INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

Managing Tense Elections

Several ISS case studies explore how elections commissions and other bodies have dampened potential conflict and increased public trust in electoral results around the world. Whether emerging from apartheid, civil war, a history of ethnic divisions, or non-democratic systems, the countries featured in these case studies faced the potential of widespread political violence. The cases show how leaders transcended partisan politics to strengthen institutions, overcome administrative hurdles, mediate conflicts, and improve security and transparency in order to restore public faith in democratic processes.

Implementing India's Electoral Code of Conduct

Negative campaigning and harassment were on the increase in 1990 when T.N. Seshan assumed control of the Election Commission of India. Seshan and his successor, M.S. Gill, used India's Model Code of Conduct, a voluntary code that had lain dormant since its creation 30 years earlier, to moderate the excesses of political parties during elections. By 2010, the code had become a way to reduce violence and help focus parties on policy. This case study provides insights into how to build acceptance of standards like the Model Code of Conduct.

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Election Commission of India poster from the 2011 election. Photo by Indu.

Keeping the Peace in a Tense Election

In 2008, Ghana held a peaceful run-off in a hotly contested presidential race, breaking the pattern of violence that had afflicted elections in Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and several other African countries during the same period. Since the advent of multi-party democracy in 1992, Ghana had held three consecutive elections that observers regarded as relatively free and fair. However, the 2008 presidential race generated concern. Previous elections had revealed substantial ethnic block voting, raising allegations of misbehavior by the two major parties both during the campaign and on polling day. Tensions were increased further in 2008 by the closeness of the initial ballot, which forced the country's first run-off in which the outcome was genuinely uncertain. This case study analyzes the measures taken by the Electoral Commission and other bodies to reduce the likelihood of violence, particularly the use of transparency as a way to build trust. With the help of other groups, the commission also organized a system for identifying potential trouble spots, mediating, and building cooperation. In large part because of these efforts, Ghanaians experienced a peaceful transfer of power.

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Ghanaians cast their votes in the 2012 general election. Photo by Kofi Akrofi.

Conflict Management Panels in South African Elections

The country's first post-apartheid election in 1994 was marred by political tension and violence. In the run-up to the second national election in 1999, the country's permanent Independent Electoral Commission created conflict management mediation panels and deployed respected local community members to each province's political hot spots. Working with the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa, the panels handled disputes before they reached the threshold for police or Electoral Court intervention. The commission's efforts resolved particularly fraught issues such as reducing barriers to entry in the 165 "no-go" areas where dominant political parties used intimidation or outright violence to exclude competition. In preparation for the local government elections in 2000, the commission extended the conflict mediation system into the country's 284 municipalities.

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Rebooting Elections in Nigeria

In 2010, President Goodluck Jonathan appointed committed reformer Attahiru Jega to chair Nigeria's electoral commission, building hope that the West African nation would finally break its chain of discredited elections. With under a year to prepare for the April 2011 elections, the commission turned to emerging technologies such as open-source software and social media to register 73 million voters from scratch and open a direct dialogue with the electorate. A small team of young Nigerian engineers guided by Nyimbi Odero pioneered these innovations, many of which contradicted the advice of elections experts. Despite some initial technical difficulties, Nigeria's homegrown technology enabled the commission to prepare for elections goals on schedule and under budget. The credibility the commission earned helped spur unprecedented levels of voter participation. Ultimately, domestic and international observers validated the 2011 elections as the most free and fair in Nigeria's history.

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ISS Featured Interview

In a 2010 interview with ISS, **Alok Shukla** discusses the importance of safety in Indian elections. Shukla, who served as deputy election commissioner in the Election Commission of India, also details the various steps taken by the commission to keep election violence to a minimum, including a targeted police deployment strategy, monitoring systems, and vulnerability mapping.

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