

International Electoral Assistance: Between Enhancing Democratization and Legitimizing Authoritarian Rule



United Nations electoral assistance in Burundi (2005). Photo by UN.

Electoral assistance has been a key feature of democracy promotion activities throughout the past decades. As opposed to mere election observation, electoral assistance includes active logistical, technical and financial support for electoral processes such as procuring ballot boxes, training polling station staff and educating voters. Electoral assistance aims to improve the quality of elections as well as public trust in them. This policy brief summarizes the findings of two recent studies addressing the impact of electoral assistance and its context. Lührmann (2018) provides a systematic assessment of the United Nations (UN) efforts to support elections. Kerr and Lührmann (2017) study the role of election administration and media freedom for public trust in elections.

UN electoral assistance

Between 2007 and 2014 the UN assisted more than one third of all national elections worldwide. Lührmann (2018) focuses on the role of regime elites for the success of such endeavours. She argues that if electoral credibility is not their strategic priority, electoral assistance remains futile. This argument is supported with evidence from the key cases of Sudan (2010), Nigeria (2011) and Libya (2012). All three African countries have received significant electoral assistance, but achieved dramatically different electoral outcomes (Figure 1). In Libya, after the fall of Gadhafi, the interim government made credible elections a top priority and subsequently improved election management in order to facilitate free and fair elections. Conversely, the Sudanese president Al-Bashir, who had come to power through a military coup in 1989, only reluctantly agreed to hold elections in 2010 and restricted credible electoral competition and management in order to stay securely in power. In Nigeria, President

KEY FINDINGS

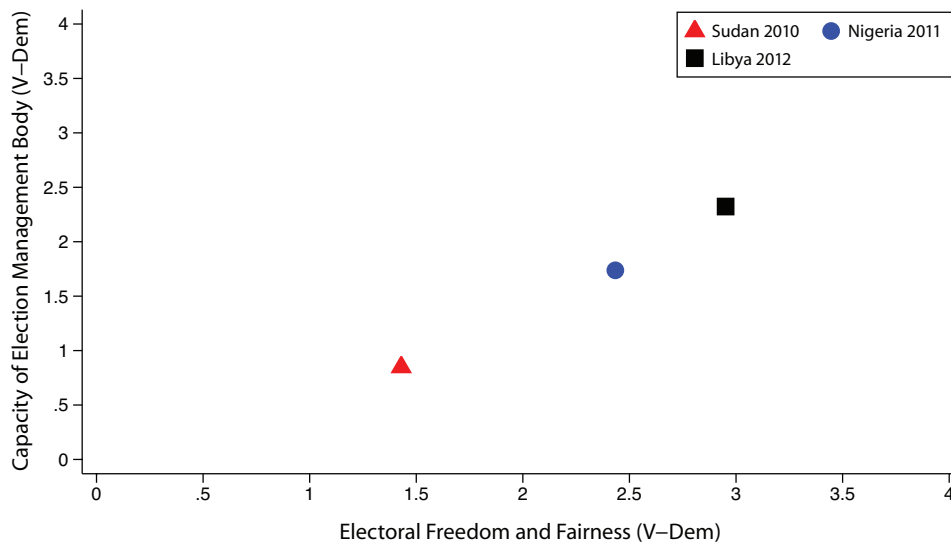
- Electoral assistance may contribute to election quality and public trust in elections in the presence of regime elites prioritizing electoral credibility.
- Such positive impacts of electoral assistance are unlikely if regime elites deliberately undermine electoral freedom and fairness.
- In repressive contexts – for instance with limited media freedom – electoral assistance risks legitimizing authoritarian practices.

Jonathan assumed office only one year before the 2011 election. He prioritized better electoral management in order to gain popular legitimacy for the consolidation of his rule. Thus, regime compliance seems to have enabled the UN to play a positive role in elections in Libya and Nigeria while the lack of compliance undermined the UN's contribution to elections in Sudan. In Nigeria, it seems plausible that UN electoral assistance had a mid-term impact on democratization. However, if regime elites undermine electoral freedom and fairness - as in Sudan (2010) - such positive effects are unlikely. Furthermore, in such contexts, the involvement of the UN may legitimize authoritarian practices.

Public trust in elections

Kerr and Lührmann (2017) do not study the involvement of international actors explicitly. Nevertheless, their findings help us to better understand the relationship between electoral assistance and public trust in elections. Using recent survey data for 47 elections, Kerr and Lührmann (2017) show that in contexts with better Election Management Bodies (EMBs), citizens trust the electoral results more. Thus, international support for EMBs may help to boost confidence in elections. At the same time, citizens seem to be more likely to trust elections if the media is under government control. The reason for this might be that citizens receive fewer critical reports about electoral events in such contexts. For international electoral assistance providers in contexts with limited media freedom this finding has potentially problematic implications. Citizens may be prone to believe the government's take on electoral events even though they are severely manipulated. In such cases, international actors may – unintentionally – help to boost the legitimacy of autocratic rulers.

FIGURE 1. THE QUALITY OF THREE UN-ASSISTED AFRICAN ELECTIONS



Source: Coppedge et al. 2017. Higher values indicate better quality.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- International electoral assistance can be crucial for free and fair elections and public trust in them, if national authorities are cooperative.
- International providers should avoid the risk of legitimizing dictatorships by making political advisability a firmer prerequisite for the allocation of electoral assistance. Potential red flags are:
 - repression against opposition parties, media censorship or a consistent track record of electoral manipulation.
 - In contexts with a high-risk of electoral manipulation, electoral assistance providers should limit their public visibility and prioritize activities aimed at reducing electoral fraud.

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