

Emerging technologies and new media: Impact on democratic governance, peace and security in Africa

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Tomorrow (04 August), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will hold its 1097th session on a relatively new thematic issue on “Emerging technologies and new media: Impact on democratic governance, peace and security in Africa”.

Following opening remarks of the Permanent Representative of The Gambia to the AU and Chairperson of the PSC for the month, Jainaba Jagne, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), Bankole Adeoye is expected to make a statement. The Director of the AU Commission Department of Infrastructure and Energy, representative of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and expert on emerging technologies, Thompson Chengeta, will deliver presentations. Representatives of Amani Africa and Institute for Security Studies (ISS) are also expected to make intervention.

While the PSC discussed specific issues relating to emerging technologies and new media, this is the first time that the Council has a dedicated session on emerging technologies and new media in general, with a focus on their impact on democratic governance and peace and security in Africa. This strategically important session helps the PSC to grapple with a theme whose ramifications and significance have been expanding at a pace that continues to widen the gulf between the rate of change of these technologies and media and the

response of policy makers.

The use of emerging technologies and new media including access to the internet and mobile technology continue to contribute positively to democratic governance and the promotion of peace and security in Africa, as in other parts of the world. For example, drones have improved the way healthcare is provided in Rwanda as they are being used to deliver blood in remote areas, thus enhancing access by overcoming geographic limitations. Mobile phones and social media also present opportunities to empower citizens and transform their relationship with the state. Real-time photos and videos uploaded to social media can expose government corruption or abuse and increase government responsiveness to citizen concerns. These technologies have also revolutionized people's ability to organize and coordinate protest movements as well as electoral campaigns.

A case in point is the 2016 elections in the Gambia. According to one study, 92% of people interviewed believed that social media played the most role compared to traditional media. Especially, they affirmed that social media platforms such as WhatsApp or Facebook allowed the population to receive and spread information, even when the then incumbent government closed the access to the Internet. Furthermore, social media allowed locals to get in contact with Gambians living abroad. The interviewees affirmed that WhatsApp and Facebook 'dominated the transmission of ideas' and were able to 'educate a larger number of people about the necessity of change'. In Mali, the mobile application 'MonElu' has been utilized as a medium to strengthen citizen participation in governance by facilitating dialogue with elected officials and in the process increasing accountability to citizens. In Kenya, Kenyan civil society successfully deployed crowd-sourcing technologies (Ushahidi) to map out the unfolding post-election violence in the country in 2008 election.

Council has taken note of the contribution of new media in various at its various sessions including the 589th, 791st and 1062nd sessions convened under the theme of "Elections in Africa". For example, at its 1062nd session it stressed 'the important role of ... responsible media, both print and electronic, in electoral processes and encouraged these entities to always contribute more positively towards promoting the integrity and credibility of elections and maintenance of peace and stability in Member States, especially by promoting civic education and accurate public information, as well as refraining from inflammatory reporting and miscommunication that may incite violence.'

In terms of the role of new technologies for promoting clean elections and limiting the rigging of elections, there is a need for identifying optimal conditions under which technologies contribute for enhancing the confidence of the electorate in the role of elections for advancing democratic governance in Africa. This is also important in terms of strengthening the quality of AU election monitoring through the use of relevant technologies and new media both for planning and conducting the election monitoring work of the AU.

In terms of positive contribution of emerging technologies for peace and security, the use of these technologies helps in timely exposing risks of violence and crises thereby strengthening early warning capabilities. Increasing use of these technologies by conflict actors also mean that it has increasingly become possible to establish the positions, motivations and movement of conflict actors, thereby enabling the planning of informed policy responses and mediation and peace-making efforts. The use of these technologies in peace processes has not only enabled mediators and peace support operations to have strong situational awareness, but to also engage in public diplomacy. These technologies also contribute

to enhancing the legitimacy of peace processes by enabling engagement with various stakeholders. Admittedly, the extent to which AU peace processes, whether in mediation or in peace support operations, are able to harness these positive contribution of these technologies depend on their possession of the requisite skills and capabilities for using these technologies for such ends.

In the light of the foregoing, one issue that would be of interest to the PSC is the need for examining the current state of how AU and Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms (RECs/RMs) peace processes are using and harnessing the potentials of emerging technologies and new media for their work in conflict management and resolution.

It is clear from the foregoing that emerging technologies and new media have significant actual and potential contribution for the achievement of AU's Agenda 2063 broadly and those relating to democratic governance and peace and security in particular. But the optimization of their current contributions and the harnessing of their enormous potentials depends on expanding access to these technologies and the technical know-how of and digital literacy for various areas of public life.

