

## **Free Elections for Democracy or Creating Client Regimes?**

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Free, fair and credible elections are the cornerstone of every democracy and the primary mechanism for exercising the principle of sovereignty of the people. Through such elections, citizens participate in the governance of their country by choosing those who govern in the quest for development. By their choices, the citizens confer legitimacy and authority on those who govern, making it easier for them to mobilize public support and cooperation for the implementation of development programs. Free, fair and credible elections are therefore a crucial requirement for good governance in any democracy. Be this as it may, the experience of many developing countries since the onset of the so-called "third wave of democratization", so dubbed by the American political scientist Samuel Huntington, throughout the world has unambiguously shown that these countries have faced numerous and serious difficulties in conducting free and credible elections not only because of weak democratic institutions and processes, negative political culture and the democratic deficit, lack of independence and capacity of the election management bodies and the judiciary, etc. but largely and detrimentally because of the arrogant and destructive interference of foreign powers bent on creating pliant governments and client regimes amenable to their national interests, without any regard for the sovereignty of these countries and their peoples as well as for the consolidation of democracy and democratic culture that they publicly and loudly 'preach' at international forums. This is what we have witnessed happening consistently and unabatedly in Latin America during the past several decades and throughout the countries of the former Soviet Union since the crumbling of the latter in 1989, and now in Africa. The bloody chaos and disruptions that occurred after the May 2005 national and regional elections in Ethiopia were undoubtedly, though neither the incumbent party and government nor any other group was blunt and bold enough to expose it publicly so far, were the outcome of such Western interference and attempt bent on ousting the current nationalist and populist developmental regime and replacing it with a client government in Ethiopia that would serve the interests of the West and its multi-national/trans-national corporations, and not Ethiopia and the Ethiopians. No patriotic Ethiopian can accept such a pliant regime in our country where national pride and sovereignty are given the highest regard. Besides, no critical observer of our last national and regional elections would doubt the dirty tricks and tactics of Western state agencies and their NGOs together with their servile local media agents and NGOs in the country who unashamedly orchestrated those foul and sinister games during and after the third national elections in Ethiopia. As we prepare ourselves for the fourth periodic elections in May, 2010, we should be fully cognizant of not only what has happened during the May 2005 polls and afterwards but about what the same external forces could and would do to thwart the holding of free, fair and credible elections this time around also, and hence to put all necessary safeguards and precautions to pre-empt their possible machinations and Machiavellian tricks. The purpose of this brief paper is to expose the age-old sinister policy of the West bent on making or breaking Third World regimes and their economic policies by directly or indirectly

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interfering in the internal affairs of these countries, including periodic elections, and thus to recommend timely measures that would help to avert these destructive interferences of the West, if we genuinely seek to enjoy the fruits of democracy and development that the West has enjoyed for quite a long time.

It is a well-established fact that US and European intelligence and state agencies penetrate civil and political society directly or via intermediary organizations, foundations and other ostensibly private groups. Penetration involves funding, influence, control and setting political agendas that serve US imperial state and business interests and is largely directed at destabilizing or pressuring regimes and securing their acquiescence with US policies. As the final, and oft used sanction, penetration broadens its scope to overthrowing regimes and putting in power obedient clients. In the post-Communist, post-nationalist world barriers to US penetration has been drastically reduced while Washington has vastly expanded its activities in penetrating and controlling regimes and opposition via what are called “civil society” movements.

From as early as the mid 1960s the US state, its intelligence and overseas “aid” institutions were deeply involved in influencing electoral processes and financing client organizations, particularly in Latin America, whenever one of the contending parties ran on a nationalist or socialist program. A well-documented case in point was the Chilean elections of 1964, where the CIA poured millions into the election campaign of Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei in order to defeat the Socialist Salvador Allende. Earlier, in the 1940s, large-scale US penetration of the Italian and French political system took place to promote the electoral victories of anti-Communist candidates.

