



Governing Council
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REPORTS ON RECENT IPU SPECIALIZED CONFERENCES AND MEETINGS

(f) PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE ON DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

The Conference was jointly organized in Gaborone (Botswana) by the IPU and the Parliament of Botswana from 14-16 September 2009 as part of events to mark the second International Day of Democracy. It was designed to promote awareness of the fundamental principles of democracy and the major issues facing the democracy community and to strengthen parliaments' engagement with the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance.

Twenty-seven African parliaments attended the conference. The conference was opened by the President of the Republic of Botswana, H.E. Lt. Gen. Seretse Khama Ian Khama, who stated that there is a growing lack of political tolerance in Africa which undermines the different institutions of the State. The keynote address from Ms. Graça Machel contained a strong call to 'change the way politics work today'. Noting that Africa is the only continent in the world where the social indicators are going backwards, she underlined that Africans today have wholly unacceptable levels of poverty. Ms. Machel then called on parliamentarians to do away with the notion of "us" the elected and "them" the people. She noted that today's parliaments are essentially urban, middle aged and male, whereas the poorer rural community and young people are not sitting in parliament. Money, or rather the absence of money, is part of the problem. In addition, gender equality is not a reality for most people, and often it is not even accepted in society as a right.

The ensuing debate about the state of democracy in Africa was passionate, insightful and often very frank. Delegates expressed particular concern at the development of power-sharing agreements, with a lively exchange of views taking place on the situation in Zimbabwe and what African parliamentarians can do to exert pressure for greater stability and democracy in this troubled country. It was recognized that power-sharing arrangements may be good to restore peace and stability in the short term, however they should not be seen as a means of subverting the will of the people as expressed during elections.

The mood of the meeting was captured in the Gaborone Declaration ([see Annex](#)), unanimously adopted by participants at the end of the conference. The Declaration deplores the re-emergence of one-man/strongman rule on the continent, and resolves to work for the ratification and entry into force of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. It stresses the need for both governing and opposition parties to be provided with fair opportunities to make a meaningful contribution to the political debate and commits participants to making sure that rules and procedures are in place so that parliamentarians can always speak freely on behalf of their constituents without fear of harassment or punishment.

In a statement delivered on 15 September, the International Day of Democracy, IPU President Dr. Theo-Ben Gurirab underlined that there is huge popular aspiration across the world for more democracy, but that many people are not convinced by the way democracy is working in practice. Referring to the results of a worldwide study of public opinion commissioned by IPU, he affirmed that "the world's citizens want more political tolerance". Eighty-six per cent of the respondents to the study consider that it is important that people should be able to express their political views, even when those views are unpopular, but only 24% consider that they are completely free to do so. Dr. Gurirab therefore urged all parliaments "to act decisively to increase political tolerance".



International Day of Democracy

Parliamentary Conference on Democracy in Africa organized jointly
by the
Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the Parliament of Botswana
Gaborone, Botswana, 14 – 16 September 2009



GABORONE DECLARATION

We, participants in the Parliamentary Conference on Democracy in Africa on the second International Day of Democracy, have reviewed the challenges to democracy worldwide and in Africa in particular. We have taken note of the global opinion poll commissioned by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) on public attitudes to democracy, which found that while there is widespread support for democracy, citizens around the world have deep misgivings about the way political life functions in their own countries.

We restate our commitment to upholding the fundamental principles of democracy. In particular, we affirm once again that democracy is a universally recognised ideal based on common values shared by peoples throughout the world irrespective of cultural, political, social and economic differences. Democracy presupposes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. We especially reaffirm the continuing validity of the Universal Declaration on Democracy adopted by the IPU in Cairo in September 1997.

Democracy has made considerable progress worldwide. Yet, serious challenges continue to face democracy. In many parts of the world, Africa included, democracy is threatened by lack of respect for human rights, intolerance, unconstitutional changes of government, notably through coups d'Etat, the deployment of unconstitutional means to stay in power indefinitely, the re-emergence of one-man/strongman rule, and the distance separating the governors and the governed. We have witnessed the emergence of a clique of self-serving political elite whose sole objective is to obtain personal gain rather than serving the people. In many countries, women continue to be excluded from political and influential decision-making processes.

Other challenges to democracy include the poor conduct of elections and the increasing trend for both governing and opposition parties to refuse the outcome of these elections. We reaffirm that free and fair elections in which all those eligible can participate in a spirit of open competition are crucial to the development of democracy. The role and status of national electoral commissions should be critically reconsidered with a view to enabling them to perform their functions in an independent and impartial fashion. We also urge the relevant authorities to consider establishing regional electoral commission that would ensure the pooling of resources across countries.

We deplore the tendency by some countries to impose democracy on other countries by force.

