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Media coverage of Kenya's 2002 elections:A Case Study of The Daily Nation and The East African Standard

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CHAPTER ONE

1.0 Introduction

This study intends to analyse the reporting of Kenya's 2002 elections in the Kenyan print media with specific focus on the *Daily Nation (*referred to as *Nation* hereafter*)* and the *East African Standard (*referred to as *Standard* hereafter*)* in the period between October and December 2002. While a total of 34 political parties contested the elections, the research will concentrate on the media coverage of the parties-Kenya African National Union (KANU) and National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), the main contenders in that election year. KANU's incumbency as the ruling party in Kenya for 39 years (1963-2002) made it unpopular with most citizens but then it was the only party many had ever known. National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) on the other hand was a coalition of various opposition parties that won the elections[1]. Additionally, President Moi whose term had come to an end had been the nation's second president since independence, having taken over from Jomo Kenyatta in 1978. This chapter presents a background to the 2002 elections as well as the role of media in the elections.

Kenya's 2002 elections elicited much interest from groups within and without the country. Ajulu (2003) notes that, the 2002 elections, the 3rd since the opening up of democratic space, took place at an important conjecture in the East African region; the region was looking for a success story. This was especially because of Kenya's strategic position in spearheading initiatives and conflict resolution in Somali and Sudan – through the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). Additionally, Kenya is a potential regional player and an important player in the new African initiative; the new Partnership for African development (NEPAD). It was therefore of great interest to see how the political climate would unfold and how citizens would react to the changes around them. African countries had long had elections occasioned by infighting and violence and the world was watching to see how Kenya would conduct its third multi-

[1]NARC remains to be the greatest opposition unity since the Forum of the Restoration of Democracy-FORD, which posed a threat to KANU's hold on power during the 1992 multiparty elections before it disintegrated due to infighting. NARC is made up of two cardinal partners, National Alliance (party) of Kenya (NAK) and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

party elections. A commentary in the *Nation* on Election Day tried to underscore the importance of the exercise;

> "This election too is a test of our shared values. It will prove to the world whether Kenya respects the rights of the people to elect a government freely and in peace. It will also demonstrate whether Kenyans are mature enough to separate the wheat from the chaff, the leader from the well-masked buffoon, the man of peace from the latent anarchist, the patriot from the tribalist". (*Nation*, December 27, 2002:1)

The media was there to document the political scenario at that time of transition. Citizens relied on these reports for information relating to candidates and the general political atmosphere. Likewise, political contenders expected the media to grant them visibility so that they could pass on their policies to the electorate.

The media is a disseminator of information to its viewers, but how valuable is this information at a time of elections? According to the Kenya Domestic Observation Report (K-DOP) of 2003, the way the media covers an election process gives a good indication of their value to society as agenda-setters[2]. The issues they highlight are taken by the voters to be those that are important and which they also must engage the politicians in. While it may not be possible for each voter to engage the contenders in debate concerning their priorities, the media steps in and acts as a voice for the public by raising their questions and getting answers on their behalf. Yet coverage of elections provides one of the toughest ethical tests for media practitioners. Brown (2004:4) in theorizing why Kenya's transition to elections went so smoothly cites a more independent media with greater readership and viewership across Kenya as one of the three main factors given by a broad consensus of interviewees. It lends weight to the idea that media was an important component of the transition and its presence cannot be ignored in the fight for democracy.

[2] When Kenyans spoke: 2002 general elections report', *Kenya domestic observation report* (K-DOP) 2003

A major similarity between the two newspapers *Nation* and *Standard* is they are privately owned, independent and over the years have established themselves as a voice for the people sometimes to the point of being confrontational towards the government in their reporting. Further they are the most widely circulated in the country and region and they boast of a wide readership across the globe through their websites www.nationmedia.com and www.eastandard.net respectively for those in the Diaspora. The two newspapers can theoretically be explained using the libertarian theory in which philosophers like John Milton, John Locke and Stuart Mill argued for intellectual freedom and the open marketplace of ideas. Ocitti (1999:8-9) notes that as far as the press was concerned, libertarians viewed it as device for checking up on the government and because of this; the press should stay completely free from government. In subsequent chapters, this research report shall attempt to relay the relationship between the press and the government in Kenya particularly with reference to democracy and elections.

