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**United Nations**  
**Focal Point for Electoral Assistance Matters**  
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## **Policy**

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# **CONDUCT OF UN PERSONNEL IN AND AROUND ELECTORAL SITES**

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Team Electoral Assistance Division  
Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs*

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## **POLICY ON Conduct of UN Personnel in and around Electoral Sites**

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### **A. PURPOSE AND RATIONALE**

#### **A1. Purpose**

1. This policy sets out the expected conduct of UN personnel, including uniformed personnel, in and around electoral sites, particularly on election day. It focuses on actions and statements that UN personnel should avoid to prevent any misperception of the UN role in an election. This guidance is particularly relevant for UN personnel who do not normally have election-related tasks.
2. Electoral sites encompass all locations and venues where national authorities carry out electoral activities, including voter registration centres, polling stations, polling centres, count centres, warehouses, operation rooms, result centres, data entry centres, and election media centres.

#### **A2. Rationale**

3. The UN Focal Point for Electoral Assistance Matters, the Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (hereafter “the Focal Point”), is the system-wide lead in development, issuance and dissemination of UN electoral policy. This policy is part of the efforts of the Focal Point to develop a comprehensive set of UN system-wide electoral policies.
4. This policy provides guidance on how to avoid creating the perception among national actors that the UN may be engaged in election observation when it is not.<sup>1</sup> The legislative and policy framework for UN electoral activities leaves no space for ad hoc electoral observation or monitoring.
5. The presence of UN personnel in and around an electoral site can easily be misrepresented or misunderstood and can raise expectations that the UN has an official observation role in the election, including to assess the quality of the process or to

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<sup>1</sup> For information on UN electoral observation, see UN electoral policy: UN Electoral Assistance: Supervision, Observation, Panels and Certification.

intervene in the event of irregularities. Such expectations could be raised further by comments from UN personnel on the electoral process. The potential for misperceptions is greatest on election day, in and around polling stations and other electoral sites where national authorities carry out electoral activities.

6. This policy recognizes that various UN entities may have related mandates that touch on elections, such as promoting and protecting human rights, and supporting international peace and security. It also recognizes that such entities may have monitoring and reporting responsibilities including on developments related to an election. This policy is not intended to undermine these mandates or to dilute established requirements.

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## **B. SCOPE**

7. This policy applies to all entities of the UN system and all UN personnel with respect to their actions around an election, particularly on election day.<sup>2</sup> For this policy, the UN refers to the entire UN system, including all UN departments, funds, programmes, entities, agencies, trust funds, commissions, peacekeeping missions, special political missions, peacebuilding missions, country teams and other bodies. This policy also applies to advisory missions or services of limited duration and applies to all settings, including where the UN provides electoral assistance and where it has a presence but is not providing electoral assistance.
8. This policy should be read in conjunction with existing UN electoral policies, particularly: Principles and Types of UN Electoral Assistance; UN Electoral Assistance: Supervision, Observation, Panels and Certification; UN Support to International Electoral Observers; and UN Statements and Public Comment around Elections. For guidance on professional standards of conduct of UN personnel, including engaging in political activities in a personal capacity, both online and offline, refer to the relevant provisions of the UN Charter, the Staff Regulations and Rules, the Standards of Conduct for the International Civil Service, other administrative issuances specific to different UN entities, and guidance issued by the relevant offices of UN entities.<sup>3</sup>

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## **C. POLICY**

### **C1. Principles**

9. UN electoral assistance and engagement in national elections are guided by principles set out in the policy on Principles and Types of UN Electoral Assistance. The following principles are particularly relevant:

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<sup>2</sup> UN personnel refers to all persons engaged by the UN system to provide services on behalf of the Organization, remunerated or not, including staff, consultants, individual contractors, uniformed personnel, UNVs, seconded personnel, and interns.

<sup>3</sup> In particular, refer to ST/AI/2000/13, ST/SGB/2016/9. Where additional information or clarification is needed regarding engaging in political activities in a personal capacity, UN personnel should consult their respective human resources or legal office or the Ethics Office.

