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**Promotion and protection of human rights: human rights questions, including alternative approaches for improving the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms**

### **Strengthening the role of the United Nations in enhancing the effectiveness of the principle of periodic and genuine elections and the promotion of democratization**

#### **Report of the Secretary-General**

##### *Summary*

In the present report, the Secretary-General discusses developments in the field of United Nations electoral assistance since the issuance of his previous report ([A/72/260](#)). During the reporting period, from 1 August 2017 to 31 July 2019, the United Nations assisted, at their request or on the basis of a Security Council mandate, more than 50 Member States.

The report notes the contributions of multiple United Nations entities involved in electoral assistance. Progress in ensuring coherence and coordination within the United Nations system is described, and efforts to strengthen cooperation and partnership between the United Nations and regional and subregional organizations and other international assistance providers are highlighted.

Elections continued to be compelling and effective ways for citizens to participate in their countries' political processes. In some cases, however, Member States faced challenges in holding free and genuine elections. A key factor shaping public confidence in an election is the conduct of political leaders, from both winning and losing parties. Winning magnanimously entails, among other things, recognizing that part of the electorate preferred another candidate or party; losing graciously after a credible process involves refraining from broad, potentially inciting comments about an "illegitimate" election without sufficient evidence.

Various aspects of inclusion in elections are touched on in the report, with examples highlighting specific groups, including women, that deserve special attention to ensure their full participation. Although there has been a continuous increase in terms of their representation in parliaments worldwide, much more needs

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\* [A/74/150](#).



to be done to ensure not only greater numbers of women in representative bodies, but also their actual empowerment.

The use of the Internet and social media in the context of elections, as both enablers of participation and tools for spreading disinformation and hate speech, raised complex issues for Member States. The paralyzing suspicion that any information or discourse can be manipulated – and the resulting erosion of trust – lies at the heart of the Internet’s challenge to democracy. The importance of, among other measures, building societies’ resilience against the spread of false or hateful content, increasing transparency in public discourse and pursuing multi-stakeholder dialogue to find answers to those policy challenges, is underlined.

## I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [72/164](#). It provides a description of United Nations activities in the field of elections and electoral assistance since the issuance of the previous report on the subject ([A/72/260](#)).

2. During the reporting period, from 1 August 2017 to 31 July 2019, the Organization continued to respond to significant demand from Member States for electoral assistance, in particular technical assistance and efforts to strengthen the capacity of national electoral authorities. The United Nations assisted, at their request or on the basis of a Security Council mandate, more than 50 Member States in conducting elections, through a variety of electoral assistance activities described herein. The report includes broader observations on opportunities and challenges facing Member States with respect to elections and in the field of electoral assistance.

## II. United Nations electoral assistance during the reporting period

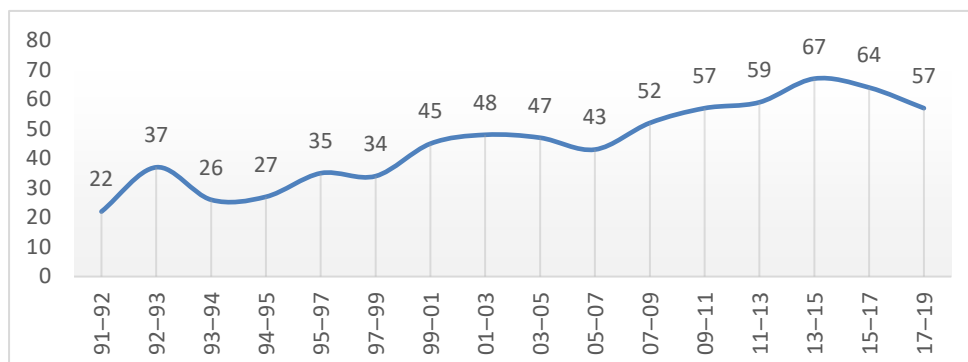
### A. Mandates

3. The framework for United Nations electoral assistance was established by the General Assembly in 1991. Assistance is provided only at the specific request of the Member State concerned or as mandated by the Security Council or the General Assembly. Before assistance is agreed upon and provided, the United Nations assesses the needs and capacities of the Member State concerned to ensure that its support is tailored to the specific situation. The Assembly has reiterated on many occasions that assistance must be carried out in an objective, impartial, neutral and independent manner, with due respect for national sovereignty. It has also reaffirmed that there is no single model of democracy and that the responsibility for organizing elections lies with Member States.

4. Since its forty-fourth session, the General Assembly has regularly considered the question of enhancing the effectiveness of the principle of periodic and genuine elections, including with respect to United Nations electoral assistance. Most recently, in its resolution [72/164](#), the Assembly recommended that the United Nations continue to provide technical advice and other assistance to requesting States and electoral institutions in order to help to strengthen their democratic processes, bearing in mind that the relevant office may provide additional assistance in the form of mediation and good offices, upon the request of Member States.

