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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 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 elections and United Nations electoral assistance since the issuance of his previous report on that subject ([A/74/285](#)). During the reporting period, from 1 August 2019 to 31 July 2021, the United Nations assisted more than 60 Member States, on the basis either of a request or a Security Council mandate.

The report highlights the contributions of multiple United Nations entities involved in electoral assistance, progress in ensuring more coherence, consistency and coordination within the United Nations system and the efforts made to strengthen cooperation and partnership between the United Nations and regional and subregional organizations, as well as with other international assistance providers.

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic posed significant challenges for Member States in having to decide whether and how to proceed with scheduled elections and to navigate complex legal, technical, political, human rights and public health considerations. Globally, the crisis drew attention to the fragility of the foundations on which credible elections are built, namely, trust in electoral institutions, responsible political leadership, a regulatory framework that has broad political support, and inclusive and non-discriminatory processes through which citizens can have a meaningful voice. However, that provided Member States with an opportunity to reflect on what makes those foundations vulnerable, how to reinforce them and how to strengthen the resilience of national electoral processes and institutions.

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\*\* [A/76/150](#).



Elections continued to demonstrate the powerful influence that candidates and political leaders have on public discourse and on the perceptions of their followers. Responsible political leadership does not mean ignoring instances of possible malfeasance or errors, or not pursuing avenues for dispute resolution established by law. Leaders should recognize that wilfully encouraging distrust in an election without concrete evidence can cause long-lasting tears in the fabric of democratic processes. The report offers ways in which candidates and other political leaders can mutually agree on, or voluntarily commit to, standards of responsible leadership and behaviour during electoral processes, including with regard to online activities.

While the number of women elected or appointed to decision-making positions has increased, insufficient progress has been made in the area of gender parity. Accelerating women's full and effective participation in public life remains a priority for the Organization, but it requires a renewed commitment to achieve a 50/50 gender balance at all levels of elected position and to prevent violence against women in politics. The report raises other important considerations regarding inclusive electoral processes, including the participation of persons with disabilities, young people, indigenous peoples and civil society.

The impact on electoral processes of climate and environmental disruptions, cases of which have already been observed, may create legal, political and operational difficulties concerning the ability of affected individuals to exercise their right to vote. Those emerging challenges can be addressed in various ways, including through a data-based understanding of potential climate impacts and risks, and through broad consultation well before a crisis arises.

## I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 74/158, in which the Assembly requests the Secretary-General to report on the status of requests from Member States for electoral assistance and on efforts to enhance support by the Organization for the democratization process in Member States since the issuance of the previous report on the subject (A/74/285).
2. During the reporting period, from 1 August 2019 to 31 July 2021, the Organization continued to respond to requests from Member States for electoral assistance, including throughout the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, by adjusting its work processes and adapting to the needs of Member States, as required.
3. As in previous reporting periods, United Nations support primarily took the form of technical assistance and initiatives to strengthen the capacity of national electoral authorities. On the basis either of a request or a Security Council mandate, the United Nations assisted 63 States and territories in conducting elections through a variety of assistance activities that are described in the present report. The report also contains broad observations on opportunities and challenges faced by Member States with regard to elections and electoral assistance. Annex I contains a list of the States and territories in which the United Nations provided electoral assistance during the reporting period, annex II contains selected examples of United Nations assistance activities and annex III contains a map illustrating States and territories to which the United Nations provided electoral assistance during the reporting period.

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

### A. Mandates

4. In 1991, the General Assembly established a framework for United Nations electoral assistance, which has continued to evolve and remains the basis for United Nations work in this field. The Organization provides assistance only at the specific request of the Member State concerned or as mandated by the Security Council or the Assembly. Prior to agreeing upon and providing the assistance, the United Nations carries out an assessment of the needs and capacities of the Member State concerned to ensure that the type, parameters and modalities of its support are tailored to the specific context. The Assembly has reiterated on many occasions that assistance must be objective, impartial, neutral and independent, 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.
5. 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 74/158, the Assembly recommended that the United Nations continue to provide technical advice and other assistance to requesting States and electoral institutions 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.
6. 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 electoral activities has continued to grow since that year. In a field of diverse United Nations actors, the

Assembly has repeatedly highlighted the importance of system-wide coherence and consistency in the provision of electoral assistance and has reaffirmed the leadership role of the focal point in that respect. Accordingly, the focal point is responsible for setting electoral assistance policies, deciding on the parameters for United Nations electoral assistance in a particular requesting Member State and maintaining, as mandated by the Assembly, a single electoral roster of experts available for rapid deployment when required to support 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 for electoral assistance matters.

7. The Electoral Assistance Division of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs provides support to the focal point. 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 parameters for United Nations electoral assistance and provides advice on the design of electoral mission components or assistance projects. The Division also manages the single electoral roster and maintains the electoral 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 United Nations entities involved in electoral assistance, including on policies and good practices. When required, the Division supports the Secretary-General, including his envoys, and political and peacekeeping missions in the prevention, management and resolution of electoral crises. It also maintains partnerships with other regional and intergovernmental organizations involved in elections. These functions have not changed following reforms to the United Nations peace and security pillar and the development system.

8. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the major body of the Organization supporting electoral institutions and other electoral stakeholders, 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. Electoral assistance is an aspect of the governance work of UNDP in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

9. In mission settings, electoral assistance is generally provided through components of field missions under the auspices of the Department of Peace Operations and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, often with the support of UNDP. Military and police components of peacekeeping missions support national law enforcement agencies in providing security for electoral processes. All electoral assistance in peacekeeping, peacebuilding and special political mission settings is delivered in a fully integrated manner from the outset, whether or not the mission is structurally integrated. United Nations electoral assistance is delivered under the overall authority of the special representative of the Secretary-General or the head of mission. This ensures that the United Nations entities providing electoral assistance to a Member State communicate with a unified voice, prevents the duplication of efforts and ensures the optimal use of available resources.

10. In non-mission settings, resident coordinators provide strategic leadership and facilitate the coordination and coherence of electoral assistance by United Nations country teams. Resident coordinators may also engage in preventive diplomacy and good offices for electoral processes, where appropriate, and coordinate common country analyses and United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks that integrate electoral priorities into country-led development

processes, as required. United Nations development system reforms adopted in 2019 produced synergies with the existing electoral assistance architecture. 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 provide assistance to resident coordinators for collaborative approaches to conflict prevention by empowering national stakeholders, national peace architectures and supporting mechanisms for inclusive dialogue and social cohesion.

11. 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 to uphold human rights and fundamental freedoms in such contexts. OHCHR also provides technical advice and capacity-building assistance on ensuring that local norms and institutions comply with international human rights law.

12. 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.

13. 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. UNESCO aims to support the development of fair, safe and professional media coverage as important elements of democracy, including by building the capacity of media professionals, media regulators, security forces and policymakers. It also supports access to information initiatives and training on fact-checking and the critical thinking of citizens.

14. Numerous other United Nations entities are involved in electoral activities or have a mandate or an area of focus that is related to 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, in partnership with other United Nations entities, supports the implementation of electoral activities in both mission settings, including post conflict and peacekeeping environments, and non-mission settings. The United Nations Volunteers programme works to integrate qualified and highly motivated personnel into electoral projects and into the electoral components of peace operations, while promoting the value of inclusion through volunteerism, especially among women, young people and marginalized groups. The Peacebuilding Fund can support countries in creating an environment conducive to peaceful elections or, in the context of contested elections, support the reduction of tensions and the mitigation of violence by encouraging dialogue and engagement. 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 monitoring and training, as well as education and awareness-raising. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees provides international protection and seeks permanent solutions for refugees, including by assisting Member States, where relevant and appropriate, in facilitating refugee participation in electoral processes. The

International Organization for Migration is the leading intergovernmental organization in the field of migration and supports the implementation of out-of-country voting programmes for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

## **B. Electoral assistance activities**

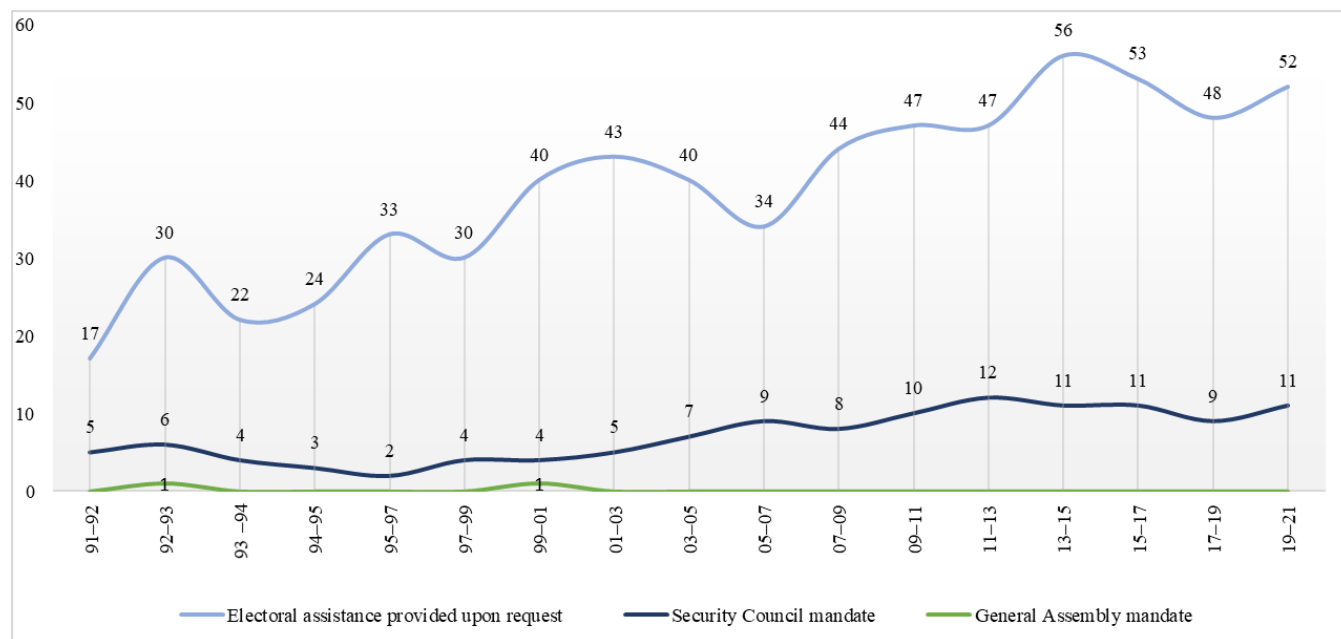
15. The COVID-19 pandemic and the immense challenges that it caused were the dominant feature of the reporting period. Throughout the period, the United Nations worked to maintain its support for Member States in conducting their electoral processes in a credible, professional, impartial and transparent manner, as well as in complying with the democratic principles of universal and equal suffrage and other international obligations. The Organization showed flexibility in trying to meet the needs of Member States, adapting to the conditions of the pandemic, including to address new requests for electoral assistance through remote and in-person needs assessments based on specific contexts and health requirements. Electoral personnel remained in-country to the extent possible to support electoral authorities in amending operational planning and ensuring the business continuity of electoral operations. The Organization also provided assistance to mitigate COVID-19 risks during elections, including advice on procedures to respond to public health requirements and support for the procurement of health and safety supplies, such as personal protective equipment.

