6th EISA ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM

PRESSING BUTTONS FOR POLITICAL CHANGE: TECHNOLOGY FOR EFFICIENT ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRACY DEEPENING AND BROADENING

CONCEPT NOTE

1. Background and Context

The third wave of political transitions that swept across Africa since the 1990s coincided with the wave of globalisation across the world. The continued expansion of democracy may not be unrelated with the technological revolution that has resulted in the compression of time and space. It is however argued that some of the regimes that emerged from these transitions are hybrid regimes that are less than democratic (Diamond 2002).

The techno-revolution of the 1990s that increased in the turn of the new millennium spurred a sense of optimism in some quarters that technological advancement in the developing world will lead to democratic development. The recent events in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region further boost the optimism on the usefulness of technology in protecting and promoting democracy. These events signal a new wave of transitions in the developing world.

Democracy is a deeply contested concept. For the purpose of this paper, we will take it beyond its minimalist conception as citizens' rights to elect policy makers to its wider procedural conception as a regime founded on three central elements – competition, participation and civil liberties. These elements are enumerated as follows:

- constitutional powers assigned to elected officials;
- periodic elections based on universal adult suffrage;
- the right to contest for political positions;
- freedom of expression;
- access to information; and
- freedom of association.

Much as democracy goes beyond the minimal requirement of conducting regular elections, it is important to note that elections are the hallmark of a democracy. While it is possible to have elections without democracy, a democracy cannot exist without elections. Beyond the minimal requirement of contesting elections on a regular basis, this wider conceptualisation of democracy also considers the context within which elections are conducted. The civil rights identified by Dahl provide the context for the conduct of elections that are free and fair. The importance of information, access to information and alternative sources of information in a democratic regime

cannot be over-emphasised. This explains the optimism created by the technology revolution for the promotion of democracy.

While optimists expect that the techno-revolution will promote and protect democracy in the developing world, another school of thought holds that the techno-revolution will serve to reinforce the existing power relations in the global polity; thus enabling repressive regimes to further oppress citizens. The recent events in the Middle East and North Africa regions are pointers to the usefulness of technology as a tool for political change and liberation. While technology may have played a key role in the events in the MENA region, it is viewed to have facilitated the mobilisation process rather than technology itself being the driver of political change. Liberation technology is defined as 'any form of information and communication technology (ICT) that can expand political, social, and economic freedom' (Diamond 2010:70). Basically, ICT is an umbrella term consisting of all technological means used to process, store and manage information and aide communication, including computer and network hardware, communication middleware as well as necessary software In view of the aforementioned events in MENA, we direct our preoccupation as to whether ICT can be defined as a useful tool for promoting democracy and political change across the continent.

With the increased use of ICTs especially the internet and mobile telecommunication, citizens now interact with themselves within the boundaries of the nation-state, but also in cyber space; thus they have been defined as 'netizens' (Ibid). This redefinition of citizenship raises the question of how democratic norms and rights listed above can be guaranteed and protected within the context of technological explosion.

In recent years, the use of technology as a tool for political change has recorded a number of successes, thus increasing the sense of optimism that it will serve to promote democracy in developing countries. The recent use of social networks like Twitter and Facebook to mobilize citizens to call for the downfall of repressive regimes in Tunisia and Egypt are clear cases of successful promotion of democracy using technology. Beyond the use of technology in transition processes, citizens have also employed technology in their demands for good governance and respect for the rule of law. The emergence of open source softwares using mobile telephones and online feedback platforms such as *Ushahidi* has increased citizens' participation in the governance process by providing means of feedback to the government. The *Ushahidi* platform was successfully adopted by Kenyan Civil Society Organisations in their mapping on the post-election violence of 2008. Following the success of the conflict mapping of 2008, Kenyan CSOs have adopted related platforms such as *Infonet* and *Mzalendo* to track government activities and budgets (Diamond 2010:77). On the flipside of internet usage for democracy promotion and protection, the emergence of 'China's Great Firewall' (internet censorship) has raised concerns about the repression of citizens even in cyberspace.

