

The Media and Elections in post-conflict Central African countries

**Dr Marie-Soleil Frère
University of Brussels**

Election processes, Liberation movements and Democratic Change in Africa
Conference
Maputo 8-11 April 2010
CMI and IESE

Abstract

In six countries in Francophone Central Africa, elections have recently been organized in a « post-conflict » situation. Focusing on the elections that took place in Burundi (2005), the Central African Republic (2005), the Democratic Republic of Congo (2006), Congo Brazzaville (2002 and 2007), Chad (2001 and 2006) and Rwanda (2003 and 2008), this research is trying to show how the media got involved in those electoral processes. These polls were crucial for peace-building and, to a large extent, supported by the international community, being considered as the last step of a peace process and the first step for establishing a new representative democratic « post-conflict » regime. The media in the region are facing many challenges that are putting limitations to their capacities to play their part in those elections, as independent stakeholders, devoted to circulate all the necessary information towards the citizen. In a context of great political tensions, when the candidates are often former belligerents that have just put down the guns to go to the polls, the media are working in an unsafe and economically damaged environment, suffering from the lack of infrastructure, inadequate equipment and untrained staff. Nevertheless, the journalists also have new opportunities allowing them to bring their contribution to the process. This paper will try to show the difficulties they are facing as well as the creative initiatives that some of them took to try to overcome those gaps.

Introduction

Six countries in Central Africa have undergone, during the past decade, a violent war or an armed rebellion in a context where multiparty system didn't lead to democratization but to civil war. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Central African Republic, Congo Brazzaville, Rwanda and Chad, elections were organized in the middle of the 2000's as the last step in a transition and peace-building process, meant to mark the return of a "legitimate" authority, sanctioned by the ballot. This paper aims at showing the role played by the media during these electoral processes that were generally organized under the close supervision of the international community. In those countries, the media landscape has indeed experienced major developments at the beginning of the liberalization processes in the early 1990's, but wars and conflicts have then created unfavorable economic conditions, turning many reporters into propagandists, and strengthening the public authorities' and other belligerents' desire to control the circulation of information. After a couple of years of « post-conflict » transition, the media in Central Africa may have benefited from a more stable environment, even though they were generally still fragile on the eve of the first « post-conflict » pluralist elections. This paper is divided in three parts: the first part will underline the main characteristics of these post conflict elections. The second part will be analyzing the main obstacles that the media in

Central Africa faced while covering the latest electoral processes. The third part will draw some perspectives, underlining positive changes as new polls are upcoming soon.

1. Elections and in Central Africa

As most countries in Africa, the 6 countries on which this paper is focused have only recently become acquainted with free and pluralist elections. For three decades, elections organized in those countries took place under single-party regimes and were aimed at renewing and legitimating the head of state, demonstrating the population's complete support to his political program. Under such circumstances, the media, on which the state had a monopoly, all spoke in a single voice.

It is owing to the democratization processes initiated in the early 1990s that the multiparty system resurfaced on the continent. Political parties and the new private media (first limited to the written press, then extended to radio and even television in some countries) were then born concomitantly, sometimes even "hand in hand." Virtually unconcerned by questions of profitability and entrepreneurial positioning, the new media « industry » was more focusing on promoting or criticizing the authorities than providing citizens with confirmed, verified and credible information.

As pluralist elections were organized in most of the African countries, new political pluralism evolved into chaos and war in Central Africa. In Central African Republic (1991), Burundi (1993) and Congo-Brazzaville (1993), the first « free and pluralist » elections lead to a change at the top of the state but also opened the door to civil war. In the DRC, Rwanda and Chad, although political pluralism was allowed, elections couldn't be organized as the serving President was hanging to power. Rebel movements contesting the party in power appeared also leading to instability and violence. In French-speaking Africa, only a limited number of countries were able, following the organization of a first poll in the early 1990s, to organize a second poll within the given deadline without any violent interruption (state coup, civil war, etc.) disturbing the normal electoral calendar. Two scenarios often unfolded: either conflicts broke out; or the ruling authorities stuck to a "minimal" notion of democratic consolidation, limiting themselves to the regular organization of pluralist elections while also establishing more or less discrete mechanisms to control public discussion. Some of these regimes were in fact termed "electoral authoritarianisms" (Schedler: 2006).

