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Electoral reforms are more than conducting routine elections
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The spread of democratic government has created a tremendous sense of possibility in countries that were long dominated by autocratic, closed, and corrupt regimes. Democratic reforms have opened political space in which citizens can more easily speak their minds, express their concerns, organize for common interests, seek out information, join political associations and parties, and choose their leaders. The new freedoms and institutions that accompany democracy provide important tools for holding leaders to account and promoting the transparency of government. These encouraging changes have taken root and transformed political life in dozens of countries under different historical legacies and cultures.

However, we know that the advance of democracy is not inevitable. Countries that undertake political reform have no assurance that democratization will be long-lasting, or that a change of regime will produce desired improvements in the quality of governance. Democratization is a risky process, and democratic development is not certain. Many new democracies face immediate challenges of survival, as governments struggle to maintain constitutional rule and electoral processes that are threatened by conflict, or aspiring dictators waiting in the wings. Over the longer term, there is the important question of how to improve the quality and depth of democracy. All democracies are confronted by the important tasks of broadening personal freedoms; encouraging genuine political competition; promoting the accountability of leaders; resolving conflict; advancing a general rule of law; and building efficient and effective public institutions.

Elections are a crucial factor in meeting these challenges. By creating regular channels for political competition, and furnishing opportunities for citizens to evaluate and change leaders, elections represent a cornerstone of democratic rule. Indeed, open, fair and competitive elections have become a litmus test for distinguishing democracies from other types of governments, many of which would like to claim the label of democracy without honoring its requirements. But "hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue", and without a transparent and accountable electoral system it is impossible to speak of an effective democracy.

General civil liberties, effective and accountable governance, widespread political rights, and checks on the power of government, are all recognized as elements of a developing democracy. Many observers have agreed that 'democracy is more than just elections, but it certainly can be no less than elections.' It is therefore appropriate to focus on the decisive role that elections can play in developing democracy, and the reforms that can help a state to realize the democratic aspirations of its people.

Indeed, elections are such a routine event, that it is easy to lose sight of their importance for democratic development. Elections furnish many advantages for democratic governance. First, the regular cycle of campaigns, voting, and the turnover of government, can be a powerful affirmation of the "rule of the people," often regarded as the foundation of democracy. Competitive elections also provide citizens with political choice. The ability of voters to weigh parties, ideas, and candidates, and to select among them, is an integral part of the democratic process. A well-functioning electoral system offers citizens political alternatives, and permits them to make decisions that express their preferences. Competition and political choice require open access to information, another benefit that accompanies the electoral process. The free exchange of ideas and information through political campaigns, the media, and groups within civil society, offer voters numerous perspectives on public affairs. A vibrant flow of information increases political knowledge, sharpens public debate, and pushes candidates to account for their ideas and their personal record. An informed citizenry can make genuine political choices, and the availability of alternative sources of information gives life to political competition.

Elections provide essential validation for democracy by increasing the confidence of individual citizens in their ability to meaningfully participate in public life. When people feel that their personal interest in politics, and their engagement in elections, makes a difference, they are much more likely to value the democratic system. Elections remind average citizens that they have a stake in politics, and that their continued interest and participation is a vital part of national life. When citizens share feelings of personal political efficacy, this encourages a general sense of legitimacy for democratic rule. The public's view that their system of government meets their needs and aspirations is a basic ingredient for stable and effective governance. Elections are important rituals of democracy

that can regularly confirm and reinforce the legitimacy of the system. Even the “losers” in a contentious election may come away with a basic regard for democracy if they feel the contest was honestly fought and judged. The process can be as important as the outcome. By allowing for a change of leaders, and encouraging broad acceptance of the political process, elections can compensate for disappointments in government performance.

Most new democracies face a set of policy problems – including economic development, reducing poverty, controlling corruption, and managing conflict – that do not allow for rapid progress. Inevitably, the citizens of any country are discouraged by the slow progress of generating jobs, reducing corruption, improving public services, or guaranteeing personal security. However, citizens can be patient with these day to day problems when they have confidence in the legitimacy of their political system. Further, there is much evidence from around the world to show that citizens in democracies are sophisticated in distinguishing between the performance of government and the system of democracy. If there are regular opportunities to criticize or replace leaders, then the public is less likely to blame their economic or social problems on the democratic system, and therefore less likely to have sympathy for non-democratic alternatives such as military or single-party rule.

When elections are significantly flawed, however, most of these benefits turn into deficits, or even threats to the survival of democracy. When the public faces repeated episodes of election rigging, political violence, and disorderly administration, their fundamental trust in the institutions and processes of electoral rule may rapidly dissipate. Without genuine political competition, in which there is a realistic chance that power can change hands according to the will of the voters, the simplest premise of democracy is denied. When the public becomes disillusioned by a flawed electoral process, they are likely to withdraw into apathy or cynicism, sometimes becoming aggravated and militant. These attitudes are unhealthy for the development of a democratic political culture, and can easily create opportunities for non-democratic elements to exercise influence.

Along with the general disaffection among the public, we should take special note of the grievances among minority communities. In every plural society, there are some groups who believe they are marginalized by the political establishment, neglected by government, and excluded from meaningful participation. When democratic governance offers regular channels for expression and choice, minorities are still inclined to accept the political system as the best option for advancing their interests, even if they are not able to attain their full aspirations. In circumstances where electoral choice is compromised, however, their sense of exclusion increases, and aggrieved minorities may become more confrontational in their approaches to politics. Some groups may even turn their back on the political system or seek to part ways with the national community.

A flawed process of elections also tends to shed light on the shortcomings of government performance. When large segments of the public believe that they cannot hold leaders to account, or vote new personalities into government, they are likely to become increasingly discouraged by a poor economy, persistent corruption, crime, insecurity, or ineffective governance. Instead of seeing the possibilities for improving national problems with various leaders over the long term, citizens may come to view these problems as insurmountable. The democratic regime may lose basic legitimacy. The public may become indifferent to anti-democratic challenges, or they may come to accept non-democratic political alternatives.

Elections are central, not incidental, to the course of democratic development. Flawed elections create major obstacles to democratization. Inadequate electoral systems can be improved through serious efforts at reform. The elements of successful reform are generally agreed, but political commitment is essential. Political leaders and elites have a pivotal role in electoral reform. One major source of electoral misconduct is the mutual mistrust among politicians and parties. Civil society has a crucial role to play in electoral reform. The international community must sustain attention to electoral reform. It is important to sustain the commitment of resources and personal energies to the goals of electoral reform in new democracies, and to be as forward-looking as possible in supplying assistance early in the election cycle. Elections are a critical component in democracy. Elections can always be better. We need to focus on the deep-seated problems early, consistently, and seriously.

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