With specific reference to the conduct of elections, in the recent past, various Election Management Bodies (EMBs) around the world have adopted ICT in a bid to enhance the management of electoral processes. The appropriate application of technology to elections is generally considered to have the capability of increasing administrative efficiency, reduce long-term costs and enhance political transparency. Technology is used, among other things, for compilation of voter lists, which is a process that is fundamental to electoral outcomes. In the delimitation of electoral boundaries and location of polling areas the application has contributed to the accuracy of the process. Technology also plays a crucial role in the management and training of election personnel, the planning and deployment of election logistics. The application of technology in the printing the ballot has also become central to the credibility and security of the process. It has also become entrenched in the actual conduct of the voting process, the transmission and tabulation of results; and publishing election results in elections in Africa. It is therefore important to examine the role ICT plays in the

entrenchment of democracy on the continent through the conduct of elections and the. (Evrensel 2010, Pran & Merloe, 2007)

In Africa this practice of ICT usage has gradually been incorporated in the electoral processes in several countries. Some countries in Africa have placed more emphasis on ICT usage in elections (such as voter registration and results processing) yet the rest of public administration still continues to rely heavily on manual approaches of information management. By paying more attention to deploying technology for elections rather than technology for democracy at large, it shows little attention paid to other democratic processes beyond elections, although the latter remains an integral part. That said, it is also worth noting that there is an enormous variation in the complexity level of technology used for the administration of elections around the world. Some adopt simple technology in elections while others use high-technology. Also, the rate of technological change is so high that EMBs must regularly re-evaluate their use of technology to determine whether they should adopt new or updated technology to improve their performance. One of the major challenges experienced in the use of technology in the electoral process in Africa is the cost implications and sustainability of these technological innovations, given the economic context of Africa.

Beyond citizens' use of technology to increase political participation, it is also important to note that there is an emerging usefulness of technology in the governance and development processes. The Commonwealth Network of Information Technology for Development foundation (COMNET-IT) describes e-governance as the influence of information and communication technology (ICT) on the process of steering society and its influence on the interaction of state, private enterprise and civil society (COMNET-IT 2002:1). In a study conducted by COMNET-IT on the status of e-governance in select countries, it identified the following trends in e-governance:

- the use of the Internet by Civil Society, NGOs and professional associations to mobilise opinion and influence decision-making processes that affect them
- the increasing electronic delivery of Government and commercial services and information
- the electronic publication of draft legislation and statements of direction for public feedback
- on the infrastructure side, the increased adoption of e-enabled community centres, the liberalisation of telecommunication markets and trends towards web-enabled mobile telephony and digital television are facilitating this evolution.

These trends clearly highlight the increased use of ICT as a tool for opening up the political space for citizens' participation and a tool for increasing the efficiency of service delivery.

While e-governance has been adopted by many countries in Africa, the use of ICT in governance has not necessarily contributed much to the expansion of the political space for citizens' participation; rather, the focus has been on computerising the bureaucratic and administrative processes of government. (COMNET-IT 2001, Dizon 2010:5)

In view of these opportunities and challenges, EISA is organising a symposium to explore the usefulness of "liberation technology" in steering political change and fostering of citizen participation in Africa over the past decade. The Symposium will also focus on how the potentials of 'liberation' technology can be harnessed to sustain democracy in Africa?

2. Problem Statement

With the recent events in North Africa and the Middle East there is an increasing optimism that the technology will facilitate socio-political change. However, there are pertinent concerns that need to be addressed for the political space in Africa to be expanded through the use of technology.

While the recent expansion of technology across the globe has increased citizens' access to information, there is also a corresponding increase in regulation of access to information. These regulatory activities have been associated with repressive and semi-authoritarian regimes seeking to curtail citizens' access to alternative sources of information in the name of national security. The policy environment in Africa is yet to be fully developed to encourage the freedom and access to alternative sources of information. The use of technology to promote citizens' participation in governance is also influenced by the interests of the political class, who in some cases view freedom of information as detrimental to their ulterior interests. Specifically, the use of technology to document abuses and cases of corruption has been curtailed by the political in many countries.

While the need to make the policy context conducive for citizens to gain access to and make use of required information is very glaring; there is a corresponding need to identify the borderline between citizen's access to information and propaganda. Recently, there has been an increase in citizen's journalism with many international media agencies giving space for citizens to report events directly from their phones and other devices. These reports are sent to the public without any means of verifying the authenticity or validity of such information. This leaves a question of how much regulation is required to protect the public from propaganda reportage and at the same time guarantee the freedom of expression. The recent experience in London has shown for that technology can be used to mobilise people for criminal activities such as vandalism as well as positive civic activities such as cleaning up the environment.

