

### 3 Stability or Democracy: on the Role of Monitors, Media and Miracles

I. van Kessel

#### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The interventionist mood of the 1990s has spawned new breeds of development-funded travellers to Africa. Aid workers and development consultants have been joined by peace-keeping armies, police trainers, officials of political parties, peace monitors, election observers – to name just a few of the new agents sent out to assist African states in transition processes towards a more democratic mode of governance. This is by and large a new type of involvement in political processes in Africa. There are as yet few rules: the new roles are not clearly defined. These new types of role-players often have only a vague notion of what they are supposed to achieve. They are sometimes deployed in several capacities which may shift over time, thus adding to a blurring of their responsibilities. Nor is it always clear who sets the agenda for various types of international involvement.

In this chapter, I will argue that a clear demarcation of the role and responsibility of peace monitors and election observers is in the interest of both stability and democracy and that some duties, notably the monitoring of democratization as a long-term process, are best left to local actors. The last part of this chapter will therefore focus on the role of independent media as monitors of democracy and, in a broader sense, as agents of democratization.

What is the role of international election monitors? To monitor the elections, report irregularities and deliver a considered judgement on the 'free and fair'-ness of the elections? And – by their presence – inspire confidence in the democratic

process? Or do election monitors have a wider responsibility? Is the monitor also the guardian of stability? What if the requirements of truthful reporting on the elections are at odds with the perceived need for political stability? From a basically technical exercise meant to check on correct procedures and to promote a 'levelling of the playing field', election monitoring has evolved towards a political signal, involving a nod of approval or disapproval from donor-countries. What if prioritization of stability undermines the credibility of election monitoring? Does election monitoring serve its purpose if the reports of monitoring missions are inspired by the political agenda of donor-countries?

On the other hand, democratization involves much more than the regular ritual of multiparty elections.<sup>2</sup> Recent African history is littered with flawed and often deliberately manipulated elections. We don't need the 1933 elections in Germany to remind us that multiparty elections do not necessarily signal a democratic process. If other conditions – notably the rule of law – are absent, elections may not result in democratic governance but in a consolidation of authoritarian rule, under which the losers of the electoral contest remain excluded from the political process. A verdict on the technical correctness of the elections has no bearing on the democratic content of the political process.

In the first part of this chapter, I will argue that the duties of election observers should not be compounded with the responsibilities of peace monitors. If there is a role for international monitoring of African elections, it should be with a clear and limited mandate. To illustrate my argument, I will use the 1994 South African elections as an example of diffuse and overlapping patterns of responsibility of international actors.

On the eve of the elections, South Africa was in the grip of fear of violent conflagration. But during the long days of a momentous but extremely chaotic election, the voting exercise was transformed into a 'small miracle', to quote president Nelson Mandela. Both in popular memory and in diplomatic discourse, the South African elections and the transitional arrangements on power-sharing have become a model which is held up as an example for other African countries. But a model of what, exactly?

## SOUTH AFRICA: FROM NIGHTMARE SCENARIO TO MODEL

International observers in South Africa have served in the role of peace monitor, election observer and 'monitor of democracy' with a long-term engagement. By all accounts, South Africa's first democratic election in 1994 was the most monitored election ever. From the second half of 1992, substantial numbers of observers from the United Nations, the European Community and the Organization of African Unity, and later from the Commonwealth as well, began arriving in South Africa. Over a period of one and a half years, these organizations deployed 2,513 observers in South Africa, in addition to domestic observers and observers from foreign NGOs (Anglin 1995: 525). Their initial task was to assist in bringing an end to the violence and to create conditions for negotiations, as a preliminary to the ultimate purpose of promoting conditions conducive to free and fair elections. Subsequently, their mandate was expanded to include the observation of the election itself. The rationale for having international observers was that by their mere presence they contribute to a climate conducive to free political participation. Anglin argues that in the case of South Africa, observers sometimes played a useful role as mediators during marches or mass gatherings with a potential for violence. Peace-keeping activities were indeed within the expanded mandate of the United Nations Observer Mission to South Africa (UNOMSA), as established by Security Council resolution 894 in 1994, which referred to 'activities relating to peace promotion and the reduction of violence'.

But the dramatic decline in violence in the final week of the campaign had little to do with the huge influx of observers (Anglin 1995: 535). That the election itself took place in an atmosphere of relative peace was due to the fact that the Freedom Front and the Inkatha Freedom Party, two political parties with the most potential for violent disruption, had at the last minute decided to participate in the polls. As the election date drew nearer, new contingents of observers kept streaming in. Their mandate was not only to assess the elections, but also to determine whether the rules of the game were conducive to the holding of free and fair elections. Among their many responsibilities was the monitoring of domestic

monitors, notably the Election Monitoring Directorate of the Independent Electoral Commission, the Independent Media Commission and the police. In briefing sessions, a strong message was hammered into the observers: so much was at stake in South Africa's first democratic elections that this exercise could not be allowed to fail. The consequences of failure would be too ghastly to contemplate.

