Speech by His Excellency Mr Rajkeswur Purryag, GCSK, GOSK, President of the Republic of Mauritius, on the occasion of the Opening of the 16th Annual General Conference of the Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries held on Tuesday 12 August 2014, at 09 30 hrs at Dinarobin Hotel Golf and Spa, Le Morne.

The Chairperson of the Electoral Commission Forum of the SADC Committee

The President of the SADC Electoral Commission Forum

Mr. Yousouf Aboobaker, Chairman of the Electoral Supervisory Commission, Mauritius

Mr. Irfan Abdool Rahman, Electoral Commissioner, Mauritius

Commissioners of Electoral Management Bodies from SADC Member States

Distinguished Delegates

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning and a very warm welcome to you all.

Let me also extend a special welcome to the Electoral Commissioners from the SADC region, and more specifically, to those of you who have travelled to Mauritius for the first time.

I wish to thank the SADC Electoral Commission Forum for having invited me to address you on a theme that has far-reaching implications for the Continent in general, and the SADC countries, in particular.

Ladies and Gentlemen

For quite some time now, the winds of democratic changes are blowing over Africa.

Many African countries have embraced the virtues of representative government based on a system of free and fair elections, the rule of law, good governance, and respect for human rights.

Gone are the days of authoritarian political regimes that had characterized the 1960’s era.

Indeed, to-day Africa is already on the path of sustained democratic transformation.

And the process of elections whereby people have been bestowed the universal right to choose their political leaders through a multi-party democratic system constitutes the very foundation of the ongoing wave of change.

Indeed, the exercise of universal voting also gives political legitimacy to the peoples’ representatives duly elected through a democratic process.
Such legitimacy is essential for the stability of democratic and constitutional government and for social and economic progress of our nation.

The genuine participation of all citizens in the electoral process is a means to establish not only the legitimate authority of governments but, also, to make them accountable to the people.

Accountability is one of the bedrocks of representative government.

An accountable political system is one in which the government is responsible to the voters.

In many ways therefore, accountability is the key to democratic governance and democracy’s indispensable political foundations.

To the extent that Government and other actors in the public realm are accountable to and trusted by the public, and to the extent that they behave in reciprocal ways, rule will be based on legitimate authority rather than raw power.

The legitimacy thus generated becomes an important social capital for the future.

As has been rightly stated in Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

(Quote)

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

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am sure you are fully alive to the fact that in many parts of Africa, and elsewhere, millions of people have braved untold violence, at times intimidation and other obstacles of unimaginable proportions in order to demand the right to express their will through the ballot box.

While the process of democratic governance is now fully on course in Africa, there are unfortunately a number of cases, and I need not mention them, where outgoing governments have simply refused to accept the outcome of the democratic electoral process.

In other cases, the election results have either been suspended or delayed for selfish political motives with their attendant consequences on the trust of the voters.

Ladies and Gentlemen
Democracy is effective to the extent that it is capable in eliciting legitimacy for the regime.

For democracy to work, all stakeholders must therefore agree to accept the results of freely held elections.

Because if the loser refuses to accept the winner, the essence of election is undermined and the whole political system is marked by instability, confusion, and very often, chaos.

As someone once put it and I quote:

“Elections and democracy are like the two wheels of a cart. If you remove one wheel, the vehicle will not move forward.” (Unquote)

There is no denying therefore that democratic rule is inconceivable without elections conducted in accordance with democratic principles and traditions.

Coming from Election Management Bodies, I am sure you are not insensitive to the fact that elections are now a major factor in the stabilization, democratization and societal progress of emerging democracies in Africa.

They are a core part of the understanding and practice of democracy and democratic values.

More importantly, they are considered as a defining and unavoidable element of all peace-building process, not only in the African region, but also, across the world.

It was Lyndon B Johnson, the former President of the United States who said and I quote:

“The vote is the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls which imprison men because they are different from other men.” (Unquote)

Democracy is not just the right to live.

It is the right to live in dignity, peace and harmony.

Regional organizations such as SADC are to-day playing an increasingly vital role in promoting and protecting the integrity of elections.

Their initiatives range from election observation to technical assistance at the national and local levels, in line with their respective mandates and the legitimacy that they draw from their Member States.

Their activities thus constitute a unique resource that, to my mind, needs to be fully harnessed.

This Conference is taking place at an opportune time, especially when there are loud and clear echoes both inside and outside Africa resonating the important role that Africa will play in the international community in this 21st century.
There is no doubt that the SADC region has made significant strides in the consolidation of citizens’ participation in the decision-making processes and consolidation of democratic practice and institutions.

To my mind, there is room for further improvement of the electoral process.

Africa, at this juncture, is at a cross-roads.

The challenge now is how to further deepen and enhance the foundations of its democratic electoral institutions so as to avoid the mistakes and pitfalls of the past.

The Southern African countries, building upon their common historical and cultural identity forged over centuries, have agreed and undertaken to encapsulate their commonality into a single vision, that of a SHARED FUTURE.

