

New Approaches for Election Fairness

Lincoln A. Mitchell

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The U.S. Embassy in Georgia recently called on that country to conduct the parliamentary elections scheduled for October of this year in the “fairest possible campaign environment.” The U.S. also restated its commitment to help Georgia in that endeavor. There is nothing particularly unusual about this statement which could have been made in reference to elections in numerous countries with varying degrees of democracy and freedom. The question which this raises is whether or not the U.S. knows how, or has the tools, to make elections fairer in Georgia or other similar countries.

It is also possible that the U.S. does not really want good elections in Georgia, but simply issued that statement because that is the kind of thing which is expected of the U.S. This, however, is unlikely in regards to Georgia where fair elections and stronger democracy are essential prerequisites for the U.S. to achieve its interests. The American goals of bringing Georgia into NATO, and solidifying Georgia’s role as a stable U.S. ally in a tumultuous region would be much easier to achieve if Georgia could demonstrate, particularly to Europe, that it is moving towards democracy.

The U.S. and their European and other democratic allies have two primary approaches to improving elections in countries that like Georgia are neither democratic nor totalitarian and are not enemies of the west. The first approach is to monitor the election. The tools and institutions used for monitoring elections are professional and sophisticated able to not only determine the extent to which an election was free and fair, but to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a particular election. However, these organizations are empowered to monitor elections, not to intervene in them or improve them. Thus, in many cases the primary achievement of international monitoring groups, or domestic monitoring groups supported by western donors is to identify whether an election was good or not. In many cases they are largely reaffirming impressions which were widespread before the election, or documenting how an election which was expected to be bad was, in fact, bad

The second approach is to provide technical support to the country conducting the election. The U.S. government’s statement about Georgia, for example, was followed by a commitment to spend \$1 million to improve the voter lists in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. Similar projects in various countries focus on technical issues such as providing ink to mark voters, purchasing transparent ballot boxes or supporting endless discussions about revising the election law. The problems with these approaches are that they offer answers to problems that are often not very salient or propose technical solutions to problems that are, in most cases, largely political.

The major obstacles to fair elections in countries like Georgia, for example, are not poor voter lists, or lack of quality election equipment, although these are often problems in some countries, but the reality that governments are not prepared to conduct elections in a way that makes it possible that they might lose. Accordingly, technical solutions can only have a limited impact on

election fairness in these countries, but they remain appealing because they are easy to fund and implement and rarely create problems with the government of the country having the elections.

It is not clear that the U.S. is able to influence the degree of election fairness in entrenched semi-democratic or semi-authoritarian regimes, but it is clear that the current approaches are no longer sufficient. The tools which are necessary to push countries to better elections are no longer simply help with election lists and other straightforwardly technical tactics, but include things like concrete political pressure linked to consequences, a willingness to publicly urge foreign leaders to conduct fair elections, and intervene more frequently when government abuses occur in the pre-election period. The politics of doing these things in countries that are allies is very complicated. It is unlikely, for example, that the U.S. government in Washington or Tbilisi is going to link assistance to Georgia, a country that has more than 1,000 troops in Afghanistan, to fair elections, or that leaders of American allies will be publicly chastised for things like arresting opposition activists or threatening opposition supporters, but unless the U.S. is willing to do these things, its ability to push countries to better elections will be severely limited. can be ignored.