16. The experience of the United Nations continued to suggest that, while professionalism in election management and adherence to international norms are essential components for any electoral process, trust in an election is also shaped by the broader political context beyond merely technical qualities. The pandemic highlighted the linkages between the technical and political facets of elections, as Member States were required to manage scheduled elections by adopting procedural changes, adjusting timelines and, in some cases, postponing elections. Where appropriate and as requested, the United Nations assisted Member States in creating an environment conducive to holding 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.

17. 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, and these types of assistance are rarely mandated. Where a Member State, at a critical point in its political life, seeks a United Nations presence in its electoral process, there must be broad public support in the State for the assumption of such a role by the United Nations.

18. Technical assistance is by far the most frequent form of assistance requested by Member States and provided by the United Nations. Since 1991, the United Nations has provided electoral assistance to 114 Member States. The number of States and territories receiving 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, 1991–2021**



Source: reports of the Secretary-General.

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

19. The General Assembly has often reiterated the need for comprehensive coordination among United Nations entities under the auspices of the focal point for electoral assistance matters, most recently in its resolution [74/158](#). The Electoral Assistance Division, in advising and supporting the focal point, continued to lead the development of system-wide electoral assistance policies, in consultation with other United Nations entities. During the reporting period, for example, the Division initiated a comprehensive update of existing electoral assistance policies. It also facilitated the adoption of joint guidance by the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, UNDP and the Development Coordination Office that clarifies the respective roles of resident coordinators and UNDP resident representatives in the provision of electoral support. In response to the pandemic, the Division, together with UNDP, and in collaboration with the World Health Organization and other United Nations entities, developed operational guidance for United Nations personnel on supporting elections during the COVID-19 pandemic.

20. United Nations entities involved in electoral matters continued to discuss internal policy issues through the Inter-Agency Coordination Mechanism for United Nations Electoral Assistance, convened and chaired by the Electoral Assistance Division. That was the established platform for exchanging information and coordinating electoral activities and the development of United Nations electoral policy.

21. In December 2020, the Electoral Assistance Division, together with UNDP and with the support of other United Nations entities, hosted a global meeting online for United Nations chief electoral advisers and chief technical advisers to discuss trends, challenges and opportunities related to the Organization's approach and delivery of electoral assistance, including in the context of the challenges of the pandemic.

22. The United Nations single electoral roster continued to meet staffing requirements in the field operations of the Secretariat and other participating entities, including UNDP. Electoral experts rostered at various levels can be rapidly deployed in support of electoral processes in Member States that request assistance. During the reporting period, the United Nations conducted a global campaign to expand and diversify its roster membership. As a result of the initiative, the number of female experts increased by 25 per cent and the total number of rostered experts reached 1,373, although women still represent only 33 per cent of that total.

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

23. The Electoral Assistance Division, together with UNDP and other United Nations entities, further strengthened partnerships, promoted South-South and triangular cooperation and ensured appropriate working arrangements with regional and intergovernmental organizations engaged in electoral assistance. Since the pandemic impeded the holding of in-person training, the Organization used virtual platforms to conduct training and support capacity-building efforts. UNDP, for example, together with the Electoral Assistance Division, held multiple global webinars addressing topical challenges posed by COVID-19 during elections. Hundreds of participants took part in the virtual events, including electoral officials and practitioners, civil society organizations, media, representatives of regional organizations and government officials, to exchange experiences of conducting elections and ideas about how to strengthen future processes.

24. The Organization supported the League of Arab States in improving its electoral database and institutional memory and assisted it in conducting virtual training sessions on gender and elections and in organizing the third forum of electoral management bodies in the Arab States. The United Nations also assisted the Arab Organization of Electoral Management Bodies in the latter's response to the COVID 19 pandemic. The United Nations is supporting the African Union in its development of a framework for technical electoral assistance for its member States.

25. The United Nations maintained its long-standing partnerships with other regional and intergovernmental organizations, including the Commission of the Economic Community of West African States, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Southern African Development Community, the Commonwealth, 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 several non-governmental organizations active in regional and international arenas.

26. The United Nations continued supporting platforms for electoral capacity development and knowledge-sharing at the regional and global levels. Assistance to the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network included updating topics that serve as primary resources for electoral officials and practitioners worldwide. The Organization also continued its support for the Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections (BRIDGE) project through its assistance in updating modules on election day management, results management and electoral legal frameworks. A recent survey conducted by BRIDGE partners indicates that participants have overwhelmingly benefited from BRIDGE trainings, which has had a positive impact on the way that their respective organizations conduct election-related functions.

