
Supporting Democracy: Preparing Malawi for 2014

ANNA K. MWABA

My current research analyzes the role of regional international organizations in encouraging democratic consolidation in their member states. Free and fair elections are central to the strengthening of democracy, especially for developing countries. As a result, election assistance has been a continued priority for international organizations over the last two decades. Good governance is necessary for addressing other development concerns, specifically, the improvement of health, education and financial sectors. However, the question that remains is whether or not these organizations have actually had an influence on the level of democracy in these countries and how.

This past summer, as pre-dissertation research, I interned with the United Nations Development Programme's Malawi Country Office (UNDP) and was placed on the Electoral Assistance Project. The aim of this project is to provide technical expertise and financial support to the duty-bearers of democracy in Malawi for the years 2013-2016, mainly the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) and the Center for Multiparty Democracy (CMD). This timeframe allows for the development of programs prior to an election and opportunities for the strengthening of the institutional capacity of these domestic organizations. For example, during my time there I was involved in the electoral budget finalization, meetings between political parties as they debated proposed changes to the Political Parties Act and the management of civic and voter education - done in partnership with the European Union (EU), National Democratic Institute (NDI), and National Initiative for Civic Education in Malawi (NICE). I was also exposed to many of the challenges that come with preparing for elections, such as communication issues that arise when dealing with a large number

of stakeholders, funding challenges for particular projects, and perceptions of the international community on the part of the citizenry.

During my time at the UNDP, I realized that the number of participants in election assistance and election observation has steadily risen over the years. Specifically, more regional organizations,



like the African Union and Southern African Development Community, in the case of Malawi, are sending in technical assistants, offering workshops for electoral commissions and creating opportunities for electoral commissioners to monitor other elections in the region. These activities are in addition to having observers present at the elections. This development highlights the importance of understanding the role of these regional actors and if their increased participation is enhancing the legitimacy of the electoral process. Current research does not isolate their effect, as they are often considered to be ineffective or mere instruments of the more powerful

countries in the region. But the reality, as I observed, suggests a degree of professionalization and autonomy that warrants closer analysis.

This experience allowed me to make connections with those involved in the electoral process, ranging from members of the donor community to those being trained to handle voter registration. I hope to return to monitor the elections in May 2014 and use this experience to further investigate the effect of election monitoring in ensuring the freedom and fairness of the electoral process. Being able to assess if there is any variation amongst the different districts will help in answering this question. Going into their fifth multiparty election, Malawi allows for closer examination of the effect of external actors on the democratization process. I am hoping that this case will allow for a better understanding of the relationship between regional international organizations and domestic politics in Africa.

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