



Democratic Transitions in Asia

Regional Workshop

Ulaan Baatar, 21-22 March 2016

Opening Remarks of Secretary-General Yves Leterme

Distinguished Guests,

It is a pleasure to deliver the opening address at this regional workshop. Since Mongolia chairs International IDEA's Council of Member States in 2016, we are extremely pleased to see our Chair pursue its role with such active engagement.

Before I continue, I would like to extend a word of thanks to the co-organizers of this conference: first of all, Mongolia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but also the Open Society and the EBI think-tank. Their partnership with International IDEA is much valued, as is the tireless work they put into organizing this conference.

The past year has been intense for the Asian region and its political developments. We have, for example, witnessed electoral reform in the Salomon Islands, the initiation of constitutional reforms in the Philippines, Thailand and Sri Lanka, and also here in Mongolia; the emergence of a new constitution in Nepal; and national elections in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, amongst others. In this environment, it is clear that Democratic Transitions is a hot topic for Asia.

However, discussing Democratic Transitions in universally applicable terms is no easy feat. In fact, the Asian countries form one of the world's most diverse region in terms of culture, historical background, development and political systems. This diversity has naturally affected the path of the region's transitions, as has the fact that many of these countries have gone through very difficult phases of internal struggle. People movements and uprisings have occurred, yet it is remarkable to see how democracy has gained ground in Asia, where leaders have often displayed a knack for gradually relinquishing their power.

Against this backdrop of diversity, democratic successes and current political developments, I believe it is most suitable to hold this workshop on Democratic Transitions in Asia. Indeed, I very much look forward to hearing from you all during the coming days, and discussing the democratic experiences of your individual countries.

As for International IDEA's stance, democratic transitions have been a core priority for us and our work over the past two decades. We are an intergovernmental organization with support for sustainable democracy worldwide as our sole mandate. This has made us a leading global actor on electoral processes, constitution building, political participation and representation, and democracy and development. Naturally, democratic transitions are an important phenomenon that relates to all of these issues.

Because of this, I would like to focus on one of our most recent books during my speech. This book is called *Democratic Transitions: Conversations with World Leaders* and has a strong link with the topic of this workshop.

The English and Dutch versions have recently been published and have received excellent reviews, including from leading democratic thinkers like Francis Fukuyama, Kofi Annan and Fareed Zakaria. Currently, Spanish, French and Arabic translations are on their way. Launch of the Myanmar edition of the book took place in January.

Democratic Transitions was written by two globally recognized democracy experts, Sergio Bitar, former foreign minister of Chile and Abe Lowenthal, professor of Political Science in the United States. Together with International IDEA staff, they interviewed 13 former presidents and political leaders from nine countries worldwide, representing five different continents. These leaders (who come from Indonesia, the Philippines, South Africa, Ghana, Poland, Spain, Mexico, Brazil and Chile) have all led transformations from authoritarian rule to consolidated democracy in their countries, over the past three decades.

The result of the interviews and their personal reflections, provide a wealth of wisdom. Through the eyes of the interviewed leaders, we gain unique insight into historical democratic transitions. So far, no publication has provided similar first-hand accounts by those directly involved in leading democratic transitions, despite the extensive academic literature on the topic. Today, we see that democracies are evolving ever faster, affected by changes like technology, the geopolitics of globalization and the rise of

extremism. Learning from yesterday's mistakes and successes can be exactly what we need to help us shape tomorrow's answers and policies.

This is why I would like to share with you an overview of the final chapter of the Democratic Transitions book. This chapter contains lessons learned from the interviewees' experiences, which will be very valuable for countries currently undergoing a democratic transition:

Firstly, we have witnessed the **importance of moving forward incrementally**.

The interviewed leaders often benefitted from taking advantage of partial opportunities whenever possible, to gain ground through small steps rather than waiting for major change to occur. Sometimes they agreed on only partly fulfilling what was viewed as a vital priority. At other times they even cooperated with factions within the dominant regime, who could be convinced of the need for change. Lesson 1 thus shows us that transition from authoritarianism to democracy may work best when moving slowly yet steadfastly.

Secondly, it is crucial to **project a positive and inclusive vision**.

Any transition to democracy will have costs and disappointments – not least for the country's citizens. To combat public fear and avoid disillusion amongst the people, it is important to present a hopeful vision of the transition. Both by showing a vision of long-term future gains, and by making modest promises of immediate gains, leaders can show the way forward, away from current grievances.

A third lesson focuses on **building convergence and coalitions**.

