

Annex A: When to Start Operational Planning: Considerations for Different Types of Elections

Scheduled elections. Scheduled elections are those that occur within the periodic electoral cycle, such as constitutionally scheduled national and provincial elections held at regular intervals. EMBs that administer scheduled elections generally benefit from being established institutions with some level of permanent staffing and budget; the ability to draw on experience; and a well-understood legal framework for elections. An EMB should theoretically commence operational planning once all post-election activities for the previous electoral cycle have been completed. This may not always be possible due to factors such as the availability of resources, buy-in or competing organizational priorities, including when an EMB manages overlapping electoral cycles for unsynchronized elections (e.g., national legislature and provincial legislature elections held 12 months apart). In some circumstances, planning for the current electoral cycle may need to begin while some post-electoral activities for the previous election (such as legal reform) are still being finalized. Notwithstanding this, in the interest of providing indicative timeframes, it is recommended that operational planning commence no later than 18 to 24 months prior to a scheduled election.

Where an EMB has been tasked with implementing a significant program of reform across electoral processes, it would be beneficial to start operational planning earlier. However, when an EMB maintains a certain level of readiness (such as by updating procedures, keeping certain levels of electoral materials in stock and having standing agreements with vendors) a 12- to 18-month timeframe for operational planning may be appropriate. Indeed, operational planning for scheduled elections sometimes starts even closer to an election; while this can make some processes more challenging, it does not make them impossible. Starting later than the recommended timeframe is better than not starting at all.

Unscheduled or snap elections. Unscheduled or snap elections occur outside of the “normal” election cycle. They include, for example, by-elections (special elections to fill vacancies), early elections (called before the originally scheduled date or due to the passing of no-confidence motions) and elections that are re-run due to annulment. EMBs administering unscheduled or snap elections can face multiple additional challenges, such as a highly compressed timeframe, a more constrained budget or challenges relating to voter engagement and potentially greater levels of political sensitivity. These may result in greater risks for disinformation and conflict. Operational planning for unscheduled elections may therefore be even more constrained. An EMB will be best placed to respond to unscheduled or snap elections when it maintains a high level of preparedness, can draw on operational planning that is in progress for the next scheduled election and can refer to previous operational plans to expedite planning. In administering an unscheduled election, EMBs should commence operational planning as soon as possible.

Post-conflict elections. Post-conflict elections are often elections that are held to mark the end of a transitional period following conflict. However, the term can also be used for subsequent elections in post-conflict societies. Each post-conflict socio-political environment is different; however, EMBs administering elections in these contexts must consider a range of additional factors. For example, an EMB may be newly established to administer the first election since the cessation of hostilities and may not be able to draw on institutional knowledge; it may likely need to engage a broader range of stakeholders; and there may be heightened risks of

election-related conflict. Candidate nomination (vetting) processes are likely to be more complex. So, too, is voter registration in the context of internally displaced persons who may have difficulty meeting documentation and residency requirements. Such requirements may also necessitate changes to the legal framework and the availability of voting services such as absentee voting in a manner that balances enfranchisement and integrity.²⁷ Additional public outreach activities may also be necessary to help build public confidence. The EMB should also prioritize GESI considerations to support an inclusive and representative electoral process. All of these considerations speak to the need to commence operational planning as early as possible, provided that the pre-conditions (electoral legal framework, budget, established EMB) are in place.

²⁷ For more information on specific considerations relating to electoral participation and internally displaced persons, see Shujaat, A., Roberts, H. and Erben, P. (2016).