



Electoral Management Body (EMB) Leadership Transitions

**Global Lessons Learned and
Comparative Good Practice**

WHITE PAPER | JUNE 2025

Electoral Management Body (EMB) Leadership Transitions: Global Lessons Learned and Comparative Good Practice

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About This White Paper

This White Paper, developed by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), outlines key considerations for leadership transitions in electoral management bodies (EMBs). When handled well, these transition periods can be times in which EMBs strengthen their public reputation and institutional commitment to delivering credible and inclusive elections. On the other hand, if EMBs do not have a clear transition plan or experiences unexpected transitions, it can lead to internal confusion and damage the institution's credibility in the eyes of the public.

Designed with EMB needs in mind, this White Paper provides a framework for understanding different types of EMB executive leadership models (civil service, multi-sectoral, judicial) and the implications each has on leadership transitions. Additionally, it provides practical guidance for EMBs, based on comparative global best practices, for better managing planned and sudden leadership transitions.

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Why Executive Leadership Transitions Matter

Executive leadership transitions within Election Management Bodies (EMBs) can profoundly impact the credibility and effectiveness of electoral processes. Whether planned or unexpected, leadership changes at the highest level can disrupt institutional continuity, unsettle operational readiness, and undermine public trust. In 2024, India offered a striking example of this dual challenge: just weeks before its general elections,¹ the resignation of Election Commissioner occurred just after the planned retirement of another commissioner, leaving only the Chief Electoral Commissioner in place to oversee a complex national vote.² This combination of both a foreseeable and a sudden departure placed the EMB in a precarious position at a critical moment.³ Similar risks have emerged in other contexts. In 2018, Lesotho's Independent Electoral Commission saw the dismissal of all three commissioners amid allegations of misconduct, requiring swift intervention to restore institutional legitimacy. That same year in Kenya, three commissioners from the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) resigned abruptly due to internal disputes, leaving the body weakened ahead of key electoral processes. In contrast, Australia's 2024 transition was marked by the orderly retirement of long-serving Electoral Commissioner Tom Rogers, whose departure was announced months in advance, allowing for a planned succession. These varied cases illustrate that without dedicated and well-prepared executive transition strategies, EMBs risk not only internal instability but also the broader integrity of the democratic processes they are mandated to protect.

This White Paper is a first effort to outline how EMBs can learn from the experiences of their peers when it comes to improving their executive leadership transition process. To date, much of the EMB leadership-related research has focused on the appointment process for commissioners and how the process can impact the EMB's independence, while very limited attention has been paid to executive leadership transitions. Effective transitions contribute significantly to the success of new executives and the overall integrity of the electoral process. This White Paper makes the case that by ensuring that transitions are well-planned, commissioners are better positioned to swiftly and competently take the reins of the EMB and thereby maintain high levels of trust and confidence among stakeholders. This, in turn, reinforces the credibility of elections and the democratic process. Whether the transition is foreseen well in advance or sudden and unexpected, a structured and proactive approach can help EMBs navigate these changes smoothly, ensuring that they continue to uphold their mandate effectively and without jeopardizing public trust.

¹ *IFES Election Guide | Country Profile: India*. (n.d.). Retrieved June 25, 2024, from <https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/101/>

² *Challenges to the Appointment of Election Commissioners Act, 2023*. (n.d.). Supreme Court Observer. Retrieved June 24, 2024, from <https://www.scobserver.in/cases/challenges-to-the-appointments-of-election-commissioners-act-2023-eci/>

³ *Election Commissioner Arun Goel resigns ahead of Lok Sabha polls | Latest News India—Hindustan Times*. (n.d.). Retrieved June 25, 2024, from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/election-commissioner-arun-goel-resigns-ahead-of-lok-sabha-polls-101709997688407.html>

Organizations operating in a highly complex environment need to tread carefully when undergoing a change at the helm. If the leadership transition is not sufficiently planned and executed with care, incoming leaders could lack the necessary awareness of the challenges and opportunities facing the institution and thereby prioritize less urgent issues. Although legal frameworks usually do not specify how EMBs should handle leadership transitions, these institutions can and should set more systematic plans and processes to ensure the change is smooth, preserves institutional memory and knowledge, and does not disrupt the EMB's functions.

Following an analysis of the reasons behind leadership transitions, this White Paper delves into the executive leadership structure of EMBs, including their organizational models and governance frameworks, and how their transitional preparatory requirements might vary. It categorizes and describes different types of EMB executive leadership structures—a civil service model, a multi-sectoral model with members drawn from various professions, and a judicial model—and it discusses their impacts on leadership transitions. The White Paper then outlines the main components that underpin a well-planned and smoothly executed transition. It primarily builds on experiences from government transitions in addition to lessons learned from other leadership transitions in the public and private sectors. It also presents a snapshot of how several EMBs in younger and established democracies are coping with the challenges and risks associated with leadership transitions.

This White Paper is based on a combination of information and data obtained via a questionnaire completed by IFES country directors, personal communication and key informant interviews with senior EMB officials, as well as a thorough review of a large number of EMB strategic plans and other documents related to EMB leadership transitions.

The Current State of Executive Leadership Transitions

EMBs are pivotal institutions in ensuring the integrity and efficiency of electoral processes. Their executive leadership structure is not merely a governance detail; it fundamentally influences how electoral processes are managed, how decisions are made, and how transparency and accountability are maintained. The diversity of these structures reflects the varied political, cultural, and historical contexts within which EMBs operate. Some are independent institutions while others are part of government departments. Understanding the different types of executive structure is crucial for comprehending how EMBs function and how they navigate leadership transitions. These transitions can range from routine leadership changes to more complex and sudden shifts stemming from political upheavals, reforms, or other reasons. The executive leadership structure determines the mechanisms through which such transitions are managed, impacting the continuity and stability of electoral management. For instance, EMBs with a single executive head might face different challenges during transitions than those with a multi-member leadership structure.

Reasons for Executive Leadership Transitions

The various reasons for executive leadership transitions each lead to distinct challenges for the stability and functioning of EMBs. Planned or expected changes typically stem from the end of a tenure, an announced departure, or a scheduled retirement. These are generally easier to prepare for, although any form of transition comes with risk to the operations of the institution and therefore requires preparation and resource allocation. Sudden changes may be driven by political upheaval, crisis-related removals from office, unexpected deaths, or abrupt resignations. These unexpected transitions can be more challenging to manage, potentially leading to instability and operational disruptions. The reasons for the transition are important considerations for addressing the process effectively.

Type of Transition	Examples	Concerns
Foreseen: <i>Leadership transitions that are expected and generally known well in advance.</i>	Executives reaching the end of their fixed terms, retirements, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensuring that the EMB has as much advanced notice as possible. Risk of overlapping or simultaneous departures. Ensuring a succession plan is in place.
Sudden: <i>Leadership transitions that are unexpected and can occur quickly.</i>	Forced removal of executives, unexpected resignations, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can be politically motivated. Risk of elections not being viewed as legitimate. May cause damage to the EMB's public reputation.

Figure 1: Types of Leadership Transitions, With Examples and Concerns

Foreseen Transitions

Foreseen transitions often occur at the conclusion of an executive's fixed term. They are generally known well in advance, enabling EMBs to prepare effectively with long lead times. Well-announced departures, for personal or career reasons, facilitate orderly transitions. When executives give ample notice, the EMB has time to conduct a structured transition process. This can include overlapping tenures with the outgoing and incoming executives working together for a period, ensuring that the transfer of duties and institutional knowledge is smooth and comprehensive. Succession planning can involve identifying and grooming potential internal successors so as to ensure that there is a seamless handover of responsibilities. This type of transition supports continuity in leadership and policy implementation, thereby helping maintain the integrity and efficiency of the electoral process. Even when selecting an external candidate, which may disrupt continuity in part, the transition will still take place in a structured environment where sufficient preparations for a handover have been put in place. The retirement of an executive—another common reason for a planned transition—allows the EMB or the appointing authority to conduct a thorough search for a replacement. This period can also be used to evaluate the leadership needs of the EMB and to find a candidate whose skills and vision align with the plans for the direction of the institution. Such forethought helps to preserve institutional knowledge and maintain stakeholder confidence.

