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Foreign Electoral Assistance as a Strategy for Peacebuilding in Post-Conflict Societies

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Is foreign electoral assistance effective as a tool for peacemaking in post-conflict societies? Judging by the ubiquity of elections as a prescription following conflict, it would seem so: nowadays, almost no peace agreement exists that does not include elections as an essential component of the peace process.[1] As a result, electoral assistance has emerged as one of the international community's main instruments for supporting peace processes in post-conflict situations.[2] Externally supported post-conflict elections, however, have a mixed record in restoring peace after conflict. In some cases, post-conflict elections have returned countries to relative peace, as was the case in Sierra Leone in 2002 or Liberia in 2005. In other cases, countries witnessed a resumption of hostilities following their elections, as occurred in Côte d'Ivoire in 2010 or Liberia in 1997.

Scholars and policymakers have suggested several possible explanations for the success or failure of post-conflict elections in consolidating peace, including the timing of the elections,[3] the specific context that existed following armed conflict,[4] the nature and intensity of the armed conflict,[5] the provision of post-election follow-up within electoral assistance programs,[6] or the appropriateness of the legal framework for elections.[7] In addition, other factors, such as the independence of the electoral management bodies, the voter registration system, the existence and quality of civic and voter education programs, the quality of electoral observation and monitoring, and the development of broad-based political parties have been identified as being critically

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important to the success of elections as a component of the peacebuilding process.[8] The academic and policy literature therefore provides us with so many explanatory variables that it becomes difficult to identify a clear reason as to why electoral assistance has succeeded or failed to consolidate peacebuilding processes in any given society.

This paper argues that the key element for the success of elections in restoring peace is the extent to which electoral assistance builds the negotiation capacity of stakeholders in the peace process. Electoral assistance will be unsuccessful if it focuses only on the technical aspects of the electoral process to ensure free and fair elections. Rather, in post-conflict settings, comprehensive and effective electoral assistance must combine both the electoral process and the peace process.

Components of Electoral Assistance in Post-Conflict Elections

Components	Activities
Assistance to Electoral Institutions and Legal Reforms	Designing election laws and procedures Strengthening institutions involved in election administration Training election staff, officials, observers, and polling station managers Election planning Voter registration Voting operations Deterring irregularities and misconduct on election-day Providing operational training to voters Providing organizational training to political parties Post-election assistance including audits and evaluation
Assistance to Electoral Stakeholders	Facilitating dialogue between former combatants and other societal groups Encouraging negotiation between electoral stakeholders Civic education and human rights work Awareness programs on citizens' rights and responsibilities in a democratic society Initiating and fostering public debate on divided issues Fostering political participation Improving the contribution of civil society groups and political parties to democratic governance Public information campaigns through the media and other means about issues at stake

Table 1: Components of International Electoral Assistance in Post-Conflict Settings

Post-conflict electoral assistance refers to any activity undertaken purposely to support electoral institutions and stakeholders in order to impact electoral processes. Unlike peacetime elections, the aim of elections in post-conflict settings is not only to elect legitimate leaders, but also to consolidate peace. Electoral assistance in these environments must therefore be designed to achieve this end. Thus post-conflict electoral assistance must have two distinct but complementary components: assistance to electoral institutions and assistance to electoral stakeholders, as illustrated in Table 1. Assistance to institutions includes any activity or program that aims to ensure a legitimate electoral process, i.e. one that is able to deliver a free, transparent, and fair election. Assistance to stakeholders, by contrast, is support that aims to strengthen relevant stakeholders' capacity for negotiation and compromise over divisive issues, in order to help them peacefully navigate the post-conflict electoral process. Indeed, in post-conflict settings, a legitimate electoral process is not sufficient to prevent former warring parties from resuming hostilities unless the post-conflict electoral process offers opportunities to stakeholders to learn to engage in dialogue and to build consensus on divisive issues.

