

U.S. ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE: LESSONS LEARNED

Richard W. Soudriette

Member of the Advisory Committee for Democracy Promotion
President Emeritus IFES

Prepared: November 20, 2008



*Richard W. Soudriette
Member of the Advisory Committee for Democracy Promotion
President Emeritus IFES
Prepared: November 20, 2008*

OVERVIEW

As President-elect Obama prepares to assume office on January 20, 2009, it is important for the incoming Administration to consider keeping America's long standing bipartisan commitment to promoting democracy worldwide. President-elect Obama spoke eloquently about the need to engage America's allies and friends to address global challenges. To continue promoting democracy in the future, the United States must engage other democracies and tap multilateral resources such as the Community of Democracies.

Support for democratic election processes and institutions must remain a vital part of the USA's democracy strategy. While elections represent only one element of democratic development, they are essential because they provide legitimacy upon which the institutions of democracy are built. Global efforts to provide technical election assistance to support free and fair election processes must continue in every corner of the globe.

In 1984, the creation of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and its partner institutes marked a milestone in U.S. foreign policy. NED, together with the Center for International Private Enterprise, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the Solidarity Center, focused on promoting democratic development efforts through political parties, civil society, private enterprise and labor.

Simultaneously, USAID targeted resources to support electoral process in the Americas. Former USAID Administrator Peter McPherson recognized the importance of supporting sustainable electoral processes. He championed USAID's support to establish organizations like the Center for Electoral Assistance and Promotion (CAPEL) in Costa Rica and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) in the USA to assist with the development of sustainable election processes in newly emerging democracies.

Over the past two decades U.S. support for the electoral process helped countries worldwide to develop robust, transparent and independent electoral processes. Despite a solid track record of electoral process successes, recently, democratic governance has suffered setbacks in several countries as highlighted by Dr. Larry Diamond, Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, in his latest book entitled "The Spirit of Democracy."

ELECTORAL SUCCESS STORIES

Regardless of recent setbacks, U.S. sponsored electoral assistance over the past two decades produced many success stories in building sustainable electoral democracy in all regions such as:

- **Latin America:** Beginning in 1988, U.S. electoral assistance provided strategic help that enabled virtually all countries in the region to develop competent and sustainable electoral processes and institutions. With the exception of countries such as Cuba and perhaps Venezuela, the focus on supporting the electoral process helped countries to embrace the ballot over the bullet as the preferred means of political change.
- **Europe:** Following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, U.S. electoral assistance helped many countries of the former Soviet bloc develop competent electoral management bodies and create transparent electoral processes. Establishment of free and fair elections in the Baltic Republics, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia enabled these countries to lay the groundwork necessary for their eventual accession to membership in the European Union. Electoral assistance in the Balkans provided the foundation enabling countries of the region to turn away from armed conflict and towards democracy.
- **Africa:** Despite ongoing challenges to democracy in Africa, today, 48% of the countries of sub-Saharan Africa are now electoral democracies. U.S. electoral assistance was essential to developing free and fair electoral processes and institutions in Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa and many other countries. The investment by USAID in Ghana in 1994 of \$9 million to assist the electoral process helped to produce one of the leading electoral democracies in Africa. Electoral assistance also transformed the Electoral Commission of Ghana into an effective resource of technical election expertise that is helping across Africa.
- **Middle East:** Continued USAID commitment to supporting the electoral institutions of the Middle East has had positive impacts in countries such as Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. The Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq (IECI) performed brilliantly in organizing three successful nationwide elections in Iraq in 2005. Presently the IECI, with continued USAID support, is preparing for upcoming local and governorate elections to be held in January of 2009. Yemen also developed the first permanent elections commission in the Arab world, thanks to the support of USAID. The elections council in Yemen successfully organized local, parliamentary, and presidential elections for several election cycles and is developing a regional election training center to promote professional election administration in the region.
- **Asia:** USAID funded electoral assistance has been effective in supporting electoral processes in countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan,

Mongolia, and the Philippines. Since 1999 technical election assistance funded by USAID has had positive impacts on Indonesia, the largest democracy in the Muslim world. Because of sustained USAID electoral support, Indonesia experienced a successful transition to full democracy. The impact of electoral support can again be seen in the successful 2004 Indonesian parliamentary and presidential elections, which were conducted efficiently and transparently in an archipelago nation of 120 million voters who inhabit more than ten thousand islands.

