



Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

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Speech by IPU Secretary General, Anders B. Johnsson

United Nations Human Rights Council High-Level Debate

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Mr. President,
Madam High Commissioner
Members of the Human Rights Council,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Mr. President,

The IPU has accompanied the development of the Human Rights Council since its inception. From the outset, we have argued that parliaments are natural partners of your Council. For your deliberations and decisions to become truly meaningful they must translate into action within your countries. Much of that requires decisions in parliament to ratify international conventions and agreements, to translate them into national policies and laws, to allocate funding to implement corresponding programs and to exercise the oversight that is the hallmark of responsible government.

The IPU welcomes the steps you are now taking to turn this vision into reality. Last year your Council held its first panel discussion on the contribution that parliaments can make to its work and you will consider its report during this session. I would like to place on record the IPU's gratitude to the countries that spearheaded this initiative and to encourage you to adopt the resolution that has been prepared and with which we fully associate ourselves.

Indeed, the IPU has already started to act on the panel's recommendations. We are making it a priority to raise awareness in parliaments about the Council and the contribution they can make to its work.

Thanks to the Romanian Ambassador in Geneva, the Romanian Chamber of Deputies and the IPU organized a first regional seminar last month in Bucharest for MPs from Central and Eastern Europe to mobilise their input for the second UPR cycle. The seminar showed that MPs are starting to contribute to the work of your Council and are keen to be more supportive. At the initiative of the Ambassador of Morocco, a similar regional event will soon take place in Rabat for parliamentarians from the African continent, while Uruguay will host parliamentarians from Latin America in June.

These seminars will be followed by activities at the national level where the IPU will share good practices and assist parliaments, at their request, in designing a process

to contribute to the UPR that meets their specific needs and circumstances. Our aim is to do everything we can to help parliaments contribute to the UPR and ensure that your recommendations are followed up.

The Universal Periodic Review is of course not the only area where it makes sense for your Council to work more closely with national parliaments and, by extension, with the IPU. Your agenda correlates closely with that of parliaments. At the heart of what goes on in parliament is a desire to uphold and preserve the dignity and fundamental rights of the individual. The IPU therefore encourages you to reach out to parliaments in a more systematic manner. We are at your disposal to assist in this endeavour.

Mr. President,

These days you will be debating the situation in several countries where people are subject to gross violations of their rights. Let me share two reflections from the perspective of the IPU – an organization that is celebrating its 125th anniversary this year. It is, as many of you know, a political organization that was created to promote peace and cooperation and one that has worked in innumerable countries over the years to help establish and strengthen democracy.

There are numerous causes of conflicts. Today they seem even more complex than ever. Yet, at the heart of the matter, crisis often occurs because the will of the people is no longer the basis of the authority of a government that has ceased to be transparent and accountable. Tolerance and respect for those who have different beliefs or customs have been abandoned. Political violence is soon followed by physical violence and countries descend into a vicious cycle of ever-greater violations of people's most fundamental rights.

There is really only one way to end conflict and that is through political dialogue. War and destruction only serve to reinforce divisions in society, not to heal or overcome them. Armed conflict in today's world constitutes in itself a massive violation of human rights. It does not deliver democracy, respect for human rights and development. Only dialogue can do that.

I make these two simple points because representation, transparency and accountability – fundamental components of democracy – are also key to avoiding and solving conflict and human rights violations. As we look to assist countries in overcoming these challenges, we should therefore also be interested in providing support to the institutions of the State that are central to democracy, including the parliament.

A parliament that truly represents the full diversity in society and that has the means at its disposal to represent the views of its constituents and hold government to account is a very powerful tool to avoid conflict, overcome divisions in society and uphold human rights. But it needs support as an institution and the all too often prevailing attitude whereby the winner takes all must be replaced by inclusive decision-making.

Similar considerations underpin the IPU's proposal that human rights and democracy must also be part of the post-2015 sustainable development goals. To make any sense at all, these goals must focus on people and their well-being. The new set of goals, targets and indicators need to be firmly anchored in the existing international human rights framework and be made the direct aim of public policy.

Shortcomings in attaining the Millennium Development Goals can in large measure be ascribed to a lack of representation, participation, transparency, effective decision-making and oversight. Taken together, these values strike at the core of what is commonly referred to as “democratic governance”, the marriage of democratic principles with sound and effective decision-making and implementation. We therefore also argue that the new development framework should contain a stand-alone goal on “democratic governance”.

Mr. President,

This week the IPU will present the latest statistics on women in parliaments. I can already tell you that we will be the bearers of some good news. In 2013, the percentage of women in parliament rose by one-and-a-half per cent world-wide. That is double the rate of increase of previous years. Even though the percentage of parliamentary seats occupied by women remains below a dismal 22 per cent, if we continue to increase the number by last year’s rate we stand a chance of reaching parity within a generation.

That will represent a hugely important advancement. Women’s equal participation in public and political life is of course the realization of a right. But it is also a means for countries to build more inclusive and egalitarian societies better able to uphold the rights of everyone.

Mr. President,

The World Conference on Indigenous Peoples will take place in September this year. The IPU holds that parliaments have a pivotal role to play in the realization of the rights of indigenous peoples. In April, the IPU and the Parliament of Bolivia will hold an international parliamentary conference that will help design a parliamentary contribution to the World Conference.

The meeting will offer parliamentarians an opportunity to exchange lessons learned on their role in the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. They will build on the work they carried out four years ago when they adopted the Chiapas Declaration on the effective participation of indigenous peoples in politics, which the IPU and the Congress of Mexico spearheaded. They will pay particular attention to progress made in several countries to ensure respect for the principle of free, prior and informed consent.

Mr. President,

I would like to conclude on an optimistic note. Looking back over the last 25 years since the end of the Cold War we have witnessed a renewed commitment to parliaments and their central role in democracy. Never before in human history have so many countries included a parliament in their system of governance as today nor have so many parliaments been the outcome of open political competition through free and fair elections.

I would like to suggest that we build on this achievement. We need to provide support to these institutions, many of which are still very young, and we should integrate them better in the global system for the promotion and protection of human rights.

Thank you.