

# International Day of Democracy

## September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2009

The **International Day of Democracy** will be commemorated for the second time on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 2009. The United Nations General Assembly in its Resolution A/RES/62/7 voted to observe this day every year, in recognition of the efforts of the International Conference of New or Restored Democracies (ICNRD) movement that for 20 years has focused the world's attention on the urgent need for the promotion and consolidation of democracy at all levels.

The celebration and commemoration of the International Day of Democracy is taking place at an opportune moment for Africa. Over 30 African countries will have presidential and/or parliamentary elections in 2009-2010, the success of which will continue to demonstrate the current status of democracy in Africa, as well as shape the future of democracy on the continent.

In January 2007 the Heads of States and Government Summit of the African Union (AU) adopted the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (Democracy Charter), which promotes democracy and good governance in African States. However, more than two and a half years later only 17 countries have signed the Democracy Charter. None of the 53 members of the AU has deposited its instrument of ratification with the African Union Commission.

**“Democracy is not only an end in itself. Building and sustaining democracy reinforces the achievement of peace, development, and respect for human rights, and supports the rule of law and achievement of gender equality in Africa.”**

*Norah Matovu-Winyi,  
Executive Director, FEMNET*

While democracy is seen as a universal value in Africa today, political instability, unconstitutional changes of governments, violent conflicts and poor governance, including high levels of corruption and a culture of impunity, continue to be major threats to democracy in the region. All Africans are affected by these shortfalls. However, women and children on the continent continue to bear the disproportionate burden of their negative impact and consequences.

One example of this is the manner in which rape is increasingly used as a weapon of war and torture in war torn areas such as Eastern DRC, Darfur and in Kenya during the post-election violence of 2008. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), reports that in North Kivu province of DRC alone, there were 4,820 new cases of sexual violence in 2008, and that more than 65 percent of the victims were children, primarily adolescent girls. These figures account only for the reported cases.

In other countries in Africa, there are attacks on women who do not conform to norms. There are increasing numbers of reports of arrests, lashings or imprisonment of women in Sudan who do not conform to the Sharia requirements, irrespective of their religious beliefs. There are also reports from various countries in the region, of adoption of draconian legislation which is intended to curtail the activities of civil society organizations and the media.

All these are challenges that undermine democracy and eventually make it impossible for the citizens of Africa to feed their families, take their children to school, access basic services and most importantly be able to realize their full potential in life.

The Democracy Charter recognizes the important role of women in strengthening democracy and achieving development, and calls for gender parity at all levels of government, and full and active participation of women in decision-making processes including the electoral processes.



Democracy cannot be fully realised without the full involvement and participation of the citizens, (through their individual contributions or as part of organised groups that make up what is referred to as civil society), and through their parliaments, which are composed of the main representatives of the people.

Therefore, the promotion of democracy in Africa has never been more urgent.

The celebration and commemoration of the International Day of Democracy provides the people of Africa an opportunity to make their voices heard by demanding for the basic minimum - that the people fully exercise their right to influence the way they are governed, and their full participation must be guaranteed and protected against any form of erosion. The ratification and implementation of the Democracy Charter by all African countries will not only set an acceptable standard, it will also establish a mechanism for ensuring collective responsibility to promote and sustain democratic governance in Africa.

## What Civil Society can do to Promote Awareness about the Role of Citizens and Civil Society in Building Strong Democracies:

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1. Organise an activity on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 2009 to commemorate the International Democracy Day. The activity may be any of the following:
  - a) Use the commemoration as an organizing strategy to call upon your government to ratify the Democracy Charter. It is important that you highlight the benefits that this will bring to the citizens of your country particularly in relation to protecting and promoting the rights of women. They are the main social and economic resource of every country in Africa;
  - b) Organize a meeting or an interview with a selected group of members of parliament representing different voices to discuss the state of democracy in your country and make some proposals for the way forward;
  - c) Organise a forum through which civil society actors and MPs and representatives from the electoral commission (body responsible for organizing elections) can develop and share new and effective strategies for strengthening democracy as a way of life in your country;
  - d) Organize a debate with students from different schools to discuss the democracy arrangements in their respective schools and how these promote the principles and values of democracy;
  - e) Organise a commemorative lecture in collaboration with a democracy institute or the faculty of political science at one of the universities in your country;
  - f) Use the popular television and radio shows to discuss democracy as a way of life. Get the telecommunication companies in your country to cover your costs as they play a critical role in democratization processes.
  - g) Share your story with the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) on admin@femnet.or.ke