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THREATEN BUT PARTICIPATE: WHY ELECTION BOYCOTTS ARE A BAD IDEA

For a while, the run-up to the 2010 general elections in Iraq appeared to be déjà vu all over again. The National Dialogue Front (NDF), a key Sunni political party, had decided to pull out of the election to protest the disqualification of hundreds of candidates—most notably their leader, Salah al-Mutlaq—for alleged ties to the banned Ba’th Party. At the last minute, the NDF walked back from the brink and decided to participate, hopefully signaling a growing understanding that election boycotts rarely succeed. The Iraqi Sunnis know this better than most, having learned this lesson the hard way just five years ago.

The Sunni community’s decision not to participate in the historic elections of January 2005 is now viewed as one of the great strategic blunders of the post-Saddam era. Claiming anti-Sunni bias from both the Shia parties and the Coalition Provisional Authority, and declaring that legitimate elections could not take place under occupation, major Sunni groups such as the Association of Muslim Scholars, the Iraqi Islamic Party, and the Iraqi Federation of Tribes decided to boycott the election. These groups initially tried to use the threat of a boycott to secure concessions, such as the elimination of a single-constituency structure for the voting that would benefit Shia or the establishment of a timetable for United States withdrawal, but none of these came to fruition.

Unsurprisingly, the Sunni parties were mauled in the elections, earning only five of 275 parliamentary seats, leaving them out in the cold during the key formative months in the new Iraq. The boycott also deprived

them of a fair share in the constitutional drafting process, and without adequate representation in Parliament, the Sunnis were unable to prevent the new constitution from passing. Potential revisions to the document remain one of the key sticking points between Iraqi Sunni and Shia. To their credit, the Sunnis quickly saw the error of their ways and participated in the December 2005 elections, upping their representation in the Parliament eleven-fold to 55 seats, but sectarian tensions remain.

The Iraqi example is illustrative of the thesis of this paper: electoral boycotts rarely work, and the boycotting party almost always ends up worse off than before; a threatened boycott, on the other hand, can pay dividends, especially in high-profile cases. In short, you can’t win if you don’t participate. A comprehensive study of 171 threatened and actual election boycotts at the national level between 1990 and 2009 demonstrates conclusively that, other than a few rare exceptions, electoral boycotts generally have disastrous consequences for the boycotting party, rarely result in desired international attention or sanction, and many times further entrench the ruling leader or party. On the flip side, the track record is considerably better when a threatened boycott is used as negotiating leverage to achieve key concessions; sometimes, opposition parties that planned to boycott even find unexpected benefits from participating in elections.

WHY BOYCOTT?

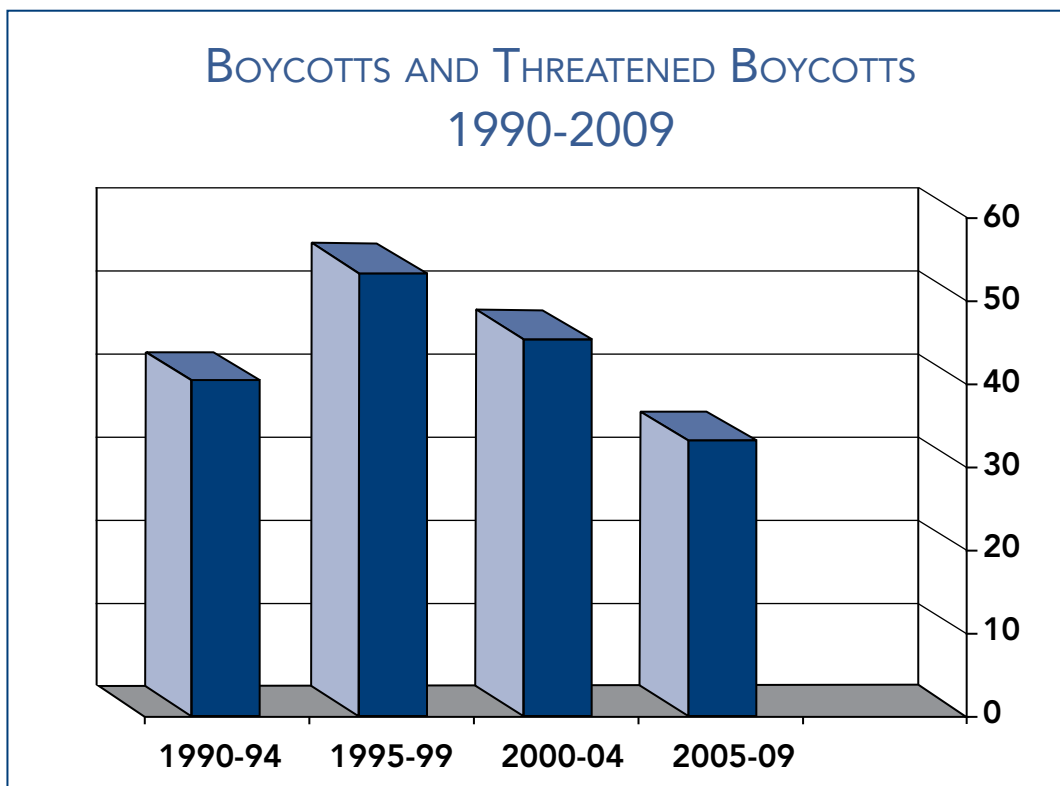
Before demonstrating the litany of negative consequences from electoral boycotts, it is important to

