



Opening Statement

by Mr. Vidar Helgesen, Secretary-General of International IDEA
at the International IDEA Democracy Forum
“Elections, Incumbency and Power – Legitimacy Through Integrity”

Accra, Ghana, 30 November 2010

Honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs
Madam Representative of H.E. the President
Honourable Ministers and Members of Parliament
Distinguished Representatives of International IDEA Member States
Excellencies Heads of Diplomatic missions
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me warmly welcome you all to the International IDEA Democracy Forum 2010 with the theme **“Elections, Incumbency and Power: Legitimacy through Integrity”**.

Allow me, at the outset, to express my heartfelt thanks to the Government of Ghana for its warm hospitality and support in the organisation of this important forum.

Ghana has chaired for the last twelve months the Council of International IDEA with great dedication and selflessness. The fact that we are meeting today in this beautiful city of Accra is also part of its commitment as Council Chair. One could hardly have chosen a better venue to discuss the theme of electoral integrity.

Among African countries that are determined to accelerate their march towards democracy, Ghana occupies a special place. Its elections have featured high levels of transparency and fairness and have generated legitimate democratic governments.

I wish to commend the Government of Ghana for assuming a leading role in fostering democracy in Africa and I warmly encourage it to persevere on that path.

Honourable Minister,

Distinguished participants,

Peoples' quest for democracy – for their right to freely choose their government and to hold it accountable for its deeds, is as strong as ever in Africa and across the planet. While pursued and celebrated as a universal value in itself, democracy, for the peoples of Africa, is the bearer of even greater hopes: it is rightly expected to bring lasting peace and sustainable development.

Elections alone cannot suffice to build a functioning and solid democracy, but we cannot even think of building a credible democracy without free and competitive elections. People's freedom to choose their government is at the very core of that process. Consequently, when elections are manipulated, fraudulent or perceived to be such, the credibility of democracy will be dealt a serious blow from which it may take a very long time to recover.

Unfortunately, we have witnessed during the last few years a number of troubled electoral processes and their fall-outs have indeed affected people's trust in democracy. In Afghanistan, massively fraudulent elections seriously eroded faith in both democracy and the commitment of the international community to help building it. In Kenya, controversial elections led to widespread violence. Although I welcome wholeheartedly the release from detention of Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar, an electoral process there under strict control of the military junta has left people with little hope as to the likelihood of an impending transition of their country towards democracy.

Regrettably, these were not isolated incidents. All too often, incumbent holders of executive power resorted to fraud, intimidation of political opponents, pressure upon

the media, or other forms of manipulation in order to twist the electoral outcome in their favour and extend their stay in power. In other cases, they simply refused to acknowledge the electoral outcome and sought to hold on to power through the imposition of dysfunctional power-sharing arrangements that distorted the will expressed by voters.

In a number of such situations, the international community has failed to react in a principled way and to take consistent action. Whatever the reasons – whether lack of political will in the face of other priorities or just sheer neglect- such behaviour has deluded voters and left them with a bitter feeling of being abandoned when they were most in need of international solidarity and support.

The key purpose of elections is to provide the country with a legitimate government. Elections may fail in achieving that purpose either because they are badly organised and poorly run, or because they are consciously manipulated. Of course, the two often, go together.

Knowledge, capacity and resources are, no doubt, still a challenge in many countries. Elections are sophisticated technical endeavours demanding skilled, experienced and impartial managers and adequate financial means. For a number of countries in the global South, in Africa in particular, the holding of elections may be competing for scarce resources, with other undeniable priorities, such as the reduction of poverty or the struggle against the HIV/Aids pandemic. The international community should therefore continue and further enhance its commitment to assist countries in need of capacity building and technical means in the electoral field. Much has been done already to share electoral knowledge at regional and inter-regional level and to build national capacities. International IDEA has been and will continue to be at the forefront of these efforts.

However, it is time to rethink the way in which support is being provided and to recognise that technical support is not enough.

No amount of knowledge and technical tools and no amount of money will eliminate manipulation and fraud in the absence of political will to do so.

The primary responsibility for the integrity of the electoral process belongs to national actors: governments, political parties and their leaders, and electoral management

bodies. They will eventually be rewarded if they succeed and held accountable if they fail.

When elections are supported by the international community, international actors too bear a responsibility. While they should remain totally impartial with regard to the electoral outcome, they cannot and should not remain silent if their resources are used to perpetrate fraud or to distort the electoral playing field.

In addition, it may be not only legitimate, but also fully appropriate for the international community to draw the attention of national actors to circumstances that may threaten the credibility of the electoral process. International actors should have the honesty and the courage to identify and openly highlight such circumstances. The elections just held in Haiti in the midst of massive population displacement and a cholera epidemic, and in an atmosphere of social and political unrest, are indeed a case in point. It seems that the international community has been pushing for elections in a situation where it should possible have supported a postponing of them.

In another recent election – Cote d'Ivoire – the UN mission warned the contenders of the high risk of violence. Elections seem to have taken place in relative calm – though several people lost their lives in election-related clashes. Yet, the announcement of the results, which is still to come, is feared as another moment with a potential to trigger violence. Here, after 10 years without elections, it is hoped that the security arrangements put in place will assist in ensuring a peaceful outcome, but ultimately this will be determined by the actions of the contenders.