Since the 1990s and increasingly in the first decade of the 21st century, US penetration and organization of “shock troops” – ostensible “civil society” organizations – have served as a battering ram to overthrow regimes and organize electoral outcomes favourable to US clients. Few have been made to discuss the theoretical implication and practical consequences of large-scale, long-term US penetration of civil society and electoral processes. At what point does a “free election” cease to be “free”? Is it ‘free’ when an imperialist superpower and its “private associates” (like the Soros Foundation) finance and train national networks of cadres, mass media outlets, provide innumerable advisers, high-tech communications and transport to bring about an electoral outcome favorable to the imperial state? How does large-scale imperialist intervention affect “free choice”, electoral competition and the capacity to mobilize for street warfare? In what sense can one speak of free elections when the “external factors of power and influence” play such a large role in shaping the leadership, activities, agendas and outcomes of elections? What are the alternatives to imperialist penetration and manipulation of civil society, its organizations, and the electoral contests? Should multi-party elections be abridged, restricted or regulated? Should the recipients of outside funding agencies be prosecuted? How about NGO’s and foundations which act as imperial state conduits of influence and finance to local clients – should they be prosecuted, regulated or allowed to carry on as if they were really “non-governmental”? These questions are central to the discussion of democracy, free elections and citizen choice. They are especially important today because the US imperial state is increasingly bent on dominating the world – as its leading politicians and ideologues openly declare.

The two principle tools of empire building are political penetration where possible and military

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wars and assassinations where necessary. Much has been written about the war strategy – its critics are numerous; few however have studied the “other track” – the political penetration strategy. In fact, some of the “critics” of imperial war strategies are advocates of the ‘political approach’ or, as they choose to call it, the ‘democratic peaceful approach’. This posing of alternatives is highly misleading, as the long-term, large-scale effects of political penetration can be just as destructive of national sovereignty, living standards and social services as open warfare.

## The Incompatibility of Free Elections and Democracy with Imperialist Penetration

While elections take place between competing candidates and parties, the major organizers, financial sponsors, propagandists and media operators of the US electoral clients are not elected, not responsible to any of the electors and have a political-economic agenda designed to favor the economic interests of imperial investors, creditors, multinational corporations and their local corrupt clients and oligarchs. “Free elections” take place in context of non-accountable (to the voters) electoral backers acting at the behest of a foreign power, in order to subordinate popular sovereignty and national independence to imperial interests. Without national independence or popular sovereignty, “free elections” have no political significance or positive outcome for the voters. All the slogans designed to manipulate voters “freedom”, “democracy”, “independence”, “prosperity”, and “partnership with the West” are devoid of content.

Following the elections, the large-scale, long-term entry of imperial banks, investors, military advisers, IMF and World Bank officials impose macro-economic policies which deny the populace the very rights which they were promised by the imperial candidates before the elections. The regimes pass from ‘local’ authoritarian regimes to international tyrannies. While imperial ideologues speak of elections “legitimizing” their newly elected clients, in fact they have no grounds for such a claim given the fact that the outcomes were largely determined by the exercise of power by external intervention.

No election has legitimacy when national independence is compromised. Imperial promoted candidates and electoral processes make a mockery of the notion of popular sovereignty. In order for free elections to occur the absolute minimum conditions demand that the populaces (citizens) are sovereign: The candidates, parties and electoral process emerge from the ‘give and take’ of the citizens of the country. Popular sovereignty can only occur if a country is independent, that the only governing authority is not beholden to a foreign power. Before one can speak of “free elections” the political boundaries defining the nation-state must be firmly established and within those boundaries, civil society and its organizations is the exclusive domain of national citizens. National independence and popular sovereignty are essential prerequisites for free elections. Given the gross violation of both conditions by imperial agencies (their pervasive political, financial and media penetration of the political processes up to and including electoral outcomes) the elections are illegitimate exercises of great power, empire building. The elections do not express the popular will; they measure the imperial capacity to intervene in civil society, change regimes and restructure the economy to maximize their interests.

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The paramount goal of the nation-state, or multi-national state, the essential framework which might allow free elections, is the securing of national independence and popular sovereignty. This means the effective exclusion of imperial penetration of civil society and political processes by whatever means necessary. This may mean constraints and legal restrictions on domestic groups financed, supported and directed by imperial state and para-state organizations and NGOs.

Imperial intervention in the electoral processes is based on long-term and short-term policies and strategies, most of which are not framed in terms of overt empire-building language, but rather in terms of “enhancing our long-term interests”.

