

# id21 insights

research findings for development policymakers and practitioners

## Elections and the democracy challenge

Many observers argue that the blandness and predictability of established democracies is a sign of national maturity. Indeed, American author and social critic, Gore Vidal, once commented: 'A democracy is a place where numerous elections are held at great cost without issues and with interchangeable candidates'.

In much of the Western world, gone are the great ideological battles of the past. Instead, today's political candidates debate the details of important, though hardly exciting, issues such as health care, trade and tariffs, and social security. It is little wonder, therefore, that voter turnout rates have been dropping in the USA and western Europe for many years. While international experts lament this creeping political-electoral apathy, in developing countries, where elections have been burdened with excessive significance, residents would probably prefer that their balloting was a bit more mundane.

The contributors to this issue of *id21 insights* show that since the early days of promoting global democracy over 20 years ago, the conduct of national and local elections has proved valuable. They also demonstrate, however, that while elections may be a significant precondition for modern democratic societies, they are only one element of democracy.

In **Gerard Stoudmann's** article, elections – especially in post-conflict countries – have often become synonymous with democracy, partly because of the simplistic reasoning of international donors. Thus, if polls go badly (as in Kenya), the world is quick to proclaim the death of democracy, whereas if they go well (as in the Democratic Republic of Congo), the event is touted as a glorious triumph for democracy. The truth lies somewhere between these two extremes.

Elections are highly technical and political, and the two elements are interdependent. A technically proficient election conducted in a negative political climate will be useless. Likewise, an

environment of political goodwill will not salvage a technically chaotic election.

The international assistance community generally has far more control over the technical than the political aspects of elections, although there are examples of elections where the outside world controls political aspects as well (in Iraq, for instance).

### Technical issues

Technical assistance alone is insufficient in the preparation and conduct of elections. Nevertheless, good technical assistance is critical and must take into account the entire electoral cycle and not simply the electoral event itself. To begin with, any electoral system has its foundation in the national constitution and related legislation. If this is poorly conceived, as it is in many countries, what follows may be doomed. Even the most rational and well-structured constitutions and electoral laws require a profound understanding of the political landscape of the country in question. For example, in 2005, the adoption by Iraq of a 'winner takes all' electoral system may have worsened existing sectarian and ethnic tensions.

The composition and independence of the electoral management body (EMB) comes next in terms of importance. Too often electoral commissioners serve at the pleasure of the head of state and tend to be political allies. Ideally, an EMB will be led and staffed by individuals of a variety of political, ethnic, and regional affiliations. In Liberia, one of the African electoral success stories mentioned by **Denis Kadima**, the inclusion of women,



Riot police clear the road leading from the Kibera slum into Nairobi city centre, Kenya. Supporters of the opposition Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), led protests against suspected vote rigging after disputed election results in December 2007, leading to unrest and violence ©Sven Torfinn, Panos Pictures, 2007

civil society representatives and members of faith-based groups, gave the EMB much-needed independence. Funding for the elections should be approved by parliament on at least an annual basis and be deposited into an account under the control of the EMB. Unfortunately, one still encounters EMBs which are nearly wholly dependent on the president's office for all but the most modest financial requirements. **Edward Joseph** makes a compelling case for an internationally accepted system of electoral certification of EMBs, which could improve electoral administration.

An accurate voter registry is also an essential ingredient in free and fair elections. As electoral experts are fond of saying, 'only amateurs steal elections on election day'. In other words, controlling

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▶ who is registered to vote can influence the outcome of the polls. Enfranchisement and, conversely, disenfranchisement are powerful weapons, something that rulers such as Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe understand supremely well.

There are many other prerequisites for representative elections, including:

- fair party and candidate registration
- effective voter education
- well trained poll workers
- order and security
- comprehensive monitoring and observation
- accurate results tabulation and transmission
- a well managed system for the resolution of disputes
- properly enforced campaign finance laws.

This last topic is discussed by **Marcin Walecki**, who writes about corruption related to political finance and regulations introduced by some countries to improve transparency in campaign donations.

One final technical development which warrants attention is the advancement of electoral technology in both developed and developing nations. This trend is unstoppable, as **Vladimir Pran** shows.

