

Eyes of Democracy: Media and elections

- **Manoah Esipisu**

Since my first story as a Reuters' journalist and in my new adopted life, I have been fascinated by watching and reporting on elections. In my new role, I've had the privilege to return to Africa to observe elections and to discuss with colleagues how to better cover elections, strengthen the media and build stronger democracies.

It is against this background that Isaac Khaguli and I have co-authored the Commonwealth Secretariat publication "Eyes of Democracy: Media and Elections",

Elections are basically about citizens having their say. They exercise this sacred right by casting a vote to indicate how they are governed and by whom.

But it doesn't stop there..

Good elections are also dependent on strong institutions one of which is a functional and responsible media and laws and rules that make a healthy democracy. They are also dependent on a conducive environment in which people can freely exercise their choice. In my presentation I will discuss just how deep those linkages go.

But before I get there I invite you to reflect on this question:

– “What has been your experience of elections in Africa?”

Personally I've seen credible elections, flawed elections and a mix of good and bad in between.

Some of your colleagues have shared their experience of covering elections in my book “Eyes of Democracy: Media and Elections” and I will share what they have said with you:

- Daniel Nyirenda, reflecting on Malawi elections says: "One of the main challenges for journalists in Malawi ... is intimidation and violence of political parties"
- Joyce Mulama, of Kenya, was concerned about corruption as one of the hurdles media face. She said: "Journalists receive offers to be the 'media eye' of certain candidates, to ensure any negative stories about those candidates are quashed. Journalists have been offered large amounts of monies to play such roles, and the pressure can be overbearing to the extent that some ... (usually reporters on low incomes) ... give in."
- Timothy Semelani of Swaziland opined: "A year before the poll, prospective candidates for the election had started giving donations to members of their constituency, secretly campaigning for the election"

Of course giving gifts in order to be elected is illegal in Swaziland.

Colleagues, these thoughts reflect just some of the realities of the conduct and coverage of elections in Africa.

Let me hasten to say that there are positive realities too. In fact even in flawed elections positive elements can be found and lessons can be learnt. I will be sharing some of these later on in my presentation.

The first point I'd like to make is that there is an important link between strong institutions and a strong democracy. Institutions such as national electoral and human rights bodies, the courts, and the media are all meant to serve the wider community over the long term, and not a particular party in power.

As we all know, parliamentarians or presidents come and go. They may serve a fixed 2, or 3, 4- or 5-year term; or

might make themselves available for longer ... but the bottom line is that they come and go. It is strong institutions that should ensure the transition is smooth and development is not interrupted by the vagaries of politics. They also have the responsibility to remind the politicians or government of their obligations to the people on both good governance and development.

We at the Commonwealth very much believe that these institutions should be less politicised and more professional, working in the interests of the community and the nation and not serving the narrow political interests of an incumbent government.

Colleagues, I would now like to single out one particular democratic institution that has a vital role to play and ... that is the media.

In some parts of Africa ... a maturing media can be proud of the role it has been playing in providing increased transparency to the democratic process ... providing checks and balances.

It has also been shining a light on the role of government, of individual politicians and political parties, be they from the government or the opposition and has required of them - accountability.

Have no doubt, this media presence makes a difference. Where the media spotlight has been absent, a number of what my friends in Ghana now call "indiscretions" have emerged in the darkness.

The second point that I would like to make is that to really fulfil its role the media need to **know** the length and breadth of the election beat. It must nurture positive and ongoing relationships with the institutions central to the holding of elections.

Colleagues, I spent 3 days with heads of election management bodies in Accra, Ghana, last week, and while

they recognised the media as a partner in the democratic process, they had much to gripe about media's lack of understanding of many aspects of the electoral process.

Covering elections, is not merely about reporting on election day. – but rather covering the election cycle ...beginning, middle and end ... looking at the bigger picture and focusing on elements that are essential for democracy. There are many elements to that cycle and they emerge long before election day ... including issues and challenges of human rights, the general political environment, and socio-economic issues.