During this period, the international missions worked closely with the South African Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). The IEC was installed only in December 1993 and was thus left with precious little time to organize this vast operation. In the preparatory phase, the international observers pointed out inadequacies and offered advice on more adequate procedures. In their final reports after the elections, they differed on some important points with the IEC. While the IEC declared the elections 'substantially free and fair', these words were conspicuously lacking from the joint statement of the international missions. They concluded that the people of South Africa had indeed been able to participate freely in the voting and that 'the outcome of the elections reflects the will of the people of South Africa' (United Nations 1994: 22-5).

Both UNOMSA and the European Union Election Unit noted some glaring deficiencies. These ranged from a shortage of ballot papers in the polling stations to unofficial transport of ballot boxes to the never explained tampering with the computer program used to accumulate the results in the central results unit of the IEC's head office. Results now had to be tallied with a manual system, leading to even more delays in a week characterized by excruciatingly long waits. The final reports of the EU mission and UNOMSA are in broad agreement in their praise for the spirit of compromise manifested by the parties in the aftermath of the election, although they differ on not insignificant matters such as the scale of irregularities. While the EU declared that procedures were impeccable in some 90 per cent of the voting stations (European Union Election Unit 1994: ii), the UN reported that only '81.13 per cent of voting stations [were] observed to be applying procedures correctly' (United Nations 1994: 81). It is not clear whether this substantial discrepancy was caused by more vigilance on the part of the UN observers or by a more lenient interpretation of the rules in the EU camp.

The EU report regretted the inadequate logistics and the 'non-transparent process of dispute settling', which was done by party officials without the presence of any international observers. But it went on to state that 'nevertheless, the parties agreed without major reservations to accept the election results as they were proclaimed, and all political quarters seem to be content with it' (European Union Election Unit 1994: 81). The EU mission did, however, not evade the crucial question: acceptance by all parties is not necessarily the same as free and fair elections. 'Whilst the final results may be plausible, sheer plausibility is not satisfactory for observers. Since the election results have not yet been presented in sufficient detail it is not possible to assess to what extent the result is not only plausible but correct and thus fair' (European Union Election Unit 1994: 81).

The UN report equally acknowledged that the elections were far from perfect. It expressed severe criticism of the inadequate planning in the pre-election phase. But in spite of these 'systemic problems' (United Nations 1994: 23) and 'evidence of irregularities' in the counting process (*ibid.*: 29), the report concluded with praise for the consensus which was maintained throughout the process. 'Fortunately, the perseverance and spirit of compromise that prevailed in the negotiations was sustained. The political parties demonstrated remarkable maturity and responsibility, thus helping to achieve an overall acceptable, credible result. This is one of the great lessons to be drawn from the whole South African process of change' (*ibid.*: 39). From this phrase, it is not quite clear what the lesson entails exactly: in case the electorate produces an 'unacceptable' result, would it then be up to the parties to help achieve an overall acceptable outcome? Did the outcome of the elections reflect 'the will of the people' or 'the will of the parties'?

In view of the broad mandate of the observer missions, which included peace-keeping as well as election monitoring, it is understandable that the reports address both the issue of political stability and the fairness of the election. But this broad mandate results in a blurring of responsibilities. An unhealthy confusion reigns between the acceptability of party deals in the interest of stability and the basic meaning of elections, which are after all held to establish the preferences of the citizens by counting their votes. As peace monitors, international agents can support an arrangement between parties which is likely to

maintain the peace. As election observers, they are supposed to monitor that the 'will of the people' is identified by counting their votes, rather than by non-transparent deals between party bosses. If the international missions have sent a signal to South Africa that the outcome of elections can be settled in a deal between parties, then they have left a legacy which does not augur well for future elections.

In evaluating the largest exercise of its kind in UN history, the UN report is rather self-congratulatory on the impact of the peace-keeping role by the observers deployed by the international community. 'As an exercise in preventive diplomacy, drawing on the strengths of several organizations to support indigenous efforts towards peace and national reconciliation, the international community's efforts in South Africa since 1992 offer a unique and positive demonstration of the benefits of such cooperation' (United Nations 1994: 38). It could have worked out less beneficially. During the instruction sessions for UN observers on short-term assignment for the election week, more attention was given to safety precautions and evacuation procedures than to the technicalities of the election and the fine points of the political contest. This resulted in an atmosphere of heightened anxiety among the observers, many of whom came ill-prepared and already feeling insecure in an unfamiliar environment. One shudders to think what the effects of a stampede of election observers towards their designated evacuation points would have been on the stability of South Africa.

Anglin equally believes that the international observers were most effective in their role as peace monitors. He stipulates that the role of election observers was modest: the major contribution of the international observers was, in fact, as peace monitors during the preceding year and a half (Anglin 1995: 541). The outcome was accepted because the political parties agreed to acquiesce in the published results, not because of the verdict of the observers on the validity of the elections.

#### A MODEL OF WHAT?

This account raises some interesting questions. Are the roles of peace monitor and election observer mutually interchangeable? And why and how did the political parties in South Africa, in

spite of glaring flaws, come to accept the published results? The South African transition was based on a series of compromises between political elites. While the political culture of the confrontational phase of anti-apartheid resistance in the 1980s had celebrated the importance of popular participation, the reality of the 1990s dictated that parties in the long negotiation process became skilled in damage control and conflict containment. This is perfectly understandable and acceptable. As Steven Friedman noted: 'Whatever the costs of the secret deal-making, manipulation and manoeuvring which lay at the centre of the negotiation process, it yielded benefits whose merits would not have to be explained to the inhabitants of Bosnia, Rwanda or Northern Ireland' (Friedman 1994: 336).

