Electoral Conflict Mediation in Zambia

In 2001, the Electoral Commission of Zambia faced a tense presidential and parliamentary election. A new ISS case study describes how commission leaders created a mechanism to stave off conflict, clarify responsibilities for dispute resolution, and provide complainants with effective and timely means for voicing their concerns.

Inspired by the use of a similar system in South Africa, the commission leaders developed conflict management committees at the national level and in Zambia's 74 electoral districts. The committees—comprising representatives from political parties, law enforcement, civil society, and faith-based organizations—mediated conflicts related to violations of the electoral code of conduct. The electoral commission piloted the committees in the 2001 elections before fully implementing and strengthening them shortly before the 2006 elections. The mediation system helped Zambia navigate an unexpected by-election following the death of President Levy Mwanawasa in 2008 and an opposition victory over the ruling party in 2011. Though some challenges remained, the electoral commission staff and committee members credited the committees with helping the country navigate competitive elections and reduce tensions between competing parties.

Dampening Election Violence in Other Countries

This Zambia example is one of several ISS case studies that explore how elections commissions have reduced violence and increased public trust in electoral results in other countries. In the 1990s and 2000s, commissions in South Africa, Mozambique, Guyana, Ghana, and Somaliland helped those countries maneuver difficult transitions to more democratic systems. Whether emerging from apartheid, civil war, a history of ethnic division, or non-democratic systems, these countries faced the prospect of widespread political violence. The ISS cases describe how elections commissions enabled leaders to strengthen institutions, overcome administrative hurdles, mediate conflicts, improve security and transparency, and leverage the work of civil society organizations. Although problems persist, the commissions raised public trust in their countries’ new or strengthened democratic
Improving Government Accountability and Leading Reform

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ISS Readers Respond

"Reading that text has been a wonderful gift. The interview took place just a couple of weeks after the provincial election was completed. We were so tired and happy and there was a real sense of a job well done. I didn’t write a diary and it is something I really regret, but that interview just brings back the memories so vividly of what was an extraordinary time and an extraordinary experience. I will treasure that manuscript."

- ISS interviewee

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