



SOUTH AFRICA

Remarks by CEO Sy Mamabolo at E-Voting Conference in Cape Town

10 March 2025

Programme Director,

Allow me to stand on the protocol established by the Commission Chairperson.

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning

It is a great honour to address you today in this very important eVoting Conference which intends to initiate a public policy debate that could potentially reshape the fabric of our electoral system and our democracy.

South Africa like many other developing countries is undergoing a digital revolution in various areas. The Vision 2030 roadmap of South Africa emphasises incorporating technology into business, education, and governance. The country's burgeoning digital ecosystem is distinguished by developments in technology infrastructure driven by public and private sector partnerships.

The rapid growth of data analytics, artificial intelligence, and digital infrastructure has transformed how most industries do business today. Digitalisation, as we are seeing in the fourth industrial revolution, has prompted organisations worldwide to ramp up digital strategies to streamline procedures and increase overall efficiency. As a result, corporations, including the government and its entities, are also rethinking traditional business models and are increasingly embracing innovative solutions that prioritise user experience and customer service.

While digitalisation is becoming more prevalent in our daily lives, we must acknowledge that some portions of our country continue to have limited access to broadband connectivity, particularly in rural areas. In our discussion here, let us not be oblivious that a significant number of South Africans still have limited access to technology.

Having said that, it is evident that the adoption of new technologies is apposite and necessary. We cannot be oblivious of the ever-present force that drives innovation and exposes us to new possibilities. Whether it is in education, healthcare, finance,

or business, digital tools are undoubtedly empowering individuals, organisations, and communities in ways we never imagined before.

Setting the scene

- Currently the world has a handful of countries that have adopted or experimented with electronic voting systems for elections or referendums.
- Countries such as Estonia, Switzerland, Brazil, India and several of the states in the United States of America, to mention just a few, are spearheading e-voting technologies.
- We have seen other countries that have experimented with electronic voting technologies before deciding to pause or even abandon the experiment after a variety of concerns, including security related issues, were raised.
- In Africa, several countries including Namibia and the DRC have attempted to experiment with electronic voting (e-voting) systems for their elections. Although in Namibia this attempted was subsequently abandoned. Nonetheless, these systems are still developing and not yet widespread across the continent.
- From what we observe, some of the common delays or factors halting the implementation of e-voting in many countries, are largely related to security concerns and affordability.
- As a result, many countries have focused on digitalising aspects of the voting process (such as registration or information access) rather than implementing full-scale electronic voting systems and related technologies for their elections.

As much as the prospects for experiment with e-voting systems and technologies can be exciting, we must also approach it with open minds and a sense of responsibility. At the forefront of these challenges are questions of security and trust. We remain committed to our mandate to deliver uncompromised elections with utmost integrity, impartiality, and accountability.

In an era where cyber threats are increasingly prevalent, ensuring the safety and security of an electronic voting system is paramount. We must build systems that are resilient, secure, and able to withstand the threats of today and the future.

Moreover, we must address the digital divide. As we indicated, South Africa is a country with varying levels of technological access. While urban areas may have reliable internet and a high rate of technological literacy, rural communities, and impoverished areas still face significant barriers to digital inclusion.

The Electoral Commission is already ahead of the curve when it comes to embracing the advent of technology. The Commission has implemented an online voter registration system that enables new voters to register and existing voters to update

or alter their registration from the comfort of their own homes or anywhere. This online registration portal is not constraint by and space.

Conference Rationale

As many sectors of the economy drive digitisation, the Elections Management Bodies (EMBs) dare not and cannot be left behind. We must, however, be both bold and responsible in our approach to embracing innovation.

The Electoral Commission found it appropriate to convene this conference to explore the prospects of introducing electronic voting technologies in South Africa at an appropriate moment. The Commission sees this as a potential watershed moment in our democracy, a discourse that cannot be ignored or limited to a certain sector of society.

The enthusiasm for e-voting is evidently strong, particularly among the youth in South Africa, who hold an unrestrained hope regarding its potential to boost voter participation, simplify the voting process, and expedite the processing of election results.

As the Commission, we encourage conversations, discussions, and lively debates among South Africans from all walks of life on this matter as we have seen happening in some social media platforms recently. Such national conversation is essential because elections are a public enterprise that belong to all citizens of our country.

Prior work conducted on eVoting

It is apposite to mention that the Commission always had e-voting in its line of sight . Electronic voting discussions commenced way back in 2013. The Electoral Commission has carried out several investigations into this subject, aiming to learn from the global experiences of countries that have either successfully or unsuccessfully tried to implement e-voting.

- We explored issues such as available technologies, costs, security/reliability, public trust, existing tech infrastructure in SA, and policy options among others.
- Identified the need for thorough public dialogue/discussions on the feasibility/potential benefits and risks
- Compiled a Discussion Document based on findings from our 2023 IEC research study on electronic voting (which explored prospects and potential challenges for e-voting in SA.

The Way Forward

For e-voting to be a viable solution, it must be accessible to all South Africans regardless of their location or socio-economic status. That is why our discussions

here must be comprehensive, aiming to address all blind spots and ultimately provide fit-for-purpose solutions for all South Africans. The Commission has not yet determined whether e-voting is the appropriate method to present to Parliament, but we are optimistic that a comprehensive discussion will occur nationwide, leading to concrete proposals by all our stakeholders.

It is against this backdrop that the Electoral Commission has taken this important step to initiate and lead public debates on this matter.

- This conference starts with the launch of a Policy Discussion Document to initiate a nationwide public debate – to be followed by a series of country-wide workshops and public consultations led by the IEC, gathering public views and inputs into the national debate.
- Inputs/views and feedback from the conference and public consultations will be used to develop, revise and refine the Discussion Document.
- The Discussion Document is intended to, ultimately, translate into a National Green Paper Policy Discussion Document, that will further inform public consultative processes and hopefully lead to a policy decision by Parliament.

With the help of the media and other stakeholders, we hope this debate is carried through in all spheres of our society until we reach a consensus representative of all participants.

Conclusion

Esteemed guests, as we stand at the crossroads of a new digital era, the electoral system cannot be spared in the technological revolution. This conference is not just a conversation about technology, it is about the future of our democracy and the integrity of our elections.

We urge all South Africans to engage in this discussion—ask questions, challenge ideas, and bring their perspectives to the table through the following platforms:

- Review this Discussion Document and provide informed commentary to info@elections.org.za
- Share your views and experiences through our social media @IECSouthAfrica
- Join the conversation on social media using #SAeVoting2025

Thank you.