understand why parties choose to boycott elections in the first place. The electoral boycott has become a regular tool for political opposition parties to use, especially since the end of the Cold War. With the rise of new democracies in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Africa, an increase in contested elections also has brought with it an increase in decisions to boycott. Whereas only four percent of all elections worldwide were boycotted in 1989, that number had risen to 15 percent by 2002. In the decade 1995-2004, an average of nearly 10 elections per year was boycotted. **(chart)** Although the numbers have declined since 2004, possibly in recognition of the futility of the endeavor, boycotts remain firmly on the radar of opposition parties planning electoral strategies. The fact that some Sunnis were even contemplating boycotting this year's elections despite the nearly-universal recognition that their boycott five years earlier was an unmitigated disaster reflects this point.

In the vast majority of cases, the boycotting party protests perceived electoral unfairness. This can range from the lack of an independent electoral

commission to rules that favor the incumbent party to the use of appointed, rather than electorally contested seats in the legislature. In virtually all cases, the opposition believes that the system inherently and unfairly benefits the ruling party. The goal of the protesting party is either to get the ruling party to level the electoral playing field or to focus the international community's attention on the unfair or fraudulent practices of the ruling regime and delegitimize its international standing.

Historically, however, this study demonstrates that, with the exception of very high-profile cases, boycotting parties receive little support from the international community. For example, in Ethiopia, opposition parties boycotted the 1994 parliamentary elections despite appeals from aid donors and Ethiopia's allies in the west.¹ The ruling Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front won a landslide victory, taking 484 of 547 seats in an election that was quickly recognized and supported by the United States.² The Ghanaian opposition decided to boycott the 1992 parliamentary elections to protest the re-election of Jerry Rawlings as president earlier that year in what was referred to as the "Stolen Verdict."³



They wanted a fresh presidential election and assumed that the international attention from the boycott would garner enough condemnation to make it happen. As it turned out, the opposition was wrong on all counts, no new election was held, Rawlings remained president until 2001, and his party took 189 of 200 parliamentary seats in the 1992 election thanks to the ill-advised boycott.

The opposition in Mali boycotted the 1997 general elections, claiming that the government of Alpha Oumar Konare had committed massive fraud. Konare was easily re-elected and his ruling party took 123 of 147 seats in the legislature. Although there were claims of irregularities and a reported turnout of less than ten percent in the election, the United States recognized the results, with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright later referring to Mali as a relative bastion of democracy in West Africa.⁴ Similarly, the Azerbaijani opposition boycotted the 2003 presidential elections claiming election irregularities, leading to a convincing win for Ilham Aliyev, the son of longtime president Heydar Aliyev. Despite the boycott and weeks of post-election protests, the United States recognized the result of the election.

THREATS CAN BE EFFECTIVE

Ethiopia, Mali, Ghana, and Azerbaijan are hardly pivotal countries on the world scene, so elections in those countries usually don't garner the international attention necessary to allow the boycotting parties to gain some benefits. In countries with greater geo-strategic relevance, however, the threat of a boycott can actually be a strong negotiating tactic. Although history demonstrates that ruling parties should not fear electoral boycotts, intense international attention on an election often entices the party in charge to make concessions that can end up being costly. The best example of this dynamic was the landmark 1994 elections in South Africa, the first of the post-apartheid era.

