



FOSTERING DEMOCRACY THROUGH ELECTIONS

The spread of democracy around the world has been a significant achievement of our times. Elections sit at the heart of this, making possible the act of self-determination envisaged in the Charter of the United Nations. The Organization's history is interwoven with elections extending back to shortly after its founding, when, in the late 1940s, it observed elections on the Korean Peninsula. During the subsequent era of trusteeship and decolonization, it supervised and observed plebiscites, referenda and elections worldwide. Today, the United Nations continues to be a trusted impartial actor, providing electoral assistance at the request of its Member States.



Referendum in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Voters in Bukavu consult candidate lists outside a polling station. EAD/DPA

The provision of electoral assistance by the United Nations is a team effort involving a number of agencies and departments and is closely regulated by the General Assembly. Electoral assistance is based on the principle established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that the will of the people, as expressed through periodic and genuine elections, shall be the basis of government authority, while also recognizing the principles of state sovereignty and national ownership of elections. To ensure compliance with these principles, the Under-Secretary-General for

Political Affairs advises the Secretary-General on electoral matters.

The Electoral Assistance Division within the Department of Political Affairs coordinates UN electoral assistance work to ensure consistency, responsiveness and efficiency. The United Nations receives an average of 24 requests per year from its Member States for assistance in elections. In addition to the Electoral Assistance Division, support is provided through a number of UN actors, including the United Nations Development Programme, Department of Peacekeeping Operations, United Nations Volunteers, United Nations Development Fund for Women, United Nations Office for Project Services, United Nations Democracy Fund and United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs.

The United Nations Development Programme, for example, spends an average of \$228 million in approximately 45 countries annually to develop sustainable electoral management capacity, foster inclusive participation in electoral processes, particularly of women and other underrepresented groups, and coordinate donor support to electoral processes.



The United Nations also has established relations with governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations involved in electoral assistance, including the European Union, the Organization of American States, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the African Union, International IDEA, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. These relationships provide opportunities for collaboration on electoral support activities as well as for sharing lessons and experiences.



A voter in parliamentary elections in Haiti at the entrance to the Voting Centre in Bel Air, watched by a peacekeeper from the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH).

UN electoral assistance has been a crucial and successful component in peacekeeping, peace-building, and establishing democratic governance. As democracy has spread, so has the role of elections as the means to establish legitimate government. The United Nations has been engaged in elections in all regions of the world, with assistance provided in: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Iraq, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Timor Lester and Yemen – to name a few.

Elections in each country are unique, and reflect an individual country's political and historical characteristics. While no single electoral system is equally suited to all nations, the electoral process must adhere to certain internationally accepted norms and standards. The United Nations therefore carefully addresses each request following a series of steps: official request; assessment; design; implementation; and sustainability activities.

It is recognized that addressing the capacity of an electoral management body in isolation will not necessarily produce free and fair elections. There also needs to be a focus on the overall political environment within which the elections take place. The United Nations therefore also makes efforts to build capacity outside the electoral authorities in order to respond to the imperative to administer free and fair elections. This involves working with voters, the media and civil society, as well as other actors and institutions of democratic governance. Additionally, support is provided for local elections, which can be as important as national elections for the democratic development of a country.

The main goal of United Nations electoral assistance is to support Member States in holding periodic, credible and genuine elections and establishing nationally sustainable electoral processes. Ultimately, the United Nations aims to ensure that Member States have the national capacity to organize future elections with little or no external help.

