Responsible citizens can become the sentinels of democracy

Ahead of the publication of the 2018 State of Civil Society Report on the theme of 'Reimagining Democracy', we are interviewing civil society activists and leaders about their work to promote democratic practices and principles, the challenges they encounter and the victories they score in doing so. CIVICUS speaks to Cheikh Fall, President of Africtivists, the League of African Bloggers and Cyber Activists for Democracy - a group of more than 200 young journalists, bloggers and activists from more than 40 African countries and the diaspora (including Haiti), who seek to strengthen democracy, good governance and human rights via information and communication technologies.

1. It seems that the work of Africtivists is strongly focused on electoral processes. Why is that?

In all of Africa, and not only in West Africa, crises occur very often during pre or post-election periods. Just to provide some examples from the past decade, more than 1,000 people were killed and 600,000 were displaced in 2007 during the post-election crisis in the Central African Republic; there were 3,248 deaths during the post-election crisis in Côte d'Ivoire in 2010; more than 800 people were killed in northern Nigeria after the April 2011 presidential election; 24 people were killed after the proclamation of the results of the 2011 presidential election in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; and between 800 and 1,500 ended up dead, and 180,000 to 600,000 people were displaced, during Kenya's post-election crisis in 2007.

In some countries, the electoral process is often laced with violence and serious dysfunctions of electoral institutions, which constitute real threats to peace. This is because the bad practices that affect the credibility of the results inevitably cause disputes that result in post-electoral conflicts with unforeseeable consequences. Reports from various national and international observer missions attest time and again to the same technical, institutional and socio-educational weaknesses, but their recommendations remain unfulfilled.

The two main causes underlying these impediments to democracy are the lack of a real political will to hold democratic and credible elections, and the poor civic and electoral education of the people. We know that the lack of access to good information largely contributes to fuelling tensions.

So first of all, Africa must experience free and transparent political transitions. The stability of African states is a prerequisite for any process of democratisation and development.

2. Do you think the situation has somewhat changed with the advent of new information and communications technologies?

I think there has been a fairly significant progress. Since the arrival of the internet on the continent, citizens are equipped with a new weapon for communicating, speaking up and questioning policies. Follow-up, criticisms, remarks and comments regarding the actions of public authorities can be done in a simpler way and have become more accessible to the population.

In the 2000s the first public information sites appeared on the internet, with platforms containing discussion forums, personal profiles and secure messaging services. These tools considerably improved African citizens' involvement in the political life of their countries.

A few years later, blogs, social media and videoblog platforms have again changed the way citizens experience citizenship. Thus, in 2010, Côte d'Ivoire relied on the mobilisation of its well-connected youth to help rebuild peace. In the same year, an unprecedented revolution occurred in North Africa in which new media and the internet played a key role. A year later, Senegal experienced its first 'Soft Revolution': a peaceful, gentle and citizen-led revolution based exclusively on social media, aimed at ensuring and guaranteeing a free and transparent electoral process until the celebration of a truly democratic presidential election.

In short, with the advent of digital and social media, we have seen and are still experiencing new citizen dynamics in our respective countries. And these dynamics are, in a way, the result of an expression or a need for citizenship. This is a boon for African democracies because when people express themselves on social media and exercise responsible citizenship by giving their opinion and providing arguments on subjects of public interest, public debate moves towards spaces of connection and interaction.

Today, digital media have become tools for citizen engagement, for raising awareness and developing consciousness, involvement, questioning, monitoring, following up and demanding accountability. They have made it possible to consolidate democratic gains and have put certain democracies to a test, which can only be a good thing for our democracies.

But Africa needs to be equipped, accompanied, prepared to be involved and to participate in this digital revolution. We have a chance - a chance that we did not get with the industrial revolution. This is chance to get to the same level as other continents, to the same level as anyone else regarding the digital revolution. We just need boldness and courage to take part in this revolution and apply it for the good of the continent.

There are quite a few initiatives in Africa and by Africans that make it possible to speak about African participation in the digital revolution - but this is far from enough.

3. What role has Africtivists played in this context?

It should be noted that Africtivists did not come out of nowhere; there are precedents to the work that we do. In the 2000s, several social movements were created in Africa in response to human rights violations and to promote increased civic participation and civic engagement. In fact, many citizen actions have been initiated, funded and carried out by citizens across the continent. In 2007, during a post-election crisis, young Kenyans created a web application called Ushahidi, which allowed people living near conflict areas to report and visualise 'dangerous spots'. The application has since been used all over the world.