Principles that need to be observed in order to allow an electoral process to be transparent and fair, are well known. Principles that should help the international community design and implement a more effective assistance to electoral processes are also being discussed in different international fora such as the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD, the United Nations and the European Union.

These principles emphasize the need to focus not only on what happens on election day, but also to examine the electoral process from the very first steps such as the design of the electoral system, including dispute management mechanisms, registration of voters and voter education, to the final counting, communication of results and drawing lessons for the next elections. I can say with some pride that

International IDEA has played an important role in the shaping of these principles and leads current efforts to translate them into practice. Unfortunately, we must admit that these principles are still far from being implemented in a systematic and global manner - with grave consequences. Too often, electoral assistance is following the same blueprint regardless of context. And too often, there is little learning from mistakes. For instance, post-election observation reports are rarely acted upon by the international community.

The motivation of an incumbent executive power when it resorts to fraud is generally easy to grasp: whatever the official reason given, the issue is generally about power itself and how to hold on to it.

As to the behaviour of the international community when it fails to prevent or react to such fraud, the underlying reasons seem to be more complex. The decision to overlook shortcomings may be driven by donor government desire to report success to its domestic constituency, thus justifying the investment of tax-payer money in electoral assistance programmes. It may be based on an assessment that any action taken to “de-legitimise” the proclaimed winner may destabilise the country’s political stage and trigger violence. When post-conflict elections are planned as part of the exit strategy of the international community, taking action against fraudulent elections may mean extending the engagement and presence in the country, with all the political and financial implications of such a decision.

Many of these considerations are legitimate, certainly when one takes a short-term view of the situation. However, the outcome of fraudulent elections, even when it benefits from some sort of tacit international blessing, will leave an indelible scar on people’s trust in democracy and will eventually fail to bring about the desired peace and security to the country and to the region. The long-term impact on democracy of international community actions is rarely, if ever, given adequate consideration.

When a narrow public spotlight is thrown on the ballot boxes only, we tend to overlook the fact that elections do not take place in a political vacuum. What happens around the ballot boxes is also heavily influenced by national political struggles, by the extent of the democratic maturity and commitment of political parties and their willingness to play by the rules, to acknowledge the outcome of the process and abide by its verdict. The role of the media in informing citizens and providing a level playing field to contenders cannot be overestimated. The issue of gender equity is

critical in electoral as in other political institutions and processes: elections, all too often, reflect and perpetuate a fundamental inequality of women and men in politics. In addition, the electoral process may also be influenced by regional and broader international agendas in the field of development, security and foreign policy.

Elections are eminently political processes. Hence, strong political commitments are called for if we want elections to be what they ought to be: a process by which free citizens freely exercise their choice!

Elections need skilled and experienced electoral managers, but the latter may lack sufficient power and leverage to guarantee the impartiality and integrity of these processes. If other agendas and concerns continue to prevail over the concern for the integrity and legitimacy of elections, we may witness a rapid fall in citizen's political participation – women's participation in particular, and increasing cynicism with respect to any political and democratic engagement. This may lead to dire consequences.

Elections are a key pillar of the entire edifice of democracy. If citizens and voters throughout the world are to maintain their trust in democracy, they need to see a renewed and enhanced political commitment to the integrity of electoral processes. They need to see such commitment undertaken by their countries' political leaders and by the international community alike.

With this perspective in mind, International IDEA and the Kofi Annan Foundation are about to launch a major joint initiative on “***Protecting and Promoting the Integrity of Electoral Processes***”. The initiative seeks to enhance the consistency, quality and sustainability of electoral processes and international support to these processes, by taking elections to where they ultimately belong: the level of political decision-making and commitment. This is indispensable if we want to put effectively to use the adopted norms and principles and the growing body of available technical knowledge and expertise on electoral processes.

As part of the initiative, a ***Global Commission on the Integrity of electoral Processes*** will be established. This new Commission will gather eminent personalities with experience in the fields of government, foreign affairs, defence and security, development and, of course, elections. By bringing together influential leaders and thinkers from different fields and from different parts of the world for the

first time on this issue, we hope that the Commission will come up with recommendation for new approaches that can better ensure the necessary political commitment to the integrity of electoral processes.

In parallel, International IDEA continues to pursue its engagement with its member states as well as electoral managers and experts throughout the world, to develop and make available high quality knowledge tools in the field of electoral processes. The latest of these tools, just published, is the first global **Handbook on Electoral Justice**. The handbook explores the critically important issue of electoral dispute resolution mechanisms employed around the world and principles that govern such mechanisms.

International IDEA is also in the process of developing a user-friendly tool to assess the risk of violence in electoral processes and to prevent violence from erupting.

Last but not least, International IDEA continues to engage in the development of electoral expertise through training and capacity building programmes in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Excellency,

Distinguished participants,

Panellists who will take part in the three sessions of the Forum today and tomorrow include eminent political personalities with national and international experience, researchers and high-level international civil servants from all continents. I trust that the discussions will provide a basis for defining a new, more political, principled and consistent approach to electoral processes around the world. I am confident that the findings will also provide considerable food-for-thought for the Global Commission on Electoral Processes, which will be launched in March 2011.

We are here today at the forefront of international efforts to address the challenges faced by electoral processes. I look forward with great anticipation to our deliberations.

Thank you very much for your attention.