While it was clear that Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) would gain a decisive majority, Mandela was under both domestic and international pressure to ensure that the elections were fully representative. The constant thorn in his side was

Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the Zulu head of the Inkatha Party and leading figure of the KwaZulu Natal region of South Africa. Fearing ANC repression, Buthelezi wanted KwaZulu recognized as a separate homeland, and threatened a boycott to achieve his demands. While Buthelezi didn't gain an independent homeland, he did receive two significant concessions. The first was the removal of a single ballot system, which would have treated all votes the same, regardless of where they were cast. And the second was the authorization of a constitutional change to give more regional autonomy to KwaZulu within South Africa. Buoyed by these gains, Buthelezi chose to participate, and immediately reaped the benefits of these concessions. Although Inkatha only received 6.2 percent of the vote nationwide, it handily defeated the ANC within KwaZulu itself, giving Buthelezi considerable power. While an actual boycott would probably have spelled the end for Buthelezi, leveraging the boycott threat earned him a prominent position in the post-apartheid South Africa that he was then able to parlay into earning the number two slot on the ANC ticket for the 1999 elections.

South Africa is not the only example of significant concessions earned by threatening boycotts. In the first post-Dayton Peace Accord election in Bosnia, Muslims and Croats threatened to boycott unless Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, a notorious war criminal, was barred from running for the presidency. As in the South Africa case, the international community desperately needed a fully representative election and pressured the Bosnian Serbs to force Karadzic to step down. In the 1998 Cambodian parliamentary elections, four opposition parties threatened boycott unless Prince Norodom Ranariddh, who had been ousted in a 1997 coup, was allowed to participate. The new Hun Sen regime was anxious to demonstrate its legitimacy to the international community in order to undo the suspension of World Bank and IMF loans imposed after the coup and convince ASEAN to induct Cambodia into its ranks, and so Ranariddh was allowed to return. The vote was split nearly evenly between the ruling party and the opposition, and the subsequent power sharing agreement included naming Ranariddh as the parliamentary speaker.

A HISTORY OF DISASTROUS BOYCOTTS

Although threatened boycotts in high-profile elections can pay dividends, the results of the study indicate that actual boycotts almost always end in failure. In addition to removing the boycotting party from any governmental role, they also result in one or more of three major negative outcomes: marginalization of the boycotting group, further empowerment of the existing ruler and his party, and unexpected negative changes to election dynamics. Let's examine these three results in turn.

Marginalizing the Opposition

First is the marginalization of the boycotting group. This is a common result because the boycott itself means that the opposition party is willfully removing itself from periodic competition for political power. In many developing countries, control of the government and its ministries means control of vital outlets for patronage. Choosing not to participate thus relegates the group to the position of vocal opposition without influence in the competition for scarce state resources. Without means of patronage to provide, the opposition is forced to rely on popular discontent with the ruling regime as its mobilizing cry. The marginalization is enhanced when international support fails to materialize, as outlined above.

The decision not to participate can often create frustration and damaging internal tension. In 1996, the Zambian opposition United National Independence Party (UNIP), headed by Kenneth Kuanda, decided to boycott the general elections. The UNIP claimed that the government of Frederick Chiluba—who defeated Kuanda in the 1991 election after leveraging a threatened boycott to change the electoral system—was using improper electoral registration lists. The decision was met with less than universal approval, especially from the 26 existing UNIP MPs, who would not be allowed to stand for their own seats in the election. Chiluba was easily re-elected, his party took 125 of 157 parliamentary seats, giving him a supermajority for the first time, and the boycott “pushed the UNIP to the verge of political extinction,” from which it has yet to

recover.⁵ Similarly, the United Democratic Party (UDP) in Gambia fell into complete disarray after boycotting the 2002 parliamentary elections over claims of irregularity in the 2001 presidential campaign. As a result, the ruling party won nearly two-thirds of the legislative races unopposed and ended up with 50 of the 53 overall seats.

The opposition to Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe also fractured over boycott discussions in 2005. That year, the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) lost 16 seats in the parliamentary elections—in part because dithering over a possible boycott kept MDC registration numbers down. Following that setback, MDC leader Morgan Tsvangarai made the fateful decision to boycott the elections for the newly-created Senate, claiming that this body would be a rubber stamp for Mugabe. Not surprisingly, this created tension within the MDC as a sizable faction believed that choosing not to participate would be a fateful error. The party splintered, Tsvangarai lost his mandate, and the ruling ZANU-PF party captured 49 of 66 seats in the Senate election against the fractured opposition. Tsvangarai was able to patch things up by choosing to participate in the 2008 elections—resulting in near-parity in seats between the ZANU-PF and the MDC—but he undercut himself in the presidential election. In the first round, Tsvangarai actually outpaced Mugabe, but the government claimed that he fell short of the 50 percent threshold necessary to avoid a runoff. In protest, Tsvangarai decided to boycott the runoff election, allowing Mugabe to triumph handily, turning victory into setback. While the eventual power-sharing deal gave the MDC an unprecedented stake in the government, Tsvangarai's boycott allowed Mugabe to retain the top governmental position.

