

Authoritarianism Goes Global

ELECTION MONITORING VS. DISINFORMATION

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Over the last thirty years, nonpartisan citizen election monitoring has spread to more than a hundred countries and involved millions of people. It is a tangible and sustained aspect of democratic development, and it poses a serious challenge to autocrats bent on electoral theft—a challenge that autocrats are devoting considerable resources to addressing.

The fountainhead example of monitoring by citizens is the work that the National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) did in stopping Ferdinand Marcos from stealing the 1986 presidential election in the Philippines. More than a half-million NAMFREL volunteers turned out to safeguard their fellow citizens' votes that year, and the group has monitored more than twenty national and other elections since. Inspired by NAMFREL and early efforts in Latin America, the Balkans, Africa, Eurasia, and the Middle East, citizen election-monitoring organizations and coalitions in scores of countries came together, often with help from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and its programs in peer-to-peer experience-sharing and best-practices development. Many such organizations can now boast decades of hard-won experience in promoting accountability and citizen participation not only at election time but also when it comes to the conduct of other political processes, the activities of parliaments, the delivery of public services, and more. Citizen election monitoring is not only generally accepted today, it has enhanced democratic political culture in many countries.

Ties have grown across borders and spanned the globe. More than two-hundred citizen election-monitoring organizations from eighty-four countries, along with the regional networks that these groups have organized, belong to the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors

(GNDEM). All GNDEM members endorse the Declaration of Global Principles for Non-Partisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations and its Code of Conduct, launched at the UN Secretariat in 2012. This document provides a professional and ethical basis for citizen organizations that wish to monitor their country's elections. Sixteen key international organizations support the declaration, providing international recognition for citizen election monitoring's critical role in promoting electoral integrity. Organizationally, GNDEM provides a means for credible citizen election-monitoring groups and regional networks to share knowledge, show solidarity, and create peer-to-peer accountability for their activities.

Although examples of international election observation can be found as far back as the middle of the nineteenth century, the practice became truly widespread much more recently, as the "third wave" of democratic transitions began washing over the globe after 1974. The collapse of the Iron Curtain and the fall of brutal one-party, military, or personal dictatorships across substantial swaths of the globe brought a rise in elections that is with us still. While most transitions produced a desire for genuine elections, in some countries ruling factions do not really want to abide by the people's will. However, even they feel obliged to allow voting of some sort if only for appearances' sake. In these regimes, fakery is often part of the electoral package. This places a crucial responsibility on election observers, domestic and international alike. The credibility with which they do their work has benefited from its integration with international human-rights fact-finding principles under the influence of the 1984 Guidelines for International Election Observing and related methods that some organizations have elaborated and shared.

As post-Cold War transitions advanced, the sanctioning of international election observation became a common practice of sovereign states. Although it is not yet universal, it is now widely recognized as central to the task of holding genuine elections in the developing world. An increasing number of traditional democracies have opened their own elections to international observation as well, which is further evidence of its becoming a norm. A wide variety of international election observers may be organized under the auspices of the UN or a number of other institutions. These include: regional and other intergovernmental organizations, associations of parliamentarians, international nongovernmental organizations, regional networks of citizen election-observation organizations, scholarly groups, delegations from political parties that have affinity with one or more of the parties that are competing, and diplomats accredited to the country holding the elections. Foreign governments also send observer delegations to elections.

Many elections are witnessed by a multiplicity of international observers, not all of whom operate with the same rigor, consider the crucial role of the election-related processes that come before and after the

day or days of actual voting, or have the same level of commitment to political impartiality. This diversity can lead to international election-observation missions that issue differing views of the same election, sometimes resulting in confusion. Autocrats not only try to exploit such confusion but actively try to *create* it through a variety of tactics—and they have shown themselves willing to devote weighty resources and remarkable levels of ingenuity to these efforts.

