

# FROM SOME OF THE WORLD'S ELECTORAL DEMOCRACIES: INSIGHTS AND BEST PRACTICES

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*"...governments that failed to deliver on the promise of a better life for all will remain fragile and lose their beginning and sustainability."*

**- Pres. Khama Ian Khama**

*Botswana, March 7, 2011*

Last March 7-9, 2011, close to two-hundred fifty (250) delegates representing election management bodies (EMBs)/electoral commissions from all continents of the world, donor institutions and international organizations gathered at Gaborone, Botswana in Southern Africa to share experiences, compare notes, celebrate achievements and discuss new ideas and approaches in the management of elections. Considered as one of the biggest democracy forum in the world, the conference, the first to be held in Africa was sponsored by the Global Electoral Organization (GEO), a network of election management bodies, election practitioners and experts established following the wave of democratization that swept the world after the end of the cold war. The GEO 2011 Conference with the theme "Credible Elections for Democracy" was hosted by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and the Independent Electoral Commission of Botswana.

The electoral conference was a milestone because it was held in Africa amid a civil war in Libya (North Africa) and difficult yet momentous transitions in Egypt and Tunisia after people's revolts. The choice of Botswana as venue of the conference was appropriate because the young Republic of Botswana (land

area, 581, 730 square kilometers; population, 1.85 million) is a multiparty democracy whose Constitution was adopted in 1966 and provide for three main organs of Government, namely, the Legislature (Parliament), Executive (President and Cabinet) and the Judiciary. It has its House of Chiefs comprised of traditional leaders and chiefs who advice the National Assembly on issues of citizenship, land tenure and customary law.<sup>1</sup>

The Commission on Elections (COMELEC) of the Philippines was invited to participate in this global forum to share its experience on the country's first automated national elections and electoral reforms (biometric registration, detainee voting, express lane for the elderly, pregnant women and persons with disabilities). This writer flew to Botswana to present a 10-minute power point presentation on "Electoral Reforms: Successes, Misses, Steps Ahead."

Opening the conference was Botswana Pres. Khama Ian Khama who said that most of the conflicts in the Africa continents are from election contests and that it was important to establish credible electoral institutions and processes to foster a vibrant democracy supported by all the national and international stakeholders.<sup>2</sup> Keynoting the conference was Mr. Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon, former President of Mexico and Vice-Chairman of the newly-formed Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Society (chaired by former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan) who stressed that fair and free, credible and clean elections are essential to security, democracy and development and that the lack of electoral integrity lies at the root of social injustice and poverty.

For three days the participants talked about election-related issues within the context of security, development and human rights and drawn therefrom insights and best practices of EMBs that could all contribute to more inclusive

and more democratic electoral processes all over the world. Some of these insights and best practices worth pondering are as follows:

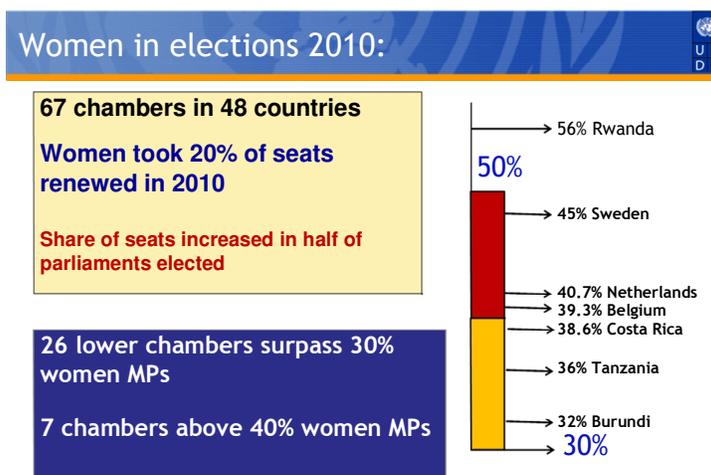
1. ***Elections and reforms.*** Electoral reform is a broad term that covers improving the responsiveness of electoral processes to public desires and expectations.<sup>3</sup> For her part, Irena Hadziabdic, Central Election Commission President of Bosnia and Herzegovina, explained that electoral reform is a change of the election system in order to improve the way that public desires are reflected in the elections and could include eligibility to vote, voting systems, design or implementation of new ballot system or new voting equipment, appointing election management bodies, voter registration system, measures against bribery and conflict of interest, election campaign rules, financing of candidates and political parties, etc. She added that electoral reform is a very demanding and slow process and has to involve representatives of the government, academe, representatives of political parties, nongovernmental sector, legal and international experts to be successful.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Kwadwo Afari-Gyan, Chairman, African Association of Election Authorities and EMB Ghana President, stated that electoral reforms could be changes that are far and between because they are structural (like replacing centralized counting by polling station counting system) or they could be changes that are regular because they are non-structural (like replacing opaque ballot boxes with transparent ones, holding dialogues with stakeholders). All these changes must be characterized by transparency, professionalism, use of information technology and expansion of the frontier of voter's education. Transparency includes, among others, presence of audit trails in the voting processes and stakeholders' inputs to the electoral system thereby encouraging them to claim shared ownership in the electoral process. Professionalism means better training and better facilities for poll personnel and voters. Information technology serves as

a tool for EMBs to efficiently conduct elections. The frontier of voter's education should both descriptive and demonstrative to impart more effectively democratic values to the voters.

