Chapter XXI

International Electoral Observation as a Means of Evaluating Democracy and Promoting Respect for Civil and Political Rights

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1 Introduction

International observation of elections has become such a common feature of international political life that it is easy to overlook how recent a phenomenon it is. Less than two decades ago, the observation of sovereign elections by international or regional organizations was an anomaly, considered suspicious or dangerous by some states. Since then, it has become commonplace. During that period, norms and techniques were at first improvised, then gradually refined, and only recently standardized. It was not until October 2005 that the main organizations involved in election observation agreed to

*The views contained in this chapter are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland, the United Nations or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.
a common set of principles.\textsuperscript{1} Electoral observation has increasingly taken on the characteristics of a métier, requiring professionalism, specific knowledge, and a professional code of conduct. Given this brief history, it should not then be surprising that the study of international election monitoring as a discipline has hardly taken place.\textsuperscript{2} It is time, however, to look seriously and systematically at the phenomenon of election observation-more seriously and systematically than this essay will be able to do, though we attempt to provide some lines for further research. At the very minimum, the observation of elections has led to a far more sophisticated understanding of what democracy is and therefore has become a tool for gauging the respect for basic civil and political rights within individual countries.

In terms of the development of international cooperation, if not international law, it is of salient interest that many countries that otherwise assert a vigorous definition of sovereignty nonetheless submit their electoral processes to observation by international organizations.\textsuperscript{3} This is particularly noteworthy given that election observation has evolved from the issuing of statements generally restricted to activities on polling day to a more comprehensive and intrusive evaluation of political institutions and conditions in a given country. This evaluation often begins months before polling day and continues months afterwards, requiring a long-term presence of international organizations probing sensitive areas such as the ability of political parties to mobilize support and the extent of press freedoms. These evaluations, furthermore, tend to lead to recommendations on improving electoral systems that become difficult for states to ignore. More recently, as the ‘color revolu-

\textsuperscript{1}The Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and the Code of Conduct for International Observers, ratified on 27 October 2005 by about two-dozen international, regional and non-governmental organization.


\textsuperscript{3}As Thomas Carothers has recently pointed out, “Weak and problematic though elections often are, they now form a crucial step in the process of attaining political legitimacy throughout much of the world. The laborious, often convoluted efforts of many semiauthoritarian leaders in the former Soviet Union, Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere to carry out at least vaguely plausible elections, rather than jut to rule without them, are evidence of this fact.” See CAROTHERS, T.: “The ‘Sequencing’ Fallacy”, in: Journal of Democracy 18 (2007) 1, p. 21.