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MOBILE MONITORS

PROTECTING THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE

THE USE OF MOBILE PHONE TECHNOLOGY IN RECENT AFRICAN ELECTIONS HAS EMPOWERED CITIZENS, ALLOWING THEM TO PUT IN PLACE THE CHECKS AND BALANCES NEEDED TO MAKE ELECTIONS FREER AND FAIRER IN AFRICA – AND ELSEWHERE IN THE WORLD, WRITES HARRY DUGMORE


Ken Banks/Kiwanya.net

Recent elections in Africa have shown just how powerful new media can be in improving transparency – and indeed the overall legitimacy – of election results. In particular, the humble short message service is playing a powerful role in connecting political parties to voters and in enabling citizens to be surer of the election results.

Africa has seen an explosion of democracy. According to Freedom House, a US-based think-tank, Africa now has 35 democracies (out of 53 countries in total), up from just 10 democracies in 1990. And the Bertelsmann Transformation Index suggests that the quality of democracy is deepening beyond mere elections: overall, there is now more freedom of the press, more anti-corruption measures and a greater depth to civil liberties.

But core to democracy is choice, as expressed by voters through elections. Mobile phones allow people to share ideas more easily and quickly. In many countries they provide a way for politicians to connect with their voters in a more intimate way. These qualities mean that voice calls and sms messages are now are integral part of elections up and down Africa.

Mobile phone and web-based technology also allows more eyes and ears on the ground, to monitor elections. This is a significant development given Africa's previous lack of development in terms of information and communication technology. Thus, while on average only about 5% of Africans have Internet access via computer, almost 50% of Africans now have access to mobile phones.

Increasingly many Africans have mobile phones that can connect to the Internet and many Africa countries are crossing the critical point where the number of people accessing the Internet through their phones surpasses those going online through a computer.

More recently, social media such as Facebook and Twitter – on mobile phones – have joined this mix. For example in Ghana's successful December 2008 presidential campaigns both main candidates – John Atta Mills and Nana Akufo-Addo – had Facebook pages and used them to keep supporters up-to-date with campaigns, and to solicit funds. Many of these pages were accessed via mobile phones.

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As sophisticated as some of these digital new media technologies are, the bedrock technology for Africa will be the sms for the foreseeable future. In the latest Ghanaian elections, for example, political parties used sms extensively to try and raise funds. Sms was also used to let supporters know where election rallies were being held.

This reflects the reality that, although Ghana does not have much broadband connectivity, or even fixed phone lines, the use of mobile phones has caught on in a big way. Ghana had fewer than 400 000 fixed lines in 2008. But mobile phone users rose from 215 000 in 2001 to 7.6 million in 2007 – out of a population of around 18 million.

What was particularly interesting in terms of the election campaign in Ghana was that, like many countries, there is a ban on campaigning in the period immediately before the actual election date. In Ghana's case, this time period was 48 hours, and indeed all TV, radio and print campaigning ceased. But how do you stop sms', official or unofficial, or internet blogging, or Facebook or Twitter posting?

The short answer is that you don't: in the final 48 hours, the number of sms' in circulation exploded as parties made the final push to sway voters in what shaping to the closest election in Ghana's history. The same use of smsing has been evident in many other recent elections in Africa recently, including Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

Of course technology and sms use is not just benign. There were many mischievous and even malicious uses of mobile phones and other ICTs in recent elections. In Ghana and Zimbabwe's elections, jokes and other messages mocking and demeaning candidates flew from all sides. In Kenya's case, mobile phones were central to both stoking post-election violence, and the efforts to stop the violence.

An even more profound use of sms, in Africa's recent past, has been in election monitoring. In many countries, election laws require the initial counting of votes at each polling booth, before votes are send to central counting venues. Capturing this immediate voting data provides parties, NGOs and the citizenry in general with a powerful tool in preventing and detecting vote rigging.

For example, in both Ghana and Zimbabwe's presidential elections in 2008, NGOs and parties made extensive use of sms to send polling station initial tallies to central command centres that aggregated the vote. For that reason, all of Zimbabwe knew within a few hours that incumbent President Robert Mugabe had lost the vote, and lost badly.

Indeed, these initial sms tabulations indicated that Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai got close to 50%, and probably exceeded this threshold needed to avoid a run-off. However,

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the election authorities delayed official results for weeks before announcing their official results of 47.9% to Tsvangirai and 43.2% to Mugabe.

This result, widely seen as fraudulent, forced a run-off election. The Mugabe regime unleashed a campaign of terror that saw thousands detained, and more than 100 MDC supporters killed.

Also banned was the publication of preliminary results at polling stations.

During the run-off, there was so much violence that Tsvangirai and his MDC party pulled out of the run-off election a week before the elections. Mugabe won the second round with 85.5% of the vote. Needless to say, without any independent verification, or even the previous mobile phone-based vote tabulation, the result had no credibility inside or outside of Zimbabwe.

In Ghana, the 2009 presidential elections also saw a new level of independent monitoring using mobile phones


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and sms' to do parallel vote tabulation. A coalition of NGOs called Codeo put 4 000 trained election monitors in place to check on the election using mobile phones – and particularly sms messages – on election day. Within this bigger group, a 1 000 special monitors went further: they conducted parallel vote tabulation sending in results from a representative sample of polling stations.

After the election, Codeo did not publish their result. But they did put out an interim statement saying by their count, the voting was very close.

After the official results were released, Codeo released their results, which were almost identical to the national results, despite being based on one in 23 randomly selected sample of polling booths.

Based on their mobile phone-based sample, Codeo scored the vote 49.81% for candidate Nana Akufo-Addo; officially he got 49.87%. Codeo scored the vote at 50.19% for John Atta Mills; officially he got 50.13%.

In a first for Africa, the results of parallel vote tabulation were used to verify official tallies. By not pre-empting the official tallies, Codeo was able to add to the legitimacy of the election, without undermining the authority and independence of the electoral commission.

Despite the closeness of the results, there was no violence, and both sides accepted the verdict of the electorate, partly due to the verification provided by Codeo. This mobile phone-based system "added a level of protection of the people's will", Kojo Asante, Codeo's project manager, told international media.

There is no doubt that the examples of Ghana and Zimbabwe show the way forward for a more empowered citizenry to put in place the checks and balances needed to make elections freer and fairer in Africa – and elsewhere in the world.