

GOVERNANCE FOR KENYA IN THE INFORMATION AGE: *SEREKALI* OR
SIRIKALI?

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At the dawn of the twenty-first century the Baconian precept: “Knowledge is Power” has never been more obviously true. Everywhere today, it those who “know” that are also the powerful. It is not coincidental that those countries that are “most developed” are also those countries who “know” the most. Information has become the basis of development and in this ae, not to know is to be truly powerless. Ignorance, in certain ways, has become no less debilitation than malaria or kwashiokor. Nowhere is this fact so dramatically illustrated as in the less developed countries such as Kenya. In such countries it is those who “have” who also possess knowledge while it is the “have-nots” that also suffer from serious deficiencies in knowledge whether it be of formal education or simply the knowledge about the basic rules of hygiene. Invariably in situations such as ours, the government, because of its unique position as a provider of fundamental development values usually finds itself in a very powerful position vis-à-vis the citizen. This power is based on the authority that it mainly derives from its knowledge about the country and private citizens and on its capacity to gather such information.

As Kasschau, Lachman and Laughery (1982) have noted, the proliferation of Information Technology and its use has been accompanied by the increasing realisation of its potential for both good and evil. Information technology like any other technology has the basic purpose of enhancing the human capacity to do all kinds of things. It however, does not decide nor can it determine what human beings decide to do; this must remain an arena for human values about what we regard to be good and what we regard to be evil. The greatest challenge facing humanity therefore with regard to information technology is to use it to enhance the quality of human life, increase individual autonomy and opportunities for personal fulfilment as well as realise free and democratic societies. This remains true for all societies, whether developed or not. Indeed one may well argue that with their usual legacy of authoritarianism and underdevelopment, this challenge is even more important for developing countries if they are to live up to the expectations of their peoples in this modern age.

But merely wishing for these goals is not sufficient and this is where the real challenge lies. In order to realise these goals for information technology there must be competent and concerned individuals who can understand and be ready to tackle the practical problems. And in Kenya, as in many other African countries, this is the grand paradox: that while the age of information technology is here and will wait for no one, the general public is largely ignorant and unprepared for it. That while information technology has the great potential of promoting development, democracy, and good governance, it is a potential that remains almost totally unrealised. Those whom information technology can help the most have the least of it.

Kenya is just starting to emerge from a period where the state routinely attempted to supervise and direct all aspects of life of its subjects. During the era of the monopoly of political power by the Kenya African National Union (KANU), the supremacy of the elite was to a large extent secured by its ability to collect information on *wananchi*, especially information that concerned dissenting viewpoints. This preoccupation with control defined the state's *de facto* information policy: it had a right to know all it wanted to know but only tell the public what it considered to be safe for them to know. It would not be far fetched to argue that the third wave of democratisation that began in the late 1980s had a lot to do with advances in information technology that to a very large extent made it difficult, if not impossible, to have total control over information by the state. The facsimile machine, satellite television, satellite telephone, the internet, all quickly and in short order, largely made state control of the media irrelevant. All these innovations demanded a culture of greater openness in the management of public affairs.

The foregoing notwithstanding, the fact today is that the Kenyan state knows a great deal about Kenyans while most Kenyans know too little about it, what it does, what it knows about Kenyans, or to what uses it puts what it knows about Kenyans. President Kenyatta's dictum: "*Serekali ni Sirikali*" to a very large extent still informs the relationship between Kenyans and the state; the *de facto* information policy already alluded to. The dangers in this situation are fairly obvious. The state has all the power while the citizen has little or none. The elite who control the state are therefore in a position of great power relative to their subjects. The Kenyan state has often fallen back on "security" as an excuse for limiting public right to access information (Bratton and

Walle, 1997: 110). Thus, as in many other African countries, the civil service in Kenya is part and parcel of the bureaucratic-authoritarian coalition that continues to undermine democracy (Bratton and Walle, 1997: 249). Since independence the civil service has therefore been used to ensure social control and to limit political participation (Bienen, 1974).