#### Political issues

There are also significant non-technical obstacles to the conduct of good elections, mostly political. For example, both Kenya and Nigeria had fairly competent and well-qualified EMBs, at least nominally in charge of their flawed elections. As many observers have noted, this depth of professional expertise did not prevent mischievous interference by political parties and the executive.

Both countries, however, are key partners of the USA: Kenya as a strategic ally in volatile East Africa and Nigeria because of its enormous petroleum resources. Not surprisingly, neither nation's mishandled election was subjected to the same level of fierce criticism as that of Zimbabwe, for instance, a country with limited mineral resources and of little strategic value to the USA and its allies. This tension between political and economic concerns and democracy promotion is a source of frustration for many proponents of democratisation.

Another political challenge is the presence of conflict and insecurity in many electoral environments (Afghanistan, Congo, Iraq, East Timor and so on). Although sometimes overlooked by policymakers, as **Carlos Valenzuela** tells us, elections can provide opportunities for conflict resolution, or at least mitigation, when they force an open discussion of divisive issues among all stakeholders.

Although there are nations that are largely indifferent to democratic influences (such as Kazakhstan) and that will conduct elections as they see fit, most countries recognise the value of elections and make at least a token effort to hold them, if for no other reason than to avert external criticism.

Cuba and North Korea, for example, both conduct regular, though fraudulent, elections. And although the Republic of Guinea holds elections, few Guineans would call them free and fair. Fortunately there are other important democratic forces at work in places like Guinea, such as trade unions, civil society organisations and professional guilds, a point well illustrated in **Elizabeth Côté's** article.

Elections do have value but, as the articles show, lessons from past conduct need to be learned, including:

- Elections are not isolated events, but part of a cycle that includes a range of undertakings from constitutional reform to disputes resolution.
- Elections assistance programmes must take into account local and regional particularities in case they deepen divisions, particularly in conflict-prone countries.
- The electoral reform community should subscribe to a set of qualitative norms

to be applied equitably to all elections, which would include standards for ensuring EMB independence.

- Serious election work is long-term by nature and requires significant and reliable financial and political support.
- Electoral reform is a fragile and delicate process, which can easily be set back without adequate care.
- Electoral work is just one component of democracy building and should be well coordinated with other related elements, such as support to civil society and mass media.
- As far as possible, electoral reform should not be linked to external political agendas.

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## Elections and conflict resolution in transitional environments

*In September 2007, few outside the country noticed the successful completion of national elections in Sierra Leone. Yet they were landmark polls, accepted as credible and transparent and a major step in the consolidation of peace and stability.*

Elections held in conflict or post-conflict environments are a critical milestone in the transition from war. They not only determine the composition of the governmental authority, they also establish democratic governance and help resolve power struggles at the root of the conflict.

Transitional elections can be hazardous and sometimes even counter-productive. Where the peace process is still fragile and electoral institutions and practices are not yet part of the political culture, social tensions can resurface during elections and explode into violence.

For this reason, critics often argue that elections can be divisive and should not be included as part of a post-conflict transition. However, whether elections contribute to successful transitions depends on various factors.

#### Integrating elections into a comprehensive peace process

- For successful transitions, such as those in Mozambique and El Salvador in 1994, elections should be integrated within a comprehensive package that deals with the different elements of the conflict.
- Elections, as isolated events, should not be considered miracle solutions for conflict resolution.
- To be effective, elections must respond to 'rules of the game' that are negotiated between the parties. In East Timor, for example, the laws and regulations that formed the basis for transitional elections in 2001 and 2002 resulted from extensive negotiations between different groups, even though the elections were organised by the United Nations.

- Negotiation helps in the acceptance of the results, which is particularly important in post-conflict environments.

The electoral process should also be complemented by other developments, both before and after the polling. Elections attract great attention, but if the other elements within the peace agreement are not effectively handled, the election will not have a positive impact. For example, the 1996 polls in Sierra Leone were held without proper disarmament and a year later the elected government was overthrown and the war reignited.

#### Negotiating electoral modalities

Often, the specific electoral modalities (systems, rules, standards, and procedures) chosen will decide whether or not elections help resolve power conflict(s). Among other things, elections will need to be inclusive – which is one of the reasons why proportional representation is often the preferred choice for a post-settlement electoral system – and well understood by all. Also, the eligibility criteria for voters and candidates and the nature of electoral authorities are critical.