Key election-observation organizations—each one known for politically impartial and rigorous observation activities—launched at the UN Secretariat in 2005 the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and its Code of Conduct (known collectively as the Declaration of Principles or DoP). Now endorsed by 49 intergovernmental and international nongovernmental organizations, the DoP has spawned an ongoing implementation process that focuses on boosting cooperation, knowledge-sharing, and peer accountability. Three UN General Assembly resolutions have recognized the DoP and its implementation process for making the practice of international election observation more consistent. That practice, however, is still well short of *fully* consistent, largely because there are so many international observers and their motives vary.

Observation findings by one or more of the DoP-endorsing organizations are likely to influence both the people of the country where the election was held and the international community. Not surprisingly, autocratic or other corrupt regimes will often strive to subvert credible international election observation in order to blunt its impact.

Shining a Light into Elections

Citizens have a right to genuine elections, and they have a right to know whether elections are genuine. The mere avowal by those in power that an election has been truly and fairly conducted and its votes properly counted requires blind-faith acceptance, and that is not a basis for *democratic* citizenship or genuine elections. In order to be confident of an election's authenticity, citizens must be able to see into the various processes that compose it.

As a practical matter, multitudes of citizens cannot be expected to inspect personally each aspect of an election's many complex and large-scale processes. These include the registration of voters and parties and the drawing of electoral-district boundaries as well as the final tabulation and publication of results, not to mention the adjudication of disputes and the regulations governing campaigning and its financing, the use of media and public resources, and so on. Instead, the "eyes" of the citizenry when it comes to elections are those who make this their mission: national and international journalists, citizen monitors, international observers, scholars who study electoral integrity, and the agents

of electoral contestants. It is they who, to change the metaphor, shine a light into elections and their workings. All these light-shiners must in turn establish their credibility with the citizens, but that task can have meaning only when transparency is present. Fact-based analyses and relevant findings depend on the ability to witness processes and to access electoral data in a timely fashion.

Electoral transparency, in other words, is not a nicety. It is absolutely and inescapably fundamental to genuine elections. Just as citizens need enough accurate information to make an informed choice in voting, so do they require accurate information about the character of electoral processes in order to vest authority in governments that result from elections. Put another way, public confidence in elections is essential to public trust in government. Moreover, that trust is important for the governmental stability that elections are supposed to buttress.

The international community has a stake in electoral integrity for reasons of peace and security. Elections are meant to resolve peacefully the contest for state power, and dubious elections all too often become flashpoints for strife. The charters of the UN and regional organizations, along with other treaties and agreements, provide a foundation for election monitoring and describe a legitimate international interest in whether a country is meeting its obligations to respect and promote fundamental rights in this area.

Incumbent governments, with few exceptions, are duty-bound by their constitutions and solemn international commitments to deliver genuine elections to their citizens. Governments also have an obligation to protect and foster the right to seek, receive, and impart information (the elements of freedom of expression), which reinforces the requirement of electoral transparency.¹ This obligation holds whether those seeking to acquire and transmit information are journalists, citizen election monitors, agents of electoral contestants, scholars, or international election observers.

Another fundamental aspect of genuine elections that supports monitoring is the precept that every citizen has the right to take part in public affairs without discrimination or unreasonable restrictions.² This broad democratic principle reinforces the essential role of citizens in monitoring elections, whether as journalists, scholars, members of civic groups, or agents of electoral contestants. To close electoral processes and information to witnesses is to block participation. Election monitoring—and electoral credibility—thus depend on “open government” and “open government data” policies.³ Governments that want to count as democratically legitimate must provide the transparency needed to verify electoral integrity and bolster public trust.

Some governments and ruling parties, however, may become bent on extending their power irrespective of the people’s will. They will seek to manipulate electoral processes even as they deny transparency in order

to avoid the stigma of illegitimacy. Blocking transparency is akin to a criminal cover-up. Witnesses must be avoided, prevented from testifying, or discredited. Distractions must be created and smokescreens generated to conceal the facts—in efforts to spread public confusion and make accountability less likely. We should expect authoritarians to be inventive when creating tactics for negating genuine elections while hiding what is really taking place. Their goal, after all, is not only to manipulate the electoral process, but to be able to claim legitimacy while doing so.