So far, so good. But in the euphoria following Nelson Mandela's inauguration, a flawed election was transformed into a model. A model of what? Of democracy or of consensus, compromise and conciliation?

I share the relief and the joy about the miracle which launched South Africa towards a common future of freedom and equal opportunities. My only concern is that we should be clear about what happened. I do not dispute that in certain situations peace and stability are more important considerations than the proper conduct of multi-party elections – as long as we do not confuse these notions, because that is doing democracy a disservice. If stability is the supreme concern, the international community should limit itself to sending peace monitors rather than election observers. The South African experience with negotiated power-sharing might hold interesting lessons for other countries. But the negotiated election should rather remain a unique miracle, and not be advertised as a model to be emulated.

The questions addressed above are of course not unique to the South African situation, as demonstrated in various other chapters of this book, notably those on Ethiopia and Chad. Is election monitoring predominantly a technical exercise to check whether the rules have been applied consistently? Or is it a political gesture, meant to bestow legitimacy on the government which emerges from these elections? Do observers have other responsibilities beyond their mandate as election observers? Two contending positions emerge from the body of policy papers and articles on the subject. The pragmatic view,

often held by policy-makers and officials of foreign governments and embassies, emphasizes the observers' responsibility for political stability in the host country. What would happen if they declared the elections invalid? Even if conditions do not fully satisfy elementary requirements of democracy, election observation can still contribute to the political stability which is vital for the further development of the democratization process. This process requires dynamic criteria rather than absolute standards. Even imperfect elections, it is argued, have been useful as a mechanism to bestow legitimacy on new rulers who at least move in the right direction, as in Tanzania.

The other view, prevalent among journalists and academics in the West, argues that the application of double standards would make the whole exercise of questionable validity. Moreover, Africans themselves time and again insist on strict criteria and feel cheated when told that their democracy ought to be measured against a special set of rules. Third World countries apparently deserve Third World democracies. If the verdict 'unfree and unfair' is excluded from the very beginning of the monitoring mission, then what is the point of the exercise? If stability is the primary concern, then why bother with election observers? Election observers should not be confused with peace monitors: that will put the credibility of the whole institution of election monitoring at stake. Limiting the damage should not amount to legitimizing a government (Buijtenhuijs 1997).

The South African case differs, however, in some respects from other questionable elections. No party felt cheated out of victory. On the contrary, the phase of negotiations had produced an inclusive formula for the transition period up to the next elections in 1999. Any party with at least 20 per cent of the vote was entitled to have a vice-president; all parties with at least 10 per cent were entitled to ministerial posts in the Government of National Unity. These 'sunset' clauses meant that the National Party was spared a total eclipse: with 20.3 per cent of the vote, the National Party was entitled to one of the two vice-presidential posts. With 10.5 per cent of the vote, Inkatha entered the cabinet with three ministers. In the post-election euphoria, president Nelson Mandela became ever more generous, offering ministerial posts even to parties which had not made the 10 per cent mark. However, the true miracle was

not the elections, but the spirit of compromise and conciliation, which all of a sudden had descended on this polarized, violence-ridden country. Stability in South Africa was preserved not because of the carefully worded verdict of the international observers, who to their credit have not glossed over the irregularities, but because the parties had decided not to contest the results. A negotiated election result seemed the logical conclusion to the negotiated revolution which rested on consensus arrangements between the major players.

Even in official documents, it became fashionable to hail the South African elections as a miracle. The EU report stated that 'given South Africa's history of racial discrimination and oppression, its massive problems of poverty and unemployment, and the tragically high levels of violence, the success of the election is little less than miraculous' (European Union Election Unit 1994: vi). Once the miracle was proclaimed, few doubting Thomases were willing to express their doubts publicly for fear of being branded spoilers of a singular success story. While the observers flew back home to spread the legend of the miracle, newspaper verdicts on the outcome remained more down to earth.

#### MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE MIRACLE

'No one will ever know if the result is an accurate reflection of the will of the South African people; indeed, if it is so, it is probably by accident', commented the *Financial Times* on the 'designer outcome' which bore such a conspicuous resemblance to the ideal outcome (*Financial Times*, 7-8 May 1994). The chairman of the IEC, justice Johann Kriegler, had set the tone when he cancelled the required procedure of conciliating the inventory of the ballot boxes with the records of the electoral officers, with the commandment that the election was 'about national reconciliation, not ballot reconciliation' (the *Guardian*, 3 May 1994). Like everybody else, *Guardian* correspondent David Beresford was duly impressed with the wave of goodwill which had suddenly swamped the country, but he did not confuse the miracle with a democratic election. 'C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la démocratie' was his paraphrase borrowed from a French general in the Crimean war, to describe the miracle

