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# TOWARDS AN INTERNATIONAL STATEMENT OF THE PRINCIPLES OF ELECTORAL JUSTICE

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*(The Accra Guiding Principles)*

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Developed by the Electoral Integrity Group

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Supported by:



## BACKGROUND

Senior judicial figures and experienced election commissioners have for some years been working separately to enhance human rights observance and democratic practices around the world. An invited group of election commissioners have been meeting annually at Trinity College, Cambridge, UK as the Cambridge Electoral Advice Group under the auspices of the Malaysian Commonwealth Studies Centre. For their part, a group of senior judges has developed the Bangalore Principles for the Domestic Application of Human Rights Norms (which, of course, include democratic rights) and the Bangalore Principles of Judicial Conduct (now endorsed by the United Nations as a global standard). In each instance the initiative began with a small group of judges that was later broadened to involve participation around the world. In the discussions it became apparent that there is no generally agreed and authoritative statement of principles to guide developments in the area of Electoral Justice, and that there was a need for these to be developed. Recognising that each in the groups have, or have had, particular and very special responsibilities in the area, the two combined jointly to explore the feasibility of developing global standards for Electoral Justice which would be embraced internationally. The members of the Electoral Integrity Group are listed at the end of this document. Meetings to date have been held in Cambridge, United Kingdom (July 2010), Bali, Indonesia (January 2011), Gaborone, Botswana (March 2011), and London, United Kingdom (September 2011). It is hoped that the resulting statement of Principles of Electoral Justice will be internationally recognized as useful tool to assist in the achievement of any needed reforms. This work has been supported by the UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF), the Open Society Foundations and Tiri.

## PREAMBLE

The realization of freedom around the world is an objective even larger than the attainment of Electoral Justice. It connotes a world in which societies are at peace both within themselves and with their neighbours: a world that conforms with the self-determination of peoples and in which individuals accept elements of control over the peaceful exercise of power. It speaks to the rule of law, and to conformity with universal human rights norms embodied in the UN human rights instruments to which countries have committed themselves.

Electoral Justice – a broader concept than the holding of a technically correct poll - fulfils the human rights belonging to all people as individuals and as citizens as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (UDHR) and guaranteed by the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights (collectively known as the International Bill of Human Rights), to which most countries of the world subscribe.

In particular, these rights include:

- *Everyone has the right to take part in the government of their country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. (UDHR Article 21.1)*
- *The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections, which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures. (UDHR Article 21.3)*

The Inter-Parliamentary Council in its 154<sup>th</sup> Session (Paris, 26<sup>th</sup> March, 1994) also emphasized these rights:

- In any State the authority of the government can only derive from the will of the people as expressed in genuine, free and fair elections held at regular intervals on the basis of universal, equal and secret suffrage. (para 1)
- Everyone has the right to take part in the government of their country and shall have an equal opportunity to become a candidate for election. The criteria for participation in government shall be determined in accordance with national constitutions and laws and shall not be inconsistent with the State's international obligations. [para 3(1)]

To achieve this, elections are fundamental. However, they are intermittent, occasional and necessarily concerned with the exercise of electoral choice across a broad range of general questions. By themselves, democratic elections are necessary but not wholly sufficient for the attainment and maintenance of freedom. Elections are only a starting point for the attainment of a vibrant democracy, but much more is required to realize good and accountable governance between polling dates.

The realisation of Electoral Justice requires a set of institutions, practices, norms, mechanisms, practices and procedures that culminate in fair and open processes by which citizens choose those who are to govern them and to hold them to account – and this not simply on polling days but on a day-to-day basis. Electoral Justice gives people who believe their electoral rights to have been violated, the ability to make a complaint, get a hearing, and receive an adjudication within a reasonable time. Much excellent ground-breaking work has been undertaken by, for example, the Carter Center and International IDEA, in developing approaches that clarify the needs for delivering meaningful elections, and the Electoral Integrity Group aspires to reinforce this work and to carry it forward.

Electoral Justice is a significantly broader concept than one that only embraces the outcome of an election conducted in accordance with legal provisions as it goes beyond the letter of the law and addresses the integrity of the entire process. Electoral Justice not only resolves electoral disputes, but protects the political and electoral rights of citizens. Thus Electoral Justice not only protects basic political rights, such as the right to vote, stand for election, the equal rights of men and women, freedom of association and affiliation, the right to security of the person, and the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs, but also the civil rights connected to these rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of association, the right of peaceful assembly, right to information, right to petition for redress.

Electoral Justice recognises that things can sometimes go wrong in electoral processes, and that the manner in which these wrongs are redressed can determine the overall legitimacy of an electoral outcome and the level of trust in the electoral process.