Disinformation and Subversion

When the UN General Assembly approved the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the world had only a handful of democracies. Yet member states voted unanimously, with only eight abstentions, to adopt the Declaration, including Article 21's democratic precepts.⁴ Since then, the number of democracies has soared, and there is now a widespread expectation that countries will hold genuine elections. There is also a general acceptance internationally that the participation of domestic and international election monitors is part of that norm.

Gaining the “democracy” label matters for a country's status in the world. So too, therefore, does the classification of a country's elections as genuine rather than phony. Zimbabwe, for instance, was suspended from the Commonwealth for holding violent, repressive elections in 2002, while Pakistan's 2007 suspension ended after its 2008 elections were deemed credible. Fiji was suspended from the Commonwealth in 2006 for failing to call elections and was reinstated after its 2014 elections were deemed credible.

Intergovernmental organizations beside the Commonwealth also regard the holding of genuine elections as obligatory.⁵ The European Union, the United States, and other democracies take into account whether a country holds true or phony elections, albeit at times in a lamentably inconsistent way. When commenting publicly on elections, U.S., EU, and other officials often cite reports from credible monitors, as do major news outlets. Anyone seeking to distort or fake an electoral process, therefore, must worry about the findings of credible election monitors.

In recent years, a perception has spread that the West, driven by economic woes and terrorism fears, is placing less emphasis internationally on democracy and human rights. Whether or not staging sham elections has become more tempting as a result, autocratic and autocratic-leaning regimes still often go to considerable lengths to cover up their electoral corruption and dishonesty. These efforts at camouflage add up to a tacit admission by autocrats that they are obligated to hold genuine elections, and they know it.

The motives for manipulating electoral outcomes vary. Incumbents in

one country may truly fear defeat in a free and fair polling. Incumbents in another may justifiably expect that they will win based on popularity or name recognition alone (especially if the opposition, civil society, and the media have all been stifled), but clientelism or some other corrupt feature of authoritarian rule may give them an incentive to pad their totals by dishonest means. In either case, successfully hiding the manipulation will require subverting credible election monitoring by national and international organizations as well as journalists.

As for the means of theft, elections can be stolen in many ways. Electoral processes are not one-day events. They include many components that occur over a long period of time and involve a wide array of governmental institutions and a range of rights and responsibilities. How the processes surrounding an election are conducted reflects something broader: the respect (or lack of it) that a government and those who are vying to control its powers have for the citizenry. Election monitoring, when credibly conducted, highlights both the positive and the negative—the good news and the bad about how an election was carried out—casting the electoral environment into higher relief in order to promote the cause of democratic accountability.

An election's integrity hinges on a diverse array of processes. These include, for example, the procedures that are used to document the birthplaces and residences of prospective voters and candidates, and also the larger-scale, data-intensive methods by which the accuracy of the voter registry is verified, the fairness of electoral-district boundaries is gauged, and the tabulation of results is checked for accuracy. The freedoms of political expression and organization must be secure. State-controlled media must remain impartial, the use of state financial and other resources must be politically neutral, and those charged with administering the elections must be not only impartial but competent. Law-enforcement and security forces must remain alert, effective, and outside the political fray so that parties and candidates can freely compete—and citizens freely vote—without fear of violence or retribution.

Electoral integrity also depends on courts and administrative complaint mechanisms that act in a timely, effective manner when election-related rights are infringed or electoral abuses committed. This illustrates how equality before the law and equal protection of the law are related to universal and equal suffrage. Removing barriers that keep women, young people, and other marginalized populations from taking part is at the core of genuine elections. Enfranchisement requires inclusion without discrimination or unreasonable restriction. Inclusion, transparency, and accountability underlie genuine elections, and indeed democratic governance more broadly.⁶ Tampering with even one of these pillars of genuine democratic choice can be enough to turn an election into a sham. Election monitoring must therefore look to all of them, taking care lest autocrats distort, undermine, or counterfeit any of them.

