

Uncovering Current Contentious Issues During Zanzibar's Electoral Process

STEVE LICHTY

My future as a fourth-year Ph.D. student entailed studying for comprehensive exams, applying for research funding and preparing a prospectus, but this summer an opportunity arose serendipitously that was too good to miss, and I embarked on a minor detour. In early July I was contacted by the International Law and Policy Group (ILP), an Oslo-based political consulting firm, which was looking for long-term observers of the voter registration process on the island of Pemba in Zanzibar, Tanzania. The three previous elections (1995, 2000, 2005) in Zanzibar were marked with serious irregularities and deemed not free and fair by several international observer groups. With this track record, the international donor community in Tanzania wanted to keep a watchful eye on the electoral process leading up to the next general election in October 2010.

The ILP was contracted by the Norwegian Embassy in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, to spend six months on Pemba to provide detailed accounts of the registration process. While officially an observer, over 80 percent of my work was ethnographical in nature, so aside from the experience gained from interacting with the Zanzibari electoral process, I conducted countless interviews with political party and government officials, members of parliament, scholars, human rights experts and religious leaders. This coupled with time spent at the village level in dialogue with local peasants has given me a clearer picture of the political, economic and social forces at play in Zanzibar's history and ones that still remain

relevant today and for the future.

The reports my team wrote for ILP were disseminated among 12 donor nations with substantial interests in Tanzania. These reports included detailed weekly updates, but also more topical oriented reports including analysis of the situation and policy recommendations. In attempting to provide reliable information, I faced the challenge of sorting through the various conflicting reports of the major stakeholders. This has shown me firsthand the ethical dilemmas scholars often face in the field, but simultaneously I observed the importance of quality scholarly work that provides a knowledge base for more effective diplomacy and development. My

course work at the University of Florida provided an excellent foundation to gain the methodological tools necessary to dig deeper into the underlying problems facing Zanzibar today. After ten weeks in Zanzibar, I take back to Florida not only a field work experience that despite not being related specifically to my dissertation topic, has opened up new avenues of research, but it has also given me the opportunity to co-publish future articles with ILP partners in Oslo.

Steve Lichy is a doctoral student in the Department of Political Science. He was a Center for African Studies FLAS fellow in Kiswahili from 2006-08.