27. 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, which is currently endorsed by 56 organizations worldwide, continues 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 and now endorsed by 299 organizations and networks, continues to provide an important normative framework for organizations engaged in non-partisan citizen election monitoring.

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

28. The core staff costs of the Electoral Assistance Division continue to be funded primarily by the regular budget of the United Nations. Thanks to contributions by Member States, the Division continued to use extrabudgetary funds as vital supplementary funding for carrying out substantive activities, including needs assessments and advisory missions; maintaining and expanding the roster of electoral experts; providing capacity development support to regional organizations; and enabling the rapid deployment of experts to the field, at the request of Member States. The Organization used the trust fund administered by the Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, along with the UNDP funding window for governance and peacebuilding, to implement rapid response and catalytic projects and programmes aimed at mitigating conflict, promoting peaceful elections and supporting the participation of women and other underrepresented groups. UN Women used extrabudgetary funds on programming to support women's participation in elections, including through responses to prevent violence against women in elections. Voluntary contributions from partners continued to be the principal funding source of United Nations electoral assistance projects in the field, which were mainly implemented by UNDP. Multi-partner basket funds established in specific Member States are often used to manage those resources.

29. In response to ongoing funding challenges unrelated to and preceding the pandemic, the Electoral Assistance Division, on behalf of the focal point for electoral assistance matters and with UNDP support, carried out a comprehensive review of financial resources for electoral assistance. The Organization is currently implementing the recommendations of that assessment.

30. Adjusting United Nations assistance to meet the needs of Member States during the COVID-19 pandemic entailed shifting resources to unplanned costs. For many Member States, conducting elections during the pandemic meant that additional funds were required for various risk mitigation measures. By the same token, financial requirements for United Nations technical assistance to support those efforts remained high.

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

31. Given that 2020 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#) on women and peace and security, it represented an opportunity to reflect on the increasing number of women elected or appointed to decision-making positions. Nevertheless, progress towards gender parity was insufficient. The Commission on the Status of Women, at its sixty-fifth session, emphasized the mutually reinforcing relationship between the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, and the full, effective and accelerated implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Commission stressed that the promotion of the full and equal participation and leadership of women in public life and the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls were interconnected.

32. Women continue to account for only one quarter of national legislators worldwide and 36 per cent of local government representatives, while they are also underrepresented in leadership positions throughout the public sector. The pandemic exposed and compounded obstacles that impede women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, further deepening existing inequalities.

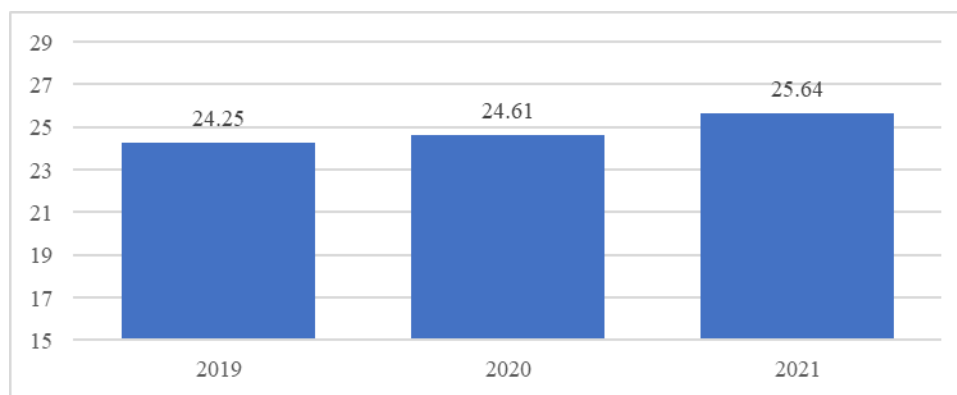
33. The Call to Action for Human Rights emphasizes the promotion and protection of the human rights of women in all spheres of work as foundational to the values and goals of the United Nations. During the reporting period, gender equality continued to be a key guiding principle in United Nations electoral assistance activities, policies and projects, and United Nations entities supported initiatives that contributed to increasing women's participation and representation (see figure II). The following examples serve to illustrate such efforts:

- In Afghanistan, ahead of the 2019 presidential election, the United Nations supported the electoral authorities in assessing barriers to women's participation, updating the country's gender strategy and reviewing electoral procedures from a gender perspective;
- In Ethiopia, ahead of the 2021 general elections, the United Nations supported a gender audit of draft electoral directives, the inclusion of gender-disaggregated data, the integration of gender components in public outreach strategies and the incorporation of gender considerations into the methodology for assessing risks of electoral violence;
- In Zimbabwe, the Organization supported efforts by the electoral commission to launch a gender and inclusion policy to guide the integration of gender equality into the commission's organizational procedures and to help it to fulfil its mandate.
- In the Central African Republic and Côte d'Ivoire, the United Nations supported the adoption of gender strategies by electoral commissions;
- In Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Cameroon, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Malawi, Mali, the Niger and the Republic of Moldova, among other countries, mindful that the pandemic would further challenge the notion of women's participation in electoral processes, the United Nations conducted electoral assistance projects to provide advice on COVID-19 mitigation measures, while emphasizing the impact of such measures on women voters, candidates and electoral officials.

34. The Electoral Assistance Division, UNDP, and UN-Women supported electoral management bodies in the Arab region to establish the Arab Network for Women in Elections. Launched in November 2019, the network brings together representatives from the region to discuss gender issues, promote good practices and advocate women's political participation.

