



REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

BY THE

HONORABLE ERASTUS UTONI

MINISTER OF URBAN AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

ON THE

**OCCASION OF THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE
24TH ANNUAL GENERAL CONFERENCE OF THE ELECTORAL
COMMISSIONS FORUM OF SADC COUNTRIES**

Tuesday, 25th October 2022

Swakopmund, Namibia

Thank you Director of Ceremonies

- **ECF-SADC President & Chairperson of Independent Electoral Commission of Botswana – Hon. Justice Barnabas Nyamadzabo;**
- **ECF-SADC Executive Committee Chairperson & Chairperson of Zimbabwe Electoral Commission Hon Justice Priscilla M. Chigumba;**
- **Chairperson of Electoral Commission of Namibia, Ms. Elsie Nghikembua;**
- **Chairpersons and Commissioners from various Election Management Bodies (EMB's) of the SADC Countries;**
- **International Partner Organizations and Invited Guests;**
- **CEO's of Election Management Bodies and Executive Directors of State Institutions;**
- **Senior Government Officials of the Republic of Namibia;**
- **Distinguished Resource Persons and Facilitators;**
- **Leaders of Political Parties and Organizations present;**
- **Representatives of Civil Society Organizations;**
- **Esteemed Members of the Media;**
- **Distinguished Guests;**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen.**

1. It is my great pleasure and honor to deliver a speech from this eminent stage whilst representing the Government of the Republic of Namibia. I am greatly honored to welcome you to the 24th Annual General Conference of the Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries (ECF-SADC) in the Republic of Namibia. I wish to express our gratitude for your presence at this very important occasion. This Conference is of great significance, as it demonstrates the Forum's commitment to the enhancement of democracy and governance, peace and stability in the SADC region. I must begin by thanking all of you for availing yourselves to serve in this important mission whose objective is to strengthen democracy in our region.
2. It is thanks to the likes of all of you, that this region is a shining light of democracy and a beacon of hope on our continent. SADC is a region of peace and democracy because we have men and women of your caliber who are ready to leave their homes for regional assignments like the one you are here to undertake.

Director of Ceremonies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

3. Electoral integrity is central to the credibility of electoral processes and the legitimacy of election outcomes. Elections have been known to either strengthen or undermine democracy, human rights, security and development, depending on their credibility and integrity. The vision for inclusive democracy and electoral accountability is one that shifts power from political and economic elites to citizens, particularly women and young people.
4. Given their central role in the promotion and protection of electoral integrity, the perception of the effectiveness, neutrality and impartiality of EMBs throughout the electoral cycle is key to determining the acceptability of electoral outcomes. Which is why the focus on EMBs in the discourse on electoral integrity and accountability in our region is timely, as are policy reflections and the development of action plans on capacitating EMBs to deliver credible elections across our countries.

5. The key principles that underpin public trust and electoral integrity are consequently ethical behavior; fairness and impartiality; and transparency and accountability. Worth noting, electoral integrity also thrives on the professionalism and independence of the Election Management Bodies (EMBs), the rule of law and electoral justice, the establishment of institutions and norms of multiparty competition, the removal of barriers to universal and equal participation, and the regulation of political finance. When these are absent, the very essence of elections allowing citizens to participate and advance their interests in political processes is hindered.
6. Therefore, electoral integrity is indispensable for the nurturing and deepening of democratic and participatory governance in the SADC region. Today, free and fair elections, the primary expression of democratic will for collective government, are far from guaranteed in many countries around the world.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

7. The theme of this conference is aptly titled: “***Stakeholder Engagement and Accountability to promote public trust in Electoral Processes in the SADC region***”. Citizen participation is paramount for the success of democracy. Elections are important for **civic participation** as they provide a means for excluded groups to be heard and to influence the political agenda. If the decision-making process excludes the masses, one cannot talk of a democracy. For meaningful citizen participation in the politics of their country and, thus, the success of democracy, it is necessary that citizens know their roles and duties in a democracy. In light of this, EMB’s must carry with them as sense of obligation to make deliberate efforts to engage all electoral stakeholders across the political spectrum. I am confident that the Seminar to take place later today will offer us an opportunity to debate on the theme and make recommendations to guide our policy direction as we go back to our countries and to the region as a whole.

