Chapter 2

Kenya’s Difficult Political Transitions Ethnicity and the Role of Media

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ABSTRACT

Kenya’s political transitions at different points in its history have had tremendous impact on the country’s media. This chapter argues that there is a close relationship between the country’s political transitions, ethnicity and the role of the media. Making reference to different transition moments such as independence in the early 1960s, the attempted coup in 1982, the advent of multiparty politics in the early 1990s and the more recent disputed elections of 2007, the chapter demonstrates the manifestations of these connections, on the perceptions of the role of the media in Kenya, and how this ultimately has affected the media, including attendant policies by the state.

INTRODUCTION

Kenya’s media has a long history that spans the period starting with the coming of missionaries in the late 1800s to the more recent developments associated with political change in the last decade of the 20th century. This introductory section of the chapter examines, albeit in brief, the history of the media and goes further to demonstrate how major political transitions in Kenya’s history and the ever present ethnic/tribal question have inevitably shaped the character and role of the national media system. Later in the chapter, we attempt to use this as a basis for characterizing Kenya’s media system. This characterization is done on the basis of two normative theoretical standpoints; the four theories of the press and Habermas’s public sphere.

The early beginnings of Kenya’s media are closely associated with the larger East African region’s contact with Christian missionaries from Europe and America in the late 1800s. These groups set up periodic publications which were mostly used as teaching tools as well as spaces for propagating Christian biblical teachings. The construction of the railway line linking the strategic port of Mombasa to the

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hinterland, including the extension into Uganda was critical to the establishment of a regular private press. The railway line not only opened up the hinterland, but also led to the quick raise of urban centres such as Nairobi, which would later become major colonial hubs of commerce and administration.

In 1901, the East African Standard was established by an Asian trader Alibhai Mulla Jeevanjee, but was soon bought by settlers who were keen to promote colonial interests in Kenya. Generally, the colonial press excluded Africans and was mainly used to promote settler ideals and interests in the country. However, from the late 1920s, growing disenchantment and agitation for self-rule and independence by the African elite led to the emergence of the early African press (Ali, 2009). One such early publication was Muigwithania (The Arbiter), which was started in 1928. Abuoga and Mutere (1988, 15) note that this journal emphasised Kikuyu culture and was published in the Kikuyu language. Gradually, as the clamour for independence gathered momentum in the 1940s, so did indigenous African publications. These publications mostly served as platforms for preaching and spreading the liberation gospel while simultaneously expressing the grievances of African peoples. Iraki (2010,143), however, notes that most of these publications were short-lived given the amount of colonial hostility directed at them and concomitant lack of editorial training.

POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE AND AN EMERGENT AFRICAN PRESS

During the pre-independence years of the 1950s, African publications had played the collective role of providing a voice for colonised African peoples in Kenya (Abuoga & Mutere, 1988). However, after independence, the media were expected to address a host of new needs and primarily the need to articulate the agenda of a society that had just emerged from colonialism. When the Nation Media Group, was founded in 1960, by His Highness the Aga Khan, a major motivating factor was to produce newspapers that were edited and staffed by Africans, containing news of specific interest to Africans, and expressing an African point of view for an African audience. This thinking clearly did anticipate the period after independence and the spirit of self determination that was going to define it. For the media, therefore, Kenya’s independence in 1963 represented a new turning point with several implications; one of which was the relationship between the media and the newly independent Kenyan government. The drive at independence as noted by Odero (2000) was to enable Kenyans to map out their own destiny. However, in order to play a useful role in this process, the country’s media needed to identify and closely reflect the desires of an emergent Kenyan society. To a certain extent this did happen, as Abuoga and Mutere (1988) have pointed out. In fact, Odero (2000:11) further argues that newspapers such as the Daily Nation, Sunday Nation, and Taifa Leo (which were at that time judged to be sympathetic to nationalist aspirations by their readers) were highly acclaimed, while those like the Standard (which were regarded as pro-colonial) were shunned by readers. During the first decade of independence, the Nation Media Group thus distinguished itself as a major player in the country’s media sector. Thus by 1973, the company was the first media organisation to be listed on the Nairobi Stock Exchange.

Independence from Britain in the early part of the 1960s was instrumental in shaping the future of the country’s media. First and perhaps more importantly, it marked a major transition in the country’s politics, by ushering in an African led administration. Jomo Kenyatta, the first President, as Hornsby (2013) writes was mostly driven by the desire for a market based economy as the engine for development. He also recognised that political stability would be a vital component to this process, and for that

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