

What is political voice, why does it matter, and how can it bring about change?

A Development Progress Discussion Paper

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Development
Progress





What is political voice and why does it matter?

What political voice is and why and how it matters – and for whom – has emerged as a central area of interest and engagement in both domestic processes of change and international efforts to support them. An informed and aware population who can participate in political processes, hold the state to account, and exercise rights and responsibilities

effectively is widely considered today as indispensable for strengthening the quality of (democratic) governance and the nature of state-society relations.

Political voice has both intrinsic and instrumental value, as was prominently highlighted in the report of the High Level Panel on the post-2015 development agenda (2013). In principle, political voice enables people to pursue the goals and aspirations that they value, and to seek redress when an injustice is perceived. As Amartya Sen has argued, the importance of participation in one's development through open and non-discriminatory processes, to have a say without fear, and to speak up against perceived injustices and wrongs are fundamental freedoms that are integral to one's wellbeing and quality of life.

In addition, it is often argued that voice has a critical role to play in improving the quality of governance. In particular, people's capacity to express and exercise their views has the potential to influence governance processes, making them more participatory and representative – especially of those who have been previously excluded or marginalised on the basis of gender, ethnicity, geography, or other identities. By increasing demands for accountability and transparency, voice can also influence government priorities, provide an important corrective to public policy, and encourage consensus building on key issues of national concern.

In order to better understand the different ways in which people express their political voice(s), and explore whether, how and why voice can become a catalyst for improvements in other areas of well-being, the Development Progress project at ODI has invited a number of leading thinkers to explore these issues in a series of activities, including events and opinion pieces. The analysis below offers a synthesis of some of the key insights and lessons that have emerged, while the individual contributions can

be found on pages 29 to 73. All blogs are also available on the Development Progress website, developmentprogress.org.



Political voice is important in and of itself, and as a catalyst for other improvements in well-being.

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How do people make their voices heard?

The past two decades have seen an explosion of political voice across the developing world. From the shift towards democracy in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the mushrooming of citizen-led initiatives to hold those in power to account, to the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa and the eruption of protest movements in countries as diverse as Brazil,

Egypt, India, and Turkey, we now have a wealth of experience we can use to reimagine the role of engaged populations in political processes and to redefine the very substance of democracy.

This is an extraordinarily diverse and complex landscape, with people everywhere grabbing opportunities to express their views in a multitude of ways to influence policy and decision-making processes. It is impossible to provide a comprehensive picture of the many forms of political voice, but it is worth highlighting some dimensions that have particular resonance today.

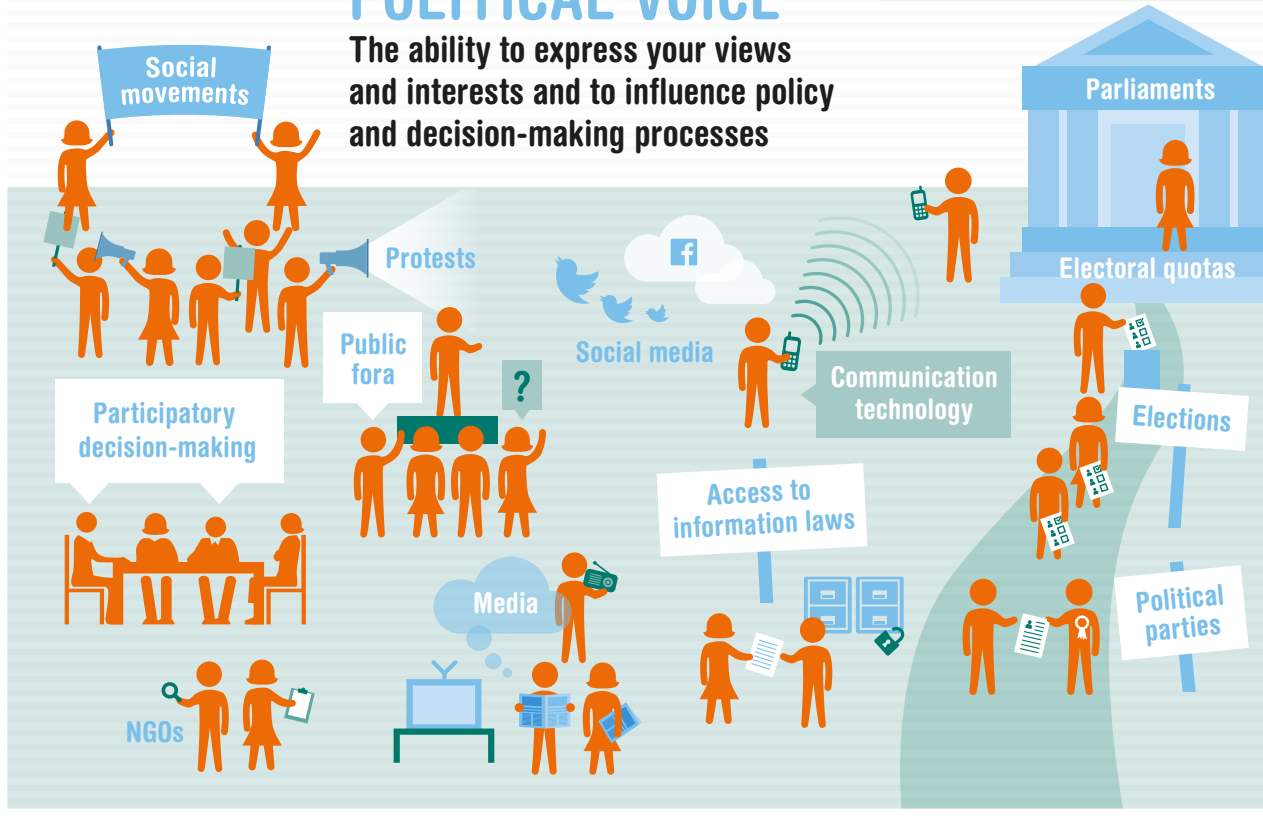


People everywhere are grabbing opportunities to express their views in a variety of ways to demand change.

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POLITICAL VOICE

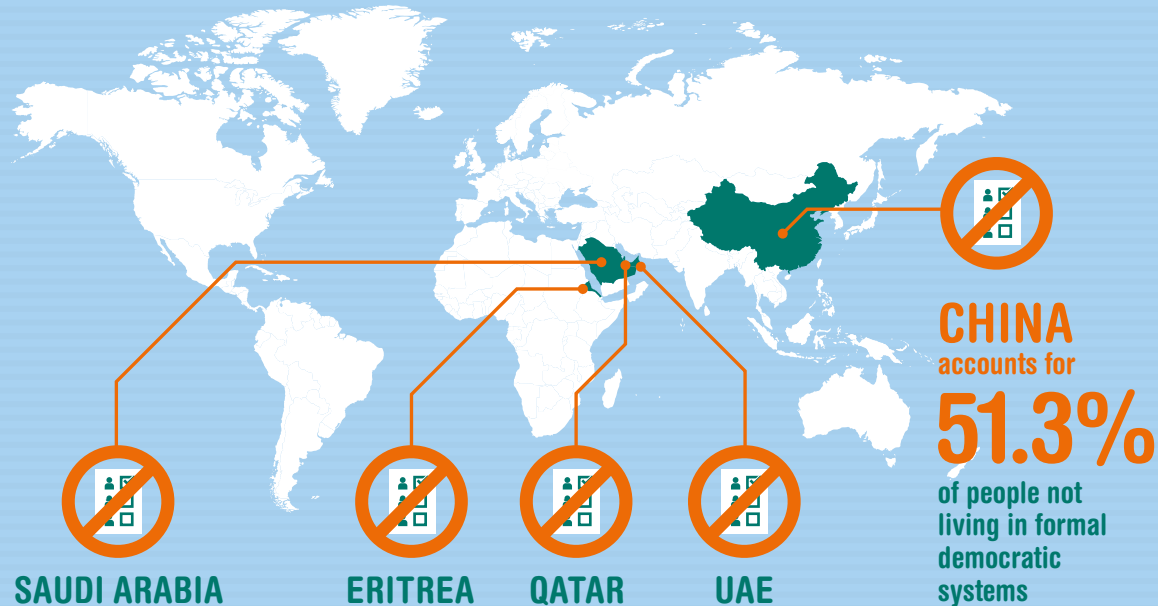
The ability to express your views and interests and to influence policy and decision-making processes





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All but 5 countries in the world have held national elections between 2000–2012



Sources: Hyde, Susan (2011). *The Pseudo-Democrat's Dilemma: Why Election Observation Became an International Norm*. New York: Cornell University Press; Personal communication with Susan Hyde, Associate Professor of Political Science and International Affairs, Yale University (22 February 2013); Rocha Menocal, A. (2013). 'Ten Things to know about democracy and elections'. London: ODI. Available at: <http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/7605-elections-democracy-elections-infographics>

Elections are the most well-established mechanisms that citizens have to exercise voice and hold office-holders to account – and they have become almost universal.

