DECOLONISING THE MEDIA: COUNTING OUT AFRICA'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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"Our history (in) about 50 or 100 years from now will there find, recorded in black and white and in color, evidence of decadence, escapism, and insulation from the realities of the world in which we live. We are currently wealthy, fat, comfortable, and complacent. We have a built-in allergy to unpleasant or disturbing information. Our mass media reflect this.

Just once in a while let us exalt the importance of ideas and information. Let us dream…

To those who say people wouldn't look, they wouldn't be interested, they're too complacent, indifferent and insulated, I can only reply: There is, in one reporter's opinion, considerable evidence against that contention.

This instrument (TV) can teach. It can illuminate and, yes, it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it towards those ends.

Otherwise, it is merely wires and lights -- in a box".

Edward R. Murrow (2005)

What's making the headlines

Western media lit up on the 23 December 2020 with the news that the South African lottery yielded, what all commentators were agreed on, was an unusual sequence of numbers. Apparently, numbers 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 are just that. The numbers garnered 5.7 million rand for twenty people while the numbers earned a further 79 people 6,283 rand each. A story of such importance that it made headlines in radio, television and newsprint outlets across the western

world perhaps leaving numerologists scratching their heads wondering at the sudden interest in their niche field of interest.

Irish state broadcaster, *RTÉ*, carried the story in its main news and current affairs programmes. As did *Newstalk* radio station. So too did *The Journal.ie*. And the *BBC* (British Broadcasting Corporation). *Sky News*. The Australian *7 News* channel. The United States (US)-based *ABC News*. The Canadian-based *Global News* channel. *The New Zealand Herald*. *The Guardian*. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Italy's *La Repubblica*. And more. The story that displaced other stories.

'And now you're up to date', as *Newstalk* reminds us following each news bulletin.

For those, and not just numerologists, who are interested in reporting on significant numbers, here are some: according to the *Missing Migrants* (2021) database 99 people died while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea in December 2020. More than 100 people drowned in three separate shipwrecks in the Mediterranean Sea in just 72 hours (Reliefweb, 2020), a couple of weeks before the South African lotto story grabbed international headlines. According to the the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR), more than 80 million people were forcefully displaced across the world in 2020 (UN News, 2020). And according to the *British Medical Journal*, malaria killed 409,000 people in 2019 and 411,000 in 2018, most of them babies and toddlers in sub-Saharan Africa (Dyer, 2020). Peter Sands, executive director of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, is quoted in the BMJ report saying:

> "The global health world, the media, and politics pay(s) little attention to a disease that is still killing over 400,000 people every year, mainly children. This is a disease we know how to get rid of — so it is a choice that we don't" (Ibid.).

Ignoring the plight of those who flounder in the waters of the Mediterranean, those who are forced to gather up what little they have and flee their homes, those who could, but never will, reach beyond the age of five is the choice mainstream media makes each day. Unless, of course, the numbers stack up in an unusual sequence.

African elections

And it is also possible that numbers have stacked up in unusual sequences in the myriad African elections that have taken place on the continent since the beginning of 2020 and continue to take place well into 2021. But my guess is, if that were the case, very few people in Ireland and in the western world would be aware of that. And hazarding a further guess, very few people in Ireland and the western world would be even aware that presidential elections *were* and *are* taking place across Africa, in 2020 and 2021.

First up in 2020 was the presidential election in Togo (population 8.2 million) where the 53-year-long dynastic rule of the Gnassingbe family continued. Pater Gnassingbe Eyadema ruled the country with an iron fist for 38 years following a 1967 coup. Son Faure Gnassingbe was first elected in 2005 and, again, for a fourth consecutive term in February. A 2019 constitutional change will potentially see him in office until 2030. Should that come to pass, it will mean that the Gnassingbe family rule will extend for over 60 years in what the World Food Programme (2018) characterise as one of the poorest countries in sub-Sahara Africa.

