

Chapter 94

The Developmental Effect of a New Political Anomaly on the Oldest ICT: A Critique of the Banning of Short Wave Radios in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Economic growth in countries like China, whose democratic credentials and human rights records are unimpressive, compels us to question the democracy-development nexus articulated by eminent writers like Amartya Sen. Against this background, this chapter assesses the impact of pseudo-democratic politics on the use of ICTs for development. It is based on research done in Zimbabwe, an electoral autocracy that recovered from being the world's worst economy in 2008 to impressive economic stability post-2009 (i.e. after the formation of a coalition government that, however, did not usher in substantive improvements in political and civic freedoms and liberties). Sen's (1999) capability approach and Illich's (1973) concept of conviviality are used for analysing the banning of the use of short wave radios in Zimbabwe just before elections that will signal the termination of the coalition government before the end of 2013. The research investigates if and how political and civic freedoms affect development. It shows that in a dual political economy like Zimbabwe, the formal (urban) economy may stabilize without political freedoms yet enclaves of poverty may deepen in the informal and rural economies due to lack of human development. A framework for the effect of politics on the role of analogue radio in development is proposed.

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INTRODUCTION

The French political thinker, Alexis de Tocqueville, once said ‘*The most dangerous time for a bad government is when it starts to reform itself*’ (1856 p.214). This statement comes true when we consider the effect of politics on Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D) in countries that are transcending from autocracy to democracy.

As a growing number of developing countries occupy the gray zone between authoritarianism and liberal democracy (Corathers, 2002) and impressive economic progress is taking place in transitional countries (like China), the effect of politics on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) enabled development requires re-examination. This is more so in the context of developing countries that are situated in Corathers’ (2002) gray zone.

Several ICT4D studies drawing on Sen’s (1999) Capability Approach (CA), (Zheng, 2009; Zheng and Stahl, 2011) have endorsed the freedom-development nexus. Against unprecedented mobile penetration in developing countries, scholars have drawn from Illich’s (1973) concept of conviviality (Ameripour et al., 2010; Johri and Pal, 2012) for conceptualizing the use of ICTs in the political dynamics of developing countries.

We contribute to this discourse by drawing from Sen’s (1999) CA, Illich’s (1973) conviviality and Corathers’ (2002) gray zone concept to access how lack of political freedoms affects the use of ICTs for development. This paper discusses the freedom-limiting effect of containing the conviviality of analogue radio ICTs in the context of Zimbabwe, an authoritarian developing country with enclaves of affluence amid vast expanses of poverty (Ledriz, 2011). After a decade of economic decline characterized by the world’s second highest inflation in history, Zimbabwe’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth averaged 7.3% since 2009’s coalition government and reached 11% in 2011. While it remains one

of the world’s least free economies its 11% GDP growth is quite profound compared to Hong Kong’s 5% in 2011 (Gwartney, Hall & Lawson, 2012). With its Human Development (HDI) lower than it was in 1990, Zimbabwe’s GDP growth which exceeds bastions of free-market like Hong Kong should bring the freedom-development nexus into question.

Radio is the most affordable ICT for fostering deeper political debate across the economic divide in Zimbabwe. Its importance for political communication is evidenced by the regimes’ desire to regulate it (Moyo, 2012) more than other ICTs. Many studies show that Zimbabwe restricts independent radio for political expedience (Moyo, 2010; Moyo, 2012; Nyareza & Dick, 2012). This paper is motivated by recent moves by ZANU-PF to criminalise the use of short wave radios and the subsequent raiding of NGOs and arrest of Radio Dialogue’s director (Bell, 2013). In February 2013 the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) announced that members the public would be prosecuted for possessing short wave radios. They also warned political parties and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that the distribution or possession of such radios was now an offence due to their use for communicating hate speech (Ndlela, 2013). The statement was followed by a crackdown on some NGOs and door to door searches of homes (Sibanda, 2013) condemned as illegal by opposition political parties and independent media (Ndlela, 2013). We view such limitation of political freedoms (Sen, 1999) as shrinkage of the public sphere (Habermas, 1962), whose developmental effect requires the re-examination we seek to initiate through this chapter.

Rather than the Western media’s characterization of Zimbabwe as an illogical dictatorship, this study acknowledges a shrewd political system employing Schedler’s (2002) “menu of manipulation” to upstage opposition while maintaining international legitimacy. Zimbabwe’s unprecedented economic decline at the height of its political crisis in 2008 and sudden recovery at the inception of

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