

WHY OBSERVE ELECTIONS?  
REASSESSING THE IMPORTANCE OF CREDIBLE ELECTIONS  
TO POST-CONFLICT PEACEBUILDING

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The success of a peacebuilding process depends on many variables ranging from social and economic issues to the fostering of truth and reconciliation initiatives. However, for the past two decades the buzzword in peacebuilding has been “democracy,” and within international democracy assistance, few instruments have been as well-funded or had such a clearly visible impact as election observation. This article focuses on the unique relationship between elections, democracy, and post-conflict peacebuilding. More specifically, it reassesses the importance of credible elections to post-conflict peacebuilding and the multi-faceted ways in which international election observation missions (IEOMs) can support a nascent peace process. This article examines IEOMs on both a strategic level (why democracy and elections are important to peacebuilding) and on an operational level (the benefits and challenges experienced at ground level). It is contended that IEOMs are an essential element to peacebuilding, but that their promise can only be fully realised if several policy shortcomings are addressed, not least the necessity to acknowledge a distinction between IEOMs conducted in post-conflict environments and those conducted under more peaceful conditions. More fundamentally, it is paramount that IEOMs are recognised as only one element of wider post-conflict democracy assistance. Indeed, unless a broad definition of democracy is embraced, the potential of credible elections as a prime contributor to post-conflict peacebuilding will be critically undermined.

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