

Chapter 4

The Role of New Information and Communication Technologies (NICTs) in the Relations between the Central Government and Four Major Kingdoms in Uganda

George Musambira
University of Central Florida, USA

Samuel Muwanguzi
University of North Texas, USA

ABSTRACT

The role NICTs are playing in the relations between Uganda's central government and four of the kingdoms in the country is analyzed and placed in the historical context within which each kingdom has pursued a strategy for preservation and development of its people's unique culture and ethnic aspirations. A convergence of cellular phone and FM radio designed by the Buganda kingdom to confront the central government with specific demands and the government's response are examined. The less combative use of NICTs by Bunyoro-Kitara, Busoga, and Toro kingdoms is described. An analysis of how each antagonist uses NICTs for a hegemonistic agenda is presented and cast against the application of NICTs for good governance and the prosperity of citizens.

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INTRODUCTION

Uganda is no stranger to political strife. From its colonial experience to the present, the young nation has endured more than its fair share of political violence. However, what is novel to Uganda's tumultuous political experience lately is the pivotal role New Information and Communication Technologies (NICTs) have played in the ongoing contentious relations between the administration of Buganda's kingdom (also known as "Mengo" in reference to the location of its headquarters) and the central government.

The strained relations exist in contrast with those between the central government and the country's three other kingdoms: Bunyoro-Kitara, Busoga, and Toro. This chapter examines several ways through which each antagonist has employed NICTs to perpetuate its hegemonic interests. The convergence of FM radio and cell phones, conceptualized in this chapter, as new media in the African context, is a potent mix that has enabled Mengo to mobilize its loyalists within Buganda and abroad to publicly, sometimes with emotional disdain and ominous rhetoric, agitate for the restoration of a federal form of government for Buganda, that would purportedly restore its past political, economic, and cultural glory.

The role the new media are playing in the Buganda kingdom's agitation is distinctive when compared with the impact the same NICTs have had in the other kingdoms in Uganda such as Bunyoro-Kitara, Busoga, and Toro where relations with the Uganda central government are less contentious. This chapter illustrates how, through the use of new media, the common person in Buganda has been a target of manipulation on the one hand by the resurgent and lately recalcitrant if not combative Buganda kingdom, and on the other by the central government with its populist but, in many cases, hollow rhetoric. The chapter shows how each of these antagonists is pursuing a hegemonistic agenda into which the common person in Buganda has been inadvertently drawn

as a pawn in the political drama. In particular, the common person's access and use of the cell phone to engage in live radio talk shows and also to participate in the so-called "Bimeza" or public forums relayed live on the Buganda kingdom radio station, the Central Broadcasting Service (CBS), is most illuminated in this political drama.

We contend that the convergence of new media; the FM radio and the cell phone, a popular and easily accessible platform on which calls into FM radio broadcasts can be made, has helped to galvanize and embolden Mengo's efforts to rekindle Buganda's relentless agitation for her glorious past and future political agenda. This analysis of new media occurs against a backdrop of the running conflict, recently turned bloody, but not without historical precedent, between Mengo and the central government.

The chapter suggests that rather than deploy NICTs for parochial and selfish political interests that inflate the egos of key antagonists, they should instead be used for civic education that fosters constructive dialogue, ethnic relativism, national unity, and development. The chapter also points out that the global winds of change that are primarily driven by NICTs demand that central government and traditional leaders must, as of necessity, adapt to new global changes that emphasize, to a large extent, horizontal collaboration, communication, and mutual respect rather than the fading command and control structure that dominated the world stage prior to the ubiquitous access and use of NICTs.

BACKGROUND

In order to put the contentious relations between Mengo and the central government in perspective, a historical review of the genesis of this conflict is apropos. The conflict dates back to Uganda's pre-colonial era when Buganda kingdom emerged as one of the most powerful states in East and

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