

Kenya Tests New Style of Politicking

Campaigns Reflect Effects of Technology, Increased Openness

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NAIROBI -- The modern, media-savvy political campaign has arrived in sub-Saharan Africa.

With Kenya's presidential election drawing near, campaigns here are for the first time making widespread use of opinion polls, text messaging, teleprompters, spin doctors, \$15,000-a-plate fundraisers and even high-powered foreign political consultants such as Dick Morris, a former adviser to Bill Clinton, who swooped in for a few days to counsel opposition candidate Raila Odinga.

Across the capital, Nairobi, and the Kenyan countryside, plastered-up posters have given way to soaring billboards bearing carefully crafted images of the contenders. Campaign managers speak of "branding" their candidates and debate the finer points of message control. Business suits are being swapped for casual wear.

In one recent newspaper ad, President Mwai Kibaki, who is seeking reelection in Thursday's ballot, urged voters to do something unusual on a continent where politics is often dominated by distant, larger-than-life leaders: talk back, using their cellphones.

"Let's reason together," the ad read, beneath a homely photo of Kibaki in a plaid shirt, reading a book to two children. "SMS me your views -- my number is 2345."

While massive rallies remain the staple of electoral politics here, the new style of campaigning is being driven by such factors as the proliferation of cellphones and Internet connections and the flow of information from abroad. Kenyans in the United States are e-mailing in tips derived from the U.S. presidential race. A younger, more media-savvy electorate is also exerting influence, with Odinga's campaign, for instance, hiring a 20-year-old music producer from a recording company called Blue Zebra to work on its events.

But most significantly, many people here see such developments as reflecting a more open political system in Kenya, an East African nation that only recently emerged from two decades of repressive rule under President Daniel arap Moi, whom Kibaki defeated in 2002.

Odinga, the opposition front-runner, was jailed during the Moi years for advocating multiparty democracy. Now he is Kibaki's main opponent.

There is a new diversity in the news media. Moi controlled the only state-run television, whereas now there are three private broadcasters and dozens of radio stations.

And the idea of surveying opinions is no longer unthinkable. "We have expanded the space in terms of freedom of expression," said George Waititu, managing director of the Steadman Group, the largest polling firm in sub-Saharan Africa. "The electorate has a bigger voice to talk back. So I think it is an indicator of the state of democracy here."

People appear to be less thrilled with the role that big money is playing this time.

Kibaki recently held an unprecedented \$15,000-a-plate fundraiser and has regularly hired helicopters

for the campaign.

Odinga, who drives a Hummer, has been on fundraising tours in the United States and [Britain](#). In a more populist touch, he asks supporters to donate about \$1 to his war chest by calling a designated cellphone number.

The presidential contenders are likely to spend \$6 million to \$10 million each, roughly the cost of a U.S. senatorial campaign.

Still, Mohamed Sihakiah, Odinga's campaign manager, said that in sum the new campaign methods represent a positive development: an attempt to be more responsive to the electorate. "In many ways, the very process itself is furthering democracy," he said. "By the 2012 elections, Kenya may be among the very few countries on the continent that have an advanced democratic process."

Despite the changes, elections here are still likely to hew to tribal divisions, in many ways the African equivalent of pork-barrel politics. Kibaki has been credited with reviving the economy, but the opposition accuses him of failing to spread the wealth very far beyond his own community, the Kikuyu, which is expected to vote heavily to keep him in power.

Odinga, meanwhile, will probably draw support from his own ethnic group, the Luo, and other communities that have felt left out. These groups have latched on to Odinga's promise to devolve federal government functions, such as budgeting, to the local level.

But even on the issue of tribalism, many analysts say they see progress in Kenya. "There are these big ethnic blocs," said Joel D. Barkan, a senior associate with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "But what's more interesting is that despite these divides, the country has remained peaceful."

On a routinely hectic day at one of Odinga's campaign houses in a leafy middle-class neighborhood here, communications director Rose Lukalo roamed about fielding calls on two cellphones. Daily newspapers headlining the latest poll results were scattered amid empty soda bottles and coffee cups.

In the media room, the 20-year-old music producer-turned-campaign worker, Austin Otieno, monitored election coverage on four television stations while editing a short film for the campaign's mobile cinema, a truck rigged with a screen and a projector.

"I'm tired of the guy," he said, referring to the president in a casual manner that would have been impossible during the Moi years.

In what amounts to the campaign's war room, James Otieno, 39, was trying to decide what text message to send out to 100,000 cellphones -- "probably something about turning out to vote," he said. "We know that people forward each message three to 10 times, so by the end of the day, it'll be across the entire country."

Around noon, the rapid-response coordinator, Kibisu Kabtesa, arrived to prepare for a news conference and finish drafting the week's talking points.

He was among those who had met with Morris, whom he recalled as "a little boisterous, but with good insights" that did not necessarily translate easily in the Kenyan context. Rapid response, for instance, requires cash that is not always handy, Kabtesa said.

Still, the campaign picked up a few tips. "We've learned the hard way that you let them goof, then move to another agenda, so they're busy responding to us," Kabtesa said, referring to Kibaki's camp.

Campaign handlers have "carefully branded" Odinga's populist message, he said.

"For example, in the new billboard, where his left hand is raised," he said, referring to an image of Odinga looking into the distance with a vague but triumphant smile on his spotlighted face. "We had that picture for a while but did not use it because we were still in the introductory stage. Now it's time, because there's a specific message we're trying to deliver -- the future."

While acknowledging the greater openness preceding this election, Odinga's camp has complained that

the government is still controlling the news media.

Last week, for instance, Kibaki's wife, Lucy Kibaki, slapped the emcee at an official event after he misstated her name -- using instead the name of a woman who many Kenyans believe is the president's second wife -- and security officials quickly confiscated videos and photographs of the incident.

Even so, Odinga's campaign made hay of the slap in rally after rally without being censored.

And despite sporadic episodes of violence and vote-buying, people generally appear to be enjoying the novelty of an election whose outcome does not seem preordained.

Even though polls have consistently shown Odinga in the lead, Kenyans are developing a healthy skepticism of such predictions.

"We are wondering, where are those opinions being collected?" said Moses Mathula, 27, who was selling jeans in a sprawling outdoor market at the edge of the city. "Where are people getting this information? Because they are not coming to us."

Along the dirt paths winding through the crowded market, people interviewed said that regardless of who wins, the run-up to the election has been invigorating compared with past contests.

"This election has gone high-tech," said Mathula's friend Geoffrey Muhanji, 35, who pulled out his cellphone to display a rambling text message he had received from a Kibaki supporter. "It's a bit more advanced."

"There's more fire this time," said Steven Kimboi, 22, who was selling warm-up jackets. "It's more open. This time there's much more communication."

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