

Director of Ceremonies,
His Excellency, the Speaker of the National Assembly of the Republic of
Namibia, and President of the Interparliamentary Union, Mr Theo-Ben Gurirab,
The Chairman of the Electoral Commission of Namibia, Mr Victor Tonchi and
all Electoral Commissioners here present,
The Director of Election, Mr Moses Ndjarakana,
Members of Parliament,
Representatives of Political Parties,
Other Stakeholders in democratic elections,
Members of the Media,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

it is an honour and a great privilege to address you here this morning at the official opening of the Namibia 2009 Electoral Symposium of the Electoral Commission of Namibia. This important event is the starting point for another election year during which *“the Namibian citizenry is once again consolidating 19 years of independence and democracy by going for Presidential and National elections”* – as it is stated in the invitation we have all received.

Director of Ceremonies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

elections are the lifeblood of democracy. Regular ballots give the citizens the opportunity to register their approval or disapproval of the Government of the day, to stand by their leaders, reaffirm them or reject them and choose new ones.

Elections in a democracy are not just a ritual played according to some strange rules of the game or a technical process. Elections in a democracy are empowering people to actively shape their own collective destiny. To be meaningful, however, voters must understand the essence and the consequence of democracy. This requires some form of political and voter education, by which people can learn about the relevance and purpose of regular elections in a democracy. This is why my own organisation as well as other stakeholder here present whose mission is to promote democracy are actively engaging in this type of work, and not only in election years like this one.

At the same time it is also important to harness the goodwill, the interest and the enthusiasm of all those who care for democracy and who actively want to support the Commission in delivering free, fair and credible elections. It is just two weeks ago that a coalition of civil society organisation in this country held a consultative workshop on the legal aspects of free and fair elections in Namibia. That workshop came up with a rather impressive list of recommendations, the merits of which I don't want to judge, but leave to those who know more about

the conditions for free and fair elections here in Namibia than I do. The Electoral Commission of Namibia, therefore, has to be commended for its proactive role in engaging not only political parties, but also civil society and other stakeholders to share perspectives on election-related matters and provide them with a platform through this symposium where they can raise their concerns.

Director of Ceremonies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

from the vantage point of the sympathetic foreign observer that I am or at least claim to be, the track record of substantially free, fair, and peaceful elections is an achievement that Namibia can be proud of. It still makes Namibia a beacon of democracy, not only on this continent together with countries such as Botswana, Ghana, Mauritius or South Africa, but also way beyond.

This track record is an asset in terms of ‘political capital’ that Namibia has gained with international organisations, cooperating partners and investors. The fact, for instance that Namibia qualified for the “*Millenium Challenge Account*” as one of only a handful of countries in the developing world as a sign for its democratic standards, is just one very concrete indicator among many others to proof this point; although not everybody in this country seems to be appreciative of that.

On the other hand, as we are just experiencing it now in this global financial crisis, there are certain types of assets or types of capital that can vanish like smoke in the air, virtually from one moment to the next.

‘*Political capital*’ is also one such elusive type of asset. It can never be taken for granted, it can disappear quicker than one might think. In my humble view, the challenge for Namibia is to not become complacent but to actively preserve and built on its democratic achievements. A good start to combat complacency is always to acknowledge that, indeed, there are challenges and weaknesses. Challenges, which, if left unaddressed, might in the long run take this country down a slippery slope away from where it stands now. The message is simple: democracy, like any other asset, needs regular maintenance and from time to time some repair work as well.

Director of Ceremonies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

in politics, “*perception is reality*”, as *Joram Rukambe* said the other day. With regard to the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections, preserving Namibia’s international credentials as a stable democracy and the perception that things are going well, in my mind require at least three things:

first and foremost and very obviously, the *end result* of the 2009 election must be seen to again reflect the will of the people, with an outcome that ideally will be accepted as free and fair by all and sundry, winners and losers;

Secondly, the state institutions or structures which are assigned the task to run these elections and guarantee their integrity must be capacitated and capable of performing their job in an effective, efficient, even-handed and transparent manner and must be perceived of doing so; the election administration must adhere to the so-called “*five ethical principals for election administration*” by demonstrating respect for the law, being non-partisan and neutral, being transparent, being accurate and being designed to serve the voters;

Thirdly, *peace and political tolerance* must prevail. Although for politicians the stakes are high during election time and emotions are often taking over when political parties and their supporters are in campaign mode, common sense, level-headedness and fairness must ultimately prevail, whereby it is upon the political leaders to lead by example - and be perceived of doing so.

Director of Ceremonies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In conclusion, let me say that there are those who claim that electoral competition and periodic elections alone do not make democracy happen. This is certainly true. Elections are not everything in democracy. But it is equally true that without free and fair elections democracy is nothing. It is my sincere hope and firm belief that this symposium, which we are inaugurating today, is becoming a milestone in a process that will lead up an election, which later on after the elections and in hindsight will once again be one that everybody will qualify as well-organised, peaceful and ultimately free and fair, an election that will add another feather to the cap of Namibian democracy.

I THANK YOU!