#### Timing

Various political, technical and security factors influence the timing of an electoral process. Furthermore, in transitional situations, the process usually starts from nothing. Such elections need to be carefully prepared or the country may risk falling into post-election violence.

Elections have been effective in conflict resolution and prevention. However, great care must be given to integrating the electoral process into a wider, comprehensive peace process for elections to be helpful in post-conflict transition.

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'Ensuring a credible election', Point of View interview with Carlos Valenzuela, Public Broadcasting Station, 2006

[www.pbs.org/pov/pov2006/mycountry/special\\_valenzuela.html](http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2006/mycountry/special_valenzuela.html)

# Successful elections in Africa

**Africans have fought hard to ensure that democratic elections are the required and preferred way for government representatives to access, maintain and give up political power. As a result, competitive elections in Africa are no longer the exception; they have gradually become the rule.**

Since the early years of democratisation in the 1990s, the focus has shifted from the quantity of multiparty elections to the quality, with an emphasis on their credibility and legitimacy. In successful elections, the outcome is accepted by the majority of key contestants and voters. Disputes, if any, are peacefully resolved through recognised mechanisms of dispute resolution. Such elections are becoming increasingly evident in Africa:

- Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, South Africa, Ghana and Tanzania have all held at least three successive successful national elections.
- Incumbent leaders have been replaced, either through the defeat of the ruling party, or through a change of leaders from within the ruling party.
- The requirement limiting presidents to a maximum two terms of office is widespread: attempts by leaders to stay in power beyond their two terms have been successfully fought in Malawi, Zambia and Nigeria.
- Successful transitional elections have taken place in countries like

the Democratic Republic of Congo, marking its emergence from 41 years of undemocratic rule (although this achievement was marred by post-election violence).

- After a 14-year conflict, Liberia held free and fair elections and gave the continent its first female president; post-conflict Sierra Leone and Burundi have also had successful elections.

Even in Zimbabwe, the March 2008 elections were qualitatively better than those held previously, although they were only partially free and enjoyed limited transparency and fairness. Attempts by President Mugabe's regime to manipulate the outcome were exposed by national and regional election observers.

A number of factors explain the gradual success of elections in Africa:

- African countries have learnt from failed experiments with democracy and have designed innovative electoral systems, including arrangements to include ethnic minorities, contain extremist ethno-regional political parties, and encourage election alliances and party coalitions.
- The continent has developed its own codified standards for free and fair elections (see box below).
- African countries have also made public commitments towards democracy; for instance, 29 countries have agreed to submit to a periodic evaluation through the African Peer Review Mechanism, a system introduced by the African Union to help countries improve their governance.
- Regional institutions are more willing to play a role in ensuring the success of national elections. This is illustrated by the increased involvement of the Southern African Development Community in Zimbabwe.

Despite these improvements, the recent experiences of Kenya and Zimbabwe show that no election should be taken for granted. These countries also highlight a possible worrying trend in African elections: if a ruling regime loses an election through fraud or manipulation, might it encourage violence as a way of forcing an internationally-mediated power-sharing arrangement?



**A poster from the National Electoral Commission encouraging Sierra Leonean women to vote in presidential and parliamentary elections on 11 August 2007**  
©NEC Sierra Leone, 2007

In addition, democratisation and regime change have not generally led to improved political performance or human development. Critics therefore argue that maintaining a commitment to elections may become a challenge. However, successful elections are crucial for political legitimacy and a prerequisite for political stability and socio-economic development.

The increasing number of successful elections should therefore be celebrated, and lessons drawn from less successful electoral processes, which, fortunately no longer constitute the majority of Africa's elections.