So, the day after the election result is announced ... and winners are celebrating and losers mourning all the way to the courts ... preparations for the next elections begin. Where we observe elections, one of the steps into the next elections is looking at our recommendations, especially items critical of the process, and starting to implement.

The election stories to be told are many and varied – There's the composition of electoral commissions, the financing and preparations for elections, voter registration and the publishing of voters list. There are issues of voter and civic education as the media is increasingly depended on to inform the voters of the national registration exercise, to explain what they are required to do and where the registration takes place,.

Then comes the elections campaign and the election itself.

Colleagues If we wait until 18 months or less to an election to be bothered by it, then we've left election coverage until it's too late in the process. If 3 1/2 years have passed since the last election and the media has not informed the electorate of the state of play in the country and what this could mean when the time comes to pick

the country's next leadership – it's too late in the day to start election reporting.

And what of reporting on the election campaigns?

In an ideal world, reporting of elections campaign should be balanced. It does not have to be equal, but there should be equitable and reasonable coverage of the different political contestants. Messages and personalities usually dictate how this may be weighted.

In Uganda in 2006 for instance, the New Vision and the Monitor gave the campaigns good coverage ... covering the same stories with different slants. The effect was that the electorate heard both sides of the debates of the day.

In countries where media plurality is absent, the public loses and politicians win.

It is the media's responsibility to ensure that contestants in the political processes are given access ... and that their messages generally reach the ears and eyes of the population. This can be done in a fair and balanced way.

In Kenya ahead of the 1997 elections, the legal framework provided for free air time, for example, so all the political parties or all the candidates were given x number of minutes in order to be able to do their party political broadcasts on the state broadcaster.

Holding debates amongst candidates is another way that the messages of contending parties are transmitted to citizens, enabling them to better engage in the political process.

Debates amongst presidential candidates especially, have not taken off in Africa ... although many efforts have been made. I recall Kenya's former President Daniel arap Moi, the self-proclaimed "professor of politics" declining to do so in 1992 and 1997 on the grounds that it would hurt his prized incumbency. Similarly the late President Levy Patrick Mwanawasa SC declined to be matched with the political opposition in a debate in Zambia in 2001. A

decade from that time, no debates have yet been held. But debates are a big phenomenon in the US, and they are likely to remain part of the UK culture now. And maybe because of what happened in the recent UK elections, Africa will clamour for debates even more, and I expect incumbent leaders will equally resist with fresh vigour.

It is worthwhile to pay particular attention to some of the observations the Commonwealth has made of how state-owned media operate in elections. In some of the countries where maybe resources and infrastructural development is not so widespread ... the state-owned media usually enjoys a massive advantage over privately owned or so-called independent media in terms of their penetration to the rural areas where much of the population might live. There is very much a need and it is something we stress in virtually every Commonwealth Observer Group report we publish, that the state-owned or public-service broadcaster should operate in an impartial and balanced manner.

It is often the major challenge we face, and for some of the elections we have observed in recent years, one of the major criticisms and one of the major problems has been the massive imbalance of reporting by state-owned media in favour of the government of the day or the president of the day. In Malawi's May 2008 election for instance, 98 percent of all elections-related reports were about the incumbent president or his party. The balance negatively reported activities of opposition parties.

That said, for some countries like Kenya, the state broadcaster is irrelevant because the space has been taken over by private media and the particular challenge of Kenya is vernacular radio stations ... which were licensed without a regulatory environment and guidelines.

On Election Day, colleagues, the role played by the media in reporting on that election cannot be overemphasized.

It is not merely a role that involves gathering and disseminating information but has implications for political stability and peace .

In Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia in 2008 ... and ... for comparison purposes in the Maldives and Bangladesh the same year ... we saw Election Day reporting done effectively. Media was reporting all day long on the conduct of the election.. This gives people an insight ... and crucially removes a news vacuum where rumours can spread; people are aware the election is happening and they can see it being carried out calmly and peacefully around the country. If there are problems ... media should report on those problems, and that is fine ... but it would make sense to also explain whether and how those problems were being dealt with.

Then, when the polling stations close ... and the count is going on ... and the results start to come out, the media, and particularly state media, can do the job of

broadcasting those results, so people have immediate information on the results starting to come in. That would maintain their interest and their confidence in the process.