Sudden Transitions

Sudden transitions can destabilize an EMB. Political crises may lead to the forced removal of executives, through legal or extralegal means. Such removals often result from shifts in political power and can be driven by new governments seeking to assert control over electoral processes. Removals can also result from attacks on the EMB from disgruntled candidates refusing to accept the outcome of credible and legitimate elections. These abrupt changes can erode public trust in the independence and impartiality of the EMB, with lasting effects. Crisis-related removals from office, such as those stemming from allegations of misconduct or corruption, also pose significant challenges and require deliberate and nuanced solutions: these scenarios often require immediate action to mitigate damage to the EMB's reputation and to restore confidence in its operations. The sudden loss of an executive, through death or unexpected resignation, also leaves a vacuum that can disrupt the functioning of the EMB. The lack of preparation time can lead to hasty replacement appointments, which may not always be in the best interest of the EMB. Quick interim appointments are often necessary to maintain operational continuity, but interim leaders can sometimes lack the authority or mandate needed for long-term decision-making.

The Importance of Contingency Planning

EMBs must have robust contingency plans to respond to sudden leadership transitions. These plans should outline procedures for emergency appointments and define the roles and responsibilities of interim leaders. By creating and maintaining such frameworks, EMBs can better manage the uncertainties associated with such transitions and ensure that their core functions continue without significant interruption. Another critical factor in managing foreseen and sudden transitions alike is the involvement of external stakeholders. For instance, engaging with political parties, civil society organizations, and international observers can help to bolster the legitimacy of the transition process. Transparent communication about the reasons for the transition and the steps being taken to manage it can also play a crucial role in maintaining public trust. The approach of the incoming executives in sudden transitions can play a significant role. For example, in 2013, Australia suffered a well-documented⁴ inability to account for lost ballots. This problem saw the resignation of the Australian Electoral Commissioner and the appointment of a new one who had previously served as the deputy electoral commissioner. The newly appointed leader used the crisis as an opportunity to drive a strong reform agenda, seeking to restore trust in the electoral process and the EMB.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of an EMB's response to a leadership transition, whether foreseen or sudden, depends on the quality of its transition plan and the competency of the dedicated transition team tasked with its implementation. By understanding the different types of transitions and preparing for them accordingly, EMBs can navigate these changes with greater stability and ensure the continued integrity of the electoral process. This approach is vital for maintaining the credibility and functionality of electoral systems in diverse political contexts.

Definition of Executive Leadership

The executive leadership of an EMB consists of senior officials who are directly responsible for institutional decision-making, strategic oversight, and operational execution of electoral processes. The team is also responsible for ensuring the integrity, transparency, and efficiency of the electoral process. It may include the Chairperson, Commissioners and Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) depending on the governance structure of the EMB. In this White Paper, executive leadership is used as a broad term to mean chairpersons, commissioners, judges (where applicable) and CEOs with executive powers. Typically, the Chairperson and commissioners form the oversight authority of the EMB, and are responsible for strategic leadership and policy direction. The CEO typically serves as the principal executive responsible for the daily management of the institution in line with the law and the direction provided by the EMB, as well as serving as the accounting

⁴ Keelty, M.J. 2013. *Inquiry into the 2013 WA Senate Election*. Report commissioned by the Australian Electoral Commission. AEC: Canberra

officer. The Chairperson typically also acts as the returning officer for the highest elected official in the country, while the CEO oversees and supports other returning officers for other elected positions.

The separation or amalgamation of roles within the executive leadership structures is entirely dependent on the legal framework, political and electoral history, and civil service tradition in a country. The complexity of elections is not necessarily a reason for the separation of roles, as can be seen in **India**, where a civil service body oversees the largest election machinery in the world. Clarity in the legal framework, robust oversight mechanisms that help mitigate governance risks, and transparent decision-making processes can all help build and maintain public trust. Failure to clarify roles and responsibilities within the governance framework can lead to reputational risk at significant moments in the electoral process. Such vulnerabilities typically emerge at the point of the declaration of results—the high-stakes apex of the electoral process—where differences about who has what authority can arise.

For example, the 2022 presidential election in Kenya saw an EMB governance breakdown at the point of announcing the results, when four commissioners publicly dissented over who had the authority to do so. This became part of the election petition, as dissenting commissioners challenged the authority of the Chairperson of the EMB to announce the final results of the election. The Supreme Court of Kenya eventually recommended formal internal guidelines that draw clear separations between the policy, strategy, and oversight responsibilities of the Chairperson and the commissioners. It also recommended guidelines be developed to separate the administrative and policy domains.⁵

A breakdown of the various roles within EMB is outlined in Figure 2, which shows the breadth of decision-making authority that there may be, along with the typical legal instrument that sets out that authority. A collaborative governance relationship between these different roles is essential to ensure the integrity of, and public trust in, elections. (Here, EMB means that no special provisions apply to any executive. The chairperson is often deemed first among equals, with a special rank or status but the same authority as other executive.)

Area	Vested Authority	Typical Legal Instrument
Appointing authority (EMB)	President/Prime Minister/ Minister	Constitution
Appointing authority (CEO)	EMB	Electoral Commission Act
Rulemaking (regulations)	EMB	Electoral Commission Act
Strategic direction/policy	EMB	Electoral Commission Act

⁵ For further information, see Supreme Court of Kenya. (2022, September 26). Decision on Presidential Election Petition No.E005 of 2022, pp. 99-104, 126. <https://judiciary.go.ke/download/presidential-election-petition-no-e005-of-2022-full-judgement/>

Policy implementation	CEO/EMB Secretary	Electoral Commission Act
Accounting Officer	CEO/EMB Secretary	Electoral Commission Act/National Treasury Regulations
Day-to-day management	CEO/EMB Secretary	Electoral Commission Act
Returning Officer (presidential elections)	Chairperson	Constitution
Results tallying/verification	EMB	Electoral Commission Act
Provisional results announcement	EMB	Electoral Act
Final results announcement	Chairperson	Electoral Act
Adjudication of offenses	EMB	Electoral Commission Act/ Electoral Act

Figure 2: Decision-Making Authority and Typical Legal Instruments Associated With EMB Roles.

For most EMBs the duration and number of terms of executives are clearly spelt out in law. According to the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, for the majority out of more than 200 EMBs (56 percent) the length of term for executives is specified, while for 19 percent of EMBs there is no specified term length.⁶ (See Figure 3 for examples.)

Country	Term Duration	Term Limit
South Africa	Seven years	Renewable once
New Zealand	Five years	Renewable
Ghana	Permanent	Permanent
Brazil	Two years	Renewable once
Costa Rica	Six years	Not renewable

Figure 3: Examples of Term Duration and Limits in EMBs

Predictability of tenure makes it possible to know in good time when a leadership transitions might occur. For example, in **Australia** the electoral commissioner's decision to leave at the end of his term, which could have been renewed,⁷ in 2024 was communicated more than one year in advance.⁸ This communication allowed for the EMB to start preparations for the transition very early and gave the appointing authority a significant lead time.

⁶ ACE Electoral Knowledge Network. (n.d.). <https://aceproject.org/epic-en/>

⁷ Commonwealth Electoral Act, 2018. Section 8(1).