In the face of these developments, two distinct trends have emerged among pundits with distinct positions on the elections (Van de Walle: 2009, p.151). The pessimists see in them a mechanism which merely serves a semblance of democracy in regimes characterized by clientelism, weak institutions and mediocre economic growth, which prevent these countries from meeting the conditions required for the establishment of truly democratic regimes. The second, more optimistic trend, claims that the regular holding of pluralist and free elections (and not just one election), even in unfavourable circumstances, can help consolidate democracy and reinforce civil liberties. In this sense, elections would not only be a component and indicator of democracy, but a factor of democratization, since each new election would strengthen and develop civil awareness (Lindberg: 2006, p.20). Even if rulers manipulate the ballot, perpetrate fraud and threaten voters, they will be forced to deny these interventions, which is to say that they will be forced to recognize that they constitute anomalies, which is one way of contributing to the legitimization of the principle of free elections.

Elections in post-conflict countries

But the elections on which this paper focuses are even more specific as they were organized in countries which have experienced armed conflicts. In these countries, elections are often seen as the last step in a transition and peace-building process, and are meant to mark the return of a “legitimate” authority, sanctioned by the ballot. They are considered a necessary step without which the transition from war to peace would not be possible, a necessary ingredient on the road to stability (Sisk & Reynolds: 1998, p.185). They are generally organized under the supervision of the international community, especially when the latter has been involved in the resolution of crisis and bringing hostilities to an end.

Elections in post-conflict countries are “quite unlike other elections.” (Quantin: 2009, p.181) First of all, they are organized under the supervision of the international community, often simultaneously to other initiatives such as disarmament or measures taken to ensure the safety of the population. They sometimes make little use of internal mobilization and organization capacities, which means that these processes can be relatively artificial. Moreover, they are often seen as an end, when in fact they only constitute a step and they alone cannot ensure that the authorities to emerge from the elections will exercise their mandate democratically. Moreover, in countries emerging from conflict situations, they involve a number of risks, since they can polarize even more societies that have already been divided by a conflict. Indeed, as Patrick Quantin reminds us, “what distinguishes the electoral act is participation in a collective reflection which can turn into confrontation.” (Quantin: 1998, p.23)

Thus, elections should not be considered the magical formula which will solve all the ills of a country emerging from a conflict. But why, then, is this relatively risk-laden step forward so crucial, and why does it often mobilize significant contributions from donors? As Gauthier de Villers claims, elections in countries emerging from conflicts are seen by the international community as “a necessary condition (and one that one would wish sufficient) to rebuild a state. (...) This task is, at bottom, more achievable and more manageable than that, for instance, of rebuilding the administration or an army, or of fighting corruption...” (de Villers: 2009, p.366) Focusing on the organization of elections means setting a reachable technical objective, which can signal the beginning of the crisis-ridden country’s redevelopment. Moreover, these elections often constitute the only option on which former belligerents agree. It often happens that, despite the risks involved in such a polarizing process, diplomats, political stakeholders and armed movements don’t have another possibility but that one to definitely put an end to the conflict (Sisk & Reynolds: 1998, p.146).

Just as one spoke in the early 1990s of a “democracy kit” in Africa, one could refer to an example of “peace-process kit,” created in the offices of the United Nations, multilateral organizations and embassies, and of which elections constitute one of the indispensable elements. “Whether in Afghanistan, Irak, Burundi or the Congo,” Jean-Claude Willame remarks, “throughout the long exercise of restoring civil and military peace, ‘peacemakers’ have always kept to the same plan: a transition government must lead to a legitimate government stemming from ‘free and democratic’ elections, often organized before the guns have fallen silent.” (Willame: 2006, p.166) As they are supported by the international community, it is often difficult to assess this kind of election: at bottom, “they involve the responsibility of those who financed them.” (Quantin: 2009, p.182)

In the past, such elections have been crowned with success, but have also led to failure. “If elections go well, the country can continue on the road to democracy and peace. But if they don’t, democracy can be undermined and the country can descend into conflict.” (Howard:

2005, p.3) Thus, elections can contribute to (re)establishing the rule of law, just as they can exacerbate tensions or revive violence, often along ethnic lines.

The elections that took place in Burundi (2005), Central African Republic (2005), Democratic Republic of the Congo (2006), Chad (2001, 2006), Congo-Brazzaville (2002, 2007) and Rwanda (2003, 2008) belong to those type of elections and present a number of similarities.

The first similarity is the importance given by the international community to elections which, though highly symbolic, are not a panacea. These elections were held in countries in which democratic dialogue, individual security and often governance show serious shortcomings. They required massive investments, though they could not, simply through the electoral principle alone, provide solutions to the problems which triggered the conflicts or resulted from them. It is probable that elections were chosen as the prime objective not only out of naivety but because they constitute a “technical” objective which was measurable, programmable and thus easier to reach.

Another similarity lies in the hope they generated in populations which, often after much suffering, expected more from these elections than they could deliver: security and stability, development and well-being. The high turnout, at least in the first and sometimes in the second post-war elections, reveals the populations’ level of belief. Exercising their right to vote often requires much effort, as citizens must be willing to travel long distances and wait long hours in front of a polling station in order to make their voice heard. This energy can, on the other hand, turn into mass lethargy if the polls are no longer considered credible.