There is no doubt that information technology has greatly enhanced the capacity of the state to collect and process information. It has also put at the disposal of the public a very powerful tool for accessing such information should such information be availed to them. Because most people are aware that the state collects and has access to a great deal of information about Kenyans and what they do, this paper will focus largely on the challenges that information technology poses to the governed and how such challenges can be met. This focus is necessitated by the fact that to a very large extent, the state machinery in Kenya still seems to be dominated by an elite that views knowledge or information as the basis of its power and is often reluctant to avail such information to the public. One only needs to make some of the most mundane enquiries to be met with a wall of silence. Some questions that are asked by members of Parliament are, properly speaking, issues of public debate but are often met with a clear reluctance to provide satisfactory answers.

In this situation it becomes difficult to determine the criteria that are used to classify certain kinds of information as “confidential” or “secret”. From impressionistic evidence, it would seem that quite a significant amount of what is declared to be

confidential or secret are not really classified as such on the basis of the critical nature of their subject matter or content. Rather, such classification is usually determined more by the feelings of self-importance by the public officials concerned, or the need to conceal scandalous behaviour of the elite! Some of such secret or confidential material that have found their way into the press clearly reveal this.

It is estimated that between 50 to 60 per cent of Kenya's population in the year 2000 is living below the poverty line. They are likely to remain poor in the foreseeable future partly because they have the least access to information and knowledge that they can use to improve their lot. At the same time they will continue to be the most powerless category of individuals by the same token. What ought to be done?

This is not a question that can easily be answered because it requires to be approached from very many different perspectives. However, since this paper is concerned with governance, it shall now turn to what needs to be done in order to help the governed to maintain some autonomy and to be the defenders of democracy and promoters of development in the information age.

In the increasing polarisation of the powerful and the powerless; those who "know" and those who "do not know"; those with information technology and those without, there is a real and serious danger of the state becoming more remote from the people that it governs. When they do not even know what it is doing they cannot keep track to how it is doing the things that it is supposed to do. In this respect, the moves

towards greater openness in some of the hitherto closed state agencies can only be commended and encouraged to continue.

The notable exception to the negative role the civil service in general has played in term of promoting transparency and accountability is the office of the Controller and Auditor General that since independence has shown a determined resolution in keeping the public informed about the financial operations of the state. Every report has come out detailing to the public how those entrusted with public offices have mis-spent tax monies. Although such disturbing revelations are invariably met with inaction in taking disciplinary action against the officials concerned, it shows how a civil service that is committed to the free flow of information can aid the cause of transparency and accountability in how the state is run. As Bratton and Walle (1997: 249) note, the civil service can best play such a role if it gets the requisite support from the press and the legislature.

It is important that the civil service as a whole begin to become more transparent and accountable. Otherwise in a situation such as ours, there is an ever-present and real danger that over-concentration of power in the hands of the elite of the state can completely alienate the vast majority who remain powerless because they have no control over information. After all, it is obvious that information and control are but two sides of the same coin (Kasschau, Lachmann and Laughery, 1982: 8), and the kinds of control that are exercised will ultimately depend on social values that guided the political process in our society. If the governed have little say in what the governors do, the information

and power that the elite has may not be used in the cause of improving the quality of life of the majority most of the time. Certainly, the room for the abuse of this power is far too tempting. People will need to control information technology in order to take charge of their lives. The human race is not sufficiently developed to be altruistic and morally and intellectually mature to be expected to always do only what is good. This applies especially to those to whom governance is entrusted. In view of this fact the governed need to keep a close watch over those who govern them.

Because information technology will greatly determine who knows what, its control is in itself a substantial source of power (Goldhaber, 1986: 39). What is required therefore is a pro-human information technology policy that would seek to equalise power across society rather than concentrating it only in the hands of a few.

