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The Limits of Election Monitoring

What Independent Observation Can (and Can't) Do

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Article Summary and Author Biography

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Today, the international monitoring of elections has become so common that refusing to invite foreign observers is seen as a signal that a regime has something to hide. Among the media and in policy circles, the importance of election monitoring is almost universally accepted. This uncritical treatment of international election observation, however, ignores a more complicated reality: that monitors can have both positive and negative effects. And now, as countries in the Middle East and northern Africa are poised to hold competitive elections for the first time, understanding the role and impact of election observers is more important than ever.

Election observation took shape in the post-Cold War years, as a number of regions, in particular Africa and post-communist eastern Europe, held multiparty elections for the first time. Today, the most active international election monitors come from the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), but more than a dozen organizations (including the Carter Center, the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, and the Organization of American States) send observers to five or more elections each year.

On the positive side, observers can verify that governments are indeed playing by the rules, which can be important in quelling "sore loser" protests, increasing voter confidence, assisting the international community in assessing the legitimacy of the elections, and in theory, promoting democratization. And when governments do not play by the rules, observers can reduce fraud that would otherwise occur and condemn governments for election manipulation, sometimes validating domestic protest, as happened in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004. International monitors conduct a great deal of on-the-ground work months before an election even takes place. They provide legal and logistical assistance, monitor the media, and coordinate with domestic observers and other civil-society groups. At the same time, they pressure governments -- either through direct meetings or public condemnation -- to update voter registers, support domestic observers, ensure that ballot materials are delivered throughout the country, and adopt technologies that make blatant election fraud harder.

Many countries benefit from ongoing advice and assistance from international observers. In 1998, Guyana established a permanent electoral commission, a recommendation first voiced by the Organization of American States (OAS) after the country's flawed 1997 election. Since 2002, Kenya no longer has individual voter card identification numbers on ballots, which in the past could be used to compromise the secrecy of the vote. After a controversy over "double punched," and therefore invalid, ballots in Indonesia's 2004 presidential elections, the country followed the advice of international observers and changed the marking process from using nails to pens. And in its 2004 and 2009 elections, El Salvador refined its voter lists, created new identity cards, and improved the reliability of polling stations and tabulation. Even if incremental, such changes help build credible electoral institutions and processes.

Yet some serious problems persist in election

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observation. For starters, in recent years, Russia and China have taken the lead in establishing "pseudo" monitors, such as those from the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. These observers endorse any election so long as the candidate or party preferred by Moscow or Beijing wins (see, for example, the CIS endorsement of the highly fraudulent 2004 election in Belarus). Although the obvious biases of these sham monitors make their assessments rather weak in the eyes of Western audiences, the endorsements of such groups are often trotted out in propaganda campaigns both at home and in friendly authoritarian countries.

Reputable observer organizations can also face political pressure from powerful states or international organizations, particularly when elections threaten a leader perceived as a Western ally, or when elections are anticipated as important marks of transitions, such as the upcoming elections in Egypt and Tunisia. Such pressure is usually subtle and varied: Donors or politicians may seek to influence assessments behind the scenes, or by strategically choosing mission staff from friendly member states. For example, in Nigeria in 1999, both the Commonwealth Secretariat and the European Union reminded their missions that their member governments wanted to endorse the elections as a way to restore normal relations with Nigeria. It is important to remember that observers are agents of donors, governments, and organizations, whose need for diplomacy or stability can push monitors away from frankly assessing elections. This problem is underreported and not discussed enough, either because many in the media assume that all monitors are disinterested "election police" or because policymakers choose to turn a blind eye.

Monitors are most likely to be effective when domestic conditions for reform are already favorable and observers can reinforce ongoing changes. Yet observer groups often face pressure to monitor elections in which a transition to democracy in the short term is highly unlikely, such as in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Haiti. In such conflict-ridden countries, observers find themselves at a double disadvantage: They are kept from carrying out full-fledged monitoring by security concerns, and they know that their sponsors may expect less than a blunt assessment of the election's flaws. This was one of the reasons it was so hard for the U.S. government to find any groups willing to monitor the 2004 elections in Afghanistan. In the end, NATO persuaded the OSCE to deploy a limited mission, but safety concerns meant that it could only operate within a small subset of the country.

High donor and media attention also leads monitors to observe elections in countries ruled by "uncooperative" host governments, which invite observers and then evade their criticism, such as Belarus, Ethiopia, Russia, and Zimbabwe. In such cases, monitors face a dilemma: They know they are unlikely to bring about true democratic elections, but they also do not want to leave the field to less credible organizations that will endorse stolen elections. In the end, donors and governments wind up directing considerable resources toward countries where monitors are not that likely to improve elections in the near future.

Still, problems persist, especially in the long run-up to elections. As election-day scrutiny has increased dramatically, some governments have moved their fraudulent efforts to the pre- (or post-) election periods. Yet due to poor or delayed funding, many missions arrive too late or are too understaffed to evaluate the full pre-election period and document whether there were problems with the unfair use of government resources, the voter registration process, the way the electoral commission is appointed and run, the rules for candidates and parties, and so on. A similar dynamic holds for after the vote, as observers and donors often shift their focus too quickly to elections elsewhere. As a result, pressure on governments decreases between elections. This problem is exacerbated by the infrequent presence of observer groups, as the lack of organizational continuity means that recommendations are even more likely to be forgotten.

Going forward, election observers will be in the spotlight again, as they will almost certainly monitor the elections in Egypt, Tunisia, and other post-revolutionary elections in North Africa and the Middle East. Following a March referendum, Egyptian parliamentary and presidential elections are scheduled for September and November, respectively. They will be a test of whether the military is willing to keep its promise to turn power over to an elected civilian government, how other parties will compete with the long-banned Muslim Brotherhood, and whether voter interest will increase after the 44 percent turnout for the March referendum. Meanwhile, constituent assembly elections in Tunisia were recently postponed to October. Presidential elections

and parliamentary elections will follow, probably in early 2012.

The challenges for international observers in these elections are many -- after all, these will be the first democratic elections in these countries' histories. Some actors, especially those who plan to use election fraud, intimidation, or other illegal tactics, have incentives to resist international monitors. Iadh Ben Achour, the head of the Tunisian High Council for Political Reforms and the Achievement of the Goals of the Revolution, was an early critic of domestic and international calls for the Tunisian government to invite foreign observers, ostensibly because he believes such foreign meddling is unnecessary.

In both Egypt and Tunisia, observers will face histories of extensive election fraud, opposition party intimidation or prohibition, and high levels of voter skepticism. In Egypt, where intimidation and abuse of power persists, observers will need to monitor the freedom of new political parties to campaign and organize, as well as the ability of voters to access information about candidates. In Tunisia, where voter databases and ID cards are in disarray, monitors will need to be vigilant that processes and administration ensure that everyone has the possibility to vote and that the elections do not face further delays.

In both countries, monitors will be under pressure from the host and donor governments to validate the elections as a proof that the Arab Spring is yielding democratic dividends. Observers will need to resist this pressure -- both to give an independent and frank assessment of the quality of the elections and to convince Egyptians and Tunisians that they are doing so.

Overall, it is important for donors, journalists, and observers themselves to be aware of the power and the limits of election observation. It would be bad to laud Tunisia and Egypt for transitions to democracy in elections that lacked international observers -- but it would be worse if international observers are present and validate the elections despite serious problems in a shortsighted attempt to avoid more violence and instability.

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