Elections hold tremendous promise for deepening the quality of democratic governance, but they can also be problematic. As Anna Larson highlights in her blog, the elections in Afghanistan have taken place at a critical juncture, and there is a lot at stake: the prospects of a peaceful transition of power; reconciliation with insurgent forces; the redistribution of government patronage and political influence; and the role of the international community. These elections have been extremely important as a step forward in participatory politics in the country – but ‘democracy’ remains a contested concept.

In India, one of the longest-established democracies in the developing world, the ongoing elections have mobilised a diverse electorate around issues like corruption and accountability. According to Will Avis, growing dissent reflects the voice of various emerging constituencies who are trying to shape a political agenda that will, in turn, shape the future of the country.

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The role of the media in electoral processes, and the potential it has to promote accountability more broadly, is also significant, especially in contexts that have been affected by conflict. The independence of the media, and the health and openness of the debate it supports, cannot be taken for granted. This was a central question that was discussed in an ODI/BBC Media Action event, organised as part of the work of Development Progress on political voice, which brought together journalists working in Egypt, Kenya and Afghanistan. Clearly, an effective, free and independent media is an indispensable component of substantive democracy, but as James Deane asserts, ‘the purpose of an election is to polarise political opinion and media often display their most polarising behaviour during an election period’.



“If you suppress legitimate debates during elections, you could be storing up trouble for the future.”

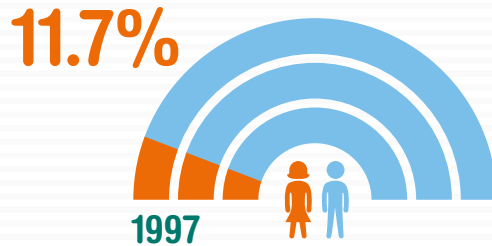
Michela Wrong, British journalist and author, speaking about Kenya at the ODI-BBC Media Action event 'Elections and accountability: what role for the media?', 27 March 2014

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Elections have also been instrumental (along with quotas) in increasing the participation of **women** in political systems – even as there are ongoing debates about whether more representation really means more influence for women in the political arena. As Duncan Green notes in his blog, women’s empowerment, including their increased political participation and beyond, is one of the greatest areas of progress of the 20th century.



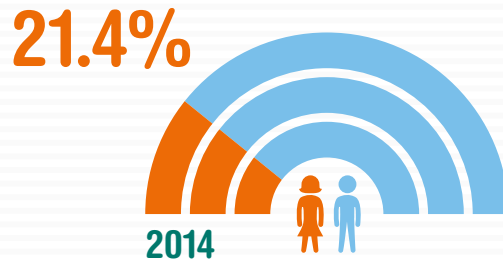
The number of women in parliament has almost doubled since 1997



LATIN AMERICA
(top region)

25.2%

average %
women MPs



RWANDA
(top country)

63.8%

women in
lower house

In more than
100 countries
QUOTAS

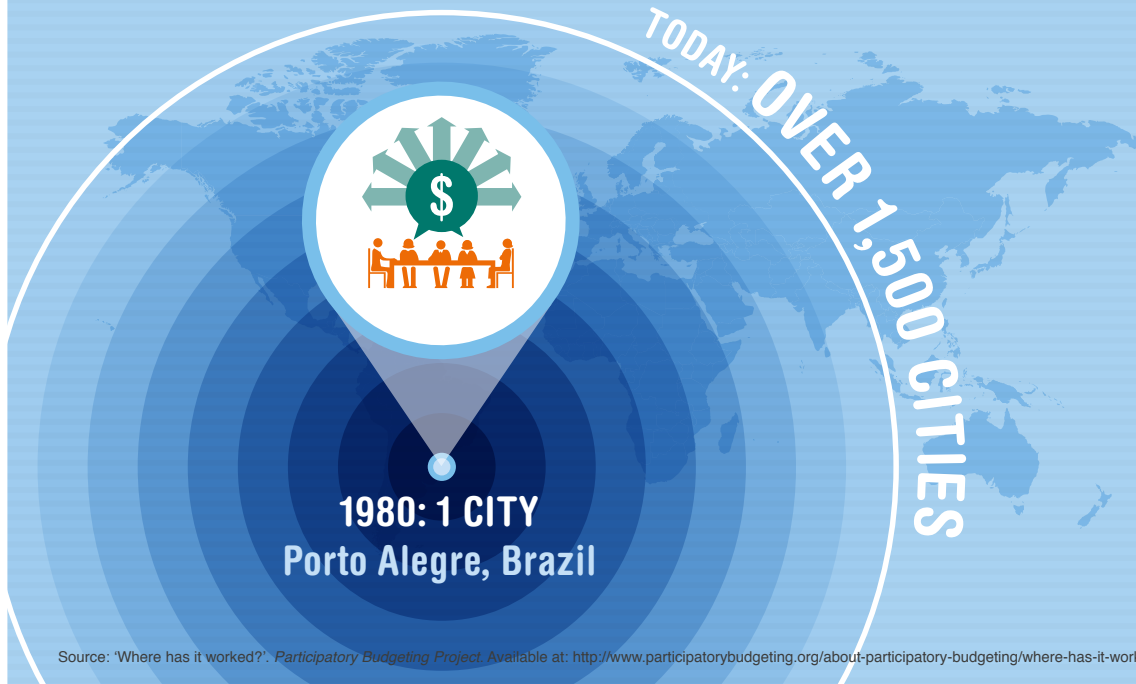


have been an
important
impetus for
change



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People in over 1,500 cities now have a say in how their budgets are spent



Source: 'Where has it worked?'. *Participatory Budgeting Project*. Available at: <http://www.participatorybudgeting.org/about-participatory-budgeting/where-has-it-worked/>

Elections also have the potential to deepen the quality of democratic governance, but they are a relatively blunt instrument of representation, and as ODI work in this area shows, they can have important limitations. More interactive mechanisms to encourage citizen engagement with the state are based on increased dialogue, collaboration and participatory decision-making. Participatory budgeting and constitution-making processes, two prominent examples of such ‘invited spaces’ of engagement, have become widespread since the 1980s – but others include citizen scorecards and community development projects.



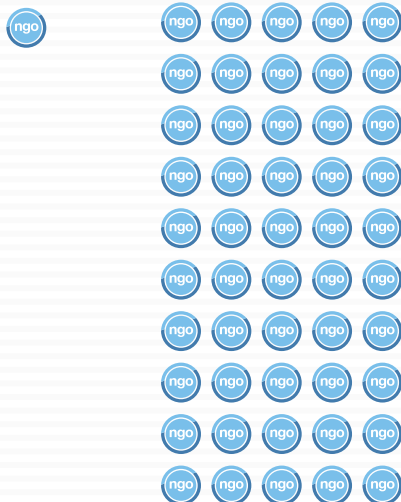
**Elections are essential
to democracy,
but they remain a
blunt instrument of
representation.**

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Often, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have proven instrumental in channeling citizen voice, engaging with elected representatives and other state actors in the kinds of invited spaces highlighted above, and/or acting as a counterweight for accountability. This can be seen in the growth of NGOs in the past fifty years, which has been exponential.

The growth of NGOs has been exponential

1951 x50 2014



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NGOs with consultative status to the United Nations Economic and Social Council

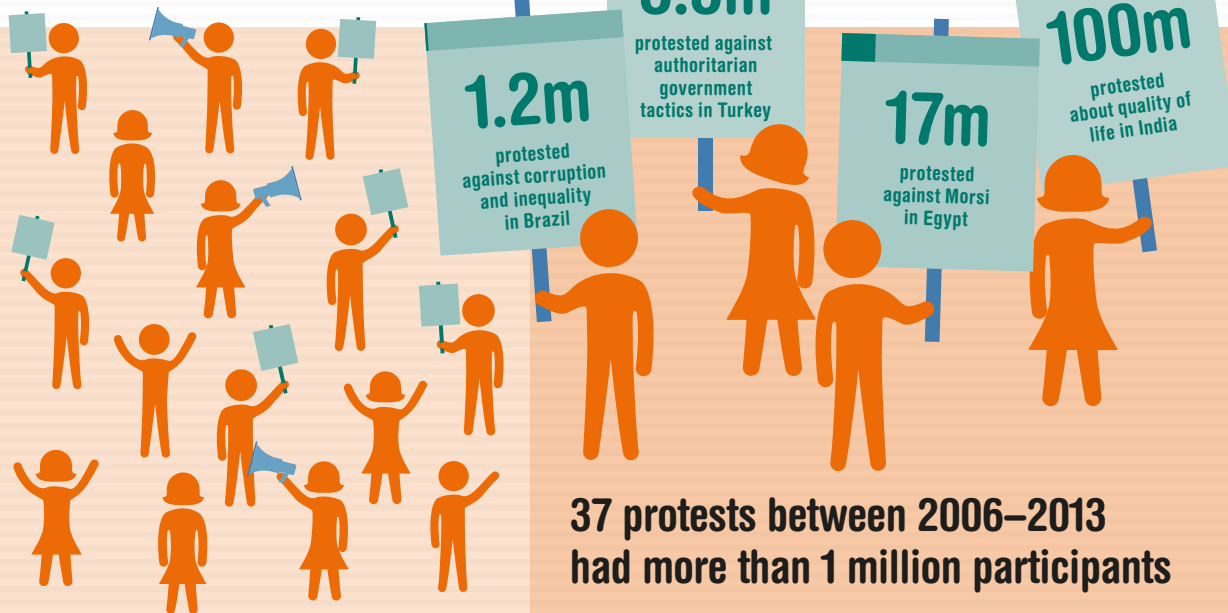


Sources: 'An Overview of NGOs'. *United States Institute of Peace*. Available at: <http://www.usip.org/node/5599>; 'Changes in the number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with consultative status with ECOSOC * 1948 to 2010'. *Statista: the Statistics Portal*. Available at: <http://www.statista.com/statistics/268357/changes-in-the-number-of-ngos-worldwide-since-1948/>

Protests are getting bigger worldwide...



