

REPORT ON MALAWI ELECTIONS WORKSHOP HELD ON JUNE 19, 2020

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Introduction

In 2018, KAS Media Africa partnered Centre for Education and Development (CFED) a local organization in Malawi founded by its scholar, Albert Sharra. The purpose was to contribute to the quality of journalism in Malawi, particularly during elections. The partnership saw KAS Media Africa and CFED holding a media training on political communication and elections reporting in Malawi in August 2018. The training was designed to help prepare the journalists ahead of the 2019 elections.

The training attracted 32 journalists from almost all major media houses including some community radios. A team of 10 experts, eight from University of Malawi, one from Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) and a veteran editor, were hired to train the journalists. The training was conducted at Annie's Lodge in Zomba, Malawi and there was a good feedback from participants who claimed it was the first of its kind training with a focus on political communication, particularly how politicians' strategies can compromise the media and also citizens and their votes.

Nullification of the 2019 Malawi Elections

Malawi successfully conducted its sixth democratic election on 21 May 2019. However, the opposition challenged the presidential results in court. After eight months of a court case hearing, the Malawi High Court sitting as Constitutional Court annulled the election results on February 3, 2020 and ordered a fresh presidential election within 150 days. Malawi Parliament settled for June 23, 2020 as the date for the fresh presidential election. In its quest to ensure there is always quality journalism during elections, KAS Media Africa and its partner CFED decided to engage the trainees again before the fresh elections.

2020 Malawi election Webinar

Planning for a possible second training of Malawi journalists remained uncertain due to the post-election violence which started just weeks after the incumbent president Peter Mutharika had been sworn in to rule the country for the next five years. The elections were nullified just weeks before Covid-19 outbreak hit Africa and since mid-March, no face to face events have been possible. KAS Media Africa gives high regards to quality journalism, politics, and elections and because of that, it decided to ensure it reaches its community of journalists in Malawi despite the Covid-19 pandemic. It, therefore, opted for a Zoom meeting.

On June 19, 2020, just four days to the polls, KAS Media Africa held a webinar through Zoom. The meeting was attended by all the 32 journalists it trained in 2018. Due to time and also the limitations that come with online meetings, we settled for four of the 10 experts who were engaged in 2018. These were Associate Professor of law Edge Kanyongolo, Associate Professor Yamikani Ndasauka and Jimmy Kainja from the University of Malawi, and Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) director of media and public relations, Sangwani Mwafulirwa. The four spoke on legal issues in elections and journalism, media ethics and elections

reporting, social media in times of elections, and MEC and media during elections, respectively.

The meeting begun at 6pm and the first to speak was Brigitte Read, KAS Media Africa programmes Manager. She shared with the participants the house rules. KAS Scholar, Albert Sharra was the moderator. He took over from Brigitte and introduced the KAS Media Africa Director Christoph Plate to the participants who were meeting him for the first time. The director spoke for about 5mins and in his speech, he commended the initiative to engage the journalists before the fresh elections and thanked both Albert and Brigitte for making it possible. He also extended his appreciation to the panelists and also the participants. He further congratulated a number of institutions that played a role in protecting democracy and the rule of law in Malawi.

Christoph said: "...Thanks to the brave judges, brave reporters and the population that said what they saw in 2019 was not correct."

He further said: "...there are many questions at stake here that go beyond the boundaries of Malawi but could have echoes on the rest of the continent, for example: if one can actually organize an election despite fighting a pandemic, or another question, what role does the EU, AU or UN consider itself when it comes to judging whether an election was fair or not, how will academics one day write the history of your country that for so long in the outside world was synonymous to brutal dictatorship under Hastings Kamuzu Banda. Malawi has shown its different image, from the clinches, you have shown a different image of your country and as the director of media in Sub-Saharan Africa, I am very thankful and I am looking forward to your deliberation and discussions tonight. I think we can all learn something from it and most of all, KAS Media Africa will be able to take the message of tonight's webinar into our discussions that we have with other people and organizations in Africa."

The director of KAS Media Africa also hinted on the forthcoming media programme that intends to bring back to the newsroom, some of the retired journalists to help the youthful journalists in the newsrooms. He said the newsroom has lost its big brains, and there is need to bring some of them back to help improve the quality of journalism, including individual responsibility. This resonated with one of the issues raised by the panelists that the public's trust on media is falling as shown by Afro-barometer reports. Of concern, according to the panelists are dwindling standards in media ethics principles which include truth-telling, independence, and media integrity.