First and foremost is the recruitment, education and ideological indoctrination of “the willing” among future “opinion leaders” and potential leaders. The US has ready-made systems for education-cum-indoctrination particularly in all of its “prestigious” universities: the “leading professors” move in and out of imperial state and corporate organizations and think tanks. The imperial state agencies and their auxiliaries in the “private” foundations provide scholarships, training programs, seminars, conferences, media attention, lucrative stipends, attention, flattery and promises of a ‘golden future’ in the recruitment and formation of future client rulers and organizers of future “civil society” revolutions. Many if not all the leaders, who have emerged, supposedly from the grass-roots struggle have biographies closely inter-linked with imperial indoctrination and educational backgrounds.

In the organization of the ‘soft coups’ or ‘civil society revolutions’ as the imperialist ideologues prefer to call it, a vast array of imperial institutions converge to promote escalating protests, exploiting local grievances. The National Endowment for Democracy, the Democratic and Republican Institutes, Agency for International Development, CIA front groups, the mass media, the Soros Foundation and especially imperial-funded NGOs intervene in the mechanics of destabilizing a regime, de-legitimizing and demonizing its leaders, propagandizing populist slogans as a prelude to overthrowing a regime and “winning an election”. The imperial-trained and indoctrinated clients emerge as the ‘popular democratic candidate’, who then proceeds to privatise public enterprises into the hands of imperial investors, invite US military base builders, provide mercenary soldiers for imperial assignments and ‘yes votes’ in international forums, while skimming off commissions for self, family and cronies. In other words, imperial-conducted elections led by penetrated “civil society” organizations violate all of the pro-requisites for free elections and not surprisingly lead to the formation of client regimes embedded in a web of imperial economic and strategic interests, in which corruption and nepotism erode the initial democratic façade.

In the electoral process, the political contest between competing domestic political factions, class and ethnic interests is irreparably distorted by the vast disproportion in financial resources, personnel, media access, organizational capacity and political reach of the intervening imperial power. The ‘political weight’ of the imperial power in electoral contests usually (but not always) makes a mockery of the notion of free elections. In many cases and for a long time, presidential candidates for office throughout Latin America (from Brazil to Honduras) visit Washington to secure a certificate of good behavior in exchange for pledging to ‘respect’ US property, trade and debt obligations as well as to assure their support of the

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general contours of US global endeavors. This is done, as claimed, in order to avoid US electoral intervention (or to secure financial support) prior to the elections and to avoid destabilization after the elections.

In other words the threat of imperial civil society penetration shapes the operative political agendas under which the incoming regime will govern, not the “populist” electoral program presented to the electorate during the electoral campaign.

The tremendous resources which the imperial state possesses in electoral financing, organizational capacity, mass media influence and societal penetration generate competitive advantages in both electoral and non-electoral “extra-parliamentary” mobilizations against typical elitist regimes. The cumulative advantages which accrue to imperialist strategists begin with financing potential leaders, advisers, and NGOs. This provides the basis for pro-imperial media outlets self-described as “independent” or “democratic”. Such media, financing and organization lead to intense propaganda and mobilization campaigns to create “civil society” movements, while the imperial state recruits or “neutralizes” officials in the targeted state with threats of international sanctions if repression is ordered to establish law and order. Having seized the political initiative, the imperial clients launch a frontal assault on the institutions of the state, imposing new elections or toppling the regimes prior to convoking elections. Riding the wave of mass mobilizations, external funding, subsidized ‘civil society’ organizations and advisers, the US –backed clients win the elections and quickly move the regime into the imperial orbit.

## When Imperialist Electoral Strategies Fail: The Military Option

The “soft coup” or electoral strategy does not always work. At different times and places, popular regimes have effectively resisted and overcome the electoral strategies, economic advantages and civil society destabilization campaigns of imperial strategists and proceeded to defeat client candidates. When the electoral and civil society strategies fail to bring to power US clients, Washington resorts to violent intervention, preceded by direct economic embargoes, financing of terrorist surrogates, direct military intervention or military coups by client generals. In the 1950s reformist regimes in Iran (Mossadegh), Guatemala (Arbenz) and Guyana (Jagan) were elected by popular majorities despite Anglo-US electoral intervention. Having lost elections, Washington organized military coups in Guatemala and Iran, while in Guyana the British, with US trade union support, provoked a destabilization campaign as a pretext for British intervention to displace Jagan. In the 1960’s, the US electoral clients were defeated by nationalist and democratic candidates in Brazil (Goulart) and Dominican Republic (Bosch). The US backed a military coup in Brazil and the Dominican Republic. When the constitutionalist forces in the Dominican Republic were on the verge of restoring constitutional democracy, the US military intervened, savagely repressed the democratic forces, restored their clients, the military and paramilitary groups and then organized ‘elections’ to provide a pseudo-constitutional façade to imperial supremacy.

