Observing Democracy

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Introduction

I became involved in election monitoring almost by chance. After expressing a personal interest in observing the Palestinian elections in January 1996, I was subsequently called upon as an area expert to participate in the observation mission. Previous commitments precluded my deployment as a long-term observer for three months so I ended up being deployed as a medium-term observer for four weeks. Since then my involvement has increased dramatically and in addition to Palestine, I have to date either observed or been involved in elections in Bosnia, Yemen, Mali, Liberia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) and Uganda. My involvement in Yemen, however, had the additional component of introducing a voter education programme for women. In Uganda, I was involved in a voter education training programme for the Electoral Commission. I shared my experiences and observations of other elections and advised on the methods and techniques that are most effective and most commonly used. However, of the seven missions in which I have so far been involved, my two favourites have been the Palestinian and Yemeni elections. Perhaps this is due to the cultural affinity I share with the people of both

these places. I shall be elaborating on my experiences there further on in my account. I will also describe some of my experiences in Liberia.

Election observation has mushroomed in the past 15 years or so with the global spread of democratisation, and the holding of elections has become the principal means by which crises in the modern world have recently been managed. Election observation means that a country intending to hold elections invites an international organisation (such as the EU, the UN, the OSCE, the OAS, etc.) to send an international team of experts to observe and pronounce on these elections. It is important to remember that an invitation by a government to have its elections observed does not signify an endorsement of the process. Moreover, the simple presence of international observers does not legitimise the election exercise. After a thorough review of the entire electoral exercise, the organisation responsible for observing the elections issues a report on its findings. If the report is favourable, then the country is given a clean bill of health. Otherwise, the elections are either criticised or condemned and a re-election is required. Because it can have serious repercussions, the final report usually avoids making stark judgements on the election exercise. Rather, it tries to strike a balance between the scale of irregularities and their proportion to fairness.

Whether this ever growing 'democratic' format of governance provides the ideal or best solution for all countries is as yet uncertain. In any case this account is not an analysis of the benefits and shortcomings of international election observation missions. Nor does it seek to compare and contrast international observes with domestic observers. Rather, it is an attempt to share some of my experiences as an international elections observer and illustrate them with various anecdotes collected along the way.

Election Observation: Duties and Responsibilities

International Election Observers fall into three categories: long, medium and shortterm observers. The long-term observer is responsible for observing every aspect of the electoral campaign - from the pre-election period to the counting of the votes. Medium-term observers also

have a large array of responsibilities although their time-frame is not as extensive as that of the long-term counterparts.

During the pre-election period, observers have a myriad of responsibilities. They must check the electoral lists, report on their compilation, publication, errors, complaints and the appeals process. They also assess the electoral commissions, the selection of its members, the degree of communication between the Central Electoral Commission and the other commissions on a lower level. They report on the nomination of candidates and assess the adherence to correct procedures, complaints and the appeals process. Observers are also responsible for reporting on the campaign - the extent of freedom of expression, meetings and rallies, access to and use of the media - always on the lookout for equality, balance and impartiality. They have to report on prohibited campaign activities, funding and complaints.

Observers increase considerably in number with the deployment of the short-term observers who usually arrive a few days before polling and depart a couple of days after the election. They report on the impartiality and competence of the polling station electoral commissions, the accessibility and size of the polling stations and the security of the delivery of the polling materials. They also report on the presence, accreditation, activities, and complaints of party representatives as well as those of the domestic observers. They observe and report on the polling procedures which involve observing the opening of the polling station, checking identification, the signing of electoral lists, the provision for those voting other than the places in which they are registered, the provision for voter secrecy, the presence of security personnel, voting provisions for the elderly, the disabled or the illiterate, the use of and security for 'mobile' ballot boxes, and the observation of the close of polling.

