

**SAFEGUARDING ELECTION MANAGEMENT BODIES IN
THE AGE OF GLOBAL DEMOCRATIC RECESSION**

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

**Cape Town, South Africa
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OPENING ADDRESS

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- **DIRECTOR OF CEREMONIES**
- **CHAIRPERSON OF THE ASSOCIATION OF WORLD ELECTION BODIES (A-WEB)**
- **MEMBERS OF THE A-WEB EXECUTIVE**
- **THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION OF SOUTH AFRICA, COMMISSIONERS, CHIEF ELECTIONS OFFICER AND STAFF,**
- **HONOURABLE MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT**
- **MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE**
- **LEADERS OF POLITICAL PARTIES**
- **MEMBERS OF THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS**
- **REPRESENTATIVES OF THE UNITED NATIONS AGENCIES AND OTHER DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS**
- **REPRESENTATIVES OF THE CONTINENTAL ELECTION MANAGEMENT FORUMS**
- **REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ELECTION MANAGEMENT BODIES**
- **REPRESENTATIVES OF ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE AGENCIES**
- **REPRESENTATIVES OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS**
- **MEMBERS OF THE MEDIA**
- **EXCELLENCIES**
- **DISTINGUISHED GUESTS**
- **LADIES AND GENTLEMEN**

It gives me great pleasure and singular honour to deliver the opening address at this Association of World Election Bodies (A-WEB) International Conference this important issue. The fact that our collective consideration of “Safeguarding Election Management Bodies in the Age of Global Democratic Recession” takes place at an event hosted by the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) attests to our recognition that challenges facing democracy and human rights are also influenced and often significantly shaped by international developments and trends.

DIRECTOR OF CEREMONIES, I wish to invite all of us to jointly acknowledge the A-WEB Executive and its membership organisations for the colossal efforts and contribution to enhancing electoral democracy and election integrity over the past nine years.

More especially, it must not have been easy for A-WEB as a membership organisation to support its entire constituency and keep it motivated during the global COVID-19 Pandemic.

I equally wish to congratulate the Electoral Commission of South Africa for assuming the leadership of this global election body on the eve of its 10th Anniversary to be celebrated in 2023, and for hosting a successful 5TH A-WEB General Assembly on African soil.

There is no doubt in my mind that the Electoral Commission of South Africa and the new A-WEB Executive Committee will deliver on their mandate over the next two years and beyond.

This International Conference on the theme "Safeguarding Election Management Bodies in the Age of Global Democratic Recession" offers an excellent opportunity to the Election Management Bodies (EMBs) together with other key electoral actors to assess some of the electoral democracy and development experiences around the world.

It is clear from the choice of the conference theme and the conceptual approach to the conference programme that the A-WEB and its membership are cognizant of the mantra that elections are not an end in and of themselves, but a means to an end.

Therefore, the EMBs should first be empowered to deliver credible elections that can produce the type of leadership that is fit to promote and defend democracy and development through the coherent social policies.

The predicament that this conference must grapple with is firstly, what should happen when those leaders and governments are not committed to ensuring the integrity of the elections?

Secondly, what must be done when the EMBs and other public institutions established to protect and advance democracy become the focus for attack by the media, political parties and some observers which

include allegations of bias or cohabitation with the ruling elite without facts or evidence being provided?

I note that the conference objectives are an attempt to comprehensively respond to this predicament. These objectives include:

- 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.

DIRECTOR OF CEREMONIES, there is no gainsaying that the late 1990s political transitions to democracy have not necessarily resulted in functioning democracies everywhere. The varying trends of that transition trajectory from one continent to another, as well as from one country to another, have led to mixed bag of results.

As Professor Larry Diamond rightly notes in his recent January 2022 article in volume 31 of the Journal of Democracy entitled “Democracy’s Arch: From Resurgent to Imperilled”: the different actors and the strategies they adopted have determined the transitions.

In some countries such strategies have helped to resolve protracted and seemingly intractable conflicts, while in others violent conflict and civil strife continue undiminished.

External and internal factors have combined to imbue democratic efforts in some countries and have served to propel democratic recession in others.

One notes with concern that the 2021 Global State of Democracy Report recorded the increase of three times the number of countries experiencing democratic recession as against the number of countries moving towards democracy since 2016.

Indeed, there are troubling signs reflecting the fragility of what has been achieved. Among the group characterised as being of the nascent democracy, some are already suffering reversals. The report shows that, until 2020, these reversals tended to be related to the integrity of elections, the role of the media and freedom of expression. The major drivers of regression are characterised in the Report as including:

- The rise of illiberal and populist parties in government.
- Increasing levels of societal and political polarization combined with low levels of support for democracy.
- Economic crises and poverty.

- Mimicking of the large and influential economic and geopolitical players who exhibit, among other things, the lack of respect for constitutionalism, adherence to the rule of law and effective functioning political and economic institutions.
- The struggle to balance freedom of expression (especially through social media) with public safety, as well as the scourge of disinformation.

DIRECTOR OF CEREMONIES, Ladies and gentlemen, based on the above prognosis in the Global State of Democracy Report, it is axiomatic that institutionalising and nurturing democracy is a daunting challenge. We must acknowledge the reality that both democratic and non-democratic practices can and do co-exist, at times, in the same country.

Therefore, it is important that, as the Conference tackles the different session topics, attention is paid to the drivers of democracy and its strengthening as well as the non-democratic aspects which undermine and threaten gains made and how these threats manifest at a continental and country levels.

This conference is both very significant and timely. There are some issues which fall within the ambit of electoral management and this may result in the scope of work and the need for collaboration with others to change. Disinformation is a clear example of such an issue. Conference will consider electoral matters that contribute towards and those that combat democratic recession challenges and how best to respond through proposed institutional and policy reforms.

There are key questions that must foreground the discussion during this Conference. For example:

- What are key characteristics or indicators of democratic recession and how do these evolve and manifest globally?
- What is the state of electoral democracy and election management among A-WEB member countries?

- What is the reality and the dangers, pitfalls and overall trends in democratic recession?
- What are the implications for electoral processes of a loss of trust in political processes, of confidence in democracy and of faith in governance institutions?
- What is the impact of democratic recession: on the performance of election management bodies, on public participation (including of citizens from vulnerable groups such as women, youth, people with disabilities and internally displaced persons), and on election integrity?
- What institutional and policy reforms are required to safeguard election management bodies in the context of democratic recession?

DIRECTOR OF CEREMONIES, it goes without saying that nothing succeeds by default; that the success of a democracy that delivers improved livelihoods for the majority of its people requires deliberate steps to be taken towards such attainment. One of these steps involves the processes by which the people are able to choose who should govern and how any mandate is given to or withdrawn from those who are elected.

It is for this reason that I joined this gathering to render my personal support and word of encouragement to the A-WEB in its efforts to address the dynamics that underlie the democratic momentum around the world.

DIRECTOR OF CEREMONIES, with these few remarks, let me wish the conference fruitful deliberations and we look forward to the decisive resolutions and plan of action to deal with the identified challenges.

I am informed that after a very full day of deliberations, delegates will get the opportunity to explore our beautiful city and heritage sites and I join all South Africans in welcoming your presence.

I wish you a productive conference and safe travels back to your different destinations.

