



Office of the Permanent Observer to the United Nations

Panel Discussion on the occasion of the
International Democracy Day 2008

Electoral Processes and Democracy Building:
Experiences from the Arab Region

Statement by
Massimo Tommasoli
Permanent Observer

Conference Room 7, UN Headquarters
New York, 15 September 2008

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Permanent Observer for International IDEA to the UN

H.E. Ambassador Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata, Permanent Representative of Italy to the UN,

H.E. Ambassador Nassi Abdulaziz Al Nasser, Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar to the UN,

Mr Craig Jenness, Director of the Electoral Assistance Division at the UN Department of Political Affairs,

Professor Khaled Fouad Allam,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to participate today in the panel discussion on "Electoral Processes and Democracy Building: Experiences from the Arab Region".

Electoral processes are one of the five main areas of work of International IDEA, alongside political parties, constitution building processes, gender and democracy, and citizens' assessment of democracy. Through work in these areas, IDEA's strategy aims at supporting democratic change worldwide, by producing comparative knowledge, contributing to democratic reforms, and influencing policy development. The establishment of IDEA's office in New York has the objective of both making products of IDEA's work available to policy makers in UN fora, and getting feedback on our work, so as to define and orient our future programming in a manner that is relevant to the work of the Secretariat, UN funds, programmes and agencies, and UN policy fora at large.

International IDEA looks at the electoral process as closely intertwined with other fundamental factors of democratization and considers the strengthening of

electoral institutions and processes in association with other key dimensions of democratic processes, in the context of a comprehensive and non-prescriptive approach to democracy building. In this perspective, experiences from the global South are particularly important.

IDEA's work in the Arab region started a few years ago with three country studies on Egypt, Jordan and Yemen, and a synthesis report, focused on three areas: women's political participation, political party life and democratic elections. Since then, our work focused on strengthening local capacities in the electoral field, through the translation into Arabic, and the holding of facilitators' course, of the so-called BRIDGE curriculum, a "Training of trainers' programme in the electoral field developed by IDEA in partnership with UNDP, IFES, UNDESA and the Australian Electoral Commission.

Today's celebration of the International Democracy Day provides me with the opportunity to launch another product of our programme on the Arab region: the translation into Arabic of the International IDEA Handbooks on Electoral System Design and on Electoral Management Design. These translations have been made possible by a generous contribution of the Government of Italy. I wish to thank Italy, Ambassador Terzi, also for the financial support extended to help International IDEA, in partnership with the League of Arab States, to set up an electoral forum in the Arab region, the only region in the world that had not yet established a professional regional network of electoral officers.

Let me avail of this opportunity to thank also the State of Qatar, Ambassador Al Nasser, for the important role Qatar has been playing in the ICNRD process. I wish also to acknowledge that one of the initiatives that IDEA implemented with the support of the Government of Italy, a workshop on "Young Leaders in Democratic Governance in the MENA Region", was organized by IDEA in Venice in June in cooperation with the European Inter-University Centre for Human Rights and Democratisation (EIUC), with the support of the Kawakibi Democracy Transition Centre, in Jordan, and the Arab Democracy Foundation, (ADF), in Qatar.

We all know the importance of the electoral process as the entry point for citizen participation, and a key component of democratic governance. A lack of citizen confidence in the electoral process will lead to disenchantment with the political process, voter apathy, and declines in productive civic participation and contributions to public life. Similarly, citizens must also have confidence in the ability of the legislative branch to defend their best interests, provide effective balance to the power of the executive branch, and effectively reconcile competing agendas to arrive at areas of consensus. When either of these two major processes is operating ineffectively, citizens may question the credibility of public policy, institutions, and even the democratic process itself, leading to less than optimal policy outcomes. In severe cases, the legitimacy of the state itself may even be challenged by socio-economic actors.

What is the value of translating IDEA's handbooks into Arabic? In our work, the development of knowledge tools based on comparative and non-prescriptive, though policy-relevant, analysis has proved to be a critical factor for the professionalization of the electoral field, on one hand, and the building of basic knowledge about policy options for democratic reforms, on the other. In fact, the handbooks are meant for two main audiences: practitioners in the electoral field, and policy makers engaged in the definition of electoral reforms¹.

The first handbook discusses electoral system design within the context of the relationships between electoral systems, institutional frameworks and party systems. How do different electoral systems influence different aspects of political participation, representation, and accountability, facilitate movement towards gender parity, promote or discourage the development of parties which offer coherent programmes and leadership, promote politics across communities in divided societies, and promote or undermine capacity for responsible politics? What are the political realities and constraints under which change in electoral and institutional design takes place?

¹ All handbooks can be downloaded at www.idea.int, including other material in Arabic, like *Designing for Equality*, a publication focused on the interplay between electoral design and the increase of women political representation.

The second handbook focuses on options for designing and establishing functioning and effective institutions responsible for the management of elections. These, defined Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs), are the institutions and/or bodies responsible for managing elections. IDEA's relationship and work with EMBs around the world is at the heart of its work on electoral processes. Building trust and professionalism in the management of electoral processes remains a major challenge for EMBs. In many instances electoral institutions face a 'credibility gap' with diminished public confidence in their integrity and diligence.

Many EMBs face basic design questions as they seek to work better: How should EMBs be structured to ensure that they can act independently? How do EMBs relate to the media, political parties, and donors? How can EMBs evaluate their performance and use experience to build sustainable elections?

With the translation of the handbooks into Arabic, we take another step in the direction of making available to policy-makers and those involved in the design and implementation of electoral processes some resources whose value rests primarily in the fact that they are based on concrete experience on the ground, developed over the last two decades in different regions of the world. The main message that I think these publications convey to a multilateral audience is the importance of looking at elections not as events, but rather as processes. This implies that the important efforts of the international community in supporting electoral processes should focus on the electoral cycle as a whole, hence strengthening institutional capacities well beyond the 'election day', and taking into account the inter-relationships between different sets of issues, like constitutional provisions, political party systems, and the role of local actors in democratization processes. International IDEA stands committed to further advance this awareness and help facilitate the production of capacity development tools like the handbooks that we are launching today.

Thank you for your attention.