⁸ Moore, G. (2023, March 17). Why our election tsar is ready to move on. *Financial Review*. <https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/why-our-election-tsar-is-moving-on-20230309-p5cqux>

Models of Executive Leadership

Beyond the common framework categorizing the structure of an EMB – (typically encompassing independent, governmental, or mixed), it is important to look at the structure of its executive leadership. Research identifies three models for this: civil service, multi-sectoral, and judicial (see Figure 4 below).⁹

	CIVIL SERVICE	MULTI-SECTORAL	JUDICIAL
EXECUTIVE SIZE	1 to 3	4 or more	5 or more
ORIGIN OF MEMBERS	Public Service	Varied Sectors	Judicial Sector
CONCENTRATION OF POWER	Commissioner 1-2 Deputies	Chairperson Deputy/Commission Executive Director	President Vice President Tribunal Justices
EXAMPLES	Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India, UK, Mauritius	Nigeria, Pakistan, Mexico, Zambia, South Africa, Armenia, Iraq, Kenya	Brazil, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras

Figure 4: Models of EMB Executive Leadership

Civil Service Model

Overview	
The civil service model is characterized by having between one to three executives at the head of the EMB, who come from the civil service or are promoted internally. EMBs with this model are less likely to have fixed tenure lengths or term limits.	
BENEFITS	<p>Clarity and decisiveness of leadership: Fewer executives means that decision-making processes are streamlined and the EMB can be quicker in responding to crises.</p> <p>Clear point of authority: Power is clearly vested in one person or a troika, which simplifies the chain of command.</p>
DRAWBACKS	<p>Perceptions of a lack of independence: Executives often come from the civil service (where the personnel is accountable to a government minister), which can raise concerns about political independence.</p> <p>Lack of diversity of perspectives: A small executive team can lead to a narrow range of perspectives and a small group having an outsized role in electoral administration.</p>

Figure 5: Overview of the Civil Service Leadership Model

⁹ Some countries have a mixed model. For example, Mexico has two distinct entities, one with a multi-sectoral model and the other with a judicial model.

This model features a small leadership of one to three executives. These are often drawn from long-serving members of the civil service or promoted from within the EMB, and their tenure is not necessarily limited. This model has been implemented in countries such as **Australia, Canada, India, Mauritius, and New Zealand**. These countries have managed their electoral processes through a single or small-group leadership, and demonstrated the advantages and challenges associated with this approach.

One of the key advantages of the civil service model is that it encourages clarity and decisiveness of leadership. With fewer executives, decision-making processes tend to be more streamlined, which can lead to quicker and more efficient management of electoral activities. For instance, in **India**, the Chief Election Commissioner, often working alongside a couple of other commissioners, is a clear point of authority, which simplifies the chain of command and enhances accountability. In some contexts, concentrated leadership can also pose challenges. Drawing from the civil service, whose members are accountable to government ministers, can raise questions for EMBs, where independence from political leadership is key. Adjusting to a model where accountability is to the constitution and parliament rather than the executive, can be a difficult transition for those appointed to be EMB executives. Furthermore, the reliance on a small number of executives increases vulnerability to potential biases and reduces diversity of perspectives in decision-making. In instances where the same person acts as the Chairperson, CEO, and senior-most returning officer, potential conflicts of interest, heavier workloads, possible perceptions of bias, and the present of potential single failure points can pose serious risks when things go awry.

While centralization can foster consistency, it also places immense responsibility and pressure on a single individual or up to three, which can be a disadvantage in complex and rapidly changing political landscapes. For example, in **Canada**, the chief electoral officer holds significant sway over electoral management. Where a troika or group of three leads the EMB, sudden illness or absence of an executive can also create barriers to a quorum. In **New Zealand**, a report of the Auditor General noted that the small size of the executive leadership of the Electoral Commission results in “an unclear separation between governance and management.”¹⁰ A vacancy, even a temporary one, complicates the ability to appoint even a temporary replacement from among the executives. An independent review panel in New Zealand has recommended the expansion of the executive leadership of the Electoral Commission from three to five members, so as to expand the skills, knowledge, and experience it contains.¹¹ In situations where executives fulfill multiple roles, which is often the case in smaller EMBs in the civil service model, the level of sophistication of the transition plan could be impacted. In these cases, new executives must not only become proficient in various technical election administration areas, but also effectively manage the EMB as a public institution in areas as diverse as financial, human resources, procurement, or other organizational features. Hence, these functions must

¹⁰ Controller and Auditor-General. (2024, May). General Election 2023: Independent review of counting errors. Report presented to the House of Representatives under section 20 of the Public Audit Act 2001. <https://oag.parliament.nz/2024/election-2023>

¹¹ Independent Electoral Review. (2023). Final Report: Our Recommendations for a Fairer, Clearer, and More Accessible Electoral System. <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/53726569>

also be considered when designing and developing the transition plan; for example, by establishing eligibility criteria that account for the required skills and experience when recruiting new executives, and by including robust capacity-building exercises for new executives that address this wide range of skills.

Multi-Sectoral Model

Overview	
The multi-sectoral model is characterized by leadership that is drawn from a diverse array of professional backgrounds, such as from the civil service, the private sector, and academia. It is sometimes mandated that some executives have a specific background; for example, as a judge or a civil servant.	
BENEFITS	<p>Wide range of expertise: <i>Diverse professional backgrounds can ensure diverse opinions and expertise.</i></p> <p>Checks and balances: <i>A less centralized approach promotes accountability among executives.</i></p>
DRAWBACKS	<p>Difficulties in reaching consensus: <i>More executives can make decision-making less nimble and reaching consensus on contentious issues more challenging.</i></p> <p>Need for clear governance structures: <i>This approach requires clear chains of command and divisions of labor to function properly.</i></p>

Figure 6: Overview of the Multi-Sectoral Leadership Model

This model features an executive leadership drawn from a diverse array of sectors in society, such as the civil service, civil society, the private sector, the judiciary, academia, and think tanks. This ensures that a wide range of expertise and perspectives is brought into the electoral management process. Some countries, like **Kenya** and **South Africa**, have specific provisions requiring that at least one judge sits on the executive or that the chairperson has a strong legal background. In **Pakistan**, for example, the Chief Electoral Officer, the senior-most member of the Electoral Commission must be a former Supreme Court judge, a senior civil servant, or a technocrat not older than 68 years.¹² In this model, the executive leadership of the EMB generally has five or more members, with an uneven number to facilitate decisive voting outcomes. Some countries, such as **Armenia**, **Ethiopia**, **Iraq**, **Nigeria**, **Pakistan**, and **Sri Lanka**, draw on diverse professional backgrounds to enhance their electoral management processes. In this model, the legal framework sets clear term limits. In **Armenia** for example, the seven-member Central Electoral Commission, is appointed for a six-year term. In **South Africa**, commissioners serve a seven-year term that can be renewed once.

One of the significant advantages of the multi-sectoral model is the breadth of knowledge and experience it brings. With executives from various sectors, EMBs can address a wider array of issues and challenges that arise during electoral processes. For instance, in **South Africa**, the inclusion of a judge ensures a robust understanding of legal frameworks, while representatives from other fields contribute their unique insights,

¹² Constitution of Pakistan, Article 213.

enhancing the decision-making process. In **Nigeria**, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) benefits from having commissioners with diverse professional backgrounds, which helps in managing the country's complex and dynamic electoral environment. Such diversity can lead to more well-rounded and informed decisions.

In this model, the EMB's executive leadership consists of a chairperson, deputy chairperson, and commissioners with separate roles. This differs from the civil service model, where these roles are more concentrated, often in a single individual. The separation of roles in a larger executive team allows for more checks and balances in the electoral process and a greater segmentation of duties, such as policy and operational roles, depending on the legal provisions. However, having multiple executives can also lead to longer decision-making processes. With more opinions to consider, reaching a consensus or majority decision can take more time. This is evident in **Kenya**, where the multi-member IEBC often requires extensive deliberation to reach decisions. Similarly, in **Ethiopia**, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) must navigate through comprehensive discussions to ensure all perspectives are considered. While this thoroughness can enhance the quality of decisions, it can also delay the implementation of crucial actions, especially in time-sensitive situations.