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**See also**  
Africa Peer Review Mechanism  
[www.eisa.org.za/aprm/home.htm](http://www.eisa.org.za/aprm/home.htm)

*Democracy and Elections in Africa*, Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, by Staffan I Lindberg, 2006

'Democracy and Elections in Africa: Critical Analysis' *International Journal of Human Sciences*, 5 (2), by Wondwosen Teshome-Bahiru, 2008

## Glossary of terms

### Executive

The chief officer of a government or state; also the branch of government responsible for putting into effect and administering the country's laws

### Poll

The casting and registering of votes in an election

### Proportional Representation (PR)

An electoral system in which there is a principled effort to allocate seats, in proportion to the number of votes cast, usually on a party-political basis or on the basis of a 'segment' (such as an identity group) within a society. PR is often contrasted with majority-rule electoral systems, such as First-past-the-post, in which the principle of 'winner takes all' is the operative principle

### Transitional elections

Electoral processes held during times of expected constitutional or regime change that are often held under special rules, such as those defined in an interim constitution or under the terms of a peace agreement

### Universal suffrage

The right to vote by all adult citizens of a political unit without regard to restrictions on the basis of identity

## Creating election standards in Africa

African regional bodies and organisations have developed codified standards for free and fair elections. Most of these principles and standards provide a sound basis for the professional and independent assessment of elections on the continent. Examples include:

Norms and Standards for Elections in the SADC Region, Southern African Development Community (SADC) Parliamentary Forum, 2001 (PDF)

[http://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/africa/regional-resources-africa/sadcpf\\_electionnormsstandards.pdf](http://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/africa/regional-resources-africa/sadcpf_electionnormsstandards.pdf)

Organisation of African Unity/African Union Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa, 2002 (PDF)

[www.pogar.org/publications/other/elections/declaration-africa-02.pdf](http://www.pogar.org/publications/other/elections/declaration-africa-02.pdf)

Principles for Election Management, Monitoring and Observation in the SADC Region, Electoral Institute of Southern Africa and the Electoral Commissions Forum, 2003 (PDF)

<http://www.eisa.org.za/EISA/publications/pemmo.htm>

SADC Principles and Guidelines for Democratic on Elections, 2004 (PDF)

[www.iss.co.za/af/regorg/unity\\_to\\_union/pdfs/sadc/elecprinciples.pdf](http://www.iss.co.za/af/regorg/unity_to_union/pdfs/sadc/elecprinciples.pdf)



# Re-evaluating electoral assistance

**Elections usually receive a high level of international political attention and abundant funding when they are linked to crisis resolution. Examples range from the Balkans in the mid-1990s, to a host of African countries, including Liberia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Côte d'Ivoire. However, focusing on elections, without considering accompanying institutional developments, can aggravate rather than mitigate existing conflict dynamics.**

An increasing number of countries are caught between conflict and electoral cycles. They each have different histories, social structures and political contexts, which require electoral assistance to adapt to new challenges. Assistance includes helping to revise electoral laws and creating credible electoral commissions. However, most international electoral assistance missions focus on the event itself, and leave immediately afterwards.

The recent examples of Nigeria, Kenya and currently Zimbabwe, show that preventing crises triggered by potentially flawed elections is a priority. Robust electoral observation and assistance should be an integral part of conflict prevention. The following also contribute to conflict prevention:

## Approach elections as long-term technical operations

To positively impact an electoral process, observation and technical support must start long before election day and continue well after. Long-term international political engagement is needed to address the potential causes of future crises. It should support the emergence of legitimate institutions, interactions between local people and the government, and good governance.

## Adapt to the local political context

Avoid a 'top-down' approach which usually ignores both local history and conflict dynamics. In Africa and elsewhere, political parties often mobilise voters along



**A group of European Union election observers at a polling station on the day of the Nigerian presidential election in 2007**

©Jacob Silberberg, Panos Pictures, 2007

## Civil society fights for change in Guinea

**Guinea recently experienced its most serious political, social and economic crisis since independence.**

A series of flawed elections, the impunity of the elite in power, a weak and disorganised political class, and a non-functional administrative state culminated in a popular insurrection in January and February 2007.

The insurrection brought civil society into a key strategic position. And, along with government and other decision-makers, civil society continues to orient and monitor the fragile accords that suspended the strike and reassured the population that things would change.

The International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) began its work with Guinean civil society over seven years ago. Insufficient dialogue and acute divisions within the country had undermined democratic processes. IFES therefore made an effort to consolidate the newly established National Council of Guinean Civil Society Organisations (CNOSCG), a coalition of civil society organisations (CSOs), which advocates for reforms, engaged citizenship, dialogue and national unity.

