

# **National Interest and the Media: Comparison of the Coverage of Kenyan Elections by the *New York Times* and *The Guardian***

**Lawrence Gikaru**

## **Abstract**

The present study is an attempt to analyze how a British and an American newspaper covered Kenya's elections based on the premise that Britain and the U. S. have different national interests in their relationship with Kenya. The period covered is from the date the elections were announced to one month after the elections were held. There were 11 articles from the *New York Times* and 12 from the *Guardian*. Each of the papers had a reporter assigned to cover the elections in Kenya.

Qualitatively, the study tries to examine the connotation of the words and phrases within the particular context they are used so as to identify recurring themes that could correspond to each of the country's perceived self-interest. The analysis is divided into two phases - the period before the elections and the period after the elections. The first was examined under two sub-themes: election fairness and stability. The specific areas that the study analyzed were sources of information, threat to stability and headlines.

Findings show that the mass media have become important and powerful instruments in today's process of foreign policy formulation especially in the US and Great Britain which are driven by national self-interest.

---

\* This paper was developed at the University of Minnesota, where the author was a Hubert H. Humphrey Fellow in 1992 and 1993.

# L'Intérêt National et les Média: Une Comparaison du Reportage des Elections Kényanes, d'après *New York Times* et *The Guardian*.

par Lawrence Gikaru\*

## Résumé

La présente étude essaie d'analyser comment un journal américain et un journal britannique ont fait le reportage des élections kényanes en se basant sur la prémise que les deux pays ont de différents intérêts nationaux dans leurs rapports avec le Kenya.

Le reportage a commencé dès qu'on a annoncé qu'on allait avoir les élections jusqu'à un mois après les élections. Le *New York Times* a publié 11 articles, tandis que *The Guardian* a publié 12 articles. Ces journaux avaient envoyé un journaliste chacun pour faire le reportage des élections au Kenya.

Qualitativement parlant, l'étude examine la connotation des mots et des phrases dans contexte particulier lequel ceux-ci sont utilisés afin d'identifier des thèmes réguliers et qui peuvent correspondre aux intérêts perçus par ces deux pays. L'analyse est divisée en deux phases - la période avant et la période après les élections. La première phase a été examinée sous deux sous-thèmes: l'impartialité et la stabilité des élections. Les domaines particuliers qui ont été analysés dans cette étude étaient les sources des informations, la menace contre la stabilité et les (gros) titres.

Les résultats montrent qu'aujourd'hui les mass média sont devenus des instruments importants et puissants dans le processus de formulation d'une politique étrangère aux Etats Unis et en Grande Bretagne.

---

\* Cet document a été rédigé à l'Université de Minnesota, où l'écrivain était professeur assistant de Hubert H. Humphrey au cours des années 1992/93.

In November 1991, an alliance of Western donor countries led by the United States, Germany, and Britain suspended aid to Kenya to press for political and economic reform. The actions, taken at the donors consultative Group Meeting in Paris was described by commentators on African affairs as one of the strongest actions ever taken linking political conditionalities to aid in an African country since the end of the cold war.

Unless reforms were forthcoming, the Government of President Daniel Arap Moi risked losing close to US \$800 million worth of aid. For a government where aid accounts for a substantial part of its budget, this provided a dilemma. The choice was either to open up and risk losing at the polls or face isolation and economic hardship.

A few years before the Paris action, Moi's government enjoyed a warm relationship with the West mainly due to what the New York Times had described as Kenya's pro-western outlook and her strategic position in the Indian Ocean (Noble, 1992). But now the cold war was over.

For aid to resume one of the major conditions was that the government loosen its single party political system by holding free and fair multiparty elections. A few months before the donor meeting, a U.S. State Department official had testified before the U.S. Congress that Moi's government was incapable of reform in "it's present state" (Cohen, 1992).

In addition to the external pressure, there was a strong and popular internal movement led by professionals and dissident politicians pressing for political liberalization and an end to official corruption.

Three weeks after the donor meeting, Moi who had obstinately defended the one party system finally gave in. The elections were held in December 1992 and were contested by four main opposition parties including the ruling party Kenya African National Union (KANU). The three opposition parties were united in one thing - to see Moi out of power; and were led by politicians who had either served in Moi's government or the one before his.

Throughout the electioneering period, the other parties maintained that the election rules (made by Moi's party) were skewed in favour of Moi and his party. When the results finally came, Moi won with a vote of about 37%. The opposition parties responded by rejecting the results citing election fraud and called for a fresh vote.

