Combining Civil and Voter Registration: Advantages and Limitations

A recent report analyzes the benefits and limitations of combining the civil and voter registration processes based on the experiences of both developed and growing democracies.

By Hadija Nassanga Miiro

Introduction and Background:

A number of countries generate voter lists from civil registries which contain detailed information on all citizens of all ages. Such registries may be supplemented by information from other government agencies like the police, insurance companies, passport offices and retirement schemes. Voter registration databases tend to have only information that is required to identify eligible voter and allows them to cast their votes in an election. The degree of success depends on a number of factors including the efficiency of the civil registry, legal framework for information sharing. Most democracies have separate voter registration processes. Typical examples where voter lists are generated successfully from civil registrations systems include Norway and Sweden, Albania, and Spain among others.

This paper discusses the benefits and limitations of combining civil and voter registration based on experiences of both developed and growing democracies.

Principle Objective:

The author conducted the above study to respond to a growing need by election administrations and governments for information on the benefits and limitations of combining civil and voter registration processes. The main objective was to enable election administrators, governments and donors make informed decisions

Methodology:

The research was based on literature review and telephone interviews with persons in countries that had implemented a combined CVR. The researcher received written information from national election administrators and international advisors on their experiences with CVR projects and had the opportunity to speak with a number of actors who had participated or supported CVR projects. The author also reviewed literature in election administrations where single line voter registration had been conducted successfully with maximum efficiency and minimum costs and where the reverse had been experienced.

With funding from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) the author analyzed in depth the conditions of the civil and voter registries of Afghanistan (Miiro H, 2006). The findings formed the basis for the CVR pilot project in Afghanistan. While the results from this study are a prerogative of IFES and not presented in this report, the author used her experiences in the IFES study to supplement arguments in this report.

Main Findings:

In many cases where joint voter registration processes had failed, governments and election management bodies had rushed to combining civil and voter registration in the heat of an election. Suddenly donors and governments realized that it was too expensive to conduct a national wide voter registration especially where previous registration had not generated an accurate register. Civil registry authorities rushed to use the opportunity to achieve what was difficult before: getting funding for a civil registry. Below are advantages and limitations reported most frequently in the study

Joint Civil and Voter Registration:
Advantages:

In a number of cases, combining civil and voter registration was reported to have significantly reduced the cost of the two processes. This only happened in countries like Sweden and Norway where the joint CVR had stabled over years and was properly administered.

Combining CVR processes allowed data sharing among government departments and partners. For example when persons change their residence, they may inform the post office, tax bureau, housing authorities, insurance authorities. Data sharing partnerships are particularly important regarding deletions since the voter or his or her family often does not provide this information, vital statistics and other such officers who have access to such information play an important role providing this information.

Continuous civil registration reduced voter fatigue as most registered voters need not report to registration offices to update their particulars. The register in most cases was updated automatically from information obtained by the civil registration authority or other such offices like the police, tax authority and insurance agencies.

A combined CVR reduced the burden of voter registration from the election administrations giving them time to concentrate on other electoral activities like planning and procedures, production of ballot papers, coordination and management of Election Day activities and tabulation and announcement of results.

Limitations:

On the other hand, where the CVR process was not well planned, it became very costly, took a long time to stabilize and did not generate reliable data for voter registration purposes.

Successful implementation of a combined CVR was limited by a number of factors:

Conflicting mandates: By law, most election administrations were mandated to conduct voter registration while government departments: ministry of internal affairs/interior, department of home affairs or department of civil registry were mandated to conduct the civil registry. In many cases, decisions to combine the civil and voter registration processes were done without clear definitions of policies in relation to issues like: where the data centre would be houses, which agency would chair the steering committee and who would own and control the CVR database.

While governments had interests in controlling civil registration data, EMBs had the mandate to control voter information. Conflicts among implementing agencies and beneficiaries resulted into delays or failure of CVR projects.