The next step is to observe the conduct of the count and report on the presence and activity of candidates and party representatives, the completion of the protocols, the transport of files and materials from the polling stations to the Constituency Commissions, and to the Central Electoral Commission. They observe the aggregation of the votes and everything up until the announcement and publication of results.

Liberia, June - August, 1997

It is not easy to observe elections, particularly if you're a long-term observer. However, the mission of the long-term observer, although the most challenging, can also be the most rewarding. It offers you the opportunity of being involved in almost every aspect of the election exercise and for getting a feel for what the situation is really like. I was a long-term observer with the EU in Liberia for the August 1997 elections where I spent almost two months. I had a fascinating time attending political rallies, meeting many of the candidates and dealing with the various members of the Electoral Commission. I also ran into one of my relatives whilst I was shopping at a supermarket. He turned out to be the owner! As I found out, the Lebanese community in Liberia is very important - if not exactly well liked. Almost all the services such as supermarkets, laundries, restaurants, hotels, tailors, haridressers, printers and patisseries are in the hands of the Lebanese. Their number has dwindled considerably but their influence is still great. I felt it necessary to downplay my roots whilst on that mission laying emphasis instead on my Euro identity.

My duties were multiple and varied. In addition to attending political rallies and working alongside the Electoral Commission, I reported on the nomination of candidates and on the campaign. I also had to report on the situation of the polling stations. I visited almost every polling station in Monrovia - for which I had overall responsibility. Some were inadequate at best. They were in straw huts that leaked whenever it rained - which was almost every day as the elections were scheduled for the rainy season. At times, the staff, although dedicated and courteous, lacked adequate training. This was mostly the case during the period of registration. As I was touring the various centres, I noticed that many of the thumbprints were smudged, in purple dye, and only on one page of the registration roll. In theory, the thumbprints (for the illiterate) have to be clear, in black ink and reproduced in triplicate. I was also getting many complaints that the ink was insufficient which surprised me. It turned out that the staff were using the indelible ink (introduced in order to prevent multiple registration) to take thumbprints instead of the black ink which was also provided. The indelible ink was ill-suited for such a

task as it does not reproduce well. This also meant that there would be no 'signature' on the registration papers during the exhibition period where registration can be challenged. Of course I could not undo what had been done but could only prevent it from happening again.

The registration period was followed by an exhibition period. This is the time to make changes, challenges and amendments to the electoral register when the register is on public display. On my daily visits I came across some astonishing experiences. One exhibition centre was located in a open air sports stadium where there was absolutely no place to exhibit the roll. As a result it was entrusted to the person in charge for safekeeping who in turn refused to show it to anyone whose name was not on the register-ruling out the possibility of any challenge. In other places the register was not displayed for fear that it may be vandalised. In some schools the register was exhibited in a locked room to which no one had access.

As a long-term observer, I had to take care of the deployment plans of the short-term observers (STOs) for Monrovia. The responsibilities of a short-term observer are mostly technical in nature - to observe and report on the polling and the count. STOs are flown in, briefed, then immediately deployed. Their observations are then collated, analysed and used in the formulation of the final report. In my experience I have found short-term missions the least exciting although this is the part of the observation mission on which the media focuses most. I was a short-term observer both in Bosnia and Mali and even though I found it interesting, I also found it frustrating because it is too narrowly focused and the time is too short. Although participation in short-term missions does allow you to gain knowledge on the technical aspects of an election, you never really feel involved in the electoral politics of the country. Indeed, often the reports of short-term observers do not tally with those of the long-term observers mainly because irregularities seldom take place on polling day. Election day is usually well organised and properly managed. It should certainly not be the day on which the entire assessment of the electoral exercise rides. As was usually the case, election day in Monrovia procceded smoothly and efficiently. It was well organised and the queues were properly managed. In some few instances

the illiterate were taken advantage of by the head of the polling station who was telling them to put their thumbprints near the picture of one particular candidate. At other times the soldiers fo ECOMOG (the military organisation reponsible for keeping the peace in Liberia) were intervening in the process in a manner that far exceeded their mandate.