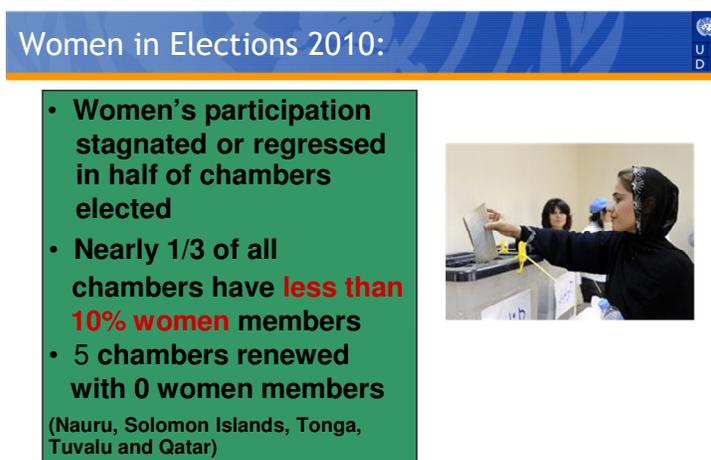
2. ***Election Management Bodies and Women.*** Aiming for greater gender balance have been observed in many countries in the appointment of a chairperson/president and commissioners of EMBs. In the conference were women-heads of EMBs like Dr. Brigalia Bam of the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa, Suzana Antonio de Conceicao Nicalau Ingles of Angola, Tania Arias Manzano of Ecuador, Irena Hadziabdic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Christiana Thorpe of Sierra Leone and Dra. Maria Eugenia Villagran de Leon of Guatemala. A good number of women EMB commissioners also participated in the conference. While women have yet to be represented in our very own COMELEC, it is worth noting that in 2004, two of the five EMB members in Cambodia were women, as were two of the five members in Jamaica, five of the nine members in Latvia, two of the five members in South Africa and two of the nine members in Palestine.<sup>5</sup>

The EMB has to provide a good example on gender balance issues in all its activities. Essential considerations are ensuring gender balance among the participants at workshops and seminars organized by the EMB, and the inclusion of gender-based issues in the content of training and voter education and information programmes. Making certain that there is gender balance in its own personnel and activities will promote EMB's credibility and allow it to tap women's capabilities for its membership, professional and support staff, permanent and temporary or ad hoc staff, consultants and advisers.<sup>6</sup>

At present, women constitute 19 per cent of the members of parliaments around the world. In one of the conference workshop presentation it was stressed that because of the national policy for a quota system for women, they are now increasing in numbers in the Parliaments of South Africa, Rwanda, Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. Rwanda has just superseded Sweden as number one in the world in terms of women's parliamentary representation at 56.3 per cent women against Sweden's 47.3 per cent.<sup>7</sup> UNDP data on women in elections in 2010 and women in leadership positions show the following<sup>8</sup>:



Source: IPU, Women elected in 2010, [www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org)



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## Women in leadership positions



- Women heads of State: 9 out of 151 (6%)
- Women heads of Government: 13 (6%)
- Women ministers: approx. 16%
- Women at the head of Parliament: 14% (approx. 16)

(Heads of govt include: Australia, Argentina, Bangladesh, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Mozambique)



3. ***Elections and Electoral Justice.*** Lead Author Jesus Orazco-Henriquez of “Electoral Justice: The International IDEA Handbook” and professor of the Legal Research Institute of the National Autonomous University of Mexico said that electoral justice represents the ultimate guarantee of free, fair and genuine elections and is decisive in ensuring the stability of the political system. Judge Johann Kriegler, former Chairperson of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) of South Africa, agreed with Michael Svetlik of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) that there are standards of electoral dispute resolution like the right of redress, an impartial and informed arbiter, a system that expedite decisions, established burdens of proof and standards of evidence, availability of meaningful and effective remedies and effective education of stakeholders but stressed that they are only aspirational standards. He claimed that electoral justice is not a branch of law like insurance law but that it is supra public law since it interfaces law and politics and in the final analysis is a political process. He advised promptness in the resolution of election contests and warned against judicialization of electoral disputes.

