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Reports on recent IPU specialized meetings

(d) EVENT TO COMMEMORATE THE 125th ANNIVERSARY OF THE IPU
(Geneva, 30 June 2014)

Driving democratic change – IPU at 125 and beyond

Introduction

On 30 June 1889, a group of parliamentarians from several countries met in Paris and created what is now known as the Inter-parliamentary Union. To mark the 125th anniversary of the IPU, in the afternoon of 30 June 2014 an event was held, hosted by the United Nations Office at Geneva and moderated by Mr. Owen Bennett-Jones, BBC World Service, bringing together the diplomatic, parliamentary, civil society and media communities to chart and spotlight some of the many achievements made over the past 125 years, and to discuss contemporary challenges to democracy. During the event, a series of three panel discussions was held, and personal testimonies on the work of the IPU were heard from four individuals whose lives had been directly impacted by the work of the Organization.

Welcome addresses

The event was opened by Mr. Abdelwahad Radi, President of the IPU, who welcomed all participants and panellists. Recalling the IPU's rich history, he said that the Organization owed its existence to two visionaries, William Randal Cremer and Frédéric Passy, who had envisioned a world where peace and stability reigned, and where differences could be resolved through dialogue and negotiation. 125 years later, that vision still held true, yet as conflicts raged on around the world and history repeated itself, it could seem that there was no end to human folly. While democracy was by no means a perfect system of governance, it was the best devised to date, and must be strengthened by building the capacity of people's representatives, protecting human rights, and promoting gender equality. The only way to address the challenges of our time and meet international commitments was through the active engagement of parliaments and parliamentarians worldwide.

Mr. Michael Møller, Acting Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, welcomed participants to the Palais des Nations, and to the Human Rights and Alliance of Civilizations Room, a particularly appropriate venue to mark the 125th anniversary of the IPU, symbolizing the collective commitment to promote the fundamental rights of every individual and engage in dialogue to resolve common challenges. The United Nations and the IPU were united in their commitment to the empowerment of individuals and communities to shape the future they wanted, where all could fulfil their potential in peace, freedom and dignity, and where societies could thrive. That partnership was even more important at a time when people had lost confidence in institutions and their ability to deliver, when rapid progress was being made, yet peace and development eluded so many, and when transitions in some parts of the world had disappointed expectations for a better future. Empowered and informed constituents were the bedrock of sound democracies. Education and access to information were therefore crucial, and the media thus had an important role to play. Looking ahead, cooperation must be strengthened to promote peace, rights and well-being for all; people the world over looked to the United Nations and their national parliaments to build peace, advance development, uphold the rule of law and confront abuse wherever it took place. Democracy must deliver at all levels.

Democracy: Changing lives, making a difference

**Panellists: Mr. Pier Ferdinando Casini (Italy), Mr. Kenneth Marende (Kenya),
Ms. Dionysia Avgerinopoulou (Greece)**

Opening the discussion, Mr. Casini, Honorary President of the IPU, underscored that while parliamentary culture was transferrable between countries, models of democracy were not. Respect for the traditions, history and culture of other countries was imperative. Like elsewhere in Europe, there had been a crisis of democracy in Italy, with the emergence of strong populist movements that wanted to change the roots of democratic systems. The importance of dialogue and upholding democratic principles was therefore more important than ever before. Parliaments must be at the centre of democracy, functioning through honesty, commitment and dialogue.

Mr. Marende explained that following the disputed outcome of the presidential elections in Kenya in 2007, post-election violence had led Kenya to the brink of civil war. With invaluable support from the international community, in particular the IPU, reconciliation efforts had been successful and a coalition government had been formed. Those events had shown that peace could not be taken for granted – daily efforts must be made to nurture it.

Turning to the Greek experience, Ms. Avgerinopoulou said that politics was everywhere, including in people's homes and on the street. At the height of the financial crisis, some politicians had used unfounded promises of prosperity to win votes. When those promises had not been kept, and an agreement with the International Monetary Fund had been entered into that had resulted in hard times for the whole population, street politics had arisen. Protests had eventually given rise to new elections and a new government, resulting in growing financial stability.

