

Vidar Helgesen, Secretary-General of International IDEA

Opening Speech

Global Election Organisation (GEO) Conference

Gaborone, Botswana 7 March 2011

Your Excellency, the President of Botswana.

Your Excellency, former President Zedillo of Mexico

Honorable Chairperson of the Independent Election Commission
of Botswana

Madam Chairperson of the Independent Electoral Commission of
South Africa

Representatives of Electoral Management Bodies globally

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to welcome you to this 5th Global Electoral
Organisation Conference and wish to extend warm thanks to the
President, government and citizens of Botswana for so generously
hosting us. Botswana is indeed a fitting venue as a guardian of
democracy at home and a long standing advocate of democracy in
Africa. A leader in this regard is our strong co-host of this
Conference, the Independent Election Commission. I also wish to
thank our many partners in this endeavor.

We are meeting at a defining moment for democracy in Africa and
beyond. The theme of democracy is all around us – as we are
witnessing the power of citizens calling for freedom in Tunisia and
Egypt; the suffering people are willing to endure for freedom in
Libya; the way democracy is being sacrificed on the altar of

incumbency in Cote d'Ivoire. These developments, ranging as they do from inspiration to desperation, can serve to illustrate alternative futures for an African continent which is faced with 19 Presidential elections over the next 18 months. The peoples and the leaders of the continent have choices to make and obligations to live up to.

Democracy is facing challenges not only in Africa. We see examples at the heart of Europe of institutions of democracy and the rule of law being undermined, we see examples of international crime capturing politics in Latin America and other regions, we see a vast Asian continent where the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism finds diverse expressions - for better or worse.

At the heart of democracy's challenges and democracy's promise lies the electoral process. It is true that democracy is more than elections, but that very statement implies that the electoral process is the indispensable starting point.

Looking back at the field of elections in the last 20 years there is much to celebrate: more countries have elections, more of those elections are free and more of them are managed with professionalism and integrity. The community of practice gathered in this hall can rightly take pride in important progress.

That being said, there is much to do ahead. Many countries are still in the grips of autocrats, and many are skin-deep democracies in which the trend is not uplifting. In even more countries, we can observe that technically acceptable elections don't always lead to

stronger democracy. It is important therefore to look at the broader context for elections, hence the agenda for this GEO conference: the focus on reforms, on violence, on stakeholders.

- Electoral and other political **reform** is needed in many countries to combat all too prevalent cultures of exclusion, polarization, elitism, and money politics – including dark money politics. One lingering crisis for democracy is the continuing gross under-representation of women in elected bodies: indeed a crisis calling for political reform. We all agree that electoral authorities cannot change the broader political context alone, but they have a key role to play.
- Changes are also needed to help prevent and mitigate **conflicts** around elections which threaten to undermine trust in democracy. While democracy provides for peace and stability in the long run, the process of democratization can be destabilizing since it implies changing power relations in society. Elections are often the pinnacle of such fragile democratization processes. Conflict resolution is not the primary mandate of EMBs, but they have a responsibility to help reduce electoral risk and thereby reducing the risk of conflict.
- In addressing these considerable challenges it goes without saying that EMBs need to engage with the full range of political stakeholders in society: parliaments, political parties, media, civil society, youth not the least. These stakeholders are key in holding EMBs to account, but they can also give

EMBs protection against pressure and abuse by the Executive.

We see far too much such abuse today - Cote d'Ivoire is merely one example. It is however an example which highlights in the extreme a point of much broader relevance: that free and fair elections are key not only to democracy, but to security, development, human rights and the rule of law. The number of troubled elections we have been witnessing around the world in recent years therefore present a call for new and more comprehensive approaches to elections. It is with this in mind that International IDEA has taken the initiative, in partnership with the Kofi Annan Foundation, to establish the Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security. The Commission held its first meeting two days ago in Pretoria and we are pleased that former President Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico, vice chair of the Commission, is here to deliver today's keynote speech.

New approaches are needed not only at the national level, but at the level of international electoral support. Those of us who are engaged in electoral reform, electoral assistance and electoral observation need to critically assess the quality, relevance and impact of our efforts. While we can make important contributions, we also need to ask ourselves some challenging questions:

- Can international engagement at times contribute to compromising the integrity of the electoral process?
- Are international experts at times brought in to do work which can be better done by nationals?

- Can the dominance of international presence undermine the development of national capacity?
- Can the volume of international observers drain too much time and resources from national election authorities, and from domestic observers?

These and other questions merit open and honest discussion between electoral management bodies, national authorities and international actors. The wealth of national and international experience assembled at this conference provides a timely opportunity for assessing achievements and failures of electoral processes of the past, with an eye to our shared future challenge: how to strengthen the integrity of elections in service of broader objectives of democracy, peace and security, development, human rights and the rule of law. Let us wish ourselves every success as we get down to work on these issues.

Thank you for your attention.