which had taken on a truly religious dimension. The reports and the editorials in the *Weekly Mail and Guardian* provided a clearer picture of the South African elections than the official reports of the observer missions. This fiercely independent left-liberal South African weekly told the stories of the stuffing of ballot boxes, the setting up of 'pirate' polling stations and the issuing of voter cards to under age youths. When complaints from all parties kept piling up, the whole exercise threatened to end in disaster. In a series of local deals, party officials decided to cut a deal rather than challenge the outcome. The IEC gave its blessing 'in the national interest'. Challenged on the legality of the horse-trading, chairman Kriegler said: 'Come now, come now, let's not get purist, let's not be overly squeamish. They are in a power game with one another and if they want to settle by withdrawing objections, that's fine. There is nothing wrong ethically or legally' (*Weekly Mail and Guardian*, 6-12 May 1994). The *Weekly Mail* concluded that the manipulated election result reflected what the major parties agreed they should have achieved at the polls in some regions. Most controversial were the results in KwaZulu-Natal, where Inkatha emerged victorious with a majority of one seat in the provincial assembly and a national percentage poll of 10.5 per cent.

While the media were digging into the less savoury aspects of the miraculous elections, the international observers returned home to find that the miracle had created a worldwide community of believers who longed to join in the celebration rather than be disturbed by questions about behind-the-scene deals.

In their debriefing session with the Foreign Ministry, Dutch observers with the various missions manifested both pride with the happy ending and a certain uncasiness with the horse deals. Observers who had served in KwaZulu-Natal found it particularly galling that people had gone to great lengths and had sometimes demonstrated great courage in the exercise of their vote, only to find that the bosses had made a deal behind their backs. Mr Job de Ruijter, a former Dutch minister who headed the observer delegation of the European Union, admitted that there had been a non-transparent network of decision-making and that backroom deals had influenced the results, but stated that all of this was well within the IEC mandate. However, in his public statements he was less outspoken, which is perhaps indicative of a certain uneasiness with the shady sides of the

miracle. In a public lecture some weeks later, he backtracked on his earlier statement, denying that some outcomes had been fixed in backroom deals and painting a picture of a more or less model election. He now offered a new and simple explanation for Inkatha's felicitous results: 'You must remember, there are a tremendous lot of Zulus in Natal.'<sup>3</sup> Such a reference to the irrational tribal nature of African politics is usually sufficient to satisfy an unsuspecting audience. While assuming that Zulus have some primordial predisposition to vote for Inkatha, this 'explanation' conveniently skips the basic fact that the contest in Natal was not between Zulus and other ethnic groups, but between Inkatha loyalists and ANC loyalists, nearly all of whom were Zulus.

The *Weekly Mail* had a more plausible explanation: faced with the choice between 'Bloodshed or Buthelezi', the ANC decided not to push its allegations of fraud beyond a point of no return. After a personal plea by Nelson Mandela, ANC leaders in KwaZulu-Natal dropped their plans to challenge the election results in court. Acknowledging the temptation to join in the celebrations and to 'go along with a cover up of the Independent Electoral Commission's performance', the *Weekly Mail* pronounced nevertheless a harsh verdict: 'By last weekend, Judge Kriegler had to admit that he had to throw aside the rules, the safeguards and what few systems he had in place just to get out some sort of result. By Wednesday afternoon, he had to acknowledge that counting accuracy and care had given way to horse-trading among the parties. He had ceased to be a judge, ruling on the accuracy and validity of the result, but ... a mediator, desperately negotiating a result that all parties would accept' (*Weekly Mail and Guardian*, 6-12 May 1994).

Both in journalistic and academic writing on the elections, different views have been expressed on the role of the IEC and its chairman. While some believe that the IEC was part of the deal, the predominant view was that it acquiesced in a series of deals concluded by the parties. The IEC then went along with their 'consensus results'. Kriegler argued that his mandate was not to ensure that the results were accurate, but that the process was free and fair. If the political parties wanted to horse-trade over disputed ballots, that was their business (*Africa Confidential*, 20 May 1994). Summarizing the election experience in KwaZulu-Natal, Hamilton and Maré concluded:

It is not clear how far the votes attributed to parties in this region are removed from the actual preferences and voices of those who were treated so badly by the election machinery and political parties, and who had borne the brunt of more than a decade of violent confrontation. The published results were a product of a trade-off between the competing parties. Despite all attempts at creating transparency in the voting process, the trade-off that characterized the final moments of vote-counting in KwaZulu-Natal remains opaque. It is widely assumed that the ANC's reluctant acceptance of the results had to do with averting further violence in the region. The electorate is being asked to accept that disputes about irregular ballot boxes and allegations concerning the lack of security in the transporting of boxes and the issuing of temporary voter cards to under-age voters have been shelved, perhaps only temporarily, by both the ANC and the IFP in an attempt to normalize politics in the region. (Hamilton and Maré 1994: 86)

Neither the international observers nor the media have fully exposed the inside story of the South African election. But the media were at least more discerning in distinguishing between the requirements of stability and the demands of democracy. The massive numbers of international observers performed a useful service as guardians of stability, although this credit is more due to long-term monitors than to the troops of observers which arrived shortly before the election. But the media did a better job as watchdogs of democracy.

Peace monitors or election observers: these hordes of international watchdogs are in any case likely to be a passing phenomenon. More sustainable is of course the building of local capacity. Independent media – for all their faults – are most suitable for the long-term role of watchdogs of democracy. In the last part of this chapter, I therefore turn to the role of media as monitors of democracy.