A definition of independent; the kind of media the two papers represent is necessary. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declaration of 1991 defines 'independent' in media as being free from government, political or economic control and 'pluralistic' as meaning an end to monopolies of all kind[3]. Kenya's media is mainly divided into the private and public media with the latter financed by government. The press however, does not have a government owned competitor. Over the years, this definition of independence has been slanted by media practitioners and owners as being free from government only and ignored the pressures of existing markets and economics.

According to an Africa Watch Report, the editorial policy of the *Nation* and *Standard* are independent, but tied to safeguarding business interests (1991:189). Quoting one senior editor, the report acknowledged that economic motivation for self-censorship is the most effective weapon the government holds over independent media. This carries the implication that because of their shareholders, the newspapers are required to make

[3] This declaration also known as the Windhoek declaration was endorsed by UNESCO's general conference at its 26th session in 1991.

profits. The newspapers become cautious about taking paths that may lead to interference with advertising revenue so they practice self- censorship[4]. In spite of this, the cry for objectivity and impartiality is still at the core of journalistic ethics and must be upheld at all costs especially in defining moments like the 2002 elections.

Concerning election coverage, it was found that the national broadcaster Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) and the Citizen[5] radio were overtly partisan in their reports on the election, the former favoring KANU while the latter, the opposition party NARC. The dissatisfaction with KBC's coverage was voiced by among others, Ezekiel Mutua; Kenya Union of Journalists Secretary-general[6], the K-DOP Report and *Expression Today;* a Journal of Democracy, human rights and the media. While the two stations represent the broadcast media, the print media also carried out detailed analyses of the elections which were found favourable. The conclusions drawn about both the private and public media lead us to question what defined the *Standard* and *Nation's* reports. It is the coverage of the elections by the private press this research is interested in, to see whether the newspapers maintained fairness in their reports. This study then is an attempt to delve into the details of the way the *Standard* and *Nation* reported the elections focusing on what issues the press deemed important in their coverage.

The media environment in Kenya has undergone major transitions since 1992 and can be said to have been freer today than in preceding years. After the 2002 elections, journalists have enjoyed a relatively liberal environment and they operate on the hope that they will have wider latitude of expression. Beginning the late 1990's media freedom was seen to have improved in that decade[7], more as a result of the return to multi party politics in the

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[4] Kenya: Taking Liberties. *An Africa Watch Report*. 1991. New York: Human Rights Watch.

[5] Citizen Radio under the umbrella of Citizen Media is owned by businessman Samuel K. Macharia who is closely affiliated to Mwai Kibaki. *Expression Today* once stated that Citizen covers Kibaki the same way that KBC covered Moi in his days as President in 'Private Media failing the fairness test' in http://www.kenyanews.com/Archives/mainsto/medst_1.html. Retrieved from the internet 10th January, 2005.

[6] Mutua noted that KBC was not serving all citizens in an interview with Njonjo Kihuria, in the *Sunday Standard,* November 9th 2002.

[7] According to a joint statement issued by the KUJ and Media Institute, to mark World Press Freedom Day in 1999. This was recorded in an article 'Media freedom still repressed in Kenya says the Media Institute' in http://www.ifex.org/en/content/view/full/24452/ Retrieved from the net 15th January, 2005.

country. This freedom can be said to have been earned for the Kenyan media had a role to play in opposition politics in the country, especially in the volatile period of the early 1990's.

Multi-party democracy as a rule was re-introduced in Kenya in 1992 yet was difficult to implement as confirmed by election results of 1992 and 1997. The 2002 elections became a rallying point for disgruntled voters to make a new decision dislodging KANU from power after 39 years of rule. The dissatisfaction at that time had reached its peak and the elections were more of a 'KANU must go' rhetoric, evidenced from the voices crying out and the kind of slogans that were carried around over the campaign period. The K-DOP report noted that,

> "The 2002 vote was a vote of defiance. Voters had become discontented with the ruling elite and needed the power of the ballot to remove the unjust system that had become oppressive. The result of the 2002 general elections was a rejection of a political system that had become insensitive to the problems afflicting millions of Kenyans."