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Sources: Ortiz, I.; Burke, S.; Berrada, M.; and Cortés, H. (2013). *World Protests 2006–2013*. Working Paper, September. New York: Initiative for Policy Dialogue and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Available at: http://policydialogue.org/files/publications/World_Protests_2006-2013-Final.pdf; 'More than one million join Brazil protests'. *Al Jazeera*. Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2013/06/201362022328194879.html>; McCoy, T. (2014) 'Turkey bans Twitter – and Twitter explodes'. *Washington Post* (21 March). Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/03/21/turkey-bans-twitter-and-twitter-explodes/>

Political voice is not just about 'polite debate' – it can often be more contentious and disruptive.

However, political voice is not just about 'polite debate'. As Frances Stewart reminds us, it has often been channeled in ways that are more contentious, disruptive – and even violent. The proliferation of protests, uprisings, and social mobilisation worldwide in recent years, in settings that include established democracies (the 'Occupy' movements in the US, the UK and beyond), more recently democratised upper middle-income countries (Brazil, India, Turkey), and countries that are going through major transformations (those in the Middle East and North Africa, Venezuela), reflects profound dissatisfaction with the quality of democratic representation.

These protests, which attract ever larger crowds, especially among the middle classes and disaffected young people, show that people demand more than just elections every few years. They want a say in what their governments do and, crucially, how they do it. But as Craig Valters reminds us in his blog, while protests are indispensable for challenging power dynamics, change is likely to take time, especially because existing power structures are not likely to melt away, and vested (elite) interests are likely to lash out.

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This growing expression and mobilisation of political voice has been much facilitated by the extraordinary growth of **information and communications technologies (ICTs)**. The spread of the Internet, mobile communication, and social media has been a key mobilisation tool, enabling people to connect across time and space in ways that were once unimaginable.

Billions of people now have mobile phones and internet...

DEVELOPING countries



DEVELOPED countries



WORLDWIDE

0.7bn
MOBILE PHONE
SUBSCRIPTIONS



2000



2012

6bn
MOBILE PHONE
SUBSCRIPTIONS



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IN
2013...

500m
TWEETS
PER DAY



645m
users



1.4bn
users

...that they can use for social mobilisation

Sources: World Bank. (2012). *Information and Communications for Development 2012: Maximizing Mobile*. Washington, DC: World Bank. Available at: <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTINFORMATIONANDCOMMUNICATIONANDTECHNOLOGIES/Resources/IC4D-2012-Report.pdf>; 'Twitter Statistics'. *Statistic Brain*. Available at: <http://www.statisticbrain.com/twitter-statistics/>; 'Social Networking Statistics'. *Statistic Brain*. Available at: <http://www.statisticbrain.com/social-networking-statistics/>

Three quarters of the world's population now have access to 'right to information' laws



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Source: 'Access to information laws: overview and statutory goals'. *Right2INFO.org*. Available at: <http://right2info.org/access-to-information-laws>

The proliferation of **'right to information' laws** has also enabled people, at least in principle, to access information they can use to hold their elected representatives and government officials to account.

How can voice be effective?

The recent and massive expansion of political voice has generated real enthusiasm about the potential of popular participation to hold power holders to account. The premise is that, when people are more engaged (and better informed), they demand greater accountability around issues they care about, and this can shape the quality of (democratic) governance and the nature of state-society relations and,

in turn, improve development outcomes. The reality, however, is more complicated than that.

Getting to the core of when and how voice can be effective – and for whom – means grappling with the underlying politics at play. The different voices emerging from society, including those of the poor or other vulnerable groups, may not necessarily be complementary but may compete with one another. So, the struggle for greater voice, inclusion, accountability and representation is an ongoing process of negotiation, contestation, and even confrontation, and it is about nothing if it is not about altering existing power relations.

To understand when and how voice is effective, it is essential to engage with the underlying politics at play.

As the ill-fated protests in Egypt show, voice alone is also not enough to bring about change; collective organisation is essential. When it comes to policy influence, the interaction of most people with the state is mediated through organisations – and political parties, parliaments, and coalitions among organised groups across state and society are all crucial. Nabila Hamza has also highlighted the role, however incipient, that think tanks across the Arab world have started to play

as intermediary organisations that may help harness participation and transform street protests into viable action.

If voice is to be meaningful, states must also have the capacity to respond to the needs and demands of their population – either through ‘invited spaces’ of participation or those that are more contested. Otherwise, increased voice may well raise expectations that cannot be met, resulting in disenchantment or, as the case of Egypt illustrates so tragically, increase the risk of instability and (violent) conflict.

Again, this shows the importance of productive engagement between progressive (and well organised) forces in state and society in amplifying the democratising scope of social engagement and participation. And it highlights why the profound lack of legitimacy of both parliaments and political parties – essential mechanisms to mediate between competing interests and channel citizen voice, especially in democratic systems – is so deeply problematic. As Alina Rocha Menocal, Gina Berg, and Laura Rodriguez Takeuchi find in their blog on governance perceptions, these tend to be



**Effective voice is
impossible without
political organisation.**

the least trusted institutions in the eyes of the population worldwide – which has important implications for the quality of voice and democratic representation.

Ultimately, the exercise of voice and the use of tools like access to information and social media to demand greater accountability and responsiveness is more likely to be effective when other enabling institutional and governance factors are present. Participatory constitution-making processes, for example, offer windows of opportunity to build the foundations of more inclusive and representative states and societies.

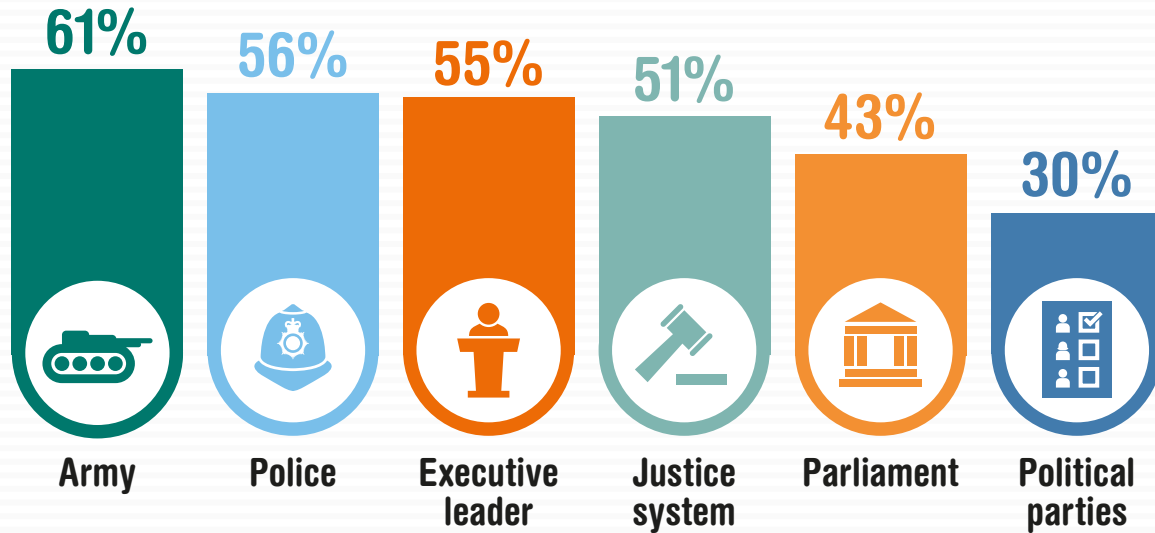
In his blog on the topic, Sumit Bisarya highlights that both domestic and international actors are placing much greater emphasis on ensuring such processes incorporate the voices of those who have otherwise been marginalised, notably women and minority groups. However, as experience from Guatemala and South Africa suggests, the challenge still remains to translate the rhetoric of new constitutions into actual practice – and as Sumit notes, poor people continue to be overlooked.

Political parties and parliaments everywhere are the least trusted institutions in the eyes of the population.



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Parliaments and parties are vital channels for political voice ...