#### MEDIA AS MONITORS OF DEMOCRACY

Media play a variety of roles as informers, educators and entertainers of the public. Mass media provide information on public

policy issues and provide a platform for discussion. Media help empower their audience by making them aware of their civil and political rights and by explaining how and why these rights should be exercised.

With regard to elections, their role is to provide a platform for political discussion in which the main issues are discussed from various points of views, to enable political parties to present their programmes to the electorate, to provide voter education in a more technical sense, and to monitor the conduct of electoral campaigns and the elections themselves. In the case of the South African elections, the media have been praised for their constructive role, in spite of initial suspicions. Much of the mainstream media in South Africa were widely regarded as representing either the vested interests of the National Party or of English-speaking big business. Suspicion was particularly strong with regard to the South African Broadcasting Corporation, long regarded as the mouthpiece of the National Party. The transitional authority in South Africa set up an Independent Media Commission (IMC) to ensure equitable treatment of all political parties by broadcasting services and to ensure that state-financed publications and state information services were not used to advance the interests of any political party. The IMC found that the treatment of political parties had been broadly equitable on radio and television. Monitoring the press did not fall under the mandate of the IMC, but international observers and NGOs did monitor the performance of the print media. UNOMSA stated that 'it is safe to conclude that the print media contributed positively to creating an atmosphere conducive to free and fair elections' (United Nations 1994: 27). Significantly, a survey conducted by the Independent Forum for Electoral Education found that some 75 per cent of respondents depended on the print and broadcast media for voter education (United Nations 1994: 27). The EU mission had an equally positive judgement on the role of the media.

This is an interesting verdict, because it contradicts the widespread notion that media necessarily function as their masters' voice. At first sight, the ANC was at a disadvantage in media coverage, because the liberation movement did not figure among the newspaper tycoons. English-language newspapers were traditionally supportive of big business and the Democratic

Party, while the Afrikaans language dailies and weeklies were vociferous supporters of the National Party. Only some weekly papers with a fairly limited circulation, such as *New Nation* and the *Weekly Mail and Guardian*, favoured the ANC. Nevertheless, in all the main newspapers the ANC received by far the most coverage, although not all coverage was sympathetic to the movement. Editorial endorsements of the Democratic Party in most of the English language papers had no visible effect on voting patterns: the DP came out with a dismal 1.7 per cent of the vote. News coverage largely ignored the Democratic Party and focused on the main contenders, the ANC and the National Party (Silke and Schrire 1994). Editorial criteria on news value were apparently established in the relative autonomy of the newsroom and not dictated in the boardrooms of the media conglomerates. Predictably, the white-owned but black circulation *Sowetan* told its readers that 'the ANC and the PAC are the only parties for whom our choice should be made' (*Sowetan*, 25 April 1994). This even-handed treatment of both liberation movements could not stop the downfall of the Panafricanist Congress, which ended up with 1.25 per cent of total votes.

At the time of the elections, broadcasting remained largely a state monopoly. But to everybody's surprise, radio and television coverage of the election period was remarkably balanced and fair. In the case of the SABC, the growth to mature reporting was no doubt helped by the guidelines and the monitoring by the IMC (Silke and Schrire 1994: 128-9). The interesting lesson of this experience remains that media can play a constructive role both as educators of the public and as watchdogs on behalf of the public, even if they are not regarded as unpartisan.

These favourable verdicts only indicate that the South African media were well behaved in the election period and that they contributed to levelling the playing field without giving undue advantage to one party. However, their role went beyond fair reporting. As monitors of the elections they were as vigilant as the international observer missions and certainly more outspoken.

The verdict on the role of the press in African elections in general is of course not universally favourable. Media coverage of the 1995 general elections in Tanzania has come up for some severe criticism. The Election Media Bulletin published by the Association of Journalists and Media Workers described

newspaper coverage as 'appalling', noting 'violation of professional ethics, malicious and outright lies, open bias, deliberate misrepresentation and the failure to distinguish between government function and campaign' (Richey and Ponte 1996: 83).

In Zimbabwe, which functions *de facto* as a one-party state, independent media, along with an independent judiciary, provide some kind of countervailing power. Human rights organizations have praised the role of the independent press in election coverage. In a report on the 1995 parliamentary elections, the human rights organization ZimRights found that 'the independent media, such as the *Financial Gazette*, the *Sunday Gazette* and *Horizon Magazine*, generally related fair, unbiased and informative coverage to the public'. The government-owned media, on the other hand, were 'demonstrably propagandistic, partisanly belligerent, and lacked objectivity in their reporting and subject matter. Since these are the only daily newspapers, this level of propaganda was very damaging' (ZimRights 1995: 6).

Unlike international observers, media are continuously on the spot as watchdogs of democracy, although – like international observers – they are often ill equipped for their role. The South African example of responsible reporting in the transition period is not easily duplicated elsewhere in Africa. South Africa's media infrastructure and its relatively well-established tradition of editorial autonomy is probably unrivalled in Africa. In other countries, such as Rwanda and Burundi in the 1990s, the media did not serve as monitors of democracy but as spoilers, propagating ethnic hate speech which contributed to the general atmosphere of heightened polarization. Journalists are of course not all brave Davids, locked in a courageous battle with the power-holding Goliaths. Although they like to portray themselves as watchdogs of the public interest, they can be as selfish and irresponsible as the much-maligned politicians. But if African countries are to embark on processes of democratization, African media will have to come into their own, moving beyond the familiar stereotypes of praise singer of the ruler or unashamed propagandist for the opposition.

