

ELECTRONIC VOTING WELCOME, ESPECIALLY IF IT WILL
RE-INTEGRATE DIASPORA – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE (1ST
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It is commendable of the Interim Independent Electoral Commission of Kenya (IIECK) to have introduced electronic voting as a sign of readiness to change with the times. After all, Kenya is part of the global village, and we cannot ignore developments in other parts of the world, especially if they help eliminate or minimize electoral malpractices and restore confidence in the electoral system.

It is in this light that I welcome the introduction of electronic voter registration (e-registration) as a sub-component of e-voting – both as a practicing informatician as well as former politician. E-voting, well implemented, will not only improve timeliness, but also transparency, efficiency, accuracy, cost-effectiveness and also provide a ready audit trail. It has been tried successfully in other countries – e.g. India and Estonia – with astounding results. Obviously, on first introduction, it faces challenges, but these are not insurmountable. The same way we faced initial challenges when bank automation was first introduced: several customers cursed them and wanted them withdrawn. Some senior politicians and trade unionists even derided computers for ‘taking away jobs’ and wanted them done away with altogether. Today, we all enjoy the convenience and comfort of e-banking – faster teller services from anywhere, (almost) anytime, any day! The automatic teller machines (ATM’s), not to mention the more recent mPesa, Zap, etc, are just but examples to cite.

This is why it is commendable that IIECK has introduced e-registration in 18 constituencies as a pilot. It is my hope that they will extend in future the service to all constituencies, and automate the entire electoral process including voter registration, national electoral register, register analysis and validation, data processing, electronic voting, automated counting and tallying, electronic delivery, analysis and dissemination of results, etc. The same culture should permeate into other democratic and governance systems, including political party nominations (or primaries) and elections, electronic voting in parliament (as Rwanda already does), elections in cooperatives and associations, trade unions, student organizations,

professional bodies (perhaps the Law Society of Kenya would have seen fewer complaints in its recent elections), etc.

Thus when I travelled recently home to register as a voter, I was dead surprised when I learnt of friends who had to travel 500km away from the City to register as voters – their constituencies were among the pilot constituencies for e-registration! What a mockery of the e-system! The benefits of e-voting cannot be fully achieved by piece-meal implementation. These fellows could have simply gone to any registration sites in Nairobi, and have their details (ID numbers, finger-prints, any biometrics, etc) automatically captured and instantly relayed to the respective constituencies and/or centres. In the same vein, the IIECK would have readily accessed their needed details.

What is more; the e-voting (especially e-registration) would have levelled the playing field for all Kenyans, including Diaspora and Members of the Diplomatic Corp in foreign lands. It is estimated that there are over 1 million Kenyans 'abroad', scattered literally all over the world. A substantial fraction of them are working professionals and business people. Together, they bring substantial foreign exchange (forex) earnings through remittances, estimated by Government to be around US\$ 1 billion (KShs 77 billion) every single year! This excludes the informal remittances through relatives for fees, health care, funerals, etc. Even at US\$ 1 billion, that is a figure higher than what any single donor or development partner gives Kenya each year! Despite being our own, we treat Diaspora with disdain – as if they were second rate citizens. Some recommendations to reverse this trend and feeling: -

Firstly, we should allow Diaspora like any other Kenyan to participate in our electoral processes and national development. Today's technology permits the latter, blurring geographic and time-zone differences. This is why it is commendable that the Draft Katiba not only allows Kenyan Diaspora to vote, but also provides for Dual Citizenship. In terms of participation in national economic development, we could learn from examples of Malaysia and China, where qualified Diaspora are specifically invited to sit on strategic boards and commissions.

Secondly, with 1 million plus population size, if Diaspora are not second-rate citizens, then they deserve representation. Unfortunately, this is one thing that even the current Draft Katiba does not give them. Yet even one of our

known largest constituencies – Embakasi in Nairobi – has only about 150,000 voters. If Diaspora asked for 4-5 parliamentary seats, they wouldn't be asking for too much. After all, if Iraq in its recent historic polls provided for about 10 seats in a 300-strong house for Diaspora, why not Kenya? And what is more: it accordingly allowed it's Diaspora to participate in the voting process. Which leads me to the third and final point!

Why does one need to travel from wherever they are domiciled (say hundreds or thousands of kilometres away) to come to Kenya and register as a voter – especially at a time we are introducing e-voting or e-registration? For the record, several countries allow their Diaspora to register and vote in national elections, among them South Africa and the USA. Even just close next door: in the other recent historic vote in Southern Sudan, Sudanese nationals residing in Kenya, Uganda (and other strategic destinations) were able to register and take part in the elections. Why have Kenyan Diaspora been denied the opportunity to register and participate in the upcoming referendum? The voter registration for the July referendum is just about to close in a week's time, without having provided for Kenyan Diaspora to register. As Sudan showed, this could have been very easily done: simply provide registration and voting centres at strategic locations, especially embassies. For instance, because of the large Kenyan population in Western Europe, 'registration and polling centres' could have been provided at 2-3 strategic locations at minimal expense!

Such a facility would have not only facilitated registration of Diaspora, but also of GoK staff on duty in foreign missions (Diplomats and their support staff). Yet, with e-voting and e-registration, the distance does not matter much. Until we can think of realizing the full potentials of e-voting, the voices of the sceptics cannot totally be silenced. In the same vein, until and unless Diaspora can be fully integrated into our national psyche, it will be hard to convince them that they are not second-rate citizens. Yet come election cycles, they are the first destination for politicians keen to fundraise for campaigns! Do we ever stop to think they can do better than that? All they get in turn is lip-service; surprisingly not a single politician or leader is asking why in the current registration process, Diaspora (who are already earmarked to vote in future elections with the new Katiba) are not being registered? It is my hope that as the Hon. Minister for Finance prepares to table his budget for this year provision will be made to register Diaspora and Staff at Diplomatic Missions in any subsequent registrations. The

Government could even do better to extend the current registration by 1 more month during which time arrangement should be made to register Diaspora to be part of the looming new socio-political dispensation. I would want to assume that this time round it was just an oversight to leave them out.

At any rate, appeasing the Diaspora could do wonders not only in making them feel wanted and part of us, but also enthuse them to be better ambassadors. This in turn, could fetch us much more in concrete terms than the millions of shillings we spend daily in 'tourism and investment' promotions.



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