

Hawaii Reporter

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Is Hawaii Becoming Banana Republic?

By Rep. Gene Ward, R-Hawaii Kai, 7/31/2008 9:52:57 PM

Hawaii Election Commissions and Offices of Election are some of the most important institutions ever invented for keeping the playing field even in democracies. But it looks like Hawaii may be in need of some realignments.

I dealt with election commissions when I was at the Office of Democracy at USAID. Our job was to help countries transition from being partially free or dictatorial to being democratic, but didn't know how.

In each country we started with the basics, elections, because free and fair elections were what most expected first and foremost out their democracy. But Elections Commissions often got in the way. Too often they were fronts for political parties, understaffed, underfunded, and had no coherent rules to follow. And when all these attributes were in place, they didn't enforce the rules. Dysfunctional election commissions made free and fair elections a real challenge, so fights break out, people are injured, and sometimes electoral disputes are taken up in jungle warfare rather than at the ballot box.

Election Commissions and election officers are instituted to prevent this 'ballots to bullets' approach to settling election disputes, but it appears to be where Hawaii is drifting. Recently, the democratic process was marred by Hawaii's new Chief Elections Officer not being legally qualified to be hired by the Elections Commission because he was not a registered Hawaii voter, was manipulated by a party official to extend the filing deadline for a House candidate, nor was it appropriate for him to start printing ballots when candidate eligibility were still being challenged.

As one Democratic Party member stated in a recent public meeting with the Commission, "Hawaii's political parties are always given the courtesy to examine the ballots before they are sent out so no inaccuracies or misunderstandings occur."

Governor Lingle put it more bluntly, "The UN sends people all around the world to make sure things like that don't happen.....that some political party hack can't go in and tell an election official how to run an election. And that's exactly what happened here." (The Governor did not mention names, but was referring to Democratic Party Chair, Brian Schatz who urged elections officials to allow a candidate to file her paperwork after the 4:30 PM deadline.)

So what's the solution? Some are saying off with the heads of the Chief Election Officer and all the Commissioners, but this is exactly the kind of behavior that Election Commissions and Offices of Elections are supposed to prevent by being the fair and objective arbitor of political contests and enforcement of the election laws on an even playing field.

In the past 30 years, there has been almost a 50% increase in the number of democracies in the world but each year there about 5-10 countries who back-slide into increased government tyranny. We are not a Third World Country nor a Banana Republic, but the behavior of our elections officials may be making us look like one. What a great way to encourage voter turnout in November 2008! *Representative Gene Ward, a former member of the Elections Team and a member of the USAID Office of Democracy, can be reached at <mailto:repward@capitol.hawaii.gov>*

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