8. On the other hand, it is the task of citizens to nurture institutions and practices that are compatible with local conditions and conducive to democratic aspirations. I therefore, posit that Political Parties, Civil Society Organizations and the Media through active participation in the electoral process must recognize their role in supporting Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) in strengthening the legal and constitutional basis for independent and impartial electoral organizations. I equally implore EMBs to strengthen mechanisms for regular and consultative multi-stakeholder engagement throughout the electoral cycle between the EMBs, Political Parties and Civil Society Organizations, among others in order to promote a more participatory electoral process.

9. Furthermore, accountability is one of the fundamental elements for an EMB to achieve its mandate to deliver free and fair elections as a public service to the citizens. Elections and other political processes are pivotal to the quality of a country's governance and can either greatly advance or set back a country's long-term democratic development. Good governance and Accountability are principles whose application is essential to a country achieving genuine democracy and development and it brings along transparent and accountable processes and institutions.

Esteemed Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

10. Democracy without the accountability is quite literally unthinkable. Electoral justice provides the linkages between democracy and accountability. If considered not solely an instrument of the government but as a rule to which the entire society, including the government, is bound, accountability is fundamental in advancing democracy. Strengthening the legislative framework around issues of accountability has to be approached not only by focusing on the application of norms and procedures but one must also emphasize its fundamental role in protecting rights and advancing inclusiveness, in this way framing the protection of rights within the broader discourse on human development.

In this context, the importance of law reform in strengthening the legislative framework around political party funding and declaration of assets and liabilities cannot be overemphasized.

11. EMBs are responsible for managing some or all of the elements that are essential for the conduct of elections and instruments of direct democracy. As such, they are central for entrenching a corruption-free culture in our electoral processes. The capacity to deliver democratic, credible, corruption-free and peaceful elections for EMBs can be appraised by their independence, impartiality and resourcefulness (financial and technical). The absence of these raises serious questions about their ability to deliver on their mandates. Allow me to emphasize that sufficient and consistent funding of EMBs, electoral processes management and elections is an imperative for strengthening democracy in the SADC region especially in countries that are transitioning from conflict and had relied on international support to fund budgets for such processes.

12. Electoral processes are an important element of democracy consolidation. However, elections on their own do not necessarily guarantee the consolidation and entrenchment of democratic values and principles. Since the dawn of multiparty elections in Africa and the SADC region, elections have increasingly become competitive as political parties and candidates compete for political victory. Citizens and civil society organisations have increased their demands on EMBs and other electoral Institutions to be more open and transparent in management of electoral processes.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

13. It gives me great pleasure to note that the SADC region continues to boldly take strides towards consolidating democracy and good governance through a process of peer learning and exchange, which is the basis of the establishment of critical organizations such as yours - the Electoral Commissions Forum. I am happy that this body has grown to become the most respected EMB network in the SADC region.
14. As you are aware, SADC has developed its own Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections, in whose introduction our countries agree to build upon our common historical and cultural identity forged over centuries, and committed to a shared future. The revised Guidelines are used together with the SADC Model Law on Elections as introduced by the SADC Parliamentary Forum, the EISA/ECF Principles on Elections, Monitoring and Observation in the SADC region and the AU African Charter on Democracy in Elections. These Guidelines remind us that in the SADC Treaty, we agree to abide by the principles of “human rights, democracy and the rule of law”, and to collectively “consolidate, defend and maintain democracy, peace, security, and stability” in the region.
15. We are here to give effect to those undertakings. SADC member states deserve to be applauded for their immense contribution towards the maintenance of peace, security, stability and good governance through their deployment of personnel in peace and security missions in the region, including, but not limited to elections observations in the region.
16. In conclusion, Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish to state that the Namibian government will continue to support the **Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries** through the Electoral Commission of Namibia to strengthen regular, credible elections and entrench democracy in the SADC region and beyond.

With these few words, it is my singular honor and pleasure to now declare the 24th Annual General Conference of Electoral Commission’s Forum of SADC Countries officially opened.

I THANK YOU.