

That a palpable sense of mounting ethnic tensions was beginning to take root in the few months leading up to the 4 March general elections in Kenya, was not in doubt but not entirely unprecedented. Sporadic inter-communal skirmishes did not augur well for an exercise that would see the country elect its fourth president since independence. The worst tribal violence seven months before the elections was witnessed in the Tana River Delta, between the Pokomo and Orma tribes, the one a farming community and the other a pastoralist one. A 2 000-strong paramilitary force was later deployed in the region to prevent further conflict, which could easily spread to the rest of the country. Even so, an escalation of violence left scores of people dead, livestock stolen and property razed to the ground. A total of 115 villagers lost their lives in the clashes. This led to suspicion that a political hand was behind the incident, beyond the dispute for water and pasture, which was the reason offered as the main cause for the conflict. One member of parliament was arrested and accused of incitement. All in all, apart from the violence in the Delta, elections went on peacefully, bar one or two isolated incidents. However, the calm that prevailed was an uneasy one. The manner in which the tallying and announcement of elections results was being conducted not only left a lot to be desired, but was the cause of much apprehension. In many people's eyes this calm was necessary to avert inflaming ethnic tensions that would see the country slide down the slippery road of the 2007/2008 post-poll chaos. Up to 1 300 people lost their lives in the violence that ensued. And to keep this calm, the Kenyan media had to be responsible in its reporting.

A crisis of CREDIBILITY

By Geoffrey Kamadi



Geoffrey Kamadi

Regulation
Ethics
Accountability

Media owners and managers therefore promised responsible journalism by appending their signatures to a code of conduct that would discourage the type of reporting deemed to incite the public to violence.

All of a sudden the media found itself on unfamiliar ground, with the spotlight falling squarely upon it.

The manner and extent to which it was going to objectively cover an electoral process, which, from a neutral point of view was flawed in many respects, became a matter of public interest.

The true test came when the Independent Electoral Boundaries Commission (IEBC), an electoral management body, prepared to announce the results. The public waited to see what would happen, given that the much-praised biometric voter registration system turned out to be a massive flop. The technology, which was meant to prevent vote rigging and electoral fraud all of a sudden shut down.

The commission therefore resorted to manual tallying of the votes. This did not sit well with a section of the public, especially when the results were coming in painfully slowly from the polling stations and took days rather than hours to compile.

Consequently, and rather uncharacteristically, the Kenyan media practically became silent. No hard-hitting questions were coming through from a media that is known not to pull any punches.

This was particularly evident when Issack Hassan, the IEBC chairman, admitted rather candidly that a computer glitch had exaggerated rejected votes by a factor of eight. No one from the Kenyan media followed up on the issue, even after a Reuters journalist brought it up.

That the reputation of the Kenyan media was on the line was clearly demonstrated by journalists taking to social media to express their views and vent their frustrations.

"I work for the media but once again I ask what law bars the media from announcing results as announced in the polling stations, why wait for IEBC to give Kenyans results that are different from what was announced in the polling stations, yet not raise a question? As the media, we failed Kenya in 2007 and 2013. We owe Kenyans more than just an apology," cried a frustrated voice on Facebook, posted by a journalist working for one of the leading newspapers in the country.

Journalists were growing tired of the self-censorship imposed by media house managers, which as far as they were concerned had gone too far.

The freedom of speech and expression the country has enjoyed over the years was under threat and all in the name of keeping the peace.

The stance taken by the media ultimately begged the question: in light of its perceived

collective silence in the wake of the elections result announcement, is the Kenyan media still credible?

Michela Wrong, a London-based freelance journalist, who had covered three previous elections in Kenya, thinks not.

“As a reader and viewer of Kenyan news, I am now far more sceptical than I used to be, and no doubt many Kenyans are too. I just don’t trust the key outlets anymore,” she says, adding that the self-inflicted damage by the media will take years to repair.

Wrong, who has written a book on corruption in Kenya, had spent more than a month writing a blog on the elections for the *New York Times*. She was previously based in Nairobi as a *Financial Times* correspondent.

Her views are shared by Anthony Wafula, a journalism consultant and observer in the country. Whereas he agrees that the media’s credibility has taken a battering, he is quick to add that the public dissatisfaction might not be all that uniform as perception might suggest.

“I am not sure if people trust the media that much again. We need to watch how people consume the media to help gauge the levels of dissatisfaction,” he advises.

However, Wafula adds: “This dissatisfaction might be region specific, so whereas one part of the country might be dissatisfied there is a possibility that another part might be very satisfied.”

Other journalists saw things differently. They defended the manner in which the media acquitted itself in the period leading up to, during and after the elections. After all, the media could not do anything more than it had already done.

Macharia Gaitho, a senior journalist and a respected columnist with the *Daily Nation*, the country’s leading newspaper, is one such journalist.

“The media questioned the IEBC over the process of acquiring the biometric voter registration kits. When the systems failed during the election, the media reported it. Even when the petition [challenging the result] was taken to court, the media was still reporting until the Chief Justice warned against subverting the process,” Gaitho, who is also the chairman of the Kenya Editors Guild, is reported to have said.

As far as he is concerned, the Kenyan media conducted itself professionally and did everything it could to inform the public.

He attributed their professional conduct to their extensive training on election and conflict reporting in the period leading up to the elections.

“We had so much training way before the elections so that we didn’t repeat the mistakes

of the last elections. We had to [inform] radio presenters what is fair and safe to air live,” he is reported to have said.

The over-cautious approach by the Kenyan media in reporting the elections was, at another level, understandable.

Indeed, following the elections chaos five years ago, Joshua Arap Sang, a little-known radio presenter with the nondescript Kass FM radio station, now finds himself as one of the suspects being investigated by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague for crimes against humanity.

The radio station is one among hundreds of vernacular stations which are said to have been at the centre of inciting their listeners. Kass FM broadcasts in Kalenjin, which is the fourth-largest ethnic group in Kenya.

Other suspects facing charges of crimes against humanity by the ICC happen to include the newly-elected president, Uhuru Kenyatta and his deputy, William Ruto.

Some will argue that the code of conduct signed by media owners effectively muzzled the ability of journalists to report freely and objectively. This was not only ill-advised but to do it with the excuse of keeping peace was not warranted, according to Wrong.

“Media executives allowed the much-vaunted ‘peace narrative’ to dominate their agendas. They endorsed a distorted retelling of the 2007/8 post-election violence, whereby the media bore much of the responsibility for the killings, rapes and looting of those days,” she says.

Citing the Waki report, Wrong explains that the media’s role in fuelling violence at the time paled in comparison to the violence instigated by armed gangs paid by political figures in addition to the security forces’ fire-at-will approach.

The Waki report was a culmination of the 2008 Commission of Inquiry into Post-Election Violence detailing events that led to the violence. The commission was led by Philip Waki, a Kenyan judge.

There is no doubt that the performance of the Kenyan media in its reporting on the elections did not exactly receive resounding approval from the court of public opinion.

What then for the Kenyan media? Dr. Levi Obonyo, a journalism lecturer at Daystar University offers: “The media should be more aggressive in their reporting, and I think some of that is already starting to happen.”

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