Media and Politics in Africa: Trends, Tensions and Possibilities

As I write, political tensions are on the rise in Burundi following President Pierre Nkurunziza decision to run for a third term in clear violation of a constitutional dispensation that only allows for two presidential terms. As a result, on the 13 May 2015, a putsch against Nkurunziza was executed while he was conferencing in neighbouring Tanzania. The coup leader, Godefroid Niyombare was for the next two days one of the most searched for names on social media after he took over state Radio/TV and announced that the president had been dismissed. He announced the closure of the airport and of more relevance to this volume, the takeover of Burundian State Radio (RTNB) became the site through which the tussle of political legitimacy was waged. In the next few hours as the world waited to hear the outcome of the coup, rival factions of the armed forces, divided between supporters of the coup attempt and the president’s loyalists, exchanged heavy machine gun and rocket fire around the state television and radio complex. This was to be expected. Whoever took over the state Radio and TV, the only media house with countrywide coverage in Burundi, in essence had political power.

The coup in Burungi was only possible not simply because soldiers had arms, but also because they could announce their acts through the media. In this sense, it becomes clear how the media becomes a conduit of political action, as both an enabler and granter of political legitimacy. In other words, without the media, the coup would scarcely have gained the impact it did, however short lived. The Burundian experience largely draws from many other cases in Africa, including Kenya’s attempted coup in 1982 where the Voice of Kenya Radio (VOK) was announced and actualized. And just like the Burundian case, VOK was the battleground between loyalist forces and the coup plotters. These two cases show how the African media and power are virtually locked up in a symbiotic sense. To control, and possibly run the media in developing countries, brings one closer to political power.

Coming long before Radio, the print cultures were the earliest platforms to cajole mass audiences in Africa. In post independent Africa, newspapers have provided a site from which democratic and social ideals were contested in the emerging states. The very first newspapers to be launched on the continent was undertaken through the work of missionary and served the Christian imperative of spreading the “good news” and consolidating the faith of both new and old converts to the faith. Shortly, the early print cultures would be implicated in the political transformations and revolutionary campaigns sweeping across the continent. For instance, the earliest newspapers in Kenya published outside missionary goals mainly served settler interests. Like other African states, Kenya’s early print cultures formed into categories reflecting the sharp racial differences that formed the social cultural space in the early 1900s. Whilst the European press served settler interests, it addressed its audiences as if they were in a “limin-
ality”, in which the addressed publics were constituted as inhabiting an ambiguous space that was both Britain and the newly adopted colonies.

Much later, the well documented struggle for Africa’s independence spawned a plethora of ‘indigenous press’ which occasionally served ethnic interests but often other nobler aims. Few of these publications, mostly done in vernacular languages, could rightly regard themselves as nationalist in persuasion. The African press was not only vibrant but militant. While the (African) Asian press embroiled itself with frivolous class struggle; the African press was more concerned with social justice and the asymmetrical nature of society in which the African plight was deplorable. Most of these publications were alternative sites from which the independent struggle was waged. As expected, most of Africa’s ethnic communities had a paper that was political activist in nature, the most vociferous in Kenya being the Kikuyu publication mumenyereri—which means he who looks after. The proliferation of indigenous newspapers sent shivers among the small but powerful minority of settlers. In response, the colonial government formed carefully structured outfits to manage Vernacular Press in the 1950s which was merely a white man’s project to express African opinion for as long as it supported government opinion. This development saw instances where the colonial government sponsored some vernacular publications to counter the other ‘hostile’ papers.

After independence, most African governments enjoyed a largely teething press that was more descriptive than incisive. However, during the 80s and the 90s the African media found itself looped in the democratic struggle, spewing a contest for ‘perspective’ and ‘readership’ which also enticed African states to either control the media, or seek co-option as a major player in the media industry. This subtle ‘power’ struggle saw the birth and death of many a media houses, as it also witnessed the change of journalistic content and an attempt of the state to reign in on media freedoms. With a multi party state already secured, the new millennium witnessed unprecedented growth in the media industry coupled with intense competition among various players in the industry. These new developments prompted the press industry to subtly begin tilting from traditional news content and becoming vehicles of entertainment, commercial appeals and purveyors of mostly sensationalized ‘hard news’. While these tensions could equally be seen in the electronic media through the 80s and the 90s, the information age has diametrically altered how politics and power is perceived and acted out in Africa.

The “Arab spring” brought attention to the crucial role of the social media in mobilizing and shaping discourse. These protests ushered in widespread political changes that saw the overthrow of dictators, political reforms in government, and unfortunately, continued civil unrest and ethnic clashes in several other countries. The verdict is still out on the extent to which social media, also loosely known as the ‘fifth estate’ in Africa was instrumental in driving all these massive political changes on the continent. What is not in doubt is that audiences in developing countries are increasingly taking an active role not just in pushing for social action, but also in producing and circulating media content. Developing countries today are a complex maze of increasingly empowered citizenry courtesy of digital media technologies. Whilst the developing states in the 60s to the 90s were able to shape and manipulate media content, to the extent that political discourses obtained a singular narrative that was tightly controlled by autocrats, the current social political complexion is a nightmare for dictators and strong armed states as it is difficult, if not impossible to control political discourse. As a result, what we see now is a plurality of political voices. These pluralities are not just seen in its production but also in how these voices are circulated, and how, ultimately they configure power in present day Africa. From Nigeria to South Africa, users of new media constituted through platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or Whatsapp appear to the most active, readily available when called upon at short notice for purposes of picketing, social protests and
contesting the hegemonic political discourse. In other words, if the current social movements in Africa with clear political imperatives were to account for their success, the role of digital media in convening new publics is writ large in gold. These new publics, forming part of the proverbial ‘information society’ appropriates protracted, or rather, staid social political tensions that have been part of the continent and elevates, energizes political agenda, through digital social networks. There is little doubt that the new publics constituted through digital media represent a new phase in conceptualizing politics in Africa.

Finally, the concept of mediatization is increasing becoming manifest, if not understudied in the continent. It is clear that mediatization as a phenomenon is already part and parcel of political space in Africa. Recently, the media has become virtually the single most important institution from which political discourses, symbols and signs are expressed, circulated and contested. Political players have understood the importance of media networks and their import in accumulating political capital. Media ownership has shifted from being a purely, or quasi entrepreneurial venture and has today become the most coveted of business ventures by active politicians. Any politician worth his name in Africa has attempted to stake ownership of a media house with varying degrees of success. This form of ownership has been direct, or indirect through seeking to influence editorial content. This is evidence that media has become the most central item in seeking power in Africa.

Again, media has become politics and increasingly, politics has become the media. If it is not mediated, then it has not happened. And if it is to be regarded as truthful, authentic and actual, it must be mediated. As such, the lines between media and politics in Africa are increasingly blurred to the point that politicians are increasingly fitting their political adventures to media formats as media formats seek to fit themselves to political culture in Africa. In Kenya, for instance, the 2013 elections were highly mediatized events, complete with a presidential debate that was obviously appropriated from the American political scene. Frankly, the event was made for media, and not for energizing the public sphere. It was clear that the debate served no useful purpose to the public as it was not expected to shift public opinion, or energize public debate. It was simply a media spectacle. A spectacle that proved the importance of the concept of mediatization and media networks, in conceptualizing media and politics in Africa. In this debate, the issues became subservient to the event as the debate became more and more a media event. Twitter trends on the debate shook global internet traffic thus confirming that mediatization as a concept and practice, is alive in Africa. As seen, more political actors in developing countries are today acting in a manner that they recognise that they are themselves media objects and subjects. Indeed, politics and the media in Africa are essentially intertwined.

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