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POLITICAL JOURNALISM AND ELECTIONS IN AFRICA

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During elections it is particularly important to assess the role media have of holding government to account on behalf of citizens. While media, in particular commercial media, do not sign a formal contract stating that they endorse and will fulfill this role, this expectation must be recognised and honoured in support of the argument for a free and plural media.

Throughout the world, ownership and control of means of communication have always been seen as critical aspects of political power since time immemorial. In most African countries, where governments own and control a sizeable number of newspapers and radio stations, the independent media have been seen as the true monitors of democracy (Ronning, & Kupe, 2000). However, these 'independent media' also come with their own sets of problems (Kasoma, 1997 on the Post in Zambia). Journalism in Africa has come far in recent decades.

The decline of one-party dictatorships, which traditionally kept a grip on the press, has brought about rapid changes. The number of media outlets has expanded in many countries, such as South Africa and Nigeria (Freedom House, 2009).

The African elections calendar 2012 included nations such as Algeria, Angola, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Chad, Egypt, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Libya, Madagascar, Mali, and many others. Elections

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have become a normal occurrence on a continent once better known for the frequency and violence of its coups and civil wars.

Since the late 1990s the number of coups has fallen sharply, whereas the number of elections has increased, sometimes in the unlikeliest of places. Africa generally lacks a solid background of democratic rule. From the time that elections are announced to when they take place, usually between six and eight weeks, there is ample opportunity for incumbent leaders and parties to bend the rules to their advantage in subtle and not-so subtle ways.

Elections serve as a technical transition for democracy to ensure 'stateness' (Bollen, 2009) that includes political stability, government effectiveness and regulatory quality, the rule of law, and control of corruption (Bratton, & Chang, 2006).

Voting behaviour is generally affected by multiple factors, including; voters' assessments of government performance, party images, sociological cues and cognitive skills. However, the relationship between race and party images dominates voter choice and they remain key motivations for voter behaviour in Africa (Habib, & Herzenberg, 2011).

As stated by Schiffrin (2009), the portrayal of elections in Africa by the Western mainstream media include its focus on crisis, disaster, war, famine and its oversimplification of social organization and ethnicity. Conversely, the local African journalism remains a disappointment for many Africans because they were hoping to have, with the increase in media outlets, quality journalism that could provide detailed coverage by Africans of the news that affects their lives. They want the media to cover the important topics that will affect their country's economic and political development, but in many cases, this is still a very farfetched dream.

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However, there are legitimate reasons for the poor performance of African journalism such as the difficult conditions under which African journalists work. This has naturally affected their reporting. Underpaid, poorly trained and working under both political and commercial pressures, many African journalists suffer from the devaluing of their profession, which has left them vulnerable and isolated. Typifying these conditions, in countries such as Ghana and Nigeria, some journalists are not given a salary but simply left to rely on payments from sources (Schiffrin, 2009).

It might be useful here to mention how the *Political Contest Model* serves as a tool to explain how the racial, ethnic and political struggle is automatically communicated by the news media as major elements during political conflicts with the aim of exploiting media attention and achieving political gain.

This research attempts to put together the puzzle pieces that the disparate scholarship on elections and democracy, social welfare and governmentality present in Africa. While the research does not offer a full alternate analysis of the elections, it suggests that such analysis could be enhanced by deeper understanding of both the realities of social welfare in Africa, and the nature of poor media governance that remain an obstacle in many parts of Africa.

The researcher argues that the micro level of everyday life is the important context to appreciate the effects of the macro level of the democratic values as well as the dynamics of the public. The research draws on original quantitative and qualitative research, as well as broader national-level data and literature on social welfare, conceptions of households, elections, gendered citizenship and critical governmentality, to argue for a more comprehensive social science approach to analysis of contemporary South African politics/realities.

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This entrenched idea of "politics of identity" (Mamdani, 2009) has substituted the notion of citizenship, with the remnant sense of belonging inherited from the colonial age, which uses ethnic identity to distinguish between cultures or classes within the same society. This has re-launched the categories and affective schemes as vectors of a colonial rule of difference (Chatterjee, 1993; Stoler, 2002).

Out of this motivation for exploring the coverage related to elections in Africa and issues concerning political dynamics emerged the idea of this journal and the close cooperation between the editor, Dr. Ibrahim Saleh, from the University of Cape Town, and the publisher, Professor Gabriel Botma, from the University of Stellenbosch. Both are prompted by a shared vision to work hard to improve the current research culture in Africa and provide real new research opportunities for African scholars.

This special issue on elections in Africa looks into various stages of the electoral process, and the areas where distortions can occur. The journal issue attempts to address topics such as the role of media in covering elections, key issues in covering elections, covering local/social issues (rights, health, and access to services) and accessing diverse voices in civil society, the themes for elections coverage, as well as media ethics and elections.

The issue includes seven important contributions by diverse authors from within and without Africa. It is thus important to address a number of questions that keep probing: Do media empower the electorate? Have Africans changed after elections?

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