

UNCLASSIFIED



United Nations
Focal Point for Electoral Assistance Matters
Ref. FP/02/2014, as revised

Policy

United Nations Statements and Public Comment around Elections

Rosemary A. DiCarlo

Approved by: *Rosemary A. DiCarlo, UN Focal Point for Electoral Assistance Matters, Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs*

Effective date: 1 February 2025

Contact: *Policy and Institutional Memory Team
Electoral Assistance Division
Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs*

Review date: *As necessary*

POLICY ON United Nations Statements and Public Comment around Elections

Contents:	A. Purpose and Rationale
	B. Scope
	C. Policy
	D. References
	E. Monitoring and compliance
	F. Contact
	G. History

A. PURPOSE AND RATIONALE

A1. Purpose

1. This document sets out United Nations (UN) policy on making statements and giving public comments – including on social media – in relation to electoral processes of Member States. It clarifies roles and responsibilities within the UN system and provides guidance on content and on internal consultations processes. The purpose is to ensure coherence, consistency and predictability of public messaging by the UN.

2. The UN Focal Point for Electoral Assistance Matters, the Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, (hereafter “the Focal Point”) is the system lead in the development, issuance and dissemination of UN electoral policy, in consultation with other UN entities. This policy is part of the efforts by the Focal Point to establish a comprehensive set of UN system-wide electoral policies.

A2. Rationale

3. The UN does not, as a norm, have a role in providing a commentary on Member States’ elections. There is simply no requirement or expectation that, by default, the UN should issue a public statement in or around an election, positive or not. A statement by the UN can nevertheless – under certain circumstances – be an important and impactful tool of diplomacy and advocacy. The UN is also often solicited or expected to offer some comment, which is understandable given that electoral processes are highly political events and the subject of much public interest. UN statements are therefore to be used strategically, complementing other UN efforts as appropriate. This document is designed to guide UN personnel in considering if a public statement or comment is permissible and appropriate, and if so, what it should say (content), and when and by whom it may be released. The emphasis is on respect for the sovereignty and sensitivity of electoral processes, the primacy of national ownership, the political neutrality of the UN, and internal coherence.

B. SCOPE

4. This policy applies to all entities of the UN system and UN personnel with respect to statements and public comment around elections. It is particularly relevant for senior UN personnel both in HQ and in the field. For the purpose of this guidance, “the UN” is understood to refer to the entire UN system, that is, all UN departments, funds, programmes, entities, agencies, trust funds, commissions, peacekeeping missions, special political missions, peacebuilding missions, regional offices, country teams, and other bodies including advisory missions or services of a limited duration. “Electoral processes”

and “elections” are used interchangeably throughout this policy. Both terms refer to elections and their various phases, such as voter registration, candidate nomination, campaigning, voting, counting, and results management, as well as dispute resolution. This includes elections at the national and subnational level (e.g., elections for president; members of a legislature; houses of parliament; constituent assembly; regional assemblies; district councils, and so on) and referendums.

5. This policy covers all settings, including those in which: a) the UN has a presence and is providing electoral assistance; b) it has a presence but is not providing electoral assistance; and c) the UN has no field presence. It covers all public statements including written and oral statements, advocacy messages and unplanned responses to questions or queries. Moreover, it applies irrespective of the medium used: the policy also covers content posted on UN webpages and on digital platforms (“social media”) using official UN accounts.

6. This policy should be read in conjunction with existing UN electoral policy, especially the Policy on Principles and Types of UN Electoral Assistance, the Policy on Conduct of UN Personnel in and around Electoral Sites, and the Guidance on Congratulatory Letters. Furthermore, all UN personnel using social media personally (i.e., on personal accounts) must be mindful at all times of their rights and duties as international civil servants as explained in the UN Charter, Staff Regulations and Rules, Standards of Conduct, Administrative Instructions, the Guidelines for the Personal Use of [Social Media](#) as well as the 2023 Guidance on Political Activities issued by the UN Ethics Office.¹

C. POLICY

C1. Principles

7. UN electoral assistance and engagement in Member States’ elections are guided by a number of principles, as elaborated in the policy on Principles and Types of UN Electoral Assistance and outlined in successive General Assembly resolutions. These principles need to be taken into consideration in relation to statements and public comment around elections. The following principles are particularly relevant:

