

Elections in Africa: can media do the right thing?



By [Issa Sikiti da Silva](#)

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With the SABC and e.tv scoring 45% and 47% respectively in covering the ruling ANC politics during the 2009 elections, compared to 12% and 14% respectively for the opposition DA, and a number of other media also dedicating most of their resources to cover ANC politics, some observers wonder whether this is fair practice or done at the expense of socio-economic issues and the 'other' parties.

MMA outraged

Media Monitoring Africa (MMA), which compiled the 2009 elections' media coverage after checking 17,797 news items, in addition to SABC coverage, continues to deplore what it calls the media's failure to adequately adopt the citizen's agenda and properly inform the people to help them make informed choices.

Despite SABC head of news research Izak Minnaar yesterday, Monday, 11 October 2010, telling a media and elections conference in Johannesburg that his organisation was committed to providing fair and equitable coverage to all political parties in the run-up to the elections, the MMA report found otherwise.

As the 2011 local government elections draws near, Prinola Govenden, MMA head of policy, warned the media that an equitable treatment did not mean equal treatment.

Ignoring socio-economic issues

Govenden also said the insignificant level of attention (less than 1%) that the media afforded to key issues such as unemployment, crime, human rights, basic education, justice, healthcare, education, poverty, race and racism, xenophobia, among others, during the last elections was regrettably unacceptable.

She told Bizcommunity.com last night that this kind of reporting was doing a huge disservice to the public.

The 'JZ factor'

In the run-up to the 2009 elections, South Africa's media scene was inundated with a high level of coverage of what the MMA calls the 'JZ factor', as President Jacob Zuma's corruption and rape case and his contest with former president Thabo Mbeki for the control of the ANC made headlines locally and internationally almost on a daily basis.

The ruling party's break-up, which paved the way to the creation of the Congress of the People (COPE), also became a hot

item in newsrooms.

Govenden said: "I understand that they need to cover these issues in the public interest because the public has the right to know, but is that all people need to know?"

Commercialisation of media

"Look at the unemployment and poverty rate; it is too high. We believe that the media has become highly commercialised, and as the MMA, we advise them to have a critical look at these core issues and provide real-time information to voters."

While SA appears a unique case study in a continent ruled by dictators, plunderers and power-mongers who suppress critical voices and inquisitive minds, the independent media in many African countries can be forgiven for not doing the right thing during the elections.

In the case study of Ethiopia where Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, in power since 1991, has according to Human Rights Watch detained and jailed many outspoken journalists and commentators, the media can only watch what they write or say. This is according to a presentation by Johannesburg-based freelance writer Samson Mulugeta, who made a presentation on the 2010 Ethiopian elections.

The 2010 Media and Elections in Africa conference, currently underway at Wits University and funded by Wits' Department of Political Studies, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Research Office and the *Journal of African Studies*, ends today, 12 October.

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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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