



PARLIAMENTARY FORUM
ON SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS

Policy Statement on Nonviolent Transition of Power

Board of the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons,
meeting in San Salvador, El Salvador, May 28-29, 2011

The space for authoritarian regimes and dictators to commit atrocities, use violence against their citizens or with impunity violent human rights has narrowed down significantly in recent years. New communication technologies and the media development have had an important role when it comes to providing the international community access to information regarding conflicts and human rights abuse. In addition, the framework and international consensus to protect international law and human rights has made important steps forward with the establishment of the International Criminal Court and the principle of the Responsibility to Protect. All this, has improved the safety and security of individual in relation to authoritarian or oppressive regimes.

Consequently have conditions for democratic demonstrations and non-violent actions to make political change improved through these new technologies and political developments. It has empowered people and positive examples can be shown from the Middle East and North African region at the moment.

As a fellowship of parliamentarians, the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms should always take a clear stand for people's right to democracy, justice and human rights. We stand by the rights of people living under oppression, to identify their methods for making change. Nevertheless, we have to recognize that authoritarian regimes almost always have superiority in military hardware, ammunition, transportation, and the size of military forces, compared to the opposition.

Nonviolence can therefore be the most useful, or only realistic, alternative for political change in many cases. Nonviolent transitions of power use peaceful means to challenge an authoritarian structure and create a more open political system. It involves a political strategy that utilizes peaceful and indigenous social power, rather than armed and foreign based force. Force emanates from organizing and mobilizing large numbers of prodemocracy groups, in order to produce, not reduce, social conflict.

Nonviolent methods also have a better chance of enhancing domestic and international legitimacy and encourage more broad-based participation in the resistance. While governments might be able to justify using violence against armed protests, regime violence against nonviolent movements is more likely to counter-productive in the eyes of the international community. The presence of a cohesive nonviolent civic coalition during the period of transition can also have a significant effect on democratic durability which can be enhanced when the opposition does not itself use violence.

Electoral violence

An authoritarian regime which has been overthrown and replaced by a democratic system is in itself no guarantee that the electoral process will run smoothly and non-violently. Both candidates and citizens might still resolve to violence during the election process.

Preventing and mitigating electoral violence, is closely linked to building the capacity of key institutions that participate in and manage the electoral process. In particular it is important to strengthen a country's electoral management, the structure which is legally responsible for managing the elements that are essential for the conduct of elections, and of direct democracy instruments – such as referendums, citizens' initiatives, and recall votes – when applicable.

Mature democracies and countries that experience well run, free, and fair elections rarely experience election violence due to the trust citizens have for the process. Independence, impartiality, integrity, accountability, transparency, and capacity of a country's electoral management body, can ensure that elections are better run and hence less prone to violence. Up until the Election Day, it is helpful if voters can be educated on the importance of voting and through largest possible political unity, be encouraged not to support candidates or parties that resort to violent tactics.

A country's security forces, police or military, are critical to preventing and extenuating electoral violence, particularly as they have the ability to directly initiate or exacerbate this violence. International security forces, on behalf of the United Nations, are sometimes available to provide security and transparency for elections. For countries holding elections immediately following conflicts, such international security forces might be necessary to ensure a peaceful transition. In the long-term, however, countries must provide their own security so as to establish national ownership of the electoral process.

Objectives

The Board of the Parliamentary Forum of Small Arms and Light Weapons, meeting in San Salvador, El Salvador, on May 28-29, 2011;

Recognizes the right for all people living under oppression to identify their methods for democratic and political change;

Understands link between nonviolent transition of power and democratic durability;

Denounces all use of military force against non violent civilian demonstrations;

Acknowledges the problem with violence at elections and the risk it proposes to democratic institutions and the population;

Recommends the members of the Forum and their parliamentarian colleagues to call for engagement from civil society organisations and the media in order to understand and, when applicable, offer support for various methods of nonviolent transition of power;

Supports international presence, such as peacekeeping missions on behalf of the United Nations, in order to provide electoral processes where needed;

Encourages the members of the Forum and their Parliaments to support involvement from civil society organisations at elections, such as election monitoring, voter education, anti-corruption groups and political party training structures in order to prevent violence at election and violent transition of power;

Urges the members of the Forum and fellow Parliamentarians to raise awareness about and support electoral capacity building, both within their own countries but also by helping other countries in need;

Mandates the Secretariat to follow the international debate and outcome on violent and nonviolent transition of power in the world and, if appropriate, provide information to the Forum members.