- a. **National sovereignty and ownership.** Unless specifically mandated by the Security Council or General Assembly the UN does not organize, certify, supervise or observe an electoral process. And while the UN encourages and supports Member States’ efforts to comply with their international obligations and commitments, the UN does not comment on the validity of an electoral process and/or the legitimacy of the electoral outcome unless mandated to do so.
- b. **Objective, impartial, neutral and independent.** Among other things, this means that the UN should not provide assistance that might favour one political group or disadvantage another and will uphold the free expression of the will of the people.
- c. **Norm-based but not prescriptive.** UN electoral assistance, and UN activities more generally, aim at furthering respect for all human rights and compliance with the rights and principles enshrined in the UN Charter and other relevant international and regional legal documents. At the same time, the General Assembly has often stated that there is no single model of democracy.
- d. **Political perspective and election-related conflict.** The UN must ensure that it is, and is perceived to be, politically neutral, that its assistance contributes to political pluralism and longer-term stability, and that it is not abused or manipulated by any political grouping.
- e. **Integration.** In any mission setting, all UN electoral assistance should be delivered in a fully integrated manner. In non-mission settings, all assistance should be delivered in a coordinated, coherent and consistent manner. UN statements, if any, should be developed and issued in the same spirit.

¹ [United Nations Secretariat Guidelines for the personal use of Social Media.](#)

C2. Policy Directives

Main policy points

8. There is **no general requirement or expectation on the UN to provide a statement or comment on an election at any moment of the process**. Specifically:

- a. The UN, as a rule, does not issue generalized statements – either of encouragement or concern – at the start of an electoral campaign period or on the eve of elections.
- b. Unless there is an explicit mandate to do so, the UN does not comment, in whole or in part, on the quality or legitimacy of Member State elections or their outcome. (Such mandates are very rare. A technical assistance mandate or a good offices mandate does not confer a mandate to speak on the quality or legitimacy of the process or outcome).
- c. Also, as a norm, the UN does not issue statements of congratulations at the end of a process. (The Secretary-General typically sends a *letter* of congratulation for assuming office and inauguration, and not for an electoral victory as such).²

9. In certain contexts, **statements can, nevertheless, be an important public diplomacy and advocacy tool**, if used strategically and to complement overall UN engagement in a country. These contexts typically include countries where there is a UN special political mission or peace operation. The objective of a UN statement could fall into one (or more) of three categories:

- a. To articulate the role and mandate of the UN in the electoral process. Such statements may be used to explain what the UN is doing, and what *it is* and *is not* responsible for during the election (emphasizing national ownership and responsibility).
- b. To convey specific messages and advocate for certain action. Statements in this category tend to either: a) revolve around established UN priorities and advocacy, such as human rights, inclusion, and the promotion of women's participation, or b) be aimed at prevention, in response to specific incidents or concerns, or to significant tensions that could lead to violence. This can include calls for peaceful conduct, respect for human rights, respect for institutions, adherence to the law, the resolution of conflict through legal means, the encouragement of dialogue, and so on. Any expressed concern should not be couched in broader language about the quality or legitimacy of the process or outcome.
- c. To congratulate the people of the Member State concerned.

10. Care should be taken around any intended language which involves, or suggests that it is based on, electoral norms or international standards. These should be directly drawn from international law (human rights treaties), Security Council or General Assembly resolutions, or language in reports of the Secretary-General. The Electoral Assistance Division (EAD) of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) maintains a compendium of public language and messages by the Secretary-General on key electoral issues, drawn from biennial report to the General Assembly, which can inform language to be used in statements or in good offices efforts.

11. Most statements around elections issued by the UN are made by the Secretary-General, the relevant Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) or other representative of the Secretary-General or the Resident Coordinator (RC). All such statements should be consulted with the Focal Point, through EAD. There is not one-size-fits-all guidance as to who should speak and when (except for congratulatory messages). Internal coordination is therefore essential, managed via EAD and the regional divisions of DPPA and the Department of Peace Operations (DPO), and based on consultation with UN personnel in the field. Statements around the role and implementation of UN electoral

² See Guidance on Congratulatory Letters (last updated 2024).

assistance projects may be made by UN Development Programme Resident Representatives (and/or country directors of other relevant UN entities providing electoral assistance).

12. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has a mandate to monitor human rights, including around elections. It makes statements on human rights aspects and issues related to elections (but without commenting on or assessing the validity of the process or its outcome). They should be consulted with relevant entities as appropriate, including the UN leadership in country, DPPA-DPO and/or the Executive Office of the Secretary-General (EOSG), to ensure that UN statements on elections and on human rights in the context of elections are consistent and mutually reinforcing.

13. Statements and public comment around elections should ideally be framed within a broader communication strategy on elections, sufficiently in advance of an electoral event. Again, appropriate coordination between the field and HQ is required.

Policy points in detail

What can be said if a statement or comment is appropriate/necessary?

