International Conference Report

Safeguarding Election Management Bodies in the Age of Global Democratic Recession

Cape Town, November 2022

FOREWORD

I am very pleased to present to you this comprehensive report on the outcomes of the International Conference of the Association of World Election Bodies (A-WEB) 5th General Assembly.

The Electoral Commission of South Africa hosted the 5th General Assembly of A-WEB and, as part of this, an international conference on key questions that confront election management bodies throughout the world. This was the first such an event to take place within our African continent and enabled us to showcase parts of our country during the fringes of the meetings which took place at the Cape Town International Convention Centre from 18-21 October 2022. The conference on 20 October was attended in person by some 300 participants.

Established in 2013, A-WEB is the world's largest international organisation in the field of election management. Today it comprises 119 election management bodies from 109 countries, including the Electoral Commission of South Africa. A-WEB was founded with the vision to enhance the efficient and effective management of free, fair, transparent and participative elections worldwide.

As one of A-WEB's founding members, the Electoral Commission of South Africa has served as the Vice-Chairperson of the association for the past three years. The Electoral Commission is greatly honored to have assumed Chairpersonship at the 5th General Assembly – a responsibility which has a term of two years.

There is no question that democratic institutions worldwide, especially electoral management bodies, face a relentless assault, which includes malicious attacks on their leaders and on their integrity and credibility, often by political forces seeking to obtain public office by force or fiat. Electoral processes are increasingly being questioned and, often without evidence, undermined. This occurs even in places considered to have long-established democracies.

It is in acknowledgement of this unfortunate state of affairs and in an effort to engage its membership in a dialogue on these challenges that the A-WEB 5th General Assembly international conference adopted the theme: *Safeguarding Election Management Bodies in the Age of Democratic Recession.*

The conference sessions have provided a framework for wider discussions to strengthen our resolve to defend and grow electoral democracy worldwide and to work together on those things that can be done to develop and strengthen policies in the future. Additionally, the conference served as a forum for a range of stakeholders and subject matter experts from all over the world to interact and build bridges. Indeed, the conference day was abuzz with lively discussion and debate – not only during the interactive sessions, but also around the coffee tables.

Coordinating an international event of this magnitude saw the staff of our Electoral Commission working with the dedication and commitment that makes us proud. We are particularly grateful for the support received for this event, both from the A-WEB Secretariat and its administration, A-WEB members, electoral experts, and other attendees. I also wish to thank wholeheartedly all contributors and participants of this event for making it an informative as well as enjoyable day!

On behalf of A-WEB, it is our sincere hope that the conference report reflects the exchange of knowledge, experiences and good practices from the conference proceedings, so that all of us may be empowered to strategically prepare to meet the challenges of the global democratic recession.

Yours sincerely

Mosotho Moepya

Chairperson

Electoral Commission of South Africa and the Association of World Election Bodies

ACRONYMS

AAEA-Africa	Association of African Election Authorities
AAAEA-Asia	Association of Asian Election Authorities
ACDEG	African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance
ANFREL	Asian Network for Free Elections
AU	African Union
A-WEB	Association of World Election Bodies
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
CTAs	Country Technical Advisors
CVE	Civic and Voter Education
DPPA	Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
EAD	Electoral Assistance Division
ECONEC	West African Electoral Commissions Network
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EISA	Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa
EMBs	Election Management Bodies
IDEA	Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
ICPS	International Centre for Parliament Studies
ICT	Information Communications Technology
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IEBC	Independent Elections and Boundaries Commission
IEC	Electoral Commission of South Africa
ISS	Institute for Security Studies
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
OAS	Organisation of American States
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
PWDs	People with Disabilities
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

USA   United States of America

USSR   Union of Socialist Soviet Republic

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) hosted the 5TH General Assembly and International Conference of the Association of World Election Bodies (A-WEB) in Cape Town, South Africa, from 18 to 20 October 2022.

The International Conference theme was "Safeguarding Election Management Bodies in the Age of Global Democratic Recession". The A-WEB 5th General Assembly and International Conference were the first on the African continent. The conference's overall goal was to discuss the phenomenon of democratic recession and how to address it to deepen electoral democracy, ensure stability, and promote peace and development.

The conference was attended by 275 participants, comprising over 60 Election Management Bodies (EMB), electoral think tanks and universities, continental and sub-regional EMB forums, government representatives, the South African Party Liaison Committee, the United Nations Agencies, the Commonwealth, civil society organisations, as well as print and electronic media.

The conference programme comprised five related sessions. The first session provided an overview of the current state of the global democratic recession using theoretical explanations and empirical evidence showing trends.

The second session looked at the impact of the democratic recession on electoral processes, including EMB performance, public participation, and election integrity.

The third session comprised a panel of continental EMBs and provided an overview of the continent-level initiatives in mitigating the impact of democratic recession in

electoral processes. Each panellist presented innovative measures EMBs have employed to cope with the conditions of democracy recession.

The fourth session comprised case study experiences of leading global electoral assistance agencies in confronting the excesses of democratic recession and strengthening the resilience of EMBs and electoral democracy.

The fifth session highlighted the interventions by intergovernmental bodies in addressing democratic recession. These sessions are summarised in seriatim below.

Session 1: The session highlighted the alarming rate of democracy recession, tracing the reversal of democratic gains from the 1970s. It pointed to several causal factors, including accelerating globalisation, fear of losing sovereignty and control, fear of cultural and religious pluralism, social media polarisation, diffusion of authoritarian leadership models and norms, underdevelopment, poverty, hunger, unemployment, natural disasters including the recent COVID-19 Pandemic and the general lack of political will to promote democracy. The recommendations included the need for: (a) strengthening the civic ecosystem around free and fair elections, (b) reforming and strengthening the State and combating corruption, (c reviving public commitment to democratic norms and state-society social contract predicated on efficient and effective delivery of services to the people, (d) combating political polarisation, and (e) bridging political and social cleavages.

Session 2: The session highlighted several manifestations of the impact of democracy recession on EMBs. These include: (a) Political interference in the appointment of Commissioners and other election officials, (b) Obstruction of legal reforms that would improve the integrity of elections, (c) Waves of violence occasioned by the weaponisation of identities, (d) Underfunding of EMBs and or delays in releases of allocated funds, (e) Whittling down of the relative autonomy of EMBs, (f) Monetisation of electoral politics with voters and officials induced or bought by candidates, their agents and other supporters. The panellists' recommendations included the need to share knowledge and experiences shared among EMBs on strengthening their resilience, improving the EMB-stakeholder relations, and developing proactive risk mitigation mechanisms.

Session 3: The panel of continental EMBs highlighted measures taken to mitigate democracy recession and reinforce the electoral processes. These include (a) Harmonisation of international treaties with domestic legislation, (b) Institutional capacity building of EMBs to enhance their independence and ICT skills, (c) creating policy dialogue spaces to inform the development of policies that create the financial and administrative autonomy for EMBs, (d) promoting the peer to peer support and sharing of resources to mitigate under-resourcing of EMBs, (e) supporting the development of innovative, responsive measures for public health emergencies and natural disasters. The panel highlighted some of the urgent responses to the challenges facing EMBs. These include (a) the introduction of targeted training for the

Judiciary to ensure appreciation of electoral processes (given the increased election-related litigation), (b) the adoption of appropriate electoral literacy, media engagement strategies and technologies to counter disinformation and misinformation, (c) strengthening of EMB officials in the use of technology in electoral processes, transparency, and accountability.

Session 4: The panellists in this session pointed out several measures they individually and collectively employed to support EMBs in the age of global democracy recession. Currently, almost all of them provide support to EMBs in (a) developing responsive, coordinated electoral assistance initiatives, (b) promoting peace, (c) training electoral officials, (d) development of knowledge products, (e) introducing constitutional building in countries in transition, (f) introducing thought leadership and capacity building. In addition, the electoral assistance agencies underscored the need for scaling up electoral assistance across the different A-WEB constituencies specifically to:

- Safeguard civil society organisations' participation,
- Enhance transparency of the technical electoral processes and a peaceful environment, and institute multi-stakeholders dialogue.
- Promote integrated project design approaches that link electoral assistance to broader democracy support.
- Focus on resilience, capacity building and technical assistance in electoral risk management.
- Revitalise international arenas for knowledge exchange on electoral assistance.
- Invest in continental and regional organisations.

Session 5: The intergovernmental organisations employed four similar interventions, albeit with different approaches and strategies. These are (a) Dialogue facilitation and preventive diplomacy, (b) Deployment of election observation missions during elections, (c) Provision of technical assistance especially in-between elections, to assist with reforms, (d) Enforcing accountability measures, including applying sanctions where applicable. These organisations regard adopting holistic approaches to mitigating democracy recession through programmes that respond to electoral support and economic development and security as key. They recommended the recalibration of continental interventions to ensure youth participation in political and electoral processes. In addition, they encouraged the A-WEB member countries and EMBs to strive to broaden the political consultative processes to promote transparency of the electoral processes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Several worrying trends have punctuated the democratisation process and efforts for entrenching electoral democracy, and these are commonly termed democracy recession or democratic backsliding by democracy scholars and practitioners.[1] Among the attributes of this phenomenon are the unconstitutional changes of governments stifling democratic rights, including multiparty competition and candidates' freedom to campaign and contest elections. It also entails constricting the opposition's access to mass media and campaign finance and the inclusiveness of voting. In addition, democratic recession erodes political accountability, transparency, the rule of law, rampant corruption increases, human rights violations, populism and extremist movements, and disinformation. Finally, the advent of democratic recession in the past ten to fifteen years has severely constrained the ability of most election management bodies (EMBs) to conduct credible elections.