Cushioned by a retirement package that included $540,000, a luxury villa and the sobriquet 'supreme guide to patriotism', Burundi's (population 11.1 million) outgoing president Pierre Nkurunziza, relinquished office but not power and influence following the presidential election of 25 May 2020. From 1993 to 2006, a catastrophic civil war engulfed the landlocked and resource-poor country resulting in an estimated death toll of over 300,000 (BBC News, 2018). Nkurunziza's handpicked successor Évariste Ndayishimiye will be required by law to consult him on matters of national security and national unity. His election took place against the background of 'summary executions,

arbitrary detentions and arrests, torture and sexual violence', according to a UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi (UN Human Rights Council, 2020). Located to the north of Lake Tanganyika, Burundi is ranked as the fifth poorest country in the world (UNDP, 2020).

Citing widespread irregularities, Malawi's (population 19.1 million) supreme court unanimously backed the constitutional court's decision to annul the results of the February 2019 presidential election in what was regarded not only as a historic moment for the country but for the continent (Fisher, 2020). In the rerun election that took place in June 2020, opposition leader Lazarus Chakwera defeated Peter Mutharika, the first time a court-overturned vote in Africa resulted in the defeat of an incumbent president. Congratulating Chakwera, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, extended 'his profound gratitude to the people of Malawi, for demonstrating their firm commitment to democracy, constitutionalism, rule of law, peace and stability' (African Union, 2020). Located to the west of Lake Malawi, the country is ranked 174 of 189 on the UN Human Development Index (UNDP, 2020).

On 18 October 2020, the electorate of Guinea (population 13.1 million) went to the polls in what most African commentators regarded as a high-stakes presidential election (Africa News, 2020). One of the most resource-rich countries in Africa, the poverty rate is alarming according to the World Food Programme (2021) with 21.8 percent of households' food-insecure. Malnutrition remains high: 6.1 per cent of children under five-years are affected by global acute malnutrition, 24 per cent are stunted, and 12 per cent are underweight. Eighty-two-year-old incumbent Alpha Conde was declared the winner in the country that first reported Ebola in the pandemic that swept across West Africa between 2014 and 2016. The election followed days of deadly violence in which at least 30 people were killed according to Human Rights Watch (2020) in what it characterised as a 'brutal crackdown that undermined the credibility of the election'. Six months previously, Conde pushed through a controversial constitutional amendment that allowed him to serve a third presidential term.

In his sixth attempt, 60-year-old Anglican priest Wavel Ramkalawan clinched Seychelles' (population 98,671) first round presidential election on 25 October 2020 in what all commentators were agreed was an orderly and free election. Heavily dependent on tourism, which contributed to 80 per cent to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employment in 2019, the archipelagic island nation located on the Indian Ocean is vulnerable to external shocks according to the African Development Bank (2020). Shocks that upended the country's economy in 2020 in the guise of the coronavirus pandemic.

Amidst fraudulent claims by opposition candidate, Tundu Lissu, who was shot and seriously wounded outside his home in 2017, 60-year-old John Magufuli, the son of a peasant farmer, was returned as president of Tanzania (population 55.9 million) in which he garnered 84 per cent of the vote. The National Electoral Commission (NEC) has dismissed claims of fraud (BBC, 2020). The Election Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA, 2020) reported the curtailment of political rallies and public gatherings and the police detention of leaders of several political parties in the run-up to the election. A World Bank (2019) report noted that a significant proportion of the population remains vulnerable to falling into poverty and about half of the population continues to live below the international poverty line of $1.90 per person per day.

In Cote d'Ivoire (population 27.5 million) where almost half the population also live under the poverty line, Alassane Ouattara won a controversial third term on 3 November 2020 garnering 94.2 per cent of the vote in an election boycotted by the opposition. A 2016 constitutional change allowed him to exceed the up-to-then two-term limit. Dozens of people were reported killed following the announcement of his election (DW, 2020a). The Carter Human Rights Center concluded that 'the tense and polarized political environment that surrounded this election was fueled by President Ouattara's decision to run for a third term and the Constitutional Council's validation of his candidacy' (Carter Center, 2020).

