de vote. Pour plus de garantie, il plie son bulletin avant d'aller l'introduire dans l'urne en présence des témoins des partis politiques et des observateurs. La Rédaction

Ce qu'il ne faut pas faire sur le bulletin de vote

L'électeur qui va cocher sur plusieurs cases vides ou dans l'un des carrés réservés à la photo ou au logo, verra son bulletin de vote déconsidéré lors du dépouillement, au même titre que celui qui aura déclaré son bulletin.

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SUPPORTING THE MEDIA DURING ELECTIONS

In supporting the organisation of free and fair elections in Africa, the international community has recently turned its attention to the media sector. Indeed, donors acknowledge the necessity of a balanced media throughout the election process, from the preparatory phase and the campaign period to the very day of the vote and the publication of election results. At the same time, donors are realistic about the problems faced by the African media in providing balanced coverage. Therefore, many donors provide multiple forms of media support before and during electoral processes. African journalists are offered training in "election reporting" sessions that last from a couple of days to a couple of weeks. In the preparations for the elections in Sudan in April 2010 there were many courses organised to train journalists from both government and independent media in election reporting. Another type of assistance is support to organisations that provide joint local media coverage of the polls. In Chad in 2001 and in Burundi in 2005 and 2010, the donor community helped the local media to set up one common newsroom and to share correspondents sent to monitor the polls in provinces throughout the country. By pulling together the resources of otherwise independently weak media organisations, these "media synergy" initiatives have given local media a collective ability to play their part as watchdogs of the electoral process. Finally, donor support focuses on consolidating the capacities of local institutions like media regulatory bodies, but also on radio stations

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outside capital cities.

In post-conflict countries, especially in countries with UN peacekeeping missions, donors have also supported the establishment of new "independent" broadcasters with national scope. The UN has created 14 of those radio stations throughout the world.¹⁰ are in Africa. In the DRC, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Darfur and Chad, these nation-wide radio services have played (or aim to play) a major part in the polls in their respective countries. But all these stations have an uncertain future. They are dependent on the UN mission and have been established with no consideration of the local media landscape. Radio Okapi for instance (established jointly by the MONUC and the Swiss Hirondelle Foundation in the DRC) costs 13 million USD annually. This cost is 26 times the budget of the most efficient local community radio, Radio Maendeleo in Southern Kivu. Radio Okapi might be a feather in the budget of the peacekeeping mission (MONUC costs 1,3 billion USD a year), but it would certainly not be sustainable if it had to depend on the local media economy. At this point no one knows what will happen with Radio Okapi the day the MONUC withdraws. At the same time no one knows how free and fair elections can be organised in that country without this station which functions as the only non-state media outlet able to broadcast over the whole country.

There are additional concerns regarding media support programmes established during elections. First, the international community's programme commitment is not the same in every country. Higher levels of international financing for elections tend to correspond with higher levels of donor support to the media, as was the case in the DRC, Burundi, Central African Republic, Guinea and Sudan. In countries where the authorities tightly control the organisation of elections (Congo Brazzaville, Chad, Rwanda), there is less donor support to the media. Yet, it is in these countries that media vigilance faces most obstacles. Second, donor support to courses in election reporting does not really contribute to the strengthening of a critical media in the long-term. Even support to media synergy is often short term and restricted to election issues. Thus, there is a risk that the media lack the capacity to continue with such reporting after the elections, reporting that is essential to ensure an ongoing public

participation. Finally, while the amount of donor money made available during limited election or peace process periods is generally large, the local media environment lacks the capacity to absorb the large number of these sometimes uncoordinated initiatives. The rapid inflow of aid might entice local media actors to switch their priorities from doing their best to cover the polls towards putting aside as much money as possible for the forthcoming darker days. In addition, the support to local media is often mediated and managed through big Northern-based international NGO's with stronger managerial skills. This can deprive local journalists from having a real impact on the identification of their own problems and on the creation of their own solutions.

CONCLUSION

Elections offer an ideal opportunity to observe the extent to which new public spaces have opened up in Sub-Saharan Africa over the past two decades, spaces with room for voicing and discussing critical and contradictory opinions. Recent elections show that despite the apparent diversity of newspapers and broadcasters, political and economic constraints, as well as restricted access to information prevent the development of independent media in Sub-Saharan Africa that can play a part in enlightening citizens. The evolution of information and communication technologies, like mobile phones and the internet, offers new opportunities. Donors must pay more attention to local needs and search for ways to strengthen a pluralist media landscape independent of political parties, governments and the international community. Only such a pluralist landscape will enable the media to contribute to realistic opportunities for democratic power alternations rather than allowing an unbalanced electoral game devoted to maintaining the tenure of the same dominant party.

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