Although no election can be perfect, positive indications across the range of election-related processes point to the presence of a democratic political dynamic, including respect for human rights and citizens' freedom to make political choices. Autocratic tactics and authoritarian governance can gut the genuineness of elections by reducing inclusiveness, transparency, and accountability, just as authoritarians can steal an election by falsifying results or—should fraud fall short—refusing to accept the voters' verdict.

Denials of access to election-related processes and the government-held data needed to assess their credibility are classic authoritarian stratagems. Such moves typically coincide with efforts to disable and disempower journalists, civil society groups, and the political opposition. News outlets may be targeted for control, social media blocked, choruses of support for the tainted elections orchestrated, public-relations firms hired, and both domestic and international monitoring efforts attacked.

Credible Monitoring in the Crosshairs

Nonpartisan election monitoring by citizen organizations—when these groups are credible and enjoy proper support—assesses a country's electoral processes in a way that is both methodical and reliable. Such assessment efforts are conducted in local languages and with knowledge of a country's political culture. They can extend over the long electoral timeline while mobilizing and training the large numbers of people needed to scrutinize key processes. They can detect electoral manipulation or other deficiencies in elections, highlighting problems and promoting public confidence where warranted. Would-be election-fakers must outsmart, block, or otherwise subvert credible citizen election monitors. Others need to know how to distinguish credible, effective monitors from those who are feckless or biased.

Autocrats' tactics against citizen election monitors resemble those meant to weaken civil society more broadly. They include denying access to information and producing laws and regulations that run counter to the standard that rights are to be protected and promoted without discrimination or unreasonable restriction. Examples include laws concerning domestic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that make it impossible or very difficult to gain and maintain legal status, or that ban the monitoring of electoral and political processes. Foreign funding or even technical assistance to NGOs may be banned as well. Electoral regulations may be written or interpreted in ways that are intended to block NGOs from witnessing key processes or that limit the number of observers so that credible groups may be kept from entering polling stations or other facilities. Individual monitors may be hit with overly onerous qualification requirements, including accreditation fees or a de-

mand that all prospective monitors report in person to the capital city or a handful of other places that are burdensome to reach—a ploy meant to stop the monitoring effort from covering the whole nation.

Abuse of law enforcement is another arrow in the authoritarians' quiver. Offices may be raided under various pretexts, with NGO leaders, their staffs, and even relatives hauled in for questioning and put under unwarranted surveillance. Prosecutors' offices may be bent to the task as well, bringing cases under repressive NGO laws, tax laws, or even criminal libel laws. The personal and financial strains imposed by raids, interrogations, subpoenas, or even false imprisonments can disrupt monitoring efforts and deter citizens from joining them. False imprisonments of election monitors rank on an autocratic roll of shame alongside the illegitimate jailings of other human-rights advocates, independent journalists, and peaceful oppositionists.

The intimidation of credible monitors may begin with threats to have them fired from their jobs or to take away their children's scholarships, and can even escalate to physical violence. Monitors may find themselves being refused entrance to or kicked out of polling places or other facilities, with harassment at the hands of the regime's minions tossed in for good measure.

A thorough autocratic regime will accompany its street assaults with online and other electronic attacks. Telecommunications systems—including the Internet and social media—may be shut down at critical times to stop citizen monitors, journalists, and electoral contestants from making known their findings. A wise citizen-run monitoring group will brace itself for cyberattacks and other disruptions before, during, and after election day.

The spread of disinformation through state-run media both old and new is essential to authoritarian attempts to control the electoral narrative. Reports asserting the credibility of manipulated electoral processes will be broadcast in extended profusion while critical reports go unmentioned. Rumors and false accusations impeaching the motives, efficacy, and veracity of genuine monitors will also fly through these state-dominated channels.