Nor is Zimbabwe the only case where a boycott can turn a projected victory into a defeat. Three opposition parties in Cameroon decided to boycott the 1997 presidential elections, despite the fact that the parties combined had captured 56 percent of the parliamentary vote just five years earlier. But, still smarting over incumbent president Paul Biya's narrow and disputed victory in 1992, the opposition

chose not to compete against him in 1997. As a result, Biya was re-elected in a landslide, garnering over 92 percent of the vote with a turnout of over 60 percent and remains president to this day.

Sometimes, the fracturing of an opposition group over electoral boycotts creates even more dire outcomes. Take the case of the 1997 parliamentary elections in Serbia. By the time these elections were held, Serbia had already experienced five-plus years of devastating war with neighboring Bosnia and Croatia under Slobodan Milosevic. The opposition, led by Vuk Draskovic and Belgrade mayor Zoran Djindjic, was on the rise. It seemed clear that a unified opposition would defeat Milosevic and end his reign of terror. But the key actors couldn't agree. Originally, the opposition agreed to boycott, but Draskovic wanted to ensure his party had representation so he changed his tune, claiming the boycott was orchestrated merely to injure his faction.⁶ The remainder of the opposition, under the leadership of Djindjic, refused to participate, even though their participation likely would have given the opposition a majority. Instead, Milosevic and his allies won the partially boycotted election and retained power. This result was quickly recognized by the opposition as a tremendous gaffe. "Milosevic is still in power because the opposition has missed so many opportunities," lamented Democratic Party official Slobodan Vuksanovic, just one month before Milosevic's repressive actions in Kosovo drew Serbia into a costly war with NATO.⁷

Finally, opposition leaders can be marginalized through non-participation just as easily as parties. In 1997, Kenneth Matiba, head of the largest opposition party in Kenya and loser in a relatively close 1992 presidential race to Daniel arap Moi, decided to boycott the presidential election to protest Moi's unfair political system. Moi handily won re-election over lesser candidate Mwei Kibaki and Matiba quickly fell into political obscurity. Ostracized by his Saba Saba party, Matiba was forced to found his own splinter party, which never gained traction. In the 2007 presidential elections, Matiba placed a distant seventh with a grand total of 8,046 votes, compared to earning 1.5 million votes 15 years earlier.

Political maneuvering in Afghanistan has yielded comparable results. Abdosattar Sirat was one of the more popular figures at the 2001 Bonn Conference established to create the new Afghan government. In the final reckoning, however, he lost out when the United States decided to throw its full support behind Hamid Karzai. Still smarting from that rebuke, Sirat orchestrated an opposition boycott of the 2004 election, claiming that Karzai's rule was fraudulent and illegitimate. But, the boycott—which was supposed to include all 14 opposition candidates—quickly fell apart, and Karzai won re-election with 55 percent of the vote. Sirat was discredited, resigned as Justice Minister, and has faded into political obscurity. Although it is too soon to know for sure, this could also be the fate for Abdullah Abdullah, who repeated Sirat's mistake in the tumultuous 2009 presidential election, withdrawing from the runoff and thereby handing Karzai his re-election on a silver platter.

Empowering Incumbents

In addition to the negative effects on the boycotting party, electoral boycotts often have the unintended consequence of strengthening the incumbent ruler and providing him and his party with a more powerful mandate to lead. The absence of opposition from the race frees the playing field for the ruling party to obtain a supermajority, allowing it to take unrestricted action including invoking constitutional change. Perhaps the best example of this is in Venezuela, where a series of ill-conceived electoral boycotts by the opposition from 2004-05 merely served to cement President Hugo Chavez in power. The 2004 boycotts of regional elections gave Chavistas 20 of 22 governorships nationwide. In 2005, four leading opposition parties, which held 41 Congressional seats at the time, decided to boycott in protest of Chavez's heavyhanded rule, leading to a governmental sweep of all seats. As a result, Chavez had the backing to pass new legislation to strengthen his powers, including the removal of presidential term limits, and he has since won additional electoral contests.

In Togo, the opposition party Union of Forces for Change boycotted the 2002 parliamentary elections in protest of unfair election laws. As a result of the

boycott, the ruling Rally of the Togolese People party won 90 percent of the seats in the elections and used its supermajority to change the constitution to remove presidential term limits. President Gnassingbe Eyadema also was able to pass two controversial amendments to ease the eventual transition of power to his son.⁸ Similar cases took place in both Ethiopia and Peru in 1992 and in each case the opposition was left without recourse for action since they voluntarily eschewed parliamentary representation.