A third similarity is the ongoing insecurity in some parts of the territory or which threatens stability from the outside. The elections aim to install a dynamic whereby one hopes to reinforce peace, though fighting continues and destabilizing the electoral process itself can become an objective of the armed factions: the perspective of elections can thus fuel conflicts and increase instability, though they are often presented as the culmination of the peace process.

Fourthly, one must underline the logistical challenge posed by the organization of elections in countries which are often vast and , with the exception of Burundi and Rwanda, sparsely populated, and where census data are unreliable and volatile, where transport is difficult, and where electricity is all but ubiquitous. Not only do wars block development, but they also lead to the deterioration of the infrastructure, thus making the task of those organizing the elections even more complicated than in other “developing” countries. When logistical challenges combine with political manipulations, it can be difficult to determine which dysfunctions are tied to technical problems, fraud or violence.

2. Covering elections in post conflict Central African countries

Elections are a perilous period for journalists the world over, since they generate heightened political pressure, an increase in the number of manipulation attempts, and the need to work hastily. If newspapers also suffer from material and financial difficulties and a shortage of competent staff at a time when citizens expect the media to be ubiquitous, journalists’ work can soon be seen as incomplete or unbalanced.

The media sector's political and economic environment as well as its structure play a key role in the manner the media cover the elections. Lang and Ward conclude that where the media environment is unstable covering elections according to the principles of equal access and non discrimination can become very problematic (Lange & Ward: 2004, p.203).

The obstacles faced by the media are also to be found in countries with a long democratic tradition, and are thus not peculiar to post-conflict countries. But in Central Africa, the local media, have on top been scarred by violent conflicts.

1) Obstacle 1: The Intrinsic Weaknesses of Media Enterprises

Most of the media have small and insufficiently trained staff, no means of transport, and limited financial means to cover telecommunications costs, which prevent them from providing rigorous and complete coverage of national elections. The best performing media are those such as Radio Okapi or Radio Ndeke Luka which had, thanks to international support, means which were far superior to those of the local media; means which cannot be generated by the local context.

The historical origin of this situation is clear: private media in these countries are recent initiatives, which have not yet been able to develop or strengthen themselves as enterprises. They are run by professionals who are often full of good will and highly motivated, but who have no training in journalism, and even less in management. Local community radios, which are particularly useful, but also, for the most part, impoverished, illustrate all these internal weaknesses.

War added extra constraints to the local media by paralyzing or destroying its economic fabric, diminishing its advertising revenues, sending investors fleeing, impoverishing readers, and generally pushing up production costs due to shortages of raw materials and energy. Moreover, conflicts generally contributed to destabilize the entire education and training sector, government spending being refocused on the army and military expenses, and the labour market thus being flooded with young graduates who are either insufficiently qualified or whose trainings are ill adapted to the market. Only those media which can invest in the internal training of their human resources thus have experienced journalists.

The question we thus which to raise is the following: is there a threshold under which the practice of independent and rigorous journalism cannot be performed? Is there a minimum of material and human resources necessary to ensure professionalism? And this question is valid outside Africa...

2) Obstacle 2: The Media's Close Contacts with the Political Sphere

The private press in French-speaking Central Africa was born less than twenty years ago, at the same time as political pluralism and was often first of all an « opinion » press. In at least four of the six countries (Rwanda, Burundi, Congo and DRC), conflicts led to some newspapers being enrolled in the combat strategies of various political movements or figures. Poverty and pressure led many media to serve influential politicians and businessmen, both often being intricately connected. The media's fragility makes them vulnerable to pressure from politicians and political parties keen on receiving sufficient media coverage, and some radios and newspapers are thus driven to sell airtime or space to the highest bidder.

The media's independence (v-à-v des pouvoirs politiques), which owes much, in the West, to the development of commercial advertising or the involvement of information professionals

themselves in the capital, is all the more difficult to consolidate in developing democracies where civil society is weak and where the political field infiltrates all sectors. In those countries, such as Burundi, where the private media have managed to grow outside of the political sphere, their very survival, which depends on the involvement of foreign partners, remains problematic.

3) *Obstacle 3: The Ownership Structures of Media Enterprises*

The close relations between the media and politicians in several Central African states is not tied to the regular holding of elections, but is tied to the very structure of the media. Media enterprises either belong to the state; are owned by individuals who are either directly or indirectly involved in politics; or depend on partnerships with foreign donors, as is the case with Radio Okapi in the DRC, Radio Ndeke Luka in the CAR, or the private radios in Burundi. These ownership and financing structures all have an impact on the contents of the media. Even community media are generally owned by an individual rather than a local community, and their reliance on Western donors for support is often structural, and influences the information they produce. In the private sector, there is rarely any transparency as regards shareholders, and many enterprises in the DRC or Congo Brazzaville are officially owned by straw men. In such circumstances, media pluralism does not necessarily imply a plurality of editorial positions or plural contents, nor does it guarantee the presence of diversified and “independent” opinions and ideas in the public sphere.

