

SOUTH AFRICA 'S MEDIA – BETWEEN FREE REPORTING AND POLITICAL INTERFERENCE

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The ANC is the winner of South Africa's recent presidential elections, and Jacob Zuma will be president. Even though the former and future ruling party narrowly missed obtaining a two-thirds majority, it did win 65.9 percent of the vote. The opposition, on the other hand, had to admit defeat. While the DA's share was 16.66 percent, the ANC's spin-off COPE barely made it to 7.42 percent. None of other parties, including the hitherto powerful IFP, totalled more than five percent.

Although it had launched violent attacks against Mr Zuma during the election campaign when he was the ANC's candidate, the opposition was unable to keep him from becoming president. What is more, the attacks on the ANC's new leading figure that had been mounted in the years before secured for Mr Zuma a degree of media attention which made him the most often quoted and best-known politician on the Cape.

Although Mr Zuma's relations with the media are tense, the reports written about him during the campaign were not unfair; in fact, 97 percent of these reports may be assessed as nonpartisan, surely a record for Africa. Impressive as it is, this figure does hide some problems.

In their political coverage, the media are inclined to concentrate on persons rather than contents, a trait that is particularly marked in South Africa for three reasons. First, the country suffers from a massive education problem. During the apartheid era, large segments of the population had no access to education. As this problem has not been resolved so far, there are many even today who find party programmes too incomprehensible and complicated for them. Moreover, South Africa's media often yield to the temptation to personalize their political reports. Second, the general lack of political depth is due not only to weaknesses on the part of the recipients but also to deficits on the part of the broadcasting and print media operators. Thus, for example, election coverage relegated the HIV/AIDS problem to the margins – in a country with an infection rate that is among the highest worldwide. Nor did the crime rate receive any more attention. Gaps in the education of the editors combined with deficient training are responsible. While the everyday suffering of many people is often described in tragic detail, its implications – such as appeals to take political action – are left out of consideration. Complex matters are shunned, but simple issues are highlighted in detail. Finally, the third reason why media coverage is so personalized lies in the political situation of South Africa itself. The long and thrilling struggle between Mr Mbeki and Mr Zuma which culminated at Polokwane late in 2007

engrossed the people quite as much as the subsequent trench warfare within the ANC, which led to Mr Mbeki's resignation from the office of president. Further crowd-pullers included the foundation of the ANC spin-off COPE and the permanent conflict between Mr Zuma and the law.

Media makers suffer not only from knowledge deficiencies but also from a lack of creativity. In the online segment, matters presented in the mainstream media are often recycled. Mail & Guardian Online may well be the only exception to this rule. During the election campaign, this portal told people how to pass their vote, analyzed political problems, and offered a list of links. The M&G Election Guide provided meaningful information to its users. Another innovation was the Poll Predictor which supplied voters with informative blueprints for their choice. Unfortunately, however, the role played by the online media was rather insignificant because of their low market share of 9.4 percent.

The SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation) presents quite a different picture. Three national television channels in English, Zulu, and Afrikaans as well as 18 radio stations in all eleven official languages serve the entire country. Although the corporation does try to meet its public-law obligations, its status as a 'public broadcaster' appears threatened now that the ANC has brought various key functions under its control, as it has done in all other public sectors after 15 years of rule. When president Mbeki, shortly before his defeat at Polokwane, arbitrarily replaced the entire board of management of the SABC, a power struggle ensued which revolved around the position of the news editor, Snuki Sikalala, and the editor-in-chief, Dali Mpofu. While the former stood down after the election, the latter is still struggling. This appears to corroborate the complaint of the opposition that the highest authorities within the SABC are working for the ANC.

A similar impression was generated by the skimpy coverage of the COPE's campaign kick-off event. Whereas the corresponding meetings of almost all the other parties – ANC, DA, IFP, and even UDM – were covered live by the SABC, the channel mentioned the COPE meeting only in a brief note. One of the legally wobbly reasons given by the SABC top brass was that the COPE was not represented in the national parliament.

Other events, too, have harmed the channel's reputation. Scandals over squandered and/or embezzled millions caused nationwide excitement, as did the sudden cancellation of a programme on political caricatures which contained an interview with Jonathan Shapiro, a caricaturist of international repute, who had attracted the ANC's wrath because of some drawings of his which allegedly disparaged Mr Zuma's person.

Many media, not only the SABC, are under pressure from many sides. Naturally enough, the political parties are interested in appearing in a positive light, but there are also individuals who desire to be presented to greater advantage, and pressure groups endeavour to get their issues aired.

It is only natural that the opposition parties should condemn the media for their government-friendly coverage. And indeed, the ANC and its leaders in government do play an eminent role in South Africa's media in quantitative terms. Yet there are two points to be made in this context. For one, it is only logical that a party whose batting average at the polls is 60 to 70 percent should be allocated more time and space than the smaller parties, particularly as proportional coverage is prescribed in law. For another, we cannot overlook the fact that more coverage does not necessarily mean more positive reports. In point of fact, the content of the reports in which the SABC described the ANC and its government work in recent years has been mostly negative. Moreover, other media have been similarly critical in their reports about Jacob Zuma and his court cases.

Needless to say, the ANC did not simply stand idly by when all this happened. On the other hand, the idea floated at Polokwane of creating a government-controlled media tribunal in response to 'hostile' reporting was withdrawn after weeks of protest. Even Jacob Zuma sought to defend himself against his attackers by claiming millions in damages, albeit without much success.

Besides the constant attempts at interfering with the media and the occasions when relations between journalists and politicians are difficult, the blurring of the boundaries between editorial content and advertising – for political parties, for example – constitutes a problem of its own. In April this year, for instance, a private channel aired the election advertisement of a political party in the middle of a news broadcast. And on the day of the election, a daily paper published a large advertisement promoting the ANC which differed from its other content neither in layout nor in typography. While this may not have been a deliberate attempt to delude the reader, such a thing is always problematic.

All in all, South Africa's media landscape is highly developed, diversified, and even free. Although attempts to interfere are made again and again, freedom of opinion has never been threatened in its foundations so far. On the one hand, the media are ever ready to defend themselves, not least because of their experience under the rule of apartheid. On the other, civil society in South Africa is wide awake and sensitive to the problem. The fact that media coverage is dominated by the ruling party throws at least a shadow on the freedom of the media. The reports that appeared in the run-up to the elec-

tions may be regarded as largely nonpartisan. However, it may well be their lack of substance which 'saved' these articles from partisanship.

Despite all positive aspects, the situation needs improving. Journalists need to be better trained, a demand which raises the question about reforming the entire system of education. Private media houses will have to enhance the qualification of their employees by investing both time and money. The quasi- public SABC needs to be better protected from the ANC's attempts at interference. Yet an initiative which might, for example, aim at installing another editor-in-chief at the interface between the public and the corporation will probably fail because the ANC has for years been consolidating its system of penetrating public life in its entirety. The incoming president, Mr Zuma, remains called upon not to yield to the temptation of tightening the grip of the government and the ANC on the SABC. If he should, this would be a severe setback for the freedom of opinion and the media in the republic on the Cape.

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