14. As noted, UN statements around elections can be used to convey specific messages, usually to reinforce or advocate for certain action or condemn certain behavior. Such statements are more likely in cases where: a) the UN has a mandate from the Security Council or the General Assembly, b) the Secretary-General has deployed a good offices mission, c) there are serious problems with an electoral process, or d) where there is the threat of, or actual violence or other serious human rights violations and abuses related to the process. For example, and as applicable, UN messaging could focus on:

- a. Promoting and advocating for Member States to adhere to international obligations and political commitments related to elections.
- b. Advocating for inclusion of women and marginalized or under-represented groups, such as youth, persons with disabilities, minority communities, and speaking out against exclusion, including on all forms of gender-based violence.
- c. Commenting on the positive atmosphere of the election, including human rights aspects.
- d. Communicating key UN messages related to the electoral process or timeline.
- e. Acknowledging progress or successful phases of the process.
- f. Encouraging improvements in the process, for example in technical areas or in terms of inclusiveness.
- g. Welcoming the holding of elections; praising those who choose to participate.
- h. Encouraging all actors to commit to respectful, responsible online behavior; to refrain from, and reject, online disinformation and hate speech; and to contribute to the online safety and security of women.
- i. Encouraging all parties to respect the process, its rules and mechanisms, in particular the results, and calling for disputes to be addressed peacefully through appropriate official dispute resolution mechanisms.
- j. Urging patience and respect for institutions and processes while the ballots are counted and tabulated, and while complaints and appeals processes are administered.
- k. Calling for patience, restraint, non-violence and respect for human rights.
- l. Urging that all disputes be resolved fairly, expeditiously and transparently.
- m. Encouraging all candidates and their supporters to accept the decisions of the appropriate bodies, and respect for the final outcome as officially announced.
- n. Calling on the winners to be magnanimous in victory and to govern on behalf of all citizens and calling on the defeated candidates to be graceful in defeat.

15. Congratulatory statements towards the people of a country, or aimed at the process in general, are not common practice, but may be issued by the field or HQ under specific circumstances. (They are distinct from congratulatory letters by the Secretary-General to newly elected/appointed leaders). Such statements should not make a qualitative judgement on the validity of the process and results. Rather they should focus on the atmosphere of the process and the overall acceptance of results. Any such statements would ideally be made only after the process is complete, including the final adjudication of any claims and appeals. However, a statement may be made earlier if it is believed to have greater impact and address a specific need (e.g., to prevent electoral violence). When such statements are made during an ongoing process, they should clearly state that the election is not yet complete, and, if appropriate, call on all sides to remain calm, follow established procedures, including for addressing electoral complaints, and respect the results.

16. When speaking of successful elections, the UN uses adjectives such as: credible; inclusive; transparent; peaceful; participatory; genuine; and inspiring confidence. The term “free and fair” presents some challenges if it is used to convey or imply an international norm, since there is no clear international legal basis for the term “fair”.

Who can offer a statement or comment?

17. In mission settings the Head of Mission, usually the SRSG, is the most senior UN representative in the country and speaks on behalf of the UN. The SRSG generally issues UN statements or public comment around elections but may delegate this authority to a Deputy SRSG (DSRSG) or another appropriate official. Any additional statements related to electoral processes by other UN personnel at the country level, in a mission setting, must be authorized by the SRSG.

18. In non-mission settings, the RC assumes this role, represents the UN Country Team (UNCT) and speaks on behalf of the UN, including on social media. The RC is responsible for responding to media requests and, where appropriate, issuing public statements around elections in consultation with the DPPA regional desk and EAD. The RC also coordinates statements by other UN entities, as necessary.

19. In mission settings, the RC retains the authority to speak on behalf of the UNCT as a group. In line with existing policy, all electoral assistance in mission settings is delivered in a fully integrated manner from the outset. While the SRSG is generally responsible for UN statements or public comment around elections, the RC, in his or her role as RC, may also make statements or public comments. Generally, such statements are confined to the role of the UNCT or its members in supporting the electoral process. The content and timing of any such statements must be coordinated within the mission. In many cases, the RC also serves as a DSRSG, and if delegated by the SRSG, the DSRSG/RC may speak on behalf of the UN at the country level.

20. Heads of UN entities in-country may also make statements or public comment related to elections. These statements should be confined to areas of their entities' mandates and shall focus on factual aspects of the electoral assistance they provide. The content and timing of such statements must be consulted and coordinated with the RC, and in mission settings, with the mission.

21. In countries where there is no UN field presence, the DPPA regional desk, in consultation with EAD, will lead the development and issuance of statements by the Secretary-General, if appropriate.

22. When the UN is mandated to observe, supervise, or certify an election, or decides to deploy a panel of experts, or provides support to international election observation by other organizations, the issuance of public statements may be part of its activities. These statements must follow the separately issued guidance and processes established.

23. When acknowledging newly elected leaders, a UN letter of congratulations will initially be issued by the Secretary-General, after the relevant leader has been inaugurated.³ The letter of congratulations recognizes the elected leader for assuming office, not for an electoral victory. This approach avoids complications around contested elections. Follow-on letters, including by UN leadership in the country, may be issued after the Secretary-General's letter or statement and should be consulted with the Focal Point through EAD. Letters may also be sent by the most senior UN official in consultation with the relevant regional division of DPPA-DPO. Unless otherwise decided in consultation, the Secretary-General's letter should be issued first.