Conflict periods have not helped revise or further extend legislation enabling to clarify the statuses of the various media and to set up legal and fiscal measures adapted to each situation. Moreover, these conflict periods helped develop political-criminal networks which would gain nothing were the countries to set up a public control aiming to ensure increased transparency in the private enterprises’ activities and the composition of their capital.

4) *Obstacle 4: The Executive’s Influence on Public Media*

Media ownership being a key factor of their independence, one must acknowledge the fact that most so-called “public” media in Central Africa are struggling to break free from the grip of governments. It is a recurrent situation in countries which, historically, have had a military regime or a single-party system and in which the media are traditionally controlled by the authorities. Though military regimes have made way for civil governments and though public media have evolved towards the status of “public service corporation” with administrative and financial independence, government control of state media is a well-anchored tradition and has a direct influence on the role these media play during elections. Moreover, in post-conflict countries, state have, more than elsewhere, been instruments of propaganda, strategic weapons used to defend the state. Resistance to their autonomization is thus all the more important.

In the six countries, the public media demonstrated flagrant unbalance in favour of the contending president. Burundi is something of an exception in this regards, given the particular power-sharing arrangement which prevailed at the time of the 2005 elections. Moreover, it has been observed that in countries where the public media have been confiscated by the executive, opposition media have often used this as an excuse to justify their own radical and unbalanced positions: the private media raise their voices because the public media fail to guarantee equal access.

5) *Obstacle 5 : The Media’s Limited Scope*

If most citizens in Central Africa don’t have fair access to information, it’s also because a large part of the population just has no access to media. The written press is generally limited

to the capital, and its print runs are small: even if newspapers circulate from one reader to the next, they still only reach a small urban elite. Extreme poverty prevents a large part of the population from purchasing a newspaper, which people are, moreover, rarely able to read. Television, which requires that one purchase costly sets and has access to electricity, has a very limited scope: in Bangui, N'Djamena, Bujumbura and Brazzaville, national television, which still has a near monopoly, hardly broadcasts outside the capital. Private radios broadcast on FM within very limited areas, though there are a few exceptions. The lack of qualified personnel to maintain equipment leads to frequent breakdowns or limits the range of transmitters. As for public radios, which, historically, were responsible for diffusing information to the population, they are, in four of the six countries studied, only the shadow of their former selves, unable to cover the whole territory.

Wars often led to a deterioration of the infrastructure, and transmitters and receivers are faced with the recurrent problem of having access to a stable source of electricity. Generators, on which the overwhelming majority of media depend in the countryside and even (in Chad, Congo Brazzaville, the CAR or Burundi) in the capital, are merely a punctual and costly palliative. The lack of an effective road network and the high costs of telecommunications also limit the possibility of circulating information beyond the capital, but also of collecting elements on what is happening there. The media's "capital-centrism" can thus be seen in both their scope and their contents.

The existence of populations excluded from electoral information is a source of concern in those six countries as democratic elections lose of their meaning when the percentage of citizens concerned by candidates' visions of society is limited by the lack of access.

6) *Obstacle 6: Press Freedom Violations*

In Central African countries, not only is the freedom of expression a recent conquest, dating to the early 1990s, but the media's use of this freedom since then has made them the victims of numerous acts of violence and repression. During the armed conflicts which were tied, one way or another, to power struggles, journalists were often among the victims of these wars. In Rwanda, half the members of the profession were decimated in 1994. In the DRC, 1998, when the second war broke out, was among the darkest years in the profession's history. In the east of the country, which is still unstable, six journalists have been killed since the beginning of the war. In Congo Brazzaville, Burundi, Chad and the Central African Republic, journalists have, in recent years, been threatened, arrested arbitrarily and imprisoned.

The number of press freedom violations and the various forms they take have led journalists to practise self-censorship. This is all the more so since these attacks against journalists generally do not result in either investigations or punishments for the guilty parties, in countries in which conflicts have left countless unpunished crimes. Journalists' self-censorship has probably become the first obstacle to citizens' right to access information.

7) *Obstacle 7: The Weaknesses of the Regulatory Authorities*

Countries in Central Africa belong to the tradition of "civil law" (the French or Belgian tradition) which traditionally provides for law governing not only the press enterprises' activities, but also the contents published by the media, contrary to the Anglo-American tradition. During election periods in particular, the public media's activities are closely defined, and private audiovisual media are often subject to significant regulation. An independent authority for the regulation of communications or the media is in charge of

organizing the media's involvement in the election campaign, but also of enforcing regulations and dealing with complaints lodged against the media.