Cognizant of the aforementioned challenge facing EMBs, the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) and the Association of World Election Bodies (A-WEB) convened an international conference under the theme "Safeguarding Election Management Bodies in the Age of Global Democratic Recession" in Cape Town South Africa on 20 October 2022. This Conference was part of the 5th A-WEB General Assembly, the first on the African Continent and hosted by the IEC. The goal of the Conference was to discuss the phenomenon of democratic recession and how to address it to deepen electoral democracy, ensure stability, and promote peace and development. The specific objectives were:

- To provide a platform for dialogue on democracy and elections among EMBs and key stakeholders highlighting challenges and opportunities.
- To critically discuss the EMBs' external vulnerabilities in the face of deteriorating democratic standards and find innovative ways to safeguard them.

- To explore alternative constructive mechanisms to complement what already exists in various EMB platforms and other entities dealing with the challenges of democratic recession, including disinformation, on EMBs and electoral processes.
- To review the interventions by the global, continental, and inter-governmental institutions in addressing democratic recession and propose improvements to ensure a resilient electoral democracy.
- To propose intervention measures by the international development partners (donors), academia, non-governmental organisations, and think tanks in assisting EMBs in dealing with the impact of the democratic recession.
- To disseminate the conference proceedings and resolutions far and wide through media releases, the internet, and various forms of publications for a more significant conference impact.
- To enhance the operational apparatuses, including election management and administration, leadership, and intra and inter-organisational coordination and planning skills of EMBs in emerging democracies and post-conflict countries.

A total of 275 participants from over 60 EMBs attended the Conference. In addition, electoral experts, continental and sub-regional EMB forums, government representatives, South African Party Liaison Committee representatives, the United Nations Agencies, the Commonwealth, universities, research institutes, think tanks, civil society organisations, print and electronic media. It was also live-streamed on the Conference Website and social media platforms, including the Electoral Commission of South Africa's YouTube and Facebook Channels. The Conference followed a facilitated dialogue format with purposively selected democracy, elections, and governance experts making presentations followed by plenary discussions.

This report captures the key issues covered by electoral experts and practitioners on the five different themes and sessions of the Conference. Following this introductory section is the proceedings section, divided into three parts. The first part deals with the opening of the Conference. The second part highlights the identified challenges brought about by the democracy recession, its impact and suggested policy measures. Finally, the third part of the proceedings highlights the closing of the Conference.

2. CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

2.1 OPENING SESSION

a) Welcome Remarks: Mr Mosotho Moepya, A-WEB Chairperson and Chairperson of the Electoral Commission of South Africa

The A-WEB and IEC Chairperson, Mr Mosotho Moepya, welcomed A-WEB delegates and all participants to the International Conference. He described the Conference as no ordinary jamboree of EMBs, but a gathering based on the conviction that holding credible elections and combating the roots of democracy recession will facilitate economic development.

He pointed out that the world is experiencing concerning levels of the reversal of democratic gains and assault on democratic institutions, including the EMBs, by anti-democracy forces. Therefore, EMBs can no longer stand by and watch because of the direct impact this erosion of democracy has on electoral democracy and election management.

Mr Moepya noted the significance of the A-WEB General Assembly and International Conference as the first in Africa. He underscored the relevance of the City of Cape Town as the host because of its links to South Africa's democratic transition, therefore befitting to host a conference to discuss how to address challenges of democratic recession and enhance the capacities of EMBs systematically and proactively.

b) Opening Address: His Excellency Thabo Mbeki, Former President of South Africa
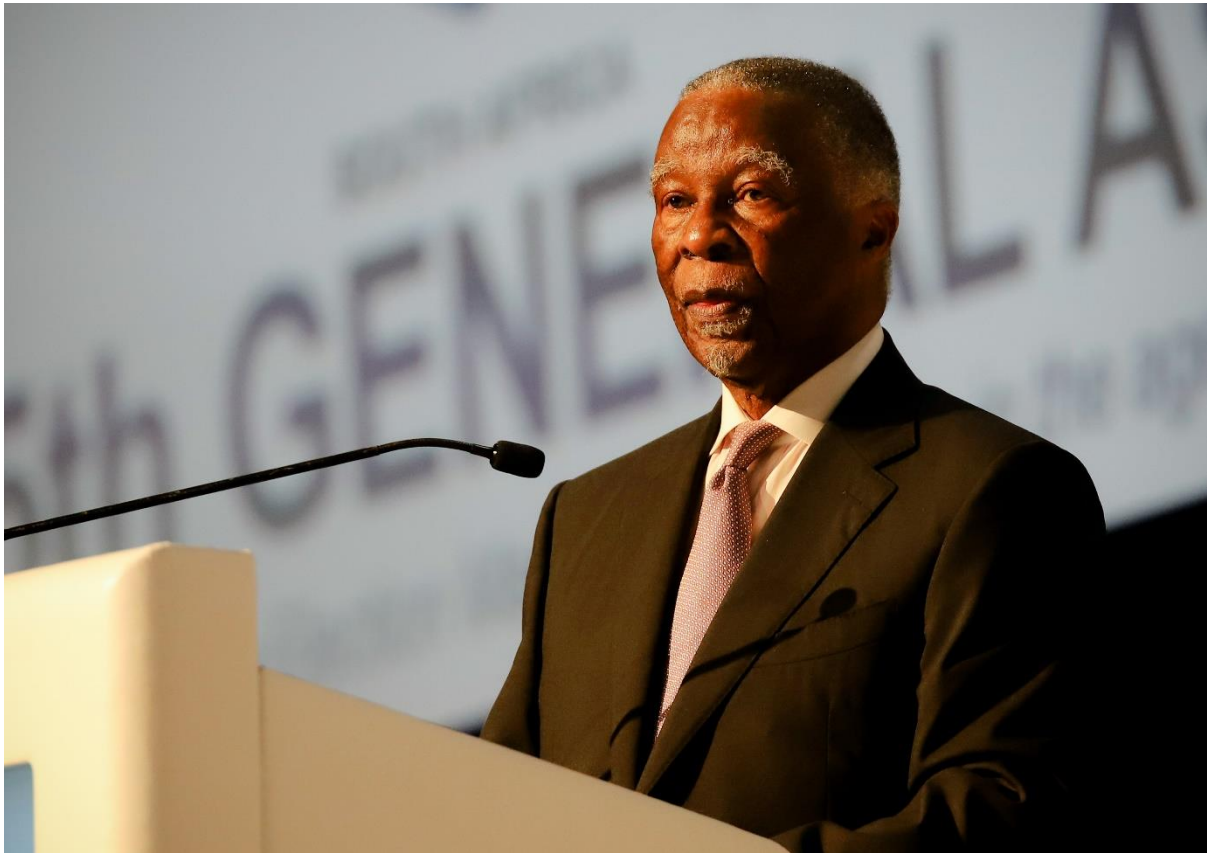
His Excellency, Former President Thabo Mbeki, delivered the opening address to the Conference. He began by conveying heartfelt condolences to the Catholic Church on the passing of a friend of South Africa's liberation struggle, Father Albert Nolan. He also reiterated the warm message of welcoming all foreign delegates to South Africa and extended his best wishes to them to have a pleasant and successful time during their stay in the country.

President Mbeki indicated that the Conference was addressing the critical issue of global democratic recession and expressed the hope that the Electoral Commission of South Africa would also get inspiration from the collective experiences of the participants and the distinguished speakers to improve its performance. He acknowledged the A-WEB leadership for the colossal efforts and contributions to enhancing electoral democracy and election integrity over the past nine years. More significantly, he supported the membership that kept it motivated during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

President Mbeki pointed out that South Africa's freedom struggle was about defeating the apartheid regime, securing the national emancipation of the oppressed black majority, and democratising the country. The vision and objective were always that the people shall govern, which means that for the liberation fighters, democracy meant self-governing. He pointed out that unpacking the meaning of the people shall govern

is not an easy task, and it consumed a lot of time to figure out between the liberation movements and the apartheid regime during the negotiations in the 1990s. President Mbeki stated that the South African National Assembly was discussing an amendment to the electoral law whose details struggle with the same question of what system should be put in place to give concrete expression to the vision that the people should govern. Hence the significance of the Conference offered an excellent opportunity for the EMBs and other critical electoral actors to discuss what to do to protect and empower those EMBs so that they fully discharge their responsibility.

President Mbeki expressed concern that the political transitions to democracy in the late 1990s have not necessarily resulted in functioning democracies everywhere but yielded mixed results. Some countries have solved the protracted and seemingly intractable conflicts, while in others, violent conflict and civil strife have continued undiminished. Furthermore, he noted that in some cases, both democratic and non-democratic practices could coexist in the same country, warranting urgent attention both to the drivers of democracy and its strengthening as well as the anti-democratic aspects which undermine and threaten the gains made.

He concluded by emphasising the importance of the Conference to deliberate on ensuring that democracy delivers the dividends of improved livelihoods for most of the people by enabling them to choose their leaders freely in a process superintended by well-resourced EMBs.

2.1 SESSION 1: THE SETTING: THEORY AND PRACTICE

2.1.1 Theory, Origins and Manifestation of Democratic Recession

Professor Larry Diamond led this session on the theory and origins of democratic recession. His contribution was predicted on the foundations of liberal democracy, which he posited as the high-quality of democracy standing on three foundations, namely:

- Democracy: "Majority rule"- popular sovereignty and control over government rule, competition, participation, vertical accountability, and responsiveness.
- Liberal government: "Minority rights"- freedom, equality, and civic culture, good governance and the rule of law.
- Republican government: "Civic Government"-the rule of law, horizontal accountability, and state effectiveness.