During the push for reform which was acrimonious and occasionally marked by inter-party violence, the U.S. government, through its Embassy in Kenya openly criticized Moi's rule citing government corruption and human rights abuses including harassment of the opposition. In an article on the U.S. ambassador's role in the reform process in Kenya the Reader's Digest commented:

'... he had such little use for diplomatic niceties. He felt isolated from foreign diplomatic colleagues in Nairobi. Privately, some urged him on, but publicly they remained silent' (Ibert, 1992)

This approach contrasted with Britain which pursued a non-confrontational approach. In an interview with an independent Kenyan daily, the British High Commissioner said his country preferred using quiet diplomacy (*Daily Nation*, 1992).

Therefore, although the two countries were pushing for reforms in Kenya, each country approached the issue differently. This seemed to reflect on the relationship that each country had with Kenya. Alongside the close economic ties Britain and Kenya enjoy (Kenya is one of the top recipients of British aid in Africa and one of its most important trading partners); the two countries have close cultural ties, Kenya having been a British colony for several decades.

On the other hand, although the United States has economic ventures in Kenya, its main interest seems to be geo-political in nature. Due to her strategic position in the Indian Ocean, Kenya used to be of particular importance to the United States during the cold war and indeed U.S. still maintains some military presence in the country.

Based on the assumption that the dominant ideology of a particular country perceived as national interest shapes the media frame through which news is filtered, this study examines how the first openly contested multiparty elections in Kenya were covered by the *New York Times*, the most influential newspaper in the United States and the *Guardian*, a major British newspaper. The *Guardian* was chosen because of its availability in the University of Minnesota Library computer data base from where this study was undertaken.

On the coverage of the Third World, Parent (1991) for example found that certain patterns of framing international news, consistent with American values, appear repetitively in the American media. Similarly, Lee (1990) has argued that while journalists may contest certain methods of U.S. official domination, they rarely depart (in the coverage of international issues) from the basic end of reflecting elite consensus.

## **Method of Study**

The period covered is from the date the elections was announced to one month after the elections were held. There were 11 articles from the *New York Times* and 12 from the *Guardian*. Each of the papers had a reporter assigned to cover the elections in Kenya.

The study uses simple quantitative and qualitative methods. Qualitatively, it tries to examine the connotation of the words and phrases within the particular context they are used so as to identify recurring themes that could correspond to each of the country's perceived self-interest.

The analysis is divided into two phases - the period before the elections and the period after the elections. The first phase was examined under two sub-themes- election fairness, and stability. The specific areas that the study analyzed were sources of information, threat to stability, and headlines.

Through the sources that they select, researchers have argued that journalists may end up projecting certain viewpoints with the exclusion of others (Parenti, 1991; Fishman, 1980)

Herman and Chomsky (1988) argue that, to score propaganda points, the media tend to portray people abused in enemy states as "worthy victims" but downplay the "unworthy victims" of human rights abuses of client states. Although Kenya could not be classified as an enemy state, the government was not in particularly good terms with the West. It can, therefore, be argued that the opposition which was fighting a regime that was considered "incapable of reform" was a "worthy victim".

Headlines have been identified as one of the peripheral framing devices that can influence our perception of a story's context. Parenti (1991) argues that headlines have the power to create the dominant slant of a story thereby establishing a mind set that influences how we read the story's text.

*Table 1: Results and analysis*

Newspaper Sources	NYT n=40	Guardian n=44
Kenyan officials	8 (20%)	7 (15.9%)
Opposition Sources	15 (37.5%)	14 (31.8%)
Kenya Citizens	3 (7.5%)	1 (2.3%)
Neutral Sources	9 (22.5%)	15 (34.1%)
Western Diplomats/analysis	5 (12.5%)	7 (15.9%)
TOTAL	100	100

NYT = *New York Times*

Table 1 shows the sources of information for the two papers. Of the articles from the *New York Times*, two were editorials while the *Guardian* had one editorial out of the 12 articles sampled. The *Guardian's* editorial was a general one on voting in Africa which discussed Kenya's elections in passing.

In both papers, the opposition sources were the most quoted, followed by Kenyan officials, and the neutral sources. Western diplomats were fourth in both papers. The neutral sources included the election commission, local independent monitors and international monitoring groups. The most quoted international monitoring group by the *New York Times* was the Republican Institute while the *Guardian* relied on the Commonwealth Observer Group. Therefore, as far as international monitoring was concerned, each paper tended to domesticate its coverage of the elections.

The most frequently quoted western diplomat was the then U. S. ambassador. The *New York Times* quoted him four times while the *Guardian* quoted him five times. The only other foreign diplomat quoted by name was the German ambassador who was quoted by the *Guardian*. As a British paper, the *Guardian* would have been expected to seek the comments of its country's representative but this was not the case. The fact that there was no apparent attempt to seek the opinion of its country's representative seemed to be consistent with Britain's espoused policy of "quiet diplomacy".

