



# THE MEDIA AND ELECTIONS IN AFRICA

## A troubled relationship

The relationship between the media and politics has long been debated, theorised and criticised. No more so than during elections, when the role of the media becomes that more important to citizens, politicians and society in general. In this article the authors explore some of the debates presented at the recent Media and Elections in Africa Conference held at the Africa Media Centre at the University of Westminster. The conference was hosted in partnership with Moi University in Kenya, and in association with the UK-Africa Media and Democracy Research Network.

By Sarah-Jane Bradfield and Vivien Marsh

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# AFRICANTRENDS

**D**emocratic principles and policies have only recently begun to emerge in many African states, believes Kwame Karikari, founder and former executive director of the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) and professor in the School of Communication Studies at the University of Ghana. In his presentation “Media and elections in Africa: the story so far”, Karikari unpacked key trends and observations relating to the state of democracy in Africa and the complex and contested role of the news media in this regard.

### *Challenging the credibility of elections*

In 2014 alone 19 African states will hold presidential, parliamentary, provincial and local elections and yet a complex interplay of legitimacy and trust issues are challenging the legitimacy and relevance of democratic elections in Africa. Multi-party political systems and media pluralism have shared the same fate in many African states, Karikari explained, in that they generally suffer a degree of repression after civilian governments are supplanted by military dictatorships. Examples include Côte d'Ivoire's first president Felix Houphouët-Boigny, former Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah and Kenya's first president Jomo Kenyatta who all took similar measures to dispense with media pluralism under an effective dictatorship. As such, the practice of free journalism and multi-party political conditions are only now beginning to flourish in certain states, and any assessment of the media and elections in Africa must consider this, he said.

In considering the role of the media in African elections, Karikari believes the interaction between media and elections is centred on the relationship between politics and the media. If elections comprise a formally endorsed set of (democratic) principles intentionally adopted by governments, in the case of the 2007 African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance and the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance adopted by the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) in 2001, then there must be voluntary consensus among African governments as to the legitimacy of the election process. Yet challenges to the credibility of elections and performance of the media are becoming increasingly commonplace and much of this has to do with the history of liberation and the semi-autocratic regimes which followed.

Describing a group of post-liberation political parties which assumed office after liberation as reincarnations of former nationalist or previously banned parties, Karikari said several new parties also entered the fray but the wave of parties did not seem to represent the wide variety of views and orientations of the time. The collapse of the Soviet system in 1991 and the communist model of China repudiated those models as attractive, accompanied by a decline in radicalism as previously Marxist or socialist parties became 'new liberal', precipitating the emergence of Western liberalism. This new model emphasised constitutionalism and democracy as key conditions for applications for financial aid to struggling African states. Allegedly even ballot boxes during Ghana's

presidential election in 1992 were provided by foreign aid. The effects of these trends added to the clamour for establishing democratic governments, while human rights and corruption-related issues prevailed.

The dawn of the 1990s marked a dramatic change in the media landscape with a boom in media activity and a proliferation of newspapers, radio and television stations. There are exceptions, however, and these include Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa's media which had managed to subsist through the decades despite pressure from the state. However, for the majority of African states the 1990s saw a wave of media activity. Côte d'Ivoire saw an increase from four (state-owned) newspapers to more than 170, and within a few months of liberation in Gabon 200 newspapers were registered. As such, for many countries this was their first introduction to mass journalism and even the first generation of the culture of media and journalism. These events have had significant impact on elections themselves, as political forces have more scope in reaching wider sections of the electorate and voters have increased access to campaign messages and spaces for interaction with political officials. Given that the free media environment is young in Africa, albeit a contested realm, it is still largely in the process of growth and development.

Ownership plays an important role in shaping the media environment, Karikari believes, and the media suffers from the wide-ranging financial challenges faced by many African countries. State-owned media still represent the majority of organisations and only a small group of states have successfully transformed state broadcasters to public service broadcasting organisations, suggesting the reluctance of many governments to relinquish their control of the media. The political elite also still have a dominant influence over many media houses as they are increasingly becoming involved in media ownership. While state-owned media is controlled by government, the commercial sector is owned by a combination of operators, politicians and community broadcasters. Most privately owned media houses do not have the resources to cover nationwide election campaigns and are forced to rely on the goodwill of political parties. In the absence of any substantial data on the relations between voters and the media during elections in Africa, Karikari believes the changes in ownership are having important effects on the industry and will be a factor in future discussions about the media and elections in Africa.

### *Election coverage and the challenges faced by journalists*

Beyond ownership, journalists themselves face many challenges in reporting during election periods in many African countries. African media specialist Marie-Soleil Frère of the Université Libre de Bruxelles in Belgium, author of *Elections and the Media in post-conflict Africa: Votes and Voices for Peace?*, argues that a failure to meaningfully analyse the socio-political environment has perpetuated simplistic, short-sighted projects which retain a short-term focus. Most of the

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original challenges remain. Violence against journalists, impunity and limited access to information are at the forefront of the challenges faced by the majority of media organisations in the selected African countries today. Frère suggests that while there have been success stories, such as in the case of Senegal's 2000 presidential elections and the joint coverage of Chad and the CAR's 2001 and 2005 elections, the majority of media support programmes have built on the myth of the media as a benevolent authority to little effect.

In her presentation entitled "Media and elections: continuing challenges and prospects", Frère shared her analysis of local media performance in six central African countries including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Chad, the Republic of Congo and Central African Republic which share similar political processes having adopted political pluralism in the 1990s, followed by civil war and post-conflict elections after peace agreements. The countries share similarities in their media landscape as well with the sectors undergoing liberalisation in the 1990s, at least four having cases of hate radio after the wars followed by major programmes of media support implemented by international non-governmental organisations and donors. Tasked with the role of ensuring the elections were free and fair, the local media faced an array of challenges ultimately hampering attempts at fulfilling their mandates.

Poor salaries for journalists who are seldom able to leave the newsroom and a heavy reliance on foreign aid have crippled the majority of media organisations which remain weak and fragile. Precarious links between media organisations and political parties perpetuate the fragility of the profession in the selected countries, with politically-supported media now openly emerging in the DRC and Burundi as a result. Little progress has been made on the extension of media coverage in many

of these countries as most media outlets are only able to broadcast in a 50- to 100-kilometre radius, perpetuating unequal access. Increasing accounts of press freedom violations, with escalating incidents of violence against journalists are being reported alongside a trend of growing self-censorship. During the DRC's post-conflict election 125 attacks on the press were reported with this number escalating to 160 in 2011 and 175 in 2012. Heightened levels of bias are further compromising efforts and in most cases media regulatory authorities are believed to have been more biased during their respective country's second election than during their first. Limited access to information underpins the aforementioned dynamics, as most journalists had adopted postwar modes of communication, premised on the belief that most information was classified as a state secret. Following times of conflict public institutions were not familiar with sharing information and a highly propagandist communications sector has prohibited meaningful progress on legal frameworks, which remain inept. Information communication technologies (ICTs) have greatly improved the flow of information and helped journalists' daily work. In Burundi, media "synergies" have developed which involve journalists pooling their coverage to reach different areas, and all radios broadcast the same news bulletin at the same time. However, widespread confusion between information and communication and funding of journalists by political parties to report on their campaign promises contributes to a lack of quality journalism.

It is noteworthy that while the six countries analysed in her book share certain similarities, many countries involve a great diversity of tradition, culture and media and perhaps it would be helpful to move away from the conception of African media toward an understanding of media in Africa, she said.



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