To the northeast of Cote d'Ivoire, sixty-three-year-old Roch Marc Christian Kabore won a second term as president of Burkina Faso (population 20.9 million) in November 2020 in what was once regarded as an oasis of peace and stability in an otherwise turbulent region, now mired in conflict. Escalating violence resulting from fierce clashes between ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) (Da'ish) and al-Qaeda militants has driven more than one million people from their homes. Since the beginning of 2020, 25 per cent of the country's entire population – one in 20 people – is now displaced according to UNHCR (2020) in what they describe as one of the world's fastest-growing humanitarian and protection crisis.

Ranked 189 by the UN Human Development Index (UNDP, 2020), Niger (population 24.4 million) is the poorest country on the planet. In its December 2020 presidential elections, outgoing president Mahamadou Issoufou was beaten into second place by ruling party candidate Mohamed Bazoum. Bazoum, however, failed to achieve the mandatory 50 per cent plus one majority. A run-off election is scheduled for February 2021 in which he is tipped to win (DW, 2020b). If all goes well, the upcoming election will mark a democratic transition in a country bedeviled by past military coups.

President Faustin-Archange Touadera of the Central African Republic (population 4.8 million) won another term of five years following elections on 28 December 2020 that were overshadowed by violence between government and rebel forces. In the immediate aftermath of the election, the UNHCR reported more than 200,000 people, 'a panicked population', fled their homes fearing their own safety. More than 30,000 people crossed the border into neighbouring Cameroon, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (UN News, 2021). Central African Republic is the eighth most dangerous country for humanitarians according to the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD, 2021) resulting in aid agencies suspending their humanitarian work.

Africa's colonial past

The big men of Africa. The big man syndrome. The pejorative Swahili word for these Big Men is *wabenzi* and the Bantu word WaBenzi meaning the men with the Mercedes Benz; the new ruling class that superseded the old colonial class. 'The replacing of a certain "species" of men by another "species" of men who have totally assimilated colonialist thought in its most corrupt form (Fanon, 2001: 27). Today's big men follow on from a long list of now reviled former self-aggrandising African presidents: Malawian president Hastings Kamuzu Banda's (1966-1994) with his penchant for three-piece pin-striped suits complete with sunglasses and black homburg hat; the extraordinary braggadocio of Jean-Bédel Georges Bokassa who in 1977 crowned himself Emperor of the Central African Empire, at a cost of $US22 million in a country at the time of two million people. And perhaps the crown prince of them all and kleptocrat-in-chief, Zairian President Mobutu, who renamed himself Sésé Seko Nkuku Ngbendu wa Za Banga, 'the all-conquering warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, will go from conquest leaving fire in his wake'.

Such grandiosity is not without context. Theirs was a learned grandiosity. Men who created their likeness on the likeness of the white men they replaced. A likeness cultivated by white-man rule 'in their narcissistic colonialist bourgeoise dialogue' (Fanon, 2001: 36). Black men who learned their white-man lessons well. Jean-Paul Sartre put it most eloquently in his Preface to Frantz Fanon's classic text on colonialism *The Wretched of the Earth* (2001: 7):

> "The European élite undertook to manufacture a native élite. They picked out promising adolescents; they branded them, as with a red-hot iron, with the principles of western culture; they stuffed their mouths full of high-sounding phrases, grand glutinous words that stuck to their teeth. After a short while in the mother country, they were sent home, white-washed. These walking lies had nothing left to say to their brothers; they only echoed".

None of the ten presidents elected in 2020 are household names in Ireland. All of the above elections were rarely, if ever, featured in Irish media. *The Irish Times* carried reports on eight of the ten elections discussed in this article, but each election report was limited to one or two reports. The *Irish Independent* reported on seven of the elections but again each election was confined to one or two reports. In the case of its report on Burundi's presidential election, there was an oblique reference to the presidential election in an article headed 'Six mass graves uncovered in Burundi containing more than 6,000 bodies' (Kaneza, 2020). *The Irish Examiner* limited its coverage to five of the above ten elections and each of the five received one article.

