



Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

135th IPU ASSEMBLY AND RELATED MEETINGS

Geneva, 23 – 27.10.2016

Opening address by the IPU President at the 135th IPU Assembly

Geneva, 24 October 2016

Honourable Speakers of Parliament,
Mr. Secretary General of the IPU
Mr. Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva,
Fellow members of parliament,
Members of the diplomatic corps,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my honour to address you here today as we open the 135th IPU Assembly. We meet at a time when exciting events and processes affecting, or likely to affect, all of us are taking place across the world. We have a new UN Secretary-General in the person of Mr. Antonio Guterres, a former MP and a strong ally of the IPU. There is a heated election campaign going on in the United States for the next US President, which will certainly have an impact on global policies. And the world is slowly coming to grips with Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.

Our excitement over these developments is equally matched by our concern at other disturbing events all around us: refugees continuing to make the perilous journey to Europe and other “promised” lands, conflicts brewing or spilling over in hot spots across the world and democracy coming increasingly under threat. We need only look at the tragedy unfolding in Aleppo and the wider context of the protracted conflict in Syria, the chaos reigning in Yemen where a funeral procession was recently attacked, resulting in the death of innocent mourners, the attempted coup in Turkey earlier this year, the quasi-paralysis of the Parliament in Venezuela ... sadly, there is no dearth of examples.

I would like to take a moment here to pay special tribute to the King of Thailand who recently passed away. He was a true leader, the father of the nation and of all Thais, a symbol of stability and continuity for the people of Thailand in their most troubled times. We are confident that his legacy will live on, and are encouraged by the reassurances we have received that the roadmap towards the return to constitutional order in the country will be pursued without further delay.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is at times like these that we are reminded of the purpose of the IPU. The IPU came into being in 1889 through a fervent desire for peace. It was established on the premise of averting or resolving conflict through political dialogue, so we can and do make a difference. At the IPU, we come together – MPs from the ruling and opposition parties – and work as one, putting aside our partisan differences and engaging in real political debate about issues that matter. As MPs we are unique in that we are not bound to be mere mouthpiece of the government. We can feel free to disagree with each other, but also to think out of the box and identify innovative solutions to the complex challenges

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that we face. This is where the IPU and its Assemblies bring value-added, through the parliamentary diplomacy that we practise like second nature every day. Let us move from words to action and make a real difference wherever we can. We should seize the opportunities of Assemblies like this one to dialogue, network and exchange. I understand that we have record participation at this Assembly – surely something strong and deep has drawn so many politicians here together.

My fellow members of parliament,

The theme of our General Debate at this session therefore could not be more apt: *Human rights abuses as precursors of conflict: Parliaments as early responders*. No country can boast an immaculate human rights record and aggravating factors such as marginalization, political exclusion, religious intolerance and poverty can inevitably lead to friction, not to mention all-out conflict and may create a fertile breeding ground for violent extremists and terrorists to push their own twisted agendas.

The theme of this session was not arbitrarily selected; you should know that it also coincides with the 40th anniversary of the IPU Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians. The work done by this Committee, a unique mechanism that works to defend the rights of individual members of parliament and to seek resolution or redress for them, is commendable. We will have other occasions to formally mark this special anniversary but you will all agree with me that this IPU body is doing extraordinary work and deserves our heartiest congratulations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Agenda of this Assembly is replete with issues of topical interest, including the SDGs, climate change, disarmament, accountability of the private security sector, allegations of sexual abuse by UN peacekeepers and vulture funds. So far, we have received proposals from Syria, Morocco, Mexico, Uganda, Venezuela, Germany, the GCC and Russia for inclusion of an emergency item on our agenda.

At this Assembly, we launch a ground-breaking report on sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliament. The facts and figures are actually quite shocking. The report shows clearly that a high percentage of women MPs have faced one form of sexism/harassment or another during their political career. This report ties in neatly with the resolution that the Standing Committee on Democracy and Human Rights is set to adopt at this session on the freedom of women to participate in political processes fully, safely and without interference. So there is still a lot of room for improvement and we are a far cry from really protecting and encouraging our female peers to enter politics given the many hurdles they have to overcome.

Fellow parliamentarians,

This Assembly will be marked by two special events: the adoption of a new IPU Strategy and the launch of our new multilingual website. As you know, we have consulted widely with you, our Members, as well as with our partners and external consultants, to prepare the current draft. What we have now is a realistic roadmap reflecting, I believe, our common understanding of the priority actions that the IPU will focus on for the next five years. It contains eight clear objectives setting out the IPU's core business and emerging areas of work. We are counting on your support to adopt this landmark document.

In a similar vein, as you know we have been working on a mammoth project to redevelop the IPU website. As our window to the world, we wanted to create a website that is modern, fresh and very user-friendly. Apart from English and French, we have also

sought to expand the audience to the Arabic- and Spanish-speaking communities. We are hoping in this way, to reach out more to our entire constituency. We will have the pleasure of launching the new site officially on Thursday in the Governing Council.

I would also like to draw your attention to a brand new Assembly App that has been devised in keeping with our Paper Smart Initiative at the IPU. I invite all of you to download it and to make use of this dynamic tool. I am sure you will want to continue to support our drive to promote a healthier and more sustainable planet. We can do so in a many small ways, including reducing our “hardcopy footprint”. So we will continue to curb the amount of paper consumed during our meetings.

The IPU is thus striving to keep up with the times and adapt to the changing imperatives of our world. We are going greener and becoming increasingly multilingual and tech-savvy. We count on your steadfast support to take our Organization to new heights.

I wish you very fruitful deliberations.

Thank you.