Many suggestions have been made in trying to answer the question of what is to be done in order to equalise power across society. It has been said that governance needs to be improved; that poverty needs to be reduced; that education must be made accessible to all and so on. Unfortunately, at the end of these very excellent suggestions we are usually left no better off than we were at the beginning because of the contradictions resulting from our actions that daily confront us. Our attempts to reduce poverty only seem to swell further the ranks of the poor, our efforts to educate only seem to create new crises; and our attempts at better governance appear to be faced with ever-formidable obstacles.

And yet, although there are many who are powerless and ignorant, there is something that those who have the power and knowledge can do to ensure that even those who do not have these resources do not suffer unduly from their disadvantage. That while true long-term solution is to empower the poor and powerless in all possible ways, in the short-term there are things that a few people of good will, with the knowledge and the power can do on their behalf.

First, it is important to recognise the fact that computers have an IQ of zero and that it is people who operate compute systems. The first from in making computers an ally in the struggle for better governance does not depend on the information technology but lies at the frontier of human values, human manners and human morals. We do not require information technology to elect good leaders; we do not require information technology to assert our rights as human beings. Information technologies can be a boon to governance but whether they are used for good or evil depends squarely on our own political values and willingness to stand by those values.

Second, and arising for the foregoing it is necessary to ensure, either through legal or other means, the privacy of the private individual and to protect all information that is collected about the public from manipulations that may cause them fear and oppression. The only way to do this is to fight for greater transparency and accountability on the part of the governors and this can be done through political processes. There is a need to ensure that the data and information that the state collects is used only for the purposes for which they are collected (Evans, 1986: 210). This is because computers have made it

very easy for state agencies to co-ordinate, process and interchange large arrays of data, something that was extremely difficult to do manually. As Evans has noted, the issue of individual consent can no longer be divorced from the use of information, and the right of individuals to control information about themselves need to be asserted and recognised by law. The ease with which various agencies can correlate files creates obvious concerns of the possibility to the return of authoritarianism.

In this regard, it is worth noting that current legislation in Kenya is largely oblivious to such implications of the information age. This is a situation that requires to be addressed urgently. In the final analysis, however, legislation is only a part of the solution. What is required is for a culture to develop that can promote good governance, a culture of democracy. It must be accepted by the state that the right to information is an inescapable corollary to the information age (Evans, 1986: 221) and that individuals have the right to inspect personal data, establish the accuracy and safety of such data and how organisations that collect data use them. At the same time, the definitions of what are confidential or secret under various circumstances and conditions need to be made clear to the public. It is not being questioned that the state may be privy to some information or knowledge that it considers to be of a high strategic and security value, and not for public consumption. However, it is highly questionable that most of the information that the public may sometimes ask for and to which the state may deny it access to be actually deserving of such classification. This tendency towards secretiveness needs to be replaced with a attitude that recognises the fact that the public indeed has a right to know; that the taxpayers should know what is done on their behalf and in their name.

Every revolution has its victims and this information age poses a serious challenge to the poor and powerless majority of Kenya: will they be beneficiaries, victims, or both victims and beneficiaries of this age? It is important to ensure that the information age does not end up by making Kenyans victims and there are certain steps that they can take to ensure that they do not become victims of this age as far as governance is concerned. Kenyans must actively promote democracy as individuals and as members of the national community. It is their only defence against bad governance. And herein lies the challenge of whether governance is going to be by *serekali* or *sirikali*. Now, more than ever before, we need democracy not just for governance but for the control of technology (Agassi, 1985). There must be mass education for democracy. Political knowledge and information are necessary for participation that is at the core of democracy. In the final analysis, do Kenyans want democracy badly enough? Because in the memorable words of the late Claude Ake (1991: 38): “Like development, democratisation is not something that one people does for another. People must do it for themselves or it does not happen”. It is only Kenyans, through their political behaviour, who will finally decide whether governance for them in this information age is going to be *serekali* or *sirikali*.

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