After the elcections were over and the EU mission was winding down, I asked my driver to tell me what the city had looked like before the war as it was hard to imagine Monrovia as a vibrant metropolis. He assured me that the city was at one time very nice, then pointed to a burned-out shell of a building and told me that it had just been completed before the war broke out and burnt it to a cinder. Then he added 'Charles Taylor did this'. I looked at him with resignation and replied 'The people have just voted him in as their President'. He was silent for a few minutes then looked at me and said 'Charles Taylor killed my Mammy and my Papa and I voted for him. This is because I want peace for me and my children and we would have had war if he had not been elected'.

Palestine, January 1996

I arrived in Palestine with the rest of my colleagues on the British team on 2nd January, 1996. We all had to undergo a three-day training and briefing in Bethlehem along with the rest of the various teams of the member states that make up the European Union. The palestinian elections were held undr the auspices of the European Union but other non-EU states participated in the observation mission including Egypt, Norway, the United States, Canada and China! Moreover, the EU in Palestine was acting as coordinator of the various observers from the EU (300) and other international organisations, countries and NGOs (360). Also present was a delegation from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the Carter Center on behalf of the United States.

At the end of the third day we were informed of our areas of deployment. Observers are usually kept in the dark about their destinations until the last moment in order to thwart any special requests to be deployed in specific areas. I was told that I would be stationed in Gaza - with three other members on the British team. We took a bus from the Ambassador Hotel in East Jerusalem where we had been staying to the

Erez border crossing which separates the Israeli state from the Gaza Strip. At the border we all had to get out of the bus, take our luggage across the border, put them onto another bus with special Gaza license plates and drive into the Gaza strip. In the pursuit of our mission we were allowed total freedom of operation but were prohibited by the EU from visiting any Israeli settlements. We were given two sets of accreditation cards-one in Hebrew and the other in Arabic - to facilitate our passage through the various checkpoints.

Once in Gaza we were deployed in teams of two, mixing sexes, nationalities and areas of expertise. I was teamed up with an Italian long-term observer seconded by the Italian Foreign Ministry with considerable experience in election monitoring. Together we were responsible for the city and the refugee camp of Deir el-Balah in the district of Gaza Middle.

Each morning began with a formal political and security briefing and ended with a debriefing in the form of a written report on the most important findings of the day. These briefings were conducted by the members of the Electoral Unit in Gaza and their summaries were then transmitted to the head office in Ramallah. At the end of our morning briefing we headed off in pairs and desinged our own agenda for the day. Our first daily visit was usually to the District Electoral Commission. There we would be given most of the election paraphernalia as well as relevant information on the location of polling stations, dates and times of political rallies, voter education and training workshops, addresses of the candidates, etc.

We interviewed every candidate that was on the list in our constituency. One interesting obesrvation we made very early on is that we were seldom alone whilst conducting the interview. We felt that this made them less candid in expressing their views or complaints. However, many would call us once they were on their own and voice their concerns. Some complained about harassment or intimidation by the police force which was theoretically supposed to remain neutral. The security forces were also accused of taking down the banners of non-Fatah candidates, ripping their posters off the walls, and putting their security cars and vans at the disposal of Fatah members. Fatah candidates always enjoyed

greater access to the media and many non-Fatah candidates were denied the air time which they were due.

We attended political rallies whenever we had the chance. We had to check for equal access, for the illegal use of public or religious buildings, and for the use of banners - whether there was any intimidation to have them taken down, etc. Party rallies usually ended with a question and answer session so it was a good way of assessing the electorates' awareness and level of understanding, as well as a means of gaining insight into their personal concerns and needs juxtaposed against the burning political issues of the time. We also attended several Hamas demonstrations but were never in any danger. The only time we were formally prohibited by the EU from circulating in the city and attending any rallies or protests was immediately following the assassination of the Hamas activist Yahya Ayash - also known as 'The Engineer'. A few days later when we were allowed to resume our functions, many people commented on our absence. They were surprised that we had kept such a low profile and assured us that we would never have come to any harm.