In essence:

- Electoral Justice translates the concept of government of the people, by the people, for the people into a practical reality for all the nations and peoples of the earth. It ensures that power is deployed through democratic means rather than through the dominating disbursement of financial resources, undue influence, force or other illicit or democratically illegitimate means. It is a form of organization of power that implies the existence of an independent and impartial mechanism for the proper functioning of the State.
- Electoral Justice upholds the dignity of human beings as citizens and individuals as a proper control on the exercise of power. It requires full civic participation, that gives full recognition of political, civil and social rights as opposed to the mere holding of elections at regular intervals.

- Electoral Justice demands that core democratic values and principles be recognised and implemented in every corner of the world.
- It permits new ideas to infuse the process of civil government over the course of time and through succeeding electoral cycles. It provides means for the just, peaceful and acceptable deployment of wealth and resources in society. It encourages resolution of disputes through the sharpening of debates and the reaching of a broadly acceptable accommodation of important differences and of conflicting claims in society. It is a precondition to the establishment of an acceptable polity, deserving of membership of, and the respect of, the international community.
- Overall, the objective in achieving Electoral Justice is to create a democratic environment in which electoral outcomes are accepted by the electorate and the competing candidates as a reflection of their democratic aspirations and preferences duly expressed by the voters in polls following free, fair and credible campaigning.
- Electoral Justice requires that there are institutions in place for ensuring that the procedures and decisions related to the electoral process are implemented. This may include the institutions such as the EMB, electoral tribunals or courts as well as the mainstream judicial process, or alternative processes such as conflict resolution processes.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The guiding principles of Electoral Justice, each of which is **an essential component of Electoral Justice**, include the following core elements. Each principle is of universal application but the examples of implementation drawn from good (and bad) practices from around the world do not necessarily apply to every country nor do they purport to be exhaustive. Moreover, democratic practices are continually evolving as societies everywhere seek to enhance the realisation of Electoral Justice. The order in which the guiding principles appear does not represent a hierarchy as they are all of equal importance and are indivisible and inter-dependent.

### *Value:* **INTEGRITY**

#### *Principle:*

**Integrity is a vital element that contributes to the legitimacy of, and must be a key element in, every aspect of the electoral process. Honesty and accountability on the part of all involved in any aspect of the electoral process is an essential quality and an imperative requirement to uphold Electoral Justice.**

#### *Application:*

- Provision of role models: Integrity and honesty calls for all in leadership positions to demonstrate their own personal integrity and to demand similar conduct from others.
- Codes of Conduct for Election Officials and Judicial Personnel and also for political parties and candidates are designed to promote ethical conduct and to deter corrupt practices.
- The legal framework should be clear on the ethical requirements for the managers of the electoral process and the members of the justice system.

#### Positive examples:

- An official who has made an honest mistake owns up to it promptly and is treated fairly.
- In a country where many people have no official documents, voter registration relies on local accountability and witnesses to satisfy themselves that the person applying to register is a citizen of the country; the production of official documents is not required.
- State-owned media cover the election campaign in an even-handed fashion and allow adequate time for parties to get their messages across to the voters.

#### Negative examples:

- Candidates and/or electors are purposely misinformed about the complaints process.
- In return for payment journalists are prepared to present designated parties and/or candidates wilfully in a negative way or to ignore them completely regardless of news value.
- Selective application of the law.

### **Value: PARTICIPATION**

#### *Principle:*

**The voice of the people must be heard, respected, and represented in the context of a free, fair and genuine contest. Citizens are the core of representative democracy as it is they who choose by secret ballot those who represent and govern them. Elections provide a way for all to decide on the decision makers in a way that ensures that all voters have a fair and equal opportunity to participate in the election process. Full participation and diversity are manifested when arrangements facilitate the involvement of all, including first-time voters, women and disadvantaged groups.**

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#### **Application:**

- The legal framework must provide for universal adult suffrage, combined with the secrecy of the vote.
- Laws provide for candidates to campaign freely and for voters to attend meetings and rallies and to access and disseminate relevant information, with guarantees for freedom of association and freedom of expression.
- Customary laws and conventions may be integrated into electoral practices in ways consistent with these values, such as separate registration and voting arrangements for men and women.
- Institutional arrangements are made to ensure periodic updating of the voters' rolls.

