



Annual Democracy Forum

“Learning from Democratic Transitions in Asia and the Pacific: An Inter-Generational Dialogue”

25-26 August, Ulanbataar Mongolia

Opening Remarks of Secretary General Yves Leterme

Distinguished Guests,

It is my pleasure and honour to deliver the opening address at the Annual Democracy Forum 2016, here in Ulanbataar, the capital of Mongolia. Mongolia which holds the Chairship of International IDEA in 2016.

Before I continue, I would like to extend a warm thanks to the President of Mongolia, the Government of Mongolia and to its Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I am not only pleased, but also very proud of having Mongolia as a Member State of International IDEA and for the strong partnership we have established since Mongolia joined IDEA in 2011, and for its excellent chairmanship of the institution in 2016. In addition to the Government of Mongolia, I would also like to extend my thanks to the other key partners in this annual democracy forum: the Open society forum in Mongolia and the NAM Centre in Indonesia, who have greatly contributed to enable this forum.

The quality and breadth of the programme developed for this Annual Democracy Forum testifies to the strong commitment that Mongolia has to the principles that International IDEA embodies and the willingness to take the lead in enabling this pioneering forum for sharing experiences of democratic experiences across the Asian region.

As many of you know, International IDEA is an intergovernmental organization with support for sustainable democracy worldwide as its sole mandate. This has made us a leading global actor on electoral processes, constitution building, political participation and representation, and democracy and development. The theme of democratic transitions cuts across all of our work and we have built a knowledge base and expertise during the twenty years of our existence that we hope can contribute to the sharing of experiences during this forum.

This forum comes at a very opportune moment, as Asia is a region in transition. However, the Asian experience is diverse, and includes both consolidated democracies, countries that underwent democratic transitions twenty or thirty years ago, more recent transitions, those that have experienced democratic progress coupled with periods of democratic stalling and reversals and those that are yet to embark on the democratic path.

Mongolia and Indonesia are examples of countries that underwent transitions to democracy nearly thirty and twenty years ago and are facing the challenges of democratic consolidation, providing good examples of institutional resilience. More recent transitions include Myanmar, where watershed national elections were held last year, ending nearly 50 years of military rule. Fiji conducted democratic elections after a period of military coup. There has been an initiation of constitutional reforms in the Philippines, Thailand and Sri Lanka, and also here in Mongolia; as well as the emergence of a new constitution in Nepal. There is a lot that we could learn from these various transitions and this forum provides just that: an opportunity to share experiences, learn from each other, discuss lessons learned and ways forward in the process of consolidating Asian democracy, with a view to making democracy sustainable and able to deliver on the commitment to Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals for the region.

What the diverse Asian experiences show is that there is no unilinear and predictable path to democracy. Democracy building is complex and unpredictable. Gains can be achieved, only to be backtracked and reversed, to later re-emerge. And one of International IDEA's roles is to analyze those diverse democratic experiences, distill the lessons learned from them, collect and document good practices in democracy building and share its knowledge on

reform processes with democratic reform champions in the state and civil society, across the world.

International IDEA aims to be a trusted partner in democracy building and reform. And we are proud that we can partner with the Mongolian government in organizing this Annual Democracy Forum to enable the sharing of these diverse and rich Asian experiences. We hope that each one of you will go home with some new insights that will be useful as your countries continue their democratic paths and that we can continue to support each of you in its own process, on its terms and in its own time and from its own democracy building perspective.

One of International IDEA's most recent publications speaks to the theme of this forum. It is entitled "Democratic Transitions: Conversations with World Leaders" and documents interviews with world leaders that have led transitions to democracy in their own countries.

The book contains interviews with 13 former presidents and political leaders from 9 countries worldwide, representing 5 different continents. These leaders (who come from Indonesia, the Philippines, South Africa, Ghana, Poland, Spain, Mexico, Brazil and Chile) have all led transformations from authoritarian rule to consolidated democracy in their countries, over the past three decades.