Much as policymakers may want to tap on the opportunities that technology avails, they face constraints due to economic realities. Many African countries lack the resources and capacity to introduce and sustain the required technology. The resources required to deploy and sustain modern technology to the point of achieving efficient service delivery is yet to be available in many African countries. Specifically, internet accessibility is still very limited to urban centres in most African countries, thus government services available online cannot be accessed by the rural population. Dependence on internet based technology in itself is a challenge within the African context because of the challenge of accessibility. The use of other forms of ICT like mobile technology needs to be further explored and increased. It is also important to note that technology is constantly evolving and many developing countries are unable to keep up with the pace of continuous innovation for reasons related to cost and poor personnel capacity thereby constraining policy options.

That notwithstanding, political perceptions also have implications on the deployment of technology for democratic development generally. With regards to enhancement of the efficiency and effectiveness of electoral processes for instance, the electorate in some cases has expressed doubt about the adoption of technology in the electoral process because they do not understand what takes place inside the "black box". This may be attributed to lack of sufficient sensitisation and buy-in of the electorate on the adoption of ICT in the conduct of elections. A recent case in point is Ireland where the citizens out rightly rejected e-voting process just because they were not consulted by the government before adoption of the technology for voting (McGaley and Gibson, 2003). These machines were destroyed in 2010 at a cost of €51 million signalling an emphatic expensive decision (Gormley, 2009). Another instance is where the usage of e-voting machines was recently abolished in Germany by the Supreme Court on the grounds that they were not "certified" (Kitcat, 2009).

Indeed, this argument posits a fundamental question. Should the EMBs and policymakers consult the citizens before they adopt a given technology for elections? Plausible as this question may be, it is not obvious that citizens in their generality may comprehend the intrinsic value of IT usage in elections. Yet legitimacy of technology, much as it depends on how it enhances the integrity of elections, it is equally dependent on the general perception of the electorate as well. Beside the question of legitimacy, there is a paradoxical experience where for instance, a very rich country like Australia has abolished e-voting because it was deemed unsustainable while poor countries like the

Democratic Republic of Congo [and others] have adopted high-tech methodologies in election management. Attending to this paradox warrants some attention. Another paradoxical instance worth some attention is in India where e-voting has been more effective among the illiterate population than usage of ordinary paper-based balloting.

As EMBs are increasingly adopting ICT in the management of electoral processes, there is also an emergent corresponding need for adoption of ICT for election observation. Election observation is preoccupied with the integrity and credibility of an electoral process (Carter Center 2007) Thus, election observers need to have the knowledge and capacity to understand, and assess the processes that take place in the "black box of technology" that led to the given election outcome.

In a general sense, use of technology in governance for improved service delivery in Africa is currently focused on modernizing or computerizing the bureaucracies of government for effective service delivery with less emphasis on citizens' participation in the governance process. On the side of the citizens, there are low levels of awareness of and accessibility to the existing ICT to be deployed for participating in governance and holding governments accountable. There is also a low level of awareness and interest in political issues across the continent as observed in the increasing level of voter apathy at elections.

3. Goals & Objectives

The overarching goal of the Symposium is to explore the role of technology in promoting political change in Africa. The Symposium will also focus on how the potential of 'liberation' technology" can be harnessed to sustain efficient elections and democracy consolidation on the continent.

Specifically, the Symposium will:

- Explore the role and potentials of technology in expanding the political space for change
- Consider the role of technology in political development
- Investigate the usefulness of technology in the conduct of democratic elections in Africa; and
- Provide a platform for experience sharing and exchange of best practices in the use of technology in democratic processes in Africa.

The policy brief emanating from the symposium will seek to harness the potentials of technology for promoting political change in Africa.

4. Methodology

- Convene reference group to work with the EISA team, giving input to the symposium concept note and programme.
- Convene a continental symposium

5. 6th Annual Symposium

Day 1

The first day of the symposium will focus on the broader context of Africa and the use of technology. The following thematic areas should be considered:

- ICT as a change agent in Africa
- Information and the changing relationship between the state and citizens

- Facilitating citizens' participation through the use of ICT

Day 2

The second day of the symposium will focus on the use of technology in elections; this will be done using the electoral cycle approach.

The following thematic areas will be covered:

- ICT and elections in Africa Case studies on ICT and Elections in Africa
- Election Observation and ICT

6. Participants' Profile

The Symposium will be bring together, representatives of: Election Management Bodiess, national civil society organizations; private election-related ICT service providers; political parties; academia, Regional Economic Communities like ECOWAS, EAC, ECCAS, SADC; the African Union; international donor agencies; and other international NGOs.

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