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ICT, ELECTION AND DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The new age is the age of globalization, driven by information and communication technologies (ICTs). Technologies are changing the way we live and even work, our thoughts as well as actions. The challenge of Africa is development and in many cases how to conduct a credible election to usher in good and stable governance. This paper assesses and reviews the role and possible interaction between ICT and election for development in Africa. The paper argues that governance is a panacea for development in Africa; as such ICT must play a key role in the electoral process. The paper recommends an ICT policy framework as well as ICT implementation task force to boost ICT development in Africa.

KEYWORDS

Development, Election, Governance, Globalization, ICT, Technology.

BACKGROUND

During the early 1950's and 1960's, many African nations were liberated from the shackles of colonialism as they gained political independence. This was a moment of euphoria for everyone then, and the excitement that accompanied it was borne out of the hope of the future, a better Africa for Africans and by Africans. Thus, the task ahead was enormous, but it must work. Therefore nation building became the target cum goal of all the new African leaders. In the midst of jubilation and hope for the future, these new leaders were seen as saviours. They all embarked on ambitious and even gigantic programs of nation building to show their people that they were actually ready for progress, change and development. Thus, in the early years significant progress was made, as per capita GDP according to World Bank (1994) in Sub-Saharan Africa grew at 2.6 percent a year between 1965 and 1974, and striking advances were recorded in social indicators such as life expectancy, mortality rates and school enrolments. But this excitement was however transitory, as the dreams soon faded, and with a short period, multi-party states according to Adesida (2001:5) quickly became one party states. Hence, degeneration from here is that these nation States in quick succession began to fall as leaders became dictatorial and thus, military coups shepherded in tyrants. To crown all this, civil wars began to take shape and forms in Africa, and the attempt at developing Africa till date appears unlikely, if not impossible. This is so in that a steady and democratic system of governance, provided by a decent electoral process has been unfeasible. It is the age of globalization and the world has become a single village, where technology thrives and wrought wonders; yet Africa still lags behind in the scheme of things. Appropriate and constructive election process is difficult to put up, and access to information as regards the government is quite difficult. As such empowering people so as to extricate themselves from both natural and manmade obstacles for a better and more fulfilling life becomes quite a difficulty.

This paper therefore, will review the role and importance of information and communication technology (ICT) and election on development in Africa. The paper contends that good governance is the panacea to development. Hence the paper will discuss the interface and critical role of both information and communication technology (ICT) and election in improving governance for development in Africa.

AFRICA AND THE ROAD TO GOVERNANCE

The question is what is governance? The concept of governance is a keenly contested one. It's definition and application is however distraught. Ever since its introduction into the development discourse in the late 1980's, the concept has assumed a highly politicized nature. According to the 9th African Partnership Forum (2007), governance must be defined in a less prescriptive and technocratic manner. In other words, governance must be defined in terms of state-society relations and internal structures and processes within government as a principal organ of the state. Here we look at governance in a continuum, first, politically and second, in economic terms. Politically, governance is concerned with the way a nation is governed. It further *comprises how the citizens, institutions and business are able to express their interests and reconcile their differences* (Adesida, 2001:7). It expresses democratic principles of freedom and accountability. On the other hand, economic governance entails the management of the society's resources and the particular role the government plays in the process of socio-economic development. Therefore the economic dimension provides the framework in which corporate governance is practiced in any society. This understanding in many ways is lacking in Africa with regards to practicability.

Revolutionary pressures for change began to increase the demand for democratization in Africa in the 1980's. This demand was however given a boost with the collapse of the USSR, and of course since the early 1990's Africa has being experiencing a tremendous political change with the people of the continent taking definite steps in demanding political participation and democratic system of governance (Adesida, 2001:6). Good governance is central to development and constitutes the primary basis for social transformation. The understanding that good governance is quintessential to development in Africa has in many ways, provoked African leaders to make commitment on making a difference in the continent. Over the years, the continent has made concerted efforts to bring about transformation in variegated aspects of life, ranging from governance, human rights, etc. Thus, from the Lagos Plan of Action (LPA) of the 1980's, and now to NEPAD underscored by the transformation of the OAU to AU are clear instances. (Alence, 2002:12).