- a. **National sovereignty and ownership.** Unless mandated by the Security Council or the General Assembly, the UN does not organise, certify, supervise, or observe an electoral process. Rather UN electoral assistance promotes and supports national ownership of electoral processes. While the UN encourages and supports a Member State to comply with its international obligations and commitments, the UN does not comment on the validity of an electoral process and/or the legitimacy of its outcome. It is for others, particularly the citizens of the concerned Member State to determine whether the process is credible, and the outcome reflects the will of the people. UN personnel should respect the sanctity of polling stations and other electoral sites as part of the sovereign electoral process of Member States.
- b. **Objective, impartial, neutral and independent.** All UN electoral assistance is provided with these principles in mind, which must also be reflected in the behaviour of all UN personnel, regardless of their role.
- c. **Political perspective and the management of election-related conflict.** Elections are fundamentally political events where political power is allocated based on the decisions of citizens through voting processes. UN electoral assistance must be aware of this and sensitive to its implications. The UN must ensure that it is, and is perceived to be, politically neutral and that its assistance contributes to political pluralism and longer-term stability and not misused by any political group or as a cover for electoral processes that do not allow for political pluralism or real competition.

## C2. Policy Directives

10. UN personnel should avoid giving the impression that the UN is observing an election if no observation mandate exists. UN electoral personnel who are providing technical assistance should also be mindful of potential misunderstandings about their role, which differs from observation.
11. UN electoral personnel providing technical assistance, whose presence at certain electoral sites may be required, should limit their presence to what is strictly necessary to perform their duties, in consultation with the electoral management body and maintain a low profile. Panels of experts may access electoral sites if specified in their terms of reference and agreed to by the host government. Other forms of UN electoral assistance, such as electoral supervision or certification are rare, but might also require access depending on the specific mandate and in agreement with the host government.
12. All other UN personnel not performing the functions outlined in the preceding paragraph should avoid a presence in or around electoral sites unless a determination has been made that one of the exceptions in paragraph 13 apply. There is no role for non-electoral UN personnel in watching or attending an electoral process as conducted by national election officials. Any UN presence in or around electoral sites must be exceptionally justified, comply with national legislation and fall within one of the situations outlined below.
13. Exceptional situations:
  - a) Governments or electoral authorities may invite UN representatives or entities to polling stations on election day or other election-related “witnessing” or “poll-watching” activities. Often the motivation is that a UN presence will increase public confidence or that the UN will endorse the process. A UN country presence may be expected or may be important for maintaining relations with the host government. In such instances, the UN entity concerned should notify the Head of Mission in a mission setting, generally

the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) or other representative of the Secretary-General and in a non-mission setting, the Resident Coordinator (RC). They will convey the request or invitation to the Focal Point through the Electoral Assistance Division (EAD) of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA). The Focal Point will consider such requests on a case-by-case basis. The Focal Point will consult the SRSG or RC on different options, including to deploying specific electoral/political staff to attend and report to the Focal Point. This modality may be considered where good offices may be offered in mitigating potential conflict, and/or where the SRSG or RC wishes to maintain distance between the work of the UN mission or country team and the requested activity.<sup>4</sup>

- b) As per its mandate, OHCHR may independently conduct human rights monitoring and provide technical assistance on human rights issues in the context of elections, particularly through a human rights field presence. OHCHR may deploy human rights monitors to assess human rights aspects of an electoral process, and provide relevant advice and support to national and international counterparts on related human rights issues.
- c) UN entities may authorize their respective staff to engage in activities that do not require accreditation by national electoral authorities and do not involve access to electoral sites, such as gathering “a general sense” of election day. This will often be the case, for example, for personnel in UN peace operations and for activities by their political and civil affairs sections. These cases require prior clearance from the Head of Mission or the RC, and should adhere to UN security arrangements. Information gathered by such activities should not be used for any qualitative public statement about the election.
- d) Members of UN military and police components of peacekeeping missions may be mandated by the Security Council to directly contribute to security during elections (including the deployment and/or protection of electoral materials and sites) or support the host state through advice and capacity-building. In such instances, they may enter electoral sites to the extent necessary for these specific logistical or security roles.
- e) UN personnel may enter a media centre or similar venue where national authorities present information on an electoral process to the public, if there is a clear purpose for UN personnel to do so as part of their official duties, taking into account that these spaces are primarily for a domestic audience. Any UN presence at such venues should be low key.
- f) UN personnel may also be present in or at public spaces where political rallies, campaign events or civic education activities are held, if required as part of their official duties.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In the special case of Iraq in 2021, Security Council Resolution 2576 (2021) mandated an expansion of existing electoral support at the request of the government to include the deployment of election monitors to follow election day proceedings at polling stations.

<sup>5</sup> This applies to UN personnel while performing their professional duties. For guidance on the conduct of UN personnel in their personal capacity, including related to political activities, refer to guidance outlined in paragraph 8.

