

Speech by H.E. Mr. Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León,
Former President of Mexico

Ladies and gentlemen, I am very pleased for the opportunity to address this 5th Global Electoral Organization Conference.

I am here on behalf of the Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security.

The Chairman of this Commission, former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, as well as my other fellow commissioners, have asked me to convey to you their regards and their sincere appreciation not only for putting together this excellent conference, but more importantly for the work that all of you carry out every day for the cause of electoral democracy, either from your respective national institutions or the regional and multilateral organizations of which many of you are devoted members.

Your conference takes place practically back-to-back with the launch of the Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security. We met for the first time this past weekend not far from here in Pretoria, under the generous auspices of the South African Government and with splendid logistical and intellectual preparation by International IDEA.

The launching of our Commission and the occurrence of your own conference could not be more timely, as recent events on this continent can attest.

Of course effective electoral democracy has been for many years not only an aspiration of the peoples of the world, but also an active pursuit and more importantly, a real achievement for many countries. Yet, we all know that for many others, it remains just an aspiration.

Luckily, now more than ever, there are indications that there is a real chance for this aspiration to be achieved by countries that have been starving for freedom and democracy for a long time.

We all know, however, that freedom does not transform a country automatically into a functioning democracy. History is full of examples in which an opportunity has been wasted because of poor institutional design and/or faulty execution of that design. Furthermore, we also know that for those same reasons, even democracies that at some point have achieved a certain degree of normality are not exempt from going through periodic episodes of political conflict, even tainted by violence.

As much as we celebrate the emergence of democratic hope in places like Tunisia and Egypt, we also sadly witness a worrisome and growing trend of troubled elections worldwide, in some cases with outbursts of violence and outright violations of human rights. A dramatic case in point is that of the Ivory Coast, where following a national presidential election characterized domestically and internationally as well run, free, and fair, the incumbent has been unwilling to honor the democratic result and relinquish power. Circumvention of the democratic will of the people not only advances the threat that the nation might backpedal into violent conflict, but also sets an extremely dangerous precedent now that twenty African countries are preparing to hold presidential elections within the next eighteen months.

And let me insist that although the developments in Egypt, Tunisia and other parts of the Arab World have a real chance to be the dawn of a democratic era in those great nations, that good outcome is far from certain. The democratic processes will face enormous challenges in those countries. And even though the primary and ultimate responsibility to succeed in constructing their own democracy will be an internal affair of those countries, much can be done by the international community to support them by sharing the good and bad experiences other emerging democracies have gone through in the last few decades. Additionally, the pertinent multilateral institutions should be mandated and funded to be supportive of those processes; however, this should always be done within a framework of unquestionable respect for the sovereignty of those nations.

These and many other events happening in our world today make both the program of your conference and, I believe, also the work of our Commission extremely pertinent. Under the chairmanship of Kofi Annan and the enlightened engagement and support of International IDEA—and especially Vidar Helgesen—and having Professor Stephen Stedman as our project director, in our proceedings in Pretoria we set up a very ambitious agenda for the next year-and-a-half. I understand that on Wednesday morning Professor Stedman will present to you that agenda agreed by our Commission.

Let me just emphasize our Commission's strong conviction that free, fair and credible elections are essential for democracy, security and development. That we recognize that the conduct and management of elections have improved in the majority of cases over the last twenty years, thanks in no small measure to people like you and the institutions you represent.

Still, the integrity of elections continues to be jeopardized in many instances as a reflection of weak rule of law; that is as a consequence of disregarding the fundamental principle of equality before the law. In fact, lack of integrity of the electoral process, more frequently than not, is a symptom of a deeper problem of security, human rights and development.

Lack of free, fair and credible elections is part of a vicious cycle that is at the root of the most profound drama of social injustice and poverty that stifles many countries in the world. Bad or nil democracy (part of which is the lack of electoral integrity) produces weak institutions, abusive power and lousy government, which in turn breeds underdevelopment, which in turn makes it easier to perpetuate regimes that neglect fundamental political and human rights.

That cycle must be broken. And it can be done, by transforming people's legitimate aspirations for political freedom into rules, institutions, and practices that truly deliver electoral integrity.

Our Commission aims to identify the main challenges that must be overcome in the pursuit of electoral integrity and provide practical recommendations for that purpose.

Needless to say, the knowledge base and rich experience that has been assembled by the Global Electoral Organization will be of enormous importance to our own work and of course we are hopeful that when we complete our report, it will receive due consideration by you all, and if persuaded, you will help us to disseminate our findings and recommendations.

Be assured that we will work hard and will put forward the best of our respective personal and professional experiences so that we can deliver into your hands, and into those of many other interested parties, a document deserving of your consideration.

Also be assured that because of our convictions and the roles that we have played at some point in our professional and political lives, we all feel very passionate and committed to the cause of democracy and therefore, to electoral integrity.

In this regard, and although I come here in no way representing the Mexican State, please allow me the liberty of expressing my pride for the active participation of the Instituto Federal Electoral of Mexico (IFE) in the Global Electoral Organization and certainly in this important conference.

Not too many years ago, it would have been inconceivable, and in fact unacceptable, that an electoral entity from my country could be part of an organization like GEO. To put it mildly, Mexico was not exemplary in matters of free, legal, fair and credible elections. To fix this aberration, and building on the fight for democracy by others before my time, I had the enormous privilege of working arduously with all Mexican political parties to produce the rules and institutions needed to create the electoral integrity that the Mexican population had demanded for far too long.

Thanks to the drive of the Mexican citizens and the commitment and response of all our political forces, today I can report to you that Mexico has a vibrant democracy and that the IFE, along with the Federal Electoral Tribunal, are the essential anchors of that democracy. That is why I salute with respect and affection my compatriots from IFE who are present here. With the same enthusiasm and appreciation for the valuable and dedicated work that all of you and your institutions do to sustain the values and the practice of democracy, I commend you all and wish you a successful 5th Global Electoral Organization Conference. I do it with the conviction that your debates, your agreements, and even your disagreements, will contribute positively to the hugely important and noble cause of democracy for all.