## **Headlines**

### ***New York Times***

- Kenya Sets Date for First Open Vote in 3 Decades
- Kenya's Managed Elections
- Kenya's Multiparty Vote Faces Critics' Wrath
- Kenyans Sip Democracy But find it Bitter, So Far
- Kenya Votes, a Mirror Perhaps of Democracy in Africa
- Kenya's Leader is Reported Ahead in Voting
- Kenyan President Holds Lead in Elections
- Moi Well Ahead in Kenya, But Most in Cabinet Lose.
- Kenya Monitors Cite Fraud, But Oppose a New Vote
- The Real Winners in Kenya's Vote \* \* \*
- Many Doubts, Few Answers in Kenya Vote

\* \* \* Editorials

## **The Guardian**

- Kenyan Elections May Open Old Tribal Wounds
- Elections Victory Scented by Moi
- Kenya's High Court Bars Candidates
- Violence in Kenya on Eve of Elections
- Opposition Tribal Divisions Will Help Moi to Keep His Grip on Power.
- Kenya Inquiry on Vote Rigging
- Opposition Calls for Re-run of Kenya Poll
- Moi Blames West for Foisting Divisive Democracy on Kenya.
- Kenya Ballot Rigging Row Risks Turmoil
- Disarray Over Kenyan Polls
- Kenyan Opposition Forms United Front
- Africa is Voting \*\*\*

\*\*\* Editorials

### **Election Fairness**

Free and fair elections had been seen as a prerequisite to reform. This remained a recurring theme throughout the coverage by the *New York Times*. The *Times* expressed concern on the election fairness in the second paragraph of the first story the paper ran to announce the day of the elections.

The decision on Tuesday ( to set the date of the elections) comes amid concern about how fair the elections will be". ( *NYT* Nov. 5, 1992)

The *Times* followed the first story with an editorial which detested "Kenya's managed elections". It said in part:

...the timing and the rules have been manipulated to benefit Kenya's highhanded President ...the timing - in the midst of holidays and America's Presidential transition - seems designed to minimize scrutiny and possible protests...having encouraged Kenya's first real elections in decades, Americans have particular reason to look hard and carefully at its conduct". ( *NYT* Dec. 21, 1992).

Instead of dealing with the issue of election fairness, the *Guardian's* first two articles concentrated on predicting the results, based on the hypothesis that the elections would be free and fair. The first story on election fairness came in the third article which was related to a court ruling barring several candidates from the ruling party from contesting

due to irregularities. For its comment on election fairness, the paper interviewed the Vice-President. However, election fraud became the main issue after the results were declared.

## **Stability**

The threat the elections posed to civil disorder was the theme in the *Guardian* prior to the elections. The first articles of the paper were devoted to an analysis of the ethnic composition of the various parties and the challenge this posed to the elections. The paper made an attempt to predict how this might influence the elections outcome.

*Their (parties) internal alliance, and tribal origins of their leaders have become the real issue under scrutiny by the 8 million electors (Guardian Dec. 4, 1992).*

The paper also expressed concern over the insecurity that seemed to grip the country just before the elections and presented the government as incapable of maintaining order. The opposition which was regularly harassed by the police was presented as a victim of government brutality.

In the case of the *Times*, the threat to stability appeared in the main body of the stories that the *Times* ran on the elections. The *Times* seemed to express surprise that Kenya could be threatened with civil disorder. Commenting on ethnic clashes that had claimed close to 800 lives and which the opposition was accusing the government of instigating, it said:

*The threat of civil disorder is striking given Kenya's reputation as one of the most politically mature countries in Africa (Dec. 30, 1992).*

## **Election Results**

The *Times* reported the election results (which took about three days) as a breaking story. The paper relied on the electoral commission for the results. Unlike all its other stories, one of its stories during this period was from the Associated Press.

The victory of Moi, which the paper had predicted due to divisions within the opposition parties, was qualified with what the paper said was across-the-board-cheating. The paper also emphasized the fact that although Moi had won, a large number of his Cabinet members had lost.

The paper did not seem to support the call by the opposition for

fresh elections, and balanced their demand with comments from the U. S. ambassador and a local monitoring group. Both admitted that the elections were marked by widespread irregularities but rejected the opposition's call for new elections. In the same article, the *Times* quoted Moi as having said that the opposition was pushing the country towards civil war by refusing to accept his victory.

In its final comment on the elections, the *Times* seemed to rationalize the final results in its editorial entitled: "The Real Winners in Kenya's Vote":

Though the rules were skewed in his favour, 15 members of his Cabinet were defeated and, in a four-way race, Mr. Moi won only by a plurality, with a claimed 36.7 percent. This is a considerable moral victory for the opposition, and a vindication of Western pressure. The best advice to the losers is to hew to the constitutional path and use their leverage in Parliament, thus building on rather than squandering their formidable moral advantage. (*The Times*, Jan. 6, 1993).

