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## Peace journalism in post-election Kenya

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*With 2007 post-election violence in fresh memory, fears were great that history would repeat itself after the elections in 2013. Various precautions, however, managed to contain outbreaks of violence. A move of major importance was the media training in peace journalism, organised by the Uwiano Platform for Peace, Life & Peace Institute and Saferworld.*

# Peace journalism in post-election Kenya

Shamsia Ramadhan

It is widely acknowledged that the media operating in a conflict context have the capacity to escalate conflict by accentuating differences, highlighting confrontation or providing a platform for dissenting voices. It is through media that a conflict in society is reported and it is the manner of reporting that can increase violence, even when this was not the intention.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand the media are also able to de-escalate conflict by utilising their expansive platform to campaign for peace, by altering their language and avoiding, to some extent, covering issues that can intensify violence, and also by providing a platform for alternative voices. It was with the understanding of the vital role of media in a conflict context that peacebuilding organisations in Kenya, such as the Life & Peace Institute, Saferworld, Peacenet-Kenya and Local Capacities for Peace International, made a decision to target the media with the purpose of developing a partnership in an attempt to encourage them to fulfil their role in a way that promotes peace and prevents violence.

The local media in Kenya have been accused of self-censorship during the general elections held in March 2013. This raises the need for discussion on what role the media have in conflict prevention and on whether self-regulation by the media within a volatile context is appropriate to prevent violence. Although the Kenyan media are facing reproach for not carrying out their mandate, there is little clarity on what they were expected or supposed to report and where they failed. The dominant perception is that the local media should have reported election anomalies and other injustices, such as the few incidences of commotion

between a couple of people and police in some areas. But what would have been the outcome of media reports of such anomalies within a highly divided society and during a hotly contested election in a country that has a history of post-election violence?

This paper seeks to present the media as key actors in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, using the engagement with the Kenyan media as a case. The article supports the general notion that with adequate support and preparation, local media can contribute to conflict prevention and peacebuilding. It describes the activities carried out by peace practitioners ahead of the general elections in Kenya. The focus is on journalists, reporters, editors and media owners committed and prepared to ensure that the elections were peaceful. The article will highlight the preparation that media practitioners underwent under the Uwiano Platform for Peace in collaboration with the Life & Peace Institute and Saferworld, an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict.

## Media in a conflict context

The citizens of Kenya have the right to information and free access to the media. Press freedom as well as freedom of expression is guaranteed in the Constitution, and the media are thus expected to report without withholding any information. However, in view of the events following the 2007 elections, the citizens of Kenya also have the right to protection from violence. Any institution operating in Kenya with the capacity to prevent violence has a moral obligation to ensure that citizens are protected from a situation that will lead to a repetition of the violence experienced in 2007.

It is a fact that within a conflict context, information is critical to determining the attitude and behaviour of the different parties to the conflict. In an era of technological advancement, the ability to do so will largely depend on the quality of available information that is relayed mainly through the various media channels, both electronic and print. The information to be relayed is not the issue. What matters is how the information is relayed. The manner in which information is shared with the public in a conflict context contributes either to de-escalation or escalation of violence. Therefore, was the so called “self-censorship” of the media necessary to prevent violent conflict? Did the media contribute to the relative peace that was experienced by Kenyans after the elections? How and why did the media adopt the “self-censorship” mode?

Within a conflict context various activities are carried out focusing on conflict prevention, involving civil society organisations and critical actors who have the capacity to prevent violence. Among them is the private sector, which, because of the impact of violence on the economy, is keen to ensure that it does not occur. Additionally, not only is there a major risk of loss of lives but also of destruction of property and disruption of livelihoods and economic activities. This has an impact on the social, political and economic capital. For the private sector, a peaceful environment is a prerequisite to guarantee that the economic engine continues to operate in order to generate profit. Therefore, in the private sector in Kenya, the media which are the main source of information for the Kenyan public were identified as vital stakeholders in conflict prevention.

