



INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

CHEMIN DU POMMIER 5
1218 LE GRAND-SACONNEX / GENEVA (SWITZERLAND)

TELEPHONE + 41 22 - 919 41 50 - FAX + 41 22 - 919 41 60 - E-MAIL postbox@mail.ipu.org

SPEECH BY MR. ANDERS B. JOHANSSON, SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

United Nations Human Rights Council High-Level Debate
Geneva, 28 February 2013

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

We live in times of enormous challenges and extraordinary opportunities. We are witnessing violations of human rights and disregard for basic human decency in Syria and many other places on a scale that shocks the world. There is something fundamentally wrong when such gross violations are allowed to continue day in day out, with no end in sight.

Why is it then that we are so unable to put an end to them? Maybe, at least in part, it is because leaders everywhere are still locked in the logic of the past where might is right. As an international community we are still very far from assimilating the imperatives of democracy.

At the same time, the mass popular movements that we have seen in the Arab world and elsewhere these last two years should give us reason to hope. They demonstrate that people are no longer prepared to stand by and look on helplessly when their rights are ignored. They want greater freedom and social justice, more transparency and accountability. In short, they are clamouring for democracy.

Democracy is itself both an aspiration and a means to achieve it; a goal and a form of government. It strives to deliver equity, social justice and sustainable development. In its essence, it is inclusive. It is founded on the right of all to take part in the management of public affairs.

Democracy advances equality between men and women and helps enhance women's participation in political life. It is inseparable from the rule of law and respect for human rights. It is built on checks and balances and ensures transparency and accountability.

Democracy does not necessarily mean an absence of conflict. On the contrary, democracy implies acceptance of and respect for those who hold differing views. What it does mean, however, is that divergences in society are solved through dialogue and peaceful means; not by taking up arms to combat those who hold views different from our own.

Mr. President,

Your Council has long been concerned with the inter-relationship between human rights, the rule of law and development. The IPU advocates that basic human rights principles such as participation, accountability and equality are essential to development and must underpin any future development framework.

As the international community is now turning its attention to the post-2015 development framework, let us remember that it is one thing to come up with a plan and quite another to actually effect change. Any new framework must necessarily involve paying attention to the institutional framework that is required to deliver the goals.

Today's shortcomings in sustainable development 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.

For all of these reasons, the IPU proposes that the new development framework should contain a goal directly related to "democratic governance." It should be a comprehensive goal that includes, but is not limited to, the capacities and functions of parliaments.

It should be a universal goal to be applied to both developed and developing countries. It should be accompanied by a set of targets as well as qualitative and quantitative indicators to help track progress. Elements of democratic governance should also be integrated in all the other goals of the new development framework.

The targets of a "democratic governance" goal could be formulated in functional, rather than institutional, terms. Such an approach could draw inspiration from the central features of human rights and democratic governance that I have just referred to, namely participation, transparency, accountability and the rule of law. These targets would not focus on parliament alone, but would cut across other constituent elements of governance.

The IPU is well placed to propose indicators to track how parliaments improve democratic governance. With the support of many parliaments we have already established global criteria for democratic parliaments. We have published a tool kit for parliaments to evaluate their own performance against these criteria and we are today in the process of developing more precise indicators for democratic parliaments.

Mr. President,

Parliaments everywhere are made up of men and women who have received a mandate to represent the people. On their behalf, members of parliament adopt legislation and hold the government to account. To fulfil that mandate they must be responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people.

The more a parliament is representative of society in all its diversity, the more it is transparent, accessible and accountable to the people, the better it is able to fulfil its democratic mandate. The Inter-Parliamentary Union takes this to heart. This is our core mission.

We translate our convictions into action. We help develop standards for democratic parliaments and provide them with practical support, particularly parliaments in countries emerging from conflict or in transition to democracy.

We are pioneers when it comes to women's participation in politics, tracking and facilitating their progress. For the first time in history there are on average now just over twenty per cent women in Parliament. While this represents some gains, it is nonetheless an appalling state of affairs. Our societies are far from being egalitarian and women continue to face discrimination.

Which is why we also provide practical support to facilitate women's access to parliament and to render the institution of parliament more sensitive to gender equality issues.

The IPU also provides support to parliaments in the area of human rights. Our approach is based on two ideas. First, there has to be respect for the human rights of parliamentarians without which they cannot effectively defend the rights of those whom they represent. Second, parliamentarians can do a lot to help ensure respect for States' human rights obligations.

Our efforts to protect parliamentarians and their parliamentary mandate is spearheaded by the IPU Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians. Its work shows that in many parts of the world it is not without risk for members of parliament to speak out. The most serious violations which the Committee deals with are the murder, torture, death threats and attempts on the lives of parliamentarians. The Committee is also increasingly called on to ensure respect for fair trial in criminal proceedings against MPs which appear to be politically motivated. The Committee has an impressive track-record and has often been able to help bring about a satisfactory settlement. Indeed, irrespective of the type of violation, parliamentarians, or their representatives, increasingly turn to the Committee because they know that it can help provide protection or redress.

As I mentioned just now, the second idea which underpins our work in the area of human rights is that Parliaments can do a lot to help ensure respect for States' human rights obligations. You have already recognized this on many occasions. Last year, UN Member States adopted by consensus a landmark resolution on interaction between the United Nations, national parliaments and the IPU.

In this resolution, you encourage our institution to "provide a parliamentary contribution to the United Nations human rights treaty body system and to the Human Rights Council, along the lines of the cooperation developed in recent years between the IPU, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and national parliaments whose countries are under review."

As many of you know, the intention is to strengthen implementation mechanisms for the Universal Periodic Review of the fulfilment of human rights obligations and commitments of Member States.

For many years, the IPU has been assisting parliaments so that they can assume a more active role in ensuring implementation of the CEDAW Convention. The periodic reporting exercise provides a unique opportunity for parliaments to provide input to the report, follow the work of the CEDAW Committee when it considers the national report, and bring the recommendations of the Committee to parliament for debate and action.

What we have in mind is a similar exercise for the UPR. That is why several of you, with countries like Romania and Ecuador taking the lead, are circulating a proposal to hold a panel discussion on this subject at your next session in Geneva. The IPU fully supports this proposal and we stand ready to contribute financially to its realization. We hope that you too can unite behind it.

Thank you.