24. Informal consultation and coordination with the international community on messaging is encouraged. Nonetheless, to safeguard its neutrality, the UN does not generally make joint statements with other organizations or individual Member States or refer in its statements to the comments of observer groups. In cases where UN partners, such as sub-regional or regional organizations, have a more central role in the election than the UN, it may be appropriate to issue a joint statement or for their statement to speak for the international community, in lieu of a UN statement. Guidance on such scenarios should be sought from the Focal Point.

C3. Related Mandates

25. **Human Rights.** The Secretary-General has consistently affirmed the importance of human rights in all aspects of the UN's work, including through initiatives such as "The Highest Aspiration: A Call to Action for Human Rights" (2020) and previously the "Human Rights Up Front Plan of Action". In his latest report on elections (A/78/260), the Secretary-General encouraged and expressed support to Member States' efforts to comply with their international obligations, including related to human rights, and commitments, as they apply to elections.

26. As the leading UN entity on human rights, OHCHR independently conducts human rights monitoring and provides technical assistance on human rights issues in the context of elections, particularly through human rights field presences. OHCHR also independently issues statements and makes comments on human rights concerns in the context of electoral processes. Statements by OHCHR and other UN entities with human rights mandates related to electoral processes will exclusively focus on human rights aspects and issues. They will not contain any comment or assessment on the validity of an electoral process.

27. UN statements on elections and on human rights issues in the context of elections should be consistent and mutually reinforcing. While taking timely and firm positions on human rights issues in the context of elections are critical, these should, to the extent possible, be consulted with relevant entities, including UN leadership in the country (e.g., SRSG or RC) and, as necessary, DPPA/EAD or the EOSG).

28. **Promoting Women's Electoral and Political Participation.** Supporting Member States' in ensuring inclusive political processes and promoting women's political participation is among the highest priorities for the Secretary-General and the UN system.

29. The main legal framework for advocating women's political participation includes the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the CEDAW General Recommendations No. 23 (on political and public life), No. 25 (on Temporary Special Measures) and No. 40 (on equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems). States parties to CEDAW are obliged to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life: to ensure that women enjoy substantive equality with men; and to revert to the CEDAW Committee on the measures undertaken to implement the Convention. The UN should use any

³ See Guidance on Congratulatory Letters (last updated 2024).

opportunity to remind States parties of these obligations and encourage measures to accelerate women's political participation.

30. More specifically, UN entities should advocate for gender parity (50:50), the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, including discriminatory laws, structural barriers, and gender-based violence against women, in particular online, with the aim of achieving *de jure* and *de facto* equality with men in enjoying their political rights and freedoms. UN entities, including UN Women, regularly deliver key advocacy messages in encouraging Member States' efforts to promote gender equality and increase women's political participation. These messages should be coherent and consistent across the UN system and be in line with relevant electoral policy, particularly the policy on *Promoting Women's Electoral and Political Participation through UN Electoral Assistance*.

31. Statements or public comment on gender equality issues related to electoral processes should be limited to the issuing entity's mandate and avoid rendering an opinion that may be interpreted as assessing the validity of an electoral process. Such statements should also be mutually reinforcing and in line with the broader UN messages in the country and be coordinated with the UN leadership (SRSG or RC), and, where appropriate with the EOSG. In case of uncertainty regarding UN electoral policy, the Focal Point, through EAD, should be consulted.

D. REFERENCES

Normative or superior references

- UN Charter
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- International Convention on Civil and Political Rights
- International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

Related Policy or Guidance on elections

- Principles and Types of UN Electoral Assistance
- Conduct of UN Personnel in and around Electoral Sites
- Guidance on Congratulatory Letters
- Promoting Women's Electoral and Political Participation through UN Electoral Assistance

E. MONITORING AND COMPLIANCE

32. The Focal Point is tasked with ensuring coordination on all electoral assistance matters within the UN system and will therefore help to ensure adherence to the principles outlined in this document.

33. Managers of UN electoral assistance programs and projects will also be responsible to ensure compliance with this directive by all UN electoral staff under their supervision.

F. CONTACT

34. Policy and Institutional Memory Team, Electoral Assistance Division, Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, ead@un.org

G. HISTORY

35. Drafted by the Policy and Institutional Memory Team, Electoral Assistance Division, Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs on 1 December 2014 and revised on 10 January 2025.

36. Consulted with members of the Inter-Agency Coordination Mechanism for UN Electoral Assistance (ICMEA) prior to adoption.

APPROVAL SIGNATURE:

Rosemary A. DiCarlo, UN Focal Point for UN Electoral Assistance Matters, Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs

DATE OF APPROVAL: 23 January 2025