Unexpected Electoral Implications

In a number of cases in this study, the electoral boycott created blowback by changing electoral dynamics in unexpected ways. In these cases, the boycotts allowed parties that would have otherwise lost to triumph or enabled new actors to fill the electoral void. The best example of the latter case is the 1992 parliamentary elections in Lebanon, when the Maronite Christians boycotted to protest Syrian involvement in the country. Their absence from the election—Christians previously had representational parity with Muslims in the 128-member assembly—only served to strengthen pro-Syrian forces. The most notable of these was a nascent radical Shia Islamic group known as Hizballah, now the most prominent political force in the country. Hizballah earned 16 seats, gaining a foothold in the political system, and Nabih Berre, the leader of the Hizballah-affiliated movement Amal, was named house speaker.⁹

In 1993, the Pakistani ethnic minority group Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM), which held 15 of 217 parliamentary seats, decided to boycott the parliamentary elections to protest harassment of its candidates by army and police forces. But their decision not to participate opened the door for Benazir Bhutto, whose party had been guilty of repression of the MQM, to edge past Nawaz Sharif's party, traditionally more sympathetic to the MQM, and gain a majority. Had the MQM participated, Sharif almost certainly would have come out on top.¹⁰

Similar dynamics played out in two other elections where the boycotting party was a militant group with a pseudo-political wing. The results were no

better. In 2000, the Basque ETA militant group and its political wing called for a boycott of the elections. Low turnout in Basque areas probably helped enable the election of Jose Maria Aznar to the position of prime minister. Aznar, whose party was the biggest adversary of Basque nationalism, was the first Conservative Prime Minister in Spain since Generalissimo Francisco Franco's death in 1975. In 2005, the Tamil Tigers called for a boycott of the Sri Lankan election as part of their demands for greater autonomy. They enforced the boycott through violent coercion, greatly limiting turnout in Tamil-dominated areas. As a result, Ranil Wickramasinghe, who was more sympathetic to the Tamil cause, was narrowly defeated by hardliner Mahindra Rajapakse. Following the election, the hardline government took a tougher stance against the Tamil Tigers, setting in place operations that would result in the eventual defeat of the militant group.

The ramifications of the final case are still playing out today in Iran. In the run-up to the 2005 presidential election, the reformists, who lost their majority in the Majlis in 2004 in a partially-boycotted election, threatened a boycott to protest the removal of their candidates from the ballot. Iran's Guardian Council conceded on this point, reinstating prominent reformists Mustafa Moin and Muhsin Mehralizadeh to the ballot. But some elements of the reform movement, especially students, continued to protest the actions of the regime and called for a boycott. In the end, the reformists got the worst of both worlds. Moin, Mehralizadeh and current reformist leader Mahdi Karrubi ended up splitting the votes of those reformists that chose to participate, meaning that all three lost out to Ali Akbar al-Rafsanjani and Mahmud Ahmadinejad. Notably, Karrubi fell only 600,000 votes short of Ahmadinejad in the first round and would have clearly surpassed the hardliner if either the boycotting students turned out en masse to vote or if Moin, who received four million votes, was not returned to the ballot.

SOMETIMES PARTICIPATION WORKS

The above cases demonstrate the multitude of possible negative ramifications of electoral boycotts, but

there is also one potential positive effect of choosing not to boycott: your party might actually exceed expectations in elections. The 1997 Albanian parliamentary elections illustrate this point as well as the potential benefits of a threatened boycott. A threatened Socialist boycott forced Sali Berisha's government to make changes to a controversial new election law. The Socialists then chose to participate and went on to defeat the ruling Democratic Party in the elections. Berisha, deprived of his parliamentary majority, stepped down a month later. Tsvangarai's MDC also reaped the rewards of participation in the 2000 general elections in Zimbabwe. Learning their lessons from the ill-conceived 1995 boycott that resulted in Mugabe's party winning 117 of the 120 contested seats, the MDC chose to participate in the 2000 general elections. At the time, Tsvangarai claimed that a boycott would "play into Mugabe's hands," and extend ZANU-PF rule indefinitely.¹¹ In the 2000 election, the MDC won 57 seats, just five fewer than the ZANU-PF.