Presentations

The presentations were in four categories. All the presenters commended Malawi media for the job well done during the 2019 elections. They said it was a busy year for the media and the fact that they managed to give good coverage to all issues of public interests, needs to be commended.

The first to make a presentation was Kainja who apart from commending the media, went on to highlight some of the shortfalls in the country's media. He highlighted the vulnerability of journalists to fake news and how it has become so easy to social media users to predict what news stories would make headlines in the mainstream media the following day. He tipped the journalists to always verify information and ask difficult questions before taking and publishing information on social media. On professional news gathering, Kainja asked journalists to prepare and avoid targeting sources with an already written story, saying this has affected the quality of reporting in that the reporters fail to capture the key points in the sources' responses. On the same, he warned journalists of partisan sources, a point which two of the participants, Christina Chiotha and Steve Chilundu echoed by saying there is indeed a serious problem in selecting sources and over-using of similar sources in the media which gives the public one side of the issue. Chiotha also noted that because of this kind of journalism, most of the stories are reactionary and the reporting does not engage with the issues at hand.

Associate Professor Yamikani Ndasauka was next and spoke about ethics. His presentation centered more on fake news and also media ethics principles such as truth-telling, independence, and media integrity. He also said the 2020 Afro-barometer report shows that 59% of Malawians trust information that is coming from the media and this is a drop from 71% in 2014. The presenter attributed this to a number of factors, and among them is weak accountability systems that reward good conduct and punish unethical conduct in the media. Ndasauka also added that there is need to promote ethical thinking among journalists. On media ethics principles, Ndasauka challenged the participants that truth is the pillar of journalism and that "there can be no professionalism without values".

Next was Associate Professor of law Edge Kanyongolo. He begun by praising the media for the good job during the 2019 elections. He said the events of the 2019 elections challenged the media because of the various activities that demanded their service from the electoral court case to parliamentary deliberations. He, however, raised pertinent questions that are hardly asked in the newsroom. For instance, he wondered if the journalists know that when they are interviewing someone, the source is giving an angle of the law. Similarly, that in press statements, the writers present an angle and the need to challenge those angles to avoid selling kites. He also wondered if journalists have asked themselves about the relationship between politics and law.

On a larger picture, Kanyongolo said although elections are supposed to be simple, the reality on the ground shows that they are no longer simple, particularly that they are regulated by law. This, he said, raises serious questions on capacity building. For instance, he said how much capacity building should media personnel have? How should it be targeted? Should we be thinking of having a cadre of specialised journalists? Can we afford specialists journalists? Can we enhance both formal and ongoing training? He also wondered why on-going training should always wait for donors. The professor of law also proposed a working relationship between the media and legal groups such as law students who can be available to help with

legal issues other than just going to the same source for legal opinions, which he said exposes the public to a single angle of the law.

Final speaker was Mwafulirwa who highlighted the key events during elections and tipped the journalists on what to do during the June 23, 2020 election. He, however, highlighted a number of shortfalls as noted during the 2019 elections and the major issue he raised was that the media was unable to audit the election. He asked the journalists to cover the 2020 election in an audit format in which they have to ask questions on whatever they see during the elections. He, however, warned that this is possible only if the journalists understand the issues before going on the ground. This point echoed all other participants who noted that journalists do not like reading, a tendency which they said affects their ability to audit the information they get from sources.

The panelists and participants spent about 30 minutes discussing some of the pertinent issues as raised by the panelists and one of the important issues raised was that there were times when the media were lost in one direction of the issue at hand like giving one particular election more prominence and coverage. Professor Kanyongolo gave an example of the attention the presidential election received over two other elections—parliamentary and local government. He also commended government that there were no cases of arrests of journalists but lamented reports of journalists' abuse. He wondered if the people who abuse journalists are punished and how is this done in Malawi.

The comments and questions posted by participants on the Zoom Chat and also KAS WhatsApp group showed that the training was timely, and the journalists had many unanswered questions which could have affected their reporting during the elections. They further requested KAS to organize more trainings before their group can be graduated.

The meeting was closed by KAS Media Africa Director who said it is always important for the media to do a soul searching and also to interact with various experts to see how they can challenge some of the views.

KAS Media Africa and all its partners wish Malawians well as they go to vote this Tuesday.