#### PHASES OF DEMOCRATIZATION

Literature on democratization typically distinguishes three phases in the process: origins, transition and consolidation.

The first multi-party elections are then seen as the crucial part of the transition phase. The role of international observers is usually limited to this phase. Media do not only follow the process throughout, they are also an intrinsic part of it: the watchdog doubles as an actor. In the first part of this chapter, we have examined the role of media as monitors of elections. Here we turn to the media as actors in the fray: how have the media fared in their broader role as agents of democratization?

Literature on the role of the media in democratization processes is scarce. As Buijtenhuijs and Thiriot note in their survey of the literature, most publications focus on obstacles encountered by the independent media rather than on their role in opening up the political arena (1995: 47).<sup>4</sup> In the few exceptions to this rule, the authors generally believe that the role of the media has been underestimated (Randall 1993; Sandbrook 1996).

Although media rarely had a triggering role in the start of the democratization process, they caused an indispensable snowballing effect. In some countries, as in Kenya, Malawi and Tanzania, media were also instrumental in the first phase, formulating demands for an opening up of the one-party state before the political opposition had regrouped into political parties. In Malawi, where no independent press had survived Banda's dictatorship, public debate was fuelled by newspapers which were faxed from Zambia in order to circumvent the censors. In Zimbabwe, which so far has not made the transition towards genuine multi-party elections, independent media – and in a few exceptional instances even the state-controlled media – have exposed corruption by state and party officials, land grabbing and tampering with the electoral rules. In some cases, exposures in the press resulted in the dismissals of government ministers or the restitution of farms or other assets. As in Malawi, new technology makes life easier for journalists and more difficult for censors. A report compiled by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace on the massacres perpetrated by the Zimbabwean army in Matabeleland in the mid-1980s was not published in Zimbabwe, because of its sensitive nature. It was, however, leaked to the *Mail and Guardian* in Johannesburg, which not only published abstracts from the report, but put the full text of the report on Internet. Via the *MandG's* Internet site, the report found its way to the media in

Zimbabwe. In Benin, outgoing president Mathieu Kérékou even blamed the press for his election defeat.

Referring more to Latin America than to Africa, Randall notes:

Though the national media themselves rarely played a 'triggering' role, in a situation in which popular protest or opposition demands were already beginning to mount, they could widen awareness of issues and help put some kind of frame on events. They could mobilize and orchestrate popular protest. By deepening and accelerating political communication in this way they significantly added to the pressures on the authorities. (Randall 1993: 636)

Even if they were not instrumental in the first phase, media played an indispensable role in the next phase. In the African context, few – if any – countries can be said to have progressed to the third phase: consolidation.

Both Sandbrook and Randall distinguish between the role of domestic media and the impact of international media. Domestic media did not play a vital role in the political openings of the early 1990s. In the nascent phase of political liberalization, it was actually the international mass media that helped crystallize opposition to authoritarian and often inept governments. Images of the fall of dictators – and their statues – in Eastern Europe had a powerful impact on African audiences. The message was that military coups and civil war were not the only methods available to get rid of autocrats: they could be removed relatively peacefully by popular mobilization. In several countries, including Zaire, the government prohibited the transmission of television pictures of the execution of Nicolae Ceaucescu, the much-feared Rumanian dictator. The growth of short-wave radio, satellite television and fax machines undermined government control over information. Media in Africa did not initiate the democratic opening, but the idea caught on by contagion, in which media played a crucial role (Sandbrook 1996: 83).

After decades of one-party rule, repression and harassment, the indigenous media were not in a fit state to take the lead as champions of democracy. Moreover, a sizeable part of the print media and almost all the audio-visual media were controlled by editors who faithfully implemented the role of transmission belt

of the ruling elite. But in several African countries the press was never fully reduced to the role of praise singer of the president and his party, or of the military dictatorship. Among the remarkable features of the political thaw in many African countries is the impressive number of independent publications which sprang up almost overnight and the eagerness of a news-starved readership which devoured the new titles. In Cameroon, the number of newspapers and magazines increased from about 15 prior to January 1990, to nearly 100 in 1993. In the same period, the circulation of the government-owned *Cameroon Tribune* dropped from about 30,000 to 5,000 (Takougang 1994).

Some of this boom was just transient. Many titles collapsed within one or two years because their owners concentrated solely on the editorial message of the paper and neglected to look into economic viability. After the first outburst of enthusiasm, circulations declined because the readership lost interest. Nevertheless, the present media landscape in Africa shows much more diversity than ever before.

#### BEYOND PRAISE SINGERS AND RABBLE-ROUSERS

Like political parties, independent media have a hard time in defining their role in the process of political democratization. The 'all or nothing' nature of African politics results either in docility or extreme polarization. Ruling parties are inclined to marginalize the opposition. Opposition parties are not geared to the role of loyal opposition: rather than formulating an alternative political programme, they set out to subvert parliamentary procedures.