We also attended a number of voter education classes. There were many in the run-up to the Palestinian elections - much more than in any of the other elections which I observed. They were either in the form of seminars, or workshops of mock elections. Many of the voter education sessions were organised by IFES (International Foundation for Electoral Systems) and the Central Elections Commission. They were sometimes held in the remotest of places but were informative and well presented. The classes I attended were all-women workshops but my colleague was allowed to participate. Even though we never witnessed any overt attempts at prapaganda during such sessions, we heard rumours that the majority of instructors were Fatah members and were only using the names of Fatah candidates in their examples. There were also radio messages and advertisements in the newspapers but no video clips on television.

the slogan for the Palestinian elections was 'Xs in Boxes'. Initially there was fear that it would cause much confusion. An 'X' in the Arab world generally signifies 'No' - something (or someone) to be rejected. The most common symbole for a 'Yes' is a tick. Yet in the Palestinians

elections an 'X' meant 'Yes' and a tick was invalid. Thus the 'Xs in Boxes' theme was one of the most recurrent in the voter education classes. In the end the fear was unfounded as very few of the ballots counted in Gaza Middle had a tick and there were very few spoiled ballot papers. This was probably due to the effectiveness of the voter education classes.

Polling Day

The climax of any observation mission is polling day. Election day is usually a very long day which normally lasts over 24-hours. The day before the election each team maps out its route deciding on which station to open and which one to close and supervise the count. The plan usually changes during the course of election day and the decision is taken to close the polling stations that are most problematic. Observers also have to be present at the polling station before it opens. This allows them to determine whether the station has opened on time, whether all the members of the polling board were present, and whether any of the voting materiel was missing. It also offers them the opportunity of witnessing that the ballot box is empty!

Polling itself took place on Saturday 20th January, 1996. Voting was supposed to commence at 7 am and the crowd for that time of day was impressive. The queues were chaotic and disorderly but there was much enthusiasm. Women of all ages were patiently awaiting their turn; some were even nursing their babies in the queue. There was a small delay in the opening one of the polling stations because the official seal required to stamp the ballots and the envelopes was missing. This delayed the opening time by only half and hour - but they made up for it by extending the voting period by half an hour at the end of the day.

A problem that arose early on during polling day had to do with crowd control. Soon after voting had started the polling stations were overflowing with people and the crowds were pushing through the doors. The voters and the police force co-operated in facilitating our entry into the various polling stations. Indeed, without such help it would have been virtually impossible to get through. The police were inside the polling station - which was technically against the law - but it was clear

that on this occasion they were there to ensure order and not to intimidate the voters. When benign irregularities take place observers have to use their judgement before deciding if they are grave enough to warrant a complaint. In one polling station, for example, the President was eager to prove to the observers that the law was being followed. Each time illiterate voters were helped to vote, the President would read back to them the names of the candidates for whom they had voted within earshot of all those present in the polling station. This was done in order to ensure that they had not been taken advantage of. But in so doing the secrecy of the vote was completely undermined. Under such circumstances the President in told about the drawbacks of his method and is advised to reassess his strategy.

However, there were other irregularities of a more serious nature such as the quasitotal disregard of voting booths - particularly by women. Women would be huddled together around the tables conferring with one another before a mass decision was made for which candidate to vote. This was regularly reported to the President of the polling station who then intervened and imposed order - if he was strong enough. Other serious irregularities had to do with helping the illiterate. the law stipulated that an illiterate could be aided to vote by a person of his or her trust. Moreover, the aide could extend their help only once. But many were taken advantage of and were tricked into voting for particular candidates. Some women belonging to the dominant political party were seen to have aided tens of illiterate women before they were finally thrown out of the polling station.