5. In 1991, the Secretary-General, with the endorsement of the General Assembly, designated the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs as the focal point for electoral assistance matters. The number of entities involved in elections has grown since that year. In a field of diverse United Nations actors, the Assembly has repeatedly highlighted the importance of system-wide coherence and consistency and has reaffirmed the leadership role of the focal point in that respect. Accordingly, the focal point is responsible for setting electoral assistance policies, for deciding on the parameters for United Nations electoral assistance in a particular requesting country and for maintaining, as mandated by the Assembly, a single electoral roster of experts who can be deployed rapidly when required for any assistance activity. Effective 1 January 2019, with the restructuring of the United Nations peace and security pillar, the Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs serves as the focal point. The number of States and territories having received United Nations electoral assistance since 1991 is illustrated in figure I.

Figure I  
**Number of States and Territories receiving United Nations electoral assistance, by biennium, 1991–2019**



Source: reports of the Secretary-General.

6. The focal point is supported by the Electoral Assistance Division of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. Pursuant to requests from Member States and in consultation with relevant United Nations entities, the Division is responsible for conducting electoral needs assessments. It recommends to the focal point the parameters for all United Nations electoral assistance and gives advice on the design of electoral mission components or assistance projects. The Division also develops and maintains the single electoral roster of experts and is entrusted with maintaining the institutional memory of the Organization, in collaboration with agencies of the United Nations system. On behalf of the focal point, the Division provides political and technical guidance to all United Nations entities involved in electoral assistance, including on policies and good practices. When required, the Division provides support to the Secretary-General and his envoys and to political and peacekeeping missions in the prevention and mediation of electoral crises. It also maintains partnerships with other regional and intergovernmental organizations involved in elections.

7. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the major body of the Organization supporting the development of electoral institutions, building partnerships, legal frameworks and processes and supporting elections in non-mission settings. In its resolution [72/164](#), the General Assembly requested UNDP to continue its democratic governance assistance programmes in cooperation with other relevant organizations, in particular those that promote the strengthening of democratic institutions and linkages between civil society and Governments.

8. In mission settings, electoral assistance is generally provided through components of field missions under the auspices of the Department of Peace Operations or the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. Military and police components of peacekeeping missions support national law enforcement agencies in providing security for electoral processes. UNDP usually contributes to the implementation of electoral assistance mandates undertaken by field missions. In countries with peacekeeping, peacebuilding or special political missions, electoral assistance is delivered in a fully integrated manner, under the mission's lead, irrespective of whether the mission is structurally integrated. In non-mission settings, resident coordinators play the critical role of ensuring that electoral support is delivered in a coordinated manner. In some 50 Member States, resident coordinators are supported by Peace and Development Advisers deployed as part of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs-UNDP Joint Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention. They assist resident coordinators in building trust

among communities, promoting non-violent communication and coordinating targeted advocacy and outreach efforts among key stakeholders.

9. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) monitors and reports on human rights in the context of elections and engages in advocacy for upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms in such contexts. OHCHR also provides technical advice and capacity-building assistance on ensuring that local norms and institutions are in compliance with international human rights law.

10. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) works for the elimination of discrimination against women and girls, the empowerment of women and the achievement of equality between women and men as partners and beneficiaries of development, human rights, humanitarian action and peace and security. Within that mandate and through its normative support functions and operational activities, UN-Women provides guidance and technical support to Member States, at their request, on gender equality, the empowerment of women, women's rights and gender mainstreaming. It promotes gender equality and women's participation in electoral processes and provides training and advice in those areas. UN-Women is also mandated to lead, coordinate and promote the accountability of the United Nations system in its work on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

11. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) promotes and supports freedom of expression, freedom of the press, the safety of journalists and access to information. Free and independent media, online and offline, are essential to democracy, and UNESCO aims to support the development of fair, safe and professional media coverage, including by building the capacity of media professionals, media regulators and policymakers and by supporting access to information as well as critical thinking on the part of citizens.

12. There are other entities of the United Nations system that are involved in electoral activities or whose mandate or area of focus sometimes touches on electoral matters. The Department of Operational Support provides administrative and logistical support to peacekeeping operations, special political missions and other field presences. The United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) supports, in partnership with other United Nations entities, the implementation of electoral activities in post-conflict and peacekeeping environments as well as in non-mission settings. The United Nations Volunteers programme works with multiple partners to integrate qualified and highly motivated personnel into electoral projects and electoral components of peace operations, while promoting the value and global recognition of volunteerism. The Peacebuilding Fund can support elections at the critical juncture of building and sustaining peace, as well as pre-election efforts to create an environment conducive to peaceful elections. The United Nations Democracy Fund supports projects that strengthen the voice of civil society, promote human rights and encourage the participation of all groups in democratic processes. It supports civil society projects in such processes, including in monitoring and training, as well as education and awareness-raising. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is mandated to provide international protection and to seek permanent solutions to the refugee problem, which includes assisting Member States, where relevant and appropriate, in facilitating the participation of refugees in electoral processes. UNHCR has also been authorized by the General Assembly to be involved operationally under certain circumstances in enhancing protection and providing humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons. The International Organization for Migration, which is the leading intergovernmental organization in the field of migration, supports the implementation of out-of-country voting programmes for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