Figure II

**Average percentage of women in lower or single houses of parliament in countries in which the United Nations provided electoral assistance during the reporting period**



Source: IPU.

## V. Observations

35. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on elections during the reporting period. Member States had to take difficult decisions on whether to proceed with a scheduled election, which could potentially put citizens' health at risk and lead to a lower voter turnout, or to postpone the process, thereby protecting lives but potentially creating political uncertainty and distrust. This meant navigating complex legal, technical, political, human rights and public health considerations. In countries with polarized political landscapes or where an election was part of a peace process or political transition, decisions were particularly sensitive. In some cases, the pandemic resulted in obstacles to the full realization of a number of human rights, in particular the right to political participation and the right to vote. Lockdown measures, restrictions on gatherings, quarantines and physical distancing requirements affected the way in which citizens worldwide engaged in political and electoral activities.

36. In some cases, there was concern that measures taken to manage the crisis may have served political interests instead of the public good and may have limited opposition voices or constrained civic space and participation, especially that of women and marginalized groups. In a number of countries, the pandemic went hand in hand with divisive rhetoric, a rise in populist and nationalist voices, hate speech, incitement to violence and harmful misinformation, each of which exacerbated divisions and may have contributed to an erosion of trust in public institutions and governance structures.

37. Globally, the crisis drew attention to the fragility of the foundations on which credible elections are built, namely, trust in electoral institutions, responsible political leadership, a regulatory framework that has broad political support, and inclusive and non-discriminatory processes through which citizens can have a meaningful voice. However, that provided Member States with an opportunity to reflect on what makes those foundations vulnerable, how to reinforce them and how to strengthen the resilience of national electoral processes and institutions.

38. Each Member State is encouraged to come to an understanding on how future decisions to alter electoral calendars or fundamentally change electoral processes in the face of a crisis ought to be taken, such as when responding to another pandemic,

a natural disaster, a climate-related disruption or a security threat like violent extremism. The experience gained during the reporting period indicates that in such circumstances, decisions that have a significant impact on an electoral process should involve broad consultation across the political spectrum, with the aim of reaching consensus. Such decisions should be taken on the basis of sound technical and scientific information, as required, and have a clear legal foundation. Women should be included in the decision-making, gender implications should be factored in and any measures introduced should take into account the impact on traditionally marginalized and particularly vulnerable groups. In addition, any postponements of elections should have clear timelines or be accompanied by agreement on a consultative process for determining a new date, and the postponement should be communicated clearly and comprehensively so that the public will understand from an early stage how their electoral rights would be affected. Moreover, any limitations on fundamental freedoms should conform with human rights obligations and be consistent with the principles of legality, necessity, proportionality and non-discrimination, while being time bound and subject to approval and oversight. Health-related or other crises should not be a time for political opportunism.

39. The experience gained during the reporting period demonstrated once again the powerful influence that candidates and political leaders have on public discourse and on the perceptions of their followers about an election and its outcome. Their words have a particularly wide reach and resonance online. Ideally, leaders would help to temper disappointment after an electoral loss and set the tone for the peaceful acceptance of results and for an active and constructive role in political opposition. They should avoid fanning the flames of discontent and inciting hatred, or even violence, against opponents, including by making broad declarations about allegedly “stolen” elections. Responsible political leadership does not mean ignoring instances of possible malfeasance or errors, or not pursuing avenues for dispute resolution established by law. Leaders should, however, recognize that wilfully encouraging distrust in an election without concrete evidence can cause long-lasting tears in the fabric of democratic processes.

40. Member States are encouraged to consider ways in which candidates and other political leaders from across the spectrum can mutually agree on, or voluntarily commit to, standards of responsible leadership and behaviour during electoral processes, including with regard to online activities. That could include, for example, commitments to practise and encourage positive online behaviour; refer to verified sources of electoral information emanating from the established electoral authorities, such as on polling locations and voter eligibility; pursue only legal means of challenging alleged irregularities, without making sweeping comments about possible fraud that do not have supporting evidence; abstain from hate speech and incitement to violence, including harassment against women candidates; refrain from knowingly conveying false or misleading information; reject the use of manipulated or altered content, as well as leaked or stolen digital material; and denounce actions that contravene those commitments. The United Nations stands ready to support the development of such codes of conduct or political commitments during elections, where requested.

41. It is not only political leaders who have a role to play in tackling the harmful use of social media and other online platforms, including through the evolving use of artificial intelligence. Cross-sectoral efforts are already under way involving Governments, civil society, the private sector – including social media and technology companies – and individual citizens. Each of those stakeholders can contribute to countering the deliberate dissemination of misinformation, online threats and hate speech, and manipulative interference. Governments, for example, can adopt regulatory and legal responses to hate speech that are carefully balanced against the

right to freedom of expression and the right to have access to information, while refraining from censorship measures and content-related limitations that do not meet international human rights standards. In this context, electoral authorities, where mandated, are increasingly having to assume roles and responsibilities in addressing the potential misuse of social media during elections. Civil society organizations can contribute to those efforts by monitoring abuses and misinformation disseminated online during elections.

