

Making elections count



Bhavna Sharma

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Elections are big news. They capture the popular imagination and international attention. Recent elections in South Africa and India have been hailed as ‘successes’ and continue to be the proud hallmarks of those countries’ democratic status, with impressive voter turnout (particularly among the poor), good organisation and efficient processes. In both countries, the public have spoken forcefully, and the unequivocal results, giving both Jacob Zuma and Manmohan Singh strong mandates to govern.

In many other countries, however, elections have been triggers of violence and conflict, often revealing weaknesses within the political system and laying them bare for the world to see. Repressive regimes such as those in Zimbabwe and Iran have tried to use elections (and rig the results) to maintain their hold on power and legitimate claim to govern. Violence around the elections in Kenya revealed economic inequalities and ethnic tension in Kenyan society. Thus, elections are often a barometer for the state of democratic and political systems in country, and as such are inherently part of the political process.

In addition, elections act as ignition points for conflict because the stakes are so high. In many countries, elections are a focal point of ‘winner-takes-all’ politics, providing the winner with what amounts to monopoly access to state resources and power, as well as international legitimacy. As elections in Kenya, Zimbabwe and now Iran have proved, the greater the risk of losing the election, the greater the possibility of violence and intimidation by the incumbent government.

While recent events have shown that electoral processes can be volatile and violent, there is much that the international community and national actors can do to improve the standard of the electoral process, producing results that are less contested and more legitimate.

To date, most support to elections from international agencies has been self-contained and not linked to support for broader governance improvements. While elections have become a necessary step – a tick box – in governance and democracy programmes, they are conceived and funded as one-off events, often isolated from other key political and governance proc-

esses. Support is, therefore, concentrated on the months or weeks in the run up to an election, and on providing technical resources and election observers. The consequence of this approach is that when elections ‘go bad’, with contested results and/or violence, the international community is often caught off guard and has to react in an ad-hoc manner. A concerted effort is needed to increase the institutional capacity and financial resources available to administer the entire electoral political and administrative process, not just the event itself. This requires not only a technical approach, but also, and more importantly, political solutions, support and capacity, as outlined in this Opinion.

Too often, the observers and technical assistance provided by international organisations have been the foundations for donors’ electoral support, where ‘international’ is taken as a proxy for ‘independent’, while national state and non-state actors are overlooked. Furthermore, the role of regional bodies such as the Africa Peer Review Mechanism and the African Union has been largely ignored. Increased engagement of national and regional actors in electoral processes and observation could contribute to results and recommendations that are more legitimate and owned nationally.

When it comes to donors’ electoral assistance, there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ model that will work everywhere. A thorough political economy analysis of the specific context will allow effective adaptation of electoral assistance to suit the needs of the country. It is essential that international donors and agencies have an accurate mapping of the key actors, their capacity constraints and the nature of their relationships and, crucially, of the political incentives around elections. This analysis can provide a number of entry points and priorities for electoral assistance. Ultimately, however, elections are a fundamental part of the domestic political process. Donors need to recognise that their role is limited, as is their influence on the process or results. One key area where donor support is essential is in building the capacity of actors who are kept weak as a deliberate measure by those in power, and whose participation is essential for a free and fair election.

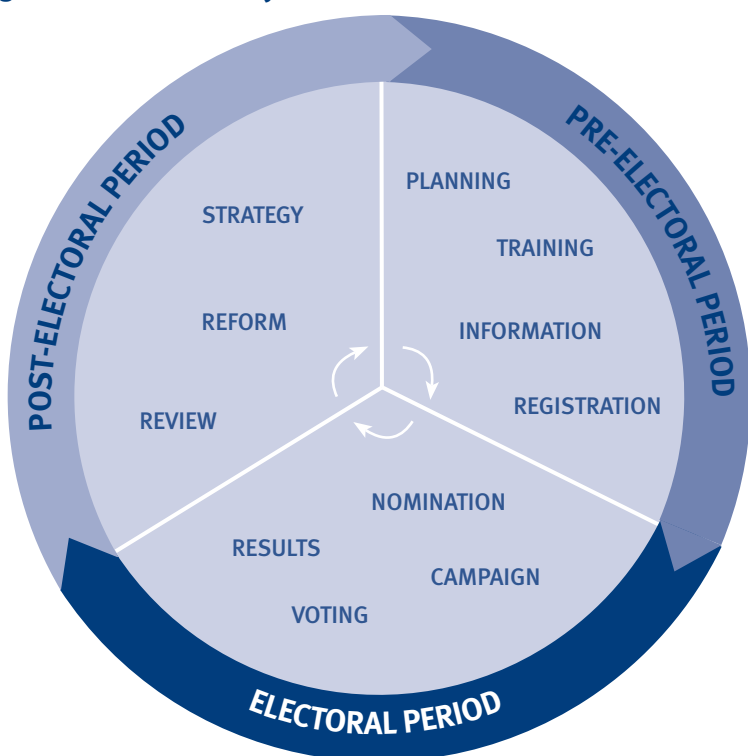
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Figure 1: The electoral cycle



Source: Adapted from International IDEA.

Increasingly, donors recognise the limitations of their existing approaches to elections and are adopting new strategies. One approach that is gaining popularity and credibility among international donors and agencies is the ‘electoral cycle’ approach, which emphasises longer term and consistent support to the electoral process. The European Commission and the United Nations Development Programme have endorsed this approach, aiming to align electoral assistance with all stages of the electoral process (Figure 1, above).

This approach also aims to direct aid as necessary to a broad range of actors, whose effective participation in elections is essential. Not only does this include relevant state institutions, but also non-state actors such as political parties, the media and national election observers. In any country, the electoral commission is a key state organisation that requires close attention. Its capacity is often weak and its independence can be compromised as

a deliberate tactic by governments that are vulnerable to electoral defeat.

Donors need to look beyond technical solutions to grapple with the political dimensions of elections, particularly their own political role and their reactions to elections. It is often the case that the international community’s own political and diplomatic (and sometimes security) priorities have taken precedence over upholding the values of democracy. One example is the reluctance to accept the outcome of the Palestinian election, even though it was deemed to have been of a fairly high standard by independent electoral officials and experts. It is also important to recognise that ‘democracy promotion’, which often has elections as a key pillar, has developed a bad reputation as a result of the use of the term by the previous US administration to justify its military and security policies. There is much that the international community could do to strengthen its own legitimacy and role in electoral support by addressing some of these credibility issues, and acknowledging that there are real dilemmas with which they are grappling. While the ideal would be consistent and transparent reactions to election results, a move towards recognising that ‘not all good things go together’, and resisting the desire for a particular outcome, would be a significant improvement on the current state of affairs.

There is an emerging roadmap for international electoral assistance. Donors and other international agencies should provide consistent and long term support that builds the capacity of, and engages with, a broad range of actors in crucial stages of the electoral cycle. Avoiding a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model and supporting context specific solutions will improve the effectiveness of donors’ electoral support, while transparent reactions to elections will strengthen donor credibility. At the same time, however, donors should be realistic about what can be achieved in the short term and the limitations of their role in what is, essentially, an internal political process. There is a fine line between defeatism (elections are meaningless) and naivety (elections always equal democracy), and the international community needs to walk this line with care.

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