

Democratisation from the outside in: NGO and international efforts to promote open elections

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Until recently, the monitoring of elections in a sovereign country by outside actors was extremely rare. The United Nations (UN) had significant experience in conducting plebiscites and elections in dependent territories but did not monitor an election in a formally independent country until 1989, when it reluctantly became involved in the Nicaraguan electoral process. At the regional level, the Organization of American States (OAS) occasionally sent small delegations to witness elections in member states, but these missions were too brief to permit any real observation of the processes, and failed to criticise fraud.¹ Since the 1980s election-monitoring has become increasingly common in transitional elections from authoritarian to democratic rule. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), domestic and international, were the first to become involved in election-monitoring in the 1980s followed by international and regional organisations like the UN, the OAS, and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in the 1990s. Election-monitors played a crucial role in transitional elections held in the Philippines (1986), Chile (1989), Panama (1989), Nicaragua (1990) and Haiti (1990). In addition, elections began to form a crucial element of UN 'peace-building' strategies in countries torn apart by civil strife such as Namibia (1989), Cambodia (1993) and El Salvador (1994). By the middle of the 1990s, international election-monitoring had thus

should support democracy as a way of underwriting its own security. The reasons why the Kantian democratic peace hypothesis, recaptured by Michael Doyle's 1983 article,⁷ was absorbed by American polic

of democracy, and indirectly, by contributing to democratisation in a host of countries.

Fifth,

Cuellar and his representative Alvaro de Soto kept the peace talks between the government and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) alive, eventually resulting in a series of breakthrough agreements.¹² In Nicaragua, Carter helped broker a series of agreements between the Sandinistas and the opposition that allowed for the participation of Mesquite Indians in the political process, the adoption of a code of civility among all political parties, and the release of much needed foreign funds for the National Opposition Union (UNO).¹³ The mediation of Carter, the UN's Elliot Richardson, and OAS Secretary-General João Baena Soares helped facilitate a smooth transition from Sandinista hands to UNO in the crucial hours after the 1990 elections.¹⁴ In the Dominican Republic, a tense stand-off between the government and the opposition, which questioned the results of the 1990 elections, was successfully defused through deft diplomacy by Carter's delegation.¹⁵

Fourth, observers play an important role in opening up the electoral process by bring

where authority has broken down. The UN has more experience in peace-building missions, greater organisational, financial and technical resou

scepticism of Western motives based on bitter experiences with colonialism, and US interventionism to 'save democracy'.²⁵

Experience suggests that there are several ways to defuse these concerns. First, in the case of peace-building missions, it may be helpful to create a mechanism, consisting of the main political forces in the country, formally vested with sovereignty. The UN in Cambodia, for example, set up a Supreme National Council (SNC) consisting of the major Cambodian factions chaired by Prince Sihanouk.²⁶ Technically, the UN derived its authority from the SNC. The UN made a concerted effort to consult with the SNC and empowered it with several important tasks. Second, international actors must obtain the consent of all major political parties and the government before observing an election, and do so in a strictly impartial fashion. The Council of Freely-Elected Heads of Government (Carter's Council), for example, has an iron rule that it will never formally observe an election if the major players do not welcome it. Third, international actors need to make sure that their work is not used by states as pretexts for intervention, though this 'externality' may be difficult to avoid. (x)-73a

inhospitable conditions overnight.³³ Still, it is possible to err on the side of too much pessimism. Growing interdependence may have quickened the time-frame for the development of democracy in part because of heightened outside involvement. Nor, should one be over-deterministic about the prospects for democracy. India has had a highly successful democracy for almost 50 years, despite not meeting one of the usual key pre-requisites for democracy: a medium or high level of per capita income. The results in Cambodia, Haiti and E

authoritarian anachronism in much the same category as such unpopular regimes as those in Burma, China, Cuba, Vietnam and Indonesia. Thus the situation was different from the past, when Mexico's softer and inclusionary form of authoritarian rule had contrasted favourably with the gross human rights violations of the bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes in the southern cone.³⁵

The role of UNEAP

The UN Electoral Assistance Program was formally invited by the Mexican election-monitoring organisations, which the government recognised were a crucial ingredient of a credible election.³⁶ The government could have financed the domestic observer groups directly but this would have been seen as a transparent attempt to co-opt them and had the opposite effect of undermining credibility. The government also hoped that the involvement of UNEAP in training and financing domestic observer groups would make them more professional and objective. The government was particularly worried about the Civic Alliance (AC), an umbrella group of independent NGOs that the government felt was biased towards the leftist Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD). AC had quickly emerged as the country's most credible election-monitoring group. The government hoped that UNEAP would finance a variety of domestic observer groups from across the

who served as political entrepreneurs by harnessing growing domestic and international concern for transparent elections to facilitate growth. AC

founding members of AC, represented a public endorsement of AC's work by the international community.

NDI's involvement in designing the quick-count conducted by AC in the wake of the closing of the polls significantly improved both its technical soundness and believability. NDI also supported regional fora on AC electoral observation efforts in the cities of San Luis Potosí, Guadalajara and Veracruz which brought together some 200 local civic leaders in each city, the national coordinators of AC and international civic leaders from Chile, Paraguay and the Philippines. In addition, NDI sponsored an AC seminar in Mexico City to train election observers and brought together 120 community leaders from all the Mexico's 31 state

elections but not give them enough time to do a serious job. In effect, there was a danger that the government would pull the wool over the eyes of the international observers by using them to improve confidence in a process that could not be properly observed because of time constraints. President Carter himself was unwilling to go to Mexico without a formal invitation from all political parties and the Mexican government. Of all the three major political parties, only the PRD was willing to consider inviting Carter. There was also the danger that,

officially accredited as international observers representing 283 organisations from around the world; the majority came from the US (68%) followed by Canada (7.6%) and Argentina (3%).³⁹ International observers probably exerted a psychological influence on the election far out of proportion to their numbers. Their mere presence, which was widely reported in the media, may have helped convince ordinary Mexicans that the elections would be clean, thus contributing to the extraordinarily high rate of turnout among voters. The fact that most observers agreed that the irregularities characterising the elections had not affected the overall results of the presidential race, and that there was no identifiable pattern to them that might indicate fraud contributed to the credibility of Zedillo's victory and Mexican elections generally.⁴⁰

According to post-election surveys, about 61% of those asked thought that the elections were clean while 24% did not and 15% did not know. In addition, 64% felt that the IFE had performed very well. This contrasted sharply with pre-election polls taken in June 1994 when

particularly with regard to media access and financial reserves. It is, however, virtually impossible to demonstrate the effects of such advantages

sovereignty, testifies to the depth of these changes. The growth of election-monitoring has major implications for building democratic institutions. Election-monitoring not only facilitates reasonably fair elections but the development of basic democratic institutions and habits as well. The crucial role of

⁴¹ J McCoy, 'On the Mexican elections', Hemisphere, Fall 1994, p 28.

⁴² For examples from other countries on the possible functions of international observers, see J McCoy, L Garber & R Pastor, 'Pollwatching and peacekeeping', Journal of Democracy, Vol 2, No 4, 1994, pp 102±114.

⁴³ See Huntington, The Third Wave, pp 175±180.

⁴⁴ A Sen, 'Freedoms and needs', The New Republic, 10 and 17 January 1994, pp 31±38.

