

OPENING ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY, MR. SHIPOKOSA PAULUS MASHATILE, DEPUTY PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA, DURING THE IEC LAUNCH AND SOCIALISATION WORKSHOP, JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA, 27 FEBRUARY 2024

Programme Director, Dr Masuku;

The Chairperson of the Electoral Commission of South Africa, Mr Mosotho Moepya and IEC Commissioners;

The CEO of the IEC in South Africa, Mr Simon Mamabolo;

President of the Association of African Electoral Authorities (AAEA), The Reverend Carlos Simo Matsinhe;

Members of the AAEA Executive Committee;

Deputy Minister of International Relations and Cooperation of the Republic of South Africa, HE Mr Alvin Botes;

Representative of the African Union Commission; led by Ambassador William Awindor-Kanyinge;

Representatives of the United Nations Agencies and Other Development Partners;

Representatives of the Election Management Bodies;

Representatives of Civil Society Organisations;

Distinguished Guests;

Members of the Media;

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to address you today on behalf of millions of South Africans at this historic event, which includes the launch of the Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in African Elections, which were adopted by the Association of African Electoral Authorities (AAEA) General Assembly at its 11th Meeting on November 3, 2023, in Cotonou, Benin.

The epoch-making development and official adoption of the Principles and Guidelines by the continental EMB body has prompted Election Management Bodies (EBMs) to use digital and social media in election management.

The adoption of the Principles and Guidelines signalled a new era for EMBs in the quest to reap the benefits of digital and social media while also investigating ways to mitigate the inherent harms that could jeopardise the credibility of electoral processes.

The Principles and Guidelines are a comprehensive framework for the EMBs and electoral stakeholders on how best to interface with digital and social media before, during, and after elections.

Therefore, the development of these principles and guidelines on social media, spearheaded by the Electoral Commission of South Africa on behalf of AAEA, is ground-breaking on the African continent.

It is also among the few such endeavours globally, including the sterling work done by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in recent years.

The timing of the continent-wide socialisation programme coincides with heightened election activity around the continent, with over 20 African Union member states, including South Africa, expected to hold elections in 2024.

The socialisation programme will enhance the election preparedness of the EMBs in these nations. The programme will also educate and encourage the application of these principles and guidelines among various national stakeholders.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the fast-paced digital world of today, we must recognise the important role that social media plays in shaping people's opinions and establishing the narratives propelled during elections.

As we witness the increasing use of these platforms in political campaigns, it is imperative that we establish clear principles and guidelines to ensure a fair, transparent, and inclusive electoral process.

Moreover, it is critical to utilise these social media platforms in a constructive manner to inform and disseminate positive messages regarding elections, with a particular focus on the youth of Africa, who, like elsewhere, are gaining significant traction on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and others.

We should, therefore, use these principles and guidelines to emphasise the importance of promoting online integrity, safeguarding against

misinformation and disinformation, protecting privacy and data security, and fostering a level playing field for all candidates and political parties.

Through adherence to these principles, we will be able to safeguard the values of democracy through free and fair elections and allow voters to make choices.

We have a significant obligation to educate our population about the risks associated with disseminating misinformation, particularly concerning elections, since false claims can erode trust in the electoral process and provoke a wave of anti-voters and instability in our countries.

Misinformation and disinformation are a threat to democracy, they undermine confidence in our elections, and have the potential to suppress voter turnout.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The reality is that the political environment during elections is tense and volatile, and we should use social media with responsibility to ensure that the content we share is credible and accurate.

In this regard, we must adhere to the adopted guidelines to achieve the main objectives of developing these principles and guidelines, which are

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- To enhance existing continental and regional normative frameworks governing the conduct of elections by specifically incorporating issues of digital and social media in elections.
- To create awareness among EMBs and other stakeholders on the benefits and threats of digital and social media to the electoral process and integrity.
- To foster policy development on digital and social media in elections by Election Management Bodies, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and Member States.

As the South African government, we are glad to have contributed to the achievement of this ambitious dream, which has now become a reality.

We are grateful for the support given to the programme by the African Union Commission, the United Nations Electoral Assistance Division (EAD), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNESCO, and all the development partners and digital companies that provided expert input in shaping the content throughout this process.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I have previously stated, the timing of the launch of these principles and guidelines is important in the South African context for two primary reasons.

First of all, it coincides with our upcoming elections, which are set for the 29th May 2024. This provides an opportunity for fine-tuning the regulatory and operational protocols for the use of social media during these elections.

Secondly, players in the digital media industry are making efforts on a global scale to counteract the negative effects of social and digital media. An example of this is the recent signing of “A Tech Accord to Combat Deceptive Use of AI in 2024 Elections” by technology companies at the Munich Security Conference on 16 February 2024.

I must mention that I am confident in our electoral processes and believe that ours is an example of what an entrenched democracy's resilience looks like.

We will therefore continue to uphold the right to free and fair elections in this election and thereafter, as we have done since 1994.

The vast majority of voters have always set the course that South Africa should take, guaranteeing that our democracy's fundamental principles are upheld.

I urge political parties that participate in robust debate on social media to uphold ethical standards and refrain from going too far in being unjust, deceptive, or hateful. We can run campaigns on social media without being malicious or degrading of both individuals and organisations.

I am encouraged to note from the programme that this is not an ordinary event but a strategic sensitisation aimed at equipping the EMBs with practical means to deal with digital and social media.

The selection of participating EMBs holding elections in 2024 and 2025 speaks to the urgency and resolve the AAEA and its partners have in harnessing the benefits of digital and social media while mitigating the inherent challenges it comes with.

In order for the efforts put into developing these Principles and Guidelines to bear fruit, I would like to encourage everyone to pay attention to the need for an inclusive approach to the domestication process. You must

ensure that all stakeholders are on-board from the onset in order to avoid this process being reduced to an agenda for EMBs alone.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You have an enormous task ahead of you. Over the next three days, you will unpack the Principles and Guidelines document and identify areas for domestication depending on your peculiar circumstances.

However, considering the diverse talents gathered at this event from various corners of the world, I am confident and optimistic that you will live up to the task before you.

I would like to thank the electoral assistance Agencies and digital companies for walking this journey with the African EMBs, offering them technical expertise, and building their capacities. Your collective efforts are a huge contribution to electoral democracy on our continent.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I conclude, it gives me great pleasure to officially declare the Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa launched.

I wish you fruitful deliberations that will encourage appropriate measures for strengthening the EMB's capacities in the use of digital and social media. I also take this opportunity to wish all the EMBs holding elections in 2024, including our own IEC, successful delivery of credible elections.

I thank you.