The media worldwide are known for sensational reporting of events as a strategy to attract readers/audiences. Many media institutions, whether electronic or print, are profit driven and thus, their approach is to ensure that they spread news and information that not only appeal to but also excite readers/audiences. The media are a very competitive industry, whose ability to maintain their clientele partly depends on the type of stories relayed to the public. A common approach in news reporting is sensationalising as a strategy to attract audiences and readers. In a conflict context this kind of reporting has the potential to increase tensions, which may lead to physical violence.

### The media's role in conflict prevention

The media project under the Uwiano Platform for Peace was crafted in a manner that allowed the media to carry out their mandate but at the same time promote peace. Taking into consideration the mandate of the media, the project infused conflict sensitivity in media coverage by conducting conflict sensitive journalism/reporting training with journalists and reporters from all over Kenya. The project linked peacebuilding principles and practice with media practice in a pragmatic session that allowed for dialogue between the two sectors. The approach adopted was grounded in conflict sensitivity, based on already existing structures instead of creating new ones. Since the media have their distinct mandate, the purpose of the initiative was – of course – not to prevent the media from sharing information and news. By advocating for peace journalism, the project sought to challenge conventional journalism to work actively for peace through the media.

As was revealed by the various commissions of inquiry, the Kenyan society is deeply divided along ethnic lines, a fact that defines and determines political support and affiliation of the various groups. As such, any information in an environment that is yet to recover from the effects of violence ought to be relayed in a manner that does not aggravate the situation. This was the main purpose of promoting conflict sensitivity among the Kenyan media.

The conflict sensitivity training focussed on issues that were expected to be used by the different political groups during the campaign period. They were identified by the journalists and report-

ers attending the training sessions and included land ownership, devolution, marginalisation and underdevelopment.

### A paradigm shift

The editors, journalists, reporters and correspondents who attended the capacity building sessions were encouraged to adopt a 'Do No Harm' framework, that is, media coverage during the election period should not contribute to the weakening of local capacities for peace, but instead all reporting should reinforce Kenyans' inclination towards peace. Peace journalism provided an alternative to the traditional conflict oriented news paradigm, changed the dynamics during a tense period, and contributed to averting violence.

Even with the long delay in announcing the result of the elections after the failing of the electronic tallying system used by the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), the media assured Kenyans that the alternative approach was equally reliable. They also impressed upon political parties who were not satisfied with the election tallying results the importance of channelling their disagreement through the legal system. They called upon the supporters of the various political groups to remain calm. After the announcement of the election results, one of the presidential candidates, Mr. Raila Odinga, filed a petition in the Supreme Court, challenging the results of the presidential elections. The media covered the court proceedings and continued to appeal for peace, and they also carried out objective analysis of the petition in a manner that provided information to citizens without inflaming emotions of the different political groups.

The main purpose of the training was to enable the media to report in a conflict

context without suppressing information but adopting a language that would not cause anxiety in an already divided society. Thus, the civil liberties guaranteeing freedom of expression and the right to information are upheld. Providing news and information to the public is also an economic issue for the media, since withholding it would be detrimental to their economic sustainability.

### The conduct of the media

What was visible during the 2013 election period was the change in language and a more cautious coverage by the various media, irrespective of political affiliation of the media owners or the media personalities. This was different from the media coverage during the 2007 election. Before the elections, various media houses developed internal policies that outlined strategies of coverage and reporting. Several of them developed a code of conduct that was published both in public and as an internal guide for media coverage, including during the election period. For example, the Nation Media Group published an announcement outlining the requirements of any political advertisement several months before the elections. This included vetting of the content to ensure that it was not provocative or adversarial.<sup>2</sup>

Internally, media institutions agreed that they would broadcast or print any political engagement that in their assessment was not offensive to any of the political groups. They were also aware that if they decided not to cover political campaigns that had provocative content, political parties would use paid space for advertising. Thus, the media houses came up with an advertising code of conduct, which all the political parties or leaders who wished to pay for

*In an effort to minimise post-election violence, journalists and reporters from the whole country participated in a series of conflict sensitive media trainings.*



PHOTO: SHAMSIA RAMADHAN



Three women on their way to a polling station in Nairobi's Mathare slum, wearing 'women for peace' headbands given out by a local women's organisation.

platform can be used in peacebuilding by promoting social unity.

