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CELLPHONES FAIRER ELECTIONS CNN

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Cell phones promise fairer elections in Africa

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Election processes are being checked with the help of cell phones
- Cell phones are more accessible to Africans than the internet and telephones
- Technology could help push more countries towards democratic models
- Experts agree more than technology will still be required to see change

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By Mike Steere
For CNN

TEXT SIZE

LONDON, England (CNN) -- The humble mobile phone is driving a new revolution which some experts hope could bring fairer elections and democracy to some African states.

During the 2006 local government elections in Senegal, Radio Sud used reporters and correspondents with cell phones to call in what they saw.

Many African countries have struggled against rigged elections and authoritarian rule since gaining independence last century.

However, African observers say the growth of simple communication technologies like cell phones are assisting many states to progress towards open and fair elections in increasingly democratic systems.

Senegal is one of a number of African countries to hold successful elections by keeping voting and counting in check through independent communication.

Former United Nations Secretary-General **Kofi Annan** said many African nations now had a "very open society" and the increasing success of elections owed a lot to the existence of mobile phones.

"With communication and cell phones, this is where it is difficult to cheat in elections now. You are announced at the district level and cell phones go wild so by the time you go to the capital, if you have changed the figures, they will know and you will be caught out."

According to experts, cellphones are particularly important for Africa due to a lack of some other technologies.

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Visiting African political expert at Indiana University, Sheldon Gellar, said cellphones were much more accessible than the internet in most parts of Africa, and therefore had greater potential to influence transparency.

"Internet provides groups in society with means to communicate, organize and obtain good information which is not controlled by government -- but, only a tiny percentage of African populations have access to internet."

Just this month **CNN reported dramatic increases in cell phone usage** in African nations.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, there are just 10,000 fixed telephones but cellphone subscribers have soared to more than a million in the last five years.

Gellar told CNN the key benefit of cell phones was that they allowed independent media, especially radio, to provide accurate coverage of elections and make it more difficult for ruling parties to cheat and get away with it.

"During the 2006 local government elections in Senegal, Radio Sud used reporters and correspondents with cell phones to call in what they saw. I remember hearing one reporter describing how a local party boss was illegally taking a ballot box on his truck from the polling station. This was reported live as it was happening."

Civilians and independent election observers outside the media have also taken advantage of cell phones to monitor elections.

Bob LaGamma, executive director of Council for a Community of Democracies, said the 2007 Nigerian election was another example of technology being used effectively.

LaGamma described a technique of "parallel reporting", whereby independent observers spread news of local vote counts and any irregularities. This technique was also used in the Zimbabwe elections this year, which he said caused Robert Mugabe to delay announcement of election results.

"Parallel reporting was important in Zimbabwe. It kept them from coming straight out and reporting a false result.

"All of this technology is very important and gives a powerful new tool that cuts the ability for cheating."

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