... but which institutions do people trust?

Source: Bergh, G., Rocha Menocal, A. and Rodriguez Takeuchi, L. (2014). *What's behind the demand for governance?*. London: ODI. Available at: <http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8837.pdf>

Constitution-making processes can be important moments of public participation and consensus-building



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**NEW CONSTITUTIONS
1990–2005**

**OVER
40%**

of all constitutions in the world in place by 2008 required approval by public referendum



INCLUDING

Colombia

Guatemala

South Africa

Kenya

Tunisia

Sources: Moehler, Devra C. and Marchant, E. (2013). 'A Multi-Dimensional Model of Participatory Constitution Making and Legitimacy', Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. Available at: http://www.american.edu/spa/gov/upload/democracy2013-moehler_marchant.pdf; Elkins, Z., Ginsburg, T. and Blount, J. (2008). 'The Citizen as Founder: Public Participation in Constitutional Approval'. *Temple Law Review*, 81 (2). Available at: http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2451&context=journal_articles.

Ruth Carlitz has also warned us that we should not get too carried away about the transformational power of (some aspects) of participation. As she argues in her discussion on ICTs, it is essential to pay attention to who is actually talking and engaging in transparency initiatives, and who is listening. According to research she has been involved in, active participants tend to be men, urban dwellers and people with higher levels of education and/or access to information – which suggests that ICTs may not be equally empowering.

Thus, if we are to better understand what is likely to work and why, it is essential to unearth the contextual dynamics at play. These include the underlying political arrangements or settlements, the nature and evolution of state–society relations, the kinds of interactions between formal and informal institutions, and embedded power structures and differentials among different groups both within and between state and society, to name just a few.



BLOGS IN SERIES

Published March and April 2014

1 A wide-angle lens on the Afghan elections



Anna Larson

Afghanistan's third round of elections took place on Saturday amid unprecedented levels of pre-election violence and widespread rumours of fraud. And yet in the damp, cold conditions of an early spring morning, participation across the country was higher than expected, with early estimates of 7 million voters and a palpable sense of defiance to would-be spoilers, including the current government itself. Clearly, this was a public expression of the desire for change.

High stakes on the table

So much is at stake: the prospects of a peaceful transition of power; reconciliation with insurgent forces; the redistribution of government patronage and political influence; and the role of the international community. Who wins the race, however, is of relatively little consequence, in terms of policies. The three frontrunners (Dr Abdullah Abdullah, Dr Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai and Dr Zalmay Rassoul) are similar in their proposals for the future of Afghanistan (which remain vague) and their ability to put these into practice. None have specified how, for example, they would deal with the Taliban, but all have promised to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the US.

So much is at stake: the prospects of a peaceful transition of power; reconciliation with insurgent forces; the redistribution of government patronage and political influence; and the role of the international community.

Having said this, Abdullah and Ghani – fierce critics of the current administration – would represent more of a break with the past than Rassoul, who is rumoured to be President Karzai’s favourite and represents a continuation of the current regime to many. But the priority for many voters is not so much the need to choose the kind of government they want, but simply to ensure a government is in place for 2014 and beyond (for more analysis on why Afghans voted, see my and Noah Cobum’s April 2014 Chatham House paper on ‘Why vote in 2014’).

For the candidates, participation is not just about winning but about demonstrating a show of strength that will be traded with the eventual winner in backroom negotiations that are likely to follow the first round. This is why eight candidates continued their campaigns to the end, even though only the top three have any chance of winning.

For Afghan voters, however, the true test of these elections is whether they help to secure a peaceful transition, or whether in fact they contribute to future insecurity.

Election day: the first milestone in a long transition process

While media sources report that Afghanistan has undertaken its first transition of power through elections (see here), it is very early to be making such statements. First, initial results are not due until 24 April, to be followed by final results on 14 May, and meeting these targets will be a significant achievement for the Independent Election Commission (IEC). There is still space for narratives of fraud, negotiations between

candidates and further violence, even before a potential run-off between the top two candidates (scheduled for 28 May, if no candidate wins more than 50% of the vote).

These elections need to be seen as a protracted political process and not simply as a one-off event that can be quantified by a simple vote-count or two. With contestation at the local level over provincial council elections, which will also take place on 5 April (but with ballots counted only after the presidential race is resolved), the next four to six months are likely to be dominated by political unrest.

Assuming a new president is chosen during this time, his first priority is not only to convince the Afghan people that he is up to the job by signing the BSA and forging partnerships with the international community, but also to appease losing candidates and their regional backers to ensure loyalty to the new regime.

This being the case, internationals looking for speedy resolution of the Afghanistan problem will be disappointed. The troops leaving Afghanistan this year may symbolise a military disengagement but they do not signal the end of the West's interest in securing the region. The heightened expectations and concerns among Afghans for 2014 – with investments, university enrolment and even marriages put on hold – may spill over to 2015, given that parliamentary elections are tied to the presidential polls and are due to take place next year. The interests of regional players will also have a direct impact on the post-election political landscape as the new president will need to assure them that

their political and economic investments in the country are not at risk. Achieving this for Pakistan, India, Iran and Saudi Arabia simultaneously will be no simple task.

Why elections matter in Afghanistan: a voter's perspective

Countering this rather bleak picture, however, has been the determination of many Afghans to vote, and their conviction that elections are the only way to produce a successor to Karzai. While they talk freely in interviews about the likelihood of fraud and backroom deals, there is no alternative and, equally, no doubt that elections are an important component of Afghanistan's political transition. This suggests that the process of electing officials has a different significance in Afghanistan and perhaps in other post-conflict environments than it has in the west.

Although transparency is important, it is not paramount; while the right to vote as individual citizens is critical, it is not illegitimate to vote in a community bloc; while political democracy is an end-goal, it doesn't trump a secure transition. And while the different candidates will uphold the interests of minority groups in different ways, the question of who wins is less important than the question of what they can do to restore order once in power.

Elections and democracy

What the elections do not indicate, however, is the outright embrace of democracy. 5 April has already come to symbolise a step forward in participatory politics for Afghanistan, and a ringing public endorsement

of democratic means to select a leader. But ‘democracy’ has many connotations in Afghanistan, many of them negative: linked to a form of western imperialism and the imposition of alien norms and values onto a sovereign, Islamic nation.

Views differ about how Islam and democracy should coincide – from the total rejection of democracy and elections (see here), to the more widespread concern that while elections are a legitimate means of transition, democracy needs to be part of an ‘Islamic framework’ (although very few people, when asked, have specified what this means). Yet others push for greater gains in liberal democratic freedoms. Clearly, these are debates that Afghans need to have among themselves as the new government is established. But what international actors must not do is jump to conclusions about the nature of the new government’s rule and its commitment to liberal democracy on the basis of an impressive electoral turnout.

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William Avis

2 Political voice, corruption and the Indian election: saffron flags and broomsticks

India's elections, which kicked off on 7 April, will be, as always, a massive undertaking, spanning six weeks and nine separate phases to cover an estimated electorate of around 800 million people. The vote will shape India's political landscape for the next five years and will be influenced by a stormy sociopolitical context, including protests over violence against women, a push for gay rights and concerns over rural deprivation, to name just a few issues. Growing dissent reflects the voice of various emerging constituencies who are trying to shape a political agenda that will, in turn, shape the results of the national election.

One issue on the agenda is corruption. Positioned by activists and commentators as both a governance and development issue, the anti-corruption movement echoes the United Nations Development

Programme, which suggests that, ‘corruption undermines human development and democracy. It reduces access to public services by diverting public resources for private gain’. Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index 2013 ranks India 94th out of 175, doing worse than Brazil, China and South Africa. The costs of corruption in India undermine the potential of 10 years of consistent economic growth. With an estimated \$419 billion being laundered out of the country over the past decade, corruption has left an indelible stain on Indian society, hampering both growth and its ability to improve living standards.

India has been rocked by repeated scandals, from the Rolls-Royce defence scam to the Commonwealth Games scam, which have undermined faith in politicians and public figures and prompted mass outcry and protests. In the early 2000s, the social activist, Anna Hazare, spearheaded a movement demanding that state governments give citizens the right to information within 30 days to show how public servants spent public money, culminating in the Right to Information Act 2005, which promised more accountable and transparent government. But there are still concerns that the public is being denied information because of corruption.

Since 2010, social activists have pursued anti-corruption measures, taking to the streets to decry the failure of Government to respond to scandals and the acceptance of corruption as part of ‘doing business’. Up to 20,000 people have taken to the streets in Delhi and marches have taken place in more than 52 cities in protest at the Government’s handling of this issue.

While Indian electors have always been politically vociferous, stalling economic growth has encouraged people to seek... a shift in the standards to which those in public office are accountable.

From informal protests against rampant corruption, the movement has evolved into a political narrative targeting both the incumbent Congress party and a wider culture of apathy that pervades all levels of Indian life. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), formed in 2012, aims to translate popular resentment into political action and electoral success, using the broomstick as its symbol and portraying itself as the only party that can clean up politics. In its first foray into politics in 2013, AAP ousted the Congress party from power in the Delhi state elections, established a minority government in the national capital and positioned corruption as a 'big ticket' item on the national agenda.