Professor Diamond demonstrated the deepening democracy and freedom recession using research data covering 1974 and 2021. The data revealed that the rule of law is deteriorating and there are increasing waves of illiberal populism. There is also growing polarisation and intolerance augmented by social media. In addition, it showed the manifestation of the decay of essential democratic master norms of mutual tolerance and mutual restraint and the surging power and malign influence of

autocratic tendencies by Russia and China. He indicated that autocracy tendencies witnessed in countries such as Hungary, Turkey, Bangladesh, and the Philippines are strangling democracies. He warned that the Brazilian and Indian democracies are also at risk. He listed several hallmark attributes of autocratic regimes, namely:

1. Demonisation and delegitimisation of political opposition.
2. Undermining the independence of the courts.
3. Undermining the independence of the media.
4. Gaining control of public broadcasting.
5. Constraining internet freedom
6. Subjugating civil society, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), universities and think tanks.
7. Intimidating the business community into submission.
8. Enriching a class of loyal crony capitalists.
9. Extending political control over state bureaucracy and security
10. Rigging the electoral rules and gaining control over electoral administration
11. Repeat steps 1 to 11 ever more vigorously.

Professor Diamond raised concerns that as a result of the above tendencies, the number of democracies in the world is shrinking regarding political rights, civil liberties, transparency, and the rule of law. Transparency is declining the fastest, while the rule of law ranks the lowest. Political parties and parliaments are also growing weak in the context of severe political polarisation along ethnic and religious identities.

Consequently, a growing list of countries with a population below a million fails to meet even minimal tests of electoral democracy.

Professor Diamond noted that the election management bodies (EMBs) are part of the architecture for horizontal accountability in which the elected elements of the executive branch cannot control various agencies of the State. They have the autonomy to do their job to ensure effective democracy and good governments. He lamented that the alarming deterioration of political tolerance, the increasing levels of political violence, and the influence of autocratic forces impact EMB's ability to deliver.

Professor Diamond warned that the world is also slipping into the global economic recession, accelerating the democracy recession and making prospects for a thriving electoral democracy dire. He suggested that there is a need to put in place the infrastructure of independent professional electoral administration and preserve its professionalism, resources, and integrity. He said a broader political and civic ecosystem is required to protect the work of EMBs. There is also the need to defend the surrounding ecosystem, including the independent media, their ability to function free of government intimidation, and the pressures of business leaders who want to get them to be quiet and not do their work. There is also a need to enhance non-state actors' work. Reducing political polarisation to bridge and narrow the political and social divides is also essential.

2.1.2 Trends and Impact of Democratic Recession on Democracy

Dr Khabele Matlosa began his intervention on the trends in democracy recession by proposing three ideations of democracy ranging from the minimum to the maximalist notions. First, he suggested that democracy is often wrongly equated to holding regular elections, which he argued was inefficient and shallow understanding. He also pointed out that for some, democracy means institutions, constitutionalism, the rule of law, and human rights. He indicated that although this conception might be appealing, it is not adequate because it is limited to civil and political rights but omits social, cultural and economic rights. Finally, he proffered the "maximalist conception" of democracy as development, meaning democracy as development not democracy for democracy's sake.

Dr Matlosa assessed democracy recession trends from the late 1980s collapse of the Cold War era, where there was a shift from the ideological parity that marked the world between the United States of America (USA) and the Union of Socialist Soviet Republic (USSR). This period marked the move from autocracy (including apartheid) to democracy and from war to peace, leading to accelerated democratisation. He indicated that democratic transition also entailed shifting from the brief unipolar world characterised by the USA's hegemony in the world economy and international politics. Scholars primarily regarded this period as epitomising the unassailable universality of liberal democracy and capitalism.

However, the unipolar world was disrupted in the late 1990s and early 2000s when the other centres of power, such as China and Russia, emerged on the world stage. The emerging order presented a phenomenon of competing centres of power where liberalism, capitalism and democratisation became under strain, resulting in a democratic recession manifesting in four main trends:

- Accelerated rate of democratic breakdown
- Decline in the quality and stability of democracy in large countries
- Deepening authoritarianism in large democracies
- Lack of political will, self-confidence, and poor performance by established democracies, including the USA, both home and abroad in terms of democracy promotion.

Dr Matlosa identified key drivers and causes of democratic recession as structural and super structural. These include, on one hand, the crisis of capitalism and globalisation during 1997/98, 2007/8 financial crises, underdevelopment, poverty, hunger, unemployment, and inequality. On the other hand, it is populism, war, unconstitutional change of governments and mismanagement of diversity. All these have led to losing faith in elections, as seen by declining voter turnout and the declining public trust in governance institutions. He proposed the following policy responses to the Conference:

- Need to address the problem of low voter turnout through comprehensive civic and voter education by EMBs and key stakeholders, including political parties and civil society organisations (CSOs).

- Need for government, EMBs, CSOs and the private sector to revamp a robust state-society social contract predicated on efficient and effective delivery of services to the people.
- Need to ensure concrete development outcomes that practically improve the livelihoods of ordinary people.
- Need to invest more in decentralisation and devolution of power to communities.
- Need to recalibrate social cohesion to reverse the democratic recession.

Session 1 Summary

Key message/s:
- The rate of democratic transitions is declining, and the rate of democracy breakdown has been increasing in the past 15 years.
- A number of emerging democracies, including South Africa, and long-standing democracies, including the USA, have been in a steep decline in the quality of democracy.
- Democracy recession must be interrogated from a conceptual understanding of democracy as a means to a developmental end.
- So long as democracy is not delivering the development dividends, people will run away from the ballot and choose bullets.

Causes, trends and Implications of democracy recession	Suggested policy measures
Causes: 1. Crisis of capitalism and accelerating globalisation. 2. Underdevelopment, poverty, hunger, unemployment, inequality. 3. Mismanagement of diversity. 4. Weak rule of law, weak political institutions. 5. Executive aggrandisement of power. 6. Severe polarisation including social media polarisation. 7. Poor economic performance. 8. Law trust in governance institutions. 9. Weak civil society. 10. Diffusion of authoritarian norms and leaders. **Trends:** 1. Declining global levels of freedom and democracy. 2. The deteriorating rule of law and lack of political will for democracy promotion. 3. Wave of illiberal populism 4. Increasing polarisation, and intolerance, magnified by social media 5. Decay of two democratic master norms, namely; (a) Mutual toleration, and (b) Mutual restraint. 6. Deepening authoritarianism in big democracies and/or significant (swing) states 7. Surging power and the malign influence of autocracies.	1. Strengthen the civic ecosystem around free and fair elections: a. Independent media. b. Civil society (NGOs and other grassroots-based organisations). c. Responsive political parties that engage citizens and are internally democratic. 2. Reform and strengthen the State, and combat corruption. 3. Revive public commitment to democratic norms. 4. Combat political polarisation and promote social cohesion. 5. Engage continuously in civic and voter education and blend democracy education with peace education. 6. Revamp a robust state-society social contract predicated on efficient and effective delivery of services to the people. 7. Ensure the governance institutions' delivery of concrete development outcomes that practically improve the lives and livelihoods of ordinary people for recalibrating social cohesion. 8. Investment in the decentralisation and devolution of power to communities.

2.2 SESSION 2: DEMOCRATIC RECESSION IMPACT ON ELECTORAL PROCESSES

2.2.1 The Impact on Election Management Bodies (EMBs)

Professor Attahiru Jega presentation dealt with the challenges of a democratic recession on electoral management and administration, as well as electoral operations. He identified three main features of democracy recession impacting on EMBs, namely.

  (a) the heightened politics of identity,
  (b) the strongman politics, and
  (c) the exclusionary governance.

Professor Jega indicated that democracy recession impacts EMBs performance in the following manner:

1. Political interference by strongman politicians in the appointment of electoral commissioners and other election officials.
2. Obstruction of legal reforms that would improve the integrity of elections.
3. Spates of violence and weaponisation of identities during elections especially ethnicity and religion contribute to low voter turnout.
4. Underfunding of EMBs and the delays in releasing funds for electoral operations.
5. Whittling down of the relative autonomy of the EMBs.
6. Irregularities perpetrated in the compilation and declaration of results.
7. Excessive elections monetisation with voters and officials induced or bought by candidates, their agents, and other supporters.

Professor Jega called on EMBs to defend their independence by being professional, nonpartisan and impartial in creating a level playing field for all political parties and contestants. They must share knowledge and experiences in their regions, and strengthen alliances, cooperation, and collaboration with CSOs.

2.2.2 The Impact on citizen participation (Women, Youth, People with Disabilities, and Internally Displaced Persons)

Ms Chandanie Watawala focused on the impact of the democracy recession on vulnerable groups like women, internally displaced persons (IDPs), youth, people with disabilities (PWDs) and the elderly. Using examples from selected Asian countries,

she pointed out that most Asian countries are partly free and not free. She cited the armed coups against a democratically elected government in Afghanistan and Myanmar, the crackdown against opposition, media and civil society groups in Cambodia and Bangladesh, and the introduction of repressive laws in Hong Kong as cases in point.

Ms Watawala pointed out that although elections ensure the peoples' right to choose without discrimination based on gender, religion or ethnicity, the Asian region is behind in providing the marginalised groups' participation. For instance, most political party leaders in Asia are old males who make no effort to enhance youth participation. In addition, most countries host large numbers of displaced persons who are the victims of deteriorating democracy and discrimination. The plight of the Rohingya people, whose voting rights are deprived in Myanmar, is a good case in point. The Myanmar citizenship laws discriminate against this sizeable ethnic minority, and as many as 600,000 Rohingya people cannot vote. Furthermore, the deprivation of political rights to the Rohingya people has led to them being treated as stateless and subjecting them to untold violence and persecution in Myanmar, forcing them to flee into Bangladesh, India, and other parts of Asia as refugees.

