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**7th UN Global Forum on Reinventing Government
Plenary Session V
“Elections, Parliaments, and Citizen Trust”
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This morning we witnessed a very stimulating session on civil society. We will now be addressing the issue of electoral politics, which some would claim is rather uncivil...

While popular trust in democracy remains unrivalled, popular trust in the key democratic actors is alarmingly low. Politicians make up the one profession which it is universally acceptable to ridicule. I think it was the once chairman of Barclay's Bank who said that politicians are people who, when they see light at the end of the tunnel, order more tunnel.

This session will focus on citizens' trust in elections and parliaments.

While civil society is almost always spoken highly of, one should not forget that it cannot replace political society. NGOs cannot replace political parties, or the electoral process, or parliaments.

In my remarks I will introduce some of the themes on citizen trust in electoral and parliamentary processes, for what will certainly be a stimulating discussion by an extremely qualified panel of eminent personalities which I have the honor to chair.

2. The Erosion of Trust

What we have witnessed since the end of the cold war, is

- firstly, a sharp increase in the number of elections, widely seen as democracy taking hold
- then, a more critical assessment of the legitimacy of elections, due to inadequate electoral frameworks, the poor and untimely funding of elections, a politically biased or unprofessional election administration, electoral fraud, unequal access to media, political restrictions, intimidation and violence, to name just a few
- subsequently, the development of standards for electoral processes, a sharp increase in the demand for technical electoral assistance, and the surge in electoral observation missions.

Higher standards as well as more complex challenges in the electoral field, disclosed a knowledge gap which soon turned into a deficit of public trust in the election process. Elections in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan demonstrated—as never before—the importance of stakeholders' confidence in the electoral process and the consequences when it is lacking. Public trust in the electoral process is crucial to its success because such confidence legitimizes the process and connects citizens to the institutions that represent them.

The results of public opinion surveys show a mixed picture across regions and societies about trust in democratic institutions and processes. In societies in transformation, political institutions have not, or have not yet, secured the trust of a majority of citizens. In East Asia and Africa about half the population withholds trust from political institutions. The situation is less favourable in the post-Communist countries of Europe and in Latin America. Clear majorities register distrust in political institutions there.

Even though competitive elections are held, representative institutions consistently rank lowest in trust. In nine of the 11 new Europe countries, nine-tenths of citizens withhold trust from their political parties. Similarly, only 14

percent of new Europeans express trust in their popularly elected Parliament. Hungary is the only country in which as many as one-sixth express confidence in both parliament and parties. Although Latin Americans have not been subject to the intense pressure of Communist Party mobilization, they too distrust both parties and parliament. The "highest" level of trust in representative institutions is found in Brazil and Uruguay, yet only one in four trusts parliament there and one in six trusts parties.

The round of elections that took place in 2005-2006 in Latin America provided a vivid example of the importance of these basic principles for the overall issue of trust in the electoral process. Out of four countries (Costa Rica, Honduras, México and Perú) in which the final results generated electoral disputes, three cases (Costa Rica, Honduras and Perú) were managed within existing institutional mechanisms, while in México the result was not accepted by the opposition party, the PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática). This created a serious post-electoral crisis. In general, the last round of elections in Latin America seems to indicate that electoral administration has been less effective than in the past rounds. The difficulties in the timely provision of the official results brought about, in some cases, doubts about election management bodies, their independence, impartiality and transparency; an unexpected trend, if compared to the positive record of previous rounds, which witnessed a reduction in electoral frauds, manipulation and ineffectiveness¹.

3. Democracy Building and the Importance of Trust

So how do we address the credibility problems emerging on almost all continents and the mistrust of citizens who are resigned to the choice of not choosing?

- more professional and sustainable electoral administration that, in turn, can promote enhanced credibility and strengthened public trust in the democratic

¹ Daniel Zovatto, "América Latina después del «rally» electoral 2005-2006: algunas tendencias y datos sobresalientes", in *Nueva Sociedad*, 207:23-33, January-February 2007.

process at large. (- building and sharing solid knowledge and best practice experience on how to build and develop electoral capacities, design electoral systems, manage and strengthen electoral institutions, and establish electoral dispute resolution mechanisms.)

- Trust is of fundamental importance for democratic governance, that is, the process by which government policies are carried out through the cooperation of citizens with public officials. While implementing popular decisions is easy, leaders need the governance capital that trust provides in order to carry out unpopular decisions. If major political institutions are deemed trustworthy, citizens are more likely to cooperate with unpopular decisions necessary for the long-term benefit of a society. If institutions are distrusted, citizens may refuse to cooperate or ignore laws and regulations, and the effectiveness of government is thereby reduced. A major challenge lies in the fact that **trust** – this political credit needed to undertake less popular policies - can be obtained only by a prevailing perception that delivery **will** come at the end of the day. In other terms, while public trust is a key factor of successful electoral processes, its existence depends on factors that go beyond electoral management and include the government's proven or, at least, perceived capacity to deliver on citizens' expectations.

Making democracy work for development.

- How development cooperation deals with parliaments and democratic politics: role of parliaments in setting priorities and monitoring
- How the international community assists in elections
- How the international community deals with so-called undesirable election outcomes

Election management is founded on basic, but fundamental, guiding principles; *independence, impartiality, integrity, transparency, efficiency, and service orientation*. Each principle is of paramount importance for the

credibility of the electoral process, and doubts on any of them inevitably impacts on public trust and confidence in electoral processes.

In addition to the need for integrity and a fair electoral process, it is important to create an electoral system in which the way people vote is the way that shapes the parliament that then belongs to them and works for delivering on its functions of legislation, budgetary control and oversight of the executive, irrespective of whether their particular party has won or lost the elections. So the issue of trust goes beyond the procedural or normative aspects of a good design of formal institutions, and trust in parliaments and electoral processes has to be seen in the context of trust in public institutions more generally.

4. Conclusions

Too often the “trust debate” focuses either on specific questions of trust in political parties or the legislature. We are facing a situation in which more and more of the public feel they do not have ownership of the democratic system or of the political process. We have therefore a much wider problem of trust in the political process.

We need a shift from democracy promotion discourses, sometimes overloaded with ideological connotations, to new and more comprehensive democracy building approaches. They should support policies that are long-term, comprehensive and responding to a home-grown demand. They should be based on more diversified views on democracy and how to develop and sustain it, not least through a stronger South-South dimension. And they should be grounded in a deeper understanding of the role of democratic politics for development and peacebuilding – including in highly polarized, vulnerable and politically sensitive post-conflict settings.