



INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION (IPU)

UNION INTERPARLEMENTAIRE (UIP)

**INAUGURAL CEREMONY  
SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION  
DR. THEO-BEN GURIRAB**

Your Excellency President Martinelli,  
Mr. Speaker of the National Assembly,  
Mr. President of the United Nations General Assembly,  
Mr. Secretary General of the IPU,  
Fellow Parliamentarians,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the Government and the people of Panama, represented here by President Ricardo Martinelli, for the warm welcome they have given us. Let me also say a special word of gratitude to the Speaker of the National Assembly, Mr. José Muñoz Molina, for inviting the Inter-Parliamentary Union to meet for its 124th Assembly here in Panama City. I would also like to welcome President Deiss, with whom I exchanged ideas about this Assembly even before he assumed his office at the United Nations.

Panama is a land that has fought hard for the right to exercise full dominion over its strikingly beautiful territory. It is the land where the oceans have been joined together through a momentous enterprise, forged with the labour of people from the Caribbean, from North and South America and from Asia. Many gave their lives to see the completion of the Panama Canal. They carved their history into the face of the earth.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The theme we have chosen for this Assembly is *Parliamentary Accountability: living up to citizens' expectations*. We selected this topic with our hosts in the latter part of last year, and since then events in the world suggest that it was an appropriate choice. As you know, the first months of 2011 were marked by sustained public outbursts in a number of countries. Those demonstrations continue to this day. In more than one country, what began as spontaneous expressions of fervour have become bitter armed conflicts.

Earlier this year, as a guest of my Arab colleagues in Doha, I stated clearly that the demonstrations were telling us that the people were not satisfied. These surges of unrest, which carry tremendous impetus for change, spring from circumstances with which many of us are familiar. Populations are growing at a vertiginous rate. In the case of Egypt, the figure has doubled in 30 years. The populations are also young. In country after country that has been in the news these days the average age is well below thirty - generally less than half the age of those who govern them. Add to this a dire lack of the opportunities that young people need so badly, and you have a potent recipe for conflict. People want more transparency, wider freedom and greater social justice. People want fair play, jobs and the benefits of

development. People want more opportunities and better service delivery. In a nutshell, they want more democracy, not less.

However, before weighing in with lessons or conclusions about what this means for democracy, I think we should exercise foresight.

One feature of today's revolutions is the part played by the electronic media. The Internet is now hailed as a powerful tool of political emancipation. For so many young people around the world, freedom is just a tweet, a blog or a text away. There is certainly no doubt that without the use of mobile phones and internet technologies, the organising power of those who orchestrated all of these energies would have been less impressive.

But, if I can offer a suggestion from the perspective of the older generation, take care. Make sure that the tools of political emancipation are not also the tools of enslavement. Because, ultimately they can be both. The plethora of blog commentary, in which every voice is as valid as the next one, can also serve to distract from real news produced by professional journalists. The social media, containing a rich store of freely disclosed personal information, can also be used to repress. Dictators can tweet as well.

I am told that a baby girl, born when the images of Tahrir Square were continuously on our TV screens, was named Facebook. Now, while I wish little Facebook a long and happy life, I would also tell her to take the blessings of her namesake with a hefty pinch of salt. Time alone will tell.

Democracy is a stubborn and unpredictable animal, and it needs a lot of nurturing and monitoring. There is nothing very exciting about respect for institutions, but - mark my words - it is unstinting respect for the institutions of democracy that will save the world from the daunting problems facing it. The path of institution-building is the one we must all take. There are no short cuts. We must all participate in the endeavour, examining our institutions in all honesty, accepting that however long they may have stood the test of time, all our parliaments, from time to time, let the people down. All parliaments provide less than an ideal level of scrutiny; all parliaments oversee the executive to a lesser degree than we would ideally want.

We can improve. We can do better.

That is why I have always believed in the IPU. Not because we host presidents and kings but because we are there, in our modest way, to defend institutions and the rule of law. We are there, step by careful step, to help make parliaments more representative, more transparent, more accessible, more accountable and more effective. That is why we seek parliaments that are more inclusive in their composition and manner of working, especially in relation to women and minority and marginal communities; parliaments that exercise more stringent oversight of the executive, including in the increasingly important field of multilateral dialogue. As the Secretary General's report that is before this Assembly attests, the IPU has been working tirelessly to put these ideals into effect.

At this Assembly, under the banner theme of parliamentary accountability, our standing Committees will be concluding its year-long discussion cycle on ways to prevent electoral violence and ensure transparency and accountability in the funding of political parties. Our women legislators, and men too, will be debating political violence against women and examining what it takes to make parliaments more sensitive to the different needs of women and men. In connection with what I was saying earlier, a special panel debate will look at past

political upheavals that bequeathed greater democracy, bringing out the experiences of countries such as the Philippines, Germany or Chile.

All of these themes are related. All are about our institution, the parliament. All are about endowing it with the capacity it needs to do its job. All are about democracy.

Fellow parliamentarians, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you all for coming here to Panama, and I wish us all an enriching and successful Assembly.

**Panama - 15 April 2011**