Greater geographical and thematic coverage is another notable benefit of the multi-sectoral model. Executives can be assigned specific portfolios to oversee, ensuring comprehensive management of the electoral process across different regions and issues. This can be particularly advantageous in large or diverse countries where localized knowledge and attention to local issues are crucial. For example, in **Iraq**, executives might be responsible for specific geographical areas so as to ensure that local electoral concerns are adequately addressed and managed. Similarly, in **Armenia**, the Central Electoral Commission assigns executives to oversee distinct electoral functions, enhancing its overall effectiveness. Irrespective of the areas of responsibility attributed to executives, it is essential that this is a joint decision taken by the full executive leadership. Hence, these types of decisions must be an integral part of the earlier phases of the transition plan and central to the day-to-day operations of the executive leadership.

To optimize the functionality of multi-sectoral executive leaderships, it is also essential to establish a robust governance structure that builds on thematic committees managed by different executives. These committees can focus on key areas such as voter registration, election security, public outreach, and legal compliance. By delegating specific responsibilities to dedicated committees, EMBs can streamline their operations and ensure that each aspect of the electoral process receives the attention it requires. Once executives have obtained sufficient technical know-how, they can better exercise their oversight function and make more informed policy decisions. The longer it takes for them to obtain the necessary expertise during their tenure, the graver the risks to the credibility of the EMB as an institution.

Judicial Model

Overview	
The judicial model draws members entirely from the judiciary. It often vests significant authority in the EMB and takes the form of an electoral court or tribunal.	
BENEFITS	<p>Judicial expertise and legal rigor: <i>The EMB is led by executives with a high level of legal proficiency and experience in upholding the rule of law.</i></p> <p>Hyper-transparency: <i>Decisions and associated documentation are entered into the public domain, which can build public trust in the institution.</i></p>
DRAWBACKS	<p>Concentration of power in a single sector: <i>Prioritizing judicial expertise can hinder technical expertise in other sectors.</i></p> <p>Real or perceived lack of accountability: <i>Because the authority to issue final and binding decisions is often vested in the EMB, the public can perceive it as unaccountable to the people.</i></p>

Figure 7: Overview of Judicial Executive Leadership Models

In this model, the members of the executive leadership of EMBs are drawn entirely from the judicial sector. This approach is exemplified by countries like **Brazil and Costa Rica**, where EMBs function as a fourth branch of government. In **Brazil**, seven magistrates are selected from the Federal Supreme Court (three), the Superior Court of Justice (two), and presidential nominees (two, chosen from six nominees from the Superior Court of Justice).¹³ These EMBs have the authority to make policy decisions, to draft laws, and to resolve disputes as courts of final instance, with their decisions being unappealable. In **Brazil**, for example, the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) has demonstrated its power by censuring former President Jair Bolsonaro for spreading disinformation against the Tribunal itself and the electoral process.¹⁴ Such tribunals operate with significant autonomy, with their rulings final and binding. Unlike in **Brazil**, where all electoral functions are concentrated in the TSE, in countries such as **Chile, Mexico, and Peru** they are split between two independent bodies: one charged with dispute resolution and the other with electoral management.¹⁵

One of the main advantages of this model is the judicial expertise and legal rigor that executives bring to the EMB. With all of them drawn from the judiciary, these bodies have a high level of legal proficiency and adherence to the rule of law in electoral management. This judicial foundation contributes to the robustness and fairness of electoral processes where the electoral tribunals are respected for their impartiality and legal acumen, as seen in **Costa Rica**. The legal expertise of executives also helps in drafting sound electoral laws

¹³ Superior Electoral Court. (n.d.) Structure. <https://internacional.tse.jus.br/en/superior-electoral-court/structure>

¹⁴ *Financial Times*. (2023, June 30). Brazilian court votes to bar Bolsonaro from political office until 2030. <https://www.ft.com/content/433b599a-441a-49a3-900d-b7fa680d930f>

¹⁵ Marchetti, V. (2012). Electoral Governance in Brazil. *Brazilian Political Science Review*, 6(1), 113-33. DOI: 10.1590/1981-3898201200010006

and in resolving disputes efficiently and justly. Additionally, these EMBs operate in a hyper-transparent manner, with all executive decisions placed in the public domain via their websites. This transparency is crucial for maintaining public trust and confidence in the electoral process. In **Brazil**, for instance, the TSE's decisions and proceedings are readily accessible to the public, ensuring that its actions are open to scrutiny and fostering a culture of accountability and transparency.

However, the concentration of executive leadership in a single sector can present challenges. One potential downside is perceived or actual lack of accountability, as these EMBs operate with significant autonomy and their decisions cannot be appealed. This can lead to criticism of insularity and a lack of checks and balances. **Honduras**, for example, moved away from the judicial model partly due to concerns about accountability and failures in electoral management. The shift was motivated by the need to diversify the EMB's leadership and to enhance oversight mechanisms within it. In **Brazil**, the rotation of judges, which helps prevent the entrenchment of power over time, is emphasized as a key part of continuing their apolitical character. A substitute is also appointed for every existing member, allowing for this rotation to take place also in the event of sudden or unexpected transitions.

The Implications of Executive Leadership Models for Transitions

Civil Service Model

The civil service model appears to be the simplest one in which to handle a leadership transition in an electoral management body, particularly in transitional settings, given the smaller executive leadership structure involved. Replacing and onboarding only up to three executives drawn from the civil service is often a simpler process than onboarding in the other two models. Familiarity with public service should make onboarding simpler as the civil service competencies of incoming executives can be complemented by a more targeted, intensive deep dive into electoral independence and key aspects of electoral management. Team-building for incoming executives could also be less complex, including integration with those already on the board, as only a small group of individuals must merge into an effective executive leadership team. Transitions in this model are typically managed through formal appointment processes, often involving nomination by the president or prime minister. In **New Zealand**, the Chief Electoral Officer is appointed by the Governor-General on the recommendation of the government. Appointments are usually well-publicized and involve extensive vetting to ensure that candidates are both qualified and perceived as impartial. This helps maintain the integrity and continuity of the EMB's operations. Except in the case of an unforeseen last-minute change during such an appointment process, the EMB can tailor its existing transition plan to the requirements of the incoming executive. Depending on the regulatory framework governing the EMB's transition plan and the political situation in the country, it might be appropriate for the transition team to reach out informally to the incoming executive for initial discussion regarding the onboarding process.

Executives in this model often serve long tenures, sometimes exceeding ten years, which allows them to oversee significant institutional changes and multiple electoral cycles. Appointment may be interrupted by retirement or removal from office. **Canada**, for example, has only had seven Chief Electoral Officers since 1920, with two of them serving 22 years or more.¹⁶ Similarly, In **Australia**, the Australian Electoral Commissioner's long tenure term has enabled sustained reforms and consistent application of electoral laws. Such continuity can enhance institutional memory and stability, allowing for the development and implementation of long-term strategic plans. However, long tenures can also lead to stagnation and resistance to innovation. When executives remain in position for extended periods, there is a risk that they may become too entrenched in their methods, potentially hindering adaptation to new challenges or to technological advancement. Balancing continuity with the need for fresh perspectives is thus a critical consideration for EMBs operating under this model, which could also impact the planning and preparations for

¹⁶ Elections Canada. (n.d.) Chief Electoral Officers Since 1920.

<https://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=abo&dir=ceo/ceh&document=index&lang=e>

a leadership transition. The limited number of positions that need to be filled during a transition under the civil service model reduces the number of executives trained. Additionally, due to the smaller size, it can be easier for executives to form a coherent and cohesive management team.