Other problems had to do with the inadequate location of the polling stations. In one area of Deir el-Balah four polling stations were set up in an open air vegetable warehouse. Makeshift voting booths were made up of tomato boxes - inadequate at best for the task at hand. By 4 p.m. the crowds had overwhelmed the vegetable warehouse and virtually no voting was taking place. A unilateral decision taken by the president of one of the polling stations to stop the vote in his polling station almost caused a riot. Old men and women who had been queuing since the early morning were shouting. My partner and I were surrounded by a huge angry mob and we had to call for support. Soon afterwards one of the

strongmen of the area appeared and promised that voting would resume after the 40-minute suspension provided the queues were orderly. Voting resumed in an orderly manner but the role played by the security forces went far beyond their remit. They were actually handing out ballot papers, stamping them and helping the illiterate who seemed far to outweigh the number of literate voters. Voting in these four polling stations ended at 10 p.m. - far beyond the 3-hour extension provided for by the law.

When the last person had voted the sorting of the envelopes began. The Palestinians had to elect a President and members of the Council. The Presidential ballots were placed in red envelopes and the ballots for council members were placed in white envelopes. Often, the wrong ballot found itself in the wrong envelope so the envelopes had to be sorted before the count could begin. When the count finally started it was close to midnight. The members of the polling station had decided to pause for dinner prior to the count since the next day was Ramadan and they had to work all night.

Counting the ballots in an open-air vegetable warehouse at midnight in January in Gaza did not provide ideal conditions. People were tired and it was freezing cold. The members of the polling board were nodding off in the middle of the count and they had to be nudged awake by their partners from time to time. At the end of the count, at about 4 a.m., a van with three policemen drove into the vegetable warehouse, took the ballot boxes of the polling station where the voting had been interrupted, put them in the van, covered them with a blanket and sped away! Polling day had ended in Deir el-Balah.

After this anti-climactic finale which we were powerless to stop (observers have no mandate to intervene), we headed to the Electoral Commission to follow the aggregation of the votes. We had worked out a shift early on in the day and our turn came up at 4 a.m. We followed this critical stage until about six a.m. but by then we were exhausted. At the end of our shift we went back to the hotel to prepare ourselves for the debriefing session in preparation for the final statement.

The final statement is always subject to many considerations - many of them political. The statement is not written by the observers but their

written observations theoretically should form the cornerstone of any report. The preliminary statement is usually followed up with a lengthier report where details of irregularities are highlighted and recommendations offered. However, by the time the final report is issued attention and interest has usually waned. In this respect the final statement can be much more important.

The final statement of the EU regarding the Palestinian elections was blurry enough to hint at irregularities yet without condemning the election outright. In the end re-elections had to take place in some areas - one of which was the area of Deir el-Balah where the ballots had been spirited away.

I was very fortunate to have had the opportunity of witnessing the Palestinian elections first-hand. In a way my Lebanese nationality was an asset: it made candidates more willing to express their concerns. Moreover, the fact that I was Lebanese and a woman made the women much more open and forthcoming. We were always made to feel welcome wherever we went. But being Lebanese did have its drawbacks. I was always expected to take sides. I was pressed to make political assessments even though that was against my mandate. I was also supposed to act as a trouble-shooter and an intermediary between the European Commission and the various members of Palestinian society. If anything went wrong I would be personally be blamed and would be expected to resolve the problem immediately. One of the candidates of Deir el-Balah uttered a very revealing remark when we had finished interviewing him. As he was introducing us to his guest who had just arrived he mentioned that we were EU observers and made a snide comment to the effect that the Lebanese are here to teach us about elections and democracy. The irony in his voice did not go unnoticed and in a way, he was right. Still, being a British citizen as well made me feel slightly more credible that my Chinese colleagues!