The Rise of the Zombie Monitors

As citizen election monitoring has spread and become an accepted part of genuine elections, autocrats have begun to create phony election-monitoring organizations. Like state-run media and the government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) that authoritarian regimes have set up to confuse and obscure the broader civil society environment, these “zombie” election-monitoring groups spin rosy but fake narratives about what are in fact manipulated election processes. All three—the state media, the GONGOs, and the zombie monitors—seek to obscure the

findings of credible monitoring efforts with clouds of rumors and phony charges. As is the case with government-created shadow political parties and candidates, the bogus groups often assume names that are very similar to those of credible monitoring organizations.

Citizen election monitors encounter these abuses in countries ranging from Azerbaijan to Ethiopia and Egypt to Venezuela. As with similar measures used to weaken civil society organizations more generally and to suppress the media, the use of these tactics across numerous countries indicates that autocratic regimes are learning from one another.

Credible international observers may be targeted in some of the same ways as their local-citizen counterparts. Data denial is popular among autocrats even as open access to government data is becoming established practice. Thus, both domestic and international monitoring groups may find themselves barred not only from entering facilities, but also from consulting census data, voter registries, maps of electoral-district boundaries and polling-place locations, or material on the workings of election-related technologies, such as voting machines. Refusing or failing at the timely release of polling-station vote counts and only announcing voting totals is a favorite means to hide fraud, while technology advances belie excuses for the denial.

Regimes may manipulate legal procedures to degrade observation efforts. Officials can “forget”—or openly refuse—to invite intergovernmental organizations to send international election-observation missions; can withhold accreditations from credible organizations; or can limit numbers so that people from such organizations are too thin on the ground to be effective. Or officials may move so slowly on necessary approvals that key electoral processes escape independent assessment. Sometimes the trick can be as simple as issuing invitations and promising accreditations—thereby *seeming* to cooperate with credible monitoring—only to have mysterious “visa delays” gum up the works.

Again, like credible domestic observers, credible international observers may be subjected to intimidation and threats of violence, perhaps as officials conspicuously “look the other way” rather than ensure the protection of law. International observers’ impartiality and professionalism may be impugned by regime mouthpieces and rumor-mongers intent on confusing world and domestic opinion while distracting credible observers from their tasks. Other regime ploys may aim at creating conflicting characterizations of the election in domestic and world media.

One way to sow narratives that favor the ruling party and sap credible monitoring of its force is to invite “friendly” delegations to see the elections. Members of sibling political parties, affiliates of allied governments, and well-known individual supporters of the incumbents are used to fill the ranks of observers. The idea is to stage an election-observation mission that leans in favor of the ruling party at least enough to weaken prospects for a critical report.

Autocrats also sometimes work to capture or enfeeble otherwise credible observer missions by influencing their personnel appointments. “Mission-stacking” may not suffice to secure the fabrication of wholesale favorable findings, but autocrats can still hope that it might cause the watering-down of an unfavorable report or divert an observer mission into extended internal debates and departures from established election-observation principles.

Not quite rising to the level of attempting to manipulate observer missions but akin to it is the practice of having prominent but naïve foreigners—politicians including former members of the U.S. Congress and European Parliament, election commissioners, or other well-known figures—tour the country as the government’s guests at election time. They witness positive (and carefully chosen) electoral developments, then offer public comments that receive heavy play in all state-run media. The term “zombie observers” was originally coined to describe such reputable but deceived individuals.

A regime that can afford public-relations firms can hire them to mount campaigns of disinformation and diversion. The methods can be as overt as major media advertisements (some governments favor full-color magazine or newspaper inserts printed on slick paper), or as subtle as quiet “charm offensives.” These may feature personal visits by leaders and friends of the regime to Western capitals, behind-the-scenes lobbying, or the promotion of discourse about the country that does not dwell on the elections as such but focuses on how important the country and its stability are to Western economic or strategic interests.