The inspiration for the book came from International IDEA's experience on the ground in many of the countries covered by the book.

The result of the interviews and their personal reflections, provide a wealth of wisdom, of which I would like to share some today as I believe they can be useful for all you today, independently of what stage of transition your country finds itself.

This wide range of insights into democratic transitions, personal reflections by the political leaders who were at the center of these processes, of countries that are now considered consolidated democracies, converts this book a unique historical overview of democratic transition processes:

Firstly, we have witnessed the **importance of moving forward incrementally**.

The interviewed leaders often benefitted from taking advantage of partial opportunities whenever possible, to gain ground through small steps rather than waiting for major change to occur. Sometimes they agreed on only partly fulfilling what was viewed as a vital priority. At other times they even cooperated with factions within the dominant regime, who could be convinced of the need for change.

Lesson 1 thus shows us that transition from authoritarianism to democracy may work best when moving slowly yet steadfastly.

Secondly, it is crucial to **project a positive and inclusive vision**.

Any transition to democracy will have costs and disappointments – not least for the country's citizens. To combat public fear and avoid disillusion amongst the people, it is important to present a hopeful vision of the transition. Both by showing a vision of long-term future gains, and by making modest promises of immediate gains, leaders can show the way forward, away from current grievances.

A third lesson focuses on **building convergence and coalitions**.

Within opposition forces, it is important to create a common vision that provides a credible alternative to the regime. Equally important is the building of coalitions between political opposition forces and social movements. Transitions should integrate groups like workers, students, religious movements and women's rights groups. These groups have often played a crucial role in democratic transitions, and need to be included in post-transition processes of building constitutions, and strengthening political parties and civil society organizations. During transitions, bridges also need to be built across sectors, for example the business sector and with reformists within the regime. Most importantly though, the general population needs to be included. Transition leaders should focus on what unites people, and – with patience and persistence – signal to all actors that they will have a stake in the new regime.

Fourthly, leaders should **create and protect spaces for dialogue**.

Dialogue can increase trust between the opposition, the regime, civil society organizations and citizens, which in turn will affect the transition's success. It is important for dialogue not to focus on past disputes, but on future common goals. Taking the time to clarify all issues on the table and define reform programmes through discussions, may ensure a better cooperation between all actors involved in the transition.

A fifth lesson focuses on **constitution building**.

Drafting the new constitution should be a truly inclusionary process, engaging a wide range of participants. Leaders should work hard to accommodate to the extent possible the core demands of all contending groups. This may also include assuring actors of the old regime that their interests will be protected. To avoid public anger, the negotiations on such issues should be made transparently and democratically. It is also important to note that a good-enough, but broadly-supported constitution might be preferred over a perfect but less legitimate text. Constitution building after transitions should focus on securing broad agreement on the way forward.

Next, it is important to **manage economic tensions** after a transition.

In many cases, economic problems were a major cause behind popular mobilization and often acted as a trigger to many transitions. Afterwards however, the new regime needs to make the same economic issues a priority. This entails balancing fiscal reforms with alleviating poverty and addressing inflation and unemployment. Ideally, economic growth is combined with a focus on equity, including through special measures for the most vulnerable in society.

Lesson 7 emphasizes the importance of **political parties**.

From the early days of the transitions, leaders should invest in building and institutionalizing vibrant political parties. Under autocratic regimes, political parties may have been downright illegal, repressed and discredited. If official "opposition" parties were allowed to exist, their access to media airtime and funding might be severely restricted. Yet parties play a crucial role in providing networks, training candidates, organizing elections and developing transition strategies. To ensure the opposition is strong enough to compete with the existing

regime, leaders should focus consistently on building, reviving and strengthening political parties.

Another important lesson is dealing very carefully with the **military and security and intelligence forces**.

