

Election Problems Tipsheet

By Doug Cospers

Many conditions must be present in order for an election to be judged “free and fair.” It is difficult and sometimes dangerous for journalists to try to observe election irregularities. International election monitors are the best source for reporting election problems if they are invited to observe elections. Some of the problems that trained election observers watch for are listed below. This tipsheet was prepared from more extensive lists contained in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) “Election Observation Handbook.” The handbook is available on line at www.osce.org.

Observing Pre-election Period

- Confusing or unfair election law.
- Confusing or unfair process of filing election complaints.
- Election commission that is not fully independent.
- Poor planning or equipment at polling places.
- Unfair restrictions, banning, suspension or deregistration of parties or candidates.
- Discriminatory practices in voter registration.
- Confusing ballots.
- Inadequate safeguards at any stage of the ballot distribution process.
- Campaign violence.
- Detentions of candidates or campaign workers.
- Reports of intimidation or harassment of candidates or campaign workers.
- Interference with campaign meetings or rallies.
- Lack of transparency in campaign funding or spending.
- A campaign too brief to enable parties to organize and convey their messages.
- Unequal treatment of parties or candidates by the media.
- Intimidation, detention or harassment of journalists.

Observing Election Day

- Violence or disturbances.
- Intimidation of voters.
- Presence of uniformed police or local government officials in or near the voting area.
- Campaign material in the polling stations.
- Delayed openings or early closing of polling stations.
- Failure to check voters' identity.
- Failure to ensure the secrecy of the vote.
- Multiple voting.
- Ballot box stuffing.
- Presence of pre-marked ballots.
- Unsealed ballot boxes.

Observing the Vote Count

- Ballot box stuffing after the polls close.
- Ballot box switching.
- Adding marked ballots after the opening of the ballot box.
- Unauthorized people such as police or local government officials at the counting place.
- Exclusion of polling station officials or observers.
- Arbitrary invalidation of ballots cast.
- Loss of ballots or ballot boxes.
- Insecure storage of ballot boxes.
- Insecure transport of ballot boxes to the counting place.
- Dishonest counting of the ballots.
- Lack of transparency in counting process and recording of final results.