Unlike the *Times*, the *Guardian* reported in greater detail what took place after the election results were announced. Seven out of its 12 articles came after the election results had been announced and gave details of how the opposition was trying to prevent Moi from taking power. As can be seen from the headlines of *Guardian's* stories, the paper seemed to legitimize the opposition's claim of vote rigging. In a phrase loaded with meaning the paper said the opposition's rejection of the vote was followed by,

Lukewarm acceptance of the result by the Commonwealth Observer Group.

In one of the articles, the paper seemed to question the motive of the U. S. ambassador's turnaround. Recalling that the U. S. embassy officials were responsible during the week of the elections for informing journalists of numerous instances of electoral irregularities, the paper seemed to wonder what had since changed causing the ambassador to reject the opposition's call for a new vote when he said:

The playing field was level and I cannot support the opposition's decision to reject the result. (*The Guardian*, Jan. 4, 1993).

## Discussion

The present study was an attempt to analyze how a British and an American newspaper covered Kenya's elections based on the premise that Britain and the United States have different national interests in their relationship with Kenya. The elections, by threatening to replace

a ruling elite that risked paying for its apparent crimes once out of power, posed a threat to social and economic order.

In terms of sources of information, the two papers were similar. They relied more on the opposition as a group than they did on the government. However, the *Guardian* initiated an interview with a senior government official, (the vice-president) and, therefore, seemed to balance the opposition claims of election fraud.

When it came to the electoral process, the *Times* was more liberal in criticizing the process, a stance very similar to that taken by the U.S. government. The *Guardian* waited until the claims were legitimized through a court ruling before it could criticize the process. However, unlike the *Times*, the *Guardian* pursued complaints of electoral fraud more vigorously once the election results were announced.

Due to her economic interest, Britain pursues a foreign policy towards Kenya that is characterized by self-interest and, therefore, conservative. If any changes were to occur, she would prefer that they be gradual in order not to disrupt Kenya's economic and political system. By devoting a considerable amount of her coverage to the day-to-day issues influencing the elections such as ethnic rivalries, the *Guardian* seemed to be drawing the attention of its readers to the challenges the country was facing in the change to a multiparty system. This tallied with Britain's economic interests in Kenya and was also a reflection of the geographical and cultural relationship between Kenya and Britain.

In the case of the United States, the country was more vocal concerning its demand for change and its policy toward Kenya appeared to be more concerned with shaping events and therefore more ideological.

The main interest of the U.S. seemed to be the installation of a multiparty system. Evidence of this was provided by her ambassador's attitude towards the oppositions' call for a new vote. Before the elections, the ambassador had been very critical of the government but after it was apparent that the president had won and the opposition had captured a sizeable number of seats in parliament, he abandoned his critical stand and indeed surprised the opposition by rejecting its call for a new vote.

The *New York Times* exhibited a pattern very similar to that pursued by the U.S. government. It raised a lot of concern on election fairness but once the results were out and it was clear that a multiparty system had been established, its tone of coverage and its commentary seemed to say, "if nothing else you have a multiparty system and you can proceed from there."

Judging from the trend the two papers showed in their treatment of the elections in Kenya, it seems justified to conclude that their coverage seems to fit into the growing conventional wisdom that the mass media have become important and powerful instruments in today's process of foreign policy formulation which is driven by national self-interest.

In the evolving political democracies in Africa today, the international media have important roles to play, even though they are constrained by the national politics and diplomatic colourings of the respective countries from where they operate. These results have significant implications for communication theory and practice, as well as international relations and diplomacy in Africa.

Future research in this area of election coverage by the international media should be more expansive in scope and also employ more sophisticated methodologies of quantification and qualification.

## References

- Daily Nation*. (Oct. 24, 1992). 'Our Desire is Free and Fair Elections'.
- Cohen, Herman J. (June 29, 1992). *US Policy and Current Events in Kenya, Malawi, and Somalia*. US Department of State Dispatch. Washington DC.
- Fishman, Mark. (1980). *Manufacturing the News*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Herman, Edward H. and Chomsky, Edward. (1988). *Worthy and Unworthy Victims: in Manufacturing Consent*. New York: Pantheon.
- Lee Chin-Chuan. (1990) 'Mass Media of China, about China'. Chin-Chuan Lee (Ed). *In Voices of China: The Inter-play of politics and Journalism*. New York: Guildford Press.
- Ibert, Deborah. (1992). 'The Man who Gave us Courage'. *Readers Digest*. August, pp 108.
- Noble, Kenneth B. (Dec. 30, 1992). Kenya Votes, A Mirror Perhaps of Democracy in Africa. *New York Times*. pp A3.
- Parenti, Michael. (1991). *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media*. New York St. Martin's Press.