The news media are caught up in much the same game: they tend to be either docile mouthpieces of the government or scandal-mongering rabble-rousers who are not overly concerned about the accuracy of their stories as long as they expose the outrageous deeds of the rulers. Freed from the strait-jacket of developmental journalism, in which media were relegated to the role of tools in the hands of the ruling elite which supposedly carried the heavy responsibility of architects of nation-building, newspapers plunged enthusiastically in the political arena. Like the political parties, they were ill prepared for their

new freedom. The flaws of the African news media have come up for much criticism: they are branded as unprofessional, irresponsible, sensationalist, partisan and venal. One Cameroonian journalist likened the role of the independent press to that of a house-fly: 'It has a habit of being around when things start stinking. So, what better then can one expect from the press in a Cameroon where almost everything has been stinking for over forty years' (Takougang 1994: 14).

There are obvious limitations to the role of the media as agents of democratization. In a predominantly rural continent afflicted by poverty and illiteracy, many citizens do not have access to mass media. As Kwame Karikari has noted, the press in Africa is urban-centred and has an elite orientation. Very few newspapers target an audience of workers and peasants. The re-emerging press in Africa remains an elite institution. The use of colonial languages excludes the majority of the population. Language is the most obvious limitation on the press as an effective medium for popular involvement in mass communication (Karikari 1993). Radio of course has more potential as a medium well suited to reach both the urban poor and rural peasants. It is cheaper and more accessible than print media, but remains state controlled in many African countries. Where the airwaves are opened up for other broadcasters, it is often only for commercial stations where popular participation is limited to phoning in with requests for the listeners' favourite music.

Whatever their shortcomings, media are indispensable to the democratic process. Will the media in Africa be able to fulfil the role of monitors of democracy and agents of democratization, in view of the domestic political and economic situation, the international setting and wavering donor support?

Mass media in Africa are confronted with an impressive range of constraints, ranging from government restrictions, extra-institutional harassment, small readership markets, a limited economic base, and the poor state of the media industry itself. Although the 1990s saw an unprecedented blossoming of new publications, the revival of the independent press is fraught with dangers. While most authors point to a relaxation of controls on the media, the picture is by no means rosy. Kenneth Best, the former publisher of the *Daily Observer* which appeared first in Monrovia and then in Banjul, and who was

subsequently forced to leave the Gambia, even stated that 'media practitioners and media organisations in Africa have never known more repression and brutality than what we are facing today'. Lawsuits and licensing of media publications or journalists have become more widespread than before, while another old weapon against journalists – murder – took more victims than at any other time in history. In 1994 alone, Africa lost some 80 journalists, more than all the media people killed in the Second World War (Best 1997: 31).

In an eloquent plea for press freedom as a core condition for sustainable democratization, Peter Takirambudde gives an overview of the legal obstacles facing the press in various African countries. In his view, democratization cannot survive in circumstances wherein the press remains largely unfree. 'Sustained democratization would require a supportive environment in which a critical tradition and freedom of expression predominate. These elements are conspicuously lacking in most of the emerging "democracies"' (Takirambudde 1995: 20). Media freedom can only be revived if African states make the transition from patrimonialism to constitutionalism: the arbitrary powers of the rulers need to be replaced by the rule of law, an impersonal, impartial and predictable rule that protects the rights of all citizens. In a democratic society, media are indispensable as a counterbalancing institution. Takirambudde deals with both formal and informal repression, censorship and self-censorship.

Much of the current discussion on the role of the media focuses on the relationship between the state and the media. The state is singled out as the main obstacle for a free press, both because of repressive practices and because the state is the owner of the majority of daily newspapers and the vast majority of radio and television stations. Rather neglected in the current debate are the constraints of the market. Political liberalization has created more space for independent media. But what have been the effects of economic liberalization? Takirambudde believes that, in the long run, the restructuring of African economies towards market systems may hatch a large and powerful entrepreneurial middle class that would believe strongly in individual liberty and would increasingly assert their rights against the state. Thus, in the long term, economic liberalization would contribute significantly to the creation of self-sustaining environment for media freedom.

In the short run, the impact of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) and economic liberalization is more ambivalent. Liberalization of imports and abolition of exchange controls has enabled media to import their own newsprint and equipment, thus robbing the government of one instrument of control. But the consequences of SAPs for the purchasing power of urban residents have impacted negatively on their ability to buy newspapers as well as on advertising budgets. As a rule of thumb, advertising accounts for at least two-thirds of newspaper revenue. One intended effect of SAPs is a redistribution of income from the cities to the rural areas: this is potentially harmful for newspapers. The bulk of their readership is urban based. Advertisers are only interested in a readership with purchasing power. Therefore, if independent media are totally at the mercy of market forces, it is difficult to sustain media diversity and to reach audiences which hold little attraction for advertisers.

The inherent risk of the free-market system is that media become hooked on the consumer market rather than on the needs of citizens. For this reason, several European countries, including Sweden and the Netherlands, have instituted various methods of subsidizing the media, ranging from low tax tariffs to straightforward (temporary) subsidies. Particularly devastating for the press in Africa has been the steep rise in the price of newsprint on the world market, which has increased by some 30 to 40 per cent over the past years. Newsprint is the single biggest expenditure for African newspapers. Many newspapers have been forced to peg their circulation at a fixed number, not because of lack of demand but because of the prohibitive costs of newsprint. In the past, various organizations – such as UNESCO and Canadian NGOs – used to subsidize paper purchases for educational and news media purposes. But in the present market-oriented environment, subsidies are out of fashion.

