REVIEW

Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook
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BACKGROUND

The significance imputed to elections in democratic politics around the world today is vindicated by the burgeoning literature in this field. Edited by three well-known authorities, with contributions from various experts, *Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook* is an updated and enriched edition of the original publication, which was produced in 1997. This handbook is part of the literature that is influencing the debate about the interface between elections and democracy in established and emerging democracies, on the one hand, and restored democracies on the other.

ESSENCE OF THE BOOK

This is more than just an academic contribution to work on the value of elections in nurturing and consolidating democracy. It is, in fact, an interesting combination of academic discourse on and a practical guide to the nuts and bolts of designing electoral systems to suit the peculiar circumstances of each country. It therefore serves two main purposes: it adds to the corpus of academic literature on elections and democratic governance and it provides a tool for electoral engineers to design appropriate systems for countries undergoing electoral system reforms. A concise and easy-to-read handbook, it is divided into six chapters.

Chapter 1: Overview

This background chapter introduces the concept of electoral systems and what they are about and outlines the criteria for electoral system design and the process of change and design components.

Chapter 2: The World of Electoral Systems

This chapter introduces the main families of electoral systems throughout the world, namely: plurality / majority; proportional representation; mixed member; and others that do not fit neatly into these three categories.

Chapter 3: The Electoral Systems and their Consequences

This, the anchor chapter, provides a blow-by-blow description, analysis and illustrations of how the systems introduced in Chapter 2 work. Not only does the chapter provide a comprehensive and comparative account we are also treated to interesting case studies showing how these systems work in selected countries and why some countries have opted to re-design their systems in the quest to deepen their democracy.

Chapter 4: Electoral Systems, Institutional Frameworks and Governance

This chapter provides insights into the direct and indirect interface between electoral systems and governance institutions. Electoral systems are discussed in relation to specific democratic institutions. Frequently, either by default or by design, analysts tend to relate electoral systems to the way in which a particularly national assembly is constituted but there is more to electoral systems than merely the national assembly. In presidential systems the electoral system has a bearing on how a president is elected. Furthermore, electoral systems play an important role in how the upper house is elected; how local government authorities are established or constituted; how provincial/federal/state assemblies are constituted and, equally importantly, how political parties put in place their own leadership structures and conduct their primary elections and nomination of candidates to contest national elections.

Chapter 5: Cost and Administrative Implications of Electoral Systems

It is common cause that elections are a very costly enterprise, especially for developing, emerging or restored democracies, which may be confronted by the triple burden of democracy-building, peace-building (in post-conflict societies), and sustainable socio-economic development, all three of which are often pursued simultaneously. Thus, largely because of poor resource endowment, most emerging democracies and post-conflict societies depend overwhelmingly on external support for their elections. For instance, the general election in the post-conflict Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), held on 30 July 2006, cost an astronomical US$422-million. The international community (especially the European Union) contributed 90 per cent of this amount, while the DRC government was able to contribute a mere 10 per cent. Administration of elections relates to the management of the electoral process including logistical arrangements such as boundary delimitation, registration of voters, production and design of the ballot papers, voter education, the polling process, by-elections, the count, the announcement of results and the election aftermath. Election

administration may seem straightforward and seamless but, in practice, it is bedevilled by logistical nightmares, especially in countries like the DRC, whose general infrastructure after decades of neglect, kleptocratic politics and protracted violent conflict is virtually non-existent.

Chapter 6: Advice for Electoral System Designers

The concluding chapter provides a tool-kit for electoral designers, showing them how to proceed with electoral system reforms and advising on what works and what does not.

RECENT ELECTORAL SYSTEM DESIGN EXPERIENCES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

While elections, on their own, do not constitute democracy, they play a critical role in its existence and sustenance. An election is a process of voting leaders into high office in the various layers of governance machinery. After leaders have been elected, a process of allocating seats is governed by an electoral system. Thus, the system is crucial in determining who gets into office and how seats are shared among competing parties and candidates. Many countries around the world have embarked on electoral system reform and global patterns suggest that the dominant shift seems to be primarily from plurality / majority systems to more proportional or semi-proportional (mixed) systems.

This global trend has manifested itself in Southern Africa where Namibia, South Africa, Mozambique and Angola changed their electoral systems in the early 1990s and adopted the proportional representation (PR) system as part of the political settlement of protracted (and often violent) conflict. While this shift may have sustained and built both democracy and peace in the first three countries, it did not do so in the case of Angola where the 1992 election result was contested and violent conflict erupted once again, with dire consequences for democracy, peace and development.

Angola has not held a general election since 1992. It postponed elections in 2005 and 2006 and is not expected to hold another until 2007. Recently, other Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries have embarked upon electoral system reforms. They are: Lesotho (2002), Mauritius (2002), Zimbabwe (2004), Zambia (2005) and Malawi (2006). Of these only Lesotho has implemented a far-reaching electoral reform package that involves abandoning its plurality system and adopting a mixed member proportional system (MMP), first put to the test in its 2002 elections.

Mauritius embarked upon a reform programme, but the political elite stymied the process because of disagreement about the implementation of the model recommended by a commission led by Justice Albie Sachs of South Africa. Zimbabwe's 2004 electoral reforms amounted to papering over the cracks of the old system, as the reform process dealt only with administrative/logistical arrangements and not with systemic and structural issues. The electoral reform processes in Zambia and Malawi, completed in 2005 and 2006 respectively, are yet to be implemented and implementation will depend on the commitment of the political leadership to the proposals.

CONCLUSION

This handbook is a valuable tool for democracy specialists in academia and for politicians, democracy advocates, negotiators and electoral engineers or designers. The authors advise us that while all reform measures are context-specific and thus cannot be applied uniformly in varying politico-cultural contexts, broad criteria can help guide the electoral system design process. These criteria include:

- ensuring a representative parliament and inclusive government;
- making elections accessible and meaningful;
- providing incentives for conciliation and the constructive management of conflict;
- facilitating stable, transparent and efficient government;
- holding the government accountable and responsive;
- holding elected representatives accountable and responsive;
- encouraging 'cross-cutting' political parties;
- promoting legislative opposition and oversight;
- making the election process cost-effective and sustainable;
- taking into account international norms and standards.

Countries may find that some but not all these criteria suit their own conditions and contexts as they embark upon the reform process.

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