



NINETEENTH CAMBRIDGE CONFERENCE ON ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY IN THE COMMONWEALTH



**UNDER THE AEGIS OF
THE MALAYSIAN COMMONWEALTH STUDIES CENTRE (MCSC)
AND THE CAMBRIDGE MALAYSIAN EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT TRUST
(CMEDT)**

**Møller Institute, Churchill College, Cambridge
Thursday 18th and Friday 19th July, 2024**

Conference Overview

The Nineteenth Cambridge Conference on Electoral Democracy is the final in a series of three online seminars and conferences during 2023-2024 focussing on the challenges to the integrity of elections and the operations of Election Management Bodies (EMBs) arising from false and misleading information spread through social media. The online discussions in October 2023 (a summary can be found at this [link](#)) agreed that the challenges to the integrity of elections were enormous with potentially long term damage to the integrity of elections and citizen confidence in democratic processes. During the following Mauritius conference, conducted in collaboration with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and the Office of the Electoral Commissioner Mauritius (a summary can be found at this [link](#)), participants focussed on social media challenges to African EMBs (although by no means irrelevant to other jurisdictions) and potential responses, including the merits of:

- educating the electorate to be more discerning about information presented on social media;
- regulating social media to encourage responsible information sharing practices;
- which partners can assist EMBs in these tasks; and
- what role and responsibilities should EMBs adopt in managing these challenges.

Against the background of these earlier discussions, the Nineteenth Cambridge Conference on Electoral Democracy will focus on three main themes across the two days of discussions, including emerging issues of importance to EMBs:

Theme 1 - Implementing Election Integrity Guidelines for Social Media

In November 2023 the African Association of Electoral Authorities (AAEA) launched the "Principles and Guidelines for the use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa". The Principles and Guidelines are aimed at enhancing the capacities of EMBs and other relevant electoral stakeholders to harness the advantages of social media and tackle the adverse effects of new and emerging digital technologies. The Electoral Commission of South Africa played a leading role in developing the principles and guidelines in collaboration with other EMBs.

In April 2024 IFES launched the "Voluntary Election Integrity Guidelines for Technology Companies". The goal of the guidelines is to provide foundational practices that technology companies, including large and small players, should adopt. The intent is to provide a shared set of expectations for companies and election authorities as they each work to advance election integrity and provide high quality information to voters. These guidelines aim to improve communication channels between technology companies and EMBs where appropriate, and to reduce barriers to supporting election integrity for smaller and newer companies.

Conference participants at the Mauritius Conference welcomed both sets of guidelines and were keen to see them implemented by working individually and through sub-regional and regional organisations like SADC, AAEA, ECOWAS and the AU (in Africa). EMBs in the global south might also find these guidelines useful for adoption either individually and, to provide added strength, through relevant regional and international fora.

With the benefit of having the key players involved in the development of both the guidelines and principles present, the conference will discuss initiatives to give effect to these and other examples of guidelines and the potential for extending their reach and impact through regional and international cooperation.

Theme 2 - Managing EMB Reputation Amid False and Misleading Misinformation

There is significant potential for the guidelines and principles mentioned above to improve the quality and reliability of electoral information available to social media consumers. However, it is likely that improvements will emerge tangibly only over the medium to long term and certainly over several electoral cycles. In the short term, false and misleading information can significantly damage the reputation of electoral authorities by undermining public trust and confidence in the outcome of elections. When misinformation spreads, it can lead to confusion, distrust, and suspicion among voters about the integrity and fairness of elections. This can result in reduced voter participation, increased skepticism about election outcomes, and challenges to the legitimacy of elected officials. EMBs must work diligently to counteract misinformation, provide accurate information, and engage with the public to maintain credibility and trust.

Some EMBs have established comprehensive reputation management systems to safeguard and enhance public trust in electoral processes. Such systems are grounded in principles of operational excellence, integrity, and transparency, ensuring that all electoral events are conducted impartially and professionally. Reputation management systems emphasise values such as agility, professionalism, and quality in operations, aiming to uphold the integrity of the electoral process and maintain public confidence. The systems also include proactive communication strategies and responsive measures to address any misinformation or challenges to the EMBs reputation.

The conference will discuss, *inter alia*, approaches to and experience with reputation management systems, whether these are sustainable in the face of ongoing social media attack, inherent resource requirements, options for seeking additional or complementary resourcing and possible new or alternative approaches, including the potential to use AI as an aid. With respect to AI, the Conference hopes to hear from an expert in the field, with a view to exploring the potential to design, with input from EMBs, automated "Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer (ChatGPT)" functionality that would allow social media consumers to check the authenticity of electoral information in real time. Such systems might conceivably generate responses based on information already found on EMB websites

and/or on EMB-identified false and misleading information, particularly at the time of elections.

Theme 3 - Innovations in Electoral Processes

Being mindful of establishing an agenda for future conferences, participants will be invited to reflect on other challenges to the integrity of elections, including the misuse of state resources, state-controlled media; restrictions on campaigning; the role of the judiciary; and pressure on EMBs. In addition, there will be an opportunity to share information about improvements in electoral processes, including where relevant the use of technology to improve the accuracy, speed, accessibility, efficiency and communication of voting and election results; the use of biometric technology to authenticate voters and reduce the risk of fraud; and processes to increase transparency and credibility of the electoral processes.

Conference Programme

Wednesday 17 July 2024

7.00 pm	Evening Reception and Dinner
	Refreshments in the Wenger Lounge followed by dinner in the Restaurant at 7.30 p.m.

Thursday 18 July 2024

Morning Session

Møller Study Centre Suite 1

9.30 am	Welcome and round table introductions	
	Speaker	Dr Anil Seal, Director, Cambridge Malaysian Education and Development Trust (CMEDT), Malaysian Commonwealth Studies Centre (MCSC)

10.00 am	Discussion on Conference Themes
	Invited Speakers

11.00 am	Morning Refreshments
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11.30 am	Discussions on conference themes
	Invited speakers

12.30 pm	Lunch Break
	Restaurant, Møller Institute

Afternoon Session

2.00 pm	Discussion on Conference Themes
	Invited Speakers
3.30 pm	Afternoon Refreshments
4.00 pm	Discussion on conference themes
	Invited speakers
5.00 pm	Day 1 Close
7.00 pm	Conference Dinner
	Hall, Trinity College
6.45 pm	<i>Depart the Møller Institute [Transport will be provided from and to the Møller]</i>

Friday 19 July 2024

Morning Session

Møller Study Centre Suite 1

9.30 am	Discussions on conference theme
	Invited speakers

10.30 am	Morning Refreshments
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11.00 am	Discussions on conference themes
	Invited speakers

12.30 pm	Lunch Break
	Restaurant, Møller Institute

Afternoon Session

2.00 pm	Discussions on conference themes
	Invited speakers

3.00 pm	Afternoon refreshments
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3.30 pm	Concluding Remarks and discussion
	Dr Anil Seal, Director, Cambridge Malaysian Education and Development Trust (CMEDT), Malaysian Commonwealth Studies Centre (MCSC)

5.00 pm	Conference Close

7.00 pm	Evening Reception and Dinner
	Refreshments in the Wenger Lounge followed by dinner in the Tower Lounge Bar at 7.30 p.m.