



LAUNCH OF MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS 2021

9 JUNE 2021

OPENING REMARKS BY THE CHAIRPERSON OF ELECTORAL COMMISSION MR GLEN MASHININI

Thank you Commissioner Masuku.

Distinguished guests.

Ladies and gentlemen.

In the interest of time let me not repeat the acknowledgements of our distinguished guests as outlined by Dr Masuku.

But on behalf of the Commission let me add my voice of welcome to all of you to the launch the 2021 Municipal Elections mobilisation campaign.

The Electoral Commission is extremely grateful for your attendance both physically and those of you who have joined us via virtual channels and live television broadcasts.

Honoured guests

The 2021 Municipal Elections are taking place in the most unprecedented and abnormal circumstances in our history. As we speak, our country is facing the onslaught of a third wave of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the past 18 months this pandemic has devastated the world and our country, infecting over 170 million people globally and more than 1.7 million South Africans to date.

The death toll globally is approaching 4 million lives lost. This includes 57 000 of our countrymen and women.

In addition to the loss of life and illness, the pandemic has ravaged our economy, led to the loss of millions of jobs, and thrown our social norms, customs, traditions and religious and cultural practices into disarray.

Notwithstanding this, we cannot allow the pandemic to change our values, our principles, our beliefs and our resolve to overcome this threat and protect our people and our way of life.

At the heart of this resolve stands our Constitution as a beacon for our continuing journey – in the words of the Preamble to the Constitution - : *“to heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights”*.

Since the Constitution was adopted 25 years ago it has never been more important and more timely to remind ourselves what we as a country continue to stand for and to strive for.

Speaking in Parliament on the 8th of May 1996 on the adoption of the new Constitution then then-President Nelson Mandela said: (Open quote)

“This Constitution is our own humble contribution to democracy and the culture of human rights world-wide; and it is our pledge to humanity that nothing will steer us from this cause.” (Close quote)

Compatriots, let us repeat in action those words: Nothing must steer us from our Constitutional democracy!

Ladies and gentlemen

The Constitution provides two fundamental guidelines on elections:

1. Firstly it requires that elections must be free and fair
2. Secondly it sets a maximum term of office of five years for legislatures and municipal councils and allows 90 days from the expiry of the term to conduct elections

What our Constitution does not do is to define what constitutes “free and fair elections”

Over the past 27 years we have set a strong precedent and high standards against which we judge the success of elections.

The dilemma facing the Commission and all of us today is whether these same standards of freeness and fairness apply without amendment under such abnormal and challenging conditions.

While remaining true to the imperatives of our Constitution, the Commission cannot be oblivious to the threats posed by the pandemic to our people, our economy and our democracy.

Preparing for our country’s fifth Municipal Elections under such uncertain and unpredictable conditions has therefore presented the Commission with one of the most difficult balancing acts in our history.

The Commission is literally walking a tightrope:

- On the one side is the tyranny of the elections becoming a super-spreader event, leading to further loss of human life
- On the other side is the tyranny of the failure to adhere to the dictates of our Constitution, leading to democratic back-sliding and setting an undesirable precedent for the future.

We dare not fall to either side!

All life is precious and we cannot act recklessly or irresponsibly. Yet equally we cannot risk undermining the Constitution and the democratic gains of the past 27 years.

Given the enormous ramifications of either postponing or proceeding with elections, the Commission recently appointed the Former Deputy Chief Justice Dikgang Moseneke to conduct an independent review of what constitutes “free and fair elections” under such abnormal circumstances.

Such a process is provided for under Section 14(4) of the Electoral Commission Act. This process may also identify additional mitigation measures to further fortify the elections against the impact of the pandemic.

This will help guide the Commission and all of us in better understanding the requirements for free and fair elections not only now but for the future.

Distinguished guests

Based on the Constitution, the law, operational readiness for the elections and a thorough assessment of the current pandemic conditions, the Commission is of the view that we are technically ready to deliver the elections.

Therefore we believe the 2021 Municipal Elections should proceed as things currently stand.

This assessment was conducted in consultation with health and disaster management authorities and various subject-matter experts.

The Commission has also drawn extensively on the experiences of more than 100 countries and territories around the world which have successfully held elections under COVID-19 conditions.

The Commission assures the nation that effective mitigation measures are in place to ensure the elections are conducted safely.

These protocols have been developed and tested successfully in over 150 by-elections over the past seven months.

The Commission appeals to all stakeholders to rally behind the 2021 Municipal Elections to ensure they are free, fair and safe.

Distinguished guests

This month we commemorate the 45th anniversary of the day young South Africans took to the streets of Soweto, later spreading to every township and rural neighbourhood, to protest against Bantu education.

Along with many other brave actions and sacrifices, this defiance of a repressive regime eventually led to our country attaining our first democratic elections and the adoption of our Constitution.

Sadly, many became martyred, paying the ultimate sacrifice of their lives to deliver democracy from the tyranny of apartheid.

We owe these brave freedom fighters the continued defence of our hard-won democracy!

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken so much from all of us:

- It has taken the lives of family members, friends and colleagues
- It has taken jobs, livelihoods and businesses
- And it has taken many of the freedoms we used to take for granted

But we dare not let it take away our hard-won democracy and the voice of the people!

Elections are not about the Electoral Commission, political parties or independent candidates.

Elections are about ordinary citizens coming together to determine the future of our cities, our towns, our communities and our neighbourhoods in an expression of the will of the people.

Distinguished guests

Hastings Ndlovu, Hector Pieterse and the tens of thousands of other young people who gave their lives for our freedom left us a legacy of a world-class Constitution whose founding provisions are

(Open quote):

One sovereign, democratic state founded on the values of:

- *Human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms*
- *Non-racialism and non-sexism*
- *Supremacy of the Constitution and the rule of law; and*
- *Universal adult suffrage, a national common voters' roll, regular elections and a multiparty system of democratic government to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness*

(Close quote)

Compatriots

The epoch we are in calls on us to stand together in our resolve to march forward with our constitutional democratic order.

Our duty under the onslaught of this invisible enemy – the Corona virus – is to avoid erratic decisions and to stabilise the country by ensuring the continuity of our hard-won electoral dispensation.

Our collective leadership must ensure certainty and overcome the obstacles we face by adapting our way of doing electoral business and by being innovative as never before!

Our appeal to the current generation of freedom-loving South Africans is to use the Municipal Elections to leave an indelible footprint for posterity:

A legacy of continuing an unbroken record of adhering to the dictates of our Constitution and staying the course on our democratic journey.

A journey that the youth of our country from one generation to the next sacrificed so much for:

- A journey that Anton Mzwakhe Lembede fought for;
- A journey that Dikgang Moseneke went to the dungeons of apartheid prisons for;
- A journey Tsietsie Mashinini perished in exile for;
- And a journey Hector Pieterse paid the ultimate price on the cold winter streets of Soweto for.

Our responsibility today is equally critical but vastly easier than their sacrifices:

1. We must register to vote and ensure our registration particulars are up to date
2. We must participate actively in the coming elections
3. We must at all times be safe and consider the safety of others

Together let us forge forward on our democratic journey!

I thank you