

TIMING AND SEQUENCING OF POST-WAR ELECTIONS: ‘MAKE HASTE SLOWLY’

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OVERVIEW

While the holding of elections is always a critical moment for any democracy, in countries that transition from war to peace its importance is even greater. It is common practice for peace agreements to include provisions on the organization of democratic elections. However, decisions on when elections should take place and how to sequence them against other peacebuilding processes are often controversial. What criteria should guide the timing and sequencing of elections that strengthen broader peace and state building efforts? If organized soon after the end of violent conflict, election organizers must confront the lack or weakness of democratic institutions, security challenges, and unresolved grievances. Delaying elections, however, postpones the establishment of a legitimate government, risks renewal of conflict and reduces the prospects of receiving international development support.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of the session was to promote understanding of the importance of adequate timing and sequencing of post-war elections, challenges to it, and the lessons learned from different country contexts.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Elections are an important undertaking in countries that transition from war to peace. They serve as a means of achieving political stabilization, stronger institutions and government legitimacy, and they have a symbolic value in signalling a break with the past. However, a high-stakes election can increase tensions and spark violence. Therefore, timing and sequencing of elections should be informed by a good understanding on the impact of elections on peace processes.

While there is a general understanding that elections are an instrument that may facilitate peace- and state-building, they should not be mistaken for a means to an end. Rather, credible elections are a building block in a broader transformative mechanism.

The organization of elections in a transitional context is always a challenge. A range of accommodative measures may be put in place to bring different parties to negotiating tables and into an election process. However, some of these measures may be undemocratic in nature and therefore have a negative impact on the democratization process in the short and long terms. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a case where accommodative measures that discriminate parts of the population have become permanent positions.

The push for, and support of, quick elections by the international community can have positive implications in restoring democracy and stability. However, elections should not be used as an exit strategy or means to an end, but as a long-term instrument. The elections in Liberia following peace agreements in 1997 and 2003 are examples of these different interventions and strategies by the international community.

There is a trend for departure from assessments and interventions based on values towards an interests-based approach. Along these lines, core value associated with human rights, rule of law and development should be defended, instead of interests.

Context-specific approaches and solutions are important. While in Nepal elections were postponed due to differences between the stakeholders—and the process is today perceived as successful—the postponement of elections in other contexts could increase tensions. Exchange of experiences and thoughts on timing and sequencing of elections can help to engage in future transformative contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure a level playing field for all stakeholders and that key decisions on timing and sequencing are results of an inclusive process with representation from different groups such as women and youths.
- Include education as a key component to improve citizens' electoral and political knowledge, to make citizens aware of choices and to enable them to make qualified criticism of given choices. This would build the resilience and capacity of societies to manage manipulation.
- In support to elections in transformative contexts, emphasize long-term planning and sustainability, rather than short-sighted interventions.
- Remain committed and do not lose sight of important matters even though in transformative contexts there is a tendency to deal with urgent matters while important matters may be neglected.

RESOURCE LINKS AND DOCUMENTS

Alihodžić, S. et al., Timing and Sequencing of Transitional Elections, International IDEA Policy Paper no. 18 (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance: Stockholm, 2019), <<https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/timing-and-sequencing-transitional-elections>>.



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