Disabling Legal Frameworks: In many cases, laws governing different governments that would benefit from a CVR restricted access to information. For example Canada, Britain and Australia have laws that prohibit elections officials to access personal information without expressive permission from the individuals concerned. Consequently only particulars for less than 50% of eligible voters can be automatically updated which reduces the cost benefits of a combined CVR process as resources are spent seeking permission from potential voters to include them on voters’ lists or update their particulars.

In many countries where voter lists are derived from civil registry databases, there were still legal requirements for annual or periodic national wide updates of the voters’ register during the immediate period prior to an election. In Cambodia for example, the law for election of the members to the national assembly required updating the voters’ register on an annual basis. In Canada information derived from other agencies did not guarantee 100% of voters’ particulars.

In many electoral constituencies, election officers still needed to conduct door to door visits to ensure new residents and those who had become of voting age were included on the voter’s list.

Lack of sufficient consultation and cooperation among implementing agencies: Combining civil and voter registration involved a chain of activities including data sharing and production and distribution of permanent national ID cards. These processes needed wide consultation and coordination among implementing agencies and beneficiaries, The CVR pilot project evaluation for Afghanistan cited lack of sufficient consultation and cooperation as major factors that limited the implementation of a joint CVR in Afghanistan. Statements like:

“The management and staff of the ministry of interior did not have good cooperation with the staff of the Independent Elections Commission.”

“The ministries of interior staff were not interested in the joint CVR and they left all the work to IEC staff.”
On the other hand, the ministry of interior accused the Independent Elections Commission of failure to consult them on key issues.

Lack of political understanding and agreements between different political forces was cited as one of the factors that delayed successful creation of a fully functional civil register intended to generate voter lists for 2006/7 local council elections in Albania. Production of national identity documents, creating linkages with other government department, and covering an entire population were some of the factors that made joint CVR more costly.

Limited Public Understanding and political perceptions: While the majority of ordinary voters viewed CVR as cost sharing process and an opportunity to obtain national identity documents, there were a number of opposition leaders who were skeptical and viewed a combined CVR as an attempt for their governments to identify and victimize opponents.

Limited Capacity of Lead Agencies: Combining civil and voter registration is time consuming and requires very careful planning, sufficient technical capability and high organizational capabilities. While voter registration is the responsibility of election management bodies in many democracies, civil registry tends to involve more players, and beneficiaries. Sharing information among different government departments for example may require database linkages based on sophisticated soft ware and hard ware that may involve high technological skills to institute, operate and maintain. Lack of such skills and high costs for hire limited successful implementation of joint CVR especially in developing countries.

Lack of location addresses, and Identity Requirements: While the OSCE/ODIHR had earlier recommended adopting a system of creating of a fully functional civil registration system in Albania whereby before each election voter lists would be extracted from the computerized updated civil registry kept in the civil status offices of local government units, such a civil registration system could not be established in time for the 2006/2007 local council elections. The process suffered from, lack of a fully functional system of addresses, lack of update identification documents and the constant and often unreported in country migration among others.

Variance in Donor Interest: Donors interested in funding voter registry were not necessarily interested in funding a combined process making it more difficult to mobilize funds for a joint process.

Limited Time: The time available to conduct a CVR was reported as the single biggest challenge. Constitutional mandates defined timelines for voter registration and other election activities. To avoid constitutional crises and deliver credible elections according to legally defined timelines, EMDs needed increased autonomy in producing and providing the voters’ register. Lack of accurate and comprehensive civil registry data, delays in enacting enabling laws and obtaining funding made it most difficult for EMBs to obtain and deliver accurate voter lists in instances where civil registration processed were in their initial stages and had not stabilized. Countries like Sweden, Norway, and Canada who successfully produced voter lists from civil registry data had built their processes over decades. In many young democracies, the time available to prepare and conduct an election was usually too short to allow effective and efficient conduct of voter and civil registration exercises.

Some civil registration systems are very complex. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, civil registration requires linking each individual to his family members creating a family tree for each individual. In Afghanistan, the need by government to maintain family tree tracking system by tracking everyone’s ancestry, resulted in many deceased persons remaining on the civil registry and was a major factor that limited the creation of a joint CVR.