### Maintaining peace

In retrospect the media's role in conflict prevention ought to have started long before the elections. They should have found out whether the various institutions were adequately prepared to ensure free, fair and peaceful elections. The critical institutions in this process were the IEBC and the Kenyan police. Being proactive, the media should have provided information related to the process of the election, for example by asking questions about the main register that was to be used and whether there were any alternatives in case this register should fail.

The conduct of the local media in the 2013 elections affirms that they indeed can contribute to conflict prevention. Their changed conduct altered the perception of the traditional role of the media in a conflict context, namely that of highlighting negative incidences. The media made a strategic and deliberate effort to approach the coverage of the election process, not as outsiders, but insiders. They are a part of the group of internal actors who have a role in maintaining peace in a conflict context. The approach they adopted, if well managed, is proactive and sustainable, with the capacity to alter citizens' attitudes and behaviour, utilising existing institutions. This approach enables the media to actively commit to safeguarding their society, a role that the Kenyan media managed judiciously. It is now up to other actors in society to follow suit by engaging with the citizens to ensure sustainable peace. 🌿

*LPI's participation in the media project was financed by the Folke Bernadotte Academy.*

space in the media, whether electronic or printed, had to comply with. The media also collectively organised and managed two presidential debates that included all the eight presidential candidates. They were able to provide a platform for citizens and aspiring candidates to engage in a constructive manner. This shifted the focus of the coverage from the politicians to matters of national interest to all Kenyans, regardless of political affiliation.

The media complied with the decision that only the IEBC had the mandate to announce election results. They also decided not to broadcast any episode that was confrontational, particularly during the release of election results when political actors disagreed with the results being announced. Publicising confrontation and political disagreement to a population that is not only politically but also ethnically divided has the potential to cause anarchy, as was the case in 2007. Neither did the media sensationalise the failure of the electronic voting system that the Kenyan government had invested in, in order to ensure free and fair elections. In addition to the conduct of the media, other institutions also created an enabling environment for the media through legal reforms. The reformed justice system acted as a confidence building measure, providing political groups and citizens with alternative options to pursue disagreements.

### A conflict sensitive approach

The socially responsible approach adopted by the local media led to relative peace

during the post-election period and confirms that the media in a conflict context are one of the channels that can be used either to incite or reassure citizens. Their thoughtfulness in reporting and their constant call to uphold peace had a great impact on the conduct not only of the citizens but also of the political elite. From a peacebuilder's perspective, the media adopted a conflict sensitive approach to reporting. Not only did they use a sensitive language, but they also decided not to broadcast incidences that could have led to anarchy. It was a deliberate choice that was influenced by training in peace journalism.

In December 2010 when the International Criminal Court revealed the names of Kenyan suspects accused of violence during the 2007 post-election riots, the thought of a journalist being named seemed farfetched. Nonetheless, among the six suspects were politicians, government officials and a journalist. Although the indictment was of an individual, he or she is affiliated with a key institution in the society. This indictment, in addition to the conflict sensitive training of media personalities, had an effect on the reporting style adopted by the media, making them less inclined to report election related incidences. Nonetheless, whatever the cause of the change in reporting, the media conduct prevented violence. The absence of violence, however, does not translate to sustainable peace. The challenge is how that change in behaviour can be sustained and how the media

- 1 Francis Rolt, "The Media: Reaching Hearts and Minds". In *People Building Peace*, edited by Paul Van Tongeren, Malin Brenk and Juliette Verhoeven, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2005, pp. 175-177.
- 2 Saturday Nation, 19 May 2012.