42. Social media companies can play a role in developing policies to monitor online harassment and hate speech and to address them in a consistent manner, in line with the standards of international human rights law. This could include the possibility of removing content that constitutes an incitement to violence or discrimination, subject to due process requirements. Member States and other stakeholders are encouraged to consider the criteria set out in the Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, adopted in 2012 by experts convened under the auspices of OHCHR, in order to distinguish freedom of expression from incitement to hatred. Those criteria emphasize the social and political context, the status of the speaker, the intent of that person and the likelihood of harm.

43. In the spirit of the Secretary-General's Road Map for Digital Cooperation, efforts should also be made at the national and international levels to recognize the importance of access to digital technology in giving a voice to marginalized and vulnerable groups. To close the digital divide, a cross-cutting approach should be considered, not only enabling access, but also promoting digital literacy and building resilience, awareness and responsibility in online environments.

44. Experience from the previous two years continued to expose barriers that inhibit gender equality and women's empowerment. Accelerating women's full and effective participation in public life requires a renewed commitment to strengthen normative, legal and regulatory frameworks. Such measures should be designed to achieve the goal of a 50/50 gender balance at all levels of elected positions. Where appropriate, temporary special measures, such as gender quotas, have shown themselves to be successful in increasing women's representation to elected office. Various examples during the reporting period illustrate that effective enforcement mechanisms to ensure strict compliance are crucial to bringing about necessary changes and positive results. Even in the absence of legal requirements, political parties should be encouraged to nominate equal numbers of women and men as candidates.

45. New forms of violence and harassment against women continue to emerge, often with heightened intensity during elections. Those manifestations transcend political and legal systems, cultures and societies, and can appear in times of conflict and peace, and at all levels of development, and require global action. Member States are reminded of the importance of adopting concrete steps to prevent and respond to violence against women in politics.

46. The impact on electoral processes of climate and environmental disruptions – instances of which have already been observed – is concerning. Climate stressors and shocks, for example, may make polling locations or entire districts inaccessible to voters. Effects of climate and environmental changes, as well as natural disasters, may displace populations, creating legal, political and operational difficulties concerning the ability of affected individuals to exercise their right to vote. As climate patterns and seasonal cycles allow some degree of planning for possible adverse effects on political processes and populations, Member States are urged to consider a data-based understanding of potential climate impacts and risks. Some have already taken action. They are also encouraged to agree, through broad consultation and in coordination with electoral authorities, on contingency operational plans and possible

amendments to electoral legislation to address such scenarios. Doing so before a crisis arises, in a less polarized context, can help to facilitate consensus in dealing with potential situations that may affect the right to vote and give rise to political divisions. In addition, since elections can leave an environmental footprint, Member States are also encouraged to consider environmentally friendly options for recycling or reusing non-sensitive election materials.

47. Transparency and accountability are essential elements in maintaining citizens' trust in elections. Throughout the reporting period, there were cases, or a perception, that certain candidates and political parties seeking public office had an undue advantage, such as on account of the misuse of State resources or the use of prohibited funding. To systematically address such practices, an effective regulatory framework is required, combined with independent and sufficiently resourced oversight bodies, to ensure compliance and enable enforcement. In enacting that framework, Member States are encouraged to promote transparency in the funding of candidates for elected public office, political parties and electoral campaigns.

48. A disconnect still exists between the principles of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the actual situation facing persons with disabilities, including in the context of legal restrictions on political participation. Member States are reminded of the particular requirements of persons with disabilities, including those with physical, psychosocial, intellectual or sensory impairments, and to take steps to enable their participation in elections. Consulting directly with persons with disabilities and the organizations representing them, as appropriate, would help to promote buy-in and bring about meaningful change, given their role in identifying needs and contributing to policies that affect the rights of such persons. Efforts by Member States to reduce the barriers to political participation for persons with disabilities should also be noted. For example, recent changes to legislation in Colombia and Spain guarantee the rights of persons with disabilities to exercise their legal capacity by eliminating guardianship, which removes a significant restriction to political participation. In political processes in Chile and Kyrgyzstan, political parties are required by law to include persons with disabilities in their candidate lists. The COVID-19 pandemic also brought additional challenges to participation in elections. Some health and safety measures implemented in response to the pandemic have had the effect of limiting access to polling stations for persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. At the same time, and on a positive note, other operational adjustments have been carried out, such as the introduction of postal and curbside voting, which increases the ability of persons with disabilities to exercise the right to vote. Member States are encouraged to consider ways in which to maintain inclusive voting arrangements while ensuring appropriate electoral integrity safeguards.

49. According to IPU, half of the world's population is under 30 years of age, while only 2.6 per cent of parliamentarians globally belong to that age group. More broadly, young women and men are often not involved in electoral processes to an extent that reflects the number of them and their potential contribution. A range of measures have increased the participation of youth in public life, including youth quotas on candidate lists, the alignment of voting and eligibility ages, greater access to financing and capacity-building for young politicians. However, barriers remain, in particular for young women, who remain underrepresented and disproportionately excluded. At times, in the pursuit of meaningful participation, young people have been susceptible to engaging in aggressive campaign activities and tactics through the influence of party youth associations. Such actions devalue substantive contributions by young people and marginalize them from decision-making processes. Member States are encouraged to explore ways in which to connect with young people, including through innovative means, in order to create positive opportunities for their participation in elections.