Problems with the Current Approach to Electoral Assistance Programs

Despite strong consensus among scholars, policymakers, and practitioners that an election is not an event but a cycle—one that includes pre-election, day-of, and post-election activities[9]—in practice electoral assistance tends to focus on short-term and quick-fix solutions rather than long-term assistance or solutions to structural problems. Moreover, funding for electoral assistance tends to concentrate more on the first component of assistance—support for electoral institutions—rather than the second component—support for stakeholders. When electoral assistance activities focus too heavily on building up strong institutional mechanisms but fail to build a minimum level of trust among electoral stakeholders, the electoral process will fail to consolidate peace, even if the voting operations themselves are functioning well.

This was the case for the post-conflict elections held in Liberia in 1997: the Independent Elections Commission was able to deliver a free and fair electoral process, but the election failed to deliver a durable peace because the electoral stakeholders remained highly divided on major issues. Indeed, President Charles Taylor, who won the 1997 post-conflict election after having threatened to restart the war if he was not elected, pursued a politics of ethnic, economic, and political exclusion that prevented public debate and social reconciliation. Since Taylor and other parties to the civil war did not learn to build compromise and to strengthen mutual trust during the 1997 post-conflict electoral process, there was little surprise that stakeholders failed to live peacefully together and that armed conflict resumed less than two years after the elections,[10] despite their having been certified as "free and fair" by the United Nations, the European Union, the Carter Center, the National Democratic Institute, and several other international organizations.[11]

Furthermore, electoral assistance is not always a neutral instrument. Electoral assistance provided either through bilateral or multilateral frameworks can be part of a gain-seeking foreign policy strategy of international contributors. For instance, France was accused of providing support to civil society organizations that were opposed to the regime of President Laurent Gbagbo of Côte d'Ivoire. Likewise, the availability of funds and other means to assist electoral processes depends more on third-party national priorities than on those of the state being assisted. There is a correlation between the geopolitical interests of major contributors and the distribution of electoral assistance assets.[12] Recipient countries may also prefer to receive certain types of electoral assistance, such as funding and voting materials, while avoiding other types, such as programs raising awareness about voting and human rights, or electoral training for media. This hampers the effectiveness of electoral assistance in many post-conflict settings.

The Missing Element: Electoral Assistance to Stakeholders

A post-conflict election is less a technical than a political issue. Thus, in contrast to the current approach to electoral assistance in post-conflict environments, which tends to emphasize the design of the institutional framework and the enforcement of electoral laws, the most successful models of electoral assistance take into account the participants themselves by supporting specific electoral activities like civic education, awareness programs about citizens' rights and responsibilities in a democratic society, and any other assistance that might help various parties engage in peaceful debate that will help build their capacity for negotiation and compromise. Moreover, donor-sponsored training activities for stakeholders should not be limited to the provision of information and materials that aim to inform voters about the mechanics of voting operations. Though such voter education activities are important to ensure the success of polling operations, they are insufficient to guarantee the success of a post-conflict electoral process. Instead, civic and electoral education activities that are aimed at political parties, civil society organizations, the electorate, and the entire population all help to build new relationships through the fostering of values,

skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are conducive to a peaceful society, even given the existence of grievances and social polarization. Such involvement can renew the participants' sense of citizenship and strengthen their commitment to one another, in addition to fostering their ability to live peacefully together.

In successful post-conflict electoral processes like in the case of Sierra Leone in 2002 and Liberia in 2005, assistance providers have been able to help political parties explicitly signal their preference for peace over military solutions through their participation in elections. In the failed cases, by contrast, political parties sent confusing messages to the electorate and never definitively eliminated a military option, despite moving forward with the electoral process. In Liberia in 1997, for example, Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Party went to the polls but still threatened to resume the war if it lost the election.