While Indian electors have always been politically vociferous, stalling economic growth has encouraged people to seek both a change in government and a shift in the standards to which those in public office are accountable. The corruption narrative resonates particularly with middle-class urban voters and has been seized by the media to chide politicians and urge change. It is also a political football, kicked around by the AAP and the saffron flag waving Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to woo middle-class urban voters. Corruption has become the spur for middle class dissent and pragmatic politicians now highlight it in their manifestos.

Whether the AAP's success can be replicated at a national level and whether corruption will really be an electoral issue is, however, unclear. Arvind Kejriwal, AAP founder, says yes. He believes a campaign based around a robust stance on governance, transparency and corruption can mobilise voters and win national support. Commentators such as

Hazare say no, arguing that Kejriwal is seeking ‘money through power and power through money’ and that anti-corruption must compete with other key issues. This illustrates splits in the anti-corruption movement and the challenge of translating informal protest into political action.

While corruption has been the hot topic in the election build-up, its importance will diminish as economic issues, sub-national tensions and regional aspirations compete for attention. In a nation where governments are forged and broken by compromise and coalition, the issue of corruption, though populist, may struggle for relevance. Wherever parties must appeal to rural population, it is issues such as food security, access to electricity and Onionomics that have real traction.

Political voice is not, therefore, one single thing. It comes from particular communities and is accented by particular constituencies, so parties must choose from a menu of issues such as economic stagnation, gender, religion, ethnic differences, etc. This is not to say that the anti-corruption movement does not matter, but rather to suggest that corruption is not the only issue that will mobilise a diverse Indian electorate.

The anti-corruption movement began as an articulation of grassroots political voice, but has been appropriated by political parties looking for votes. Whilst Hazare, Kejriwal and the AAP position corruption at centre stage, the big winner in this discourse is likely to be the Hindu nationalist BJP and their leader Narendra Modi. Perceived as an ‘incorruptible’ leader (despite accusations of his complicity in the massacre of over

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2,000 Muslims in 2002), he can use the anti-corruption ticket to catapult the BJP into a position to form the next coalition government. The AAP, in contrast, remains a party defined by one man (Kejriwal), one victory (Delhi), and one policy (anti-corruption).

While the AAP has provided a political platform for popular protest, this remains a north Indian, urban and middle-class rallying call that fails to resonate in rural areas across the country. Here, the charismatic leadership of Kejriwal is replaced by local activists who generate their own electoral appeal and local issues trump a critique of national corruption.

3 Of media, elections and polarisation



James Deane

It is five years since Paul Collier published *Wars, Guns and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places*. He argued that elections alone were a poor guarantor of democracy, an often rotten mechanism for ensuring accountability between politician and citizen and a highly effective vehicle for already entrenched political interests to become even more entrenched. Collier maintained that meaningful democracy required a lot more than elections: the rule of law, a strong civil society and – very importantly – a free press.

This is the kind of argument – backed by evidence – that media folks like me really welcome. Elections are procedural: they are events that fall easy prey to manipulation and that, once dispatched, too often allow unaccountable leaders to plunder or abuse power. Real democracy is, in contrast, substantive: it depends on the kind of information flows and dialogue that stitch accountability and participation into the fabric of a society. An effective, free and independent media is an indispensable component of this substantive democracy and just as vital as the opportunity to vote at a ballot box.

Media play this informative role both in the run-up to elections and on Election Day itself, where they can be a key guarantor of the overall quality of the electoral process. Media ensure that electorates are informed about the policy choices available to them. Media provide the platform for voters to hear arguments from politicians about policy choices and, through debate, enable voters to voice their concerns and demand answers to their questions. Media can also be among the most effective observers and monitors of free and fair elections, ensuring public trust in the voting system and alerting the public to corruption or mismanagement.

Few elections live up to this democratic vision, of course. ‘Free and fair’ elections are, in reality, often brutal and factional. So it is with the media. Media in some developing countries adhere to a code of ethics that commits them to report impartially and to reflect a range of perspectives around an election. But the purpose of an election is to polarise political opinion and media often display their most polarising behaviour during an election period.

In fragile states, in particular, the political advantages to powerful societal actors of owning, controlling or intimidating the media have grown, while the incentives that encourage genuinely independent media seem to be diminishing. Research by BBC Media Action suggests that a neutral and objective press independent from political interest is becoming rarer, rather than more common. Courageous journalists determined to work in the public interest continue to survive around

the world, but such examples are countered by stories of inflammatory and hate-filled media in countries ranging from Kenya to Egypt to Afghanistan. The Kenyan journalist who faces trial at the International Criminal Court for his actions in the wake of the 2007-2008 Kenyan elections is just one high-profile example of the media being accused of fuelling tension in recent years.

Elections also constitute a boom time for media for economic reasons. This is partly because paid-for advertising from political parties skyrockets and partly because the scourge of brown envelope journalism (bribes paid by political interests for favourable media coverage) tends to increase.

Finally, the rise of social media in recent years has also changed electoral dynamics in developing countries. Social media creates major new opportunities for voice, dialogue and holding both politicians and traditional media to account. At the same time, however, social media also provides opportunities –under the cover of anonymity – for the expression of a factional, ugly and sometimes violent discourse.

Given the critical role of the media around elections acknowledged by nearly all electoral management bodies, donor organisations and political figures alike, it, might be assumed that support to media in fragile states would be a priority within the international development community.

In 2010, however, BBC Media Action and International Idea organised a small conference where donor organisations and other interested

The character of a country's elections is determined increasingly by the character of a country's media.

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parties agreed that support to media around the elections was too often an afterthought in the electoral planning process. The conference called explicitly for support to media to become better prioritised within the 'electoral cycle' approach, the planning system around elections that is now widely utilised by donor agencies supporting elections in the developing world. There has been progress on this front since then, but the issue too often remains peripheral and poorly integrated into electoral support agendas.

This matters. How people access information, how they articulate their concerns and grievances in open public debate and how their loyalties are formed are all shaped by rapidly changing 21st century media and communication environments. And the character of a country's elections is determined increasingly by the character of a country's media. Electoral management bodies and international organisations that support elections need to place a much higher priority on understanding the role of media and embedding support strategies that maximise media's positive role and diminish its negative impact.

4 Understanding the nature of power: the force field that shapes development



Duncan Green

Women's empowerment is one of the greatest areas of progress in the last century, so what better theme for a post on 'voice' than gender rights?

Globally, the gradual empowerment of women is one of the standout features of the past century. The transformation in terms of access to justice and education, to literacy, sexual and reproductive rights and political representation is striking.

That progress has been driven by a combination of factors: the spread of effective states that are able to turn 'rights thinking' into actual practice, and broader normative shifts; new technologies that have freed up women's time and enabled them to control their own fertility; and

Globally, the gradual empowerment of women is one of the standout features of the past century.

the vast expansion of primary education – particularly for girls – and improved health facilities.

Politics and power have been central to many, if not all, of these advances. At a global political level, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) appears to be one of those pieces of international law that exerts genuine traction at a national level, as it is ratified and codified in domestic legislation.

But what is needed to turn such global progress into better national policies? To find out in the case of violence against women, Laurel Weldon and Mala Htun have painstakingly constructed the mother of all databases, covering 70 countries over four decades (1975 to 2005). It includes various kinds of state action (legal and administrative reforms, protection and prevention, training for officials), and a number of other relevant factors, such as the presence of women legislators, GDP per capita, the nature of the political regime, etc. In a paper for the Gender and Development journal, they concluded that the empowerment of women was crucial:

Countries with the strongest feminist movements tend, other things being equal, to have more comprehensive policies on violence against women than those with weaker or non-existent movements. This plays a more important role than left-wing parties, numbers of women legislators, or even national wealth.

As Htun and Weldon's paper implies, violence remains one of the main obstacles to women exercising their rights. Beyond the grim realities of such violence, however, there is some good news at national level, from women-only 'pink' public transport, to women's police stations to the rapidly snowballing campaign against female genital mutilation.

That focus on women's movements and women's voice is a core part of Oxfam's work around the world. It starts with understanding the very nature of power, the invisible force field that connects individuals, communities and nations, whose visible consequences include much of what we call 'development outcomes'.

Much of the standard (i.e. ungendered) work on empowerment and voice focuses on institutions and the world of formal power – can people vote, express dissent, organise, find decent jobs, get access to information and justice? These are all crucial questions, but there is an earlier stage, known as power 'within'. The very first step of empowerment takes place in the hearts and minds of the individuals who ask: 'do I have rights? Am I a fit person to express a view? Why should anyone listen to me? Am I willing and able to speak up, and what will happen if I do?'