## **B. Electoral assistance activities**

13. During the reporting period, the United Nations continued to provide assistance to Member States in conducting their electoral processes in a credible, professional, accurate, impartial and transparent manner, as well as in implementing the democratic principles of universal and equal suffrage and other international obligations. The Organization emphasized helping Member States to build public confidence in electoral administrative bodies and electoral processes themselves. The experience of the United Nations suggests that such confidence is shaped by factors that go beyond the technical quality of an electoral process, compliance with international obligations or the effective performance of the electoral management body; it is also formed by the broader political and economic context. Consequently, where appropriate and as requested, the United Nations also assisted Member States in creating an environment conducive to the holding of peaceful and credible elections through good offices, support for political dialogue, facilitation and mediation. Those efforts were often accomplished in collaboration with regional and subregional entities and other actors. Since 1991, 113 Member States have received electoral assistance from the United Nations. A list of States and territories that received electoral assistance during the period under review is provided in annex I, selected examples of United Nations assistance activities is set out in annex II, and a map illustrating the States and Territories receiving electoral assistance is presented in annex III.

14. Member States expect the Organization to understand a country's needs before deciding how to respond to a request. The focal point therefore continued to assess each request to determine whether and how best the United Nations could provide support. In carrying out such assessments, which can also be helpful in gauging the potential financial support of donors, the focal point considers the national electoral context, including women's participation in electoral processes, and makes recommendations to ensure gender mainstreaming. The approach of the United Nations is generally to respond positively to requests for support, but there can be limitations. For example, there may be insufficient funding or time to deploy the assistance capacity. There have also been cases in which a request is in an area that the Organization traditionally does not cover, in which it has limited expertise, in which national capacity is extensive or in which it otherwise appears that United Nations expertise would not add value. In addition, the Organization is more likely to provide assistance if there is broad public support for its assumption of such a role. Furthermore, unless specifically mandated to do so by the Security Council or the General Assembly, the United Nations does not organize, certify, supervise or observe an electoral process. Technical assistance is by far the most frequent form of assistance provided by the United Nations.

## **C. Cooperation and coordination within the United Nations system**

15. The General Assembly has often reiterated the need for ongoing comprehensive coordination among United Nations entities under the auspices of the focal point, most recently in its resolution [72/164](#). The Electoral Assistance Division, in advising and supporting the focal point, continued to lead in the development of system-wide electoral assistance policies, in consultation with United Nations entities.

16. The Inter-Agency Coordination Mechanism for Electoral Assistance, convened and chaired by the Electoral Assistance Division, continued to serve as the platform for information exchange, coordination and the development of internal policies among members of the United Nations system involved in electoral matters. The Mechanism now includes representatives of UNDP, the Department of Peace

Operations, OHCHR, UN-Women, UNESCO, UNOPS, the United Nations Democracy Fund, UNHCR and the United Nations Volunteers programme. The Peacebuilding Support Office continues to be represented in the Mechanism as part of the reorganized Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, in recognition of its role and the Peacebuilding Fund's support for electoral activities.

17. The United Nations single electoral roster continued to be used for meeting staffing requirements in field operations of the Secretariat and other participating entities, including UNDP. Persons on the roster have been assessed and cleared as electoral experts at various levels and in different fields of electoral expertise and can be deployed readily. Preparations have begun to launch, before the end of 2019, a new campaign to update the roster.

18. In its resolution 39/11, the Human Rights Council presented a set of draft guidelines on the effective implementation of the right to participate in public affairs, prepared by OHCHR, as a set of orientations for States, as well as for, where appropriate, other relevant stakeholders. The Council requested OHCHR to disseminate and promote the use of the guidelines and to provide technical cooperation and capacity-building to States upon their request. In line with the framework established by the General Assembly, OHCHR will coordinate closely with the focal point for electoral assistance in implementing the resolution.

#### **D. Cooperation with other organizations**

19. The role of the focal point for electoral assistance includes ensuring appropriate working arrangements with regional and intergovernmental organizations engaged in electoral assistance. The Electoral Assistance Division continued to strengthen its collaboration with such organizations during the reporting period. For example, the United Nations conducted nine regional training sessions, workshops and round-table discussions in partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Caribbean Community secretariat, the Commission of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the League of Arab States (LAS), the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Topics included women and elections, the prevention of electoral violence and election observation. The Organization also engaged in new partnership activities with the Indian Ocean Commission and organized electoral staff exchange programmes for SADC, OIC, ECOWAS, LAS and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region.

20. The United Nations has long-standing partnerships with other regional and intergovernmental organizations, including the African Union, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the European Union, the Organization of American States, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, as well as with several non-governmental organizations active in the international arena.

21. The United Nations continued to support key platforms for building electoral capacity and institutional memory and sharing knowledge at the global level, such as the Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections (BRIDGE) project and the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network. United Nations support included updating a BRIDGE module on gender and developing new ACE topic areas on youth and on gender so as to maintain them as primary resources for electoral practitioners across the globe.