If the EMB under its outgoing executive leadership did not keep pace with the introduction of new technologies or meet management expectations from external stakeholders or the EMB's staff—as well as the EMB more broadly—the incoming one could face an aggressive reform agenda on their part and pressure for wide-reaching electoral reforms. The transition plan must reflect these demands. Therefore, departing executives should document and, ideally, have enough overlapping time with incoming ones to systematically go over the rationale for current practices and their benefits and drawbacks. An ad hoc, unwritten transition plan that has not been firmly “ground-proofed” and accepted by incoming executives may increase the risks associated with a leadership transition, whereas communication on the transition plan helps to maintain institutional memory as well as giving new executives a better understanding of priorities to address and the constraints related to previously implemented solutions.

Multi-Sectoral Model

This model presents unique demands and challenges. A successful leadership transition plan must recognize these and ensure that the new executive team lives up to its full potential from early on in its tenure. The incoming members have a very diverse background, be it a technical elections background, experience working in the private or public sector, and a record in larger or smaller organizations with diverse leadership. Effectively designing and implementing a reasonable transition plan for this model could test even more experienced transition teams. Each executive might require a unique curriculum and briefing package and that should be balanced with the importance of creating a functional team cannot be overlooked. The team-building component can sometimes become increasingly complex the higher the number of executives; this should not be underestimated when developing the transition plan, along with its calendar and resource requirements.

Staggering the terms of office for executives can mitigate some of these challenges by ensuring continuity and stability within the EMB. This produces a blend of experience and fresh perspectives, facilitating ongoing institutional knowledge while encouraging innovation and responsiveness to new challenges. Staggered terms help preserve organizational memory and maintain consistency in governance practices. In **Pakistan**, the Election Commission's staggered terms allow it to maintain continuity while integrating new ideas and approaches over time. The staggered approach can present transition challenges, however. For instance, if a large number of executives remain in place they risk treating incoming ones as junior to them. This could undermine the cohesiveness of the executive team. The incoming executives can also be reluctant to accept the advice of the “old guard” if they perceive them to be responsible for a poorly run election, mismanagement, or improprieties during the last electoral cycle. The transition team needs to consider how to avoid such outcomes. For instance, rather than dividing executives into two distinct groups during various

onboarding processes and trainings, it could be beneficial to integrate them and even team up a newcomer with a mentor from the incumbents.

Judicial Model

The judicial model presents some of the same transition challenges as the multi-sectoral one. The transition plan needs to include swift capacity-building across a spectrum of election technical areas for numerous new executives. In addition to a wide and intensive learning component of the transition plan, the new executive team could benefit from team-building. That members come with shared knowledge from the legal community could speed up the transition, although operational aspects could require special attention in the case of incoming executives have limited experience in leading a large, national institution. In some societies and judicial systems, stakeholders treat senior judges with a deference that is diametrically different to how political parties, civil society, and the media often interact with election commissioners. Countries like **Brazil** face the challenge that judges appointed to the EMB are not obliged to stop their other judiciary activities. This implies a tension between their EMB duties and their other roles within the judiciary. Only a small number of judges have returned to the TSE after their initial two-year tenure,¹⁷ which creates a challenge in the institutional expertise regarding elections needing constant renewal and investment when it comes to transition. Acclimatizing to a different institutional culture could be instrumental to the success of executives individually and collectively and would require special attention from the transition team.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Lessons Learned and Global Best Practice for Successful Leadership Transitions

Transition Appointment Processes

The formal transition from one leadership of an EMB to another involves distinct legal procedures that vary significantly depending on its executive structure. These are usually found in a country's constitution, electoral law, or EMB law. Each of the three models presented above has its own appointment and transition mechanisms, reflecting its unique governance framework and operational requirements.

	Civil Service Model	Multi-Sectoral Model	Judicial Model
Key Characteristics	Appointments are generally straightforward, but highly centralized. Often, this involves formal appointment by a high-ranking authority, such as the president or prime minister. The process may also include a mandatory handover period for incoming and outgoing executives.	Appointments are more complex, given the need to represent a wide array of expertise and sectors.	Appointments involve legal processes, emphasizing judicial independence and legal expertise. Terms are often staggered to ensure continuity. Transitions often include comprehensive legal protocols (for example, for the transfer of cases by outgoing members or the requirement that all their pending cases are resolved prior to ending their term).
Example	In New Zealand, the chief electoral officer is appointed by the Governor-General on the advice of the government. The legal process includes vetting the candidate and often involves parliamentary or legislative approval. The transition process for a single new executive might also include a mandatory handover period.	In Nigeria, INEC members are appointed by the president, subject to confirmation by the Senate. The legal framework requires that appointees represent various professional fields. Staggered terms are legally mandated to maintain continuity.	In Brazil, the members of the TSE are appointed primarily from the judiciary. The legal appointment process is rigorous, with adherence to strict judicial criteria and often involving multiple branches of government to ensure impartiality and integrity.

Figure 8: Comparison of Models' Transition Appointment Processes

In all the models, the transition process needs to include provisions for emergencies and sudden vacancies. For instance, if the chairperson resigns or is otherwise unable to continue in office, the legal framework includes or needs to include a process for interim appointments to ensure that the EMB remains functional. A deputy chairperson may act in the interim role until a new chairperson is appointed. In **New Zealand**, the outgoing chief electoral officer can remain in office beyond the end of their term, as was the case in 2019,

allowing some continuity until a new person is appointed. In **Canada**, the current CEO, who was previously the General Counsel of the EMB, was appointed for two years in an acting capacity, before he was confirmed in the role. In **Zambia**, the law provides for a four-month period in which a member of the Electoral Commission whose term has expired can continue to hold office until a new appointment is made.¹⁸ In **Pakistan**, a vacancy will result in the senior-most elder member of the Election Commission to serve in the position until it is filled.¹⁹ Such interim appointments may be made quickly by the same appointing authority, such as the president, with a subsequent formal appointment process to follow. Appointing from within the EMB carries the benefit of reducing the level of onboarding required.

However, there may be instances when a “perfect storm” undermines measures such as the use of staggered terms. In **Kenya**, for example, the IEBC was left with just three members following the resignation or unplanned departure of four in 2022. When the term for these three members expired, the institution was left with none, creating a leadership void that lasted for more than a year. This resulted in major reputational and credibility challenges for the EMB. An analogous situation occurred in **Nigeria** in 2015, when the tenure of the Chairperson and of more than half the members of the INEC elapsed, leaving executive positions open for a year and a half. While one of the remaining members was appointed Acting Chairperson, the long absence of a permanent Chairperson resulted in higher public distrust in the EMB.²⁰ Similarly, in **Pakistan**, the last two leadership transitions violated the constitutionally mandated timeframe for appointments, creating institutional instability and the disruption of electoral preparations.

While the civil service model involves a centralized and often quicker legal leadership transition process, the multi-sectoral and judicial ones require more complex and legal procedures, as well as staggered terms, to ensure continuity and representativeness. Each model’s legal framework is designed to maintain the integrity, stability, and functionality of the EMB during transitions, and it is tailored to the specific needs and structure of the EMB.

Lessons From Government Transitions

The transition from one government to another is one of the most studied public leadership transitions.²¹ Preparing for and executing it involves a higher level of complexity than a leadership transition in an EMB, yet parts of the overarching frameworks and several of the processes that guide such transitions can be highly relevant to EMBs. These can be adapted to create an effective leadership transition framework for EMBs. Government transitions are characterized by several elements aimed at facilitating the highly sensitive and

¹⁸ Electoral Commission of Zambia Act 2016, Section 6.

¹⁹ Constitution of Pakistan, Section 217.

²⁰ S. Jah, Personal Communication, May 22, 2024.

²¹ The discussion regarding government transitions builds the National Democratic Institute’s comparative study of executive transitions.