4. ***Elections and Media.*** Dr. Steve Surjibally, Chairman, EMB Guyana advises that media should be treated as friends. Updates and

information about election matters should be shared with them. Dialogues and meetings should be held between EMBs and media. He and Manoah Esipisu, Deputy Spokesperson and Deputy Director, Communication and Public Affairs Division, Commonwealth Secretariat suggested that media be given training and briefing on election procedures and processes. In the end, successful elections depend on an informed citizenry and media plays a big role in ensuring transparent and successful elections.

5. ***EMBs and Political Pressure.*** There are two areas where political pressure come in. They are in the appointment of members in the EMBs and in the release of budget for the EMBs. Those appointed are close to the appointing authority and some are placed in the positions to weaken the independence of the institutions. Budget is not released immediately and is used as a leverage against EMBs. Samuel Kivuitu, former Chairman of Kenya EMB suggested that to neutralize political pressure, EMBs should cultivate good relationships with political parties, media and other stakeholders and involve them in electoral activities like voter's registration. It is also helpful to make these partners realize they have rights and responsibilities in the electoral process EMBs should welcome election observers who would monitor elections.

6. ***Elections and Youth.*** The general observation is that the youth in many countries are not interested in elections. They view it negatively and would rather involve in activities not related to elections. Political parties share a big part of the blame for not making efforts and extra-efforts to educate and encourage the youth to be involved in electoral politics. In some countries, political parties have a negative perception, thus, discouraging young people from political exercises.

7. *Elections, democracy and violence.* Pres. Khama Ian Khama of Botswana pointed out that although there is a democracy deficit in many parts of the world, it remains a vital aspiration of millions and a much sought after universal value. Former Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo stated that although democracy remains an aspiration to millions, it is a real achievement for many others.

In her paper entitled “Women in Elections-related Conflict,” Dr. Annie Barbara Chikwanha of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IIDEA) explained that all types of conflict are present in Africa which are violent and non-violent and which are intermittent, endemic and intractable. These conflicts are not just about power and resources but are rooted in the denial of human needs such as identity, security, respect and recognition. To address these election-related conflicts she proposed, among others, the incorporation of human rights into the national educational curriculum, establishments of long-term election conflict management/resolution boards across all regions at the national level, gender balance of the leadership in election administration and election observation teams and enforcement of an Electoral Code of Conduct.<sup>9</sup>

In the Gaborone Declaration 2011 conference participants expressed that elections exist as a cornerstone of democracy that empowers people to participate in the selection of their political representatives. However, they noted with concern that while an increasing number of countries around the globe conduct elections as a peaceful means of discerning the will of the people, they also observe the increasing instances of election-related violence and therefore acknowledge the need to address the root causes of, and reduce the potential of election-related violence.

8. *Elections and the newly-created Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security.* This Commission headed by former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan and whose members are former heads of states, Nobel laureates and EMBs serves as a useful forum for issues relating to elections, democracy and security affecting various EMBs and as a collective voice to urge and push for reforms in electoral processes. The political value of this body in the international arena is invaluable.

The GEO Conference ended with the approval of the Gaborone Declaration 2011 which highlights the importance of establishing and strengthening the professionalism of credible electoral institutions, acknowledges the need to address the root causes of, and the potential for election-related violence, calls greater attention to the importance of promoting gender equality in all economic, political and social contexts and empowering women in the conduct and administration of elections, and urges participants of the conference, individuals and organizations to bring the experiences and outcomes of the conference to the attention of the electoral authorities, political parties, civil society, the media and others across the globe and to endeavor to ensure more credible and inclusive electoral processes.<sup>10</sup>

Ninety-three (93) year old Nelson Mandela, “tata” (father), of the neighboring South Africa and considered an icon of democracy will surely relish the fruitful outcome of the GEO Conference.

### **Endnotes:**

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<sup>1</sup> Bajanala, A tourist guide to Botswana, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Baleseng Batloleng Khama shuns electoral process subversion in Daily News, March 8, 2011.

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- <sup>3</sup> Electoral Management Design: The International IDEA Handbook 295 (2006).
- <sup>4</sup> Hadziabdic, Irena. Election Reforms in ACEEO Region. Paper presented during the GEO 2011 Conference, March 7, 2011, Gaborone, Botswana.
- <sup>5</sup> The International IDEA Handbook, op. cit., note 3 at 70.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Quota Project: Global Database of Quotes for Women, <http://www.quotaproject.org/aboutQuotas.cfm>.
- <sup>8</sup> Ballington, Julie, Women and Elections, Current States and Way Forward. Paper presented during the GEO 2011 Conference, March 8, 2011, Gaborone, Botswana.
- <sup>9</sup> Chikwanha, Annie Barbara. Women in Elections-related Conflict. Paper presented during the GEO 2011 Conference, March 8, 2011, Gaborone, Botswana.
- <sup>10</sup> Global Electoral Organization (GEO) Gaborone Declaration 2011.