In recent years, we have witnessed the establishment of post-election power-sharing arrangements. We recognise that such arrangements may be necessary for restoring peace to fragile post-election communities. We nevertheless stress that they should not be used to subvert or circumvent the sovereign will of the people and that where they are put in place, they should be for a short period of time

We have discussed the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance which can help to strengthen democracy, the rule of law and human rights on the African continent. The majority of our States are parties to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights and hence have subscribed to the ideals underpinning both Charters. We deplore the fact that since its adoption by the African Union on 30 January 2007, the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance has not entered into force because it has not received the required minimum of 15 ratifications. We therefore resolve to work within our parliaments to ensure, as soon as possible, ratification and entry into force of this important instrument. We will also take steps to popularise and domesticate the Charter, while reflecting on how to improve upon it in the future. We affirm that parliaments should be closely associated with this process.

We reaffirm the centrality of parliaments to democracy. We believe that parliament is a preeminent forum for mediating the conflicting interests of society and promoting dialogue and reconciliation. Yet, we are preoccupied by the erosion of parliament's authority and public image as a result of its perceived inability to deliver effectively to the people. We have therefore looked at ways and means of improving the functioning of democracy. We pledge to help our parliaments and members of parliament to entrench a culture of service to the people. Loyalty to the people and the constitution rather than to individuals will help parliaments improve upon their image and public trust. Loyalty to the people also dictates that we as parliamentarians seek always to interact with them with a view to articulating effectively their interests and working towards the improvement of their welfare through more responsible socio-economic governance.

We resolve to work tirelessly to make parliaments in Africa more democratic. We are determined to ensure that our parliaments are evermore representative, transparent, accessible, accountable, and effective at both the national and international levels. Representative parliaments require that all components of society in its diversity - men and women, youth, ethnic, cultural and religious groups - are represented equitably and that their representatives are able to participate effectively in the work of parliament. Parliaments should be more assertive in exercising their constitutional right to hold the executive accountable with a view to greater efficiency in the management of resources.

We express the firm determination to work towards an environment that enables the expression of all shades of opinion in political life. We stress the need for both governing and opposition parties to be provided with fair opportunities (including public funding, access to information, representation in the various organs of parliament) to make a meaningful contribution to the political debate and to put into practice the checks and balances inherent in any truly democratic and accountable system of government. We confirm the validity of the IPU Guidelines on the Rights and Duties of the Opposition in Parliament adopted in Libreville in 1999.

We have learnt of very interesting examples of the successful blending of traditional and modern forms and structures of governance that allows for more inclusive and participatory democracy. We encourage such policies as they enrich the democracy debate, bring government closer to the belief and involve the people more in the management of public affairs and result in outcomes that are more consonant with the welfare of the people.

We have seen that political intolerance undermines the capacity of governing institutions to perform effectively. We are determined to foster political tolerance among citizens and political leaders through more education, improved communication, and most importantly, upholding the highest standards of ethics in public life.

We resolve to ensure that everyone, including members of parliament can enjoy freedom of expression. It is essential that parliamentarians should be able to express themselves freely in order to articulate the interests of the people without hindrance or fear of victimisation. We are therefore committed to putting in place guarantees for the respect for the rights of the political opposition. The opposition should never be demonized or characterized as an enemy. Similarly, the opposition should refrain from demonising ruling parties.

Similarly, we will make sure that rules and procedures are in place so that parliamentarians can always speak freely on behalf of their constituents, in the national interest and according to their conscience, without fear of harassment or punishment, such as the loss of the parliamentary mandate. We have seen that tolerance within political parties, characterised by free debate and consensual decision-making allows for strong parties and minimises indiscipline that is detrimental to stability. We therefore encourage political parties to enhance internal democracy so that all members can participate in internal party debate and influence policy choices in an atmosphere of mutual accommodation.

We have noted and hereby encourage the important role played by regional parliamentary assemblies in evolving standards, resolving political crises and promoting democracy in Africa. We also encourage regional institutions to establish mechanisms that would compel the participants in elections to accept the results thereof failure of which should be sanctioned.

We resolve to convey this Declaration to our parliaments and to urge them to do everything within their powers to ensure that it is followed up in an effective manner. We urge the IPU to bring the Declaration to the attention of all African Parliaments and to encourage them to take steps towards its implementation.

We invite the IPU to forward the Declaration to the African Union and to request that joint efforts be made with a view to the entry into force, as soon as possible, of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. We further request that the IPU and the African Union devise a joint strategy for monitoring the implementation of the Charter.

We express our deep gratitude to the Government and Parliament of Botswana for hosting this Conference.

The Gaborone Declaration was adopted unanimously by participants in the Parliamentary Conference on Democracy in Africa on 16 September 2009.