The 2021 Taliban takeover of the government in Afghanistan also led to the displacement of people. Many took refuge outside the capital Kabul and to neighbouring countries like Pakistan, leading to a humanitarian crisis, with many people, including women, children, PWDs and the elderly, still requiring humanitarian relief many months later.

She added that patriarchy dominates most Asian countries. Although there have been efforts to increase women's participation through quotas, structural barriers, like gendered social norms, lack of financial freedom, and violence against women, often militate against women's involvement in countries like Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Nepal, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste. For example, the elected female leader in Myanmar has been removed from office and prosecuted and convicted for numerous political offences.

Ms Watawala concluded her contribution with the following recommendations to the EMBs.

- There is a need for all stakeholders to foster the holding of genuinely democratic elections.
- There is a need for regulation and implementation of democracy-friendly laws and amending the repressive laws and constitutions, which may challenge credible elections.
- There is a need for closer collaboration between the EMBs and electoral stakeholders.

2.2.3 The Impact on Electoral Integrity

Professor Toby James assessed the impact of the democracy recession on the integrity of elections. He noted that a democratic slowdown might lead to an expectation of compromised quality and fairness of the polls. However, the Electoral Integrity data provides no firm evidence of an overall decline in the quality of elections worldwide. Global aggregate scores vary a little each year, but no consistent decline exists. It shows that instead, it is other aspects of democracy, including civil liberties and media freedoms which have seen the more significant reduction.

Using the perceptions of the electoral integrity index, the Electoral Integrity project conducts academic expert surveys in individual countries around the world. Its 2012 to 2021 survey involving 4591 expert assessments of electoral integrity across 480 elections in 169 countries around the world established that the overall stages of the electoral cycle remain unchanged in terms of the quality of elections. The surveys found that vital areas tend to be both counting at vote procedures, but there are some concerns in areas such as the media and finance where some specific countries faired weakly. The performance of EMBs also differs from country to country and depends on the peculiar socio-economic and political challenges.

Professor James offered ten solutions to the EMBs in countries with specific problems. These solutions include:

- Holistic evaluation

- Investing in staff and recruitment
- Inclusive internal decision-making
- Building inclusive networks
- Promoting independence
- Investing in elections
- Advocating reform
- Communicating
- Diagnosing digital risks
- Risk management preparedness

Session 2 Summary	
Key message/s: • There is a notable democracy recession but no overall decline in election quality. • Strongman politics undermines the rule of law and put pressure on public institutions, including EMBs, undermining the ability to deliver on their mandate. • The challenges posed by democratic recession are enormous but not impossible. There are several actions that EMBs can take.	
Impact of democracy recession on EMBs	**Suggested policy measures**
1. Political interference by strongman politicians in appointing electoral commissioners and other election officials. 2. Obstruction of legal reforms that would improve the integrity of elections. 3. Spates of violence and weaponisation of identities during elections, especially ethnicity and religion, contribute to low voter turnout. 4. Underfunding of EMBs and the delays in releasing funds for electoral operations. 5. Whittling down of the relative autonomy of the EMBs. 6. Irregularities perpetrated in the compilation and declaration of results. **7.** Excessive monetisation of elections with voters and officials induced or bought by candidates, their agents, and other supporters	1. Strengthen institutions and the electoral legal framework to entrench electoral integrity. 2. Invest in staff and recruitment, ensuring meritocracy, job satisfaction, and managing stress. 3. Institute inclusive internal decision-making. 4. Invest in domestic and external relations and build inclusive networks for peer learning, citizen engagement and safeguarding independence. 5. Develop digital, emergency, and operational risk management mechanisms.

2.3 SESSION 3: MITIGATION MEASURES BY CONTINENTAL EMBs FORA

2.3.1 AFRICA: The Association of African Electoral Authorities (AAEA)

The Association of African Electoral Authorities shared experiences of measures taken to mitigate democratic recession on the African continent. Justice Chifundo Kachale began his contribution by underscoring the importance of the human aspect of election management. He pointed out that democratic institutions are only as strong as the men or women leading them, and electoral integrity is an institutional value as much as a personal value. Therefore, the electoral process is an expression of a powerful human ideal of human dignity, and that's why ideally, it is supposed to be one man or one woman, one vote. Justice Kachale also stated that the interventions meant to ensure credible EMBs must pay attention to professional skills and personal integrity to manage the electoral process.

Justice Kachale highlighted several challenges facing EMBs on the African continent. These include:

Technical: Although there is a lot of investment in information and technology (ICT) for managing elections by most EMBs, there is limited ICT infrastructure and unreliable power supply. The electronic transmission of election results, often with unreliable network connectivity, has hugely undermined African electoral processes. There is

also inadequate skills capacity to match the ICT needs. In addition, the appointment of office bearers such as Commissioners is yet to respond to the skills requirement. The composition of most Commissions is a political compromise by the political elite. Yet, Commissioners are expected to understand and oversee the use of ICT in electoral processes.

Operational: The legal frameworks for elections in most jurisdictions on the continent place unrealistic timelines for concluding specific vital electoral processes, the consequence of which has been election-related conflicts exposing the electoral staff to physical security risks. The public health emergencies, particularly COVID-19, laid bare this problem, especially for the EMBs that conducted elections at the height of the Pandemic. There were demands on these EMBs to undertake pervasive logistical operations with minimal technical resources during the Pandemic. On the other hand, there was information overload in the public domain due to increased access to information during an emergency. As a result, the EMBs lacked the capacity and financial and technical resources to compete for public attention by generating more traffic on electoral matters.

Justice Kachale also gave an example of the 2022 Kenya general elections, where there was palpable tension around election results because of the unrealistic expectation for the announcement of election results. This was compounded by the citizens' access to the results uploaded by the Independent Elections and Boundaries Commission (IEBC). The citizens did not appreciate that the IEBC had to physically verify every constituency result meticulously before formal declaration- something that cannot be done in real-time operationally even if high volumes of temporary staff had been recruited.

Financial: The lack of financial resources is a significant challenge for African EMBs. There is a trend of underfunding of election budgets, delayed disbursements of resources allocated by national parliaments, restrictive procurement regimes especially where certain unique election materials and technologies are required, and poorly coordinated investment by electoral assistance providers and providers and other cooperating partners.

Justice Kachale concluded his contribution by highlighting some of the measures taken by the AAEA to mitigate the challenges faced by its member EMBs. These include:

a) **Peer support:** The AAEA facilitates solidarity missions to member EMBs holding elections. The tasks gather relevant information on the operational aspects of the polls and provide feedback for remedial action during the elections and electoral reforms.

b) **Sharing of electoral materials:** The AAEA members lend a hand to each other where there are limited hard and soft ware materials for elections. For instance,

the Malawi Electoral Commission provided over 2000 power supply generators to the Electoral Commission of Zambia during the voter registration for use in rural areas.

c) **Capacity Building of the Judiciary**: The AAEA members have also undertaken comprehensive capacity-building programmes for the Judiciary to ensure expeditious resolution of election-related disputes. In Kenya, the EMB trained judicial officers from the Supreme Court to the lower courts.

d) **Civic and Voter Education (CVE):** The AAEA members have also embarked on comprehensive CVE programmes for the citizens and the media to counter the effects of disinformation and misinformation about the electoral processes.

2.3.2 ASIA: Association of Asian Election Authorities (AAEA)

The Association of Asian Election Authorities (AAEA) representative, Honourable Anup Chandra Pandey, highlighted the challenges facing the regional membership, which are similar to their African counterparts. These include barriers to inclusion and equal access for universal adult suffrage, voter apathy, regulation of political parties, regulating political finance, controlling misuse of money power, the inadequacy of legal and legislative instruments for enforcing codes of conduct, multimedia disinformation campaigns, fake news including the inadequacy of social media regulatory framework,

polarisation and populism and its consequences for democracy, adverse effects of globalisation, economic inequality, democratic discontent, illegal immigration, challenges of sustaining multi-ethnic democracies

Honourable Pandey indicated that notwithstanding the primary challenges and the disruptive COVID-19 Pandemic, which saw many elections postponed, some Asian countries, including India, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan conducted their elections. In the case of India, general elections and 11 state legislative assemblies' elections covering 440 million voters were held during this Pandemic. A high voter turnout was recorded in nine of the eleven states. A key to the successful holding of these elections during the COVID-19 Pandemic was the timely conduct of in-house research study of international practices and the development of crisis response mechanisms, effective knowledge sharing, resilience, and empowerment of the EMB to respond to this crisis.