What part can the international community play in enabling independent media to fulfil their role as monitors of democracy? Support can be given in various ways: advocacy, material assistance (both to individual media and to help create an enabling environment for a free press), training, and political conditionality.

Organizations for human rights, press freedom and journalists' organizations have been active in the sphere of advocacy, but their activities are largely limited to supporting individual journalists who have run foul of the authorities. Conceivably, there is also a role for international solidarity in supporting campaigns for legal reforms conducted by African media organizations. One clear example is the current battle in many African countries between the state that wants to maintain its monopoly over broadcasting, and media organizations that demand the opening of the airwaves to independent broadcasters. Assistance to individual media projects is channelled through various NGOs, such as the Communication Assistance Foundation in the Netherlands. But with less than 1 per cent of the total budget of the Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation allocated to media in the Third World, there is scope for improvement.

Assistance can be given to individual newspapers or radio stations, but can also be used to create an environment in which newspapers can survive and thrive. Subsidy schemes for newsprint could be a temporary measure to facilitate the take-off of newspapers. Publishers can also pool resources and set up a joint import scheme which will enable them to buy newsprint at a discount, as the Senegalese publishers are doing with the help of the Canadian embassy (Best 1997: 33). In countries where the only printing press is controlled by the government or the ruling party, the provision of printing presses would make a huge difference. There is a massive need for training. Journalists are often poorly trained, ill paid, have a low social status and therefore often feel insecure in their battles with authorities. If independent media are to fulfil their watchdog role in emerging democracies, they will have to become more professional. Only media with a reputation of reliability and accuracy will be taken seriously by the ruling elites. Among the journalistic profession in Africa, it is widely and emphatically recognized that journalism and newspaper management are in need of more professionalism. Training needs are diverse, ranging from training in journalistic skills and ethics to newspaper management, advertising, marketing, technical expertise with regard to printing equipment, computer technology, desk top publishing.

More contentious is the case for political conditionality. Takirambudde notes that political conditionality has been employed as a tool to promote democracy, but that this tool has not been very effective because of insufficient down-to-earth links between political conditionality and the achievement of 'real' human rights, such as press freedom. Rather than on global and imprecise demands, political conditionality should be more surgically targeted on rigorous respect for freedom of the media (Takirambudde 1995: 53).

Professional journalism does not mean unpartisan journalism. Like the media in Europe, media in Africa will have their own socio-political profile and their own political preferences. There is nothing wrong with that, as long as it does not result in distortion of the news. Media are partisan; but so are observers. The report of the European Union mission to the South African elections freely recognizes that it is always difficult to find neutral observers. Explaining why 'monitoring' was preferred above the more interventionist mode of election 'observing', the report states: 'The many national and international observer groups that were present, brought together people from a wide variety of backgrounds: with a range of political commitments and often patchy knowledge of the electoral regulations. It is preferable to have them play the unobtrusive role of observing rather than intervening in the process' (European Union Election Unit 1994: 44).

## CONCLUSION

International advisers and monitors can play a useful role in countries emerging from a past of authoritarian rule. Their duties and responsibilities ought to be clearly defined. Their reports should not be inspired by the political agenda of their country of origin. A clear distinction between peace monitors and election observers is crucial in order to avoid an unhealthy confusion between the interests of political stability and the requirements of democracy. In any case, the role of international observers is limited to the transition phase and to a limited sphere of activities, such as elections. The broader democratic process requires 'monitors of democracy', but this role is best left to local actors, notably independent media. This

is therefore not a plea for either/or monitors or media: both have a role to play. But while much attention has recently been given to various forms of international involvement and intervention, the role of the media in Africa is much neglected.

The donor community is narrowly focused on multi-party elections as the litmus test of democratization. A political conditionality which singles out multi-party elections as the crucial element, without taking account of the wider environment, risks being counter-productive. Indispensable for sustainable democratization are independent media. Governments – not only in Africa – have a tendency to dismiss media as ‘irresponsible’ and therefore not very relevant to the democratic process. Tension between governments and media is however a normal condition in democracies. As Lord Jacobson once said when opening a debate in the House of Lords on the state of the press (cited in Grant and Egner 1989: 263): ‘Relations between politicians and the press have deteriorated, are deteriorating ... and should on no account be allowed to improve.’

#### NOTES

1. In this article, the terms ‘observer’ and ‘monitor’ are used interchangeably.
2. Van Cranenburgh 1997; Sandbrook 1996; Ellis 1996; Hyden 1996; Shaw and Maclean 1996; Young 1997; Abbink 1995. For an extensive survey of the literature on democratization up to 1995, see Buijtenhuijs and Rijnierse 1993 and Buijtenhuijs and Thiriot 1995.
3. Lecture by Mr J. de Ruyter for the Nederlands Genootschap voor Internationale Zaken (Netherlands Society for International Relations), The Hague, 14 June 1994.
4. Some recent books on the subject are: Bourgault 1995; Hachten 1993; Tudesq 1995.

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