Only one election mattered

Contrast that with the tsunami of coverage of the United States' (US) presidential election; the political nooks and crannies of swing/purple states hashed and re-hashed in mind-numbing detail. Much of it repetitive. Much of it speculative. And much of that speculation was plain wrong. Nobody predicted that President Trump would receive 74,222,958 votes highlighting the futility of much of the pre-election coverage. We have become all too familiar with the intimacies of Joe Biden's family and the trouser-tugging antics of Rudy Giuliani; his dye-smeared face splashed all over our media. Not forgetting the daily updates of the wildly idiosyncratic behaviour of the defeated incumbent. Our world has become obsessed with their world.

And all the while, other worlds exist. Africa exists.

Undeniably, the US election affects global politics in a way that African elections do not. The power that the US wields matters on a global stage. US elections have consequences not just for their own citizens but for all of us. But African elections matter too. For their citizens and for us too. All 185.1 million citizens.

Incontrovertibly, we have strong historical and cultural connections with the United States. But it's not that we don't have strong cultural and historical ties with Africa. From Roger Casement's devastating 19th century

critiques of the Belgian-led colonial exploitation of the Congo to former President Mary Robinson's 1992 tearful response to the famine in Somalia, Ireland has always claimed a special connection with Africa. Irish missionary footprints can be found in most African countries. By 1965, there were 6,517 Irish Catholic missionaries, nuns, brothers, priests and laity along with hundreds of Protestant and other faiths working in the global South, of whom 4,122 Irish Catholic missionaries were working in Africa (O'Sullivan, 2012: 15). The 1951 South African census recorded that 8,254 South African residents were born in the twenty-six counties of Ireland and an additional 1,366 were born in the six counties. By the early 1960s an estimated five thousand to six thousand (7 per cent of the white population) of what was then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) identified themselves as Irish-Rhodesian (Ibid.).

Ireland's connections with Africa

Irish politicians have consistently reminded African countries of these links when it feels the need. Marking Ireland's accession to the UN Security Council in 2021, then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar declared:

> *"Today's victory underpins Ireland's place in the world; as a global island, with a clear and tangible ambition to play a central role in contributing to international peace and security. We look forward to working with our partners in the international community from all around the world to promote our shared values of peace, justice, and human rights"* (DFA, 2020).

His predecessors were also quick to invoke Ireland's connections to Africa and beyond, stressing our shared colonial past, a past that has seeped into official political discourse. Speaking at the UN General Assembly in October 1960, Irish Minister for External Affairs, Frank Aiken, declared that Irish people knew 'what imperialism is and what resistance to it involved'. Taoiseach, Séan Lemass, told a gathering in Washington in 1963 that Ireland had a 'natural' sympathy with the cause of the developing world. and that Ireland was 'particularly conscious of the needs of countries following our path to freedom' (O'Sullivan, 2012: 17). Thanking all those who supported Ireland's

election to the UN Security Council, then Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simon Coveney said: 'We will not betray that trust' (DFA, 2020).

How that is to be achieved in the absence of public knowledge of and engagement with Africa, a continent that holds almost seventeen percent and growing of the world's population is difficult to imagine (Worldometer, 2021). Whatever about the visibility of Ireland's place in the world, Africa's place in Ireland is largely invisible. Africa: the invisible continent. The reality is that Africa does not count in Irish media unless one is counting lotto numbers. Africa is largely invisible. Its people are largely invisible. Its politics are largely invisible. And its presidential elections are largely invisible. And the climatic and health-related threats to its people are largely invisible. Beyond the election between two white, male septuagenarians, other elections are taking place. Beyond the fetishisation of randomly selected numbers, other numbers count. The outcomes of elections that shape the lives of almost 200 million people. Elections that also feature some septuagenarians. But Black septuagenarians. Elections between black leaders of ten African countries. Of which so little is heard.