Vested interests and Influence Peddling: Undue influence by interested suppliers of services, registration materials and soft ware particularly from international suppliers was reported as a major factor that limited successful implementation of CVR projects. There were reports of lead agencies being compromised by suppliers to select non appropriate or more costly systems in expectations of kickbacks from suppliers.

Separate Voter Registration Process: Advantaged and Limitations

Advantages: Due to the fact that data required for single VR processes was limited to voter information and the target population in most cases was smaller consisting of only adults, 18 years or above, voter registration required shorter periods and less funds to conduct and complete.
Voter registration put more control into the hands of election authorities hence making them accountable for the quality of the register. Election Management Bodies (EMBs) in countries like Uganda and South Africa were more in control of the registration process than countries like Pakistan where voter lists were generated from civil registry data and in the hands of other government bodies like the ministry of interior.

Voter registries created by EMB were reported to be more accurate in most of the cases especially where CVR processes had not stabilized. Many people reported that it was easier to control non eligible voters from the registry if the register was in the hands of an EMB. Voter information was reported to be more secure in processes solely for voter registration purposes. This was again related to the fact that fewer information was collected all of which was in the control of a single organization.

In countries like Cambodia, the costs of voter registration were reported to have decreased over years in spite of the fact that voter registration was not a direct result of the civil registry. Most EMBs with an ongoing VR carried periodic updates a short period to the elections. During the non election period, they did not need to report changes in domicile, deaths, and voter becoming of age. Civil registration required continuous reporting of population changes: births, deaths and change of residence.

Many VR processes had generated accurate and comprehensive voter lists although in several cases this had taken time and in repeated updates and changes in registration procedures and technology.

Limitations:
Voter registration was not compulsory in most countries where it was a single process. Consequently the register left out many eligible voters especially disadvantaged voters like women and persons with disabilities.

In many developing democracies, like Afghanistan, separation of the voter registration process did not generate the desired results. Registration processes that has been conducted more than twice and at exorbitant costs did not generate registers that meet internationally acceptable standards.

In many countries registration of voters had been left to the last hour: due late enacting of laws, lack of sufficient funds, poor security and limited administrative potential among others. The result was inaccurate voter lists with significant numbers of voters’ particulars missing out on the final lists used on Election Day. This was the case in almost all first registrations after constitutional and or electoral reforms regardless of whether the registration process was single or combined.

Vested interests and fight for tenders were not only limited to combined CVR processes but were equally experienced in single VR processes. Influence of the tendering processes resulted into purchase of registration technologies that were unsuitable for particular environments. Consequently many processes did not produce accurate registers due to delays in implementing solutions or to contaminated choices of registration solutions.

Voter registration is a comprehensive process. Naturally, single VR processes put a bigger burden on the EMB to organize and conduct. Ordinarily high numbers of staff are required to do field recording of voter data and to process the data into a register at central or regional offices.

Voter registration requires periodic updates especially during the time before an election. The result is voter fatigue as voters need to continuously check if their names still exist on the register or to report changes in voting locations or to identify and report persons who dies or left the area.

Conclusion:
While combining civil and voter registration is apparently cheaper and may allow sharing a bulk of information across government agencies, reducing voter fatigue and generating voter lists in a relatively shorter period where the process is administered efficiently, rushed decisions to combine the two processes, without sufficient consultation and planning, limited funding, lack of coordination among implementing agencies, limited time frames and a series of other factors combine to make joint CVR projects less beneficial than single voter registration processes. The decision to combine civil and voter registration processes must be based on the particular circumstances of a country and the ability of both government and the EMB to overcome the limitations associated with a joint process. All likely limitations must be carefully evaluated and
the choice should be based on which option will deliver the most accurate and timely register
under the particular circumstances.

Hadija Nassanga Miiro is the Chief Technical Advisor/Elections for UNDP/Yemen.

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