50. There are some 370 million indigenous people worldwide, and many of these communities face a variety of impediments to political participation. Obstacles can manifest themselves as non-inclusion in voter lists, as well as difficulties in obtaining voting credentials and in access to voter information in indigenous languages and to polling locations. Member States are urged to consider ways to increase the participation of indigenous peoples in electoral processes to enable them to fully exercise electoral rights as equal members of society, as stipulated in international law and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

51. Civil society plays an essential role in supporting credible, inclusive and peaceful elections. In its resolution 74/158, the General Assembly acknowledged the importance of the national observation of elections and its contribution to enhancing the integrity of electoral processes, promoting public confidence and electoral participation and mitigating the potential for election-related disturbances. Other important civil society contributions include civic and voter education, the monitoring of electoral violence and electoral reform. Throughout the pandemic, civil society played an important role in promoting transparent and accountable electoral processes, advocating timely and accurate information on elections, encouraging safe and inclusive voting measures and undertaking the observation of elections, at a time when international observation efforts were often restricted. The contributions made through the active engagement of civil society actors were recognized in the Call to Action for Human Rights, although concern was raised that civic space is shrinking. Particular consideration should be given to safeguard civil society's ability to support and participate in electoral processes without undue restrictions.

52. As indicated in previous reports, while demand for United Nations support remains high, electoral support projects in the field have faced funding challenges in recent years. There were instances when the Organization could not launch or complete electoral assistance projects owing to insufficient donor funding. Given the importance of electoral assistance to Member States and the increasing demand for support, it is crucial to ensure that adequate and more predictable resources are available so that the Organization can provide support in all cases of approved assistance.

53. United Nations engagement throughout the reporting period reaffirms the fact that electoral assistance works best when it is part of coherent and unified strategies combining technical support and political engagement. Representatives of the Secretary-General, including special representatives, envoys, and resident coordinators, often in collaboration with regional and subregional actors, continued to play strategic roles to encourage the participation of political leaders in electoral processes, including through preventative diplomacy, mediation and good offices. Defusing pre- and post-election tensions and encouraging political consensus-building, such as through dialogue processes and national peace infrastructure, are part of the comprehensive approaches to build election environments conducive to preventing and managing conflict. Broader programmes on governance, human rights and peacebuilding may also contribute to lowering tension and mitigating risk during elections. In some cases, however, electoral violence demonstrates the multitude and complexity of factors influencing electoral environments and the need for continued reflection on how best to confront those challenges.

54. During the reporting period, the United Nations strove to navigate challenges posed during the pandemic by adapting and responding to the needs of Member States. While the Organization has adjusted to the circumstances, it looks forward to resuming full in-person engagement in electoral assistance as soon as conditions allow. The United Nations continues to stand ready to support Member States, when requested, in the conduct of their electoral processes.

## Annex I

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

#### Member States

Afghanistan*	Malawi
Albania	Malaysia
Angola	Mali*
Armenia	Mexico
Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mozambique
Burkina Faso	Myanmar
Cameroon	Nauru
Central African Republic*	Nepal
Chad	Niger
Chile	Pakistan
Côte d'Ivoire	Papua New Guinea
Democratic Republic of the Congo*	Paraguay
Dominica	Peru
Dominican Republic	Republic of Moldova
Ecuador	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
El Salvador	Sao Tome and Principe
Ethiopia	Solomon Islands
Gambia	Somalia*
Ghana	South Africa
Guatemala	South Sudan*
Guinea-Bissau*	Sudan*
Guyana	Suriname
Haiti*	Timor-Leste
Honduras	Togo
Iraq*	Tunisia
Jordan	Uganda
Kyrgyzstan	Uzbekistan
Lebanon	Vanuatu
Liberia	Zambia
Libya*	Zimbabwe
Madagascar	

#### Observer States

State of Palestine

#### Non-Self-Governing Territories

New Caledonia

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\* Assistance provided under a Security Council mandate.

## Annex II

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

#### Afghanistan\*

1. Pursuant to Security Council resolutions [2489 \(2019\)](#) and [2543 \(2020\)](#), the United Nations provided technical assistance and capacity-building to the Independent Electoral Commission and the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission for the September 2019 presidential election amidst a challenging security environment. The main areas of support were electoral operations, civic education and public outreach, voter registration, fraud mitigation, gender mainstreaming and increasing women's political participation. At the same time, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan provided good offices, including after the election, during a prolonged period of audits, recounts and adjudication of complaints, prior to a political agreement being reached in May 2020, in which it was specified that government appointments should be shared 50/50 between the two leading presidential candidates.

#### Bolivia (Plurinational State of)

2. Following disputed general elections in 2019 and the ensuing political tension, the United Nations, led by the Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General for Bolivia and the Resident Coordinator, contributed to national peace consolidation efforts in several key areas: electoral assistance, human rights monitoring, dialogue and the prevention of gender-based violence. Those efforts also included support for enacting legislation and securing the establishment of a new membership of the electoral body in December 2019. Ahead of the 2020 general elections and the March 2021 local elections, the United Nations provided technical electoral assistance to the supreme electoral tribunal and the departmental electoral tribunals, including on security standards and the transmission of results, public outreach, the promotion of dialogue with political parties, indigenous groups and media, the promotion of women's political participation and the establishment of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) mitigation protocols.

