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Burundi: Media and good governance

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From the origins until the time of the liberalization of the media in the 90s, the Burundian press covered the totality of the Government's actions. No personal initiative from the journalist could be accepted, that is to say, that media actions relating good political governance, economic or social governance started with the birth of political parties and civil society associations.

Since the television has been operational in Burundi (even in the 2000s) the highest authorities' speeches of the country have always been fully broadcasted, those delivered either inside or outside the country.

Government members often solicit the television journalists even when it is just about the opening and the closing of workshop seminars which are part of their daily activities. In other words, it could be asserted that the written and audiovisual public media were at that time the pure and simple extension of the party and the government.

In spite of their poor financial means, the private radios brought a new breath to good governance. Topics which used to be taboos such as acts of violence committed by the police are debated on some radios including Radio RPA, ISANGANIRO and BONESHA FM.

Government members that make themselves responsible for mismanagement are denounced in broad daylight. On the other hand the private newspapers show some weaknesses, less than five newspapers are published on a regular basis. Some are created and disappear some time later.

It seems then that some raised problems are being solved progressively, but there is still a long way to go to master all the aspects of the issue.

The violences that broke up in October 1993 constitute one of the most dramatic demonstrations of the cyclic socio-political crises that Burundi has been experiencing since the first years of independence.

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Gacaca jurisdictions are an original traditional solution for Rwandans to solve the problems within the fragile post genocide context: justice and reconciliation.

The specificity of Gacaca jurisdictions is that they are community-based and require involvement of the population. They are therefore rooted in the community: a justice of Rwandans by Rwandans. They are perceived as the cornerstone for the rebuilding of unity and reconciliation among Rwandans.

They present an opportunity to say the truth on the 1994 Tutsi genocide, they punish the guilty parties and re-establish the innocents in their rights. They revive a climate of confidence among the citizens. They speed up the trials. They dissipate suspicions and rumors. They constitute a good example of resolving conflicts and restoring the social tissue.

The setting up of the institutions resulting from the Arusha agreement has not smoothed out all misunderstandings between the different political actors.

We have even been witnessing the weakening of the state authority. Consequently, we are witnessing a crisis in governance that is characterized by very serious cases of embezzlement, loss of confidence in the political leadership, excess of unfulfilled social demands and the weakening of the institutions of control of the governmental action such as the National Assembly.

Among the big challenges to be taken up, there is the restoration of the state authority, the imposition of ethics in the management of public affairs, and the stabilization of the political system through dialogue and compromise.

Public and private media have coped beautifully with their task relating to governance and they deserve to be more sustained.

The 2010 elections should be prepared carefully to avoid the tragedies that occurred in the past, and the bad example of Kenya in December 2007.

If the media synergy worked properly during the 2005 elections, those of 2010 deserve a particular attention because the Burundian people needs firm and feasible promises. They need to attend to their socioeconomic activities peacefully.

In the past of Burundi, the media used to give the floor to the state exclusively. The press has therefore been taken as a tool of exaltation and to the service of the power since the colonial times until the beginning of 90s (on the eve of the multiparty system).

Its role was to tell the population what it had to do, that is to say, to execute the decisions taken from the top. During the period 1991-1999, the press gave the floor to the civil society, to the private sector and to the unions.

It participated thus in the improvement of the democratic debate. It became more committed, denounced and advised.

Since 2000, the press has really entered into the debate process and denounced abuses such as corruption.

Obviously, efforts have been made by the media in the conduct of their profession, but since abuses persist, there is a need for the capacities of the journalists to be reinforced in their profession.

Gacaca jurisdictions have completed the pilot phase of gathering information and the phase of passing sentences is almost at the end. In all, over 1,050,000 cases have been judged. The results of Gacaca jurisdictions are palpable but it will take much time for people to become aware of them.

In any case, they allow access to justice, ownership of the conflict resolution mechanisms; they demonstrate the capacity of the leaders at local level, they offer the opportunity for dialogue and collaboration.

They thus allow the restoration of the truth on genocide, bringing out the role of the different actors. However, Gacaca jurisdictions are meeting some challenges in the fulfillment of their mission.

These challenges include the persistence of the genocide ideology, partial confessions, the management of the traumatized, the intimidation of the witnesses, the mobilization of the population. Gacaca jurisdictions remain a good conflict resolution mechanism. They have an institutional basis and offer an opportunity to speed up the trials, to reveal the truth, to fight against impunity and to promote reconciliation.

