The Voter Registration System in Yemen
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What follows is a short overview of the system used in Yemen for compiling the voters' register for the 2003 Parliamentary elections. There, previous voter registration exercises had been conducted very poorly and were marred by severe deficiencies and technical problems. Subsequent attempts to amend these deficiencies were carried out by the electoral commission neither with a clear mandate nor with an open trail to document the legitimacy of these amendments. The flawed amending process only compounded further the problems by having all main stakeholders losing their already low confidence in the integrity of the register.

Capturing the voter's information from the ID card

In an attempt to address this situation, various parliamentary committees and political parties explored several possible options, among which there was one of integrating the voter registration process with an ambitious, heavily technological civil registry project, which had been piloted with significant shortfalls in 2 or 3 regions of the country. I conducted a technical assessment during my time there with IFES. Such an unfeasible endeavour was eventually abandoned for the decision of starting a voter register anew.

Transferring the voter's information to the voter's card

The new voter registration system for the 2003 Parliamentary elections in Yemen presented a number of technical and technological innovations.

The main innovations were:

(1) the introduction of a photograph not only in the voter card (previously registered voters were provided with a sort of a cheap paper receipt) but also in the register; and

(2) the establishment of a national database of voters.

The introduction of the photographic voters list followed a study tour, also sponsored during my time with IFES, which brought Yemeni electoral administrators to visit the electoral commission of India. India maintains photographic voters' list and the Yemeni saw this element as very appropriate to their situation. Previous elections had been marred by irregularities, among which the most common one was the problem of "impersonation".

Given the very low quality of the registration receipts issued to voters, a relatively common malpractice were cases of voters impersonating other voters, so that some would report to vote just to find out that someone else had already voted for him/her.

In addition to solve the impersonation problem, the photographic voters' list presented a number of additional benefits, such as speeding up the identification of registered voters on election days (allowing therefore a polling station to process larger number of voters and more efficiently) and, last but not least, it dramatically increased the overall perception of the integrity of the register.

Transferring the voters' information from the voter's card to the voters' register

The register contained an exact replica of the voter ID card, with the same information and the photograph of the voter. After each page had been completed, to prevent any alteration of the information therein contained, it was laminated with a security plastic layer (transparent) which could not be removed if not by obviously damaging the page. The voters' card presented the same security feature.

The electoral commission decided to computerize the voter registration data only when the month-long voter registration had just been completed (8 million voters registered). A computerized centre was quickly established, in which data entry clerks worked in different shift (24 hours/day, 7 days/week) were manually inputting the captured data (with the only exception of the photograph) to create a preliminary voters' list. While this process could have been speeded up by adopting some limited technology (OCR forms and scanners), the manual version worked quite well.

All the completed registration books were orderly filed in archives, so that they could be used as a backstopping tool when the computers would bring up entries having some common features (for instance the same names or same birthdates, etc). In such instances, in a matter of a few minutes the original registration books were retrieved from the archive and the relevant data would be quickly verified (for instance two same names with the same face in the photograph would unequivocally prove a double registration).

A completed and laminated page of the voters' register

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