IFES has helped to strengthen civil society through programmes designed to enhance the capacity of the coalition and its member organisations:

- CSOs were trained to design and implement several national civic education campaigns: over a million Guineans received information on participatory democracy, the constitution, rights and responsibilities, and the electoral process.
- Women were encouraged to engage actively in the electoral process as voters and potential candidates.
- Guinean leaders from all parts of the country, sectors and from the grassroots level were included: trustworthy local contacts were made early on to ensure that the widest possible range of people was included in the process.

established ethnic or regional divisions. Importing Western models of legislation does not automatically lead to sustainable democratisation, even if it is often accepted to please foreign donors.

## Strengthen regional capacities

In Africa, this means assisting organisations, such as the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States, to mobilise professional resources and mechanisms of electoral assistance and monitoring that go beyond the deployment of a short-term mission on election day.

The role of regional organisations is especially important in long-term electoral processes, such as when electoral lists are produced or when corrective measures are suggested to the relevant national authorities. Long-term

- Dialogue platforms, led by an all-Guinean steering committee, brought together all the stakeholders – civil society, political parties, government experts, opinion leaders, senior citizens and security forces – to discuss Guinea's problems, identify solutions and develop strategies that could improve democratic processes.

This process was a critical step towards addressing many of the structural barriers to good governance. Although the January-February 2007 uprisings happened soon after this, the process provided a multi-sectoral plan for carrying the country out of crisis. Guinean civil society gained credibility as a result, and became a source of hope for citizens.

Unfortunately, along with this new-found popularity, inner divisions and rivalries surfaced within the social movement. Thus the main stakeholders – union leaders and the CNOSCG – were unable to strategise and plan the next steps. IFES then facilitated a series of meetings, which helped the civil society to define precisely the changes needed and make some progress.

Ten months later, although the country's elite groups are still fighting one another, they regularly meet. IFES is leading a nationwide United Nations peacebuilding initiative, in which over 5,000 citizens at the grassroots level are meeting to voice their problems and aspirations, and identify potential and existing sources of conflict.

This could well contribute to peaceful and credible legislative elections, scheduled for late 2008.

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## See also

*Dynamique participative pour l'émergence d'un état de droit en Afrique: exemple de la Guinée*, IFES, L'Harmattan: Paris, 2008

involvement is best done, for perception and political reasons, by regional, rather than other foreign, institutions, especially when former colonial powers are suspected of having an agenda. But this can only work if those regional organisations have sufficient capacity for such involvement.

The African Union (or any other sub-regional organisation), is increasingly getting involved in preventing and reducing conflict. As part of this, it will have to develop electoral assistance mechanisms that it can own, adapt and implement.

If donor countries are serious about conflict prevention as part of their aid packages, they need to support these developments.

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## See also

'Election Observation in West Africa: The ECOWAS Experience', Elections Today, ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, by Tim Bittiger, 2005

<http://aceproject.org/today/feature-articles/election-observation-in-west-africa-the-ecowas-experience>

# Trusting internet voting in Estonia

**In the 2007 Estonian parliamentary elections, all voters could choose to register their vote via the Internet.**

Estonia is the only country in the world where universal suffrage through internet voting has been introduced. In other countries, internet voting takes the place of postal voting, for example, for those doing military service or living abroad.

While there are no internationally recognised standards for electronic voting as yet, countries using such technology are developing their own principles and guidelines.

Important elements for discussing standards for equipment, technology and procedures at national level include the following:

- legal framework requirements that are prescribed by election and other national laws, and electoral administration bylaws and regulations
- technical requirements and specifications developed by the electoral administration
- production standards of manufacturers
- information technology standards developed by expert and standard setting organisations.

The cornerstone of the internet voting system in Estonia is a government-issued personal identification document (ID card) which is used to authenticate the voter online. The ID card is a digitally enabled 'smart card' that contains a chip with the voter's digital signature and data.

From the voter's perspective, the system is very simple. Any computer with a smart card reader, which is connected to the internet, becomes a voting station. The voter inserts his or her card into the card reader, opens the elections commission web page, types in a PIN code and casts his or her vote. The process is very similar to online banking systems developed for Estonian banks. In fact, the internet voting system was conceived and developed by the same experts who developed the online banking systems.

