

How media mismanage elections coverage in Africa



By [lssa Sikiti da Silva](#)

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In a continent plagued by bad governance, election rigging, political intolerance and media freedom threats, and ruled mostly by former liberation movements, election time appears to be a critical period during which ordinary citizens look to the media to provide them with pertinent information to help them make informed choices.

But, as University of Venda lecturer Tendai Chari put it, the media become like participants in elections rather than being neutral.

Emotive and personalised

"Reporting becomes very emotive and very much personalised - the focus falls on candidates' private lives and business interests," Chari said, today Monday, 11 October 2010, at the media and elections two-day conference at Wits University in Johannesburg.

"Media provide very little information on contestants, policies debate, elections procedures, elections frameworks, and kind of become implicated in political struggle," he added. "In the process, media become part of the problem rather than part of the solution."

Elections are meant to be fought over policies and issues affecting the country, he said, adding that in a democratic society, the media have the duty to disseminate information that aims at influencing the way voters cast their ballot.

Lack of knowledge

"But in many instances, Africa media do not live up to these expectations," Chari said.

Some observers believe the reason behind the media's election mismanagement is due to the lack of knowledge of the dynamics of elections, which they see as a period of 'revenge' and personal attacks - mostly on ruling party candidates who are often accused of mismanaging the country.

Professor Tawana Kupe, dean of Wits University's Faculty of Humanities, said people who studied journalism and media have no knowledge of the political dimension of elections, while most politicians do not know how journalism works. "If the two are combined, it is going to be a wonderful marriage," he said.

Some, however, blame elections mismanagement on lack of resources and inadequate skills in the African media

environment.

Zim media vs other countries

"The media in Zimbabwe are highly unprofessional and under-qualified compared to other African countries," Chari lashed out, presenting an overview of how Zimbabwe media covered past elections in his country. "A journalist in Zimbabwe is everyone who holds a pen and a notepad. "It could be anybody who sells second hand cars or works in the mines, and so on. This is to show you that there are no qualifications in Zimbabwe," he said.

Furthermore, Chari said African media focus too much on the ruling party during the elections, and in the process, he said, they ignore, heckle and overlook the opposition.

Maintain a balance

"Media should not become the tools of war and conflict in a country during the elections. They should always maintain some kind of balance when reporting on candidates and issues, ensuring that they do not promote people who might become worse when they are in power."

A successful story came from Burundi, where under-resourced media houses came together in 2005 to form a synergy in order to be able to provide real-time information during various elections, including the referendum.

Burundi media tackles elections reporting

In a country where there are few newspapers and lacking credible and classic media training institutions, Burundi's media houses synergy considerably improved the quality of journalism and media reporting during the 2010 elections, according to Jacob Enoch Eben, of Burundi's American Friends Service Committee. The synergy, which some delegates said will not work in South Africa, is said to be working perfectly to such an extent that it boosted citizenship participation, enhanced transparency, and promoted peace, dialogue and reconciliation

Abigail Booth, of Wits' Political Studies, said covering election campaigns by the media in Kenya is like entertainment and talking about pop stars.

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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