

WHAT THE MEDIA SHOULD DO IN THE UP-COMING ETHIOPIAN ELECTIONS

By

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A free and independent media plays a crucial role in consolidating democratic process. Media consolidates democracy when, among others, it provides balanced and unbiased information to the citizens, when it serves as a forum for political expression and debate and when it discloses violations of human rights whenever there is any. The role of media particularly during elections is immense. It should provide voters with unbiased information regarding political parties and their candidates so that the society would empower politicians out of informed choices.

What we had in this country in the past was contrary to these cardinals. I would say that Ethiopia is a country where the worst media prevailed. But I am not saying that all of our media are bad. There are a very few which operate in a professional and responsible manner. But one cannot deny that there are some which are neither responsible nor media in a proper sense so to speak. If the same tendency continues in those media in the up-coming elections we will have to expect the worst than what we had in the aftermath of Elections 2005. So, I wish the most notorious local “private” media stop promoting their vested interests or hidden agenda or simply uphold the tenets of journalism: balance, fairness, objectivity and accuracy in their reports if they really consider themselves as part of this nation and champions of democracy.

We have seen how media can undermine or consolidate democratic process in any country. It can actually expedite or slow down the over-all development of a country. Its impact even goes to affect the very survival of a nation by fomenting genocide and atrocities. During the horrific genocide in Rwanda, 1994, it was the Rwandan local media that played a major part in supporting, or creating an atmosphere to sanction the terrible human suffering that led to the murder of at least half a million people, according to media reports. In other words, perhaps as many as three quarters of the Tutsi population and thousands of Hutu who opposed the killing

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campaign and the forces directing it were slain. We can cite similar other instances including some in the most advanced nations of the world. We can even remember how imminent dangers were poised to our country during last elections, when some notorious media meddled in politics and religion and other malpractices in order to incite their readers to violence. Though they succeeded in igniting the conflict, it was for the extraordinary vigilance paid by the government and peoples of Ethiopia that the situation was quickly put under control.

In any case, freedom of media cannot guarantee peace, democracy and development. In fact in countries like Ethiopia , where the level of professionalism among media people is just at its infancy, media might be detrimental to the very survival of the nation. I don't think the regulatory function by the government will either help much in shaping the media. The potential danger that existed in our country is high in the absence of media's self-regulatory mechanism such as a voluntary press council though 18 years have elapsed since press freedom has been guaranteed and any sort of censorship has been abolished in the country.

That is why I wrote this piece of article, which I believe tries to give some clues particularly to those unprofessional media practitioners as to what they should do and should not during the up-coming national elections, some nine months away when all the nerves of the nation will be on high and a slight fault might endanger our existence.

1. The Ethiopian journalists should hold high the ethics of their profession. They, among others, must be fair, unbiased, accurate, complete, factual and professional in their reporting.
2. There is no doubt the media play the role of watchdogs of the Ethiopian society. Thus it is the primary duty of the media to help the people get enlightened and politically be informed. This duty does not only make the people have informed choices to elect and empower but also hold government liable and accountable whenever some of its actions or inactions infringe the law.
3. The Ethiopian media should know that they operate in a complex environment where extraordinary ethnic and religious diversity prevail. Under such a situation, their slight error might lead to a serious damage. Hence they have to be extremely careful in their reporting and most importantly try to be as compassionate as possible. They also have to balance their stories

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whenever a third party is mentioned in them or try to get up relevant confirmation from the pertinent body if the story is likely to affect the lives of many.

4. They should know that the media and the government are mutual adversaries but with different functions. However, it is important that the media should respect the government's role as much as the government should respect the media's role. The media should also know that is how both of them can ensure the sustainability of the fledging democracy in the country.

5. The media must allow the citizens have access to information to enable them participate effectively in the democratic processes, in general and in the electoral process in particular. Moreover, the media should take part in undertaking voter education, which should never be taken as the duty of the government alone.