Usually these forces are highly connected to the authoritarian regime. It is thus necessary to act firmly to achieve democratic, civilian control over these services. Sensitivity is required though: while high-ranking officers responsible for torture or brutalities may need to be removed, ordinary cadres might require protection from reprisals. Leaders should recognize the responsibilities of the military as well as security and intelligence forces, while simultaneously ensuring they refrain from political comments or partisan involvement. As long-standing mistrust might exist between civilians and the military, this process can be a long, difficult task for new regime leaders.

Finally, the necessity for **reconciliation and transitional justice**.

As systematic corruption, repression and outright human rights violations might have occurred before a transition, there can be intense pressure to hold the perpetrators accountable. Naturally, this is an extremely sensitive and difficult challenge. Yet ignoring unresolved issues is more problematic in the long-run. Leaders thus need to provide truth and justice, while simultaneously assuring the safety of those leaving power. Victims need to be recognized, without preventing the growth of mutual tolerance in society. Through transparent legal processes or the installation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, justice can be achieved through dialogue rather than through revenge, blaming and shaming.

Finally, it is of critical importance to bring in a gender lens to the analysis of democratic transitions. In all transitions studied in the book, women played critical roles leading change through social movements, the state bureaucracy, political parties, the legislature and civil society. A number of lessons can be drawn from the various experiences: for women activists, it is of utmost importance to organize early in the transition process; form a range of alliances both within civil society and across sectors; participate actively in all phases of the transition process; develop platforms that can unite different groups of women and

maintain momentum during the implementation and consolidation phases. It is also critical that political leaders open up spaces for women to participate fully in the transition process and make sure that post-transition constitutions, policies and institutional designs reflect equality concerns.

As you can see, the 10 lessons I mentioned are no easy challenge for leaders of transitions. The Mongolian case is in this sense striking: the priorities set out by the President are clear: promoting the rule of law, fostering social justice, fighting poverty, combating corruption and supporting participatory democracy.

The Mongolian President actively sought membership of International IDEA, and the Council warmly welcomed Mongolia as its 26th Member State in December 2010. As the chair of the Community of Democracies, President Elbegdorj launched a number of initiatives, which are vital to both mature and emerging democracies around the world. These include Zero Tolerance for Corruption and Education for Democracy.

This is why International IDEA is working to ensure our work on Democratic Transitions does not end with the book publication. Instead, we are exploring how to make the lessons practically relevant for current and future transitions, such as those we will be discussing during this forum.

To end, I would like to emphasize how this book is about leadership. Successful democratic transitions depend on many factors inside and outside of the state, domestically and externally. However, transitions can only succeed if political leaders have the will for change and a great sense of duty and responsibility. Leaders who are not afraid to lose power, in order to win freedom and democracy for their country. By gathering here today at this regional workshop, each and every one of you is illustrating that will to change. You have come here because you believe that democracy matters. Because you want to make Asia a frontrunner in this field.

When asked how Mongolia will impact democracies around the globe, President Elbegdorj answered: *“We do not have anything to teach, but we have something to share with the rest of Asia and the world”*.

The joint project of the Electoral Observation Training Centre will provide an excellent opportunity for Mongolia to do that. The Center will contribute to the professionalization of the electoral field by allowing Mongolia to share its knowledge on electoral observation with its regional counterparts and thereby contributing with expertise to consolidating and deepening democracy in the Asian region. International IDEA is strongly committed to the joint implementation of this project and we welcome the opportunity it provides to continuing to deepen our partnership with Mongolia. We would be very pleased to also have the OSCE and the Community of Democracies and the Council of Europe as joint partners in this project.

I would just like to end by saying how important it is for democracy worldwide and for organizations such as IDEA working in the area of democracy to have leaders step up and tell the world that democracy cannot just be the work of politicians, international civil servants or professional NGO workers.

It must be the responsibility of every citizen, and they must be involved to make democracy deliver. Such **locally rooted democracy** is crucial. Such locally rooted democracy is what Mongolia’s experience is inspiring.

I look forward to engaging with you – so that we may all become leaders of democratic progress.

THANK YOU