'Power within' is particularly important for work on women's rights. In South Asia, the We Can campaign is an extraordinary campaign on violence against women launched in late 2004, that at the last count had signed up some four million women and men to be 'change makers' – advocating for an end to violence against women in their homes and communities. It aims to reach 50 million people (via 5 million change

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makers) – a symbolic target equal to the estimated number of South Asia's 'missing women'. What's different about We Can (apart from its scale) is that it is not about policies, laws, constitutions or lobbying the authorities – it aims to change attitudes and beliefs about gender roles at community level. And it's viral. Each change maker talks to their friends and neighbours, and tries to persuade them to sign up too.

In a piece on women's voice, I'd better leave the last word to a woman, in this case Selvaranjani Mukkaiah, A We Can change maker in Badulla, Sri Lanka:

To me change is the killing of fear. For example, someone may know how to sing but will not sing. Someone or something needs to kindle the fire in you and kill the fear that stops you from changing. I have killed the fear of talking and that is a change for me.

5 What does growing protest worldwide tell us about political voice and social change?



Craig Valters

Protests are an indispensable way to challenge power dynamics and raise citizens' voice. They can also play a critical role in raising citizen's consciousness, encouraging populations to force their governments to listen.

We are witnessing a remarkable rise in global protests, as outlined by Alina Rocha Menocal in the opening blog of this series on political voice.

From established democracies to the world's most stubborn autocracies, people are exercising their political voice through protest because more formal channels seem to have failed them. And with the help of new communications technology, protests are now going viral.

The sheer scale of protest reflects a profound and global lack of trust in the very institutions that are supposed to speak in our name – a mistrust confirmed by recent ODI research. So what do these protests tell us about the expression of voice and processes of social change?

1. Change through protest is a messy and long-term process

Protests have a remarkable emotional appeal – often morally persuasive and deeply moving. Yet they can also be disappointing, with the immediacy and vitality of the protest often challenged and sometimes marked by the reassertion of existing authority. In an article reflecting on ‘The Alchemy of Protest’, Christian Caryl points out that the power of demonstrations lies in the overtly public nature of the challenge that they pose.

Mass demonstrations are clearly embarrassing for leaders, particularly in those countries where authority is rarely challenged on such a scale. Yet size itself, while clearly important, does not guarantee ‘success’: much may depend on decisions and processes we don’t see or understand until a later date, if at all. Either way, the ebb and flow of protest dynamics and their aftermaths defy simple explanations and are likely to be punctuated by a variety of challenges.

2. It seems impossible to anticipate the outcomes of protests

As highlighted by Moses Naim in El Pais, until shortly before their demise, Ben Ali, Gaddafi or Mubarak were treated by experts as untouchable leaders whose hold on power was permanent. The next day, those same experts were all busily explaining why the fall of these dictators was inevitable.

We appear to know little about how and why protests actually start – and predicting their eventual effects is just as fraught a task. This is linked, in part, to a failure of political analysis and an under-appreciation of citizens' grievances and their effects – but is also fuelled by the rather unpredictable, fragmented and fluid nature of protests. Situations have changed at speed in various countries, depending on the growth and demands of the protest itself, the elite reaction, international support (or lack of it) and more.

In a recent study by Ortiz et al. analysing 843 protests between 2006 and mid-2013, it was claimed that 37% of protests resulted in some kind of achievement, mostly in the areas of political, legal and social rights and that global issues and economic justice appear the most difficult areas in which to achieve change. This doesn't take into account more informal changes, such as the raising of political consciousness, which will affect change in the future.

3. Elite power structures won't just disappear

Existing asymmetrical power structures that underpin governance processes are tough to break down. The existing political dynamics of the country will inevitably play a central role in how events unfold. Particularly in long-term authoritarian contexts – and perhaps in democratic systems – the political, social and economic determinants of elite power often remain in diverse ways despite large-scale protests and apparent major social change.

Where power does change hands, it does not necessarily become more accountable or less centralised: elites may simply remove one badge and replace it with another. Power relations often remain deeply embedded in institutional structures (sometimes called the deep state). Fundamentally, progressive change through protest is all about challenging and changing the distribution of power in various contexts.

4. Elites will often lash out

As an Amnesty report in 2012 on protests in the Middle East and North Africa argued, persistent attempts by states to offer cosmetic changes, to push back against gains made or to violently oppress protesters betrays the fact that, for many governments, regime survival is everything.

According to media reports studied in the Ortiz et al. report, the protests generating the most arrests were in Iran, the UK, Russia, Chile, Malaysia, US, Canada and Cameroon; the most deaths were reported in Kyrgyzstan, Egypt and Kenya; the most injuries, in Egypt, Thailand and Algeria.

As Frances Stewart argues, progressive change is difficult because the elite possess the most powerful weapons – they can buy people off; they can control the media; they often control (or are) the police and army. Of course, protests can have a dark side when militant groups are thrown in the mix – when protests become less a mechanism for voice than a way for violent groups to push their agenda, states are obligated to respond. Yet the line between peaceful protest and violent action can also be blurred deliberately by those in power to legitimise repression, through provocation and propaganda.

5. Eventually, protesters need a legitimate organisational structure

Clearly, the viral, fluid and diverse nature of recent protests has been part of their appeal and relative success. Yet it is also their critical weakness: they often lack organisational capacity beyond loose networks bringing together a variety of people and fractured messages.

Of course, growing discontent, a lack of trust in political institutions, economic injustice, and corruption – all of these can bind people into strong longer-term social movements. But as Paul Mason notes, 2012 taught the pure horizontalist movement that politics abhors a vacuum, even one created with the best intentions. Without an eventual channel or organisational structure for the voice of protesters, the effects are short-term or more easily reversed.

Increasingly, governments worldwide are being identified by people across different ideologies as elitist, repressive and unaccountable. Protests are an indispensable way to challenge these power dynamics and raise citizens' voice. They can also play a critical role in raising citizen's consciousness, encouraging populations to force their governments to listen. Elites beware: in an increasingly networked world, the ability to avoid scrutiny and to ignore legitimate demands is now fading away.

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2012 taught pure horizontalist movements that politics abhors a vacuum, even one created with the best intentions.

*Nabila Hamza*

6 The boom of think tanks in a changing Arab world

Think tanks in the Arab World carry a heavy responsibility in terms of deepening the reform agenda, adding weight and authority to the voices pushing for change.

Change is becoming very real in some Arab countries, while others are still clawing their way towards democracy or enduring a bloodbath in the fight for regime survival. The actors and factors that will shape the outcomes include the region's think tanks and research centres. They carry a heavy responsibility in terms of deepening the Arab reform agenda, adding weight and authority to the voices pushing for change, fostering greater political and economic awareness, and helping governments to address political, economic and social challenges.

After a history of enforced absence, Arab strategic think tanks are mushrooming across the whole region, with many created in Tunisia and Egypt, in particular. The winds of freedom, thought and action that have blown across the region since the Arab spring have bolstered this trend. Many academics who were once silenced and unable to engage in policy-making, write or publish their research, are today creating research groups and involving themselves in all the issues related to democratic transitions.

However, there are many barriers to the development of such think tanks and their successful participation in national policy-making processes in the region. Arab think tanks are not as powerful and influential as their US and European counterparts. They have relatively limited resources, a smaller number of scholars, and restricted means and formal channels to influence decision-makers. Most lack expertise and know-how in policy-oriented research, which has an impact on the quality of research and policy papers they produce. They are also unfamiliar with the culture of lobbying, consultancy and advocacy that has become commonplace for think tanks in other parts of the world. In addition, many institutions and researchers face difficulties in accessing information and this is curtailing their activities, alongside the restrictive legislation on publications and freedom of expression that is still entrenched in many countries of the region.

Today, Arab countries face many challenges as they undergo transition. Think tanks can certainly play a vital role in addressing these challenges. Their primary function is to help government and political parties understand and make informed choices about issues of domestic and international concern. They could become positive and innovative partners for authorities at the local and national levels through their research, analysis and outreach. Research and analysis could include the evaluation of government programmes and the framing of policy issues and the publication and dissemination of research findings in books, articles, policy briefs and monographs. In addition, they could undertake key outreach activities, such as giving public testimony, holding press conferences and giving media interviews, delivering speeches on hot

topics and, very importantly, by providing a channel whereby those who have rarely been heard can have a voice in the policy debate.

Think tanks can and should do more than just inform and advise the government and ruling elite. They can offer up their expertise in consolidating the democratic process, in charting a path towards the assessment and monitoring of government performance – vital for keeping governments accountable to democratic values and for good governance. They also have a key role in deepening the Arab reform agenda, in advocating respect for human rights (including the rights of women and children), press freedom and equality for vulnerable groups, and in driving effective policy reform that guarantees genuine political participation – shaped by a strong voice for the once disenfranchised – pluralism and sound inclusive democracies.

In order to do that, think tanks must launch new programmes and projects that are relevant to the new political, economic and social context, and re-shape their research agenda to further accommodate the needs and challenges of Arab countries in transition. They need to identify new modes of engagement with other stakeholders that could lead to constructive and positive contributions to the process of change, beyond the production of research.