Honourable Pandey shared eight critical recommendations towards mitigating challenges posed by democracy recession among the AAEA member countries. These include:

a) **Harmonisation of International Treaties with Domestic Legislation**: There is a need to pursue standard benchmarks for legislation and adopt international best practices. The AAEA met in May 2022 to address the domestication of gender-related protocols in the region.

b) **Independence of EMBs and legal regimes to tackle challenges:** The is a need to strive for the autonomy of EMBs to ensure their neutrality, the sanctity of elections and the purity of electoral processes.

c) **Regulation of the media:** There is a need for regulation of the media, including social media, and the capacitation of journalists for balanced reporting on elections. One of the significant challenges for EMBs is the alarming misuse of social media platforms for disinformation. Some practical responses to this challenge include the Electoral Commission of India's voluntary code of ethics for social media. Taiwan's government also has a policy to counter election disinformation. This policy identifies the disinformation, debunks and combats it, and punishes the perpetrators. The is also a need for the EMBs to form partnerships with social media companies.

d) **Technology Integration:** There is a need for enhanced efficiency, efficacy, transparency, and integrity of electoral processes. Social media is a double-edged sword; leveraging it for voter connect has been hugely beneficial. However, it must be strategically integrated to provide user-friendly tools and facilitate voter participation in different electoral processes, including voter registration, management of polling stations, voting, counting, and electoral logistics.

e) **Plenary Powers to the EMBs:** There is a need to provide plenary powers to the EMBs to facilitate timely decisions in the election processes and to handle any unforeseen developments during the election period.

f) **Manpower and Financial Capacity:** There is a need for strengthening EMB's human and financial capacities to cope with the enormous operational demands. For instance, the Electoral Commission of India conducts elections for 1 billion voters but only has about 450 permanent staff. It only increases staff capacity to about 12 million by recruiting temporary staff during the general elections.

g) **Regulation of Election Finance**: There is a need for a regulatory mechanism to control the misuse of money and expenditure control, especially during campaigns.

h) **Voter education:** There is a need to scale up voter education efforts, especially for ethical participation. Voter education connects people to elections and electoral processes and serves as an important tool for addressing social aspects of elections in a strategic, structured, and objective manner. Different AAEA members have evolved their voter education frameworks. What is also required is proper funding and administration for objective, nonpartisan voter education and information campaigns.

i) **International and domestic observation:** Election observation enhances the integrity of elections. Some AAEA members, including India, Uzbekistan, Fiji and Nepal, have successfully used election observation. Other members are could use observation to enhance the quality of their electoral processes.

j) **Leveraging on A-WEB:** There is a need to leverage the membership collective of A-WEB for collective action. The EMBs need to collaborate closer and strengthen democratic norms and processes by collective action. This collaboration could be through a series of dialogues within the AAEA region.

2.3.3 AMERICA: Organisation of American States (OAS)

The representative of the Organisation of American States (OAS), Dr Francisco Guerrero's presentation focused on critical areas of the organisation's work relevant to safeguarding election processes and EMBs against the impact of democracy recession. These include:

a) **Electoral observation**: The OAS has observed elections in member states since its first electoral observation mission in Costa Rica in 1962. It has deployed over 300 electoral observation missions in 28 of the 34 OAS member states. The OAS uses electoral observation as a tool for advisory services or assistance for strengthening members' electoral and institutional capacities, especially in complex and polarised political-electoral contexts, characterised by a growing dissatisfaction with democracy in the region and a permanent questioning of the public institutions. As a result, electoral observation reports have become relevant and essential, granting transparency, accountability, and confidence building for citizens and political parties.

Dr Guerrero mentioned that in 2018 the OAS published a study on the impact of the election observation recommendations between 1999 and 2015. The findings suggested that matters related to the general principles of a democratic election, such as impartiality, neutrality, inclusion, representation,

transparency, and equality, have gained more relevance. It is worth noting that this is the sentiment expressed by the Election Integrity Project 2012 to 2021 survey. The OAS findings reflected in a general way the areas in which the region needs to work to have fairer, more inclusive, clean and equitable electoral elections. Noteworthy among these areas are reforms to guarantee:

- Equal opportunities through equitable and transparent political financing systems, balanced access to the media for all candidates, freedom of the press and access to information, gender equity in political participation, and representative electoral districts.
- The effective use of the right to vote through an electoral register that faithfully reflects the population qualified to vote.
- The integrity of voter preferences through the professionalisation of electoral administrators.
- An impartial arbitrator through institutions structurally independent, neutral and whose systems allow several instances for decisions review.

b) **Inter-American Democratic Charter**: The 2001 Inter-American Democratic Charter is the road map of the OAS to defend democracy, especially against democracy recession challenges. Its importance lies in the mutual recognition of all the Americas countries that representing democracy is the ideal system of government for the people of the hemisphere. The Charter establishes "essential elements of representative democracy including the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, access to and the exercise of power following the rule of law, the holding of periodic, accessible, and fair elections based on secret balloting and universal suffrage as an expression of the sovereignty of the people, the pluralistic system of political parties and organisations, and the separation of powers and independence of the branches of government. The Charter has proven to be an effective mechanism in crises and periods of the rupture of the democratic order.

In addition to the various measures supporting EMBs to cope with the democracy recession challenges, the OAS also provides technical cooperation in electoral matters to its member states in the modernisation and improvement of the quality of services offered by electoral bodies throughout the region. The support is within the ambit of Article 23 of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which allows member states to request the assistance of the OAS to strengthen their electoral and institutional capacities. Some areas of support include registration/electoral roll, electoral computing, electoral statistic, legislative reform, electoral organisation and logistics, strengthening of organisational structure, electoral administration, promotion of citizen participation, horizontal cooperation, political financing, gender equity, voting abroad, electoral mapping, electoral security, management and quality certification in electoral processes and information security management.

The OAS also promotes the EMB's autonomy and independence, rejecting attempts to co-opt and discredit them for reasons inspired by private interests. It recommends that the EMBs must technify their processes. In addition, they must ensure the rigorous planning of their management, transparency and accountability, the training of their officials, respect for their decisions, their plural conformation, and the provision of sufficient financial resources to carry out their activities.

Session 3 Summary	
Key message/s: • Democratic institutions are only as good as the men and women who lead them; therefore, election integrity is more than an institutional value but a human value. • The campaigns to weaken the EMBs are severely pernicious since they create citizens' distrust in the management of elections.	
Democracy recession mitigation measures by continental EMB Fora	**Suggested policy measures**
1. Modification of EMB programs during Public Health Emergencies. 2. Introduction of targeted training for the Judiciary to ensure better appreciation of the electoral processes (in anticipation of litigation). 3. Providing technical support to member EMBs. 4. Facilitating peer learning and sharing of electoral materials among EMBs. 5. Deploying electoral observation missions to support peer learning, inform electoral reforms and strengthen democracy. 6. Publication of guidelines for EMBs on organising elections during pandemics. **7.** Convening regional dialogues on thematic electoral issues affecting member EMBs.	1. Create more Financial Autonomy for EMBs (through Legal Reforms). 2. Adopt appropriate Civic, Voter & Media Engagement Strategies and Technologies to counter disinformation and misinformation. 3. Introduce campaign-related regulations to restrict the misuse of money power. 4. Invest in a capacity-building programme for EMBs to build resilience. 5. Strengthen the regulatory environment to obviate suspicion using instruments such as Codes of Conduct, legislation, and legal redress mechanisms.

2.4 SESSION 4: MITIGATION MEASURES THROUGH ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE

2.4.1 United Nations Development Programme

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) representative, Dr Roselyn Akombe, indicated that the UNDP has been providing electoral assistance to several United Nations (UN) Member States for over three decades as the leading implementer of UN electoral assistance. The UNDP deploys Chief Technical Advisors (CTAs) to EMBs to better understand their circumstances and provide direct expert support while always upholding the UN normative agenda of transparency, accountability, and ensuring inclusion in all processes. The support is also offered under the overall leadership UN Electoral Assistance Division (EAD) of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA).

Dr Akombe indicated that electoral assistance is provided only at the request of Member States or when the UN Security Council or the UN General Assembly gives such a mandate for electoral assistance. The UNDP has learnt the following lessons in electoral aid around the world.

a) **The centrality of building trust in EMBs:** At a time when democracy is in peril the most significant bulwark for ensuring the sustainability of democracy is by having EMBs that are trusted.

b) **The professionalisation of the electoral processes:** Professionalisation contributes toward the management of risks. The EMBs require the highest level of technical competence to cope with the internal and external demands of the electoral process. The UNDP has invested in the Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections (BRIDGE) programme to ensure the professionalisation of EMBs. It is also introducing a new pilot on building institutional excellence in elections and electoral management.

c) **Responsible use of digital technologies:** The rise of digital technologies has enabled most EMBs to improve their electoral processes. And yet the threat of internet shutdowns or slowdowns requires EMBs to have redundancies in their systems to allow for continuity in disruption situations. They must also ensure full respect for human rights. The UNDP has learnt that although regulation can help establish more structured communication with social media companies, candidates, and voters, the restrictions on the freedom of expression must end. We must heed these calls. Responsible digitalisation is imperative for EMBs, especially to bridge the digital divide and ensure inclusive processes.

The risks of digitalisation also need attention. EMBs need to have processes in place to ensure the transparency of their procurement, their sustainability, data privacy, the ownership of the technology by the national authorities and the ability to test and audit them.

d) **Multistakeholder approach to elections:** The UNDP has learnt that it is not just the EMBs that can ensure election integrity. Engaging civil society organisations (CSOs) and political parties is essential. These key stakeholders can protect the EMBs and the electoral process when genuinely engaged.

e) **Inclusivity of the electoral process:** The UNDP has also learnt that electoral assistance must be inclusive by bringing in women and youth. Inclusivity helps protect the EMBs. Hence, the UN has launched its governance for people and the planet offering to support Member States and put up the renewed power and peacebuilding framework for Africa. This framework is specific to the continental governance work. It is especially relevant because the continent's endeavour to silence the guns will succeed when the assistance providers strengthen the EMBs and electoral processes.

2.4.2 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)

The International IDEA representative Dr Roba Sharamo indicated that contextual understanding of the democratic recession challenges based on its annual global study, the State of global democracy report buttresses IDEAs electoral assistance.

The latest global State of Democracy Report paints a backsliding trend of several democracies, others are becoming hybrid while some are becoming more authoritarian. IDEA has noted threats to democracy from three Cs: conflict, the COVID pandemic and Economic decline.

