

Chapter 5

Fanning the Flames of Fear: A Critical Analysis of Local Language Radio as a Catalyst to the Post Election Violence in Kenya

Timothy W. Kituri
Royal Roads University, Canada

ABSTRACT

Democracy depends on a free and independent media to survive. As a democratic country, Kenya enjoys a media that is relatively free. This includes radio stations that broadcast in local languages and which provide the majority of Kenyans with access to news and entertainment. These local language radio stations have been singled out as a catalyst to the post-election violence that rocked Kenya in December 2007. Tribal messages that propagated hate and fear, based on political and historic events, were broadcast--thus inciting violence. Critical Discourse Analysis is used in this study to explicate the ideologies of power through systemic investigation of the messages created and transmitted over the local language radio stations. This study contributes to the body of work done on media and democratization in Africa by showing how a gap regulatory and journalistic monitoring can jeopardize the watchdog function of media. The author recommends further research in these areas as a means of strengthening the role of media in building democracy in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Within hours of the announcement by the Chairman of the Electoral Commission of Kenya, Mr. Samuel Kivuitu, that incumbent President Mwai Kibaki was the winner of the presidential elections held on December 27, 2007, reports of violence

began to trickle in from different parts of the country. The fighting intensified and soon took on an ethnic dimension resulting in two months of violence and turmoil, the deaths of over 1,000 people, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands from their homes. The international community, led by former UN Secretary General

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Kofi Annan, stepped in to support efforts towards finding a political solution to the crisis. The ultimate solution took the form of a 50-50 power sharing agreement between President Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga, leader of the official opposition and closest opponent in the presidential race. The post-election violence is believed to have its roots in political, social, and ethnic inequalities that can be traced back to colonial times. It is also believed that the media played a catalyzing role in the violence by failing to uphold journalistic ethics.

Democracy in Kenya, and of course in Africa, has been measured by, among other indicators, the continued independence, liberalization, and the proliferation of independent media (Ismail & Deane, 2008, p. 320). As a result, and mainly due to market-driven factors geared towards increasing advertising revenue, numerous local language radio stations have sprung up. The radio stations have capitalized on ethnicity to provide a stable audience and thus guarantee advertising revenues. For example, Inooro FM, which broadcasts in Kikuyu (language of the Bantu family spoken primarily by the Kikuyu people of Kenya) is believed to have a 54% audience share in the Central Province (Maina, 2006, p. 22). These stations have also given the once marginalized ethnic population a voice in their local dialects. However, these local language radio stations have been heavily criticized for their role in catalyzing the violence after the 2007 general elections; they have been accused of spreading fear among the different tribes. Through local language radio call-in talk shows, the general public, and sometimes politicians, were able to encode messages of fear aimed at undermining the credibility, on tribal grounds, of opposing candidates. This ideology of fear stemming from historic events inevitably acted as a catalyst to the post-election violence.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) will be employed to expose the instances of fear of tribal oppression and powerlessness rooted in the divide-and-conquer strategies used during colonial times. CDA is relevant in studying the relationship

between discourse, power, dominance and social inequality, and the position the analyst takes in such a relationship. CDA is a multidisciplinary method used to uncover how discourse structures and strategies (re)produce dominance and power in society (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 249; Hay, 2002). The messages encoded in the call-in talk shows hosted by the local language radio stations, and the lack of well-trained, ethically conscious journalists and moderators, acted as catalysts to the violence by feeding on the historic fear of tribal domination. The research conducts a systematic investigation of the historical context of the messages propagated by the local language radio stations as documented in academic journals and transcripts from the commission of inquiry set up to investigate the violence.

It could be argued that the independent media did not foster democracy, but instead eroded it largely through unprofessional journalism. The role played by the local language radio stations in the post election violence threatens the notion that democracy is fundamentally reliant on the existence of an independent media (Kasoma, 1995). This research paper will contribute to the ongoing discussions as to the role of, and need for, free and independent media in the creation and maintenance of democracy in Africa.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LIBERAL THEORY OF PRESS FREEDOM

The media in Africa and in Kenya have, as a direct result of colonial rule followed by one-party rule, had the tendency to evolve into an authoritarian press system of direct government control (Nyamnjoh, 2005; Odhiambo, 2002). In order to survive, African journalists allowed their governments to use them and the media as propaganda tools rather than serve as watchdogs to inform the public. African leaders have long been aware of the influence electronic media has

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