22. The Organization also continued to support the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, which was commemorated at the United Nations in 2005. The Declaration, currently endorsed by 55 organizations from various

regions of the world, has continued to play an important role in enhancing the professional international observation of electoral processes. The Declaration of Global Principles for Non-partisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations, launched at the United Nations in 2012, continues to provide an important normative framework for organizations engaged in non-partisan citizen election monitoring.

### **III. United Nations electoral assistance resources**

23. The core staff of the Electoral Assistance Division continues to be primarily funded by the regular budget of the United Nations. Extrabudgetary funds continued to play a vital supplementary role, enabling the Division to carry out needs assessments and advisory missions, provide capacity-development support to regional organizations, rapidly deploy experts to the field upon the request of Member States and perform other substantive activities. The trust funds administered by the Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, along with the UNDP funding window for governance and peacebuilding, continued to enable the Organization to implement rapid response and catalytic projects and programmes, including those aimed at preventing conflict and supporting the participation of women and underrepresented groups in political processes. Extrabudgetary funds administered by UN-Women were used to support programming to promote women's political and electoral participation.

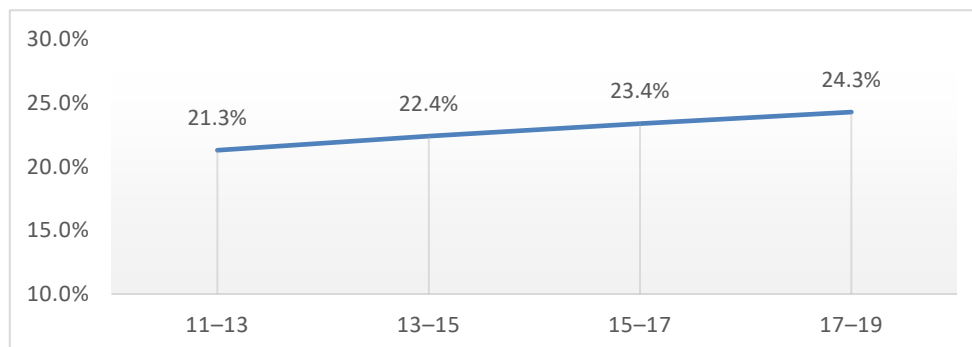
24. United Nations electoral assistance projects are generally funded by voluntary contributions from development partners and are managed mainly by UNDP, often through multi-partner basket funds established in the Member States concerned. While the demand for United Nations support remains high, electoral support projects in the field have faced funding challenges in past years, leading to instances in which donor funding was not sufficient to launch or complete an assistance project even after the focal point had approved a package of technical electoral assistance. There have also been instances in which partners have decided to grant funding to other non-governmental electoral assistance providers instead of the United Nations.

### **IV. Gender equality and elections**

25. Despite some improvements in recent years, progress on women's representation in elected and appointed positions continued to be slow. The global share of women in lower or single houses of parliament is currently only 24.3 per cent (see figure II). This is slightly higher than in the previous reporting period, but again falls short of the gender balance requirements highlighted in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which will be reviewed, at its 25-year mark, in 2020. Women are even less represented in other branches of government across the globe. As at 1 January 2019, only 6.6 per cent of Heads of State and 5.2 per cent of Heads of Government were women. There is a clear need for concerted efforts to address the various challenges to women's equal participation in electoral and political processes.



Figure II  
**Percentage of women in lower or single houses of parliament worldwide, 2011–2019**



Source: reports of the Secretary-General.

26. During the reporting period, gender equality continued to be a key consideration in the provision of electoral assistance, and United Nations entities carried out various initiatives in that regard. For example, in Afghanistan, the United Nations assisted the national electoral authorities in mainstreaming gender in all administrative and operational processes and communications for the parliamentary elections in 2018. The support contributed to sustained levels of women's participation as voters, candidates and election administrators. In Malawi, there was an increase in the number of women parliamentarians elected in 2019, which followed national efforts, supported by the United Nations, to promote the participation of women. A gender-mapping exercise in Mali, conducted by national authorities with the help of the United Nations, identified women's priorities and expectations ahead of the 2018 presidential elections. UN-Women supported gender assessments and strategies for strengthening women's participation in electoral processes in Bangladesh, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Further examples of United Nations support for gender equality are described in annex II.

27. In 2018, UN-Women launched a global compilation of data on women's political participation at the local level, which was the first such exercise to obtain comparable high-quality data in respect of women's representation in local government pursuant to the Sustainable Development Goals. As at 1 May 2019, in 103 countries and areas, women's representation in local elected bodies varied from less than 1 per cent to 50 per cent, with a median of 26 per cent.

## V. Observations

28. During the reporting period, elections continued to be compelling and effective ways for citizens to participate in their countries' political processes and have their voices heard. In some cases, however, Member States experienced tension and disputes around elections or faced challenges in carrying out a free and genuine process in which human rights and political participation were protected for all. The result at times was violence and loss of life. There were also instances in which the results were rejected or political actors withdrew in protest from the electoral contest.