One political group that seems to have learned from past boycotts and benefitted from participation is the Islamist political parties in the Middle East. These parties are generally looked on suspiciously by the leaders of conservative authoritarian regimes, who have historically sought to limit their rise. In Bahrain, the Shia Islamic National Accord Association (INAA) decided to boycott the landmark 2002 legislative elections—the first since the king dissolved the parliament in 1975—because the king had also created a second legislative body that would be wholly appointed by him. As a result of the boycott, the legislature was split between secularists and Sunni Islamists with the Shia Islamists on the outside looking in. This imbalance was corrected in 2006, when the INAA not only participated, but took 18 of 40 seats, beating out both the Sunni Islamists (12) and secular independents (10).

Islamists in Jordan reaped similar benefits from choosing to participate after previous damaging boycotts. In 1997, the Islamic Action Front was the largest opposition grouping in the Jordanian parliament, holding 16 of 80 seats. Nevertheless, it chose to boycott the elections that year in protest of a

change in the election laws that would benefit tribal leaders at its expense. The results, unsurprisingly, served only to reduce Islamist influence in the legislature. By 2000, only five of the 80 seats were held by Islamists, compared to almost one-third of the body in 1991. The IAF regretted the decision, realizing that its influence had been lost in the government, negatively affecting its popularity in former strongholds.¹² Seeing the error of its ways, the IAF decided to participate in the 2003 elections, despite the fact that the election law had not been changed. This time, the IAF earned 17 seats, making them once again the largest oppositionist party and demonstrating the benefits of participation.

DEALING WITH AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

For opposition parties facing authoritarian regimes, the choice of whether to participate in or boycott an election is akin to deciding whether to hit or stand in blackjack when holding 16 against a face card; neither option is likely to end in success. If the opposition party decides to participate, it is highly unlikely that it will win, given the high levels of fraud and fear that often accompany elections in these countries. Additionally, opposition participation serves to legitimize the election for the outside world, regardless of how fairly it is conducted. On the other hand, choosing to boycott guarantees election victory to the ruling party, further entrenching it in place. The boycott might remove the veneer of democratic legitimacy of the ruling regime, but as we have seen, it doesn't change the facts on the ground. Staffan Lindberg's study of authoritarian parties in Africa indicates that their chance of success depends on making it to the second election.¹³ Once the regime is over that hurdle, it is often clear sailing. This phenomenon argues strongly for opposition participation, at least in the first round of elections.

This dynamic has been observed in a number of African countries over the past two decades, most notably Burkina Faso, Chad, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire Togo, and Tunisia. The pattern plays out like this. The opposition protests the government's authoritarian tendencies and claims the

electoral process is unfair. They choose to boycott in protest because they don't want to legitimize the ruling regime. But, the absence of any opposition serves only to return the ruler and his party to power by larger margins. So, we have Blaise Compaore, president of Burkina Faso since 1987, Idriss Deby, ruler of Chad since 1991, and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, president of Tunisia since 1987. The mild exception seems to be Cote d'Ivoire, where the pattern began familiarly, with Henri Bedie's re-election to the presidency with over 90 percent of the vote in 1995, thanks to an opposition boycott. But, then things turned off course. Bedie was overthrown in a 1999 military coup by retired general Robert Guei. New elections were held, and Laurent Gbagbo of the opposition, who had boycotted the 1995 elections, upset Guei in a 2000 election and assumed the presidency. Gbagbo was aided in gaining a parliamentary majority later that year by the boycott of another oppositionist, Allesane Ouattara. The ongoing conflict between Gbagbo and Ouattara was a primary cause of the civil war in Cote d'Ivoire, which lasted from 2002 to 2004.

In these situations, there are no clear good options for opposition parties but election boycotts are certainly not one of them. They have not produced regime change, and whatever international outrage is stirred up in these remote locations seems to have minimal effect. However, given few good alternatives, it is reasonable to expect the pattern of fruitless boycotts to continue, unless international pressure can be stepped up to the point of having a meaningful impact.

WHEN BOYCOTTS CAN WORK

Of the 171 cases examined for this study, a small minority (roughly four percent) resulted in positive outcomes for the boycotting parties. These cases fell into two very different categories: cases where the opposition party had considerable popular support and the boycott was merely one piece of a larger opposition campaign that could mobilize street protests, strikes and other forms of civil unrest, and cases where electoral laws required quorums to proceed. There have been successes in both categories, but the former cases bring the risk of military

intervention while the latter cases risk blowback to the boycotting party for being obstructionist.