These authorities are quite new in the African media landscape and emerged in the wake of the liberalization of the media sector or in the course of peace processes, often with the primary aim of ensuring fair access to the media during elections. Overall, they are quite recent, institutionally fragile, under-financed and -equipped, often inactive, sometimes incompetent, and generally too politicized. Regulating the media is generally perilous and faces, on the one hand, the journalists' distrust (since they wish for the least possible interventions from the public authorities in their sector), and on the other hand, the attempts of the government to control and manipulate the regulatory body. The legitimate, neutral and impartial intervention of regulatory authorities, which is particularly needed during election periods, is still in need of much work in Central Africa.

8) *Obstacle 8: Difficulties in Accessing Information*

In countries which for decades have known state monopoly on the media, followed by murderous conflicts, and in which information has been handled as a spoil of war, withholding information is strong. Free and democratic elections require transparency and communication, in countries where opacity, and even deliberate lies and propaganda have been the rule. This is a radical change of culture, both for administrations, which now have to make public the information, and for journalists, who have to learn where to find it or how to demand it.

Indeed, it is the lack of access to information which leads the media to report rumors, "fake opinion polls," and hazardous forecasts, and thus, ultimately, to commit mistakes during electoral processes. It's therefore the citizen's right to be informed, which translates as the journalist's obligation to inform, which is not accomplished.

9) *Obstacle 9: The Candidates' Disproportionate Means*

The unbalance of the media can also be the result of the candidates' disproportionate means, in particular those who have access to state funds and do not hesitate to mobilize them to serve their campaign. Twenty years ago, Jean-François Médard used the term "neopatrimonialism" to designate the practice whereby a head of state believes that public funding constitutes his personal patrimoine. Under Idriss Déby in Chad or Denis Sassou Nguesso in the Congo, it is clear that a head of state "does not organize elections in order to lose them."

Moreover, it is clear that in post-conflict countries, in which candidates to the highest office (in the six cases we have studied) all have a military background and used to wear military clothes a few years earlier and carried guns, electoral campaigns are run like military campaigns. Campaigns are operations meant to seize power, strategically planned like confrontations, which require that all available troops and means be mobilized. Military leaders do not ask of their workforce, even if they are paid with public money, to serve the population, but to vanquish the enemy. And it works, since, having studied the six electoral processes, one sees that all elected presidents (Bozizé, Kagamé, Kabila, Nkurunziza, Déby and Sassou Nguesso) all share the fact that they led battalions in the regular army or in a rebel movement (or both) before entering the electoral campaign.

The unbalance observed in the media thus often reflect the disproportion in the campaign means mobilized by candidates.

10) Obstacle 10: Inflaming discourse from the political candidates

Many observers believe that the inflaming discourses observed on air or in the pages of newspapers during the electoral campaigns are not so much due to journalists themselves as to the politicians who were interviewed. While some debate hosts certainly lack professionalism, the journalists are often merely the ears (sometimes eager, it is true) to which politicians address their xenophonic discourses or direct attacks on the honour or the privacy of other people.

This issue is tied to that of the campaign arguments, thus of the strategies and programmes of candidates and parties. Ultimately, the problem is the manner in which a political project is presented which is seeking the support of the voters. Much has been written on political parties in Africa, their history, their similarities and differences with political parties in Western democracies (Basedau, Erdmann and Mehler). Many studies put forward the weakness of these organizations, centred around a “big man”, as well as their ethnic or regional foundation. In these post-conflict countries, the nature of the contending political parties (former single party for some, former armed rebel movement for others; opportunistic initiatives for others yet, set up hastily and limited to a few members in the capital...) shed some light on the strategies and campaign discourses. The journalist and the media become, sometimes involuntarily, the relay of a campaign based on the rejection of the other, the threat of a return to war or simply on untruthful promises.

11) Obstacle 11: Confusing Information and Communication

Advertorials have become widespread in Central African media. The terms “gombo” (in Chad), “camora” (in Brazzaville) or “coupage” (in Kinshasa) refer to the amount of money journalists receive from organizers to cover an event. Thus, interviewing a candidate, covering another’s rally, or reporting on a civil society organization which gravitates around another candidate are opportunities for a journalist to obtain financial advantages from his “source” of information, which he will then be sure to treat kindly. The reports born from this kind of deal are always presented to the public as news reports, and not as communication products. The same holds for productions created by communications units outside the media, but which manage to insert themselves, sometimes at a high cost, in television news, radio news or the dailies’ editorial pages, without any mention of their source, and thus of their veritable nature.

