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Freedom of expression is a cornerstone of democratic societies and a cherished human right – and thus it should remain. During election campaigns throughout the world, the centrality of freedom of expression is even further accentuated as millions of people must make up their minds over whom to entrust with the leadership of their towns, regions or countries. To help them make their decision, the free exchange of information, ideas and opinions is crucial. For an electoral process to be considered truly free and fair, there must be space for competing ideas and ideologies, and for a public debate in which everyone can be heard.

But all human rights are interdependent and indivisible – and another foundational principle of international human rights law is that of equality and non-discrimination. And it is precisely in this context that freedom of expression has some narrowly defined boundaries. Free speech may be restricted by law, for example, if it is necessary to ensure respect for the rights of others. When speech – of any ideological provenance – incites to discrimination, hatred or violence, in some cases pitting different groups against one another, it should be prohibited by law.

Currently, hundreds of millions of citizens of the European Union are going to the polls to choose their representatives for the European Parliament, in one of the world's largest exercises in democracy. But in Europe and elsewhere, election processes are being tarnished by an increase in hate speech and some politicians' relentless search for scapegoats.

Having monitored election processes from Venezuela over Togo and Palestine to East Timor, it is my experience that elections are the most powerful testing grounds for a society's commitment to human rights values. Thus, it concerns me that numerous elections – across Europe but also beyond – have become staging grounds for politicians who use them as platforms for spreading discriminatory rhetoric and inciting to hatred, rather than as opportunities for promoting dignity and dialogue. Hate has entered mainstream politics and the increasing propensity to target and label those who hold different views as unworthy of respect can even lead to physical harm.

Politicians, in their capacity as leaders and influencers, have more responsibility than many others in this context, because they have the power to shape the debate and to shift public opinion, either positively or negatively. International human rights standards, such as the [Rabat Plan of Action](#), require political leaders to refrain from any incitement, to speak out firmly and promptly against hate speech and to never justify violence by prior provocation.

In the digital age, the media, in particular the gigantic social media companies through which an increasing number of people access much of their news and form many of their opinions, have a shared responsibility to help ensure that acts of incitement to hatred are spoken out against and acted upon with the appropriate measures, in line with international human rights law.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights does not judge political parties or people on the basis of their political ideas – however, the Office has a mandate to promote and protect the human rights of all people, everywhere. When those rights are at risk, whether in words or in deeds, we have to speak out, regardless of the ideological background of those who threaten them.

Non-discrimination and freedom of expression are both absolutely essential components of the set of values which has provided the mainspring for democratic societies in Europe since the

end of the Second World War. When they are seen as two parts of the same coin, they constitute a solid basis for democracy. Yes, democracy is about listening to the will of the electors – but it is also about defending the minority, and those at risk, whoever and wherever they may be.

The conduct of the European Parliamentary Elections, and of the newly elected MEPs – whether they belong to left, right or centre – will provide a litmus test of whether we are still safeguarding these human rights and fundamental freedoms, or whether our politicians are now steering us along a dangerous path to more division and hatred.