#### Positive examples:

- Registration centres and polling stations readily accessible to voters.
- Women involved in all aspects of the electoral process.
- Mobile polling stations provided for remote areas.
- Special arrangements made to assist voters with disabilities, e.g. ramped entrances to polling stations; trusted companion permitted to provide appropriate assistance to a visually impaired voter; braille facilities made available.
- Voter education programmes are run throughout the year both for electors and for high school pupils just before they reach the age for voting.

### Negative examples:

- Laws framed to ban certain political movements or candidates on clearly discriminatory grounds.
- Insufficient time allowed for the voter registration process or for parties to challenge registrations or the lack of effective mechanisms to redress their grievances.
- In a country where many people have no official documents, birth certificates were made a requirement for voter registration, leading to many voters being disenfranchised, and to the widespread production of false certificates.

## Value: **LAWFULNESS (RULE OF LAW)**

### *Principle:*

**The lawfulness of every electoral act and the likely consequences of violations must be firmly established and widely understood in order to secure the legitimacy of the outcome. An election is legitimate when it is conducted in accordance with the rules clearly established within the valid legal framework of a community. The laws themselves must comply with relevant international norms and their implementation should reflect the principles of Electoral Justice and appropriate sanctions must be defined.**

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### **Application:**

- Laws guarantee the political and civil rights of citizens with clear sanctions for violation.
- Laws, clearly drafted in simple, intelligible language, are readily available and widely disseminated among all those with responsibilities for the poll.
- No aspect of the election is left unregulated. There should be no wrong without a remedy.
- Regulations are unambiguous, consistent with each other and capable of implementation across the country.
- The legal framework makes clear provisions for the rules and procedures for election petitions; it also clarifies which authority is responsible for the resolution of election dispute
- Amendments to laws and directives are made well ahead of time.

### Positive examples:

- Law provides that election petitions be dealt within a reasonable time on the basis of substance, not rejected on the basis of minor technical or procedural irregularities of little impact and which may be perceived as a tyranny of procedure.
- Any election related legislation changes to be applied to an election must have been promulgated and in effect for at least six months prior to the start of the election period. Otherwise that change could only be applied at subsequent elections.
- The most senior judge involved organizes seminar for judges to encourage substantive, not purely technical, and uniform approaches for handling election petitions.
- A major political party fails to pay the registration fee on time, or in the required manner. The electoral commission, following the letter of the law, excludes them from the poll; the party ultimately wins right in court to contest the election.

### Negative examples:

- Returning Officers reject ballot papers for narrow technical reasons despite the fact that a voter's wishes are clear (e.g. on the ground that the voters indicated their preferences by means of a tick rather than the stipulated cross)
- Laws lack sanctions or remedies for non-compliance.

## **Value: IMPARTIALITY AND FAIRNESS**

### ***Principle:***

The principle of impartiality and fairness guarantees the equal treatment of voters and contestants. It also guarantees the equal application of the rules of the game. Impartiality and fairness on the part of election management bodies and all administrative and security authorities must be extended to voters, candidates, political parties, the media, civil society and other stakeholders, and in so doing contribute to the electoral concept of providing a 'level playing field' for all electoral contestants. Whether before or after the poll, dispute resolutions must be fair, accessible, efficient and timely.

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### **Application:**

- The law or practice is clear that Electoral Justice prevails over inconsequential errors or misunderstandings.
- The electoral authorities are appointed in a neutral manner and discharge their responsibilities impartially and fairly, without any outside interference.
- Publicly controlled media allocate fair coverage to the contesting parties.
- Public funding for election purposes is allocated in a fair and rational manner.

### **Positive example:**

- Discretions exercised openly, fairly and giving reasons

### **Negative examples:**

- Discrimination occurs when some parties are provided with information ahead of others or the latter are kept entirely in the dark.
- The governing party and/or its candidates use government resources for campaigning or other electoral purposes, to the disadvantage of the campaigns of others.

## **Value: PROFESSIONALISM**

### ***Principle:***

Managing the electoral process requires technical knowledge of electoral issues and competent delivery of the process. Beyond the professionalism of EMBs, it is also important that the Election Dispute Resolution Body (EDRB) should be professionally competent. Professionalism in the management and oversight of all stages of the electoral process must be demonstrated in the planning, operation and the conclusion of elections including the pre-electoral, electoral and post-electoral periods. Key indicators of professionalism include experience, expertise, objectivity, efficiency, accuracy, commitment and effectiveness.

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### **Application:**

- Regular and comprehensive briefings with, and hands on training of, election officials on all stages of the election process, and clear guidelines established.
- Regular training of electoral personnel and regular updating of the electoral process
- Regular training of judicial officers on electoral issues and constant review of election dispute resolution procedures.
- Opportunities are created for peer learning and for the adaptation of best practises

- Adequate funds put at the disposal of the electoral authorities in a timely and open manner; funds are used efficiently and cost effectively.
- Professional qualifications and experience are considered as criteria in the appointment of EMB staff.