While he agreed that politicians tended to over-promise and fail to deliver, Mr. Casini said that was not purely a problem of politics, but one of human nature in general. Ms. Avgerinopoulou said that general distrust in politics and politicians meant that other vehicles, such as civil society and business, were used to effect change. Young people were often disillusioned with politics, and politicians must therefore engage with them to encourage greater trust. Mr. Marende said that although promises might be broken, a government working to ensure good, accountable, transparent, democratic governance would have delivered to some extent. Mr. Traoré (Burkina Faso) added that democracy was fragile: while States could function without a parliament, democracy could not. If a State did not have mastery of its own territory, democracy through public participation in politics could not be upheld. African parliaments were experienced in dialogue and seeking consensus, and their experiences should be shared in Europe and further afield.

Regarding whether the continuous search for consensus resulted in weakened government, Mr. Marende and Ms. Avgerinopoulou agreed that while the compromise often required to arrive at a consensus could be considered to result in weakened agreements; that was the nature of broad participation in decision-making, and was often the most harmonious outcome. It might also be the closest solution to meeting the needs of the electorate. The price of compromise was therefore worth paying. Mr. Casini added that, by its very nature, democracy required a search for consensus. Unfortunately, decisions taken for the greater good of the people which had painful results often led to a loss of popularity for the decision-makers. Politicians therefore often lacked the courage to make difficult decisions. The tendency in Europe to blame European governance, rather than national governance, for tough decisions, was short-sighted.

Mr. A. Burt (United Kingdom) pointed out the contrast between the humble origins of the IPU's founding fathers and the Organization's great work around the world over the past 125 years. He acknowledged the outstanding commitment of Secretary General Johnsson, and expressed support for Secretary General-elect Chungong. He commended the IPU's relationship with the United Nations and underscored parliamentarians' independence from governments. In too many States, public criticism was considered treachery and punished, whereas opposition should be cherished as a vital part of good governance. Parliamentarians of the world must unite to proclaim universal democracy as a fundamental human right, so as not to fall victim to those who would subvert belief to win power and control over others. People had an inalienable right to consent to the governance of their country freely and without fear, wherever they were in the world.

Breaking the gender inequalities: women's political emancipation

**Panellists: Ms. Margaret Mensah-Williams (Namibia),
Ms. Fawzia Koofi (Afghanistan), Ms. Elissa Golberg (Canada)**

Although women's participation in politics, and in particular their representation in parliament, was increasing, progress was slow. Ms. Mensah-Williams explained that while women represented half the world's population, they did not hold half the world's power. People in positions of power liked to keep that power, but if equal opportunities were to be afforded to women, those people would need to make way. Achieving equality could therefore be seen as a power struggle.

Ms. Koofi said that women's political participation in Afghanistan faced many challenges: social barriers, male dominance and conflict. Historically, women were agents of peace. While some women had been freely elected in Afghanistan, the introduction of a quota system had been essential to boost women's inclusion. That system had given women a chance to prove themselves in politics. While it was hoped their participation would contribute to changes in public attitude towards them, it would not happen overnight. Ms. Golberg agreed that a change in attitude was needed, but emphasized that it was not simply a case of needing to see equal numbers in parliament. Fundamental issues of power structure and political dynamics must be addressed. Men and boys must be engaged in those efforts. Girls must be empowered through education, in order to bring change in the future.

When asked whether the quota system led to biased representation, Ms. Mensah-Williams said that while quotas were needed in some instances, in others, where the leadership was in favour of gender equality and political will was present, they were not. Ms. Kadaga (Uganda) pointed out that women were underrepresented in parliament in many States parties to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. States parties must to their utmost to uphold their commitments under the Convention. Ms. Golberg underscored the importance of not simply setting quotas, but rather of setting the conditions for women to thrive in parliament. On the question of whether quotas should also be set for other groups, she said that minority representation quotas could be considered appropriate in some contexts.

Asked whether women had a different approach to men in politics, Ms. Golberg said while women's approach differed with regard to means of reaching consensus, women were not necessarily inherently more peaceful. Ms. Mensah-Williams said the way women had debated and changed laws had made a difference in Namibia, particularly with regard to legislation on rape. Ms. Koofi believed that women were more likely to resolve disagreements through dialogue. Ms. Parvez (Pakistan) agreed, and said that women had been granted opportunities in politics thanks to the unerring efforts of the IPU. Ms. G. Tjoues (Cameroon) added that women, as wives and mothers, tended to be opposed to war. In fact, no war in history was ever started or led by women. Men must not prevent women from moving forward in politics.

