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STAFFAN DARNOLF – speaking notes - Moderator of the Third session: What role did the electoral administrations play in ensuring the transparency of the electoral processes during emergency periods and based on the allocated resources

Intro

From the outset i want to make clear that I am a huge fan of election observation.

At the same time, I need to make a confession. I have personally not been an observer since 2002 general elections in Pakistan. So maybe I am speaking out of ignorance here, but I hope not. In my work as an advisor to election authorities for soon 3 decades I have followed the work of domestic and international observer missions very closely. and that is for a very egoistic reason. and that is, if election observation is done right - professionally applying a relevant methodology using both quantitative and qualitative data points - they will make my work easier. Based on the EOM's data, findings and recommendations, electoral assistance provides to EMBs are armed with solid arguments to convince EMB leadership that the just concluded election was not perfect and certain improvements and reforms are actually needed leading up to next election.

And because I value election observation findings so highly and rely on it so my work with EMBs, I am also a critical reviewer of observation methodologies and how these methods are applied by observer missions in the field.

EMBs and Covid-19

During the last 20 months, my colleagues and I at IFES been involved in supporting some two dozen elections. In some instances, elections were held on time and with basically zero adjustments made to COVID while in other cases elections were both postponed and almost transformed. The adjustments were drastic, not just ensuring availability of PPEs for election officials, changes made to voter registration, candidate nomination, voting and results processes to accommodate various COVID protocols, but also EMBs needed to take onboard health-related educational responsibility. It also needed to engage with new governmental authorities it never worked with before. The governmental institutions often had a very basic understanding of the lead times required to organize an elections and therefore Covid-19 taskforces or Ministry of Healths were sometimes very slow in making decisions jeopardizing EMBs abilities to meet legal electoral deadlines. Another challenge in the relationship between the national COVID taskforce and the national election authority had to do with the EMBs independence. As Ministry of Health representatives were sometimes not properly prepared to operate and communicate strategically in a highly politically charged atmosphere, how decisions were made a communicated by Covid task forces negatively impacted upon the perceived independence of the EMB and could have been avoided with better and clearer SOPs and TORs for these taskforces, as these were often more designed from a strictly public health perspective and not integrating the political dimension.

EMBs often took advantage of the additional time given by a temporary postponement of elections by:

- Introducing or expanding early voting solutions

- Improved public outreach by better utilizing various indirect forms of communication, in particular social media
- Altered training methodology of its ad hoc staff and recruited new personnel (web-based trainings, expanded use of videos)
- Revisited procurement processes and instead relied more on local vendors than international procurements

The many changes came at a cost to the EMB:

- increased integrity risks due operating under very different conditions at EMB HQ and field offices
- Costs: as the national treasure lost revenue health-related costs went up and therefore challenging to secure timely financial commitment
- Timely access to PPEs and other critical election material from international market
- With increased reliance on web-based solutions (VR, candidate nomination, training, public outreach, results transmission) comes increased cyber-security risks
- Effectively countering mis/disinformation about new procedures and how EMB would secure voters, parties, observers AND its own staff was often a challenge.

Observers and Covid-19

To what extent has observers been able to fulfill their roles and functions during Covid-19? I think the answer has three distinct components:

1. Observers' ability to be physically present and observe the various electoral processes. At least for many international observer missions this proved challenging due to travel restrictions, as well as restrictions on the ground in host countries
2. As EMBs introduced new web-based solutions, be it web-based poll worker training, display of VR online instead in registration sites, or enhanced early/absentee voting solutions observer missions did not always have access to these new online services thereby limiting their observation surfaces
3. However, even in countries where EMBs have made efforts to integrate observers and granting them access to both the old and new electoral processes undertaken under Covid-19 conditions, EOMs have sometimes faced a challenge: how to objectively measure to what extent the observed elections conducted under Covid-19 conditions met international standards.