Furthermore, in the successful cases, civil society organizations emerged as third parties capable of standing between the former warring parties and political parties. In Liberia in 2005 and in Sierra Leone in 2002, assistance to civil society organizations allowed the people to take ownership of the post-conflict electoral process, while in Liberia in 1997 and in Côte d'Ivoire in 2010, the post-conflict electoral processes were almost hijacked by former warring parties.

Who are the key stakeholders? The participants who matter the most in a post-conflict electoral process are not necessarily the same as those in a routine electoral process. They extend beyond the regular political parties and their supporters to include the main actors of the armed conflict. Failure to integrate relevant actors of the wars in the post-conflict electoral process increases the threat of opposition to the election results, which eventually could lead to a return to war.

Assistance to Stakeholders as a Major Condition for Ensuring Peace

Assistance to electoral stakeholders is both necessary and sufficient to ensure peace in the post-conflict period. Even in cases where electoral assistance did not fully build strong electoral institutions, as in Sierra Leone in 2002 and Liberia in 2005, peace was still preserved and strengthened because the electoral stakeholders were capable of reaching compromise over contentious issues. This does not imply that assistance to electoral institutions is less important than assistance to stakeholders. However, it does imply that for post-conflict elections that aim to consolidate peace, emphasis should be put on preventing the recurrence of war by strengthening the ability of individuals and groups to negotiate and make compromises over divided issues. Even where electoral institutions have the capacity to handle election operations appropriately, the perceptions of stakeholders remain important to the ultimate outcomes[13]—stakeholders must accept the election results and the resulting political order in order to consolidate peace and prevent the resumption of fighting. Conversely, in the absence of a political compromise, the electoral process will likely fail, as occurred in Côte d'Ivoire in 2010.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The success of elections in post-conflict settings rests heavily on the quality of the relationships between societal participants. They are the ones who have tried to advance their interests and preferences through war; and after war, they remain the ones through whom peace can be restored and consolidated. Thus, to ensure sustainable peace, electoral assistance needs to support local stakeholders as active partners in the elections. The following recommendations provide guidance on how to achieve this:

1. Electoral assistance providers should conceive post-conflict electoral processes as peace processes. Assistance providers should seriously take into account the fact that post-conflict elections are often

explicit provisions in peace agreements. A post-conflict election is one component of a larger peace process, and it aims not only at selecting legitimate leaders, but also at consolidating peace.

2. Electoral assistance providers should define electoral assistance in post-conflict settings from the perspective of improving the relationships between electoral stakeholders. The quality of the relationships and trust between parties to the peace process and to the electoral process is what should help determine the appropriate types of electoral assistance needed for a specific post-conflict electoral process to strengthen peace.

3. In post-conflict settings, electoral assistance providers should focus more on civic education and on electoral stakeholders, and not only on technical assistance to electoral administration bodies. In routine electoral processes, the focus is more on the capacity of electoral management bodies to deliver free, fair, and transparent electoral process, and rightly so. Conversely, in post-conflict elections, the focus should be more on the ability of electoral stakeholders to navigate peacefully through the entire electoral process and to transform the post-conflict election into a starting point for the return to normalcy.

For a set of policy recommendations regarding electoral assistance as a strategy for peacebuilding, see the accompanying Southern Voices Network Policy Brief No. 3, by Arsène Brice Bado.

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2. Indeed, the Sierra Leonen post-conflict election of 2002 was a provision in the Lomé Peace Agreement of July 1999; the Liberian post-conflict elections of 1997 and 2005 were provisions respectively in the Abuja Accords of September 1995 and in the Accra Peace Accords of August 2003; and the Côte d'Ivoire 2002 post-conflict election was a provision in the Ouagadougou Peace Agreement of March 2007.

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4. Kristine Hoglund, Anna K. Jarstad, and Mimmi Soderberg Kovacs, "The Predicament of Elections in War-torn Societies," *Democratization* 16.3 (2009): 530–557.

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10. The rebel movement, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), launched its first attacks on April 1999; a second rebel movement, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), was founded in 2003.

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