Three Recent Cases

Three recent cases illustrate how election-rigging and cover-up tactics are being used. The first is that of Azerbaijan’s October 2013 presidential election, which returned Ilham Aliyev to the presidency for a third five-year term with a reported 85 percent of the vote. The OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) was the only prominent international mission allowed to observe various election processes, though it observed election day together with the OSCE’s Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE-PA). The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and a delegation from the European Parliament (EP) also observed but only focused on the election day. Normally, those groups would join the OSCE bodies in a joint preliminary statement immediately following the election. This time, however, a split developed. The OSCE bodies focused on a sharp preelection crackdown (which undermined freedoms of expression, association, and assembly), as well as ballot-box stuffing and counting irregularities. The PACE and EP delegations presented positive findings.⁷

Aliyev’s government apparently maneuvered to stack the PACE and

EP delegations, and brought in sympathetic observers from friendly sources, including other ex-Soviet republics. In order to reinforce upbeat claims about the integrity of the balloting, the government orchestrated the presence of foreign election commissioners. They were shown selected polling stations and invited to comment publicly on what they saw. Public-relations firms in the pay of the Azerbaijani government also worked throughout the electoral period and beyond to paint a rosy picture.

At the same time, journalists and citizen observers had been targeted for intimidation. Azerbaijan's Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center (EMDS), a credible citizen election-observation organization and GNDEM member, had seen its overseas funding cut off. Then, following the election, the head of EMDS and two colleagues were hit with trumped-up charges of tax evasion, illegal business activities, and abuse of authority. An Azerbaijani court gave Anar Mammadli, the head of EMDS, five and a half years in prison, while Bashir Suleymanli and Elnur Mammadov got three and a half years each. Their real "crime" was having had the temerity to report truthfully on elections in their country. As of this writing in May 2015, Mammadli remains behind bars; Mammadov's sentence was suspended, and Suleymanli was released approximately ten months after his false conviction. Other human-rights defenders, journalists, bloggers, and more have landed in jail as the Aliyev regime has continued a broad crackdown on civil society and political opposition.

When Zimbabwe's government held July 2013 elections for the presidency and the bicameral Parliament—our second case—the only international observers allowed came from the African Union and the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). Zimbabwean authorities blocked U.S. and EU observation efforts, and President Robert Mugabe warned SADC observers that Zimbabwe would pull out of the SADC if it "decides to do stupid things."⁸ (Zimbabwe had withdrawn from the Commonwealth after being suspended for the repressive 2002 elections.)

Although the 2013 polling proceeded more peacefully than had the bloody 2008 elections, opposition supporters were systematically disenfranchised in huge numbers by either being denied registration or being turned away on election day. The disenfranchisement and high incidence of "assisted voting" (that is, accompanying the voter to help mark the ballot) undermined the credibility of Mugabe's claim to a landslide 61 percent and his ruling party's lopsided majorities in the two houses of Parliament. Yet the SADC observers made positive pronouncements.⁹ The head of the African Union delegation offered glowing comments to the press¹⁰ in advance of the more nuanced official statement that came from the AU mission as a whole.¹¹ By contrast, the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN)—a credible citizen election-observation

coalition and GNDEM member that mobilized 7,099 monitors on election day while keeping key processes under long-term study and assessment—had severe criticisms of the electoral process.¹² Echoing these strictures was the 80-member observer team from Botswana, which formed part of the SADC mission but put out its own statement contradicting the SADC’s sunny findings.¹³ The earlier and more positive statements overshadowed the ZESN and Botswanan criticisms, however—a testament to the Mugabe regime’s grasp of how important it was to “seize control of the narrative” and get its story out first.

The third case is that of Venezuela, where credible election monitoring by international and citizen sources has been undermined at least since the 2008 regional elections. Citizen election observers who accept foreign funds face fines. The permitted number of citizen observers is limited, and the way in which credentials are distributed between what electoral authorities call “pro-Chavista” and “pro-opposition” groups makes it extremely difficult for credible observers to deploy to the representative sample of polling stations that they must observe in order to perform sufficiently precise statistical analyses of electoral-process quality. The incumbent regime, meanwhile, makes a point of inviting friendly regional organizations such as the Council of Election Experts in Latin America (CEELA) and more recently the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), with every expectation that they will make positive statements about the voting and the larger electoral process.¹⁴ Between the regime’s refusals, restrictions, and scheduling decisions, the OAS, the EU, and the Carter Center have all found themselves effectively blocked from observing Venezuelan elections.

