

# Are Africa's vernacular radio stations 'problematic'?

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Three years after the post-elections violence in Kenya that left more 1500 people dead, scores injured and some 660 000 displaced, the role played by the media, vernacular radio stations in particular, during and after these events, still puzzles many observers. They continue to wonder whether Africa's vernacular radio stations are tools of nation-building or platforms for fomenting ethnic hatred and violence.

## **Sowing ethnic division**

The issue resurfaced this week at the Media and Elections in Africa conference held at Wits University in Johannesburg. Kenya's Joyce Omwoha, of Wits' Department of Media Studies, described how Inooro FM and Kass FM incited violence and sowed ethnic division between on one side the Kikuyu, Embus and Merus (supporters of incumbent president Kibaki), and the Luo, Kalenjins and Luhyas - who opposed Kibaki and supported Raila Odinga and other opposition politicians.

## **Declaring war**

Omwoha deplored the 'dehumanising' broadcast material used by these radio stations, content which proved to be prejudicial to national security. Kass FM's declaration of war included statements such as: "OMO! Ondoa madoadoa yote (remove all the stains - foreigners in our land).

"We are farmers and we are living in the midst of 'weeds' that need to be cleansed or pulled out.

"Fellow Kenyans, the Kikuyus have stolen our children's future. Hope of removing them through the ballot has been stolen. We must deal with them the way they understand, violence. We must dominate them."

## **Manipulating indigenous communities**

On a continent with more than 5,000 ethnic groups and vernacular languages, many observers believe it is highly likely that indigenous communities, mostly illiterate and uneducated, could be easily manipulated by the media, in this case outlets financially and ideologically supported by politicians seeking to settle scores.

In response to Kass FM's jibes, Omwoha said Inooro FM counter-attacked opposition parties' supporters, saying: "Beasts from the west, baboons, animals of the west," referring to Luo and Kalenjins communities living mainly in Western Reef province.

According to Omwoha, speculation was also rife among the Kikuyu communities that their rivals, the Luo and Kalenjins men, were not circumcised, prompting presenters to capitalise on this 'weakness' to launch a scathing attack such as: "An uncircumcised male is not a real man - leadership belongs to the men, not the coward [the uncircumcised]."

"We say no more innocent Kikuyu blood will be shed. We will slaughter them right here in the capital city. For justice, compile a list of Luos and Kalenjins. You know at work or in your estates, or elsewhere in Nairobi, plus where and how their children go to school."

## **Over-liberation of media**

Shola Omotola, of Nigeria's Redeemers University in Ibadan, said an over-liberation of media, if it goes unchecked, could help create a situation of anarchy whereby political opportunism and media manipulation, mostly orchestrated by power-hungry politicians, may occur, citing the example of Ghana.

"Ghana's change of media landscape brought an over-liberalisation, which paved the way to political parties indirectly establishing media houses through which they badmouth and attack each other," Omotola explained. "There should be some degree of freedom so that these media houses perform well without abusing the freedom of others."

## **Kenya violence vs Rwanda genocide**

Bizcommunity.com spoke to Omwoha on the sidelines of the conference, asking her if the Kenya situation could be likened to the Rwanda genocide scenario where Radio Mille Collines, a Hutu station, was accused of fomenting violence against the Tutsis.

"No, there is no link because the scenarios are different," she said, without elaborating.

"Vernacular radio stations are very important because they are entertaining outlets and they also seek to promote different cultural values and ideologies through the content they disseminate.

"However, my advice to them is that they should ensure that they do not act as avenues for fanning ethnic hatred. Therefore, they should monitor their own content and ensure that they air programmes that have a positive impact to the community they broadcast for and the nation at large."

## **ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA**

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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