Though these practices make it possible to fill the coffers of financially fragile media or to ensure that impoverished journalists will be paid, they also contribute to duping the audience, and are, in this respect, condemned by all codes of ethics adopted by journalists in the countries under consideration.

The only media among those we have studied which do not know this type of practice are those financed by foreign donors (Radio Okapi, Radio Ndeke Luka, *Le Journal du Citoyen*, Radio Isanganiro...), all of which pay their staff sufficient salaries. Besides, years of a single-party system followed by armed conflicts created a context favourable to the emergence of this type of behaviour. Indeed, for decades, African journalists have been considered first and foremost as a channel by which to communicate certain information at a certain time, and not as a news professional whose mission it is to collect, select, verify, confirm and diffuse facts independently. As a result, Central African journalists have been used, to serve a country’s development or national union. This perception is common among many political figures, and some media are ready to conform to this approach, even in part, if it enables them to survive.

12) Obstacle 12: The Lack of Professional Solidarity

Solidarity can reinforce the media's capacities to face up to the elections. The Burundian media gathered in a « synergy », an editorial coordination project that ensured them the capacities to cover the elections. The adoption of common codes of conducts, the creation of self-regulation authorities, the joint denunciation of press freedom violations have all reinforced the whole sector and enabled it to consolidate its autonomy from politicians. In some countries, however, such as Congo Brazzaville, such synergies currently seem impossible, given the strong competition between heavily politicized media. When political affinities outweigh professional identity, journalists are the mouthpieces of politicians before being journalists, a hindrance to professional solidarity.

In other countries, collective dynamics do exist, but they are sometimes punctual and weighted with suspicion. One reason is that professional solidarity organized itself, in the early nineties, on the basis of associations of journalists which existed under single-party regimes and state media monopolies. These associative structure found it difficult to open up to journalists from new private media and there is often a gap between journalists in the private and public sectors. Moreover, wars and conflicts paralyzed the associative action and led to at times profound divisions between members depending on the « side » each one took during the conflict.

13) Obstacle 13: A foregone outcome

Lastly, one cannot demand from the media more than what they can do. For the media's work to bear fruit, for voters to go to the ballot and make an informed choice in voting, the latter must be convinced that the elections are worth it and that each vote counts. And yet, in “adjectival democracies,” where a multitude of parties are authorized and freedom of expression is granted, but where pluralism is controlled by informal mechanisms, democracy is merely a façade, which barely disguises a political project which is resistant to real pluralism and true competition. In this kind of regime, the organization of pluralist elections, the establishment of democratic institutions held up to the international community can serve to hide an authoritarian political project.

In five of the six cases studied, the electoral competition was not quite open. The candidate who was declared the winner at the end of the process is not only the one who exercised the executive power at the time of the organization of the election, but also the one who was favoured by the international community. Only the 2005 elections in Burundi stand out from this pattern.

The media sector often reflects this situation. In “adjectival democracies,” the freedom of the press is also “adjectival”: it is “controlled”, “responsibilized” or “framed”, or simply neglected and suffocated. Everything can lead one to think that the media are free, though the numerous constraints impede their daily operations and the open space is not as open as one might think...

3. The opportunities of the XXIst century

Having identified thirteen major obstacles which impede the work of journalists during election periods, one last question deserves to be raised: how are these obstacles to be

overcome? The recent electoral experience of Central African countries shows that a number of opportunities exist which might lead to possible solutions.