When President Hugo Chávez died of cancer on 5 March 2013 without a permanent constitutional successor, the government organized the vote to replace him on April 14, leaving insufficient time for international organizations to arrive and mount observation missions. Foreign witnesses, individually and in small clusters, were present for the voting, which very narrowly favored Chávez’s handpicked successor, interim president Nicolás Maduro. The opposition candidate, Henrique Capriles, demanded a full ballot audit, the implementation of which he later denounced as bogus. The small OAS delegation that was present for election day noted the official results and supported a full recount, while the UNASUR delegation saluted the democratic spirit of the polls and called for respecting the result.¹⁵

Piercing the Fog

It is important to identify the tactics that autocrats use to fog the electoral environment so that their subterfuges can be exposed and accurate electoral assessments can be seen clearly. Citizens, national and international journalists, international and domestic election monitors, diplomats, and others all have roles to play in this effort. Elec-

toral contestants themselves must learn to defend electoral integrity by documenting abuses and using evidence-based approaches to seeking redress, just as electoral authorities need to assert independence and integrity. These efforts reinforce and advance the norms and standards for genuine elections, improving the efficacy and integrity of election competition, administration, and monitoring. They also support those facing autocratic hostility and pressure.

Promoting democratic norms is essential to countering authoritarian resurgence. As democratic electoral practices gain ground, autocratic tactics will become harder to hide. As most countries embrace wider transparency, including access to important election-related data, efforts to block witnesses and deny information will stand out in starker relief. As the beachhead of accountability expands, providing redress to those who have seen their election-related rights abridged and justice to the violators, impunity for autocratic abuses against candidates and voters will be broken down. As barriers to participation are leveled, autocratic techniques of disenfranchisement will be more easily countered. Making such advances takes time and must be approached in the unevenness of national circumstances.

Both citizen monitors and international observers will need to continue countering authoritarian learning with democratic learning and innovation. Methods must be improved: Manipulation takes place across a spectrum of electoral processes, so long-term monitoring and systematic countertechniques must be employed. Credible international observers should take seriously constraints on their ability to perform tasks such as evaluating the quality of key processes that take place months before election day, or weighing the efficacy of certain electoral technologies. This highlights their need to improve cooperation with credible citizen monitors. Citizen election monitors, in turn, can benefit from cooperation with credible international observers, who can bring attention to their findings and help keep open their space to operate. Both international observers and citizen monitors should also seek out others—from civil society, the media, election authorities, and reform-minded sectors of officialdom—with whom relationships can be built to serve political impartiality and electoral integrity. Such multisided interaction is needed to pursue electoral and broader democratic development, including follow-up on observer recommendations.

Networks, regional and global, should be reinforced so that peer learning, the sharing of innovative techniques, peer-to-peer accountability, and solidarity actions can be further developed. This is particularly important for citizen election monitors, who operate in many countries and often cover electoral and political processes that extend beyond and between elections. Public communications efforts need improvement as well. Credible citizen monitors and international observers should

concentrate on getting accurate findings to the public as quickly and responsibly as possible whether through various social media, infographics, videos, or other communications technologies. When it comes to countering false narratives, timing is critical.

Supporting those who work to prevent and expose authoritarian electoral maneuvers is essential. Citizen monitors in many countries can use direct help in the form of systematic monitoring methods and sophisticated communications techniques, as well as aid in making their organizations stronger. Global and regional peer networks have untold potential to provide such assistance and to build solidarity.

Media freedoms are essential to genuine elections, democracy, and countering rising authoritarianism. The media—broadly defined to include bloggers, citizen journalists, and social-media users as well as more traditional press outlets—provide a safeguard for electoral and governmental integrity when they operate ethically. The media’s watchdog role makes them a part of credible election monitoring and gives them a responsibility to cover credible citizen monitors and international observers as well as to expose zombie and phony observers.