29. Those experiences confirmed lessons outlined in the previous report, including the recognition that it is political leaders, from both government and opposition parties, who bear the overriding responsibility for successful elections. This applies not only in the period leading up to an election, in which they must engage in civil

and peaceful competition, respect the integrity of the process and the rights of all and call upon supporters to do the same, but also in the days and weeks that follow, when the results emerge and tensions may rise, providing tests of true leadership. Both those who end up winning and those who are defeated face the choice of reaffirming public trust in their country's democratic system or undermining belief in its legitimacy. Winning magnanimously entails recognizing that a part of the electorate preferred another candidate or party, giving appropriate political space to such different views and refraining from monopolizing a hold on State institutions or harassing opponents. Losing graciously after a credible process involves refraining from broad, potentially provocative comments about an "illegitimate" election without sufficient evidence, challenging results through legal and peaceful means only, adequately substantiating any allegations of irregularities, accepting a loss arising out of a credible process, playing an active and constructive opposition role and focusing, perhaps, on the next opportunity at the ballot box.

30. It is important for the Organization, where requested or mandated to provide support, to develop a comprehensive approach to its engagement well in advance of an election. Just as elections are not isolated technical events but rather an integral part of national political processes, United Nations electoral support should be incorporated within a broader engagement to help Member States promote peace and stability as well as democratic governance, as appropriate. This includes combining technical support with engagement with political leaders and good offices efforts by envoys and special representatives of the Secretary-General, at both the national and regional levels.

31. In previous reports submitted to the General Assembly, the importance of inclusiveness in national democratic processes has been consistently highlighted. In adopting the Sustainable Development Goals, Member States committed to ensuring, among other targets, responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making processes at all levels, women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. In its resolution [73/148](#), the Assembly reiterated those principles with respect to women's participation, encouraging national legislative authorities and political parties, as appropriate, to state zero tolerance for sexual harassment, intimidation and any other form of violence against women in politics. Member States are again called upon to undertake more systematic efforts to promote and enable women's participation in politics and in elections, which does not end with increasing their numbers on elected or appointed bodies, and rather requires their full empowerment as active participants and leaders.

32. In December 2018, at an intergovernmental conference held in Marrakech, Morocco, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration was adopted, in which the benefits of migration and the huge contributions migrants make to both their host countries and their countries of origin were recognized and reinforced. Participating States committed to the creation of conditions allowing migrants and diasporas to fully contribute to sustainable development. The Compact highlights, among other possible actions, enabling the political participation and engagement of migrants in their countries of origin, including in elections, such as by establishing voter registries for citizens abroad and through parliamentary representation, in accordance with national legislation.

33. As part of the United Nations youth strategy, launched in 2018, the Secretary-General committed to leveraging the capacity of the United Nations to promote the right of young persons to participate in public affairs, including in political and civic processes, platforms and institutions at all levels. As in the previous report, Member States are urged to consider ways to increase the participation of youth in decision-making and in electoral processes as candidates, voters, electoral officials, party

agents and observers. In this context, the approach taken by some Member States to align the minimum age of eligibility to stand for elections with the minimum voting age is noted as being a possible path to greater participation. Member States are also encouraged to recognize the particular needs of persons with disabilities and to remove obstacles that prevent them from fully and equally participating in electoral processes.

34. Inclusion needs to be understood and applied within the context of each Member State, reflecting the diversity of its society. In this context, the efforts of some States to overcome discrimination and barriers to political participation faced by persons on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity are noted. The new Constitution of Nepal, for example, approved in 2015, grants citizens the freedom to decide the gender identity that appears on their citizenship documents. In 2010, the Election Commission of Nepal had already included a “third gender” category in its list of voters, complying with a decision of the Supreme Court to offer such an option on all official documents. A similar right to determine one’s own gender identity in official documents was guaranteed in Pakistan in a law adopted in 2018. In New Zealand, too, as a result of a policy change adopted in November 2012, all persons can choose to have their gender marked in their passports as male, female or a third category, based solely on self-determined identity. Those cases represent what are still exceptional examples of State practice regarding the recognition of gender identity. Other notable efforts include those initiated by electoral management bodies, such as the National Electoral Institute of Mexico, which, for the 2018 elections, established a protocol to enhance the participation of transgender voters.

35. The growing influence in elections of the Internet and social media, being both enablers of participation and tools for spreading disinformation and hate speech, including against women, and to incite violence, raised complex issues for Member States. The risks of manipulation and of activities aimed at undermining political processes are worrisome and must be taken seriously, even if the actual threats and their effects on election outcomes remain difficult to gauge. The paralyzing suspicion that any information or discourse can be or has been manipulated, leading to the erosion of trust, lies at the heart of the Internet’s challenge to democracy. Member States have already been confronted with instances of real, if sometimes indirect, political impact. Furthermore, the spread of hate speech through online platforms can have a damaging impact on an electoral process and be a trigger for violence. As part of the effort of the United Nations to combat such phenomena, the Secretary-General in June 2019 launched the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, which points to concrete ways in which the Organization can counter hate speech while upholding the freedom of opinion and expression.