#### Burkina Faso

3. For the November 2020 general elections, the United Nations contributed to strengthening the planning and operational capacity of the National Independent Electoral Commission by providing technical expertise, training polling staff and procuring electoral material. The Organization also supported establishing a consultative mechanism to enable the Government and political party leaders to reach a consensus on the observance of the electoral calendar and constitutional requirements, despite delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The United Nations also provided support to the National Human Rights Commission for monitoring human rights during the elections. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel maintained close contact with key stakeholders and, through good offices, supported efforts to build an environment conducive to peaceful elections.

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Assistance provided under a Security Council mandate.

## **Central African Republic\***

4. Pursuant to Security Council resolutions [2499 \(2019\)](#) and [2552 \(2020\)](#), the United Nations provided operational, logistical and technical support to the National Elections Authority for the planning and conduct of the December 2020 presidential and legislative elections, as well as the legislative run-off elections held in March, May and June 2021. United Nations assistance was channelled through an integrated effort by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The Organization provided electoral security, procured COVID-19 prevention kits, and recruited and deployed 4,000 personnel throughout the country during voter registration and polling to educate voters on preventing the spread of COVID-19 and to ensure the observance of physical distancing. The United Nations also supported the establishment of a hotline for women candidates, which served as an early warning and response mechanism. The good offices of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for the Central African Republic and Head of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic contributed to maintaining the elections on schedule in a challenging environment characterized by armed insurgency and political instability. The Peacebuilding Commission assisted in sustaining international political and financial support for the timely conduct of the elections as part of the country's peacebuilding priorities.

## **Ecuador**

5. For the February 2021 general elections and the April 2021 presidential run-off elections, the United Nations provided technical assistance to the electoral Commission and the electoral tribunal in the transmission of results, public outreach, the promotion of women's political participation and combating gender-based electoral violence, including through public awareness activities. The Organization also monitored human rights in the electoral context. United Nations electoral assistance was provided to support broad, real-time access to electoral results, as well as efforts to restore public trust in the electoral management bodies.

## **Jordan**

6. In preparation for the November 2020 parliamentary elections, the United Nations provided technical assistance to the Independent Election Commission to promote the participation of young people and women in elections through various nationwide public awareness campaigns and training initiatives. In addition, the Organization supported the implementation of COVID-19 health and safety protocols throughout electoral operations.

## **New Caledonia**

7. Pursuant to requests from the Government of France, the United Nations deployed electoral experts to advise the relevant authorities during the second referendum on self-determination, which was held in October 2020. In addition to those advisory deployments, the United Nations supported the coordination of international election observers. The Organization also deployed an expert panel to report to the Secretary-General on the political environment and technical organization of the referendum, which included recommendations to the Government of France and New Caledonian stakeholders.

## **Niger**

8. Local and regional elections were held on 13 December 2020, followed by legislative and presidential elections on 27 December 2020, with a run-off election on 21 February 2021. The United Nations provided electoral assistance to the National Independent Electoral Commission through technical expertise in electoral administration, logistics and operations, institutional communication, civic and voter education, the training of polling staff, the procurement of electoral material and biometric voter registration. The Organization contributed to the effective implementation of quota legislation, leading to a significant increase in women's representation in parliament. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel maintained close contact with national stakeholders and carried out good offices missions in collaboration with the Economic Community of West African States and other organizations.

## **Papua New Guinea**

9. A non-binding referendum on the future political status of Bougainville was held between 23 November and 7 December 2019. At the request of the relevant authorities, the United Nations provided technical assistance to the Bougainville Referendum Commission through capacity-building of the electoral administration and helped to develop public outreach and information campaigns on the referendum. The Organization also funded the recruitment of an international Chair for the Commission and coordinated international observers. Observers commended the conduct of the referendum, and both the Autonomous Bougainville Government and the Government of Papua New Guinea recognized the process as credible, peaceful and reflective of the will of the people. As required in the Bougainville Peace Agreement, the two Governments have started to engage in a process of consultation on the results of the referendum.

## **Republic of Moldova**

10. The presidential election was held in November 2020, resulting in the election of the country's first female president. In response to a request from the Government, the United Nations provided technical assistance to the Central Electoral Commission, including on voter and civic education; promoting the participation of women, young people and persons with disabilities; implementing an automated system for managing political party and campaign financing and developing the register for electoral officials; providing advice on the safe conduct of the election during the pandemic; and providing institutional and capacity development to the Commission. The Organization also supported the establishment of a platform to facilitate the exchange of information on electoral processes and to pool support for the Commission.

## **Tunisia**

11. Following the sudden passing of the country's president, Tunisia held an early presidential election on 15 September 2019 and a run-off election on 13 October 2019. Legislative elections were held on 6 October 2019, as scheduled. Through the provision of technical electoral assistance, the United Nations helped to strengthen the institutional capacity of the Independent High Authority for Audio-visual Communication and the Independent High Authority for Elections, including for planning electoral operations. The Organization also supported the monitoring of the

access of persons with disabilities and older persons to polling stations, of gender-based violence patterns and of the overall human rights situation during the elections.

## **Vanuatu**

12. In March 2020, Vanuatu held parliamentary elections, as planned, with the support of the United Nations, including assistance in the design and conduct of a public information campaign on COVID-19 protocols, and the procurement and installation of handwashing stations at polling stations. In the absence of a sufficient quantity of personal protective equipment, UNDP provided assistance in the activation of local networks which became critical for procuring the equipment needed and for producing the sanitizer used throughout electoral operations.

## Annex III

### Map of States and territories to which the United Nations provided electoral assistance during the reporting period (1 August 2019–31 July 2021)