Turning to the issue of violence against women in parliament, several participants agreed that women often faced abusive heckling, personal criticism regarding their looks and their clothing, discrimination and derogatory comments about their gender and sexuality, and intrusions into their private lives. Ms. Koofi said that in some cases, men wanted to silence the women's political movement and used discrimination as a means of doing so. Ms. S. Moulenyi-Mouélé (Gabon) added that many young women became disheartened by that treatment and gave up their political careers as a result. Ms. Mensah-Williams said that the IPU was conducting studies into discriminatory heckling of women parliamentarians. Mr. A Burt (United Kingdom) said that although women remained underrepresented in his parliament, discussions on quotas had been inconclusive. Women in parliament must be able to stand up to the same level of heckling and fierce debate as their male counterparts, but must not be subjected to harassment. Ms. Golberg emphasized that women were capable of participating actively in parliamentary debate, but were, in some parts of the world, subject to systematic violence. Ms. Mensah-Williams added that aggressive debate was a perfectly acceptable element of parliamentary life, provided it remained carefully restricted to the subject under discussion. Ms. Koofi agreed and said that in some cases male colleagues could be prone to using debate as a shield for abuse.

Will democracy survive the media?

**Panellists: Ulrik Haagerup (Danish Broadcasting Corporation) and
Mr. Jimi Matthews (SABC TV, South Africa)**

Mr. Haagerup said that journalists and politicians entered their respective professions with the desire to improve the lot of the people, yet often they were not considered to be working for the good of society. Democracy and a free and independent media were inextricably linked. Public trust was lacking in journalists and politicians alike. Journalism had tended to focus on putting negative images in the minds of the public, but that was not the full picture. The media had the capacity to choose from which angle the public viewed certain situations. He gave the example of an NGO in Denmark which, unable to get positive information about certain situations covered in the news, had resorted to placing advertisements on milk bottles to broadcast its message. Negative media coverage increased public insecurity and people were tiring of such negativity. While a truly free media must be able to publish critical stories, those stories should be balanced. The media tended to portray politicians as fighting against each other. Politicians were projected as corrupt, while interest groups were shown as victims. In some cases that picture was true; in others it was not. A balance must be struck. In a democracy, the people elected their leaders. In order to remain in politics, those leaders must be re-elected and therefore tended to use the media to highlight drama and negativity to their own advantage, playing to a situation in which the media had more influence on the public than politics itself. That approach was detrimental to democracy: media democracies produced populists, not leaders. A media that thrived on perpetuating mistrust had given rise to a generation that did not want to enter into politics. That was the greatest threat to democracy. Media must therefore accept its responsibility with regard to building the future to the benefit of society, and give the public the whole, balanced picture. The Danish Broadcasting Corporation had therefore made efforts to supplement its news schedule with constructive news, seeking solutions to shape a better future. That approach had proven to increase public trust.

Mr. Matthews said that democracy in South Africa had come at a high price that had often placed journalists in an unenviable position. The transition to democracy had not been easy. The President of the Republic had appealed to the media to play a more positive role in the promotion of national unity and social cohesion. Others had called on the media to go beyond reporting on crime and disasters and to celebrate success and tell stories of African progress. The right to freedom of expression came with associated responsibilities: good journalism must prioritize information that was in the public interest, thus sharing the objective of democracy to serve society. Journalism could both reflect and construct a democracy. In the modern world of social media, journalism and democracy were both at the mercy of, and catalysed by, the Internet. There was no doubt that democracy could survive the media, provided that democracy was genuine. While politicians drove society through their ideas and decisions, those with access to social media had useful tools to discuss those ideas and decisions, thus holding the powerful to account. On the question of whether the media had played a role in the peaceful transition to democracy in South Africa, he said that it had enabled continuous debate and discussion, which had been key to the transition. Efforts were being made to improve access to information for rural and remote populations, and to ensure that they were also included in public discussions and that their voices were heard.

