



Inter-Parliamentary Union

For democracy. For everyone.

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134th IPU Assembly

Opening of the General Debate

Representative from the IPU Forum of Young Parliamentarians

Mr. Vytautas Gapsys

Lusaka, 20 March 2016

Mr. Matibini, Speaker of the National Assembly of Zambia,

Ms. Mensah Williams, Bureau President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women MPs,

Mr. Ahmad Alhendawi, Representative of the UN Secretary General and his Envoy on Youth

Ms. Yvonne Chaka Chaka,

Ms. Annette King, Acting President of the Standing Committee on Democracy and Human Rights,

Distinguished guests,

Colleagues and friends,

It is my great pleasure to be speaking with you all today as we launch this debate on rejuvenating democracy, giving voice to youth. Thank you to Zambia and the IPU for this timely and important theme.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are faced with a paradox: our democratic institutions are increasingly developed. And, thanks to digital advances, there has never been more choice for voters about how to make their voices heard. Yet, despite this progress, public confidence in our democracies is weak. Young people in particular very often simply do not trust our institutions and, with half the world aged under 30, it is time to address this mistrust.

To do so, our democracies need self-correction. We are still functioning under systems that were designed for yesterday's world. We now live in a world where globalization has brought us all closer together, and where digital technologies have changed the way we communicate, identify ourselves, and understand our planet.

Technology is democratizing the world. Social media allows people's opinions to cross oceans in seconds. Users on Twitter determine which issues get the world's attention. Today, young people communicate online and they do it politically. As a nexus of political interaction, our parliaments must bridge the gap between the offline and online worlds, and so bring democracy closer to the people.

However, sometimes it feels like our parliaments are like a telegraph, when what we need is a smart phone.

In fact what we need is democracy 2.0.

Ladies and gentlemen,

For us, young parliamentarians, rejuvenating democracy is about harnessing young people's ideas and innovative know-how to bring the institutions of parliament into the digital era.

You all have a secret weapon in your countries that can help rejuvenating democracy. That weapon is a native of the modern digital world. That weapon understands this new era, thinks critically, has new ideas, innovative approaches, an open mind, and boundless energy. This weapon is peaceful and wants to help. It is ready and eager to participate fully in improving democracy, and in making it more open, accessible, accountable, transparent, and effective. I am here to speak on behalf of this weapon: the youth of the world. We stand ready to work with you to renew our institutions, so that they fulfil the needs and expectations of all the people.

Despite our willingness to contribute, there are still many obstacles blocking our path. Although young people are one fifth of the world's population, only 1.9% of the world's parliamentarians are under 30. That means that there are less than a thousand members of parliament speaking on behalf of 1.2 billion people.

For us, young parliamentarians, rejuvenating democracy means lifting the obstacles to youth participation in public life. Shutting out youth from democracy destroys their confidence in their governing institutions. This is a high price that can lead to larger dissatisfaction, disinterest, and even unrest. Youth are not apathetic; they simply are frustrated with a system that often does not open up to them and does not speak for them. Moreover, people of all ages are deprived of all the incredible qualities that young people can bring. It is as if we have struck gold, but have decided not to exploit it.

The IPU has been at the forefront of addressing this shortcoming:

- In 2010, we adopted a ground-breaking Resolution on *Youth participation in the democratic process*;
- In 2014, we created the IPU Forum of Young Parliamentarians to raise youth voices;
- Since 2014, we monitor the state of youth participation in parliaments across the world; and,
- In my view one of the most important achievements we made was to succeed in shifting the global debate on youth participation from "consultation" to "representation".
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The time has now come to go further.

We, young parliamentarians, prepared thoroughly for this Assembly's Debate and we recommend that:

- Measures, such as quotas, be adopted to enhance youth representation in parliament;
- The minimum age of eligibility to run for office be aligned with the voting age;
- Structures that mainstream youth perspectives such as parliamentary committees and networks of young parliamentarians be established in parliament;
- Political parties bring forward young people below 30, particularly women;
- Lastly, young people's knowledge and practice of politics needs to be strengthened. Providing young people with a microphone in public life is also about teaching them how to use it.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Rejuvenating our democracies by giving voice to youth is a necessity. As young people, we want to engage. We insist that our voices be heard. This Assembly, this Debate, provide an opportunity to make a difference and set a course towards a more democratic path for everyone. Young men and women are counting on us. Let's work together and not let them down.

Thank you.