International and domestic media should learn how to distinguish credible citizen election monitors and international observers from GONGOs and zombies, and should report on the broader electoral context rather than just election day. Identifying organizations that endorse GNDEM’s Declaration of Global Principles for citizen election monitors and those that endorse the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation provides a fundamental starting point. Journalists, scholars, and others should “monitor the monitors” and document the dealings of phony election observers as well as the efforts of public-relations firms and lobbyists in major capitals to spread fog over authoritarian electoral theft. Proper information can cut through the fog of disinformation.

That information must be accurate and credible, and its circulation must be timely. Only then can the true nature of an election be illuminated. That is how public confidence is established and political volatility is reduced—it is also how chicanery is exposed.

The world’s democratic actors, including governments, are being challenged. Authoritarians have made a priority of controlling the narrative concerning their elections—and more—by blocking or suppressing truth-tellers and fogging the scene with disinformation.

Do democratic activists and democracies have the resolve to cut through the fog by supporting real election monitoring and calling elections by their true character? Genuine stability, like democracy, is about much more than elections, but both depend on elections being credible.

NOTES

1. See Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 19 and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 19.

2. See UDHR, Article 21 and ICCPR, Article 25.

3. See, for example, Open Government Guide, “Elections,” www.opengovguide.com/topics/elections.

4. The abstentions came from the three USSR voters, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Yugoslavia.

5. See the Inter-American Democratic Charter; the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance; the OSCE’s Copenhagen Document; and Article 25 of the ICCPR.

6. Patrick Merloe, “Human Rights—The Basis for Inclusiveness, Transparency, Accountability and Public Confidence in Elections,” section 2 of “Promoting Legal Frameworks for Democratic Elections,” NDI report, 30 September 2008, www.ndi.org/files/2404_wv_elect_legalframeworks_093008-3.pdf.

7. Compare OSCE International Election Observation Mission, “Republic of Azerbaijan—Presidential Election, 9 October 2013: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions,” Baku, 10 October 2013 (www.osce.org/odihr/elections/106901?download=true) with Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, “Presidential Election in Azerbaijan: Joint Statement by PACE and EP Delegations,” 10 October 2013 (www.assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/News/News-View-EN.asp?newsid=4699&lang=2&cat=31).

8. See “Mugabe Threatens Sadc Pullout. . . Labels Lindiwe Zulu ‘Street Woman,’” *News Day* (Harare), 6 July 2013, www.newsday.co.zw/2013/07/06/mugabe-threatens-sadc-pullout-labels-lindiwe-zulu-street-woman.

9. See the SADC mission’s statement at www.sadc.int/files/4313/7545/6616/FINAL_Preliminary_Statement_of_the_SADC_Election_Observer_Mission_to_the_July_31_2013_Zimbabwe_Harmonised_Elections_as_at1148_on_August_02_2013.pdf.

10. “Zimbabwe Poll ‘Free and Peaceful’ Say Obasanjo and SADC,” BBC News Africa, 2 August 2013, www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-23546050.

11. See AU observation mission’s preliminary statement on Zimbabwe’s 31 July 2013 elections, <http://pa.au.int/en/sites/default/files/Final%20Copy%20Preliminary%20Statement%20Zimbabwe%202013.pdf>.

12. See the Zimbabwe Election Support Network’s report on Zimbabwe’s 31 July 2013 elections, <http://263chat.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/ZESN-2013-Advance-Harmonised-Election-Report.pdf>.

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14. “International Observers Report Their Findings from Yesterday,” 15 April 2013, www.democraticunderground.com/110813210.

15. See Organization of American States, “Insulza Salutes Civic Spirit of Venezuelans and Supports Recount Proposals,” press release, 15 April 2013 and “Declaración de la Misión Electoral de la UNASUR,” 15 April 2013.