



Regional Workshop

Promoting Effective Elections in Africa: Developing a Collaborative Dialogue among Key Stakeholders

Proposed Dates: 3-4 July 2017

Venue: Nairobi, Kenya

Main premise: The important role of free media in promoting democracy, including the conduct of free and fair elections.

Introduction

Elections matter and are deemed an important feature of any democracy. In fact, the 1990s saw the third wave of democratization make a sizeable impact on a number of African countries ushering in a culture of multipartyism, holding of regular elections, the legitimisation of opposition parties and the introduction of termed mandates. This to a great extent has had a stabilising effect on the continent but of course cannot be generalised as evidenced by the sporadic flaring of post election violence and conflict in certain regions.

For a number of experts and observers the holding of elections has been hailed as a momentous event – allowing citizens the right to vote. Examples were the first post-apartheid elections on South Africa (1994), those in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2006 or those held more recently in The Gambia (2016) that interrupted 22 years of Jammeh rule. Despite the initial celebration and joy of going to the poll, many citizens have been quickly disillusioned by what can be termed as the quality of elections. Common accounts of stuffed ballots, ineffective or biased electoral commissions, systematic abuse by the incumbents of state resources (including public media) or post-election violence have dampen the enthusiasm.

Another feature that must not be overlooked is that the organisation and management of elections are costly. In most cases, these are voted budgets that come from the public purse. Therefore, ensuring the legitimacy and credibility of elections are paramount.

In more recent years, there seems to have been a paradigm shift reflected by an emphasis on the quality of elections organised as opposed to the number of elections organised. Key considerations are as follows – ensuring free and fair elections, promoting an informed citizenry, allowing dialogue and exchange between the different actors, ensuring violence



free and conflict free elections amongst others. To that effect, a number of international, continental, regional and national guidelines / protocols and codes have been created and subsequently adopted – IPU’s Declaration on Criteria for Free and Fair Elections (1994), the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2007) or the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections (2004). In addition to these guidelines, the African continent increasingly welcomes international, continental and regional observation missions. In a number of countries domestic observation missions have also been encouraged.

Engaging with Stakeholders

Elections are far from being standalone events. On the contrary the necessary ecosystem must exist to ensure that elections are freely and fairly conducted. In order for this to happen key actors / stakeholders must fully play their role and responsibility. Three key stakeholders have been identified for this purpose: the media, the electoral bodies and the voters / citizens. In fact, ensuring a dynamic, balanced and engaging exchange may contribute to credible elections.

The media: far from being a homogenous entity, one needs to take into consideration the significant differences that exist between the private, public and community media as well as those between print, broadcast and new media. In fact, one of the key role of the media during the entire electoral process is to ensure that voters make informed choices. It is understood that news reports must be factual, accurate, well sourced and based on sound evidence. A culture of ethical and evidence based reporting should be promoted by media houses and be applicable at editorial and journalistic level. In certain media houses, the development of an internal code of reporting on elections has been devised.

We are all aware of the important tensions that exist between private and state / public media across the continent. Incumbents have and continue to abuse public media and this has been regularly highlighted in the various international, continental and regional observation mission reports.

What should be done? Ensure that the media professionals understand the key role they play and equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to do so. The media should also act as a platform of communication of ideas giving a fair chance to parties and candidates to air their views.

The electoral bodies: in recent years there has been a fair amount of research work that has focused on the role and responsibility of Electoral Management Bodies in ensuring that the



electoral process is effective and efficient. Outreach and engagement with the media has been one of the key features. Getting the media to understand the workings of these EMBs, engaging in an agenda to ensure that elections are clean, respectful and constructive and ultimately when elections are fair and free to get the media to endorse them.

The voters / citizens: developing an informed and empowered citizenry helps to ensure that elections remain relevant and become meaningful processes. In an age of information plenty, accessing truthful, accurate and balanced information matters. This is even more important with the advent of new media and more specifically social media as a means of communication and source of information. We have not forgotten the chilling messages of the *Radio Mille Collines* or the hate speech fanned by certain radios during the post-election violence in Kenya. Therefore, educating the people is key and both the media and the electoral bodies must see this as the centrepiece of their strategy.

Justification

Elections and the media have been at the centre of interest of a number of regional workshops. The workshop to be held proposes a number of unique features: (1) bringing together media professionals and representatives from electoral bodies to discuss their respective communication and information needs, (2) draw from a pool of participants that go beyond sub regions (West, Southern, Central and Eastern Africa) allowing for a rich cross fertilisation of experiences and (3) discuss concrete proposals to improve communication between EMBs and media professionals.

The workshop will be held at a time sensitive period where a number of countries will be readying themselves to hold elections. It is expected that the workshop will provide be both timely and relevant to the different parties.

Key Objectives

- Offer a summative account of the state of democracy in Africa (especially in relations to elections)
- Understand and assess the ecosystem that defines the election process (electoral bodies, media systems, existing guidelines, protocols for the running and management of elections)



- Evaluate the role and responsibility that the media has in the election process (tone, engagement process, types of discourses, ethical framework, codes of reporting, etc.)
- Promote a better understanding and exchange between electoral bodies and media professionals so that they can better 'serve' the citizens
- Learn and share from participants invited which will offer a body of knowledge
- Chart out a stakeholders' collaborative framework to ensure that elections are relevant and meaningful

Countries in Focus

More than a dozen African countries will be organising elections in 2017 and 2018. This is seen as an excellent opportunity to invite media professionals and electoral bodies officers to discuss and share their experiences around elections in their specific countries and to see how the process can be strengthened. The countries in focus in addition to being those facing the polls in 2017 / 2018 will reflect a geographical balance. The aim is to ensure a cross fertilisation of experiences. A mix of smaller and bigger countries as well as a diversity of media landscapes will be factored in.

Participants' Profile

A good mix of media professionals from print, broadcast and new media, electoral officers as well as media councils. The aim is to promote a culture of dialogue and exchange among these key stakeholders to comprehend better why elections matter and what can be done to enhance its quality for the consolidation of democracy.

Expected number: 30 – 35 participants

Workshop Methodology

A mix of formal presentations, inputs / experience from the ground (media professionals and electoral representatives) and case studies. The discussion is expected to be frank and open with the aim of presenting core concerns or best practices and developing a collaborative framework that can be implemented post workshop.

Key Partners

The Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) and the African Media Initiative (AMI) have joined forces to organise this important two day workshop. Such an event is



deemed crucial as it requires both the media and the electoral bodies to engage in a qualitative discussion on how individually and collectively they can contribute to making elections meaningful. In fact, this is deemed both timely and relevant in light of the number of African countries going to the polls in 2017 / 2018 and the growing concern of the steady decline of democracy across the world.