Based on the studies and experiences from electoral assistance initiatives, IDEA has drawn some lessons, including:

a) **Investment in Regional Economic Bodies:** Donors and electoral assistance providers should actively support regional-level assistance networks and initiatives. The sub-continental support allows for context and language sensitivity, more robust local suitability and ownership, efficient diffusion of good practices and know-how, facilitating experience-sharing, fostering peer-to-peer cooperation and support, and upholding regional electoral obligations and standards.

b) **Appropriate context specific interventions:** Electoral assistance should not be seen as a once-off event and a one size-fits-all intervention. While the global principles hold true, national ownership and adaptation to contextual realities should be central to design and implementation of electoral assistance.

c) Promote integrated project design approaches that link electoral assistance to broader democracy support.

d) **Peer learning:** There is a need for knowledge exchange between EMBs. There is a need to create platforms for lesson learning and policy development at national and international levels. Electoral assistance in this regard must be provided in time instead of during election time.

e) **Dysfunctional relationships:** Stakeholders' divergent objectives and priorities may result in lack of trust that is hard to overcome. Contextual dynamics may pollute relationships in a country context at various levels, including:

- National vs. national
- National vs. international
- International vs. international
- Role of global and regional networks

f) **Integrated communication:** There is a need for robust and regular communication channels between multiple layers of electoral assistance stakeholders to ensure that electoral support is effectively tied to broader democracy support between elections.

g) **Norms and policy development**: Addressing global electoral assistance challenges requires regular international forums and modalities for standards and policy development, information sharing, goals aligning, and recalibrating electoral assistance investment priorities in tandem with evolving electoral needs and global democratic trajectories.

h) **Platforms for learning:** Electoral assistance programmes must have components like post-election reviews and project evaluations. End-of-project evaluations must focus on contextual relevance and effectiveness.

i) **Collaboration between all stakeholders:** Robust and regular communication channels between multiple layers of electoral assistance stakeholders (donors, implementers, national partners) and related State and non-state actors (such as security and other state agencies, diplomats, human rights activists, or journalists) are at the heart of this Report's recommendations. Attention to built-in mechanisms and modalities that facilitate and expect a collaboration between all stakeholders, such as regional and global electoral assistance forums, is critical to address the dysfunctional relationships that hinder appropriate responses to fast-moving or complex electoral situations.

j) **Review of electoral assistance principles** – for instance, some African regional economic communities do not have documented principles and guidelines for electoral assistance. Others have obsolete guidelines for addressing emerging challenges, especially in political transitions.

2.4.3 Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA)

The Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA) representative Mr Baidessou Soukolque highlighted some lessons learnt from EISA's electoral assistance efforts across Africa. These include:

a) **The election management bodies (EMBs) must be aware that it is performing a public service and draws their legitimacy from the people:** The EMBs must thrive from the desire to conduct transparent elections and defend the free exercise of sovereignty by the people. This motivation can strengthen their independence or autonomy and their ability to conduct transparent and inclusive electoral processes.

b) **When open and consensus-based frameworks of interaction provide a venue for debate and support to electoral authorities:** Experiences from many countries have shown that the more open the electoral authorities interact with other electoral stakeholders, the more credibility they gain. Additionally, they can convey some of their arguments. For example, the 2021 Zambia exchange and information platform set up by the EMB helped it deal with the ruling party's assault on the EMB's integrity. Similarly, the 2015 Central African Republic consensus-building framework paved the way for holding elections under difficult political and security environments.

c) **Collaboration between election management bodies (EMBs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs):** The partnership between civil society organisations and election authorities plays a crucial role in safeguarding democratic gains. Articles 12 and 27 of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) encourage the creation of legal conditions conducive to the development of CSOs and their partnership with CSOs.

d) **Electoral assistance for reforms:** Electoral authorities and citizen actors are key players in promoting electoral and institutional reforms. Their reports on assessing the electoral cycle and election observation are precious. Targeted support from technical and financial partners can enhance their role in reforms and overall improvement of the electoral process.

e) **Strengthening Civic and Voter Education (CVE)**: The democratic backsliding exacerbates through a growing political alienation. Citizens no longer recognise themselves in public governance, and we are witnessing a takeover of the political spectrum by political actors alone. Therefore, the CVE is critical to turn around the situation, especially as technology becomes more central in the organisation and conduct of elections.

f) **Supporting peer-to-peer missions**: Establishing or strengthening the existing connections between EMBs is crucial. The links allow for mutual learning, peer support and learning missions. For example, as part of a partnership with the West African Electoral Commissions Network (ECONEC), EISA regularly provides technical support to this mission, strengthening regional solidarity among EMBs. For instance, from these exchanges, the Electoral Commission of Ghana offered technical support to its counterpart in Liberia. At the same time, the Electoral Commission of Nigeria has also supported the EMBs of Sierra Leone and Burkina Faso, among others.

g) **Support for the professionalisation of civil society**: Civil society plays a crucial role in mobilising voters and promoting peaceful elections. EISA has noted that in settings where civil society is structured and involved, citizen oversight of public action is more methodological, and the quality of political processes is better.

h) **Following up on Observer recommendations:** Recommendations issued by Election Observation Missions are essential for the democratic consolidation and improvement of electoral processes. They are, in fact, valuable assets for institutional actors and technical assistance to learn from the present and better anticipate future actions.

i) **Capacity building of other electoral stakeholders, including the Electoral Court and political parties:** Alongside the EMBs, different actors play a

crucial role in ensuring the quality of elections, including electoral courts and political parties. Hence the need to provide them with substantial technical support, especially in fragile democracies or those undergoing a transition.

2.4.4 Institute for Security Studies (ISS)

The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) representative, Mr Hubert Kinkoh, indicated that the ISS seeks to enhance human security to achieve sustainable peace and prosperity. Its programming revolves around three main areas, namely:

 (a) research on many areas, including elections and democracy conflict and insecurity and unconstitutional changes of government,
 (b) policy engagements,
 (c) technical assistance.

The ISS produces knowledge products to inform its engagement with key interlocutors, including at the Continental and national levels, and to help mitigate the impacts of democracy recession on electoral processes and the work of EMBs. For instance, it has organised a couple of webinars on how governance deficits fuel instability across the continent. The participants in these webinars included government officials, African Union representatives, the UNDP and development partners.

Recently, the ISS has published a detailed account of how electoral manipulation remains a factor that drives democratic regression across the continent in terms of generalised conflict and instability. Moreover, it has shown how democratic recession complicates the work of EMBs throughout the continent, from the Sahel to the horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region.

Key stakeholders are increasingly consuming the ISS knowledge products in the electoral space, offering policy-oriented solutions to complex electoral processes in political transitions. For example, the ISS research looks at how Sudan's political stalemate impairs mediation efforts to bring about some understanding between citizens and the military and offers recommendations. The institute has also organised high-level briefings and seminars focusing on countries holding elections, such as Kenya, Angola, Zambia, and Somalia. Lessons drawn from the dialogue sessions inform the work of EMBs in the countries hosting elections in 2023.

The ISS has also offered technical assistance to governments and the African Union, with the latter commissioning the ISS to develop the sanctions framework on unconstitutional changes in government. The African Union has previously issued sanctions against the defaulters. The ISS continues to help shape the policy framework that will help realise a more comprehensive approach to dealing with this problem.

Session 4 Summary

Key message/s:
- Electoral assistance must be demand-driven and responsive to the expressed needs of the EMB.
- Electoral assistance providers must maintain professional standards regardless of political opinion and interests.
- Elections and electoral assistance are only effective if it adopts a multistakeholder approach to ensure the involvement of all key actors.
- Electoral assistance is not a once-off event but a sustained support based on a thorough understanding of the country's context.

Democracy recession mitigation measures by electoral assistance agencies	Suggested policy measures
1. Strengthening the institutional and operational capacity of EMBs through training and direct financial support. 2. Producing and widely distributing knowledge products to EMBs. 3. Conducting systematic and thematic research with policy-relevant analysis to inform electoral assistance and reforms. 4. Hosting policy engagement platforms to optimise policy responses related to elections and other areas. 5. Deploying long-term and short-term election observation missions to countries holding elections and providing policy recommendations. 6. Introducing civic and voter education programmes for CSO, political parties and other key electoral stakeholders. 7. Facilitating inter-EMB exchanges through dialogue and skills exchange.	1. Invest in election infrastructure and knowledge exchange. 2. Design all stakeholder-wide interventions to ensure the centering of the majority yet marginalised groups in society, including women, youth, and people with disabilities. 3. Develop policy guidelines for the support of newly established EMBs in countries in transition. 4. Develop election-related mitigation programmes for conflict-prone countries. 5. Infuse the use of technology in electoral processes. 6. Development and implementation of voter literacy and measures for civic participation to boost the interest of young voters and integrate them into formal political processes

2.5 SESSION 5: MITIGATION MEASURES BY INTERGOVERNMENTAL BODIES

2.5.1 The African Union (AU)

The African Union representative, Mr Robert Gerenge, underscored the timeliness and importance of the A-WEB International Conference theme of "Safeguarding Election Management Bodies in the Age of Global Democratic Recession". In collaboration with the Association of African Electoral Authorities (AAEA), he announced that the African Union will convene the 7th continental EMB Forum in Maputo in November 2022 to continue with a conversation on the same theme.

While acknowledging the global regression in democracy, Mr Gerenge hastened to point out that the State of democracy in Africa presents a mixed bag. He conceded that there is a resurgence of military coups on the continent, and since April 2021, there have been military coups every quarter. There has also been a double coup in Sudan and a counter-coup in Mali.

