

# Why the Military and the Police should register and vote

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The argument that the military and the police should not participate in the electoral process is based on the false concept that registering and voting is a political act.

It is accepted that the armed forces and the police service should indeed be politically neutral and should serve loyally any legitimately elected government. It follows that no member of the two organisations should be a member of a political party nor an activist for a political party. However, to be on the electoral register and to cast a vote are civic duties and not political acts. In many countries this is recognised by making registration compulsory. Some countries go so far as to make voting compulsory.

In most countries, as in DR Congo, there is a constitutional right to vote from the age of eighteen, from which the only derogations are for those whose rights have been suspended by competent authorities for mental incapacity or for criminal conviction. There is no exclusion *per se* for military or police. There could be a difficult constitutional wrangle if a member of the military or of the police were to challenge an exclusion before the courts.

The concept of universal suffrage and of representative democracy is based on every citizen being able to express an opinion via the ballot box on which candidate, or which party, he or she wants to represent them. Barring the military and the police from voting for their opinions does not suppress those opinions but merely denies their expression. Expressing an opinion at the ballot box is no more nor no less a political act than holding that opinion.

To regard the military and the police as being unable to fulfil their function as members of the security forces if they were to vote is to diminish their professionalism and to give the impression that they are not full citizens. Integrating the military and the police as far as possible within civil society is a far healthier policy than marginalising them, which could play into the hands of political groups who would wish to control militias.

Experience in other countries does not suggest that enfranchising the military and the police brings problems. I was the co-ordinator of the international observation team for the Russian elections in 1996 and there were polling stations in a number of army barracks - and on large ships. All parties were invited to visit the barracks to address the soldiers and a number took the opportunity, some accompanied by observers who reported good attentive meetings. Monitoring of the voting figures in such polling stations suggested that the militaries' voting preferences were very similar to those of "ordinary" voters and there was no evidence of officer pressure on military voters.

Perhaps the most powerful argument for members of the armed security services voting is to consider how else they might express their opinions if denied access to the ballot box. In English the slogan is "the ballot not the bullet" and it is regarded as important to ensure that the military and the police have the constitutional opportunity to express their opinions on their governance rather than give any excuse for violent expression. Two examples are illustrative: the ANC only adopted the armed struggle in South Africa because the apartheid system denied black citizens the right to vote. In Northern Ireland peace eventually came only when Sinn Fein, the political arm of the IRA was able to contest elections, thus giving IRA paramilitaries the opportunity to vote.

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