36. The response to those challenges is evolving, as are opinions on how best to confront them. Thinking varies widely as to what is the appropriate role of the State in regulating public discourse while at the same time respecting freedom of expression and protecting journalists, including during elections. Whichever path Member States choose to follow in that regard, they may wish to focus on building the resilience of their societies to handle potentially false, emotive and incendiary content spread online and through social media, including by promoting critical thinking and digital literacy and supporting professional journalism. They may also consider requiring greater transparency of sources of information disseminated online and providing citizens access to other tools that enable them to verify information sources and reporting. In that regard, the steps being taken by some social media companies to voluntarily assume greater responsibility for countering the misuse of their platforms and to explore ways to review online content while respecting basic rights and freedoms are noted. Broad, inclusive dialogue and engagement with all stakeholders – political actors, citizens, social media platforms, media representatives

and civil society – appear to offer the best prospect for arriving at sound legislative and policy initiatives in this area, based on internationally protected rights and freedoms, including the right to information, the freedom of expression and the right to privacy. Similarly, non-partisan and consultative processes for monitoring, investigating and resolving disputes around allegations that false or misleading information may have influenced an election may be effective in reducing tensions. Furthermore, particular attention must be focused on protecting those who are often the target of hate speech, such as women and vulnerable groups.

37. While the focus concerning online communication tools is sometimes on misuse and manipulation, their potential to expand free speech and political participation for underrepresented and marginalized groups, including women, youth, persons with disabilities, refugees and internally displaced persons, and to empower them should not be overlooked. In keeping with the Secretary-General's strategy on new technologies launched in 2018, a balanced approach is required, one that recognizes that there is nothing inherently negative about digital technology and online communication per se – the question is the way in which they are used. In its commentary on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Human Rights Committee addressed the importance, for the full enjoyment of the right to political participation, of the freedom to debate public affairs, to criticize and oppose, to publish political material, to campaign for election and to advertise political ideas ([CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.7](#), para. 25). Clearly, the Internet and social media offer citizens the means to exercise those rights freely and independently, and a blanket suspension or shutdown of the Internet during an electoral period would be likely to provoke widespread protest that this constituted their restriction or violation.

38. With respect to the use of digital technologies for electoral operations, such as voter registration, voting and counting, there were again instances in which Member States grappled with balancing the promises and the pitfalls of innovations. The United Nations neither encourages Member States to introduce digital innovations in their operational processes nor discourages them. Their potential for increasing participation, reducing certain irregularities and strengthening public trust can be great. At the same time, some of the sobering conclusions outlined in previous reports have been confirmed by recent experience. Those include the importance of ensuring, first and foremost, clarity about the problem to be resolved through any new technology, of taking ample time to consider the technical, financial and political feasibility of the innovation through a broad consultative process and of gradually introducing new technology to allow for thorough testing and adjustment. Such testing should also take into account increasing concerns regarding the vulnerability of national electoral infrastructures to cyberattacks. Attempts to interfere in elections are not new, but the impact of cyberthreats has redefined potential targets and elevated possible damage and requires a reassessment of responses. A number of important initiatives on digital security are being established through multidisciplinary and cooperative approaches, such as the 2018 Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace. Building on such initiatives, universal and multi-stakeholder commitments with respect to digital trust and security are critical for addressing such threats, including in elections. In this context, the Secretary-General looks forward to studying the recommendations of the High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation and considering their application for electoral processes.

39. An independent judiciary plays a critical and sometimes underappreciated role in protecting the right to political participation. National courts are vital in establishing or upholding citizens' confidence in an election by adjudicating challenges to the results or to the process itself. All Member States are encouraged to ensure that their relevant courts and judges are able to act and make decisions independently and in accordance with the rule of law and their human rights

obligations. Courts should also have the resources necessary to fulfil their functions within the short time frame allotted for bringing an election process to a credible conclusion. This implies a detailed knowledge of electoral operations, as bona fide challenges can be resolved most effectively when there is a good understanding of the procedural intricacies of polling, counting and tabulating results. Such an understanding is essential for striking a proper balance between the conflicting demands of speed in reaching clarity regarding an election outcome and fairness and deliberation in the adjudication process.

40. Member States are therefore encouraged to ensure the appropriate level of legal certainty in their national systems and to define, through suitable legislation, the powers of the judiciary and the process of resolving electoral challenges. This is particularly true with respect to the power to annul an election or parts of an election or to implement other corrective measures, such as a recount. It is important for courts and the electorate alike to know in advance under which circumstances an election may, or perhaps even must, be voided, and how the evidence can or will be weighed. An important question to address is whether annulment may be initiated only if the alleged fraud or irregularities have affected the result of the election – that is, if the allocation of seats to parties or candidates would be otherwise if it had not been for the alleged acts – or whether it is sufficient that a particular irregularity has occurred irrespective of its impact. This is of course a matter for Member States to decide in the context of their own political and legal systems. In codifying judicial powers and processes concerning remedial measures in elections, however, Member States are encouraged ensure that corrective measures are in proportion to the alleged infraction and should protect otherwise unaffected election results and validly cast votes.