Estonian voters moved from online banking to online voting easily. Despite debates in the rest of the world about the security of internet voting, Estonians (so far) trust their internet voting system, mainly because they trust their banking system. However, this trust is based on the incorrect assumption that online banking and internet voting are basically same systems.

The online banking and voting systems have one crucial difference, however. While the banking system was designed to record and track every action and rules out anonymity, voting systems do the opposite: they ensure anonymity. To the surprise of the international election observation mission, Estonian voters, political parties and oversight non-governmental

## Controlling money and politics – an exercise in damage control

**No democracy is immune from the corrosive effects of money on politics. The United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, and other established democracies have all experienced recent political scandals.**

Furthermore, once civil society and the media in transitional regimes gain the resources and ability to uncover abuses and corrupt practices, such scandals may become increasingly reported in those countries as well.

Political finance-related corruption manifests itself in a variety of ways:

- In some cases, the ruling political party directly abuses state resources in order to improve its electoral chances.
- Private businesses that benefit from public contracts or privatisation contribute large campaign donations.
- Wealthy donors may also launder and provide campaign funds to control political parties or purchase seats in parliament; these donors may have ties to undesirable elements, such as organised crime or terrorist networks.

While transparency in political finance can expose poor governance practices, it does not inevitably lead to good governance. Indeed,

there are instances where greater knowledge about political donors deepens apathy and cynicism among voters.

Nevertheless, newly introduced political finance regulations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Latvia, Liberia, Mexico, Poland, and the United Kingdom have brought increased transparency and a degree of equity to the monetary aspects of politics. In particular, strict reporting obligations have been adopted with respect to party income and donations over a certain value. The obligations also contain restrictions on foreign and anonymous donations. Many countries set limits on the value of donations that parties are entitled to receive, and restrict party election spending. Most importantly, several countries have set up their own independent statutory oversight bodies.

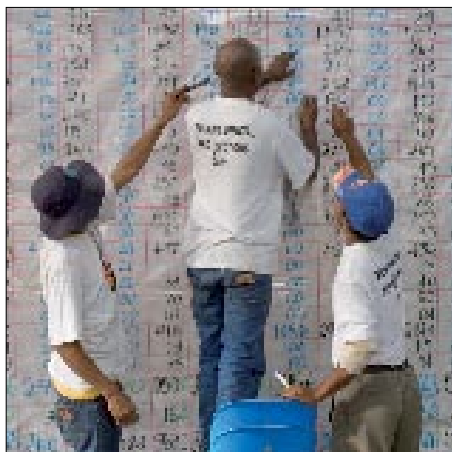
Arguably the funding of political parties in most democracies is more transparent than a decade ago. But some countries, including the USA, Kenya and Indonesia, still have much work to do in terms of regulating the role of money in their political systems.

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### See also

'Political Finance and Political Corruption', in *Global Corruption Report, 2004*, London: Transparency International, by Marcin Walecki, 2004



**A counting room in Papua New Guinea, during the 2007 general elections. School teachers were employed as counting officials, and local schools were closed for a week since the electoral process took much longer than expected. The counting process is entirely manual.**

©Jocelyn Carlin, Panos Pictures, 2007

organisations (NGOs) were not sufficiently aware about what internet voting entailed to be able to evaluate and scrutinise the system. This was despite the readiness of the Estonian Elections Commission to educate political parties and watchdog NGOs on the voting system.

Despite the benefits of internet voting and the application of universal suffrage, participation levels in internet voting were still low. Nevertheless, as more Estonians begin to vote through the internet:

- Estonian political parties and NGOs will have to revise their approach and educate themselves about the system so that they are able to assess its security and ability to protect anonymity.

- Proper oversight will be the only way to build voters' trust in the system.
- As we saw in the Netherlands and Ireland, the lost of trust could mean the complete cancellation of electronic voting.