In the seventies the US poured millions into its electoral and destabilization strategies to defeat

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elected Chilean President Salvador Allende. When Allende's support actually increased over his term of office, the US combined a heavily financed "civil society" destabilization campaign with a military coup. Where the US lacked a capacity for electoral intervention and mobilization because "civil society" was under worker (as opposed to client) hegemony as in Bolivia, Washington simply backed a military coup to decimate the popular organizations of civil society.

In the 1980s in Central America, Washington faced highly organized and politicized popular civil society organizations, which challenged US client regimes, and civil organizations. In response, Washington financed and advised para-military death squads and special military forces to engage in genocidal massacres of popular civil society organizations. The strategy of "death squads and elections" ensured the continuity of US client rulers.

In Nicaragua, popular civil society organizations overwhelmingly backed the nationalist-populist Sandinista government. Washington combined continued financing of the internal elite with the arming, advising and financing of a mercenary invasion army, the Contras. In the 1984 elections the US was the only country which refused to recognize the Sandinista election; instead the US government intensified its military and economic warfare, bleeding the government of resources, devastating economic activities and inflicting heavy casualties on the civilian population. After a decade of warfare, the US poured tens of millions of dollars in advisers and propaganda and threats of continual warfare into the election campaign of 1989, leading to the election of a US client "President".

The only popular regime which Washington was not able to reverse through the 1960s to the present was the revolutionary government of Cuba, which organized highly regulated elections, anchored in public institutions loyal to the national government. The US had no leverage in the electoral system and was not able to utilize the military to counter or overthrow the revolutionary government.

In the new millennium Washington has made several efforts to overthrow the Chavez regime including a military coup, an elite-sponsored economic lock-out and the electoral process. All were defeated because of Chavez regime's powerful organized support among the mass of poor in civil society, the allegiance of sectors of the military and the inclusive social welfare reforms.

In several countries in Latin America, namely Argentina, Bolivia and Ecuador, popular civil society organizations have ousted pro-imperialist US client regimes, despite institutional repression. Efforts by US imperial strategists to build pro-regime "civil society" organizations were a dismal failure, despite no lack of mass media support, an army of client NGOs, vast expenditures of financial resources and the dispatch of political advisers. In Latin America the growth of independent mass movements in opposition to US client rulers presiding over the imperial plunder and impoverishment of their people has forced the US to resort to recruiting 'outsiders', former leftists labeled 'centre-left' and to strengthen the formal and informal repressive apparatus. This has facilitated the election of client presidents, but has weakened Washington's influence in civil society.

## Conclusion

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What are the alternatives to US-controlled electoral processes and imperial penetration of civil society organizations designed to curtail national independence and popular sovereignty? The first point of departure is recognition that there is a serious problem with the very way in which the entire electoral process is organized to favor imperial outcomes in most Third World countries. The second is to recognize that some regimes are extremely vulnerable to imperial electoral strategies –because they are corrupt, elitist and divorced from organized independent mass support. This is most notable in the former Eastern European and ex-Soviet Republics where the ruling elites have used state enterprises for personal enrichment, creating a new oligarchical class of predators who try to play off Russia against the EU and the US. These regimes manipulate voter outcomes to remain in power – but have little or no capacity or interest in mobilizing significant sectors of the population in the face of US-NGO orchestrated street protesters. In many cases these regimes may have originally been encouraged or supported by Washington in the break-up of the Soviet Union but subsequently may have used up their credibility, retained some economic and military links to Russia, a mixed state-private economy, or “privatized” economic enterprises under circumstances in which local cronies were favored and major foreign investors excluded.