- g) UN national personnel have the right to vote according to national legislation and in doing so may need to access an electoral site.
14. Other unforeseen situations may involve a request or invitation for a UN presence at electoral activities beyond those outlined above. UN officials may be asked to attend or participate in election-related activities such as launching an election process, the beginning of vote counting, vote tallying or audit proceedings, the announcement of results, or attending a political debate. These activities may not require access to an electoral site as defined by this policy; however, any UN presence at such activities calls for caution and should be carefully considered for political sensitivities and potential implications. In such and similar cases, the first point of contact should be the SRSG or RC, as appropriate. DPPA/EAD may also assist to clarify a UN presence in and around electoral sites and at other election-related activities.
15. Accreditation by the national authorities is always required if access to electoral sites is needed under the circumstances described in this policy. Unless the UN is specifically mandated to observe an election, UN personnel who have been approved to be present in or around electoral sites (including UN electoral personnel providing technical assistance) should request accreditation as a “(special) guest” (or another appropriate category), and not as an “observer”, if such “guest” accreditation is available. In certain cases, access for UN personnel who are providing technical assistance may be granted by the electoral authority through issuing a separate badge. If laws and procedures do not foresee categories of special or “guest” accreditations or other similar categories, UN electoral personnel providing technical assistance may be required, in exceptional cases, to request a separate badge strictly for the purpose of entering an electoral site to follow the performance of election officials and assess the effectiveness of technical assistance provided. In doing so, as stated in paragraph 11, UN personnel should maintain a low profile at all times and not interfere in the work of election officials or the process and clarify their role in advising or providing technical assistance to the electoral authorities to avoid any perception of the UN acting in a role as an observer organization. UN personnel who are accredited to enter electoral sites should familiarize themselves with the basic procedures and abide by standards of conduct expected by the electoral management body. OHCHR human rights monitors have separate procedures for obtaining accreditation and ensuring their freedom of movement for their mandated functions, in agreement with the governments of host countries. Such accreditation should not be as an “observer”.
16. Authorized UN personnel in or around electoral sites may encounter media representatives, party agents, observers, polling officials, and voters. If asked about their specific role and the UN’s role in the election, they should be transparent about the UN presence. If appropriate, UN personnel can provide brief factual information on their specific role, without evaluating or commenting on the process. Overall, responses should only clarify the UN’s role in the election and direct further inquiries to authorized UN spokespersons or relevant national authorities. UN personnel should not be seen as, and should avoid references to, “observing”, “supervising”, “overseeing” or “evaluating” the election (except where there is a mandate to do so). Further guidance on engaging with the media, issuing statements or making public comments on elections, including via social media, is provided in the policy on UN Statements and Public Comment around Elections.
17. Voters, party agents, observers and other stakeholders may present concerns and complaints to UN personnel, particularly about alleged violations of the polling or counting process. UN personnel should politely decline to receive or act on these complaints. Instead, they should refer complainants to established national processes, electoral

officials, law enforcement or a judicial appeals process. OHCHR personnel monitoring the human rights situation around an election may have separate internal procedures related to complaints about alleged human rights violations and abuses.

18. UN personnel should not intervene in an electoral process, even if they believe electoral violations and abuses are taking place.<sup>6</sup> Such incidents should be reported immediately to the head of the UN electoral team in the country or, if no such team exists, to the SRSG or the RC. UN electoral personnel may discretely raise issues with relevant counterparts in the electoral management body as appropriate. All security related incidents should be reported and managed according to the UN security framework. Human rights violations and abuses should also be brought to the attention of UN leadership in the country and OHCHR.

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## **D. REFERENCES**

### **Related Policies**

- Principles and Types of UN Electoral Assistance
- UN Electoral Assistance: Supervision, Observation, Panels and Certification
- UN Statements and Public Comment around Elections

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## **E. MONITORING AND COMPLIANCE**

19. The Focal Point is tasked with ensuring coordination within the UN system regarding electoral assistance and will therefore help to ensure that the principles outlined in this document are adhered to.
20. Managers of UN electoral assistance programs and projects will also be responsible to ensure compliance with this directive by all UN electoral staff under their supervision.

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## **F. CONTACT**

21. Policy and Institutional Memory Team, Electoral Assistance Division, Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, [ead@un.org](mailto:ead@un.org).

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## **G. HISTORY**

22. Drafted by the Policy and Institutional Memory Team, Electoral Assistance Division, Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs in June 2015 and revised on 19 November 2024.

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<sup>6</sup> “To intervene” is understood in this context as directly interrupting, blocking, or steering the actions of national actors involved in an election, and other ways of directly and actively engaging in or changing the course of a process.

23. Consulted with members of the Inter-Agency Coordination Mechanism for UN Electoral Assistance (ICMEA) prior to adoption.

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**APPROVAL SIGNATURE:**

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*Rosemary A. DiCarlo*

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