For details, see National Democratic Institute. (2021). Global Lessons on Managing Executive Transitions.

complex nature of the process, which have key lessons²² for EMB transitions as well (some of their key elements are outlined in Figure 9).

Development of the Transition Plan	Importance of the Transition Team	Composition of the Transition Team
<p>A transition plan is essential to the success of the transition.</p> <p>In countries lacking a specific legal framework for these processes, government institutions can develop regulations and procedures to inform the transition plan.</p> <p>Generally, the plan outlines timelines for the various phases of the transition and the resources and funding available for its execution.</p> <p>The plan also outlines who are the members of the transition team, how decisions are to be made, and the type of authority they have to ensure compliance with the plan.</p>	<p>The transition typically follows a systematic process with several phases, although this might vary depending on the country's political system. In general, the transition is divided into pre-election and post-election phases.</p> <p>The pre-election phase involves the leading presidential candidates arranging a small team of advisors and experts who will perform key functions during the transition in case of victory.</p> <p>Along with the development of the transition plan, the transition team may need to familiarize itself with the unique features of the legal and regulatory framework governing the transition.</p> <p>In many countries, the transition team of the incoming government will increase its staff and start engaging directly with the outgoing government and government institutions for briefings. Additional public resources will sometimes also become available for the incoming government's transition team.</p>	<p>The transition team is made up of several key individuals tasked with assisting in the functions related to a leadership handover.</p> <p>As well as the incoming government, the outgoing one might put in place a transition team, as both should have the same goal of facilitating a smooth and effective transfer of power.</p> <p>In many countries, the incoming government's transition team is made up of a few individuals that are already part of the leader's inner circle. In fact, many of them have often worked for the individual for a lengthy period, although sometimes experts on various transition-related issues or former civil servants with familiarity with the functions of government might also be included.</p>

Figure 9: Components of Leadership Transitions in Government

Adapting Elements of Government Transitions to EMB Leadership Transitions

Some common challenges and opportunities for adapting some of the elements outlined above for EMBs are discussed below.²³

²² For details, see K.Siambi, J. (2022). Leadership Succession Planning and Organization Transition: A Review of Literature. *International Journal of Managerial Studies and Research*, 10(3), 16–30. <https://doi.org/10.20431/2349-0349.1003003>

EMB Leadership Transition Regulatory Framework

Many countries do not have a law guiding government transitions,²⁴ and the research for this White Paper did not find a dedicated law focusing on EMB leadership transition in any country. The legal frameworks governing EMBs usually cover topics related to the appointments of the chairperson and deputy chairperson, the area of responsibilities for executives, and the procedures for making and recording their decisions. However, the laws in question—primarily the electoral law and the EMB law—often lack references to how new executives are integrated into the workings of the EMB beyond swearing an oath, signing various documents related to codes of ethics, and being allocated certain areas of responsibilities.

The absence of a specific legal framework governing leadership transitions does not prevent an EMB from developing and issuing regulations for this process as part of the systematic planning that is critical to its smooth functioning. For example, the **United Kingdom’s** Electoral Commission has embedded induction into its Corporate Governance Framework, stating that the Chairperson’s duties include “ensuring that new Commissioners receive a full, formal and tailored induction on joining the Commission.”²⁵

Transition Plan

EMBs rarely have regulations in place without also having policies and procedures to guide their implementation. Regulation for voter registration, boundary delimitation, candidate nomination, and election observation are but a few examples. Hence, EMBs with leadership transition regulations are more likely to put in place a formal transition plan detailing elements similar to those in government transitions, such as identifying who is in charge of developing the plan, defining roles and responsibilities of the transition team members, setting the goals, objectives, and activities associated with the transition, and defining the resource requirements and timing for the process. EMBs that are not bound by transition regulations can nonetheless develop a simplified transition arrangement based on informal discussions between the incoming and the current executives. However, having a regulatory framework for leadership transitions would highlight the importance of the process and the need for an effective transition plan.

²³ Strategies for managing government transitions will vary by jurisdiction, influenced by a number of factors such as type of political system (e.g., executive or legislative-centric), and funding levels available to support transition processes. An exhaustive review of transition processes around the globe is beyond the scope of this paper, but common tactics for executing successful transitions are summarized in brief in this subsection.

²⁴ National Democratic Institute. (2021). *Global Lessons on Managing Executive Transitions*.

²⁵ The Electoral Commission. (n.d.). *Corporate Governance Framework*. <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/about-us/how-we-make-decisions/our-corporate-governance-framework>

Transition Team

A transition team should be established to manage the leadership transition process in EMBs. Just like in government transitions, the size and composition of the transition team could differ starkly from country to country but also depending on the nature of a particular transition instance in a country. For instance, if only the Chairperson of a Commission is being replaced and the replacement is the current Deputy Chairperson, who is already familiar with the EMB's mandate, staff, and operations, then there is a limited or no need for extensive preparations by the incoming chairperson or from the EMB itself. However, if all, or a majority of the executives are being replaced by ones with limited prior experience with elections in general and to the EMB in particular, then the size of the transition team could be greater to accommodate greater demands.

This transition team, ideally composed of senior officials and representatives from various departments of the EMB, is responsible for overseeing all aspects of the transition. Officials such as the Chief of Staff, the Secretary, or the Chief Electoral Officer are critical members of the team. Their tasks include creating a detailed transition plan, coordinating with outgoing and incoming executives, and ensuring that all necessary administrative and operational tasks are completed. The team should also prepare comprehensive briefing packs that include essential information about ongoing projects, key contacts, upcoming deadlines, and strategic priorities. These packs are crucial for equipping the new executives with the knowledge they need to hit the ground running.

Example

In New Zealand, ahead of the 2020 elections, the onboarding covered the following:

- Roles, functions, and purpose of the Electoral Commission
- Lessons learned from the previous election
- Current priorities for the Electoral Commission, including readiness, funding, and legislative amendments
- Preparations for the 2020 elections
- Topical electoral policy issues
- Budget and financial information
- Reading materials, relevant legislation, key dates, comparative overview of electoral systems, election timetable, party registration policy, broadcasting allocation decisions, work program, voter and nonvoter survey report, overview of official count process, enrolment data.
- Organizational culture

Onboarding can have limited value in bridging the gap between the incoming executives' previous experience and their new position, however. It is therefore recommended to augment any short-term onboarding and training with longer-term mentoring and coaching.²⁶ Mentoring and coaching are ideal for effectively onboarding new executives in EMBs, although instituting these can present significant challenges. Executive roles demand a deep understanding of electoral processes, regulatory frameworks, and stakeholder management, alongside the capacity to lead with integrity and impartiality. These challenges can exceed the experience of incoming executives, even those who are long-standing civil servants or professionals. This

²⁶ Terblanche, N.H.D., Albertyn, R.M., & Van Coller-Peter, S. (2018), *Developing leaders by supporting their transitions into senior positions*, South African Journal of Business Management, 49(1), a12. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v49i1.12>

applies equally to promoted internal candidates who assume the higher position; while they may be more familiar with the workings of the EMB, its electoral preparations, and its culture, the demands of the new position may require a different and greater skill set that they may be unfamiliar with. However, when possible to institute these opportunities, mentoring provides new executives with invaluable insights from seasoned professionals, facilitating the transfer of institutional knowledge and best practices. Coaching helps to hone leadership skills, to foster critical thinking, and to promote adaptive strategies in a rapidly evolving electoral landscape. Together, mentoring and coaching ensure that new executives not only have the required technical competencies but also are equipped with the strategic acumen and ethical grounding necessary to uphold the principles of democratic governance and public trust. As seen in business environments, this is a strong combination of macro- and micro-level support and development that can have enduring impact regarding the success of leadership transitions.²⁷

Internal and External Stakeholder Engagement

Strategic communication is vital for EMBs in internal and external contexts. Internally, clear and consistent communication with staff is necessary to ensure that everyone is aware of the transition plan and their role within it. This can be facilitated through internal memos, meetings, and an internal portal where updates are regularly posted. Externally, public statements, press releases, and media briefings should be used to inform the public and other external stakeholders about the leadership transition, emphasizing the steps being taken to ensure a smooth and effective handover. The source of such public communication varies, but the appointing authority has an important role to play in this regard.