The two countries which have, at least for an extended period, won elections contested by imperial clients are Nicaragua (1984) and President Chavez in Venezuela (1998 to the present 2005). In both countries the regimes carried out important socio-economic reforms which elicited wide-spread mass support, governed with a modicum of honesty under the law, secured the loyalty of at least sectors of the military and had some access to mass media outlets. Most of all these regimes engaged organized masses in class and national struggles which politicized and mobilized them and created a level of anti-imperialist consciousness and independent class-based national organizations. In the case of both countries successful struggles against local imperial clients created an identity of interest between regimes and mass supporters which were instrumental in neutralizing the corrupting influx of massive imperial funding of local clients and the propaganda effects of imperial funded mass media outlets.

Nevertheless, in Nicaragua a prolonged war of attrition (over a decade) which destroyed the economy and the unregulated electoral process allowed the US to pour tens of millions of dollars to promote NGOs, political parties and mass media outlets, resulting in an electoral victory for Washington’s electoral clients in 1989.

In Venezuela, the unregulated electoral process allows ongoing US intervention of electoral processes and penetration of “civil society” organizations despite resounding defeats of imperial clients in municipal, gubernatorial, congressional and presidential elections.

Washington’s shift to military threats has not precluded funding of local elites, and Colombian paramilitary and military forces poised to intervene on any pretext.

In these circumstances of pervasive and persistent imperialist penetration of civil society and massive intervention in the electoral process what can be done to protect and promote citizen choice and free elections (that is – free of imperial intervention)? How can the integrity of the electoral process be protected from the massive intrusion of public and “private” imperial funding and training operations?

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First of all, free elections cannot take place unless national independence and popular sovereignty is put at the centre of political practice and discourse. The left and progressive intellectuals and politicians have totally ignored the vital issue of national security and the measures necessary to protect the electoral process from imperial penetration. Virtually no serious debate or discussion of practical policies has taken place within left movements, parties, journals or social forums, despite the widespread and pervasive nature of imperial intervention in electoral processes. History teaches us that this ignorance or 'laissez- faire' attitude has disastrous results in political terms (destroying democratic procedures and the integrity of free elections) as well as catastrophic socio-economic consequences, by bringing to power pro-Western predator regimes which sell off strategic resources to multi-national corporations at bargain prices and impose IMF austerity programs. Clearly new electoral and political regulations and laws are in order.

In the first place legal measures must be passed which prohibit any and all funding by imperial sources or their "front groups" of local political parties or social organizations. All groups which receive foreign funding must register as foreign agents and face stiff jail sentences and fines if they fail to register.

Secondly all funding for electoral and social activity over a given level must be accounted for before an impartial tribunal.

Thirdly groups or institutions acting in concert with armed imperial organizations or clients to overthrow legally constituted regimes should be subject to public prosecution, and their property confiscated. "Private" foundations with a history of imperial collaboration in destabilizing regimes should be denied licenses and their recruiting activities terminated.

The purpose of these electoral regulations is to level the playing field for electoral competition and to eliminate many of the financial and political advantages which the imperial infiltrators utilize to manipulate elections. Tighter regulations on the use of the mass media and media ownership, and the opening of media channels for the expression of popular views and organizations should create a pluralistic exchange of ideas. Restriction on the ownership of media outlets by foreign interests would constrain imperial media propaganda and incitement to violence. Consolidation of national independence requires the limitation of imperial penetration of civil society and the state (especially the military). All joint military activities with imperial powers should be curtailed and overseas educational programs should be regulated to ensure that students avoid the major propaganda mills in the overseas studies programs, especially in the social sciences, law and commercial schools. A balance needs to be established between openness to diverse cultural influences and exchange of ideas and the need to eliminate the negative influence of cultural imperialism and recruitment of future clients.

While these and other regulations of political and electoral processes are necessary, they are not sufficient or even effective if there is no deliberate effort to politicize and educate civil society. Mass democratic organizations, class based social and economic reforms, citizens militias, defense of the national economy and open public debate can create a democratic class consciousness and minimizes imperialist media manipulation and the provision of monetary enticements to act via phony 'civil society' organizations. Vigorously enforced security and electoral regulations and an active participatory citizenry which experiences the positive effects of egalitarian socio-economic reforms are the best way to ensure that free elections take place

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in the service of democracy and not foreign interests of empire building. Yes, free, fair and credible elections that truly reflect and that are based on the sovereignty and independence of the country in question to build and consolidate democracy but by no means elections manipulated by foreign powers to suit their selfish and imperial ends at the expense of others. That should be our guiding principle and strategy in our preparations for the fourth national and regional elections in Ethiopia in May 2010.