#### Positive examples:

- EMB conducts training for party officials throughout the electoral cycle and conducts periodic training of officials in the registration of voters, the conduct of the elections and the enforcement of codes of conduct..
- EMBs adopt the use of modern technology in the conduct of elections.
- EDRBs review the rules for election petitions to make the process more timely and efficient.

#### Negative examples:

- Polling agents unaware of duties and rights to attend the poll and the count.
- Voters unaware of relevant procedures and requirements (e.g. they may be required to bring proof of identity etc)
- Variations in counting procedures across the country.
- EMBs set up too close to an election to permit adequate planning for and management of registration and for voting arrangements to be adequately developed; The EMB has no permanent employees or institutional memory and is therefore widely perceived as being unprofessional
- EMBs lacking independence and having to look to executive government for its approval of even minor decisions.
- Voters are unaware of correct voting procedures.

### **Value: INDEPENDENCE**

#### *Principle:*

**The independence of all those authorities that are legitimately engaged in the electoral process and the resolution of electoral grievances and disputes must be respected and guaranteed by law. There must be no interference by any outside interest.**

#### **Application:**

- Selection process for appointing electoral commissioners is open, transparent and impartial, and credible and transparent consultation takes place before the appointments are made so that the EMB is, and is seen to be, independent of political influence.
- Political parties and community groups have the right to challenge appointments of commissioners and of polling staff where they can establish a reasonable likelihood of perceived bias.
- Appointments as Commissioners are made for statutorily laid down tenures and once made can only be recalled for a valid cause clearly specified in law.
- Commissioners free to appoint their own staff and do not depend on the secondment of staff from government departments whose loyalties may not lie with the Commission.
- Clear prohibitions against interference with authorities engaged in the electoral process.
- Provision of adequate and timely resources to the EMB.

#### Positive example:

- Members of the EMB are held in high regard by the general public and other stakeholders.



### Negative example:

- Known active supporters of the government are appointed to key positions in the EMB and in the conduct of the poll.

## Value: **TRANSPARENCY**

### *Principle:*

**Transparency is a core element that involves openness at all stages of election organization, which must include access to relevant information on a timely basis, a readiness to provide justification for decisions and a frank admission and swift correction of any mistakes or oversights so as to inspire confidence and credibility in the system in the minds of all stakeholders.**

### **Application:**

- The whole cycle of electoral operations conducted in a transparent and open manner, wherever appropriate in the presence of all stakeholders, but not in ways which putting the secrecy of the ballot at risk.
- Details of political party and candidate funding, both amounts and sources and their expenditure, made public.
- In order to enforce reasonable limits placed on election expenditure of both parties and individual candidates, appropriate sanctions are imposed for any significant breach of election expenses regulations.
- Hearings of election petitions are open to public observation.
- The process of drafting and amending the legal framework is transparent and open to public participation.

### **Positive examples:**

- In the absence of credible threats to the security of the counting centres or to groups of voters, results are declared promptly and published at the counting centre after a transparent counting process such as counting ballot papers in front of a crowd.
- EMB requires detailed information from all political candidates, including educational qualifications, asset and liabilities declarations on a periodic basis, and any criminal convictions, etc.
- Independent, non-partisan political monitors create websites that publicize information on political parties and candidates as well as voting behaviours and patterns that may indicate serious conflicts of interest.
- Election finance limits enforced and candidates required to make all payments from a single bank account.

### **Negative examples:**

- Parties able to circumvent finance reporting requirements.
- Opposition party agents excluded from attending the poll and the count without due cause or are only provided with aggregated vote totals, not voting breakdowns ideally to the polling station (unless to do so could constitute a danger to groups of voters).

## **Value: TIMELINESS**

### ***Principle:***

**Timeliness must be demonstrated in a manner consistent with the other principles before, during and after the poll and at all stages in electoral management, including resolution of disputes as this is an integral element in Electoral Justice. The element of time in the administration of justice cannot be ignored, because justice is a time-bound concept.**

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### **Application:**

- A timetable for the entire electoral programme consistent with constitutional and statutory parameters is formulated, agreed with the major political parties, is published and is adhered to throughout the electoral process.
- Adequate time is allowed for the preparation of an accurate Voters' Register.
- The legal framework provides clear time lines for the resolution of election petitions.

### **Positive example:**

- The EMB plans the counting process in such a way as to be able to announce results promptly.

