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International Day of Democracy 15 September 2010

Clean politics: a contradiction in terms?

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Ask anybody what they think of their politicians nowadays and the answer will probably not be complimentary. Corrupt, ineffective, or - worse still - don't care. Few people will spontaneously claim to be well represented by their local MP in parliament. Society generally views politicians with distrust.

The United Nations has proclaimed 15 September as International Day of Democracy. This seems a good opportunity to look at the state of the democracies in our countries. And, as President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the organisation that brings together the world's parliaments, I would like to address a message to some of our young people.

As I said, many people would look elsewhere before turning to politicians to solve their problems. To ordinary people feeling powerless to bring about change in an increasingly frightening world, politics can often seem to make difficulties worse, not better. When the political solutions appear flawed, as often they do, people turn to other organisations and groups to find a sense of their own importance. In exchange for less democracy, they get greater certainty.

Democracy has come a long way in recent decades. The end of the Cold War brought a wave of multi-party systems to replace previously unrepresentative parliaments. In fact the number of countries in the world without a functioning parliament can now be counted on the fingers of one hand: Fiji, Guinea, Madagascar, Myanmar, Niger. It is surely good news that so many countries in the world are governed under democratic principles and practices.

Indeed it is. But in that case, how can widespread disenchantment with democracies, and more specifically with parliaments, be accounted for? Does it come from a failure to live up to the ideals and standards set down in their founding documents? The failings vary: parliaments that are multi-party in name, but which fail to respect the rights of the opposition; parliaments in which parties are all-powerful, leaving individual members no room for their own proposals; parliaments that vote outrageously high salaries for themselves and abuse their material privileges.

This is part of the picture, but only a part. The truth is that politics has never been a clean game. It was Abraham Lincoln who said that people who have very few vices also tend to have very few virtues. Asked what he would say to young people who had no interest in politics, my predecessor at the helm of the IPU, Italian Chamber of Deputies Speaker Pier Ferdinando Casini replied “what is the point of having clean hands if you keep them in your pockets? I say to young people that they should get their hands dirty with politics. Because the more politics becomes politicking, the further away it is from the people.”

Politics is a rough game. It's a competitive arena where mistakes are seldom forgiven. Advancement in the political sphere always comes from knowing how to make compromises. Politicians invariably disappoint, because they always achieve less than they promise. Politics is not a panacea for a nation's problems, but it is a necessary ingredient to promote public debate and carry out oversight.

Parliament is the home of compromise. It is where opposing ideals and ambitions compete, where both sides accept less than they want for the sake of the common good. Society needs a place where the people elected to represent it can knock sparks off each other in order to forge a realistic future in the public interest. That place is parliament. Nothing else fulfils that role.

The IPU's theme for the International Day of Democracy is Political Accountability. It is about strengthening links between parliaments and citizens. Politicians everywhere, in countries rich and poor, should pay more heed to what the electorate says to them. But it works both ways. For politics to work well, people have to take an interest in it, especially the young, women and men. They have to roll up their sleeves in the engine-room of democracy and - why not - run for a seat in parliament.

The ideal of government by and for the people is a powerful one. But for it to succeed it needs constant, meaningful investment in the pre-eminent institution of democracy, the parliament. And it needs people who believe in hard work and compromise for the good of their country. Otherwise the more divisive ideologies will win the day.

The writer is the Speaker of the Parliament of Namibia and the President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU).