

KEYNOTE ADDRESS DELIVERED BY THE HONOURABLE MINISTER OF HOME AFFAIRS, DR AARON MOTSOLEDI, MP, AT THE IEC CONFERENCE ON SAFEGUARDING ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE: STRATEGIES FOR COMBATTING DIGITAL DISINFORMATION AT THE CAPE TOWN INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION CENTRE

02 MARCH 2020

Thank you, Commissioner Masuku, for the warm introduction.

Chairperson of the Electoral Commission Mr Glen Mashinini

Vice Chairperson Ms Janet Love,

Commissioners Dr Nomsa Masuku, Mr Mosotho Moepya and Judge Dhaya Pillay,

Chairpersons and Commissioners from the various African electoral commissions present,

Dr Khabele Matlosa, Director of the Department of Political Affairs of the African Union Commission,

Dr Ayodele Odusola, Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Programme,

Honourable members and representatives of political parties,

Conference speakers, panellists, moderators and rapporteurs,

Members of civil society,

Members of the media,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen.

Good evening

Allow me to welcome our guests to our beautiful shores during this momentous period in the history of our country as His Excellency, Mr President Cyril Ramaphosa, assumed the Chairship of the African Union with a pledge to work towards silencing the guns on the continent.

I am told that we have over 170 delegates from at least 34 African election management bodies along with representatives from the Southern African Development Community Electoral Commissions Forum here with us. We also have guests and participants from outside the continent including the United States, the United Kingdom and Sweden.

It is an honour to be officially opening this African conference on Safeguarding Electoral Integrity in the Digital Age. This is a gathering of people tasked with ensuring the integrity of elections and thereby strengthening democracy on the continent. Stronger democracies will edge us close to the goal of silencing the guns.

We are gathered here shortly after we, as a country, celebrated 30 years since the founding father of our nation, Tata Nelson Mandela, walked out of prison after serving 27 years for fighting for the dignity and equality of all South Africans. Amongst others, he was fighting for the right to vote.

We may remember that when he was in the dock, in 1964, to be sentenced to Robben Island, he outlined the demands of black people. After outlining these demands, he said the following; "Above all, we want equal political rights, because without them our disabilities will be permanent".

I am sure that many of you remember the day Tata Mandela walked out of prison. You have seen the picture of him with Mama Winnie Mandela, raising their clenched fists high, in triumph.

That iconic picture is a meme, if I were to use social media language, which communicates, quiet powerfully, the sentiment that "if triumph of human spirit over adversity was a person".

The reference to a meme demonstrates how much our society has evolved over the past decade. For an example, 10 years ago people on social media were talking about what was in newspapers. These days, it is the newspapers which are writing about what people on social media are talking about.

Over the years, social media has increasingly become the source of information as it made people in authority more accessible to citizens.

It has also been used as a powerful tool to mobilise people around a particular cause. We have seen the #BlackLivesMatter movement which is fighting against police brutality, mostly in the United States of America.

We have also seen the #MeToo movement which gives a voice to women who were abused for years, mostly in the entertainment industry.

Parallel to this positive influence of social media there has, unfortunately, been the advent of fake news.

It is not that fake news didn't exist before social media. The challenge is that fake news can spread rapidly even before the subject of that fake news is aware that wrong and sometimes malicious information is being spread.

The bad news is that, as election management bodies, you are going to be faced with this and more complex challenges as you seek to protect the integrity of the electoral process.

For an example, three years ago, programmers were already able to use Artificial Intelligence to make fake videos which mimic a person's mannerism, gestures and voice. They were able to insert their mischievous messages into these videos in a manner that makes it almost impossible to tell that they are fake.

We have also seen the emergence of social media bots which are also Artificial Intelligence products which can automatically generate messages to support or discredit a particular cause. They participate in social media conversations with real people.

Few elections in recent years have not been marred by incidents and reports of manipulation and distortion of information to unfairly sway voters, suppress voter turnout and to undermine opponents.

The Oxford Internet Institute recently noted that the number of countries where formally organised social media manipulation occurs has increased from 28 to 48 countries globally.

According to the Institute, the majority of growth comes from political parties who have learned from strategies deployed in elections elsewhere and are increasingly using bots, fake news, and disinformation to polarise and manipulate voters either directly or through proxies.

Responses to these threats have to date have been varied, with some level of success and failures. Some countries have turned to legislation and regulation. Others have pursued a more educational approach seeking to better arm voters on how to spot fake news. Still others have adopted more radical approach of shutting down internet access during key election periods.

What is clear is that none of these solutions is a silver bullet.

What is needed is a comprehensive approach which takes into account all the factors and is then adjusted to reflect the unique realities of each country.

We also need solutions which balance human rights between the rights to freedom of speech and expression on the one hand, and political freedoms, the right to vote and the right to have free and fair elections on the other.

I don't mean to scare you but I'm merely pointing out the task that lies ahead for all of us who are advocates of democracy.

The good news is that election management bodies have had to navigate difficulties for years and they succeeded.

For an example, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) of SA, had to find a way of identifying areas where it needed to place 9 500 voting stations in 1994, during our first democratic elections, to enable all the eligible voters to be able to cast their votes to elect a government of their choice.

For those who don't know, elections during the Apartheid years were only for white people. About three million people used to vote. Black people were excluded and a census including black people was last conducted in the 1950s. The IEC had to go into uncharted waters. It had to organise an election for a population which was six time more than the average voting population and they didn't know where 15 million of these people were concentrated.

So when you see those images of snaking queues of people waiting patiently to cast their votes, remember that the IEC found a solution which would ensure the integrity of those elections. It wasn't without its challenges but it was a solution none the less.

So, to tackle today's challenges which includes Safeguarding Electoral Integrity in the Digital Age, it would be helpful to look at the ingredients which have laid the foundation for the success of the IEC.

THE INTEGRITY OF ELECTIONS

Ladies and gentlemen

Integrity is the currency of our democracy and the value and underlying strength of our democracies is directly linked to the reliability, veracity, accuracy and acceptance of the outcome of elections.

There are a number of ways in which election management bodies and other stakeholders can enhance the integrity of their elections.

The first and foremost of these is transparency – and its twin, inclusivity.

Transparency and inclusivity are two sides of the same electoral integrity coin. One without the other is meaningless.

You can have the most open and transparent electoral process but unless you include all stakeholders in this process they won't have access to see the inner workings.

Similarly, you can have one of the most inclusive processes in the world but if there is limited transparency you gain nothing.

Ladies and gentlemen

By inviting all stakeholders to participate actively in all stages of the electoral cycle and by opening each aspect of the process to scrutiny and examination you limit the potential for disgruntlement, dissent and conflict.

In South Africa one of the most important and successful parts of the election process over the past 25 years has been our political party liaison committee structure.

This is where representatives of all represented and competing parties meet monthly with the Electoral Commission at national, provincial and regional level. The frequency of these meetings increases ahead of elections.

It is at these committees where consultation takes place on all aspects of the process – from legislative amendments to the identity of presiding officers of voting stations.

Then over the election itself these committees form part of a broader and more inclusive process at the national and provincial results centres where all stakeholders – political parties, the media, observers, civil society and government – come together to oversee the finalisation of results.

Working together from one venue with simultaneous access to the results system provides a level of transparency, inclusivity and accessibility which remains a benchmark for democracies the world over.

In a digital age, election management bodies need to ensure that they engage all the stakeholders and communicate their messages through their verified platforms and encourage the stakeholders to communicate their agreements via their own platforms. This is because people believe their leaders. If their leaders have access to credible information they can then communicate this to the people they lead.

Such cooperation will make it harder for fake news to take hold because these tend to come from unauthenticated and unverified sources.

In other words, we need to give citizens information from credible source which will enable them to make informed decisions.

I have mentioned a few movements which highlight how social media has been used to mobilise communities towards particular causes. Election management bodies need to do the same. They need to mobilise society to guard the independence and integrity of election management bodies.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ELECTIONS

Distinguished guests

The 2019 statistics from e-commerce marketing company internetworldstats.com shows that internet penetration on the continent was at 39.8 percent, against a global average of 60.9 percent.

This suggests that as a continent, we have a window of opportunity to develop policies which will help us to fight the threat posed by the abuse of social media on the integrity of the electoral system.

Conferences such as this one are very important in peer learning and establishing best practices in dealing with this.

I am encouraged that even social media companies are alive to the dangers and challenges brought about by fake news in their own businesses. We need to strengthen these types of collaborations for the ultimate benefit of society.

By bringing together experts in elections, social and digital media, and human rights from throughout Africa and the world, this conference is well positioned to achieve these objectives and to make a meaningful contribution to the global consideration of these challenges.

This window of opportunity may not be open for long. According to the Global Digital Yearbook for 2019, five African countries saw their internet populations double over the past 12 months while nine countries experienced annual growth of 50 percent or more. Half of the top 20 fastest-growing countries in terms of social media penetration are African countries.

THE GROWTH OF DEMOCRACY

Distinguished guests

Despite challenges and setbacks, democracy remains the vastly preferred method of appointing and holding leaders accountable around the world and around our own continent.

The Global State of Democracy 2019 released by International IDEA in November shows that the number of democracies continues to grow around the globe.

Countries such as Armenia, Malaysia, Myanmar along with Tunisia and The Gambia on our own continent were not counted as democracies only a few years ago. Today they have joined the democratic fold.

The report notes too that more people today choose their leaders through the ballot box rather than through the bullet, and more people today live in democracies compared to 40 years ago. Despite woefully slow progress, there is also more gender equality in politics and representative institutions than there has ever been in history.

For all its faults and challenges, democracy continues to expand and thrive on our continent.

Last year at least 19 African countries held elections – including South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Kenya, Malawi, Senegal, Algeria and Tunisia.

This year there are general elections in another 21 countries including Burkina Faso, Burundi, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Sudan and the Seychelles just to name a few.

But the expansion and progress of democracy on our continent is neither assured nor certain.

Just as new democracies can arise, so existing and seemingly entrenched democracies can weaken and become more fragile.

As a newly elected Provincial Minister of Education in Limpopo in 1994, we were invited to Germany and visited their department of education. We found out that they have Democracy Education in their curriculum. We were puzzled by this and upon enquiry, the Germans told us that democracy is not a given. It is a learned process and it must be learnt continuously. They encouraged us to never get tired of learning about democracy.

The struggle of many democracies to achieve equitable and sustainable economic and social development has given rise to a resurgence of populism and nationalism which can threaten social cohesion and democracy itself.

At the same time election failures – including poorly run elections and election results set aside by courts - undermine support and faith in democracy and result in citizens questioning their continued trust and participation in the democratic process.

While relatively resilient, democracy needs constant attention and nurturing if we are to ensure the democratic gains of our lifetimes continue to be enjoyed by future generations.

CONCLUSION

I wish you well as you discuss and engage on this very important discussions about how we can protect the integrity of the electoral system which contributes enormously to stability in the world.

At the end of your discussions, I invite you to enjoy the hospitality our country offers. Two weeks ago I was on Robben Island, the renowned World Heritage Site, to oversee the weddings of people who wanted to solemnise their marriages at the historic place. You can also go and create your own memories of Cape Town. I'm not inviting you to go there and get married but it's not forbidden so we can help you. Cape Town can be very fascinating at times. You are more than welcome to come back to our country with your family and even friends.

I wish a successful conference and may you travel back home safely.

I thank you.

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