By providing the voters with the various candidates to pick from, the media was serving in its capacity as a conveyor of information. It matters what kind of information was conveyed which is what this research intends to dwell on. It will be imperative to try and gauge whether the media distanced itself from the ongoing game of politics and how well they separated fact from opinion in their reporting.

The same K-DOP report faulted the Kenyan media for tending to concentrate on parochial, unengaging and irrelevant issues that were not beneficial to voters. The report additionally acknowledged that the media engaged on personalities and the rhetoric spewed by them, instead of focusing on matters that would help voters judge whether such people deserve to be elected or not. It is crucial that the media provides citizens with access to all facts, opinions, and ideas brought forth to the period leading to elections. Chirambo and McCullum (2000) aptly state that the media must separate fact from

fiction, rumour from truth, sense from babble; an idea that should be taken seriously else the electorate will deviate from the issues that affect them that are being overlooked by those intending to hold on to power.

The K-DOP report went on to specify that the private media must question and criticize the government, candidates, political parties and other contending forces. They must do this freely without censorship, intimidation or political pressures. Potential voters will require from the media well balanced information while political parties, and candidates need to impart messages freely without distortion or manipulation. In this, the media should strive to carry out its role towards the electorate and the candidates, linking both of them in the arena of political persuasion.

The press is usually guided by a code of ethics, under which journalists operate. Situations arise in which a standard measure of operation is required for media bodies to operate under. For instance, the Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK) issued its own guidelines on 12th December, 2002, albeit late, to the media houses with regard to how they should operate. Some media houses like the Nation Media group had already formulated internal guidelines which were subsequently published in the *Nation*. Group Board Chairman Hannington Awori in an article titled 'Balanced and Fair Coverage' presented an action plan that the group would use in presenting news reports as they happened[8]. The conclusion of this article read:

> "We are committed to responsible journalism - balanced, accurate and impartial reporting. Our group will not endorse any candidate or party, but will, in the true character of its editorial independence, promote good governance in its widest form and encourage informed debate on national issues," *(Nation*, October 14, 2002)

[8] Nation's internal media guidelines were accessed under http://www.nationaudio.com/elections/platform/Platform1.html. Retrieved from the internet, 20th December, 2004.

The ECK guidelines were standard in the way the media was required to operate and were designed to ensure the media conformed to democratic principles. The ECK had already discussed these guidelines with the respective parties running[9], perhaps as a well-meaning gesture towards the parties. A very interesting clause in the guidelines stated, to quote verbatim, 'newspapers may choose to take a partisan line. However, newspapers are legally bound, as all media, to avoid publishing any material that may incite hatred or violence'[10]. That the ECK gave leeway to newspapers to openly show their preference was in contravention of media ethics at a time of reporting. Yet this may have been a reflection of some general traditional Western thought that media cannot remain wholly non-partisan in their reporting of politics and by extension, elections. This idea allows us later in this research report to question the idea of whether the media, even private media can ever be fully objective in their reports.

The research shall accordingly be informed by the three vital roles of the media in an election. These include the watchdog role, information and analysis, and a forum for public debate and discussion (Gurevitch and Blumler; 2000:25, Tettey, 2001). Randall, (1998) notes that in the sphere of politics there are important ways in which the media itself contributes to the content of the messages and especially to its form. The media mediate and do not occupy an autonomous space in a given social system but instead provide channels of communication between elements within it. In this, the media must provide even ground for all the parties involved in terms of the roles above. Additionally, the research will look into the theories of news production in a bid to inform on various sociological and economic issues that influence the way news is covered on a day to day basis.

[9]EU Election Observation Mission Kenya 2002: Final report on the General Elections (pg 26). Retrieved from the internet Jan 30th 2005, from http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/human_rights/eu_election_ass_observ/kenya/rep02.pdf

[10] ibid

1.1 Rationale:

Schudson (2003:198) opines that the press is an important instrument of democracy. Prior to the 2002 elections the press in Kenya had carried a democratic agenda by vouching for democracy and ensuring the opposition groups were represented in the news. For instance, before the 1997 elections, the press reported on the demands and conditions set by the people for constitutional reforms, arguments that were put forth by the National Convention Executive Council (NCEC)[11]. They had been there to highlight the injustices of the Moi regime exposing them to the international community thereby opening a way for constitutional reforms. This battle was mainly fought by the private press with the *Standard* and *Nation* taking central place in the quest for political pluralism.