Yemen, February - June, 1997

As mentioned above, my involvement in Yemen was not strictly in terms of an international elections observer although I also had full accreditation for such a mission. In Yemen my main responsibility was

to make use of my previous electoral experience to introduce and implement a voter education and awareness campaign targeted at women in the southern Governorate of Hadhramaut. The reason why Hadhramaut was chosen was due to Britain's historical ties with the southern region, in addition to the fact that the focus of foreign and local interest is mostly on Sana'a and the north. This made the southern region a more attractive and virgin area of study. The reason we chose to target women was because 50% of the population cannot be ignored in any project aimed at encouraging democracy. In the light of the role that women play in raising and nurturing new generations, their involvement is crucial if changing societal prejudices and creating a more equitable society is ever to be achieved.

The project was fascinating but controversial - fascinating because the country's unfortunate geographic location in a region not famous for holding competitive elections or upholding democratic traditions made Yemen's own experiment of dabbling with democracy a challenge in itself; controversial because any involvement in the political life of a country by outside institutions is usually perceived as political intervention. Indeed, we were initially treated with some suspicion and our task was made even more difficult with the decision of some local actors to boycott the elections. Thus to be involved in a project on a topic that was ipso facto rejected by some parties was seen as partisan. To be encouraging the women electorate actually to go out and vote was perceived as an intolerable interference in the affairs of a sovereign state. Although we were aware of the significance of our actions and the interpretations they engendered, we nevertheless decided to proceed as planned.

The voter education project we devised was based on the findings of an attitudinal survey undertaken to assess the peoples' knowledge of the electoral process. One thousand questionnaires were distributed equally amongst men and women. The survey covered as wide a cross-section of the Hadhramaut as possible in terms of area (rural and urban), education (literate and illiterate), socio-economic status (rich and poor), location (north and south) and gender (male and female). The immediate objectives of the survey were to evaluate voters' attitudes towards

women's participation in the elections in that Governorate in particular; to provide the project with an accurate picture of voters' ideas about different components of the electoral process; to try and gauge the intentions of female voters on election day; to identify the position of men with regard to women's participation; to create an accurate picture of local conditions and expected responses to the proposed campaign; and to prepare the ground for the design and launching of the voter education compaign. The more general objective of the survey was to enable us to quantify the extent and nature of the democratic transformation of the society in general.

The questionnaires differed slightly between men and women. With regards to the men, in addition to gauging their main sources of information and their knowledge of the electoral system, we also wanted to find out the extent to which they were liable to influence the decisions of the women in their family. Their reactions were not always helpful. Five percent of them actually tore up the questionnaires. The women were more co-operative and easier to work with. Three per cent more women than men filled and returned the questionnaires. The fieldwork was undertaken by men and women from the Hadhramaut itself.

The results of the survey were very revealing. There was a stark difference between how the men perceived the women and expected them to behave politically and how the women perceived themselves and their political involvement. In general, of the women who had actually registered, more of them had intended to vote than their male counterparts had believed. Most relied on the audio-visual media as their main source of information. More women relied on television whereas a greater percentage of men relied on the radio. A considerably higher percentage of men relied on the newspapers since the illiteracy rate amongst women in general is extremely high. Finally, with respect to their knowledge of the polling process, there was scant knowledge of the mechanics of the election (segregated polling station, symbols for the candidates, help for the illiterate, etc.). As for the nature of the election itslef, a third of women respondents were unaware that the April 27th elections were for the parliamentary assembly.

The Campaign

Based on the results of the survey, a four-pronged approach was adopted that would allow us to address as many gaps as possible. The first approach was to produce an audio cassette. This idea stemmed from the fact that recorded cassettes are the primary means of communication used most frequently by the illiterate. Cassettes, in fact, are the recorded equivalents of letters and are a familiar and accessible format. So the aim was to produce an audio cassette with several components: a poem on the elections written and read in the Hadhrami dialect by a Hadhrami poet; this poem would also form the basis of a song played by a 13-piece band and sung by a Hadhrami singer. The cassette also had a dialogue where people of various corss-sections of society exchange information about the elections, stressing participation and some technical aspects of the process based on the survey findings.

