Two Decades of International Electoral Support:
Challenges and Added Value

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I. Introduction

Electoral support activities by international actors have skyrocketed since the beginning of the 1990s. Today, a number of international organizations engage in election related activities, among them the United Nations (UN), the Organization of American States (OAS), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the European Union (EU) and, recently, the African Union (AU). A considerable range of support activities is possible. While election observation is, broadly speaking, the impartial assessment of the character and the quality of the electoral process by external actors; electoral assistance is of an advisory character, and may include, inter alia, legal and logistical advice, poll worker training and civic education. Another means of international electoral involvement is “election organization”, where the international community itself runs the election.¹

The figures on democracy and electoral support account for the extensive international engagement in the field. Between 1987 and 2002, observers were present for 86 per cent of the national elections in 95 newly democratic or semi-authoritarian regimes.² As for electoral assistance, between 1989 and 2005, 363 official requests for assistance in electoral matters were referred to the UN. Of these, 275 requests were accepted, with assistance being provided to 96 different countries.³ Most recently, in January 2009, the UN Security Council called upon the international community to support the electoral process in Côte d’Ivoire inter alia by providing electoral observation and related electoral assistance.⁴

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¹ “Democracy support” more broadly speaking does not focus on the election process itself but rather on the wider issue of democracy building and consolidation.