

THE ELECTION OBSERVER EFFECT

2008 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Excerpts from Publication “Elections in Belize: The Naked Truth

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Observing the Observer

As Election Day drew closer, Belize was undergoing something of a crisis, whereby anything goes in the Media. It resembled more a feeding frenzy, and prompted one to question the role elections play in the consolidation of democracy. In the midst of all this the Government of Belize undertook the bold step to invite International Election Observers to the 2008 Election. International election observation has become an important mechanism for ensuring election integrity and enhancing the credibility and legitimacy of elections (ACE, September 2006). While it enjoys almost universal acceptance, international election observation is conducted during an exceedingly sensitive period in the existence of that country and its people, and due to limitations only a snapshot of the political culture is observed (Brahm, Sept. 2004). This was the first election observer mission to Belize and the Commonwealth Secretariat was the Observer Group so invited. The Commonwealth Team consisting of five persons including two staff persons were deployed on a short term mission, arriving approximately four days prior to Election Day.

The outcome of the Mission came in the form of a Report some five weeks after the 2008 Election. The Commonwealth Observer Team’s Report concluded that “*Belize enjoys a mature democracy and a well-functioning electoral process*” that “*...voting and counting were carried out efficiently ...*” and that “*...the 2008 General Election were credible.*” The Report offered seven bullet-point recommendations “*...for improvements to the electoral structure, process and environment....*” Three of these are directly related to the status of the election management bodies. The recommendation is for one expanded, independent body with the Chair being appointed from among the members. Three observations on the Report merit highlighting, looking at the broader expanse of competitive electioneering, election management bodies, and the practice of election monitoring in deepening democracy in Belize.

Firstly, the Report’s release some five weeks after a fiercely competitive Election was untimely for three primary reasons as listed below.

- Election Observer Missions are perceived as one arbiter in the outcome of an election
- Information becomes less relevant with the passage of time
- Timeliness is an element of good governance

Good governance principles mirror many essential elements of democracy and one aspect of transparency is timeliness. Nation states such as Belize invite independent monitoring bodies primarily to witness the legitimacy of the election and to determine such or not, must be conveyed in a timely manner. As a result of the tardiness of the Report, coupled

with Belize's election history, the statement of credibility by the Commonwealth Observers was a non-statement and quickly became politically irrelevant (Palacio, 1993; Election Reports 1999 to 2003).

Secondly, the challenges with the EMBs have been publicly highlighted from 2005 at a conference sponsored by the Commonwealth Secretariat (Palacio 2005); and while improving on Belize's electoral management body is nothing short of a legal and administrative transformation, the Commonwealth Observer Report made some specific recommendations. To date, and mid-way into the term of the current government, these recommendations have been disregarded. Having more than two-thirds majority in the House of Representatives, this government has the political power to make the transformation, even for reasons of rectifying what they modified in 1988/1989. Instead the election management bodies are now wholly politicized as asserted above. But why ignore the recommendations of the Observers and politicize the election management bodies, when the UDP as opposition campaigned for and won the 2008 Election on a platform of good governance practices? This leads on to the third observation.

Thirdly, the Report singled out the Association for Concerned Belizeans (ACB) a relatively new NGO, as the organization that "*mounted a very strong campaign for a fair and transparent election*". The only justification made in the Report was that the ACB pushed to ban cell phones from the Polling Stations to deter bribery. Bribery is defined as the offering, promising or giving of something in order to influence a public official. On assuming power, the new Government afforded positions, awards and contracts to the Leader and other members of the ACB. For example, one member was appointed Governor of the Central Bank, and the Leader was appointed Chair of the Social Security Board. Later, there were more appointments and awards to the Leader, which included: Corporate Secretary to Board of the now Government owned Belize Telemedia Ltd., with the son as Board member; awarded with an unusually large number of Government's high profile cases to the tune of approximately \$1.5 million dollars to date (House Meeting, February 19, 2010; www.channel5belize.com, Feb. 10, 2010). Is this bribery?

As defined, the term "promising" is futuristic, and bribery can come in many forms, pecuniary or non-pecuniary. Also according to the literature non-pecuniary forms can involve favourable publicity to one side versus the other. Was this the case in Belize with the ACB? Or were the actions of the ACB a clear example of political assignation for future consummation? While the answers to these questions are outside the scope and objects of this Paper, these represent food for thought in the continuing dialogue of building on Belize's democracy. Worthy of mentioning is that one member of the ACB has since publicly claimed to have been the National Campaign Manager for the UDP and founder of the ACB (www.7newsbelize.com, May 17, 2010). These however do cast a cloud of uncertainty over ACB's good intentions and objectives. But more importantly for purposes of this Paper, the Commonwealth Observer Report by so distinguishing an organization that demonstrated some inclination towards partisan politics reveals some deficiencies in its observation and therefore the Report.

Criticisms

Criticisms have been levied on international election observation and monitoring by scholars as well as participants. One participant in his paper has determined that international election monitoring can be a useful tool, but that “too often it is a charade” when Missions lack the tools “to transcend the superficial and empirically baseless assertions of fairness or fraud that are often found in monitoring delegations’ report” (Munson Jr., 2008). Some indictments surround the duration of the mission, quality of observation, the experience of Observers in areas such as democracy development and electoral management, and preparation of Delegates; a few of which are highlighted below (Pereira, October 2006).

- It has become an opportunity for “electoral tourism”
- Observers tend to arrive at conclusions that contradict their observations
- Inadequate size of the mission and/or time span too short compared to the complexity of the electoral exercise
- Misunderstanding the observed nation’s political culture and circumstance
- Relying on media to gain information about electoral atmosphere
- Lacks the necessary attention to details required of quality election monitoring
- Lacks uniform international standards that define what constitutes a free and fair election

The scholars looked at the political role played by Observers, the standards and methodologies employed in the coverage of the election. One critic was a member of an International Observer Team and surmised that the Team lacked knowledge of history and culture of the country under observation (Munson Jr., 2008).

Utilizing content and narrative analysis of the Report as research techniques, an opinion on the Expert Team Report on Belize’s 2008 Election was communicated to the Head, Political Affairs Division at The Commonwealth Secretariat (Palacio, 2008; www.belize-glessimaresearch.org). The Communiqué pointed out with justifications, biases and inaccuracies in the body of the Report which is not reflective of the conclusion and some of the recommendations. This along with the deficiency in observation and reporting highlighted above, demonstrate some weaknesses. While the flaws of Observer Missions have been publicized, election observation is still highly valued as a democracy development initiative, if for no other reason than the viewpoint that competitive elections remain the most important element of a liberal democracy. To be effective in ensuring election integrity Observer Missions’ Reports must be beyond intractable. Missions should submit a code of ethics to each observed country which can be utilized as one basis for appraisal, and be held accountable, if nothing else to satisfy good governance principles on all Parties concerned and not only the State being observed.