The Media's Role		Obstacles	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inform citizens (fully, honestly and rigorously) - Monitor the activities of public and private actors on behalf of citizens - Serve as a platform for society's various components 	Outside the election period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The media's intrinsic weaknesses: low educational attainment, economic frailty, lack of material and technical means - Strong political connections - The executive's grip on public media - Weak diffusion range: unequal access to the media - Press freedom violations - Inactive or politicized regulatory authorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - De facto media pluralism: existence of diversified private media - Technological evolutions opening up new means of participation (mobile phones, the internet) - Donors' interest in the media sector: support opportunities - Existence of self-regulation associations and of professional organizations of journalists and media managers - Increase in the number of training centres for journalists
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide information on the electoral process (electoral registers, voting procedures, etc.) - Analyze electoral stakes - Supervise the implementation of the election (denounce any lack of transparency or rigour) - Assess the outgoing government 	Pre-election period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited target audiences - The media's limited self-production capacities - Lack of a journalistic tradition and skills as regards civic education - Obstacles to access to information - Factors leading to politicization: financial frailty (the lure of a reward), material shortages (means of transport and equipment), lack of training, media ownership structures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Donors' interventions: support provided to specialized international NGOs and local NGOs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • creation of new media production of • awareness-raising contents equipping the local media • trainings • supporting the regulatory authorities • supporting self-regulation mechanisms - Ongoing lobbying for the adoption of rules enabling access to public information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Allow parties and candidates to express themselves - Cover the various aspects of the campaign - Present, criticize and compare programmes - Monitor the organization of the election - Allow citizens and civil society to express themselves 	Electoral campaign	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disproportion between candidates' financial and material means and their media visibility - Blatant unbalance of state-owned media (encourages the other media's partisanship) - Structural and financial links between the media and candidates - Excessive and uncontrollable discourses of politicians - Weak distinction between information and paid-for political communication - Weakness and impotence of provincial media - Press freedom violations and journalists' insecurity - Obstacles to access to information - Lack of material and human resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Existence of independent and permanent monitoring mechanisms - Evolution of government media to public service media (projected or ongoing) - Lobbying to demand transparency of the capital of private media - Embargo mechanisms of political figures - Constraints for the identification of promotional material - Professional solidarity (synergies) and collective projects (pooling of available resources) - Existence of local associations for the defence of the freedom of the press and of mechanisms guaranteeing journalists' physical security - Decentralization of these mechanisms in the provinces
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Observe and report on voting operations - Denounce dysfunctions - Publish partial results (if authorized) - Analyze available data (turnout, etc.) - Cover accounts given by independent observers 	Election day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understaffed editorial teams - Shortage or absence of means of transport - Limited means of communication - Violations of journalists' rights and lack of security - Limited access to polling stations and the counting of votes - The media's intrinsic limitations (periodicity) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Synergies (including with the written press) - Possible collaborations with civil society (observation) - Use of ICTs (mobile phones and the internet) to gather and transmit information - Existence of mechanisms making it possible to respond rapidly and jointly to attacks against journalists
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Announce overall and/or detailed results (and tell citizens where detailed results can be found) 	Announcement of provisional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Late announcement of results: need to cover a long period of uncertainty and rumours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consultation mechanisms of media professionals: adoption of joint positions in relations with the

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analyze results - Cover the reactions of the different parties and candidates - Cover any potential demonstrations 	results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Losers' violent protests against the organization of the elections and the results (the media being a potential target of this violence) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> regulator or the electoral commission - Existence of instructions which are likely to help ensure journalists' security in the event of violence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reveal the reasons behind the appeals and the unfolding of the procedure 	Challenges and appeals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opacity of the process (lack of transparency of the administrative authority in charge of examining appeals) - Pressure from the international community to accept the results and validate the elections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development of specialized communication services in the institutions in charge of examining the legal challenges - Mechanisms enabling the public interpellation of foreign diplomatic representations (press conferences, open letters, etc.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Announce / publish the final results - Comment on the final results - Cover the various parties and candidates' reactions 	Announcement of final results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Losers' violent protests against the final results (journalists' insecurity) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - International solidarity: contacts with international associations and foreign colleagues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cover newly elected authorities as they take office - Remind newly elected representatives of their campaign pledges 	Newly elected representatives take office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reprisals against media which did not support the winner - Emergence of new, politicized "rival" media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Existence of professional associations and self-regulation mechanisms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inform citizens (fully, honestly and rigorously) - Monitor the activities of public and private actors on behalf of citizens - Serve as a platform for society's various components 	Outside the election period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The media's intrinsic weaknesses: low educational attainment, economic frailty, lack of material and technical resources - Strong political connections - The executive's grip on public media - Weak diffusion range: unequal access to the media - Press freedom violations - Disinterest of donors and operators for the sector once the ballot is over... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - De facto media pluralism: existence of diversified media - Technological evolutions opening up new means of participation (mobile phones, the internet) - Donors' interest in the media sector: support opportunities - Existence of self-regulation associations and of professional organizations of journalists and media managers - Increase in the number of training centres for journalists

Never before have there been so many media in Central Africa, and never before have they been so diversified or enjoyed such freedom of expression. Despite an unstable context and a decade of widespread murder, hundreds of newspapers, radios and televisions are now operational throughout the region. Elections offer an ideal opportunity to observe the extent to which a space has opened up in which to voice and discuss critical and contradictory opinions, and to observe how far these countries have come since the days of single-party unanimity which reigned some twenty years ago. The evolution of ICTs now offers these media unprecedented opportunities to gather and diffuse information: mobile phones and the internet have already changed the way many journalists work. This technological evolution has revolutionized the circulation of information and increased the possibility for isolated journalists to access information and communicate with fellow journalists; it has also enhanced their visibility, thereby reinforcing the impact their work can have.

Moreover, media professionals can now count on many professional associations and organizations, whose aim is to strengthen professional solidarity in the sector (associations of journalists), guarantee self-regulation (press observatories), set up training programmes and projects (press houses), and defend the freedom of the press and the rights of journalists.

