

PRESS BRIEF

Sudan's Elections

What the Observers/Monitors Didn't See

"The ultimate question is whether any consensus exists on common standards, and how relevant are the variations or deviations, considered from an international law perspective. 'G.S. Goodwin-Gill, Free and Fair Elections, Inter-parliamentary Union, Geneva 1994.

The EU and Carter Center observer missions in Sudan have concluded – in their preliminary findings – that the Sudanese Elections (11-15 April 2010) did not comply fully with international standards. Other monitors and observers have been more generous in their assessment (IGAD observers, for example, considered the elections credible); but, in compliance with the popular Sudanese wisdom that says: "Do not listen only to the one who makes you smile," we comment on the EU and Carter Center assessment. What these observers (whose honesty we do not question) have missed are the historical and comparative perspectives.

A comparative perspective, juxtaposing Sudan's elections to the regional context, would give Sudan an A+ in peaceful and transparent polls, run by an independent commission (not by a government ministry).

A historical perspective would have reminded the observers that the Electoral Law that reserves 25% of seats for women is an exception on an international scale.

A historical perspective would also have reminded the observers that it has taken centuries for genuine democratic procedures to strike root in the USA and Europe. In 1832 the first British Reform Act increased the eligible electorate from half a million to 750,000 out of 24 million. Full universal suffrage including women was only achieved in 1929. Full suffrage including women was achieved in France in 1945. Some Swiss women got the right to vote in 1991.

In the USA, African Americans, Chinese, Yiddish speaking Jews and others were disenfranchised for a long time in different states even after 1964 in some cases.

Irregularities in registration, voting and counting were responsible for embarrassing delay in the USA 2000 presidential elections (but nobody opined that the result didn't fully comply with international standards.)

A comparative perspective would also have drawn the attention of the observers to the multiple hybridity of the Sudan. Afro-Arab, with a hybrid AU-UN force in Darfur and a hybrid electoral system which includes both First past the Post and Proportional Representation features. The small parties and minorities are guaranteed representation. This is important in a multi-cultural – multi ethnic country in which conflict was fuelled by the non-recognition of unequal development between the centre and periphery.

Observers and monitors from the EU and the Carter Center were invited, despite the fact that "international law does not require any State to submit its electoral process to a system of international "validation", according to Inter-parliamentary Union approved research. Sudan will invite both in the future too, hoping that they bring with them their historical and comparative contact lenses next time.

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