In **Pakistan**, the Constitution establishes a structured approach to engaging with stakeholders, including political parties, during leadership transitions in the Election Commission.²⁸ The consultative process between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, the involvement of a bipartisan Parliamentary Committee, and the requirement for provincial representation ensure that a wide range of political perspectives is considered. Additionally, the broad mandate of the Election Commission to conduct free and fair elections and the support from executive authorities underscore the importance of maintaining transparency and integrity in the transition process, thereby engaging civil society and ensuring public trust. However, this varies from country to country. For example, **Sri Lanka** does not have specific procedures for engagement with stakeholders during leadership transitions. However, the leadership of the Election Commission later released a media release with regard to the appointment of new executives.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ S. Ahmed, Personal Communication, May 27, 2024.

²⁹ S. Paasilinna, Personal Communication, May 20, 2024.

Timing of Transitions

The timing of training and orientation for incoming EMB executives is paramount, given the wide array of topics to be covered, and they should not take place too close to upcoming elections. However, much depends on the timelines of the appointing authority. For example, in **Kenya**, new members of the IEBC were appointed less than a year before the elections of 2017 and 2022. In **Honduras**, members of the National Electoral Council ended their term in September 2024, and thus the new group that oversaw the national primary elections in March 2025 had been in position for only six months.³⁰ Such an approach not only compromises the onboarding process and creates significant pressure but also results in hasty preparations for elections.

The impact of sudden transitions on electoral preparations can be significant, especially if they occur close to an election. To mitigate this, EMBs should ensure that their critical functions are not overly dependent on any single individual within the executive team. Cross-training staff and establishing clear protocols can help maintain operational continuity. A combination of clear policies and operational experience from within the EMB can help mitigate the impact of a sudden transition. Rapid-response transition teams should work closely with interim executives to quickly stabilize the situation, addressing any immediate operational challenges and ensuring that the electoral process remains on track.

A salient distinction between EMB and government transitions is that in the latter the incoming leadership can rely on its political party machinery to undertake much of the preparations for a smooth transfer of authority. In some countries, government transition teams also have access to public funds. In the case of EMBs, this responsibility rests with their bureaucracy, if at all identified. So, if managing the leadership transition is not a recognized part of the EMB's work, it is highly unlikely that incoming executives will be granted the right support or EMB funds to prepare themselves for their new duties. In these cases, incumbents must rely on their personal networks to draft briefing materials, organize meetings, and prepare the incoming ones for their new duties. Depending on the EMB's tradition and financial situation, and executive's contract, the position could come with some support staff and dedicated advisors who could assist in preparing and executing transition plans. However, the uncertainty surrounding what type of support a new Commissioner will receive, or the reliance on personal networks that may or may not provide the proper support, can negatively impact the success of the transition team.

³⁰ M. Varela-Erasheva, Personal Communication, May 14, 2024.

Women in EMB Transitions

Being a woman in Arab society is in itself a challenge. It was very difficult for Somali society, with many customs and traditions, to accept me, a woman, as a head of the election commission. In the past, the norms in Somali society have limited the role of women to being mothers and housewives, which prevents women here from achieving what they set out to do. There were many instances where intimidation was used against me and other women in this field. However, I rejected the traditional “role of women” and the mold set for us by society, and persisted to complete my mission.

-Halima Ismail Ibrahim, Chairperson of Somalia’s National Independent Electoral Commission

Research by International IDEA³¹ shows that only 22 percent of EMB chairperson positions were filled by women as of 2022. Women face unique transition challenges when stepping into EMB leadership roles. Many EMBs lack formalized induction programs that address the specific barriers women may encounter, such as navigating institutional resistance, managing expectations shaped by entrenched gender biases, and dealing with a lack of precedent for female leadership. In institutions where the leadership has been historically male-dominated, women executives often receive limited transitional support from outgoing leaders, colleagues, or political stakeholders, which makes it harder to establish their credibility and authority early on. **To address these challenges, EMBs must institutionalize gender-sensitive transition processes, which should be explicitly addressed in the transition plan and by the transition team.**

Key measures include:

- Developing structured induction programs tailored to the experiences of women executives, ensuring that they have the necessary institutional knowledge and strategic support, and that necessary security measures in place.
- Establishing formalized peer support and mentorship programs, connecting newly appointed women executives with ones experienced in electoral governance, the broader public sector, and international networks.
- Encouraging male allies within the EMB and government institutions to actively support and advocate for women executives, helping to dismantle resistance and institutional biases.
- Strengthening legal and digital protections against online harassment and disinformation targeting women in leadership roles.
- Ensuring that the leadership transition incorporates strategies to proactively counter political influence.
- Ensure women are visibly leading the EMB, signaling a commitment to inclusivity, fairness, and democratic values.

³¹ *Few women at the top of electoral management bodies worldwide.* (n.d.). Retrieved April 23, 2025, from <https://www.idea.int/news/few-women-top-electoral-management-bodies-worldwide>

Conclusion and Recommendations

Executive Leadership transitions in EMBs are pivotal moments that significantly impact electoral integrity and performance. The leadership at the helm of these institutions plays a critical role in ensuring free, fair, and credible elections. Therefore, the smooth and effective onboarding of new executives is not merely an administrative necessity but a cornerstone of democratic stability and public trust. This White Paper has reviewed the differing circumstances that surround EMB leadership transitions, examined the three models that govern the executive leadership of EMBs and how the unique features impact the transition process, examined best practices from the field of government transitions and how to best apply them to EMB leadership transitions, and identified key focus areas to consider during the transition.

Structured approaches to EMB leadership transitions, whether foreseen or sudden, are essential to maintaining the continuity and effectiveness of electoral processes. Foreseen transitions allow for comprehensive preparation, including the implementation of mentoring and coaching programs, detailed briefings, and the development of the essential transition plan, that addresses immediate and long-term objectives. Sudden transitions are more challenging and they underscore the need for robust contingency and crisis-management plans that can be swiftly activated to mitigate disruption and uphold electoral integrity. Any approach to transition, whether foreseen or sudden, should also take the structure of the EMB's executive leadership into account and be tailored to that context.

Studying governmental transitions provides valuable insights for EMBs. The success of these transitions often hinges on a well-defined written transition plan and the establishment of a transition team with clear mandate and resources. These elements ensure that incoming executives are fully informed, supported, and able to maintain the momentum of their predecessors. Transition teams play a critical role in orchestrating the myriad details involved in leadership handovers. They facilitate the seamless transfer of responsibilities, ensure institutional memory is preserved, and provide a support structure for new executives. Additionally, robust policy processes guide the strategic direction of the transition, ensuring alignment with organizational goals and the broader electoral mandate.

Planning and crisis management are indispensable components of a structured transition approach. By anticipating potential challenges and developing crisis-response strategies, EMBs can navigate unforeseen obstacles with agility and resilience. In cases of anticipated transitions, EMB strategic plans are an excellent place to integrate a structured approach to transitions into the forward thinking of the institution. This proactive stance not only safeguards electoral operations, but also reinforces public confidence in the EMB's capacity to manage leadership changes without compromising electoral integrity.

While there is little research on EMB leadership transitions, several relevant practices and strategies for successfully managing them can be identified.

Recommendations for effective leadership transitions

Consider the process within the context of the EMB's strategic plan, in drafting a new plan and in socializing the current plan among a new set of executives.