However, he said that it is not all gloomy and dark from the conceptual continuum on democracies as elections, democracy as constitutions, and democracy as development. Even within the apparent grim global picture of democratic recession, Africa has successfully conducted elections often under challenging contexts. The cases of the successful Nigerian elections despite the Boko Haram insurgency and the success stories in Liberia, Niger, Tunisia, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Madagascar, and most recently in Zambia, Malawi and Kenya are cases in point.

He said that the past ten to fifteen years of democracy recession have also been a period of significant, peaceful, and democratic transitions in Africa. However, he argued that Africa does not get fair recognition for its achievements, and there is not enough propagation of narratives around successful cases.

Mr Gerenge indicated that the African Union had calibrated its responses holistically instead of only within the election's lens. Accordingly, it has taken the following measures:

1. **Norm setting:** The African Union has developed various normative governance instruments within the elections field. These include:

   a) The 2007 African Charter on Democracy Elections and Governance (ACDEG): The norms support election management according to international and continental standards. However, one of the biggest challenges has been the application of these norms.

   b) The guideline on amending national constitutions: Noting the trend of amending the constitutions by the incumbents for third terms, the African Union is taking measures to thwart this development. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has already added a supplementary protocol on democracy and good governance that restrains member states from changing electoral laws within six months before elections.

2. **Enforcement of the sanctions regime**: The African Union has acted quickly to suspend member states where there were unconstitutional government changes in contravention of the ACDEG. The sanctions regime has helped put political pressure on reforms and a peaceful democratic transition. The African Union adopted the Accra Declaration on Unconstitutional Changes of Government in Africa in 202, which embodied the outcomes of an African Union dialogue on the unconstitutional changes of Government in Africa.

3. **High-level dialogues:** The African Union has held a continental high-level dialogue forum on unconstitutional government changes in Africa. One of the recommendations of this dialogue has been the need to reform the sanctions regime and adopt a comprehensive framework for tackling the governance challenges. In addition, in 2019, the African Union held a dialogue on refugees and internally displaced persons in Africa because the continent of Africa has the most significant number of refugees worldwide because of natural disasters and conflicts. Therefore, the AU has become a conduit for cross-national lesson learning on election management.

4. **Implementing Agenda 2063:** The African Union has adopted several flagship projects under agenda 2063, Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA), to respond to the developmental aspirations of the continent.

5. **Electoral Assistance:** The African Union provides electoral assistance to several EMBs on the continent, the most recent being the Independent Electoral Commission of Lesotho which organised a successful election in October 2022. The electoral assistance to EMBs includes areas such as voter registration, capacity building of EMB officials, and financial resources to support some of the struggling EMBs.

6. **Election observation and reforms:** The African Union observes elections and establishes a linkage between election observation and Technical Support. The observation reports inform the African Union, EMBs and other stakeholders on what works and what areas require improvement in an electoral process. The African Union follows up with the stakeholders on the recommendations for reform.

2.5.2 Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) representative Mr Ulvi Akhundlu indicated that the ODIHR promotes democratic elections, respect for human rights tolerance, non-discrimination, and the rule of law in European member countries. It conducts election observation in the region and has provided electoral to participating states to improve the conduct of the elections since 1991. The ODIHR

has, over the years, transitioned from observation of the election day as the focus to focus on the entire election cycle, including the pre-and post-election day elements. The shift is because it noticed a marked improvement in election-day activities among member states.

The ODIHR has identified challenges ranging from the abuse of administrative rules to disqualify some candidates to the discriminatory voter and candidate verification processes and procedures widely used to limit participation. Compiling voters' lists is another area that remains problematic, especially in the absence of proper checks and balances. In addition, there is a challenge of lack of equitable access to the media and unbiased coverage by the press, glaring lack of participation by underrepresented groups, including women, national minorities, and persons with disability, leading to voter apathy in most participating States.

Mr Akhundlu highlighted the double-edged sword effect of digital media in European elections as elsewhere in the world. On the one hand, it has great potential to make electoral processes more accountable and inclusive. Citizens and candidates have also found new ways to obtain and disseminate information and engage in politics. On the other hand, it comes with a unique set of challenges, including disinformation and cyber security threats, which have become part and parcel of elections across the continent. These problems also impair election observation, primarily through fake news,

He highlighted some concrete measures taken by the ODIHR to mitigate democracy recession challenges, including:

a) **Improvement of ODIHR observation methods**: The organisation has developed and enhanced its observation methodology and introduced new guidelines on using digital technology to observe election campaigns online, including on social media. It incorporates these elements in its election observation work to enhance professionalism and offer practical and comprehensive post-electoral recommendations to all participating states.

b) **Strengthening the fiscal, administration and legal independence of EMBs**: The ODIHR works with decision-makers, governments, and parliaments in strengthening EMB's fiscal, administrative, and legal capacities and providing funding for future emergencies.

c) **Strengthening Election integrity:** The ODIHR enhances the public trust in the integrity of electoral processes and greater participation in the elections through our observation and collaboration with EMBs. Areas of focus are developing and adopting transparent and effective campaign finance rules, preventing misuse of state resources, and robust civic and voter education. The ODIHR has also prioritised working with participating states' electoral stakeholders to translate the ODIHR election observation recommendations into concrete deliverables and outcomes, mindful of the EMBs mandate limitations.

d) **Formal and informal alliances for reforms**: The ODIHR works with global and regional civil society organisations, policymakers, academia, and independent experts to generate broader and stronger partnerships for reforms.

2.5.3 The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth representative, Mr Linford Andrews indicated that over the years, the Commonwealth had played a central role within the international observer community in developing, promoting and enhancing good international practices in observation. He underlined the importance of an accurate prognosis of the underlying causes of democratic recession for an appropriate solution. He called on the international community to support EMBs to ensure a systemic approach to ensure a robust, resilient, and resourceful defence against global threats that undermine democracy. Equally, he beseeched governments to fully realise the social contract between the government and the people.

Mr Andrews indicated that, for its part, the Commonwealth provides support in several ways, including:

a) **Fostering people-to-people linkages:** The Commonwealth leverages its convening power to encourage consultation in building consensus and implementation of reforms encompassing governance, electoral issues, human

rights, and the rule of law. Underpinning this method is the election cycle approach which addresses the pre-election, election, and post-election dimensions.

b) **Providing support through election observation**: The 2018 Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in London endorsed a set of revised Commonwealth guidelines for election observation in member countries. These guidelines are based on a cycle of engagement with member countries that includes pre-electoral support, post-election engagement to review observer recommendations, and thirdly, offering technical assistance through the EMBs on the implementing

c) **Strengthening the functional independence of EMBs**: The Commonwealth advocate for the institutional autonomy of the EMS as a bulwark against political interference in the electoral process. Accordingly, it has provided technical support to the EMBs of Cameroon and Nauru.

d) **Promotion of knowledge sharing:** The Commonwealth promotes knowledge sharing through (a) the Commonwealth electoral network, which is a network of 56 EMBs in member countries. (b) Australia funded the Commonwealth election professionals (CEP) initiative to provide capacity-building training for junior-level election professionals. (c) publications on various aspects, including cybersecurity, political finance, and the impact of COVID-19 on electoral processes.

e) **Strengthening Governance Institutions:** The Commonwealth provided targeted support to a spectrum of oversight institutions, including public sector institutions, anti-corruption bodies, and human rights institutions, to enhance their capacity to become resilient to counter anti-democratic tendencies that may emerge in societies.

f) **Building Partnerships:** The Commonwealth focuses on internal and external partnerships with a range of international development partners and other international observer organisations to reduce duplication of efforts to complement each other.

2.5.3 The United Nations Electoral Assistance Division (EAD)

The United Nations Electoral Assistance Division representative, Mr Hassan Sesay, affirmed the earlier contribution by the UNDP and the horizontal and vertical working arrangements for assistance between the UNDP and the EAD. He indicated that the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), precisely SDG number 16, in which the United Nations works to support Member States in promoting peace, justice and strong institutions, guides the United Nations agencies' interventions.

Mr Sesay outlined the framework for UN electoral assistance established by the UN General Assembly in 1991. Under this framework, the Under Secretary General for the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), to which the Electoral Assistance Division belongs, is responsible for coordinating the entire UN system in supporting Member States' elections. It also ensures consistency and coherence in the delivery of UN electoral assistance. He mentioned that the UN currently supports technical assistance to over 50 Member States worldwide and the standard type of assistance in post-conflict settings to build trust around the electoral process.

Mr Sesay shared the UN's experience building trust around electoral processes and supporting EMBs to build resilience. These include:

a) Conducting genuine elections requires more than improving technical details, it involves more than compliance with international commitments.

b) Without taking away from the critical role played by EMB, electoral assistance providers must recognise that technical assistance cannot substitute diplomatic and political engagement. The UN invests a lot of effort in this area, and sometimes it's often imperceptible. Still, many resources go into the good offices' engagement, mediation and engaging in processes to build election environments.

c) Transparency in electoral administration should be a key objective. Therefore, electoral assistance providers must work with EMBs in promoting transparency and ensuring that the process is maximally consultative and informative with key contestants, civil society, and public involvement.

d) Youth participation is key to countering voter apathy. Many measures have increased youth participation in public life, including youth quotas on the candidates list, the alignments of voting and eligibility ages, greater access to finance, and capacity building for young politicians. In addition, the UN Secretary-General has appointed a special envoy on youth to enhance youth participation and enable access to decision-making processes, including UN processes.

e) The inclusivity of women in electoral processes by EMBs and their involvement in decision-making is vital. However, political parties, both government and opposition, bear the overriding responsibility for successful elections and women's participation.

f) Broader political and economic context shapes confidence in an election. Some factors go beyond the quality of the electoral process itself, compliance with international obligations, and the effectiveness of an EMB. The focus must be to combine technical assistance with political and diplomatic engagement to mitigate democratic recession.