A quick glance at Africa today would definitely show that a great disparity exist between the Africa of the early 1960's and that of the 21st century. Improvements and changes have taken shape in various dimensions, especially in the area of governance. The military era has gone, democratic settings have taken shape, and elections are now prevalent in the continent. The political transition in Nigeria in May 1999 after years of military authoritarianism and the democratic changes of government in Benin, South Africa and Senegal, Sudan and even Cote d'voire are all positive instances. Additionally, it is no longer business as usual, that is; disrespect for the constitution. Now, that is changing as the African Union (AU) and other African regional organizations move more systematically and firmly to uphold democratic values (Harsch, 2010:10). This translates further into the condemnation and rejection of unconstitutional changes in government by the African Union, as enshrined in article 3 (10) and article 5 of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. This Charter however provides the framework to enhance the capacity of AU to respond to potential threats to governance, such as the resurgence of coups and unconstitutional violations of democratic principles.

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Despite the gains ushered in via social transformations in Africa, many of the problems that led to the pressures of participatory democracy are still unresolved and proper development has not being attained in Africa. (World Bank, 2000; Adesida 2001:13; Harsch; 2010:11).

ICT, ELECTION AND GOVERNANCE

As earlier stated, for development to be achieved, a good system of governance must be in place to usher in both political and economic development. A good system of governance is achieved therefore if the duo of ICT and election are appropriately strengthened. In this section, we give an exposé on the interaction between ICT and election for good governance and by so doing strengthening development in Africa. ICT's have changed lives, and are still changing lives in many ways that are unspeakable. The convergence of computers, according to Adesida (2001:8), telephony and communications is changing the way we live and work, and it is transforming many aspects of social and economic organization. Indeed, not only are ICTs affecting the way we do business, they have equally led to the creation of entirely new industries such as software, e-commerce and even e-government. According to Jean-Francois (1995:11), though ICT make possible information exchange, yet they are deepening the process, creating new modes of sharing ideas and reducing the cost of collecting and analyzing information. Thus, as it stands ICTs does not only present the best opportunity for accelerated development, they offer a more serious window of opportunity for developing countries to catch up with the rest of the world and even leapfrog as it were.

Election simply refers to the formal process of selecting a person or people for public office or accepting or rejecting a political profession by voting. Historically, elections were used in ancient Athens, in Rome and in the selection of Popes and Holy Roman Emperors. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2010:1). The origin of elections in contemporary world is traceable to Europe and North America beginning from the 17th century. Thus the holistic characteristics notion of the Middle Ages was transformed into a more individualistic conception, which emphasized the individual as the critical unit to be counted.

From 1990 to 2001, forty-two African countries had organized both presidential and parliamentary elections; whereas in 2011 alone more than 18 African countries were set for elections (The Economist, 2011). Most of these had ended up in confusion. Nigeria had just concluded her 2011 elections; the outcome ushered in a new president, but with post elections violence. A key feature of well-functioning States all over the world, Africa inclusive is democracy. Strong elements of democracy are people's participation in governance through regular elections and a vivacious civil society (Decalo,1994). Democratic governance requires an open government and easy access by citizens to the government. In fact, 70% of rural dwellers in Africa cannot access government, Bhavya, et al (1999:) thus estranging government from the people.

ICTs, especially the internet and web can be used to develop a democratic culture in Africa through stimulating open and public debate, establishing open government, as such enhancing interactions between the governors and those being governed. According to Olise (2010:159), ICT can be used to influence Behavior Change Communication (BCC) in as much as the people can assess their rulers. This again can equally play out during voting. Historically, voting has always been through the utilization of the ballot box. But ever since the advent of the information revolution, the notion of election and voting has become quite dynamic in many parts of the world. ICT is now used to transform the election process in several ways, in political advocacy, in political debates, in conducting opinions polls, and in voting. Political parties in Africa can equally use the internet as a mechanism to access huge databases of likely voters and become dynamic with their political campaigns. Baran (2004:27) posits that ICT is a veritable instrument for political development. According to him, 'ICT impact on political campaigns and voting is instrumental to governance'.

A good number of developing countries, for example Mexico, Iran, Brazil and Chile have already started deploying ICT in monitoring their elections. Africa must not be left behind this time. For credible elections, it is important in this information age to employ ICT. Though some African countries have also started the deployment of ICT, but it is majorly for the registration of voters, as it is evident in Nigeria during the last voters registration exercise, but was not applicable during the election proper.

In many parts of Africa, elections have being very turbulent, especially after polls have ended. In many cases, people lost their lives and properties worth millions, if not billions are destroyed. This is owing to poor election monitoring processes. It is important at this juncture to say that the information age is not just here, but is here so that it can be accessed. African governments must make a sacrifice for progress and development, and this must come in the form of deploying ICT for election monitoring. This way, post-election violence can be curbed.