In the case of foreseen transitions, create well-defined succession plans, striving to ensure an overlap period. Succession planning can also involve identifying potential internal successors.

In the case of sudden transitions, maintain contingency plans that outline procedures for emergency appointments and define the responsibilities of interim leaders.

Involve and communicate transparently with external stakeholders, including political parties, civil society organizations, and international observers.

Where transitions are managed through a formal appointment process, appointments should be well publicized and involve extensive vetting to ensure that the candidates are qualified and perceived as impartial.

Tailor capacity-building efforts to the needs of the EMB's specific context, with particular attention to creating a functional executives team.

Make specific efforts to integrate incoming executives with incumbent ones; for example, by engaging in joint capacity-building efforts.

The transition team should prepare regular briefing packs that include essential information about ongoing projects, key contacts, upcoming deadlines, and strategic priorities.

Despite the unpredictability of some transitions, plan for an adjustment period in which critical training and orientation can take place.

Maintain a crisis-mitigation plan. It should include crisis scenario planning and preparations, inclusive of sudden changes in the executive team, and ready executives to handle crises with little notice.

Ensure that new executives have adequate security clearances and briefings. EMB leaders may face national security-related issues, such as cybersecurity and disinformation attacks.

Leadership transition in EMBs is a matter of profound importance. By adopting a structured approach that draws on best practices from government transitions and that emphasizes the development of a transition plan covering foreseen and unexpected transitions as well as the need for a dedicated and sufficiently resourced transition team, EMBs can ensure that these pivotal changes bolster rather than hinder their mission. Such diligence in managing transitions ultimately strengthens the foundation of democratic governance and enhances the credibility of electoral processes.

Annex 1: Suggested Actions for Managing Executive Leadership Transitions

The following are suggested steps or actions for managing executive leadership transitions in electoral management bodies, while bearing in mind that the proximity of upcoming elections would change priorities and transition pace dramatically.

1. Pre-Transition Planning

- a. **Develop a Transition Strategy:** Establish clear policies for foreseen and sudden transitions to ensure leadership continuity and adherence to legal provisions.
- b. **Institutionalize Diversity Commitments:** Where possible, integrate gender and diversity considerations into appointment and transition planning processes. If this is absent from the law, seek to advocate relevant reforms.
- c. **Build Support Networks:** Facilitate peer-mentoring programs for incoming executives to provide guidance and support—particularly for women and members of other marginalized groups but also for those who may not be coming from an election-specific backgrounds.

2. Structured Transition Process

- a. **Form a Transition Team and Plan:** Assign a dedicated team to oversee the transition, timelines, knowledge transfer, operational stability, strategic communications, resources, and change management. Make sure to include planning for firsts (first day, first week, and first month).
- b. **Prepare Briefing Materials:** Develop comprehensive handover documents covering institutional evolution, legal frameworks, mission and strategy, ongoing projects and critical matters, staffing, risk-management plans, and key stakeholders.
- c. **Engage Internally and Externally:** Communicate clearly with staff, government agencies, political actors, and the public about leadership changes and trust-building. This needs to also include peer institutions such as other constitutional bodies and international EMB networks.
- d. **Capacity Development of New Executives:** Arrange targeted training for new executives on the unique nature of elections and on emerging leadership and governance challenges. Implement team-building among executives and with department heads of the secretariat.
- e. **Change Management:** A new leadership will herald change and result in some kind of internal reform process. Expectations around developing a new vision and strategy, clear governance guidance, managing possible declines in staff morale, revised approaches to stakeholder engagement, and adjustments to operational approaches and accountability are all to be expected and should be planned for.

- f. If Transition Occurs Just Prior to or During Elections: To ensure minimal interruption, fast-track any permissions, legal authorities, operational plans, risk-plan adjustments, and critical decision-making provisions needed for a rapid transition.

3. Specific Challenges for Women and Underrepresented Groups

- a. Combat Harassment and Disinformation: Strengthen policies and mechanisms that address intimidation and disinformation targeting women executives, ensuring perpetrators are held accountable, and fostering a safe and equitable leadership environment.
- b. Ensure Inclusive Leadership Development: Provide targeted leadership training and institutional support for executives from under-represented groups.
- c. Promote Visibility and Legitimacy: Publicly highlight and support diverse leaders to strengthen their authority and credibility.

4. Post-Transition Support

- a. Evaluate the Transition Process: Conduct a review of the transition to identify successes and areas for improvement.
- b. Sustain Mentorship and Guidance: Encourage continued engagement between outgoing and incoming executives, fostering long-term stability.
- c. Monitor Impact on Institutional Integrity: Assess how the transition has affected external and internal trust, public confidence, and organizational performance.

Annex 2: Country Example Quick Reference

Civil Service Model	
Australia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Electoral Commission has a long tenure, which has enabled sustained reforms and the consistent application of electoral laws. However, this long tenure has also raised concerns about potential stagnation and resistance to innovation.
Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The chief electoral officer holds significant sway over electoral management, which fosters consistency but can also place a significant amount of responsibility on a single person. Since 1920, there have only been seven chief electoral officers, with some serving for over 20 years. The current chief electoral officer was appointed after serving as General Counsel of the EMB and served in an acting capacity for two years before his confirmation.
New Zealand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members of the Electoral Commission are appointed for five-year, renewable terms. Chief electoral officers can remain in office beyond the end of their term, as was the case in 2019, allowing some continuity until a new person is appointed.
Multi-Sectoral Model	
Armenia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members of the Central Electoral Commission are appointed for a six-year term and are assigned to oversee distinct electoral functions. The commission draws on diverse professional backgrounds to enhance electoral-management processes.
Iraq	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Independent High Electoral Commission draws on diverse professional backgrounds to enhance electoral-management processes. Members may be tasked with specific geographical areas, ensuring that local electoral concerns are adequately addressed and managed.
Kenya	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The law mandates that at least one judge sits on the executive of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) or that the Chairperson has a strong legal background. The multi-member IEBC often requires extensive deliberation to reach decisions. There have been repeated challenges regarding transitions and leadership in the commission, including lengthy vacancies, unplanned departures, public dissent by members in defiance of the Chairperson, and last-minute appointments of new members.
Nigeria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Independent National Electoral Commission has a multi-member executive structure that draws on diverse professional backgrounds, which can help manage the country's dynamic electoral environment. Members are appointed by the President and subject to confirmation by the Senate. The law mandates staggered membership terms to ensure continuity and to preserve institutional memory.
Pakistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The law mandates that the chief electoral officer must be a former Supreme Court judge, a senior civil servant, or a technocrat not older than 68 years old.

- Membership terms in the Election Commission are staggered and interim appointments are possible to maintain continuity in electoral processes.

South Africa

- Members of the Electoral Commission are appointed for a seven-year term, renewable once.
- At least one judge must sit on the executive, or the chairperson must have a strong legal background.

Judicial Model

Brazil

- Members of the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) are appointed for a two-year term, renewable once. Terms are staggered.
- Members are primarily appointed from the judiciary, and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Federal Court serves as the head of the TSE. The TSE operates with significant autonomy. Its rulings are final and binding, and they are readily accessible to the public.
- Two-year terms mean that institutional expertise is a challenge, but they also emphasize the rotation of judges as a key part of continuing their apolitical character.
- One substitute is appointed for every member, allowing for a quick replacement in the event of a sudden or unexpected transition. Seamless handovers are ensured by the requirement that all outgoing members complete their pending judgments.

Costa Rica

- Members of the Supreme Electoral Court are appointed for a single six-year term. All come from the judiciary.
- The court is respected for its impartiality and legal acumen. It is hyper-transparent and all executive decisions are placed in the public domain via its website.

Honduras

- Honduras moved away from the judicial model partly due to concerns about accountability and failures in electoral management.
- A group of new members was appointed to the National Electoral Council only six months before the March 2025 national primary elections.



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