Then came 2002, the election year when Kenya witnessed a landmark achievement by holding free and fair elections which saw the opposition NARC form the next government. In presenting these reports, certain views stood out as important to the media and these were given greater leeway than others. Further, the private press was supposed to be a non-partisan conveyor of information considering it is regarded as the Fourth Estate. This Fourth Estate is the very same of which Edmund Burke at the House of Commons in 1774 noted,

> "There are three estates in Parliament; but in the reporter's gallery yonder, there sits a Fourth Estate more important than they all".

This Estate has continued to be strong influence on citizens over the years especially with regard to watching the other three estates on behalf of the people. With the media setting the agenda for civilians, it mattered what they reported about.

It is these issues the research is interested in confronting. In the past, government controlled media was the object of scrutiny. Scholars and researchers writing about the media in Africa often wrote about the need for independent media that was not

[11] According to Amnesty International, the NCEC was formed as a loose alliance of political parties, human rights, legal, religious and other groups calling for Constitutional Reform in Kenya. The Council was instrumental in fighting for Kenya's second liberation. Retrieved from the internet February, 10, 2005 in http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAFR320081998?open&of=ENG-KEN

economically dependent on government (see Zaffiro, 1993; Eribo and Jong-Ebot, 1997; Ainslie, 1996 and Carver, 1991among others. However, there is a need to enter the realm of private media to critically assess what agendas they set for their news reports. This arises from the knowledge that private media has in the past been given greater latitude than the state owned media without subjecting it to checks and balances. Ajulu (1995:20) notes that the perception around media coverage of 1992 elections was that dailies were far from impartial and this became increasingly obvious as the election date drew closer. Although he singled out the *Kenya Times* for being a propaganda organ of KANU, the *Nation* and *Standard* were also faulted for their biased analysis of the elections. With increasing liberty in the media circles after 1992, it will be important to translate this in the 2002 elections to see what changed. Within this context, I will endeavor to look into what issues the media deemed important over that election period. Further, I will explore the notion of objectivity, bias and balance, with the argument that the expectations towards the press are higher than can be met by the industry. The research will use Lichtenberg's (2000) argument in which she notes that the media is not able to be blatantly objective, but according to journalistic values, reporters are required not to allow their preconceptions to cloud their reporting. This will be informed by an analysis of the extent to which the news organizations exercised editorial independence by looking at the themes they favoured.

1.2 Scope of the Study:

The study will be carried out for the period between October and December 2002. This period is chosen because it captures the official campaign period as President Moi dissolved parliament on October 25, 2002. The "Rainbow Coalition" which fielded the winning Presidential candidate merged officially on October 14, 2002; the same day Uhuru Kenyatta was declared KANU presidential candidate. News stories, headlines, editorials and election round-up pieces will be analyzed for the study. This study will also look into the opinion and analysis sections of the newspaper for a discussion of what the press debated on. Reference will be made to certain landmark events that occurred in the course of that year which prove useful to the whole election scenario. These include the merger of KANU and NDP at Kasarani in which President Moi appointed Uhuru

Kenyatta as the KANU presidential candidate. Such scenarios provide a background to the emergence of disgruntling within the ranks that led to the formation of the Rainbow Coalition and subsequently, the merger of the opposition in October.

1.3 Research Questions:

A number of questions arise in relation to the role of the two dailies in the 2002 election:

1. What did the two newspapers report on KANU and NARC in terms of their candidates, policies and ideals?
2. To what extent did these two newspapers maintain editorial independence in their representations of the election campaigns? Was there a distinction between fact and opinion as evidenced from the news stories and how did the papers present the reality at that time?
3. Did the newspapers give a fair running chance to each of the contenders in question, evidenced from the headlines, news stories, and editorials in the newspapers?

The research intends to answer these questions using content analysis with data derived from the newspapers. This shall lead us to draw a conclusion to the relationships between media and democracy in Kenya.