Within opposition forces, it is important to create a common vision that provides a credible alternative to the regime. Equally important is the building of coalitions between political opposition forces and social movements. Transitions should integrate groups like workers, students, religious movements and women's rights groups. These groups have often played a crucial role in democratic transitions, and need to be included in post-transition processes of building constitutions, and strengthening political parties and civil society organizations. During transitions, bridges also need to be built across sectors, for example the business sector and with reformists within the regime. Most importantly though, the general population needs to be included. Transition leaders should focus on what unites people, and – with patience and persistence – signal to all actors that they will have a stake in the new regime.

Fourthly, leaders should **create and protect spaces for dialogue**.

Dialogue can increase trust between the opposition, the regime, civil society organizations and citizens, which in turn will affect the transition's success. It is important for dialogue not to focus on past disputes,

but on future common goals. Taking the time to clarify all issues on the table and define reform programmes through discussions, may ensure a better cooperation between all actors involved in the transition.

A fifth lesson focuses on **constitution building**.

Drafting the new constitution should be a truly inclusionary process, engaging a wide range of participants. Leaders should work hard to accommodate to the extent possible the core demands of all contending groups. This may also include assuring actors of the old regime that their interests will be protected. To avoid public anger, the negotiations on such issues should be made transparently and democratically. It is also important to note that a good-enough, but broadly-supported constitution might be preferred over a perfect but less legitimate text. Constitution building after transitions should focus on securing broad agreement on the way forward.

Next, it is important to **manage economic tensions** after a transition.

In many cases, economic problems were a major cause behind popular mobilization and often acted as a trigger to many transitions. Afterwards however, the new regime needs to make the same economic issues a priority. This entails balancing fiscal reforms with alleviating poverty and addressing inflation and unemployment. Ideally, economic growth is combined with a focus on equity, including through special measures for the most vulnerable in society.

Lesson 7 emphasizes the importance of **political parties**.

From the early days of the transitions, leaders should invest in building and institutionalizing vibrant political parties. Under autocratic regimes, political parties may have been downright illegal, repressed and discredited. If official “opposition” parties were allowed to exist, their access to media airtime and funding might be severely restricted. Yet parties play a crucial role in providing networks, training candidates, organizing elections and developing transition strategies. To ensure the opposition is strong enough to compete with the existing regime, leaders should focus consistently on building, reviving and strengthening political parties.

Another important lesson is dealing very carefully with the **military and security and intelligence forces**. Usually these forces are highly connected to the authoritarian regime. It is thus necessary to act firmly to achieve democratic, civilian control over these services. Sensitivity is required though: while high-ranking officers responsible for torture or brutalities may need to be removed, ordinary cadres might require protection from reprisals. Leaders should recognize the responsibilities of the military as well as security and intelligence forces, while simultaneously ensuring they refrain from political comments or

partisan involvement. As long-standing mistrust might exist between civilians and the military, this process can be a long, difficult task for new regime leaders.

Finally, the necessity for **reconciliation and transitional justice**.

As systematic corruption, repression and outright human rights violations might have occurred before a transition, there can be intense pressure to hold the perpetrators accountable. Naturally, this is an extremely sensitive and difficult challenge. Yet ignoring unresolved issues is more problematic in the long-run. Leaders thus need to provide truth and justice, while simultaneously assuring the safety of those leaving power. Victims need to be recognized, without preventing the growth of mutual tolerance in society. Through transparent legal processes or the installation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, justice can be achieved through dialogue rather than through revenge, blaming and shaming.

Finally, it is of critical importance to bring in a gender lens to the analysis of democratic transitions. In all transitions studied in the book, women played critical roles leading change through social movements, the state bureaucracy, political parties, the legislature and civil society. A number of lessons can be drawn from the various experiences: for women activists, it is of utmost importance to organize early in the transition process; form a range of alliances both within civil society and across sectors; participate actively in all phases of the transition process; develop platforms that can unite different groups of women and maintain momentum during the implementation and consolidation phases. It is also critical that political leaders open up spaces for women to participate fully in the transition process and make sure that post-transition constitutions, policies and institutional designs reflect equality concerns.

As you can see, the 10 lessons I mentioned are no easy challenge for leaders of transitions. This is why International IDEA is working to ensure our work on Democratic Transitions does not end with the book publication. Instead, we are exploring how to make the lessons practically relevant for current and future transitions, and how to systematically incorporate the theme of transitions into our work.

To end, I would like to emphasize how this book is about leadership. Successful democratic transitions depend on many factors inside and outside of the state, domestically and externally. However, transitions can only succeed if political leaders have the will for change and a great sense of duty and responsibility. Leaders who are not afraid to lose power, in order to win freedom and democracy for their country. By gathering here today at this regional workshop, each and every one of you is illustrating

that will to change. You have come here because you believe that democracy matters. Because you want to make Asia a frontrunner in this field.

I look forward to engaging with you – so that we may all become leaders of democratic progress.