Emerging technologies and new media are not however without peril. Indeed, previous engagements of the PSC and recent and current experiences illustrate the adverse impacts of emerging technologies and new media in Africa.

Internet and social media platforms have been misused for spreading misinformation and inciting violence, particularly during election periods, undermining democratic processes and imposing serious risk to peace and security. In this regard, Council's 653rd and 713th sessions have been particularly critical in drawing attention to the abuse and misuse of the media space by some political actors, which has the impact of undermining the credibility of electoral processes. A

relatively newer trend Council may wish to note at tomorrow's session is also the manipulation of algorithms by social media platforms to shape perceptions of people during elections, with the core purpose of precipitating artificially engineered electoral outcomes.

Aside from the context of elections, the more general abuse of media space for spread of hate speech and incitement of violence has also been a matter of serious concern in the continent. For example, in cases where it is difficult to trace the individual(s) or group(s) engaged in disinformation or misinformation operations, the distribution of content, such as images, memes, videos, and even voice messages, leads to a high level of violence among communities. In Nigeria, images of corpses in mass graves were used to fuel animosity between the Fulani Muslims and Berom Christians, which resulted in violence and killing. The perilous use of these technologies is something that the PSC has addressed, particularly in the context of its thematic agenda on hate crimes and prevention of genocide. At its 761st session for example where Council highlighted how the misuse of social media has the potential of escalating the ideology of hate and genocide and how the abuse of media space can disrupt social cohesion and endanger national unity, it urged member States to set up mechanisms for monitoring the use of media.

The use of new technologies for surveillance and disinformation by state actors has also become a major source of concern as it dampens the positive contribution of these technologies and new media by exposing people with dissenting voices to serious peril. The 2020 titled a roadmap for digital cooperation noted, 'new technologies are too often used for surveillance, repression, censorship and online harassment' and that 'greater efforts are needed to develop further guidance on how human rights standards apply in the digital age.' The PSC may in this regard welcome the initiative of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights' under its

resolution 473 on artificial intelligence, robotics and other new and emerging technologies.

Council's 850th session addressing the theme of "Cyber Security" has highlighted the 'importance of a safe and secure cyber space for reaping the dividends of digital transformation of Africa'. On the adverse side, a number of PSC's sessions on terrorism and violent extremism have expressed concern over the growing use of technologies and media by terrorist groups. In addition to emphasising the concerning use of technologies such as UAVs by terrorist groups, as well as the manipulation of internet for purposes of radicalisation and recruitment, it is also important for Council to reflect on the use of new technologies in armed conflicts and the impact thereof. In recent years, the demand for military drones in Africa has significantly been on the rise, driven by a growing number of internal conflicts and counter-terrorism operations. Libya for instance is often even called the world's largest 'drone war theatre', with multiple countries supporting one of the warring parties militarily in the civil war through the delivery of drones. France is deploying armed drones in the Sahel region against militants in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, and both US and French air strikes in Africa are notorious for injuring and killing civilians, often without any transparency or accountability regarding civilian casualties.

According to the latest drone study reports, African countries have also increasingly acquired and used (armed) drones themselves in their fights against armed groups. At the same time, armed groups are increasingly putting effort into weaponizing small commercial drones, turning these into surveillance and combat drones, of which Boko Haram is a primary example. These developments make clear that military drones have become an essential tool for armed forces in their operations, but that their use gives rise to questions about clear legal norms, wider military-strategic considerations and

improved export controls.

The expected outcome of the session is a Communiqué. Council may recognize the enormous contribution and potential of emerging technologies and new media in addressing the socio-economic, governance and peace and security challenges and for the implementation of AU's Agenda 2063. It may call for the imperative for enhancing Africa's participation both in the development of and access to emerging technologies and use of new media for the advancement of the wellbeing of the people of the continent. It may express concerns about the threats posed by actors that use emerging technologies to disseminate malicious online contents that diminish trust for democratic governance. The Council may call for the development of regulatory framework for ensuring that technology firms strengthen their supervisory mechanisms to prevent the use of their technologies for destructive purposes. It may request for greater collaboration between member States, RECs/RMs, the AU Commission, and the Private Sector in promoting the development and responsible use of emerging technologies and new media. Having regard to upcoming elections in the continent, particularly Kenya's general elections scheduled to take place 09 August, Council may also urge all relevant stakeholder to refrain from misuse of new media and task the AU election observers to pay particular attention to the impact of new media with a view to propose ways of more effectively addressing the increasing adverse use to which new media and technologies are used in tampering electoral processes. It may also call on member States to ensure respect of human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL) standards in their use of new technologies including weapons such as battle drones and UAVs.