The problem with technology

Can elections be influenced by the subtle use of software?
By BHEKINKOSI MOYO

Zimbabwean-born Bhekinkosi Moyo is an author based in Dakar, Senegal. He writes extensively on democracy, development and politics.

The Zimbabwe elections held in July and those in Kenya during the first quarter of the year have possibly set another precedent. Both countries' elections did this a few years ago too when they led to unity governments due to their violent nature and the belligerence that characterised them. We will recall that both the opposition parties and incumbents in these countries locked horns and forced the SADC, the UN (represented by Kofi Annan) and the AU to push for consociational democracy. In these instances, the unity governments stopped the countries from further disaster, but did very little to transform the political and economic landscapes.

This time round there was little violence and open intimidation influencing the outcome. Instead, opposition parties and some observers claimed that technology was used to skew the results. That is, the number of ballot papers were manipulated by the tweaking of the software programmes supposedly adding up the votes. Have we entered a phase in Africa where brutality is no longer necessary to rig elections, but technology takes its place?

Rigging elections through the use of technology presents a new set of challenges. It is very difficult to verify, unlike violence that is out there for everyone to see – dead bodies, tortured souls, bruised egos and burnt buildings are all clear signs. Technology is another story – it's hard to notice and often too complex for most people to grasp. The implications are dire.

The use of technology to rig a result makes it difficult for observers to get a clear picture of elections, especially if there is no outward signs of tampering. Observers are quick to pronounce elections free and to some extent credible, and once elections are said to be free, it is a done deal.

The absence of any violence makes it very difficult for an electorate, especially those who have lived through a campaign of brutality before, to understand why some democratic forces would still be arguing that the elections were not fair.

For most, the fact that they were not intimidated or violated in the lead up to and during the ballot is enough to qualify elections as free and fair.

However, for democratic forces, the absence of violence alone is not enough to qualify an election free and fair as indeed observers in Zimbabwe did. Democratic groups want more than just the event to be fair, they want the same for the voting process too.

A major challenge is that most Africans would rather have stability than democracy, especially if democracy brings instability thereafter. Egypt today might actually be on the route to democracy, but it is the chaos that has brought the country to its knees.

One could argue that the bar of election observation and monitoring has been lowered through the use of technology. This might also be the beginning of new ways of cheating in an election that will be tolerated and perhaps even admired by those who thirst after power.

There will be another range of African elections shortly, specifically in Southern Africa. Close monitoring will be very necessary to safeguard the democratic process. **AD**