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### See also

'Internet voting in the March 2007 Parliamentary Elections in Estonia', Report for the Council of Europe, European University Institute and the European Union Democracy Observatory, by Alexander H. Trechsel and Robert Schuman, 2007 (PDF)

[www.vvk.ee/english/CoE%20and%20NEC\\_Report%20E-Voting%202007.pdf](http://www.vvk.ee/english/CoE%20and%20NEC_Report%20E-Voting%202007.pdf)

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# Certifying election commissions to stop election violence

**Question: what do Kenya, Georgia, Ukraine and Haiti have in common? Answer: located on three different continents, each country has held highly problematic elections over the past five years – with highly problematic election commissions organising them.**

In each country, elections led to serious demonstrations that threatened public order. Of course, we know that the disputed elections themselves did not produce the ethnic grievances that tear at Kenya, or the east-west divide that polarises Ukraine, or the rich-poor class cleavage in Haiti. We also know that addressing these 'root causes' of conflict – Haiti's desperate poverty, for example, or disputes over land rights in Kenya – is a daunting, long-term endeavour.

Indeed, precisely because the particular conditions in weak states make them vulnerable to mass disturbance, it is crucial to treat elections with utmost sensitivity. The challenge is whether it is possible to reduce the chances of election-related violence by improving electoral administration.

The answer is a resounding 'yes' – provided the common link in bad elections is understood. In each of the 'election-challenged' countries cited above, the election management body (EMB) was deficient:

- In Haiti, chaos within the election commission led to an unintentionally inaccurate result that immediately raised suspicions of rigging.
- In Georgia, Kenya and Ukraine, election commissions were dominated by ruling parties, who exploited their positions, systematically distorting results to deny the opposition victory; unrest followed.

In short, there is a direct, causal link between dysfunctional or biased election commissions and contested elections. Rather than rely solely on traditional tools of election observation and technical assistance, an innovative scheme – certification of election management bodies, performed by a special United Nations (UN) election body – should be introduced:

- Instead of waiting for problems to emerge and then reporting on them passively, external experts would begin their review well in advance of the election.
- Using criteria developed jointly with election experts from developing countries and transitional democracies, the UN certification team would check to see whether core minimum standards of operation are being met.
- The most crucial standards would focus on the composition of the election commission – ensuring independent voices are included.
- Rules, including the all-important issue of vote tabulation and integrity of the ballot, would also be scrutinised.
- The certification team would not just evaluate, but also judge

***The challenge is whether it is possible to reduce the chances for election-related violence by improving electoral administration***

## Useful web links

ACE Electoral Knowledge Network  
[www.aceproject.org](http://www.aceproject.org)

Centre for Democratic Institutions  
[www.cdi.anu.edu.au/](http://www.cdi.anu.edu.au/)

Democracy International  
[www.democracyinternational.us](http://www.democracyinternational.us)

EISA – Promoting Credible Elections and Democratic Governance in Africa  
[www.eisa.org.za](http://www.eisa.org.za)

Election Guide  
[www.electionguide.org](http://www.electionguide.org)

International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES)  
[www.ifes.org](http://www.ifes.org)

International Crisis Group  
[www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?](http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?)

International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance  
[www.idea.int](http://www.idea.int)

International Knowledge Network for Women in Politics  
[www.iknowpolitics.org](http://www.iknowpolitics.org)

Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy  
[www.nimd.org/](http://www.nimd.org/)

Psephos Adam Carr's Election Archive  
<http://psephos.adam-carr.net>

UN Electoral Assistance Division  
[www.un.org/Depts/dpa/ead](http://www.un.org/Depts/dpa/ead)

and issue a verdict as to whether or not the EMB meets minimum standards.

Countries that reject either the UN experts' conclusion, or refuse to subject their commission to certification, would be sending a public, early warning of trouble ahead. With such a mechanism, diplomats, technical advisors and opposition figures would have ample time – and an ample platform – to press for more transparency and reform.

Certification does raise many questions about the standards to be applied and perceived infringements on sovereignty which is a sensitive issue in many parts of the world. However, with good will and determination, these issues could find satisfactory resolution. Those who believe certification cannot work have an obligation to offer their own solutions if we are to avoid future Kenya-style crises.

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### See also

'Observe Early and Often', Op-Ed Contribution, *The New York Times*, by Edward P. Joseph, 7 January, 2008  
[www.nytimes.com/2008/01/07/opinion/07joseph.html?ref=opinion](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/07/opinion/07joseph.html?ref=opinion)

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