

Commonwealth Workshop on Government & Opposition: Roles Rights and Responsibilities

Opening Statement by Commonwealth Deputy Secretary-General Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba

Male, 13 June 2011

Hon Abdulla Shahid, Speaker of the People's Majlis of Maldives; Hon Vijay Bahuguna, representing the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association; distinguished workshop participants from political parties and civil society across Asia and from regional and international organisations; distinguished experts and presenters from across the Commonwealth, other invited guests, and members of the media

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you this morning to the opening session of this Workshop on Government & Opposition, organised jointly by the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and hosted by the People's Majlis of Maldives.

We have brought together representatives from Government & Opposition parties and civil society from the eight Asian Commonwealth countries. We also have a team of distinguished presenters to help guide our discussions and assist us in our deliberations.

I bring you greetings from Mr Kamallesh Sharma, the Commonwealth Secretary-General.

This is the fifth such workshop in the 'Government & Opposition' series, which we have been running in collaboration with the CPA for some years now. Previous workshops have been conducted in West Africa, Southern Africa, the Pacific and the Caribbean. A workshop in East Africa is also envisaged next year. This series of workshops is a tangible manifestation of the importance the Commonwealth Secretariat and our partner organisations place on the need to support and strengthen democratic culture in our member countries.

It is significant that this workshop is taking place in Asia. This is where over 70% of Commonwealth citizens live. It is a region which boasts of three founder members of the modern Commonwealth. It has countries with a very strong tradition of democracy and others with nascent ones. It also manifests the diversity that is so typical of the Commonwealth.

It is particularly appropriate that the workshop is being held here in Maldives, against the backdrop of the pristine natural beauty and serenity of these islands, and the warm welcome that we are accustomed to receiving here. It is even more compelling because here we have an example of a successful recent transition to multi-party democracy, one with which the Commonwealth was closely associated and which throws up all the challenges of consolidating such transitions.

The aim of this workshop is to contribute to the creation of a constructive 'partnership' between government and opposition parties in each country. While they may be political adversaries, they share a common national responsibility and obligation of nation-building and advancing the prospects of real development –

human, political, social and economic -- of the people of their respective countries. This can only be achieved if the political system works constructively for the welfare of all, not if it creates or exacerbates ruptures in society.

We also seek to explore the ways in which other stakeholders -- from civil society, oversight institutions and media -- can further contribute to the development of the democratic process by ensuring transparency and accountability in public life.

The Commonwealth places the 'twin pillars' of democracy and development at the heart of its agenda. Democracy across the Commonwealth takes many shapes and forms, and clearly challenges persist in a number of countries. But we have a common set of principles which define our approach to democracy, as articulated in the 1991 Harare Declaration. Harare encapsulated the support of Commonwealth leaders for "democracy, democratic processes and institutions which reflect national circumstances, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, just and honest government, and fundamental human rights".

Most recently, at the 2009 Trinidad and Tobago CHOGM, leaders reiterated their commitment to these core values in the *Affirmation of Commonwealth Values and Principles*, underlining that "not only governments but all political parties and civil society also have responsibilities in upholding and promoting democratic culture and practices as well as accountability to the public,"

We work in many and varied ways to promote and achieve these principles, including providing capacity-building and professional development assistance, advice and technical cooperation in the area of democratic development, election observation, and the conduct of workshops and seminars such as this.

In undertaking these activities and programmes we seek to co-operate with Commonwealth partners, such as the CPA and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF), as well as with other regional and international organisations, some of which are also represented here today, to harmonise our approach and maximise our impact.

We also actively engage in political dialogue with member countries and our Secretary-General can and does use Special Envoys when necessary, with the consent of the countries in question, to seek solutions to a political crisis or longer term problems in a country. Where there are serious or persistent violations of Commonwealth political values, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) can discuss the situation in a country; happily, such instances are few and far between.

Where serious derogations from constitutional rule take place, countries can be suspended from the Commonwealth. But even then we remain engaged and seek to provide assistance to rectify the problems and facilitate the re-admission of any suspended country. Indeed, CMAG is currently seeking to become more of a constructive and engaging mechanism, instead of just a punitive one.

As you will see from the Agenda of the Workshop our focus is very much on promoting a constructive relationship between government and opposition parties as well as on how to create the conditions and environment in which this relationship can flourish.

We can all think of examples of the cost, in terms of lives and livelihoods, when the political relationship between government and opposition turns violent. Such conflict can tear a country apart. It can certainly block economic development, impinge on the rule of law and respect for human rights, and create a pervasive climate of fear and uncertainty.

Government and opposition have to see themselves as partners. Government must acknowledge that there needs to be democratic space for the opposition to function and to enable other viewpoints to exist. Indeed it is often said that government can only be as good as its opposition – thus the role of opposition is a very real one in holding governments accountable and ensuring they deliver.

On the other hand, oppositions also need to be constructive, using the democratic space provided responsibly to raise legitimate dissent where this is required, without becoming needlessly disruptive.

In Asia, as elsewhere, the challenge to strengthen the capacity and integrity of key democratic institutions remains a vital one, as does the need to build a democratic culture, so that differences can be resolved not through conflict but through peaceful democratic, political activity and respecting the rule of law.

During this workshop we will also be seeking to focus on some key questions:

- What is successful governance? How important are formal institutions? And political leadership?
- What is the role of parliament and how can it be used to increase co-operation between government and opposition?
- What is the role of political parties, during and between elections? How can we ensure the electoral process is inclusive and enjoys broad political support?
- What is the role of oversight institutions, media and civil society, in ensuring there is accountability and transparency in the political process and thereby a greater degree of confidence in it?
- How can political systems be truly representative and provide guarantees of basic rights? What mechanisms should be provided to ensure women's representation in political life and ensure that human rights considerations are built into every stage of the process?
- And perhaps most importantly, how can conflict – both within parliament and in the wider society – be managed so as to move our countries towards greater stability and prosperity?

A lot of wise and experienced people have gathered here in Male to address these important questions.

We hope that by the end of the workshop we will have identified some best practices and strategies which we at the Commonwealth can promote and which you can use to help shape political relations between government and opposition parties for the good of all the people in your own countries.

We at the Commonwealth remain committed to supporting you in this noble endeavour.

I wish you all well and look forward to your exchanges and your deliberations.

Thank you.