Session 5 Summary	
Key message/s: • The state of democracy is a mixed bag across continents. • A broader political and economic context shapes confidence in an election. • There is a need for continental bodies, governments and EMBs to consolidate the application of democratic norms. • Technical assistance by intergovernmental bodies cannot be a substitute for diplomatic and political engagement. Therefore, EMBs and Governments must do the needful to engage at all levels with all actors.	
Democracy recession mitigation measures by intergovernmental bodies 1. Developing norms and standards for elections, democracy, and governance. 2. Facilitating high-level dialogue at the continental level. 3. Deploying election observation missions. 4. Engaging in preventive diplomacy before and during the elections. 5. Providing technical support after elections for reforms. 6. Producing knowledge products for circulation in the regions. 7. Providing capacity-building support to EMBs. 8. Supporting governments and parliaments to strengthen fiscal and administrative capacities. 9. Collaborating with a broader network of stakeholders, including the sub-regional bodies, to advance electoral reforms. 10. Supporting governments to promote peace and human rights.	**Suggested policy measures** 1. Adopt holistic approaches to mitigating democracy recession through programmes that respond not only to electoral support but to economic development and security. 2. Recalibrate continental interventions to bring to bear the participation of youth in political and electoral processes. 3. Strengthen overall political consultative processes to promote transparency of the electoral processes.

3. CONFERENCE CLOSING

3.1 Closing Remarks

Commissioner Judge Dhaya Pillay delivered the Conference's closing remarks on behalf of the Electoral Commission of South Africa. She thanked conference participants for participating in Africa's maiden A-WEB General Assembly and International Conference. She acknowledged the international lineup of academic and election experts who graced the Conference and delivered high-quality papers.

Justice Pillay expressed confidence that the Conference not only confronted head-on the obstacles impinging on the delivery of credible elections but also delved deeper into the debate beyond the procedural aspects of elections. She added that Conference also turned the spotlight on the relevance and effectiveness of liberal democracy and its capacity to deliver freedoms and development. She indicated that the Conference summary was the testimony of a work and results-oriented Conference. She congratulated the speakers and participants for their resolve to defend and grow electoral democracy worldwide.

Justice Pillay indicated that the speakers at the Conference addressed the causes and implications of democracy recession on electoral democracy and provided policy responses. She hoped the discussion on "safeguarding election management bodies in the age of global democratic recession" would continue among political parties and

other electoral stakeholders. She pledged the Electoral Commission of South Africa's commitment to building the A-WEB into a solid and robust organisation of which Africa and the world can be proud. She called on the A-WEB collective to ensure that future generations benefit from the A-WEB legacy.

Justice Pillay concluded her remarks by wishing all the delegates safe travels back to their destinations and inviting them to return to South Africa to explore its rich heritage, wildlife and the best weather.

4. ANNEXURES

4.1 ANNEXURE 1: Conference Programme

08h00:08h30 Registration

OPENING SESSION

08h30:08h40 Welcome, Opening Remarks and Introduction of the Guest Speaker

Mr Mosotho Moepya, Chairperson, Electoral Commission of South Africa

08h40:09h40 Opening Address by His Excellency, President TM Mbeki

Session Chairperson: Mr Glen Mashinini, Commissioner, Electoral Commission of South Africa

SESSION 1: THE SETTING: THEORY AND PRACTICE

This session provides an overview of the current State of global democratic recession. Using theoretical explanations to the phenomenon, the session delves into the manifestation, trends, and impact of democratic recession at a global scale.

Session Chairperson: Professor Victoria Graham, University of Pretoria

09h40:09h55	**Theory, Origins and Manifestation of Democratic Recession** Professor Larry Diamond, Stanford University
09h55:10h10	**Trends and Impact of Democratic Recession on Democracy** Dr Khabele Matlosa, Centre for African Diplomacy and Leadership, University of Johannesburg
10h10:10h40	**Plenary Discussion**
10h40:10h55	**TEA BREAK**

SESSION 2: DEMOCRATIC RECESSION IMPACT ON ELECTORAL PROCESSES

This session looks at the impact of democratic recession on the electoral processes including on EMB performance, public participation, and election integrity. Through the facilitated plenary discussion, the participants will share views in order to jointly

identify key challenges affecting the EMBs and electoral stakeholders, and proffer innovative strategies on managing those challenges.

Session Chairperson: Dr Roselyn Akombe, UNDP Governance and Peacebuilding Regional Coordinator, Regional Service Centre for Africa

10h55:11h10   **The Impact on Election Management Bodies**

Professor Attahiru Jega, Department of Political Science, Bayero University

11h10:11h25   **The Impact on citizen participation (Women, Youth, People with Disabilities and internally displaced persons)**
Ms. Chandanie Watawala, Executive Director, Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL)

11h25:11h40   **The Impact on Electoral Integrity**

Professor Toby James, Co-Director, The Election Integrity Project, and Professor at the University of East Anglia

11h40:12h10   **Plenary Discussion**

SESSION 3: MITIGATION MEASURES: A PANEL OF CONTINENTAL EMBs FORA

This session comprises a panel of continental EMB fora and provides a snapshot of the different initiatives at continental level in mitigating the impact of democratic recession in electoral processes. The participants will explore innovative ways to deal with the technical, operational, and financial challenges facing the EMBs. The session will specifically address, (a) EMBs citizens engagement through new ICTs, (b) the EMBs capacity needs for human, technical, financial, and other resources, (c) the EMBs' leadership capacities, coordination, and planning skills required to withstand the challenges of democratic recession.

Session Chairperson: Honourable Justice Priscilla Chigumba, Chairperson of the ECF-SADC Executive Committee

Panel of Continental EMBs Fora

12h10:12h25   **AFRICA**: Association of African Electoral Authorities (AAEA)

Justice Dr Chifundo Kachale, the Representative of the the AAEA Southern African Region.

12h25:12h40   **AMERICA**: Organisation of American States (OAS)

Dr Francisco Guerrero, Secretary for Strengthening Democracy

12h40:12h55 **ASIA**: Association of Asian Election Authorities (AAEA)

Mr. Anup Chandra Pandey, Election Commission of India and AAEA Secretariat

12h55:13h25 **Plenary Discussion**

13h25:14h25 **LUNCH BREAK**

SESSION 4: MITIGATION MEASURES THROUGH ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE

The session comprises case study experiences of leading electoral assistance agencies in confronting the excesses of democratic recession and strengthening the resilience of EMBs and electoral democracy. The session will identify (a) what works well (b) what has not worked well, (c) and what must be done differently or in addition to electoral assistance efforts. The session will also propose concrete measures and steps to be taken following this Conference to safeguard EMBs from the impact of democratic recession.

Session Chairperson: Mr Tracy Capaldi Drewett, Executive Director, International Centre for Parliament Studies (ICPS)

Panel of Electoral Assistance Agencies

14h25:14h40 **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)**

Dr Roselyn Akombe, Governance and Peacebuilding Regional Coordinator, Regional Service Centre for Africa, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

14h40:14h55 **International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)**

Dr Roba Sharamo, Director Africa and West Asia

14h55:15h10 **Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA)**

Mr Baidessou Soukolque, Executive Director

15h10:15h25 **Institute for Security Studies (ISS)**

Mr Hubert Kikoh, Researcher, The African Peace, and Security Governance Programme (APSG)

15h25:15h55   **TEA BREAK**

15h55:16h25   **Plenary Discussion**

SESSION 5: MITIGATION MEASURES BY INTERGOVERNMENTAL BODIES

This session will highlight the interventions by intergovernmental bodies in addressing democratic recession particularly, how they have prevented the growth of populism, authoritarian rhetoric and practices undermining democratic ideals. The panel of global, Continental, and inter-governmental institutions will propose improvements to ensure a resilient electoral democracy. They will also highlight measures taken to strengthening EMBs in emerging democracies and post-conflict countries across all continents.

Session Chairperson: Dr Ayodele Odusola, Resident Representative, United Nations Development Programme

Panel of Intergovernmental Bodies

16h25:16h40   **AFRICA**: African Union (AU)

        Mr Robert Gerenge, Principal Advisor to EMBs, Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

16h40:16h55   **EUROPE**: Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

        Mr Ulvi Akhundlu Deputy Head of the Election Department

16h55:17h10   **COMMONWEALTH**

        Mr Linford Andrews, Adviser and Head of the Electoral Support Section

17h10:17h25   **UNITED NATIONS**

        Mr Hassan Sesay, Team Leader, Strategic Partnerships Electoral Assistance Division, Department Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, New York

17h25:17h55   **Plenary Discussion**

SESSION 6: CONFERENCE CLOSING

This session winds up the Conference with a summary of key issues raised and proposals on the way forward for meaningful enhancement of the resilience of the EMBs.

Session Chairperson: Mr Sy Mamabolo, Chief Elections Officer, Electoral Commission of South Africa

17h55:18h00　　**Conference Summary**

Dr Victor Shale, Senior Manager, Office of the CEO, Electoral Commission of South Africa

18h00:18h10　　**Closing Remarks**

Judge Dhaya Pillay, Commissioner, Electoral Commission of South Africa

[1] See the Global State of Democracy: Building Resilience in a Pandemic Era: Annual Report 2021. Online at: https://www.idea.int/gsod/sites/default/files/2021-11/the-global-state-of-democracy-2021_1.pdf

Also see Diamond, L. "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession". *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 1, Jan. 2015, pp. 141-55. Levitsky, S., and L. Way. "The Myth of Democratic Recession". *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 1, Jan. 2015, pp. 45-58.

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