Abraham Lincoln defined democracy as the "government of the people, by the people and for the people". This means government is not at extreme from the people. Rather, the people are however the government as they are part and parcel of decision making. It is in this line that Essoungou (2010:3) posited that information must be democratized. This means that the people must be part of government, contributing to issues that affect their lives. Little wonder, Coates (1994:3) and Pitroda (1993:27) maintains that, ICTs are the most democratizing tool ever. The people, the electorates can use ICT to contribute to on-going debate about a bill in parliament. That is to say that citizens can be invited to send in comments via e-mail, Facebook, twitters etc., to government officials or parliamentarians. By so doing their view can be taken into consideration before laws are passed and policies made. This in turn, doubtless, makes the government more transparent, accessible, and accountable and even more responsible to its constituents and will likely reduce public suspicion, sentiments and in many cases, political apathy.

ICT IN AFRICA: A CHALLENGE

Okpaku (2002:7) identified various bold initiatives on-going in Africa to streamline the continent on the path of development. According to him, these initiatives are both continental and regional. For instance, the African Connection/Ministerial oversight Committee was created during the ITU African Regional Conference to serve as an institutional framework for the coordination of telecommunication development in Africa. There is the African Telecommunication Union, the African advisory group on ICT (AAG – ICT), as well as several regional infrastructure initiatives such as the RASCOM satellite project, the COMTEL Project – all to make affordable access to ICT resources for Africans anywhere in the continent. Though these initiatives are on ground, yet ICT are relatively new technologies in Africa, as such they require knowledge and expertise to use. More so, literacy rates are low in Africa, and this poses a grave challenge. This according to Adesida (2010:21) accounts for the low turnout of people for ICT training at the free ICT centers in various rural communities, where capacity building is supposed to establish the necessary skills to uplift men and women to engineer Africa to the next phase.

Again there is the low level of technology penetration in Africa. Danaan (2006:14) is of the view that "it will take Africa many decades to develop a systematic, efficient and reliable ICT enterprise that would promote the ideals of globalization and development". The certainty of this statement lies in the fact that Africa depends so much on technology transfer from the West. More so, per capita income is quite low in Africa and ICT technologies do not come cheap. Thus affordability becomes a challenge in many respects. For majority of Africans, Laptops constitute a luxury, and though there is a reduction or fall in prices, the cheapest computers still go for less than $1000. This of course, frankly is the equivalent of per capita income in most Africa countries. The option for many users is but a fairly used system that is relatively cheaper with shorter life span. In spite of the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) initiative for school children, as well as the Catalyzing Access to ICT in Africa (CATIA) programme, which were basically meant to enable poor people gain maximum benefit from information and communication technology, the idea of inexpensive laptops in Africa is still far from reality.

There is also the challenge of a workable policy framework. Policies are necessarily course of action adopted to achieve certain objectives. They are meant to act as guidelines for the implementation of development plans and strategies. But most African countries are deficient and lagging in this aspect. In situations where these ICT policies are not available or properly implemented, a whole lot of things could be wrong. Yet, in spite of all these challenges there is a ray of hope for Africa. The launching of the Nigerian Communication Satellites (NIGCOMSAT-I) in 2007 and (NIGCOMAST-2) in 2011, as well as the launching of DAARSAT Communications by DAAR Communications Plc in 2008 is a clear indication that there is hope for Africa.

CONCLUSION

Development for Africa is no longer a myth, if only what must be done can be done to put Africa on the same pedestal with others. The world is changing fast, voting and elections are no longer problematic in many countries as a result of the deployment of new technologies. Therefore the first step in the successful

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deployment of ICT in elections in Africa is for African governments to strive to achieve e-government. E-government brings the government closer to the people. Indeed, when the people are closer to the government, it is easier to m+ove to the next level of e-election. The creative deployment of ICT in the election process will definitely help curb rigging and get more people involved in the electoral process. Even Nigerians in Diaspora can equally participate in their electoral process.

Finally, though the interaction of ICT and election can effect development for Africa with a view to participatory governance. It is fundamental that a policy frame work must be on ground as to ICT operation and management. On the basis of this we strongly recommend that an ICT implementation committee/task force must equally be on ground in every country of Africa, as machinery to drive ICT into action in Africa. This must necessarily take the shape and form of existence in perhaps every ministry and parastatal of the government. Also, Government of African countries must strive to make computers (laptops, palmtops, PC's) cheaper and affordable for their citizens. We also recommend that African government should take advantage of ICT by creating functional websites, administered by specialists so that their citizens can reach them easily with their ideas/complaints, as well as them their citizens.

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