Think tanks should try to build their capacities and expertise to enhance the quality of their research and policy papers. They need to learn how to lobby with parliamentarians and decision-makers and how to link with the media and disseminate their findings and recommendations. They

have to rethink their communication and outreach strategies as well as their partnerships, renewing and implementing partnerships with civil society organisations, trade unions, political parties and media, among many others.

In closing, I would like to quote Plato's *The Republic*, which puts it very clearly: 'there can be no good government until philosophers become kings and the kings, philosophers.'

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7 Studies show: people want democracy to deliver the goods

People are concerned first and foremost about the ability of governments to deliver on key needs and expectations. Political freedoms remain decidedly secondary concerns.

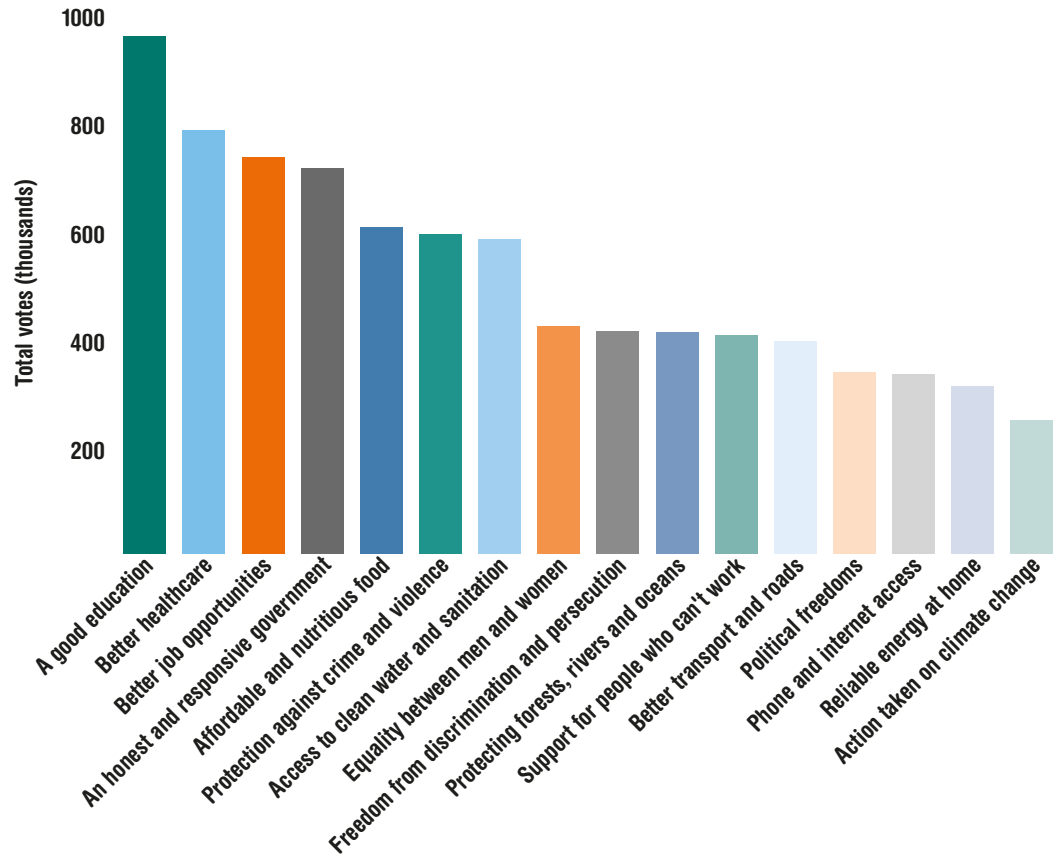
Does the average person consider governance when they think about the things that affect their everyday lives? In a new Overseas Development Institute (ODI) paper that assesses views on governance based on survey data from around the world, we find that they do. But governance has many aspects, and there are some that are more important to people than others.

In general, people seem to be concerned first and foremost about state performance and the ability of governments to deliver on key needs and expectations in areas including economic management, growth stimulation, job creation, health, education, or a more equitable distribution of goods and services. Corruption is a central part of this story, since it has such a big impact on people's satisfaction with their governments and their perceptions of its performance overall.

Other governance dimensions, especially those associated with political freedoms, are also important, but they remain decidedly secondary concerns. Perceptions of governance are quite instrumental: people tend to value political freedoms and democracy mostly in relation to how democracies perform and whether they successfully provide the expected goods and services. This can place democracy under considerable strain, especially in countries across the developing world where the ability of governments to respond to citizen needs remains weak. The question of how these democracies can be more effectively supported so that they can improve the wellbeing of their populations is therefore crucial, with important implications for a future international development consensus to succeed the Millennium Development Goals after 2015.

Our findings on governance perceptions draw on emerging results from My World, an innovative global UN survey on people's priorities for the future, which has gathered over 1.4 million votes from people in as many as 194 countries. The survey asks respondents to select their top six out of 16 possible development priorities for the future that would make the most difference to them and their families.

Of these options, most respondents prioritised 'an honest and responsive government', which ranks only behind such central concerns as education, health, and jobs. Other governance-related options lag considerably behind, particularly 'political freedoms', which ranked fourth to last:



Data: February 2014

Admittedly *My World* only provides a snapshot of what people care about, and doesn't reveal much about why they vote the way that they do. So we compared the *My World* vote results with more detailed regional Barometer surveys that cover larger samples of polling data from countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. This revealed a strikingly similar picture across surveys on what dimensions of governance people value more, and important insights can be drawn from those results.

People are concerned above all about the ability of their governments to 'deliver the goods,' namely in relation to economic development, employment, and essential public services such as health, education, and water and sanitation. According to these Barometer surveys (and very much consistent with the *My World* vote rankings) the number of people pointing to economic concerns and the provision of services as the main challenge that their governments should address is much higher than concerns about democracy and rights.

The regional surveys show that people do also care about democracy: when asked in the abstract which form of government they prefer, an overwhelming majority of people across countries and income groups choose democracy (and, implicitly, political freedoms). Yet very often their appreciation of democracy is linked to how democratic systems perform (which brings us back to the goods they deliver). Here, overall, assessments are much less positive.

As the growing number of popular protests and uprisings around the world indicates, there is profound dissatisfaction across the board with the ability of democracies to deliver tangible benefits and to improve the wellbeing of ordinary citizens. People are clearly clamouring for greater democratic rights and increased representation. But more fundamentally, this popular mobilisation is also an expression of a profound revulsion with leaders and political systems perceived to be deeply corrupt and unwilling or unable to address the everyday needs of citizens.

As a recent essay in the *Economist* argues, even established Western democracies have not been spared. Disillusionment with the workings of democracy in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere has become rife. In particular, inequality has deepened over the past few decades (in the United States, for instance, the share of national income going to the richest 1% of the population has risen from 8% in 1980 to 12% in 2012), and there is a widespread sense that these democratic systems have become increasingly biased towards the rich and powerful, and are unable to provide for the population at large. Popular disenchantment has become even more pronounced in the context of the financial crisis and austerity programs. As the rise of the ‘Occupy’ movement and its slogan (‘We are the 99 percent’) shows, people are deeply frustrated with the inability of democracy to provide goods, as well as the perceived social and economic inequality, corporate greed, and corruption that have come to characterise it.

People consistently rank parliaments and political parties as the institutions they trust the least, while the military earns the highest measure of public confidence. Even where people feel that they are able to express their ‘political voice’ (through elections for instance, or the freedom to say what they think), they don’t believe that their voice is being heard and can make a difference on how their governments work. This reinforces feelings of frustration at a widely perceived lack of government responsiveness and accountability, and is a particularly worrisome trend among young people.

So what does this all mean?

The preference for effective government has important implications for state legitimacy. Clearly the question of legitimacy is multifaceted and complex, and historically states have relied on a combination of sources and methods to build public trust. But these survey findings suggest that performance-based legitimacy is particularly important.

The vast majority of countries today are formal democracies. People still seem to expect that such systems are inherently better at providing public goods, even though this isn’t necessarily the case. This puts democracy under considerable pressure. The most urgent challenge of the 21st century, therefore, may well be to strengthen democracies around the world so that they can respond to the demands of their populations more effectively. If they fail to do so, democratic institutions run the risk of becoming increasingly hollow and perfunctory, at least in the eyes of the public.

Our findings also have important implications for emerging global development goals set to take shape after the MDGs expire in 2015. As has been amply discussed, institutional structures and dynamics are essential in shaping development outcomes and in explaining differences in progress between countries. For example, Nepal has made significant progress in improving maternal health care by devolving decision-making to local bodies, as well as by strengthening oversight and accountability among government, service providers, and local communities. Conversely, lack of policy coherence and weak accountability mechanisms to track performance have contributed to an under-provision of maternal health services in Malawi, Uganda, and Niger.