### **Negative example:**

- Disputes drag on after the conclusion of the poll for so long as to make the outcome politically meaningless and resulting in constitutional deadlock.

## **Value: NON-VIOLENCE (FREEDOM FROM THREATS & VIOLENCE)**

### ***Principle:***

**All stages of the electoral process must be conducted without violence, intimidation, coercion, corruption, or other conduct that can interfere with the free conduct of the elections in accordance with the values of Electoral Justice.**

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### **Application:**

- Codes of conduct for political parties, candidates, election officials and observers are formulated by the EMB in consultation with those involved; and the codes make explicit reference to the need for moderate language and to refrain from any form of violence or coercion.
- The legal framework contains sanctions for perpetrators of electoral violence.

### **Positive examples:**

- Contestants in the elections when criticising the public conduct and the policies of their opponents refrain from attacking their personal lives or private conduct and use moderate language towards their opponents while at the same time urging their supporters to refrain from violence and intimidation.
- In a country where “muscle-power” and intimidation are prevalent, security personnel are deployed under the direct authority of the EMB.

### **Negative examples:**

- Violence, intimidation and/or vote manipulation are prevalent before, during and/or after the election.

Undue displays of power by the security forces are interpreted by the public as intimidatory.

**Value: REGULARITY**

***Principle:***

Elections must be conducted periodically, and at more-or-less regular intervals. Such intervals, as well as any variations, must be clearly set out in the law.

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**Application:**

- The Constitution of the country provides for elections to be held at regular intervals.

**Positive example:**

- The Constitution does not allow for the postponement of elections.

**Negative example:**

- The incumbent government acting on spurious grounds or extraneous considerations proclaims a period of state emergency to postpone elections.

**Value: ACCEPTANCE**

***Principle:***

Where the foregoing principles of Electoral Justice have been substantially observed, the electoral processes reflect the will of the people. It is then an overriding principle of Electoral Justice that everyone must abide by the outcome; that the outcome must be given effect by the institutions of government; and that the legitimacy of the result be acknowledged by the international community.

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**Application:**

- Codes of conduct subscribed to by contestants.
- Local groups of trained and dispassionate observers report their findings.
- International observers assess the outcome in an impartial and professional manner with reference to the criteria developed by recognised national or international organisations.

**Positive example:**

- Long-serving president accepts electoral defeat and promptly prepares for a smooth transfer of power.

**Negative example:**

- Electoral Management Body challenged for legally invalidating poll results in selected districts.

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## ELECTORAL DISPUTE RESOLUTION

A contest for power lies at the heart of political processes. It is our belief that a sound application of the principles of Electoral Justice will serve to minimise both the risks to Electoral Justice and their impact. When and where problems of any kind arise it is axiomatic that they are resolved expeditiously, fairly and in ways that reflect the principles we have outlined.

Particularly in post-conflict and transitional situations there can be little time to debate and gain consensus on core aspects of a new electoral system. The pressure is for an election to be held quickly, with little time to develop the necessary understandings and commitment. In such circumstances it may be well beyond the ability of national institutions to resolve the major disputes (including widespread violence) that can arise. Fortunately, there are institutions positioned to provide peace advisory services through mediation, political mentoring, advocacy and other good offices.

## AN INVITATION BEYOND ACCRA

There are various ways in which the values we have identified can be put into practice, and there is certainly no basis for any prescription of 'one size fits all'. We are deeply conscious of the fact that even long-established democracies enter periods of transition as they work to adjust their practices the better to reflect the demands of Electoral Justice.

In offering this document to the global community we express the sincere hope that those involved in aspects of Electoral Justice around the world may find it of interest and worthy of observance and implementation. It is our hope that they may contribute their own experiences and insights to produce an agreed international statement that can be used domestically either as reaffirming existing practices as being reflective of Electoral Justice or as a source of assistance in efforts to achieve that end.

It is our belief that Electoral Justice achieved through processes that reflect these principles will make a substantial contribution to a better, more peaceful and fairer democratic world.

With this in mind we invite interested organizations and individuals to consider joining us in the further development of these principles with the objective of creating a statement that has widespread international support by contacting us at the details provided below. Among others, EMBs may wish to assess their systems and processes against the Principles; political parties may compare their codes of conduct and practices against the Principles; Judges may find the Principles of assistance when reviewing their own role in advancing electoral justice; groups that conduct democracy audits may apply the Principles in their country studies; and academics who conduct applied research to specific aspects of the electoral process can test the Principles to their case studies.

Accra, Ghana  
15 September 2011

# THE ELECTORAL INTEGRITY GROUP

## **The members of the Electoral Integrity Group are:**

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