There are three cases that fit into the first camp—Bangladesh in 1996, Peru in 2000-01, and Thailand in 2006-07. In all three cases, the boycotting party had considerable public support and a number of additional weapons at its disposal. In Bangladesh, the opposition Awami League and its allies decided to boycott the February 1996 parliamentary election, demanding that Prime Minister Khaleda Zia resign. The boycott call was accompanied by mass protests and general strikes, which basically shut the country down two days before the election. Facing no opposition, Zia's BNP took 205 of 207 seats in an election with exceptionally low turnout. However, continued protests and strikes led Zia to agree grudgingly to another set of elections, to be held under a caretaker government two months later. This time, Awami chose to participate and earned 147 of 299 seats (compared to 116 for the BNP) in the new voting.

In 2000, after years of ruling Peru by undermining democratic institutions, it appeared that incumbent President Alberto Fujimori had finally met his match in charismatic opposition leader Alejandro Toledo. Despite leading in the polls, Toledo lost to Fujimori in the first round of an election marred by claims of massive fraud. Since Fujimori didn't cross the 50 percent threshold, a second round was required, but Toledo chose to boycott to protest both the fraudulent first round and the lack of objectivity of the electoral commission. Without opposition, Fujimori triumphed easily in the runoff, but Toledo claimed that "the president can declare himself the winner, but his government will lack credibility and legitimacy."¹⁴

Toledo then pulled upon his reservoir of support, tapping into the anger at Fujimori's fraud to organize massive peaceful demonstrations to protest the election results. The international community, led by the Organization of American States, also played a supporting role in this case by refusing to validate Fujimori's elections and spearheading an electoral observation mission. The ongoing pressure resulted in Fujimori's sudden decision to resign six months later under allegations of corruption. An

interim government oversaw new elections in 2001, and Toledo defeated Alan Garcia to become the new Peruvian president. As with Bangladesh, the boycott was just one piece of the puzzle; the ability to mobilize strong anti-governmental support was the key factor in the eventual regime change.

In 2006, embattled Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra called for parliamentary elections to be held within 60 days, three years ahead of schedule, as a way to break a governmental impasse. The opposition, angered that Thaksin was planning to use these elections as a makeshift referendum, protested and chose to boycott despite holding 96 of 500 seats. Thanks to the boycott, Thaksin's party won 458 seats in the election, but as in Bangladesh and Peru, popular support was on the side of the opposition. Massive protests and demonstrations led to Thaksin's decision to step down two days after the elections. The courts then nullified the elections and called for new elections to be held under the control of a caretaker government.

But even the Bangladesh and Thailand cases were not clear-cut victories, as post-boycott events served to move both countries away from democracy. In the Thai case, the military filled the void five months after the nullified elections and took power in a bloodless coup. It would be another 15 months before any elections were held. The Bangladeshi example is more complicated. Awami's boycott allowed it to take power in 1996, but the BNP returned to the throne in 2002, leading to another standoff ahead of the planned 2007 elections. Returning to their 1996 model, Awami organized massive protests and strikes, but this time the military finally stepped in, ruling the country as a "caretaker government" under a state of emergency throughout 2007 and 2008. The second scenario in which boycotts can be effective is what I refer to as "quorum boycotts." In these cases, the country's president must be appointed by two-thirds of the legislative body, so opposition coalition decisions to boycott these elections can prevent the attainment of a quorum and nullify the elections. The boycotts are successful in these cases because they operate under strict constitutional guidelines. Whereas a president in a general election

can win a boycotted election even when turnout is 25 percent or less, in the quorum cases, the boycott can bring the proceedings to a standstill.

The Moldovan opposition utilized this tactic in 2000 to prevent a Communist candidate from earning the presidency. Four attempts at an election were held and all four failed due to a lack of quorum. Finally, new parliamentary elections were held in 2001, and the Communists gained enough seats to push their candidate through. The opposition tried again in 2005, after earning 45 of 101 seats in that year's parliamentary elections. Once again, the boycott nullified several attempts to pick a president, although this time, one of the opposition parties negotiated with the Communists to support their candidate in exchange for action on several key laws.

There are dangers in this approach as well, despite some successes. Although taking the obstinate stance can yield benefits in negotiations, the public may not have the stomach for extended delays and obfuscations, especially when there is not a strong anti-incumbent outcry. In these cases, the boycotting party can end up getting burned. Take the Republican People's Party (CHP) in Turkey. A secular party, the CHP objected to Prime Minister Erdogan's appointment of Islamist Abdullah Gul as a presidential candidate. The CHP's boycott left the parliament ten votes short of the required number to elect him, leading to three failed attempts and finally new parliamentary elections. But, when the elections were held, the CHP took a pounding, falling from 178 seats to 112. Most of the seats were lost to a new nationalist party that then made a deal with Erdogan's party to support Gul's candidacy.

IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study hold profound lessons for both ruling and opposition parties, as well as the international community in terms of the decision making surrounding electoral boycotts. From the perspective of the opposition party, it is clear that electoral boycotts are rarely the correct strategy, unless the opposition has widespread public support and persistence to remove the ruling regime. In the vast

majority of cases, if the opposition chooses to participate, they will at least have some stake in the system; if they boycott, they will be on the outside looking in and history has demonstrated that the international cavalry is rarely willing or able to ride over the hill and save them. Opposition parties would be better served focusing on other electoral strategies, including building coalitions, trying to create a unified front to prevent harmful infighting, and in more high-profile cases, employing the threat of a boycott to earn electoral concessions or some form of power-sharing agreement.

The calculus is different for the ruling party, whose only goal is to return to power with as much legitimacy as possible. Ruling parties have generally responded to boycotts or boycott threats in one of three ways: ignore or belittle them, crack down on boycotters, or negotiate a settlement. The primary response of the ruling party has been to downplay the electoral boycott, often citing high turnout numbers and claiming that the opposition parties had decided to boycott to save face because they were going to lose anyway. During the 1995 Haitian election, senior government officials explained the opposition's boycott this way, claiming "They have no popular support; they boycott because they know they will lose."¹⁵ Hugo Chavez gave a similar explanation regarding the Venezuelan opposition boycott in 2005, stating that the opposition "should accept the truth that they have no public. It's an attempt at political sabotage."¹⁶

In high-profile elections, ruling parties will likely feel greater pressure to negotiate but the record shows that even then, they should be wary about giving away too much for the sake of opposition participation. Zambia in 1991, South Africa in 1994, and Cambodia in 1998 are all evidence of that. In these cases, the party in power will have to walk a fine line in order to enable even a boycotted election to appear legitimate, often by hyping turnout numbers and emphasizing that they did all they could to bring a recalcitrant opposition party to the table. More heavy-handed techniques by the ruling party, such as arresting individuals that call for boycotts, as has been done in Honduras and

Russia, are unnecessary and foolish. If the goal is to make the elections seem as legitimate as possible, it is counterproductive to institute further crackdowns to prevent behavior—an electoral boycott—that will probably only serve to strengthen the incumbent regime.

The historical lack of successful boycotts also creates a dilemma for the international community as it wrestles with the question of whether international stability or the promotion of democracy through free and fair elections is a larger priority. Traditionally, the United States and international organizations have encouraged the broadest possible participation in elections in order to make them as representative as possible. The goal therefore should be to encourage parties not to boycott. But if there is a boycott in a reasonably fair election, the international community becomes torn between recognizing the potentially legitimate grievances of the boycotters while still validating the elections that took place. One potential solution is to increase international monitoring of elections in order to reduce fraud and thus encourage broader participation. The problem with that course is that, according to a 2009 study, the presence of international monitors actually increases the probability of an electoral boycott.¹⁷

So what is the international community to do? There are three areas that should be focused on in order to have the most positive impact.

Encourage broad participation. The top priority, given the abysmal track record of boycotting parties, is to continue to encourage the broadest participation possible in order to avoid the calamitous outcomes of Venezuela, Lebanon, Iraq, Serbia and others. It will be impossible to adequately address all perceived grievances, but all efforts should be made to discourage boycotts, even when confronting authoritarian regimes.

Apply public pressure. The international community needs to use its bully pulpit, whenever possible, to condemn countries that are democracies in name only in the hopes that fear of international isolation or the loss of international aid will allow for fairer

electoral systems. One major caveat here is that the United States and others must be willing to back up these threats; in numerous cases fair elections have taken a back seat to stability, especially in regards to our allies in the fight against global extremism.

Act rapidly. Given that authoritarian regimes entrench over time, it is important to engage as quickly as possible, especially during periods of political transition. Once an authoritarian leader has been elected and re-elected, it is often too late to have meaningful impact. The call for rapid action also dovetails nicely

with encouraging broad participation. Given the logistical preparations necessary to hold elections, opposition parties must be goaded into participation as early as possible to avoid missing registration windows or harming electoral chances. Too often, opposition parties come to the decision to participate too late to achieve the full effect. The threat of a boycott can pay dividends but the opposition parties still have to participate in order to receive the full benefits. Choosing to sit out is almost always a losing proposition.

(ENDNOTES)

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