In 2010, young Ivorians launched #CIV2010 and #CIVSOCIAL. These hashtags identified two citizen initiatives designed to meet the challenges of the electoral period and cope with the post-election crisis.

In 2012, Senegalese bloggers covered the entire electoral process with a new digital tracking and observation system, #SUNU2012. Their work prevented fraud, and thus to some extent helped avoid a potential post-election crisis. This e-observation process was a breakthrough for citizen participation in Africa. The only tool available to these young people was their mobile phones, and their plan was to take pictures of the score sheets at each voting centre while an app calculated the results and then disseminated them to the public, even before journalists did. Also in 2012, young Ghanaians launched #GhanaDecides, a response to citizen participation in electoral processes.

From 2012 to 2015, Africa witnessed several other citizen initiatives: #Vote229 in Benin, #GuinéeVote in Guinea, the Mackymeter in Senegal, the Buharimeter in Nigeria, the Presimeter in Burkina Faso and the Talonmeter in Benin.

In short, it was the spontaneous solidarity of young African citizens who were online and engaged in socio-democratic change that triggered the establishment of a pan-African network. The creation of Africtivists has shown the importance of connecting physically after maintaining strong online links.

Our network's first successful action, even before its official launch, was the #FreeMakaila campaign, which saved Chadian journalist Makaila Nguebla from being extradited from Senegal to Chad. Makaila was eventually expelled to Guinea, where the community mobilised to welcome him before he was offered asylum by France. Later, even though he had been previously expelled from Senegal, Makaila was allowed to attend the first Africtivists summit, which took place in Dakar in 2015.

From 2015 to date, along with all the members of our organisation, we have carried out several campaigns with great energy, and we have supported several citizen initiatives in Africa as well as outside the continent, in solidarity. Since 2015, we have shared our vision of participatory democracy, transparent policymaking, good governance and accountability. We share common values. That is the strength of our network.

4. Can you provide some examples of the work done by Africtivists so far?

One example is that of the Gambia, where Africtivists worked jointly with Gambian civil society organisations, journalists and activists for more than a year before the presidential election of 2016, on all things related to information, campaigning and data collection. We then trained several Gambian activists and journalists on the fight against digital censorship and surveillance, and provided them with cybersecurity tools. This gave them a head start on what would have prevented them from working, and thus helped them to be in a position to inform the world.

What is the takeaway? That all the abuses and human rights violations perpetrated by President Yaya Jammeh during the presidential election - for example, telecommunications were shut down and there was some level of censorship of the mainstream media - did not stop news from the Gambia coming out via the internet. You surely noticed, on the day of the presidential election and despite the censorship, that all the information regarding the elections, including about the voting process and results, was systematically published on the internet. When radio stations were shut down, we made a pirate online radio available to some Gambian journalists to help them continue to inform the world.

We then launched online initiatives for targeted campaigns and organised against some regimes when they tried to imprison, intimidate or censor their people. We saw what happened in Cameroon when the internet was shut down, what happened in Chad during the last presidential election, and what happens in Togo, a West African country, where demonstrations are usually suppressed and the internet and social media are often cut off.

Since 2015, we have also provided help to a lot of civil society actors who had problems at home, so they could get out. Four of them were activists, journalists and bloggers who were forced to flee their countries because they suffered repression, violence and threats to their integrity and safety. That's why in 2017 we started a cybersecurity training and capacity-building programme for journalists, media workers and civil society actors.

5. What are your recommendations for other civil society organisations seeking to promote participatory democracy?

We don't claim to be vigilantes keeping heads of state in check. We think of ourselves simply as watchdogs and sentinels of democracy, and as such we begin with ourselves. We do it as citizens, by respecting what our laws mandate, by trying to serve as role models and by pushing others to do as we do. Once we play our roles as responsible citizens, we can be in a position to call our rulers to account and to remind them of their responsibilities regarding the political commitments they have made for the good of society.

We do not claim to be political adversaries or opponents, but a citizen force that needs to act responsibly, stay able to pose a challenge and make proposals to push our states and our democracies forward.

Get in touch with Africtivistes through their website or their Facebook profile, or follow @AFRICTIVISTES and @cypher007 on Twitter.