

Director of Elections, Mr Moses Ndjarakana,
Mr Erastus Semango, Facilitator and Resource Person of this important
workshop
Distinguished participants from the Electoral Commission of Namibia

I want to use this opportunity to share with you some brief thoughts about the importance of this workshop for the staff members of the Election Commission of Namibia.

Representing an organisation whose main task is to support democracy by strengthening democratic institutions among other things, I want to start with a short reflection on democracy.

As you all know, democracy is a bad political system – except that history has shown that all other political systems are by far worse. Hence, we have to be grateful that we have it where we have it, like in Namibia, and we have to strive to get it where we haven't got it, and I won't mention any examples.

Even were we have it, democracy is like a precious flower or a delicate plant; it needs constant watering, fertilizing, and cultivation by strengthening its institutions – like independent electoral commissions - , by upholding checks and balances of transparency and accountability and by promoting democratic culture and robust public debate. Without this constant struggle for excellence and perfection, democratic political systems easily degenerate into a pure façade behind which authoritarian rule can rear its ugly head.

Democracy is first and foremost about the right of the people to choose other people to whom they give a mandate to govern important parts of their lives. A democratic mandate therefore, by nature, can only be a temporary mandate. After all, nobody wants to write blank cheques to others to rule one's life!

Unfortunately, very often, this notion of a temporary mandate is easily forgotten once you are in power. Some people at least, once they are in power, think that, for all the good they have done in the past and the trust their people may have once placed in them, they have acquired a moral right to govern in perpetuity. In particular unfortunately, this seems to happen, if they can call themselves liberators. And when the people, instead of being eternally grateful, is showing signs of unhappiness with their performance in government and may no longer be prepared to renew their mandate, often times they are not particularly choosy in the means they apply in order to cling to power.

And this is a problem, of course. Because in democracy it is not the will of the ruling elite, it is the will of the people that must prevail at all times. Competition in the political arena must be free and fair, based on rules that are fair and applied to everybody in the same even-handed manner.

Now this is where the difficult task of independent election commissions (IEC) or more general, of election management bodies (EMBs) comes in. They are the custodians and the enforcers of the rules of the game, of the game politicians and political parties have to play to win or to retain power, entrusted onto them by the people. This, by all standards, is not an easy task. Setting and applying the rules of the game in such a highly contested area requires strong, competent and independent electoral institutions. And it requires courageous and committed men and women of *expertise, integrity, independence, impartiality* and *experience* who run them.

This is why members and staff of the Electoral Commission of Namibia continue to have a huge responsibility towards the nation and its citizens. They are just not allowed to fail in their duties. Hence, the importance of opportunities such as this one, where ECN staff members get the chance to further improve their skills and expert knowledge under the able guidance of an experienced resource person and facilitator, where they also get a chance to reflect jointly on the principles, norms and standards that should guide their work.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is proud to be associated with that endeavour and I particularly want to commend the Acting Director of Elections, Mr Ndjarakana, for having taken this initiative. You can be assured that we at FES will continue to support this and other types of activity aimed at strengthening electoral democracy, be it at regional level in our co-operation with the Southern African Election Commission Forum (ECF) based in Gaborone, Botswana or be it at national level, through our support for Election Management Bodies in the respective countries, such as the Electoral Commission of Namibia.

I thank you!