41. In the previous report, attention was drawn to instances in which international funding was insufficient either to complete or to launch an electoral assistance project. Such instances continue to occur, limiting the ability of the Organization as a whole to deploy one of its conflict prevention tools. Member States are again called upon to ensure sufficient funding when the United Nations has been requested or mandated by the Security Council or the General Assembly to provide electoral assistance in order to honour that request or to implement that mandate.

42. In 1991, the General Assembly established a framework for United Nations electoral assistance that continues to be applicable and essential today. A primary objective was to ensure that electoral assistance would be provided by the United Nations in a coherent and coordinated manner. In the decades since, the number of entities involved – and thereby the range of expertise that the United Nations can offer in support of Member States' elections – has grown, and with it the importance of delivering as one. The move towards a single peace and security pillar and the changes to the development system that entered into effect in 2019 have strengthened the ability to do so. In collaboration with all United Nations entities involved, the focal point will continue to pursue unity in diversity and cohesive engagement in support of Member States.

## Annex I

### United Nations electoral assistance provided during the reporting period

#### Member States receiving assistance

Afghanistan*	Libya*
Angola	Madagascar
Argentina	Malawi
Armenia	Malaysia
Bangladesh	Mali*
Belize	Mauritius
Benin	Mexico
Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mozambique
Cameroon	Myanmar
Central African Republic*	Nauru
Chad	Nepal
Côte d'Ivoire	Niger
Democratic Republic of the Congo*	Pakistan
Dominican Republic	Papua New Guinea
Ecuador	Paraguay
El Salvador	Republic of Moldova
Ethiopia	Rwanda
Gambia	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
Guatemala	Sao Tome and Principe
Guinea	Sierra Leone
Guinea-Bissau*	Solomon Islands
Haiti*	Somalia*
Honduras	Timor-Leste
Iraq*	Tunisia
Kenya	Vanuatu
Kyrgyzstan	Zambia
Lebanon	Zimbabwe
Liberia	

\* Assistance provided under a Security Council mandate.

**Observer States receiving assistance**

State of Palestine

**Non-Self-Governing Territories receiving assistance**

New Caledonia

## **Annex II**

### **Examples of United Nations electoral assistance provided during the reporting period**

#### **Armenia**

1. In preparation for early parliamentary elections, held in December 2018, the United Nations, through a project of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), supported the Central Election Commission in procuring electoral materials, training polling staff on voter authentication devices, developing a searchable voter list application and implementing its voter education programme.

#### **El Salvador**

2. In preparation for the February 2019 presidential election, the United Nations supported the training and capacity-building of the electoral tribunal, facilitated dialogue forums for national actors and helped raise awareness of violence against women during elections. The entities involved, UNDP and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), promoted and supported the conclusion, in October 2018, of a political pact for the guarantee of the human rights of women among political parties, candidates and the electoral management body, which included commitments to stop violence against women. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) monitored the protection of human rights in the context of the elections and supported the national human rights institution in that regard.

#### **Guinea-Bissau\***

3. The United Nations, through an integrated effort by the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea-Bissau and UNDP, provided technical, financial and material support to the national election commission and the technical office in support of the electoral process for the legislative elections held in March 2019. The Organization also provided assistance in the establishment of what is referred to as an “election situation room”, a civil society platform established in some countries to track information about electoral developments, mitigate the risk of violence and help increase the participation of women and youth. The Peacebuilding Commission was engaged in sustaining international support for the timely conduct of inclusive and peaceful elections and to advocate a quota for women in parliament. The United Nations further supported national authorities in the drafting and adoption, in December 2018, of a gender parity law, which requires that the share of women on party candidate lists must be at least 36 per cent. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel complemented the good offices efforts of the mission, carried out in collaboration with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and other international organizations.

#### **Honduras**

4. Honduras held general elections in November 2017. The United Nations continued to provide technical support for the electoral tribunal through a UNDP project that had been active since 2015. The full implementation of the project was

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\* Assistance provided under a Security Council mandate.



hindered by interrupted and partial funding. OHCHR, pursuant to an agreement with the Government of Honduras signed in 2015, monitored the protection of human rights in the context of the election and the protests that followed. A public report detailing the findings of OHCHR was issued in May 2018. In the post-electoral period, the United Nations supported a high-level dialogue among political parties that led to a consensus on the creation of two new electoral entities, namely, a national electoral council and an electoral tribunal, as well as reforms to the civil registry, and the enactment of those reforms by the National Congress in February 2019.

