



Address by Vidar Helgesen, Secretary-General of International IDEA, at the opening of the international conference on "Sustaining Africa's Democratic Momentum", jointly organized by International IDEA, the African Union Commission and the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa, 5-7 March 2007 in Johannesburg.

Your Excellency Professor Alpha Oumar Konare, Chairperson of the African Union Commission

Your Excellency Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Deputy President of the Republic of South Africa

Excellencies, former President Uteem of Mauritius, former President Masire of Botswana

Your Worship Amos Masondo, Mayor of Johannesburg

Dr Brigalia Bam, Chairperson of the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen

It is with great pleasure that International IDEA has joined as a co organizer of this conference. South Africa being one of our Member States, and the African Union one of our close partners, IDEA considers it a true privilege to be part of this undertaking. I would like to thank the leadership and staff of the IEC and the AU for their committed and efficient cooperation in making this conference a reality.

This conference is the first in the history of the continent that brings together former African Heads of State and Government, the executive, parliamentary actors, electoral authorities, political party networks, civil society, and academia, to share one platform and contribute to discussions on how to sustain Africa's democratic momentum.

The range of actors who are engaging in this conference testifies to the fact that democracy is a process of diversity and complexity.

Democracy is more than the logistics of organizing an election. It requires strong and independent institutions and rules to ensure fair political play also between elections.

Democracy is more than good governance in the executive branches of government. It requires checks and balances provided by political parties, parliamentary opposition, an independent judiciary, media and civil society.

Democracy is more than a set of rules for political elites to play by. It requires popular participation and consultation not only on election day, but in shaping policies and in defining the frameworks for political life – such as through inclusive constitution building processes.

In order to sustain democracy there are critical gaps to be filled. One is the continuing under-representation of women in too many countries. Another critical gap is that of political parties. While political parties are crucial for the vitality and legitimacy of the democratic process, they universally belong to the least trusted institutions in society. This leaves democracy with a momentous challenge, and one which demonstrates that democracy is a fundamentally political process which cannot be sustained by a technical assistance approach only.

This conference on the multiple dimensions of democracy takes place at a time when there are loud and clear echoes both in and outside Africa resonating the important role that Africa will and must play in the 21st century. An ongoing response to this is the transformation of the OAU into the AU with renewed commitment to promoting socio-economic development through NEPAD and the APRM; the creation of various structures, programmes, and protocols under the auspices of the AU to harness continental efforts towards peace, security, rule of law, human rights, and democracy;

and the concerted efforts among the African leadership to condemn conflict, bad governance and authoritarianism.

There are still many challenges remaining though, and Africa's partners are urged to remain committed to accompanying the democratic process so that it sustains its momentum. In this connection, International IDEA applauds the African Union on having developed critical programmes in support of democracy and development on the continent. Noteworthy is the decision by the African Heads of State and Government to approve the establishment of an electoral assistance programme within the AU Commission, and the establishment of the democracy and electoral assistance fund; and most importantly to approve the Africa Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance. International IDEA considers it a privilege to have worked alongside the AU structures to support the conceptualization and development of these initiatives, and in the same vein we wish to pledge our continued support to and collaboration with the AU Commission in taking these initiatives further.

Madam Chairperson, Africa is the first region to convene a conference of this nature within the framework of South-South cooperation. At this meeting, we have delegates from Latin America and Asia. They are here to share with us their frameworks and practices in the areas of democracy and governance. We trust these exchanges will foster better understanding and heightened awareness that democracy has no linear path and that there is no one-size-fits-all, ready-made solution on offer. Democracy entails principles that must not be compromised, but that need to be applied in the national and local context, taking into account the historic, cultural, political and legal traditions of each country. Therefore, sustaining democracy is also a long-term undertaking which should not be reduced to events-driven efforts and quick fixes.

As a multilateral and intergovernmental organization mandated to promote democracy, International IDEA is proud to participate in this conference and to co-operate with Africa in its endeavour to reclaim her position in the global arena. Our participation and support for this event is inspired by the values, enthusiastically shared among our

member states, who in Africa include South Africa, Mauritius, Namibia, Botswana and Cape Verde, to build and consolidate democracy around the world through dialogue, policy relevant analysis, capacity building and support for democratic reform initiatives.

Again, ladies and gentlemen, we feel honoured to have you with us over the next three days, and we have high expectations for the quality of deliberations.

I thank you for your attention.