And this is well in line with the SADC principles and guidelines governing democratic elections that stress:

1. the full participation of the citizens in the political process;
2. political tolerance;
3. regular intervals for elections as provided for by the respective National Constitutions;
4. acceptance and respect by political parties of the election results proclaimed to have been free and fair by the competent National Electoral Authorities in accordance with the law of the land; and
5. challenge of the election results as provided for in the law of the land.

All this augurs well for the image and integrity of the SADC Countries which have already earned international recognition as a regional body in matters of democracy and good governance.

But the process of election also calls for strong and independent oversight Institutions to ensure that the electoral system is not only free and fair but seen to be free and fair.

That is why Member States must establish impartial, all-inclusive, competent and accountable national electoral management bodies staffed by qualified personnel, to oversee and supervise the conduct of elections.

Also, they need to put in place competent legal entities including effective constitutional courts to arbitrate in the event of disputes arising from the conduct of elections.

They must see to it

- that the law of the land provides safeguards of the human and civil liberties of all citizens, including the freedom of movement, assembly, association, expression, and campaigning;
- that all political parties are provided equal access to the media, including electronic media, during electoral campaigns as well as election funding.

Additionally, an impartial, competent, independent and professional electoral management body must have the responsibility for all phases of the election process covering the whole spectrum from the registration of voters to the proclamation of results after satisfying itself of the fairness and transparency of the entire process.

As Election Management Bodies, you have a very crucial role to play in the conduct of elections and more importantly, to ensure voter confidence in the system.

Because the existence of effective, independent and talented Elections Commissioners who are fully committed to democratic government and to economic development are unmistakable indicators of the credibility of any electoral undertaking.

Electoral Commissions are indeed indispensable organs of any democratic government and should be independent of the Government machinery.

The quality and character of their leadership should also be vital for the success and credibility of the electoral system.

At the same time, they should be accorded security of tenure and protection from outside interference.

In countries where electoral institutions are weak, elections results are easily manipulated to favour the manipulator.

There are perceptions that in some countries, parties in power have from time to time used democratic institutions to interfere with the electoral process or fabricate election results.

Such practices inevitably create doubts in the minds of the voters and must be avoided at all costs.

Therefore, the role of this Forum is crucial in helping to further develop and promote a democratic culture and environment that would guarantee the fairness of the whole process.

This also implies ensuring that the required facilities such as unhindered access to voting rooms, ballot-papers, appropriate infrastructure, are available to the voters to enable them to exercise their political rights in a timely manner.

I strongly feel that an electoral system that does not reflect the concerns and values of a specially modern electorate, wired in information and communication technology, will not help create political stability, a *sine qua-non* for economic development and the continued welfare of our people at large.

*Ladies and Gentlemen*
Glad am I to note that voter education is also part of your Forum’s objectives.

As an institution, you may need to engage more forcefully in the civic literacy of our citizens, especially among the youth.

It is only by educating our voters that will we be able to build and maintain a healthy democracy and respond to the expectations of the electorate.

That is because voters need to understand their rights and duties under the Constitution and election laws of their country in order to engage fully in the process of election.

Educated and informed voters help safeguard electoral integrity and contribute to the legitimacy of elected governments.

And here, I would like to quote what Franklin D. Roosevelt also a former President of the United States once said:

(Quote)

“Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education.” (Unquote)

Educating the electorate in the SADC Countries can be a tall order but it is an indispensable condition for the survival of an electoral system grounded in the values and principles of democracy.

*Ladies and Gentlemen*

Each country has its own unique system that takes into account its political, historical, social and cultural characteristics and contexts.

However, any electoral process should indiscriminately adhere to obligations and commitments embedded in international human rights instruments.

Past history on the Continent has taught us that free and fair elections that underpin political stability and social cohesion are closely linked with development.

That is because the electoral system has profound consequences on the political and social life of the population of a country in terms of promoting political pluralism, promoting and protecting human rights, strengthening the rule of law, and improving governance.

I believe this Forum provides an excellent framework for SADC Member States to also reflect on how we can enhance the robustness of our electoral system so as to make them more sustainable, taking into account each country’s specificities, values and culture.

I have noted that electoral reforms will also be one of your major preoccupations during this two-day Annual Conference.
Electoral reform is a continuous process.

It is essentially a sensitive political issue that very often stoke passionate debates in the community.

You have an opportunity to-day, as independent electoral bodies, to learn from each other’s experiences, and see how we can take the process of electoral reform one step further.

I have no doubt that the role that the SADC Forum is playing in promoting free and fair elections in the region is taking a new dimension, as is evidenced by the credibility of election observer missions conducted by SADC – ECF in the Member States.

With these words, I wish to reiterate my thanks and appreciation to Electoral Commissions’ Forum of SADC Countries for their invitation to address such a high level gathering of Commissioners this morning.

I wish you all a fruitful Conference.

It’s my pleasure now to declare open this 16th Annual General Conference of the Electoral Commissions’ Forum of SADC Countries.

I thank you for your attention.