In Malawi in 2008, the electoral commission reached a deal with a private radio station Zodiac FM, to broadcast the result directly from counting centres. This was hailed as partly responsible for cooling the political temperatures at that time. Where there is a news blackout and there is a big gap between the close of polling and the results starting to come out ... our experience is that the space and air usually filled by rumour and conjecture and speculation and ... also a level of tension.

In Kenya after the 2007 election, the results dried up midstream when the opposition candidate was deep in ascendancy. When they resumed, the candidates were at par ... with a million-vote gap between the leading candidates having vanished. A similar scenario had played

out in Zambia in 2001 although there margins were rather razor-thin. Rumour took over ... the final result announcement in the Kenya case was filmed rather secretly only by the state broadcaster. Days later the head of the electoral commission was quoted as saying he didn't even know who really won the election. Although he clarified later that he meant he didn't know whether President Mwai Kibaki fairly won the election, the damage had already been done.

It has to be emphasised that media can play a really important role in getting the information out to people, maintaining their confidence in the process and then, hopefully, seeing it through ... and issuing the final result. For Africa, radio is critical in this process.

Increasingly, of course, there are people writing blogs and there is the use of the internet.

In the Mozambique elections, there were lots of daily internet e-letters going out to people. It is a question of horses for courses ... there are different ways of doing it, but the principle remains the same ... that of getting the information to people in a timely and transparent manner. In Kenya in 2007, blogs accepted contributions via SMS.

Colleagues – what I have outlined so far should leave no doubt in our minds about how crucial the work of the media is in covering the electoral process and safeguarding democracies.

But what if that vital investigative, information, provision and analytical work was being limited because of the relevant laws and legal arrangements did not exist.

You will be aware that all is not well in Africa here. Some of our laws can and do potentially criminalise the media and hinders it from carrying out its work.

Where a journalist is accused of slandering or misreporting, for example, we have seen that the laws, in a number of instances make this a criminal offence

Colleagues, there is also the flip side of the argument where irresponsibility on the part of the media results in have dire consequences for the society.

For example, in Rwanda ... and in the former Yugoslavia ... the media was very much seen to be inciting the population to hatred and violence.

Predictably, post conflict governments in these countries have taken a strong stance where the media is concern, putting measures in place to ensure that history does not repeat itself.

These countries are challenged to provide a framework for responsible media reporting without suppressing freedom of expression. During a visit to Rwanda this week I saw a society struggling to find that balance. Societies coming out of a conflict do struggle to find that right balance and

of course it is not going to happen immediately ... it does take time. As the Commonwealth, it is one of the things we can encourage and support.

Over and over societies grapple with striking the balance between freedom of expression, the citizen's right to privacy and responsible journalism

One of the best mechanisms that I have seen successfully used to perform this balancing act is self-regulation. This can be done either through a broadcast council or a press council or some kind of code of conduct where media recognises and commits to operating responsibly, but is also given the prerequisite freedoms to undertake its duties. South Africa is a good example of this.

For self-regulation to be successful however investments must be made in developing the media as an institution and in journalism as a profession. Colleagues you know like I do that good investigative journalists, business or political journalists, don't fall from the sky – they are trained and mentored. You know as I do that freedom of expression alone does not get your newspaper, your radio station, your television station or your website good stories, you also need properly trained and equipped journalists.

In would like to wrap up , colleagues with a reminder that

- Africa cannot have good elections without strong institutions.

One of the strong institutions that's needed is a free and functional media

- a media that knows and is committed to reporting elections beyond just election day,
- a media that is free but also responsible

- A media that is invested into and produces good journalists in return
- A media colleagues that is prepared to build and protect democracy

Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma, in "Eyes of Democracy: Media and Elections" said and I quote :

"The media may take an election by surprise, but an election should never surprise the media. It's task is to be informed, to be prepared, to be investigative, and to be ready and willing to look beyond headlines and into the meat of articles and interviews which probe the issues of democracy – fully and fairly. Electorates – and elections – depend on it."

I thank you.

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