



International IDEA Democracy Forum
Accra, Ghana, 30 November - 1 December 2010

Concluding Remarks

by

Mr. Vidar Helgesen, Secretary-General

Honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration,
Distinguished panelists of the Democracy Forum,
Dear guests,

- As we speak, tension is growing in Cote d'Ivoire as the Electoral Commission is being prevented from announcing the electoral results. Once again, the integrity of the electoral process seems to be under grave threat. And once again, we get confirmation that the theme for this forum is extremely topical.
- I am impressed by the vast experience, political insightfulness and the deep awareness of the problems at stake that emanated from each and every presentation we heard yesterday and today.
- We are most grateful to HE the President of Ghana, for highlighting, in his statement delivered by Mme Special Advisor Christiana Amoko-Nuama, the critical importance of the integrity of electoral processes in Africa and beyond, and for his kind words about International IDEA and its support to the consolidation of democratic processes in Ghana.

- Once again, we wish to thank the Government of Ghana, and in particular the Honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration, for the warm hospitality we enjoyed in Accra and for Ghana's wise and thoughtful contribution to this Forum.
- It would certainly be pretentious and premature if I tried, at this stage, to draw any final conclusion from a major debate that is just taking off.
- Nevertheless, in spite of the diversity of the situations we looked at, a fundamental common understanding has clearly emerged – an understanding on which we need to develop actions to follow up to this debate.
- We have grasped and reaffirmed the critical importance of the integrity of electoral processes. It was heartening to note that the analysis put forward by International IDEA's background paper, has found such a clear resonance in the Forum debate.
- Let me summarize the elements that we have identified in our debate, elements that clearly urge us to move ahead towards influencing change in the currently prevailing attitudes and policies
- We were unanimous, I think, in our understanding that competitive, multi-party elections are a vital component of democracy. Elections are simply the sole effective and reliable instrument for citizens to choose their representatives and the government to which they want to entrust their confidence. They confer legitimacy to government at national and international level. They are the most important tool to translate civic and political rights into practice.
- But elections can perform these critical functions only if they are credible and perceived as such by the vast majority of citizens.
- Elections can be credible only:

- When they are run professionally, in an impartial and transparent way, and when their outcome is reflecting faithfully the real choice of citizens
- When they are inclusive: no major group of citizens should feel excluded from the process or prevented from taking part in it on an equal footing; gender inclusiveness is a must not least in the selection of candidates and participation of voters
- When the playing field for contenders is even and transparent
- When those elected can effectively assume the functions and responsibilities for which they have been elected
- When the entire electoral process has taken place in a peaceful and orderly way; when violence and threat of violence has been reduced to a minimum.

Excellencies,

Dear guests

The Forum has expressed great concern over the fact that an increasing number of electoral processes around the world do not comply with these basic requirements. Such elections, it has been argued, not only fail to confer legitimacy to the proclaimed winner, but eventually erode the very credibility of democracy, particularly in those societies where it is still fragile and needs to take root.

We have seen how the integrity of electoral processes can be deliberately and systematically destroyed by the incumbent authoritarian regime as in Myanmar,

We have seen that electoral integrity can fall victim of a protracted conflict in which conscious fraud is sometimes combined with failure to grasp the basic requirements of a free and fair electoral process, as in Afghanistan

The electoral playing field may also be distorted by deep social inequalities and the prevalence of phenomena such as organized crime and drug trafficking - as in some countries of Latin America; something which has proven able to capture political processes and institutions.

As we have seen from other examples, the very fear of having to account to citizens may be inducing the incumbent to resort to illicit means and electoral manipulation in order to avoid losing power.

On the other hand, we have learnt from the Indonesian experience that democratic reform can pave the way for more transparency, public awareness, and even settlement of conflict. Importantly, Indonesia and Ghana have both translated the democracy they have at home into a priority of foreign policy in their respective regions.

It has been stressed that the primary responsibility for the integrity of elections stays with national actors: electoral management bodies, executives, political parties, parliaments, civil society and, last, but not least, the mass media. With the national leadership as a starting point, international support can be important – but we have learnt that it is not always optimal. At the level of technical assistance, there seems to be a need for new and different approaches: a focus on long-term processes instead of the event, building long term national and regional capacity instead of growing international missions, integrating electoral support with other democracy assistance programmes. The analysis on Sierra Leone very pertinently emphasized that “continued reliance on international assistance can also undermine the independence of the national electoral commission”. Sometimes, international actors can cause more problems than they solve.

Even with improvements in technical cooperation, the problem of electoral integrity cannot be effectively addressed if confined to the technical and managerial dimensions of the process. We have heard appeals for international commitment and action, and even, suggestions about the creation of new international mechanisms to prevent and sanction electoral fraud.

A new global political commitment to protect and promote the integrity of elections is indeed called for: a commitment that needs to be subscribed to by political leaders and decision-makers. Failures and double standards on the part of the international community, such as in the Palestinian elections in 2006 or the Afghan elections in 2009, have dealt serious blows to the credibility of the international community

We will need to strive for a commitment at all levels and in all relevant fora: the United Nations, international financial institutions, regional and sub-regional organizations, individual governments and citizens' organizations.

Dear Friends,

International IDEA, inspired and energized by your testimonies and your analysis, wants to take this debate further.

International IDEA and the Kofi Annan Foundation will join forces to that effect and launch, in March 2011, a major new project on the Protection and Promotion of the Integrity of Electoral Processes. In the framework of this new initiative the Global Commission on Electoral Processes will be established with the principal task to present recommendations for strengthening political commitment in favour of free, credible and sustainable electoral processes at the service of

democracy. Your deliberations will no doubt be a key source of inspiration and encouragement for the work of the Commission.

We will pursue the same goal of electoral integrity at the General Electoral Conference (GEO), which will be hosted by International IDEA in Botswana in March 2011. In doing so, we will also be drawing on the outputs from the African Union Summit on the theme of Shared Values in January and Ghana's leadership in promoting the democracy agenda in Africa.

Distinguished Panelists,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to thank you for having pioneered this process through your active and creative participation in the Democracy Forum.

Let me also thank again the Honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration, and his able team in the Ministry, and also the International IDEA's team under the stewardship of Goran Fejic and with the great support of our Ghana Office.