In the ensuing discussion, Mr. A Burt (United Kingdom) underscored the importance of differentiating between objective journalism and propaganda. While many emerging democracies had a multiplicity of media, those media were often polarized on either side of political argument. Ms Koofi (Afghanistan) added that the media had a role to play in shaping public opinion and creating accountability. Coming from a society where people were ready to kill themselves and others to promote their values, she was particularly interested in how the media could be used to promote democracy and freedom. Ms. V. Petrenko (Russian Federation) agreed that the media must be objective and free. She paid tribute to a Russian journalist recently killed, unarmed, while reporting from a conflict zone.

Mr. Haagerup said that when journalism gave a distorted picture it either became untrustworthy and irrelevant, or became propaganda. Balanced reporting was therefore essential to re-establish the media as an authority that could be trusted and that was not seeking to influence or manipulate.

Personal testimonials

The event was punctuated by personal testimonials by four individuals whose lives had been directly impacted by the work of the IPU. Mr. Mohamed Nasheed (Maldives) said that in 2000, he had been unlawfully removed from his parliamentary seat. Although the IPU had not been able to have him reinstated, it had made considerable efforts to assist him in the protection of his rights as a parliamentarian. It was largely thanks to the IPU that parliamentary rights were enjoyed at all in the Maldives, although those rights remained under threat in the context of dictatorship. Mr. Iván Cepeda (Colombia), thanked the IPU for the fundamental role it had played in the pursuit of justice in the case of the assassination of his father, Senator Manuel Cepeda, and in the protection of his own security in the face of persecution and when forced into exile. Ms. Tsedal Yohannes (Eritrea) expressed her gratitude to the IPU for its efforts to put pressure on the Eritrean authorities to reveal the whereabouts of 11 political prisoners, including her sister, and grant their release. Her family and the families of the other prisoners were distraught, and could only hope that the IPU's continuous efforts would ensure that the prisoners were not forgotten. Mr. Kassoum Tapo (Mali) explained that, in his position as Deputy Speaker of the Parliament of Mali, he had been arrested by military coup leaders. The attention drawn to his case by the IPU Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians, of which he had also been a member, had resulted in securing his release, along with that of several other political prisoners.

Closure

As well as marking the 125th anniversary of the founding of the IPU, the day was particularly significant as it saw the end of the mandate of Anders B. Johnsson, seventh Secretary General of the IPU. Numerous delegations took the floor to express their gratitude for his dedication and commitment to the Organization over his 16 years of office, in particular his role as a champion of gender equality and women's participation in politics. He had led the Organization through challenging times and his leadership and guidance had been invaluable. They expressed support to the Secretary General-elect, Mr. Martin Chungong, whose mandate would begin the following day. He would doubtless perpetuate Mr. Johnsson's legacy, demonstrating loyalty and dedication to the Organization and its values.

Mr. Anders B. Johnsson, Secretary General of the IPU, thanked those present for their expressions of support, and said that he had chosen to join the IPU in 1991 because it was an organization of politicians who had an innate understanding of the lives, needs and desires of the people. It was an organization that was not afraid to use the word "democracy". Parliament was at the heart of democracy, and peaceful lives could not be built without it. He felt privileged to have been part of the work of the Organization. Although politicians often had a bad reputation, he could say with confidence that he had met and worked with many good people doing their utmost to build a safer world. Gender equality remained one of the most fundamental issues that the international community must address, and which was central to the modernization of institutions. The future was built on the decisions of today, and the IPU and national parliaments must therefore strive to ensure that they were equipped to deal with modern challenges.

Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General-elect, said that 125 years after the IPU's inception, its founding principles and values lived on. Democracy existed in order to have a positive impact on people's lives, as the bedrock of human rights, gender equality, peace-building and development. The event had shown that while democracy was real and vibrant, it remained under threat when left undefended. Democracy would therefore always be a work in progress. The IPU and the world's parliaments faced many challenges, particularly with regard to achieving gender equality and youth participation, protecting human rights and in particular defending the rights of parliamentarians themselves, as the representatives of society. Greater efforts were needed to respond to challenges that threatened development, peace-building and dialogue, and to dispel the distrust in politicians. An improved relationship with the media could play a key role in that regard, to the benefit of all. Mr. Chungong reiterated the IPU's commitment to working together with the United Nations and to achieve synergy between the two organizations in operations all over the world. He stood ready to lead the IPU into a new era.