A key weakness of the MDG framework was its neglect of the crucial nature of governance. Including it as a stand-alone goal would signal its centrality to development outcomes, as the High Level Panel on the post-2015 development agenda has recommended. But as our assessment here highlights, it is also essential to understand governance above all as a government's ability to deliver tangible goods and benefits that make a difference to people's everyday lives. Governance must also be addressed as an objective that cuts across areas such as health, education, and the management of water and other natural resources.

Translating these ideas into consensus on a new development framework will not be easy. Doing so requires a significant change in the way we think about development, as well as in the current strategies to promote governance in the post-2015 framework. We will need to move away

from normative conceptions of change and toward more practical approaches grounded in contextual realities. But this shift will be essential for the next set of development goals to have substance, and to fill the gaps that matter most to people.

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Sumit Bisarya

8 We the (poor) people – constitutions and the economically marginalised

Constitution-making has been taken out of the proverbial smoke-filled chambers of elite-bargaining and into town-halls, village squares and the internet.

Thomas Paine once wrote, ‘A constitution is not the act of a government, but of a people constituting a government’. If so, it follows that the people must have a voice in how they are to be governed.

Much progress has been made in recent years to take constitution-making out of the proverbial smoke-filled chambers of elite-bargaining and into town-halls, village squares and the internet – where far more groups and individuals can make their voices heard. In 2013, both Viet Nam and Myanmar conducted public consultations for their parliamentary-led constitutional reform processes, and even in Egypt – where public consultations were limited at best – the new constitution was adopted by referendum.

National and international actors alike are focusing more on the inclusion of marginalised groups. And constitution-building processes – because of their timing, nature and content – can be key opportunities for the participation of once marginalised groups in democratic processes.

On timing: constitution-building often takes place at a transformative moment in national history, where a nation is asked to set out a vision of itself not as how it is, but as how it would like to be. In terms of their nature, constitutions are often written not by parliamentary majorities but through consensus, supermajority voting and/or public referendums. As for content, constitutions provide the overarching framework for state and society, defining how power is allocated among groups, or locking groups out of power until the next constitutional moment.

Pathways for participation in the constitution-building process are often created for women or those from minority groups, for example. However, one major voice is often left unsought and overlooked – that of the economically marginalised.

Participation can be divided into three categories: representation, consultation, and decision-making. And each of these presents problems for the participation of the poor.

Representation consists of election or appointment to constitution-making bodies, which provides an opportunity to select agents to speak for group interests. Increasingly, representation includes reserved seats for marginalised groups, and/or election systems designed to over-represent minorities. But rarely have the economically disempowered been included as a group on a constitution-making body. The divides between those from minority groups and everyone else may overlap with economic divides, but not always; and even where such cleavages do overlap, there is no guarantee that the interests of the poor will be represented.

First, there is the ‘creamy layer’ problem, namely that those most likely to be appointed or elected are unlikely to be from the poorest sub-strata of the group. Second, development and redistributive economic demands may be subsumed by identity-related concerns – such as freedom of religion and personal status laws for religious minorities, or cultural and educational autonomy for linguistic groups.

Consultations offer opportunities for those negotiating the constitution to receive input from the general public discussion or from interest groups on contentious issues. Again, the economically marginalised, as a group, are often overlooked, surprisingly, when consultation campaigns are designed. What’s more, in many countries the challenges of low literacy rates and the logistical challenges in reaching the rural poor cut large swathes of the population out of the constitutional debate. Consultations favour organised urban elites who have access and means

to ensure their voices are heard. The hopes of the poor ride, if anything, on development-oriented civil society organisations who may bring with them ideas and knowledge, but who lack the bargaining power enjoyed by the voting constituents of a trade union or religious group, for example.

On decision-making, the voting public at large often has the final say over whether a constitution is adopted or not through a referendum, which should offer an opportunity for the huddled masses to make themselves heard. However, in many countries the disenfranchisement of those living on the fringes of society is commonplace. This can be the result of challenges to their registration because they lack identity documentation, their lack of physical access to polling stations, and their exploitation as ‘vote banks’ for feudal masters or warlords whereby they trade their votes for subsistence. Even where the poor can vote freely, questions remain over whether there is enough good quality voter education to make an informed choice, and whether a ‘thumbs-up-or-down’ on a final draft can ever constitute effective participation.

The recent wave of constitution-building in Arab States illustrates the lack of focus on economic inequality. While the constitutional moments in Tunisia and Egypt were triggered by lack of employment opportunities and victimisation of the poor by the state, the constitutional debates revolved around the role of religion in politics and society, women’s rights and the allocation of power in the central government – all important issues that are crucial to the futures of these countries, but any serious discussion of a revised constitutional framework that might promote human development was minimal, if not non-existent.

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Without the inclusion of the economically marginalised, discussion of their place in the new constitutional order and how that new order aims to address past inequalities, constitution-building processes risk continued silence and lack of hope on the societal challenges most in need of national debate.

9 Political voice: Who's talking? Who's listening?



Ruth Carlitz

The extent to which ordinary people are speaking up to influence government decision-making is increasingly seen as a harbinger of a 'developed' society.

This is evident in terms of what development experts are measuring (voice and opportunities for participation are central to the World Bank's World Governance Indicators and the International Budget Partnership's Open Budget Survey) as well as what is being funded – like the new and ambitious Making All Voices Count initiative.

However, in both measuring and generating political voice, two critical questions often go unanswered. First, who's talking? And second, who's listening?

Last year, Rosie McGee and I undertook a study on people's use of technology for transparency and accountability initiatives (T4TAIs) (commissioned by the Institute of Development Studies, Hivos's Knowledge Programme and the Africa Technology and Transparency Initiative (ATTI)). A literature review was combined with fieldwork on two ATTI-supported projects in Uganda: 'Mobile Phones for Improved Access to Safe Water' (M4Water) and TRAC FM, which aims to amplify people's voice through SMS and radio.

Our exploration of who's talking found that many T4TAIs do not meet the initial ambitions of their designers in terms of empowering ordinary people to raise their voices in new ways. Instead, the active participants tend to be the 'usual suspects': men, urban dwellers and people with higher levels of education and/or access to information. Such a bias risks empowering certain citizens while further marginalising others, serving to entrench discrimination and social exclusion rather than increase accountability to the broader public.

Constitution-making has become much more participatory, but the economically marginalised are still overlooked.

Not only is take-up often skewed in this way, it also tends to be lower than expected. Indeed, while many T4TAIs are designed with mass users in mind, mass take-up is hard to achieve. A number of the more successful initiatives have relied less on 'crowd sourcing' than on 'crowd seeding' – targeting specific members of the community rather than the public at large. Crowd seeding has been used successfully to gather information about conflict in remote areas, and has been demonstrated to be a key factor contributing to the impact of technology-based platforms that promote accountability.

A recent review by the Transparency Accountability Initiative of seven technology interventions that aim to increase the accountability of public and private organisations found that:

to the extent that these platforms increase accountability, only two... did so through chains of action in which the ICT interventions provided information that was then used by 'mass' users. The other platforms, and even [the first two], were successful when various more centralised 'organisational' users acted upon the information made available.

Reducing the cost of communication can also help to motivate participation, as can feedback mechanisms to let people know their voices have been heard, as shown in a study of UNICEF's U-Report system in Uganda. This ties in to people's expectations about what they can hope to achieve through their participation. Indeed, one of the major barriers to widespread participation in initiatives that are supposed to raise the voices of ordinary citizens is potential users' cynicism about their own ability to have any influence on government decision-making. Such cynicism might be better termed realism, given the widespread lack of government responsiveness in many of the countries where such initiatives have been implemented.

This brings us to the second important question that is often overlooked in the design of initiatives meant to enhance voice: who's listening?

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I spent part of last year conducting research commissioned by the Accountability Programme in Tanzania, documenting the engagement of their civil society partners with local government councillors. Many of these organisations – like Oxfam in its Chukua Hatua (Take Action) initiative and HakiKazi Catalyst – began to engage with local elected officials when they saw that their work to empower ordinary citizens was falling on deaf ears. While this sort of multi-stranded engagement approach has helped to increase impact, my forthcoming study finds that responsiveness to citizens' demands is still constrained in Tanzania because of the prevailing influence of the central government on local affairs.

In sum, who's talking – and who's listening – should feature more prominently in the design and evaluation of initiatives meant to enhance 'political voice.' We need theories of change that are more clearly defined – both in terms of the incentives people have to participate, and the context in which their voices are heard and responded to.

While many initiatives take a universalist approach (perhaps because they are funded by multilateral agencies looking to replicate results on a global scale) they would be better grounded in well-informed political economy analyses that get at what really makes government officials tick in different countries, as well as who within the government actually has the ability to respond. Otherwise, efforts to increase political voice risk creating mere echo chambers that do little or nothing to advance development progress.

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Cover photo North Darfur woman votes in Sudanese national elections.
UN Photo/Albert Gonzalez Farran

Page 9 International Monetary Fund's Managing Director Christine Lagarde talks to members of the media after she met with Nigeria's President Goodluck Jonathan, 2011. IMF Staff Photograph/Stephen Jaffe

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