Despite newsroom's 'ravenousness for content … with all the ephemera it takes to fill it', Janan Ganesh (2021) argues that television has lost its way. Radio too, where each (often highly remunerated) anchor is 'a monologed merchant' filling space with sound and sometimes fury. The contrived debates. The tendentious guests. The echo of the echo-chamber. The reverie of trivia. And the commentariat drawn, in the Irish context, from the predominantly white, middle-aged, middle-class professional class, from which Black voices, rarely, if ever, feature. In a widening culture of what counts as 'news', news that informs and illuminates, that opens out to encompass the whole world is fading from our screens and from our dials. Insofar as space is given to Black lives, this space is, for the most part, devoid of Black lives. Ganesh (2021) argues that we are witnessing 'the debasement of TV (and radio), …the monetisation of fluff … that has done more than social media to pollute civic life. The great US broadcast journalist and war correspondent, Edward R. Murrow (2005), was right when he said television

ought to be more than 'wires and lights in a box'. It can illuminate and it can inspire. But only to the extent that humans are determined to use it towards those ends. If we don't know, as Peter Sands argues, it is because we chose to not know and those who determine what constitutes news make those choices on our behalf every day.

For now, it would appear that black presidential elections don't matter. As I write (January 2021), the imminent Ugandan election is gaining quite a lot of traction in the Irish media (*RTÉ*, *The Irish Times*, *The Irish Independent*, *The Irish Examiner*) with a lot of focus on opposition candidate, rapper-turned-politician Bobi Wine. As to the question why Uganda is getting such attention, I do not have an answer. Perhaps it's the rapper-turned-politician schtick? For example, *The Irish Times* published a full-page article, paid for by Irish Aid through the Simon Cumbers Media Fund, headlined 'Uganda's Reggae Politician' (Butler, 2021). Perhaps it's because the 76year-old, Yoweri Museveni, has been president of Uganda for 35 years although in the African context that in itself is not unusual.

A review of *RTÉ* on-line indicates that the Malawian presidential election was the only country of the ten considered above that featured in its reportage. It did cover the Togolese election in 2005, the presidential election in Burkina Faso in 2014, Niger in 2011, the 2014 exile of President Michel Djotodia of the Central African Republic. *RTÉ* also carried two football results for two of the above ten countries in 2020.

Writing about the third level sector in South Africa, much of which is still in thrall to an Apartheid mindset, 20 years after the end of Apartheid, Cameroonian scholar Achille Mbembe (2015) calls for the decolonisation of the university from the entrapment of whiteness. Television too in this country calls out for decolonisation from its 'old clothes' whiteness. A space where Black and other people of colour can say 'This is my home. I am not an outsider here. I do not have to beg or apologise to be here. I belong here'. For that to happen in the university sector, Mbembe (2015: 4) argues:

"we need to decolonize the systems of management insofar as they have turned higher education into a marketable product bought and sold by standard units. The system of business principles and statistical accountancy has resulted in an obsessive concern with the periodic and the quantitative where excellence has been reduced to statistical accountancy".

Irish media too.

We need to decolonise Irish media.

For decolonisation to happen in the university sector, Mbembe further argues it needs to break free from 'imitation' and 'mimicry'. The same holds true for television and radio. Decolonisation is a time of 'closure' as well as a time of possibility, what the Kenyan scholar, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, cited by Mbembe (2015) calls a time for 're-centering'.

It is time too for re-centering Irish media. For an end to mimicry and imitation. In a country that celebrates its much-vaunted artistic creativity, that ought to be within our reach. 'Human history is about the future', according to Mbembe. If Irish media is to have a future, a critical part of that future is escaping from the entrapment of its whiteness, escaping from its all-consuming western gaze, recognising that there is a world beyond Boston and Berlin, beyond the nexus of the United States and the European Union.

Perhaps 2021 will be that year. Perhaps 2021 will be the year in which Irish media will really engage with the African continent and its politics. Perhaps. Should that be the case expect to hear a lot about presidential elections scheduled for 2021 in Benin, Cape Verde, Chad, Djibouti, The Gambia, Libya, Niger (re-run), Republic of Congo, São Tomé and Príncipe, Somalia, South Sudan and Zambia.

And now you're up-to-date.

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