ELECTION ASSISTANCE STRATEGIES FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

As the Obama Administration considers strategies for future election assistance, it would be useful to consider an initiative spearheaded by former Clinton USAID Administrator Brian Atwood called the “Common Agenda.” Because of this initiative, the development agencies of the United States and other countries such as Japan coordinated efforts to achieve common development objectives. An example of the impact of the “Common Agenda” was in El Salvador in 1997, where the Japanese International Development Agency (JICA) provided cash to support electoral projects already being funded by USAID. In 1999, JICA and USAID worked together to provide funding and technical assistance to support the emerging electoral process that helped to launch Indonesia on the road to full democracy.

The Bush Administration also encouraged election assistance projects that involved multiple implementing partners. Since 2001, the British Department for International Development (DFID) coordinated with USAID in directing election assistance funding to support joint election assistance projects in Nigeria and Sierra Leone. USAID and DFID relied upon the same implementing organization, IFES, to assist election commissions in both of these countries.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, USAID provided major funding to IFES to supply technical assistance to the election commissions. However, in both cases USAID agreed that the U.N. Election Assistance Division would be responsible for overall project coordination. Therefore, IFES was instructed to work under the U.N. banner.

While USAID pioneered electoral support work since the 1980s, today there are multiple partners the United States can work with to implement election assistance projects. On the multilateral level, the United Nations Electoral Assistance Division and the United Nations Development Programme offer technical assistance in the election field. Both organizations have worked and continue to work closely with USAID funded election assistance projects in countries such as Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Liberia, Iraq and Timor Lest.

Other regional multilateral organizations with experience in providing electoral assistance include the African Union, the European Union, the Organization of American States and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Additionally, several countries such as Australia, Canada, Chile, Ghana, Hungary, India, Mexico and the United Kingdom have active electoral assistance programs.

A number of NGOs are also engaged as implementers of electoral assistance. These include IFES, International IDEA, the Association of European Election Officials (headquartered in Hungary), the Center for Electoral Assistance and Promotion (CAPEL) and the Electoral Institute of South Africa (EISA). An additional resource is the Global Election Officials (GEO) Network established in 1999, which convenes every two years in various venues. The GEO is the largest worldwide network of election officials. GEO's host organizations include the United Nations, The UN Development Programme, IFES, IDEA, ACEEEO, CAPEL, EISA, Elections Canada, the Federal Electoral Institute of Mexico and the U.S. Election Assistance Commission.

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

The United States should continue to offer targeted electoral assistance to:

- Countries where electoral chaos might trigger conflict and threaten basic freedoms.
- Countries where problematic electoral processes threaten regional peace and stability.
- Countries with a strategic foreign policy interest to the United States.
- Countries that are potential candidates to participate in the Millennium Challenge Program.

Because the United States cannot go it alone in offering election assistance, it is vital to involve all relevant players engaged in technical election support work. It is recommended the United States take the initiative to organize a global meeting on international election assistance. Such a meeting could be organized with the U.N. Electoral Assistance Division and involve international development agencies, electoral assistance providers, senior election officials, and internationally focused philanthropic foundations. The objective would be to provide a coordinated effort to deal with current and future electoral support needs and create a network of electoral assistance providers better able to respond to future needs.

The United States should also work through existing democracy and governance frameworks. The Community of Democracies was an initiative of the Clinton Administration and was steadfastly supported by the Bush Administration. The Obama Administration should keep the United States actively involved with this initiative. It would be useful for the Community of Democracies to establish an electoral process working group that would involve election officials from member states. This would help make the leaders of the world's democracies aware of the importance of electoral support. It would also serve as a vehicle to encourage member countries to offer expertise, funding and equipment to support electoral assistance efforts around the globe.

USAID should be encouraged to devote more financial resources to developing election training programs, election administration resource materials and web-based election management tools. In the 1990s, USAID provided funding for developing this type of information to enable election administrators in emerging countries to seek help online.

The launching of the Administration and Cost of Elections (ACE) website in 1997 with USAID support provided countless election administrators with an important resource at their fingertips. ACE can answer their questions and explain best practices other countries are following in the elections arena.

In the year 2000, the electoral commission of Iran downloaded basic information about conducting elections from the ACE website and translated it into Farsi. This was used for elections when reform minded candidates won the presidency and a majority of seats in the Iranian Parliament. This was made possible by the support of USAID and offers a clear example of why USAID should devote financial support for election training and resource materials.

From 1990 to 2005, over nine billion dollars in USAID funding went to support democratic governance in more than 100 countries. Much of this funding was directed to electoral assistance. A recent Vanderbilt University study provides clear evidence that this funding overall led to a dramatic increase in democratic change. The sanctity of the ballot box is a key component of this change. The Obama Administration should keep international electoral assistance and support for democracy and governance programs as a vital part of the foreign assistance program of the United States.
