

Media and the political participation of minorities: The Mauritian Example

Minorities face multiple challenges across the world including in Mauritius. The island-state is justly described as a plural, diverse and vibrant democracy. But the images of shining coexistence between communities that are sold to the world as a model are contested by the feelings of marginalization and everyday grievances of its minorities. Problems of social exclusion and prejudice – the social alienation of the Afro-Mauritians dubbed the “*Creole malaise*”(the Creole ailment), of gender discrimination and inequality regularly surface up to remind the authorities of their obligations and the need that the country makes unfaltering steps towards social justice and towards building an inclusive society. Besides, the current global financial mess, the failings of financial institutions with its severe economic and social impacts, has made even harsher demands on the poor and vulnerable: amongst them the minorities who are mostly and disproportionately affected.

As the duty-bearers try to think anew out of the financial mess, it has been emphasized that human rights has to be prioritized in policy responses to the crisis. Ensuring equitable democracy and conflict-free societies where peace is durable require that minorities are given their full rights to participate in the political process not for the sake of passive representation but for real freedom of agency and transformational social change. What are the conditions for their political participation from the perspective of the media?

(1) *Media as agents of change*: It is obvious that the media may either help the processes of minority political participation or be a major obstacle to that path. A number of studies have documented the negative roles, ethical shortcomings of the media in fuelling racism, sexism and ethnic tensions. In Mauritius, although our press is not exempted for a number of criticisms, it can be argued that it has been playing a constructive role in encouraging minority participation in the political process.

In fact, the partial liberalization of the airwaves in 2002 has benefited the minorities. The cooperation of the media, particularly of the recently licensed private radio stations, has been instrumental in raising awareness, and setting the agenda about minority imbalances in the political process. In fact, the last elections in 2005 were a watershed with an unprecedented increase of women in the Mauritian Legislature. During that election, the number of female members increased sharply from 4 to 12; before 2005 the number of female members in the national assembly had never exceeded six. In their study, Yoon and Bunwaree (2008) highlight the factors that have allowed for more women to be elected in 2005, including the efforts of women's NGOs, women's effective campaigning, but also the cooperation of the media. In fact, they note that “*in addition to their vigorous campaigns, the recent liberalization of the airwaves [2002] helped some women, particularly female new-comers, by breaking the monopoly of airtime by incumbents, mostly men. [...] Because many more radio stations*

exist now, politicians from different camps could make their 'voices' heard. The radio stations hosted a number of political programs and invited candidates, including women, thus helping women candidates gain some publicity" (Yoon and Bunwaree, 2008, p. 22).

What about the forthcoming 2010 Mauritian elections? In a context where the political class is reluctant to implement electoral reform (and proportional representation with gender quotas), would it be possible to field-in and continue increasing the number of women in the Mauritian legislature? To the question, Yoon and Bunwaree note that the commitment of electing more women into parliament require that women's NGOs and the media should make continuous and unfaltering efforts. The media as a political ally and an active agent of change may raise awareness on issues of under-representation and support greater equity in the political process.

- (2) *Freedom of Expression and Access to information:* To ensure participation of minorities in the political process, it is paramount to reaffirm the link between freedom of expression, access to information and citizen's empowerment. In Mauritius, a lack of political will has not delivered on the promise of governments to provide for a Freedom of Information Act. Anachronistic laws such as the *Official Secrets Act* of 1972, originally a British law, hamper the working of journalists as public officials refrain to talk to the press and frustrate possibilities of investigative journalism. The *Sedition Act*, also a colonial heritage, places limitations on freedom of expression and political dissent.

Only a week ago, the Mauritian Attorney General has had to face accusations of sedition after he complained in a public speech of police brutality, particularly targeted at the Afro-Mauritians. Whatever the merits of his accusations, they could have provided for open debate and an enquiry on the allegations of police brutality but the Police force had recourse to the law of sedition to jam the Attorney General.

Participation in the political process cannot be limited to voting every five years at the time of elections. Kasenally (2009) emphasizes the need that Mauritian politics moves away from delegative democracy – people turning out to vote but are weak to hold to account those they have voted for – and engages into deliberative democracy, a concept that stipulates that through deliberation and dialogue, citizens can make informed and better choices about collective actions and the direction of public policy.

- (3) *Media democratization and the need for independent media:* One of the challenges that journalists encounter across the world, including in Mauritius is the rapid 'tabloidisation' of the media. With market forces into play journalists are not encouraged to pursue their interests on

subjects related to minorities and gender issues because these topics do not sell magazines. Sensation driven news, sameness in news products are seen as more easily marketed.

As the Mauritian media industry becomes more and more commercialized and commoditized, they tend to promote a corporate, pro-business agenda. Small minority parties with alternative/radical economic views are crowded out and seen as parties that would never obtain political power. How can the media push for a progressive agenda? How can the media reflect the diversity of opinions? This is why new communicative spaces have to be created for deliberation and for encouraging diversity. In Mauritius, besides public and corporate media, importantly there is also the need to encourage *independent media* - community radio in particular – as new platforms so that contesting minority voices are not silenced.

New social Media: As a way to consolidate democracy and as new forms of political/electoral campaigning, there is also the need to encourage minority political parties to harness the full potential of *digital media and social networks* (Internet, blogging, Facebook, etc). When discussing the ways to encourage political participation, the role of new social media (chat rooms, forums, discussion boards) should be further examined.

- (4) *Equitable access of Minority Political Parties to public media:* At the time of elections, one of the major challenges for minority parties is their inability to access national media. Electoral reforms should address the issue of the funding of political parties as a way of providing a level playing field in-between parties. It seems that there is a consensus for mechanisms of state funding of political parties in Mauritius. Access to public media by minority parties can come in the form of state subsidy. It is also an election regulatory imperative (whether it is the Electoral Commission or the Broadcast Authority) that policies of airtime are democratized and that minority parties are guaranteed equitable access to the media so that they can get across their message to the electorate.

Reference:

Yoon, M and Bunwaree, S (2008) The Mauritian Election of 2005: An Unprecedented Increase of Women in Parliament. In : *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Vol 9, May 2008.

Kasenally, R (2009) *Moving away from a Political Clientelist Model to a Responsible Party Model – Doing Politics Differently. L'express*