6. They should know that accurate electoral reporting entails proper and adequate understanding of the electoral process, including the rules governing each stage of the process. This means media practitioners must know the legal framework within which the country's institutions perform their duties. Besides, journalists in reporting the electoral process should be armed with relevant tools such as the Constitution, the Electoral Law, and The Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation among others. These documents are vital not only for them to operate legally and responsibly but also help them to confidently publicize infringements to the law whenever they happen.

7. The media have a great duty to examine all the contending parties and the candidates in terms of their ideologies, agendas as well as to reflect the needs and aspirations of the people to the parties and politicians. They should never favor some elites or some parties and deny others access to explain themselves. So far, the great majority of the "private" media have failed in this regard. For example, none of them criticized *Medrek* party when it walked out of the recent inter-party dialogue on the electoral code of conduct. Or none of them tried to clarify by interview as to why the party did not want to sit together with some of the oppositions in that dialogue. In fact, some of the unprofessional newspapers even hailed the

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party's move as courageous one and almost tried to call for others to follow its initiative. Shame on them!

8. Ethiopian media practitioners should not hastily paste information provided to them by the various sources. They should first and foremost try to investigate and verify it as well as check and cross check, since little mistakes may bring about unprecedented harm to the nation.

9. They should know their breach to the ethics of journalism impacts negatively the electoral process in the sense that it misleads the public to make wrong choices of candidates at elections or may lead to violence as was the case last time.

10. The media practitioners should ensure that the content of what they publish or broadcast is not influenced by the political parties. They should refrain from publishing one sided press statements provided by political parties to their likes.

11. The media should draw the attention of everybody to vote and not otherwise. The experience we have in the past is the great majority of the "private" media directly and indirectly trying to convince the public to boycott the elections, which is not good.

12. The media should not report any speculation about electoral results before their announcements made by the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia. That was also one of the major offences committed by the Ethiopian media in last elections which subsequently brought about unproductive and in fact destructive consequences to the nation. The media should not publish the words of the political parties as if they are true and final without verifying them from the relevant body such as the electoral board or the police commission.

13. The media must provide a level playing field for candidates in an election by ensuring fairness and balance to the extent that no candidate is disadvantaged or given unfair advantage over the others. This is again one of the major problems that usually manifest itself in the Ethiopian media during election times. Of course, the public media is reputed for fairly treating all the candidates be of political parties or of individuals. The great majority of the "private" media however have a bad record in this regard. Those media usually try to exploit the election-related opportunity to promote their narrow interests or more specifically their masters or their parties. In fact, I also know a case, when an editor-in-chief of one local newspaper was

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actually a contender in the last election, representing the former *Kinijit* party in the district where I used to reside some years ago. He is still an editor-in-chief wasting most of his time in propaganda activities in favor of his few colleagues who now represent several opposition political parties that have branched out of his disintegrated party. So I think utmost care has to be given to such notorious media practitioners who may again compete in the coming elections while they continue to work as media practitioners. Well, there might have been nothing wrong with their political role had these people been running their own party organs instead of disguising themselves as commercial medias tagged in private or independent. The problem is that these people want both the political power and the money form the business. I still believe that let the bygones be bygones and let these people upright themselves for the coming elections. But frankly speaking I doubt these people will change. Look what some of the media did in their recent reporting about “who was who” in the just ended Ethiopian year. One displayed members of an opposition political party, deliberately sidelining other most prominent figures in the nation. Another presented us nothing but a list of criminals, including an imposter who was convicted of a crime that can be sentenced to life imprisonment, while none of them mentioned at least the multi-billionaire investor who invested billions of dollars in the country for the apparent reason that they suspect him to have a different political outlook to theirs.

14. The media should set the agenda genuinely telling the people as to what is desirable and what is not. Unfortunately, the record we have in this regard is not good either. One can substantiate this from our recent experience. The private papers should have denounced the walk-out of the *Medrek* party from the joint political debate on electoral code of conduct. Is not the motto of the world press day this year for the media is “Tolerance, Reconciliation and Dialogue”?

15. The media must view the National Electoral Board as its partner and not as its foe. It should not only follow-up what it works, but also collaborate with it to ensure the success of the electoral process.