A half century of the Daily Nation

By Karim H Karim

Introduction

When the *Daily Nation* was established in 1960, the newspaper business in Kenya was dominated by the colonial press, which did not represent the interests and aspirations of the local people. By staying true to its mission of helping the newly independent country discover its civic voice, the *Nation* emerged as the country’s most popular daily.

Article text

One of the earliest components of what eventually came to be known as the Aga Khan Development Network resulted from His Highness the Aga Khan’s purchase in 1959 of a Kenyan Kiswahili daily called *Taifa Leo*. This was followed in the next year by the founding of the English language *Daily Nation*.

Speaking in 2005 at the opening of the International Press Institute World Congress that was held in Kenya, the Aga Khan noted that, “At that time, many African nations had freshly emerged from colonial rule, and I believed that good journalism could play a critical role in their development.” He had strong support from young African politicians in the pursuit of this objective.

The newspaper business in Kenya at that time was dominated by the colonial press, which did not represent the interests and aspirations of the local people. There were some very definite innovations that the *Nation* introduced into Kenya’s mainstream English language press. While not neglecting international news, it brought national reporting to the fore. Its stories were presented in accessible writing and its format allowed for easy navigation through the contents. Unlike the broadsheet size of its main competitor, the *East African Standard*, the *Nation* adopted a smaller size which made it easier to handle.

True to its mission of helping the newly independent country discover its civic voice, it also employed many African journalists. The paper was soon to be edited and managed by African staff. Readers noticed the difference in style and content, and the *Nation* emerged as the most popular daily in Kenya. However, reaching out to a mass readership did not mean that journalistic standards were compromised.

The Aga Khan has expressed strong views on journalism, which are underpinned by an ethical framework. Whereas he is convinced that journalism is a force for development and that it has an important role in ensuring issues affecting public interests are discussed openly, he said that:

“...journalists must move beyond a primarily adversarial relationship with those they write about. To be sure, the role of the independent critic can be a vital role – but it is not the only role. If the dominating assumption of media is that the rest of society is up to no good, that the best journalism is what many call ‘gotcha’ journalism, then the media will forfeit a more constructive and nobler role.”

The Aga Khan has been supportive of the freedom of the press, but has cautioned that it not be used to shield the media from a sense of social accountability. He has pointed out that the journalists who
are underpaid and the media owners whose institutions are financially unstable can become vulnerable to corruption.

“Our experience with the Nation newspapers in Kenya has demonstrated that journalistic improvement goes hand in hand with financial health,” noted the Aga Khan at the *Commonwealth Press Union Conference held in South Africa in 1996*. He draws a clear distinction between the financial health of newspapers and profit-driven media which often are sensationalistic. The reduction of news to entertainment and exploitation of ethnic and religious differences in society can have very negative consequences.

The Nation has made systematic investments in the training of its staff and upgrading of its facilities to ensure that it delivers good content in the most effective manner. It also has sought to upgrade the skills of its management and has instituted an in-house educational programme for journalists. The Aga Khan University will be establishing a Graduate School of Media and Communications in East Africa to enhance such training.

One of the key features of the Nation has been its determination to remain at the forefront of media technology in order to deliver a good product. The Aga Khan noted that “The Nation was in the 1960s among the very first newspapers outside North America to embrace computerised typesetting.” By the mid-1990s, it was a leader in moving into multimedia technologies and making available its publications globally through the Internet.

The newspaper has expanded into the Nation Media Group (NMG), the largest media company in the East African region. NMG has a suite of dailies and weeklies and runs radio and television stations in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. The Nation Digital Division is responsible for the Group’s Internet and mobile telecommunications activities. NMG’s shares are publicly traded on the Nairobi stock exchange and are owned by thousands of local shareholders.

The Nation Media Group is also part of the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development (AKFED), a unique development agency that operates on a commercial, for-profit basis, but which reinvests any profits it generates into further development work. AKFED is dedicated to promoting private initiatives and building economically sound enterprises in the developing world — and the Nation is a part of that story.

At its fiftieth birthday, the Nation is the flagship of a very successful enterprise to enable Africans to have a say in their own societies’ development.

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