Furthermore, one has also observed a positive evolution in the public authorities' interventions in the sector, with the creation of communications regulatory authorities, an ongoing reflection on the public media's greater autonomy, and pledges to contribute public funding to private media.

Lastly, the international community has recently turned its attention to the media sector and shown a willingness to support it. The international community's commitment is not the same everywhere: the greater its involvement in a peace process and the financing of elections, the greater its tendency to wish to accompany the media, as was the case in the DRC and Burundi. In countries where the authorities still control the organization of elections (Congo Brazzaville, Chad, Rwanda), fewer efforts have been made to strengthen journalists' capacities, though that is precisely where vigilant media risked facing the most obstacles. Though donor support has been essential for the completion of many projects with positive repercussions, there is one major drawback: it is punctual and is strictly centred on the elections themselves. The media thus risk finding themselves unable to pursue their work and continue to give citizens the information they need to participate in the management and control of the state.

Conclusion

Going back to the rift which separates scholars studying the development of electoral processes in Africa, should one be optimistic or pessimistic about the media's role in the building of electoral democracy in Central Africa?

The optimistic will argue that, just as any election can be seen as an opportunity for democratic principles to reinforce themselves, each media which makes its voice heard in these post-conflict countries helps reinforce the freedom of expression. Paradoxically, even some abuse can contribute to democracy, if it is denounced, punished and identified by the entire profession as violating the principles guiding the responsible exercise of the freedom of the press. For optimists, regardless of their shortcomings, the media's contribution to the creation of a space for debate and to the anchoring of citizenship is in itself a remarkable advance, one which is irreversible...

But pessimists might also ask themselves whether Central African media are not merely, like the elections themselves, gadgets in the "democracy kit," unsuited to the context, and perhaps even dangerous pyromaniacs who maintain intrinsically perverse relations with the authorities. Indeed, the difficulties which countries in the region have in generating (without foreign aid) the economic and political conditions necessary for the development of professional media seem widespread. For pessimists, the media, as they currently stand, are, at worst, instruments at the service of political ambitions, and at best, impotent voices who are addressing citizens who have no power, and whose rulers can use the media to show to the outside world their commitment to democracy.

Nevertheless, one should not expect the media to achieve what is beyond their reach: to render transparent electoral processes which are not so; create competition in a tightly controlled context; put an end to virulent electoral campaigns with ethnic or regionalist tendencies; etc.

However, one should demand from the media what is within their reach: to denounce ballot manipulations; promote expression by all in as balanced a manner as possible; ease tensions by banning discourses inciting violence; etc. These are tasks which they can perform if they work together, if they anticipate the elections, and if they organize themselves so as to cover them professionally.

Bibliography

- FRERE Marie-Soleil (dir.), *Afrique Centrale. Médias et Conflits . Vecteurs de guerre ou acteurs de paix*, Bruxelles, Editions Complexe, 2005.
- MEDARD Jean-François, “L’État néo-patrimonial en Afrique noire,” in Jean-François Médard (ed.), *États d’Afrique Noire: Formations, mécanismes et crises*, Paris, Karthala, 1991.
- HOWARD Ross, *An Elections Reporting Handbook*, Vancouver, IMPACS, 2005.
- LANGE Bernd-Peter et WARD David (ed.), *The Media and Elections. A Handbook and Comparative Study*, London, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2004.
- LINDBERG Staffan, *Democracy and Elections in Africa*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2006
- QUANTIN Patrick, “Entre déconnexion et réduction: l’étude des élections et des partis”, in Gazibo Mamoudou an Thiriot Céline (dir.), *Le politique en Afrique. Etat des débats et pistes de recherche*, Paris, Karthala, 2009.
- QUANTIN Patrick, “Pour une analyse comparative des élections africaines”, « Pour une analyse comparative des élections africaines », in *Politique africaine*, n°69 « Des élections « comme les autres » », mars 1998, p.12-28.op. cit., p. 23
- SCHEDLER Andreas (ed.), *Electoral Authoritarianism. The Dynamics of Unfree Competition*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2006.
- SISK Timothy D. and REYNOLDS Andrew (eds.), *Elections and Conflict Management in Africa*, Washington, United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998
- VAN DE WALLE Nicolas, “Démocratisation en Afrique: un bilan critique”, in Gazibo M. et Thiriot C., *Le politique en Afrique. Etat des débats et pistes de recherche*, Paris, Karthala, 2009, p.135
- WILLAME Jean-Claude, *Les “faiseurs de paix” au Congo; Gestion d’une crise internationale dans un Etat sous tutelle*, Brussels, Editions Complexe, 2007,