

**Speech by His Excellency The President
of the Republic of Botswana**

**At the Official Opening of the 5th Global Electoral
Organisation Conference Gaborone International
Convention Centre, Gaborone, Botswana
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Former President of Mexico: Mr Ernesto Zedillo

Secretary-General of International IDEA: Mr Vidar Helgesen

1. Let me begin by welcoming you all to Botswana. It is a pleasure to officiate at this important and very relevant conference on elections. It is also an honour for Botswana to host the 5th Global Electoral Organisation Conference taking place for the first time on African soil.
2. By bringing together election experts from all over the world under one roof, the GEO (as the conference is known) indeed provides a unique opportunity to engage on key current issues confronting the world of elections. I am proud that our own Election Commission is co-hosting this event.

3. Elections exist as a means by which ordinary people are able to engage routinely in the selection of their political representatives. This process stands as a cornerstone of democracy and its integrity should be protected. It has been shown to work in practice and open the door for basic freedoms to be respected and human dignity to live side by side with economic growth. It is, therefore, appropriate to have this conference convene under the theme of "Credible Elections for Democracy".
4. Over the next three days, I am informed that this conference will address issues related to elections and its role within the democratic framework, such as electoral reform, elections and conflict and the engagement of stakeholders in the electoral process.
5. When the electoral process is subverted in order to negotiate a brokered deal or settlement to compensate for the loss at the ballot box, this should be condemned in the strongest terms. Africa has had its share of such agreements; made between political opponents to share power; after the electoral process has either been manipulated or disrupted.

This is a very worrying trend, which sends the wrong message to citizens about the value of their vote.

6. Greed, corruption, and undemocratic practices have led to the manipulation of constitutions, electoral processes and the rule of law. Across Africa and other parts of the world we continue to have challenges in this regard. When leaders refuse to accept the outcome of election results in processes that have been deemed to be free and fair in their execution, they should be held to account. As in Ivory Coast recently, the hunger to stay in power by Gbagbo is more important for him than respect for the will of the majority of people.
7. Most of the conflicts on this continent arise out of the contestation of election results. Hence the importance of establishing credible electoral institutions and processes to foster a vibrant democracy, supported by all national and international stakeholders and respect for the outcome by politicians.
8. It is quite fortuitous that this conference also coincides with the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day,

which the world will be celebrating tomorrow. On this day we will honour the role of women in the economic, political and social sphere. Millennium Development Goal Number 3 talks of promoting gender equality and empowering women, thus placing an important emphasis on gender equality in political representation.

9. All countries should aspire to ensure that men and women are equitably involved in the democratic structures and processes of their countries.

10. I am aware, that on the 4th of March, just a few days ago, International IDEA and the Kofi Annan Foundation launched the Global Commission on Electoral Processes in neighbouring South Africa. I am proud to see that this Commission, made up of eminent personalities, includes my illustrious predecessor, former President Festus Mogae. The work of this Commission is expected to address the protection and promotion of the integrity of the electoral process. I look forward to the Commission achieving its objective of placing elections and democracy at the centre of the international agenda.

11. In July 2011 we will witness the creation of the world's newest country and Africa's 54th state. Ordinary citizens voted in a referendum in January in south Sudan to secede from the north. They overwhelmingly chose to secede. Structures will need to be put in place and institutions created to help build this new democracy. Lessons on institutional strengthening and electoral processes in general from this conference will hopefully be applied in that country so that it forms a solid foundation for their growth and be forever entrenched in their governance.
12. This meeting is taking place at a time when the world is witnessing profound changes. Recent events in parts of Africa and the Middle East show that governments that fail to deliver on the promise of "a better life for all" will remain fragile and lose their legitimacy and sustainability.
13. Although democracy is still in short supply in several parts of the world, it remains a vital aspiration of millions and a much sought after universal value. However, until recently it had faded as a topic on the international agenda. World-leaders met and invoked other concerns—the economic and

financial crises, threats to peace and security, environmental emergencies and climate change—to name a few. Today we see Democracy as a central component of the international agenda, as much as it is part of people's yearning for basic freedoms and rights.

14. In Botswana Democracy has served us very well. We have seen that it provides the foundation for good governance and prudent economic management. With the guarantee of basic freedoms, Botswana has a strong political tradition to show the rest of the world.

15. Nothing should detract us from our commitment to democratic ideals. Only democracy can create the most favourable conditions under which our aspirations can be fulfilled. And in Botswana, and on the African continent, our aspirations are many.

16. Africa is known to be a young continent as demographics show that the continent has the youngest population compared to other continents. We therefore have an important responsibility, to ensure that the legacy, which we bequeath to the leaders of tomorrow, is one where

democracy is valued as an intrinsic part of daily life. This legacy is one where young people believe in its power and its importance. While we can point to many things that influence people's faith in democracy, I firmly believe that a credible electoral process will enhance this faith.

17. We, therefore, need to cherish the process and safeguard it from those who wish to corrupt it. The institutions that oversee elections play a significant role in this regard. With so many elections specialists gathered here for this important conference, I trust that your discussions will be fruitful and live up to the ideals set by the conference theme, as well as the aspirations of so many citizens across the globe.
18. We are the custodians of the present and our present actions will be judged by future generations as to whether we actually did provide "a better life for all". Let us aspire to use democracy to inspire our young people to exceed our own achievements, doing so in honour, humility, and in service.
19. I wish you well in your deliberations over the next few days, trusting that you will enjoy the hospitality of Botswana.

20. With these remarks, I declare the 5th Global Electoral Organisation Conference open.

PULA !