## **Iraq\***

5. Pursuant to Security Council resolution [1770 \(2007\)](#), the United Nations continued to support the efforts of Iraq to reform its electoral laws, institutions and processes and to promote the political participation and representation of women and minorities in the electoral process. In the context of the May 2018 legislative elections (the first following the defeat of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and the fourth under the 2005 Constitution), the Organization provided technical assistance to the Independent High Electoral Commission, including in the use of new election technologies. The United Nations also provided technical support to the legislative elections held in September 2018 in the Kurdistan region, organized for the first time by the regional election authority.

## **Lebanon**

6. Following the adoption of new electoral legislation, parliamentary elections were held in May 2018, the first since 2009. The United Nations provided technical assistance to the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities, the Supervisory Commission for Elections and a number of civil society organizations. The Organization, through the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon, UNDP and UN-Women and including the participation of the United Nations Volunteers programme, provided support in such areas as candidate registration, the training of election officials, the design and production of new uniform ballots, the management of results and the monitoring of the media. The United Nations also advocated and supported efforts to increase the political participation of women.

## **Liberia\***

7. In preparation for the presidential and legislative elections held in October and December 2017, the United Nations provided logistical and technical support to the National Elections Commission, as well as training in the management of election security to Liberian security agencies. Its support was aimed at improving electoral institutions, processes and laws, increasing women's political participation and training young journalists on conflict-sensitive reporting in the context of elections. In addition, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Liberia engaged in good offices efforts in collaboration with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel; Olusegun Obasanjo, the former President of Nigeria (a member of the Secretary-General's High-level Advisory Board on Mediation); and representatives of the African Union and ECOWAS. In the post-election period, UNDP support was focused on electoral reform, the development of the National Elections Commission's administrative support systems and the rehabilitation of the Commission's warehouses.

## **Madagascar**

8. At the request of the Government, the United Nations, through UNDP and others, provided technical assistance to the Independent National Electoral Commission for the presidential election in November and December 2018 and the legislative elections in May 2019. Areas of support included capacity-building of the electoral authority, advice on electoral legislation, support for the consultative framework and civic education, and strengthening of the capacity of women candidates. The Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on Madagascar and the resident coordinator provided good offices in the lead-up to the presidential election, in coordination with envoys of other organizations. Those efforts helped to support a peaceful transition of power following the presidential election.

## **Mali\***

9. Pursuant to Security Council resolution [2423 \(2018\)](#), the United Nations provided logistical and technical assistance, as well as aid to national security forces, for the conduct of the presidential election in August 2018, mainly through the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali and UNDP. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Mali provided good offices in close collaboration with representatives of the African Union and ECOWAS. The Organization, including through UN-Women, also supported efforts to increase women's electoral participation, including through educational campaigns and technical assistance for women's organizations.

## **Nepal**

10. The United Nations, through a UNDP project, provided capacity-building assistance to the Election Commission for the preparation and conduct, in 2017, of local, provincial and national elections, followed by indirect elections for the National Assembly (the upper house), President and Vice-President. The elections were part of a political process that had ended a 10-year conflict. They also marked the start of the devolution of power to newly established provincial and local governments, as envisaged in the Constitution adopted in 2015.

## **Republic of Moldova**

11. Parliamentary elections were held in February 2019. Through UNDP and UN-Women, the United Nations supported the electoral process with the aim of strengthening its transparency, credibility and inclusiveness. This included building the capacity of the Central Electoral Commission through the use of modern information technology infrastructure; promoting women's participation; supporting the participation of persons, in particular women, with disabilities; furnishing technical advice on electoral systems and processes; carrying out voter information and civic education initiatives; and supporting civil society organizations and other electoral stakeholders.

## **Sierra Leone**

12. The United Nations supported the National Electoral Commission in strengthening its planning and management capacity and its results management system for the presidential, parliamentary and local elections held in March 2018.

The Organization also supported efforts to increase women's participation, to prevent violence against women in elections and to develop conflict prevention and mitigation initiatives focused on the peaceful resolution of electoral disputes. The entities involved in those activities within their respective areas of work were UNDP, UN-Women, OHCHR and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, with the support of the Peacebuilding Fund. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel, in collaboration with representatives of other organizations, engaged in good offices to support the peaceful acceptance of the outcome of the presidential run-off election. The United Nations and other international actors continued to encourage dialogue among key stakeholders after tensions rose following a ruling in which the High Court overturned a number of parliamentary election results.

## **New Caledonia**

13. Pursuant to a request from the Government of France in 2016, the United Nations, through a project administratively supported by the United Nations Office for Project Services, deployed experts to advise the relevant authorities during the annual update of the special voter rolls in preparation for provincial elections and a referendum on self-determination in New Caledonia in November 2018. Similarly, in 2019, experts were deployed during the annual update of the voter rolls. In addition to this advisory capacity, the United Nations deployed a panel of experts to report to the Secretary-General on the environment and the technical organization of the referendum and to provide recommendations to the Government of France and New Caledonian stakeholders.

**Map of States and Territories that received United Nations electoral assistance during the reporting period (1 August 2017–31 July 2019)**