The approach was the production of a short 30-second video clip emphasising the existence of segregated polling stations the secrecy of the ballot. The aim of the short video was that a repetitive and frequent transmission of the same short message produced in a quick editing format would be more successful than a longer programme. For different version of the video were produced each with different lyrics and music from the song. The video was broadcast on national television since there is no local television in Hadhramaut.

Since the results of the survey considered the radio to be an essential source of information particularly for women, the cassette was designed in such a way as to enable excerpts of between 8 and 10 minutes to be broadcast unedited onto the radio. Excerpts of the cassette were broadcast on the local radio stations in Mukalla and Seyoun.

The fourth approach was through the placement of adverts in the national newspapers. Each advertisement was a full page still image from the video which was accompanied by an appropriate verse from the poem which changed every day. The title of the advertisement each day was the same title as the audio cassette and song.

It was hoped that this unified approach would help maintain a link

between the four components of the project. By using the song in all the various formats we hoped to create a strong identification with the campaign and a unifying theme throughout.

Project Evaluation

The project was evaluated by the same teams who had conducted the original attitudinal surveys in the same original constituencies. From the returned questionnaires it was clear that most respondents were reliant upon the audio-visual media for their information, citing television as the primary source. It was encouraging to know that almost all of those questioned had heard the tape and understood the message. The tape was apparently played on loudspeakers during many electoral rallies, distributed and exchanged amongst friends, and played in cafes. The television clip was not as widely viewed as we had hoped as competition for air time was intense in the immediate pre-electoral period. The newspaper ads proved very popular. The simplistic but strong imagery of the adverts made a very stunning image and tied in well with the music and video cassettes.

Electoral Conclusions

In a wider sense, the participation of women in the election in the South was dependent upon a number of variables such as the political boycott and social constraints on their pariticipation. But probably the most important impediment to real female participation in the electoral and political processes in Yemen is the pervasively high rate of illiteracy which serves as a psychological and physical obstacle to pariticpation. Indeed, from our own observation of the voting process in the Wadi Hadhramaut, women were not only largely ignorant of the process - struggling to comprehend the ballot paper and how to fill it in - but were not in possession of the skills needed to participate independently, making them susceptible to undue influence and monitoring by interested parties. In some of the polling stations I visited on election day large groups of women were sitting on the floor, ignorant of the entire exercise, not knowing what to do and in many instances unable to hold a pen. The polling station was chaotic with no semblance of voter secrecy

and it was only after the polling staff had noticed my presence in the polling station that they attempted to inject some modicum of order to the voting process. The polling staff were helpful and friendly when I spoke to them but many of the women electorate present in the station could not answer the very basic questions I had asked them. Some polling stations were totally empty and the records showed that very few had actually voted by the time we'd arrived in the early afternoon. Other polling stations had a group of women praying but it was unclear whether they had voted or whether they had any intention of voting. The may have found the polling station a convenient shelter from the scorching sun.

Thus a longer term effort to educate the people on the mechanics of voting needs to be undertaken for the next elections. Existing education by the authorities tends towards the rhetoric extolling the virtues of unity and Yemeni democracy without really addressing its needs. Democracy in Yemen is young and operates in a region which not only lacks a western-style democratic tradition but is largely hostile to it. Strengthening the rule of law and ensuring greater accountability is still a necessity that is somewhat laking. So in the middle and long terms an increase in qualitative participation is of utmost importance to Yemen in order to strengthen the democratic process. Key to this development is the need to address illiteracy in Yemen among both men and women as well as to explain to the rural population in particular how national representation is able to translate into tangible practical results for the population as a whole. It is in the main the misunderstanding of that essential point in democratic representation that is responsible to the apathy with regarding participation in the elections.