

Forum: SOCHUM II

Issue: The question of forging interference in National Elections.

Specialist Chair: Leah O'Connor

Introduction

Throughout history many countries have attempted to influence another country's national elections. However, the act of interfering directly in a country's election is an attempt to undermine the electoral process and ultimately, democracy. The right to exercise a free and unhindered vote in elections is a key aspect of parliamentary democracy and is therefore a fundamental principle of our core values which we view as a vital part of our human rights. The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Article 21 states that "the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures".

Definitions

1. Democracy: a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives;
2. Foreign actor: a person or entity which attempts either directly or indirectly to influence the democratic election of national parliamentary representatives;
3. Collusion: illegal cooperation or conspiracy in order to deceive others.

The Issue (Historically & Currently)

From history we know that powerful countries have attempted to influence the behaviour and actions of foreign countries in order to advance their geopolitical interests. An early example is the disputed 1952 parliamentary elections in Iran. At the time the British government was particularly concerned with the damage to British oil interests through the actions of the government of Mohammed Mossadegh. Accordingly, both the British and the American governments attempted to secure the election of their more favoured candidates in that year's election. That attempt proved unsuccessful, but the actions of the CIA led directly to the overthrow of the Mossadegh government soon after.

It could be argued that the United States has a history of attempted meddling in the elections of foreign countries, particularly those in Central and South America. Nicaragua is an example of this pattern of behaviour, firstly through the Iran-Contra scandal and then through the 1990 presidential election. In the election, the US planted stories about corruption in the leftist Sandinista government which arguably contributed to a win for the opposition.

In more recent events, we can see that the allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 United States presidential election have led to the establishment of the Mueller investigation. The Special Counsel's investigation, led by Robert Mueller, indicted 13 Russians and 3 companies run by a businessman with close Kremlin ties in February. The Internet Research Agency (which was funded by the two other companies indicted), established an operation which included social media posts, online ads and the organisation of political rallies in the United States. With hundreds of thousands of followers, fake social media accounts pretending to be Americans posted divisive social and political messages online. This was directly aimed at voters in order to boost the popularity of Donald Trump. The large-scale operation had a profound impact. According to the indictment, one rally organised by these foreign actors, "Florida Goes Trump" reached over 59,000 Facebook users in Florida and a Twitter account pretending to be led by the Republican Party had over 100,000 followers in Tennessee. Facebook believes that the Russian propaganda efforts reached at least 146 million people across Facebook and Instagram. In July 2018, a US federal jury indicted 12 Russian military intelligence officers for crimes connected with the hacking the Clinton Campaign and the Democratic National Committee, which coordinates strategies for Democrat candidates. As a result of the hacking of Hilary Clinton's campaign manager's emails, the news coverage following that event was considerably affected with a consequential impact on the course of the 2016 presidential election. Although the main aim of the Special Counsel's investigation is to investigate Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, the counsel has also been instructed to explore possible collusion between Russian officials and the Trump campaign.

These national elections shouldn't be considered in isolation. Future elections may be subject to foreign interference. Foreign actors are becoming increasingly organised and employ highly skilled operations which will continue to undermine democracy. China for example has arguably continued efforts to sway political opinion in Taiwan and this effort may have become increasingly visible in the run up to the 2020 presidential elections through military and diplomatic maneuvers but also cyber-attacks and disinformation. A pro-independence party's website has come under several cyber-attacks allegedly from China and false social media profiles have used fake news to heighten fears about Chinese military drills.

The prospect of future elections being interfered with directly by foreign actors could potentially undermine our right to vote freely.

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