

DEMOCRACY

Democracy is both an ideal and a set of institutions and practices.

As an **ideal**, it expresses two very simple principles:

- that the members of any group or association should have control over the group's rules and policies; and
- that those members should treat each other, and be treated, as equals.

In modern States, these principles are realized through a continually evolving and complex set of **institutions and practices** that include:

- a legal framework that guarantees peoples' rights
- governing institutions that are representative and accountable to the people
- an active citizen body or civil society
- political parties that articulate the views and aspirations of the people
- communication media that inform people about public affairs

The involvement of the people in the public affairs of their countries is more likely than any other form of government to ensure basic freedoms and equality, meet the needs of everyone and preserve or restore peace.



Photo: Afghanistan, UNDP



IPU AND DEMOCRACY

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) is the world organization of parliaments. Established in 1889, it now comprises 150 national parliaments and eight associated regional assemblies. The IPU is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, and has an office in New York that acts as the organization's Permanent Observer at the United Nations.

The IPU promotes democracy, in particular by strengthening the institution of parliament. Over the years, it has helped to develop democratic principles of governance and international standards for free and fair elections, and has helped to establish parliamentary systems in more than 50 countries.

The organization also assists the more than 40,000 parliamentarians around the world in representing their constituents freely and safely. In 1976, the IPU founded its Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians, which investigates violations of these rights. The IPU also encourages women's participation in political life and monitors their progress in politics around the world. In doing so, the IPU has become the recognized authority in this field.

In addition, the IPU encourages parliamentary involvement in international relations and promotes parliamentary diplomacy through its semi-annual Assembly, in which parliamentarians from around the world meet to exchange views and take positions on issues of immediate global concern.

INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

PO Box 330, 1218 Le Grand Saconnex, Geneva, Switzerland

Tel: +41 22 919 4150, Fax: +41 22 919 4160

E-mail: postbox@mail.ipu.org, Internet: <http://www.ipu.org>

Design: suzation.com

YOUR VOICE, YOUR CHOICE TOGETHER WE CAN MAKE DEMOCRACY WORK



Democracy requires strong parliaments • free and fair elections • guaranteed human rights • gender equality and non-discrimination • active civil society • effective political parties • independent media

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF

DEMOCRACY

15 SEPTEMBER



A PARLIAMENT DOES NOT GUARANTEE DEMOCRACY.
BUT THERE CAN BE NO DEMOCRACY WITHOUT A PARLIAMENT.

Throughout history, democracies have flourished, been threatened or dismantled, and re-emerged in societies all over the world. In 2007, the United Nations acknowledged the resilience and universality of the principles of democracy by declaring 15 September the International Day of Democracy.

The word, democracy, comes from two Greek words: *demos*, which means "the people," and *kratein*, which means "to rule." This "rule by the people" originated in the sixth century BC—and has been evolving ever since. When the UN General Assembly established the International Day of Democracy, it noted that "while democracies share common features, there is no single model of democracy" and that "democracy does not belong to any country or region."

It was in September 1997 that the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the world organization of parliaments, adopted a *Universal Declaration on Democracy*. That *Declaration* affirms the principles of democracy, the elements and exercise of democratic government, and the international scope of democracy.

The International Day of Democracy is meant both to celebrate these shared principles and as a reminder that the need to promote and protect democracy, including gender equality, human rights and fundamental freedoms is as urgent now as it ever has been.

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF

DEMOCRACY

PARLIAMENT

Parliament is the central institution of democracy.

Parliament represents society in all its diversity. It embodies the will of the people.

Parliaments have the responsibility for reconciling conflicting interests of different groups and communities in society, and for turning the resulting agreements into policies. They do this through dialogue and compromise.

Parliaments conduct a variety of tasks, including:

- making laws
- approving taxation and government spending
- overseeing the activities of the executive branch of government

The challenge for parliaments is to carry out these functions as democratically as possible.

PARLIAMENT



Photo: Timor Leste, UNDP

WHAT IS A DEMOCRATIC PARLIAMENT?

A democratic parliament is one that is:

- **representative**, which means that it reflects, as closely as possible, the social and political diversity of the population, encourages the full participation of women, and ensures equal rights and protections for all of its members so that they can freely exercise their mandate
- **transparent**, which means that it works in a way that the public can see, either directly or through communication media, such as print or electronic news organizations
- **accessible**, which means that the public, including associations and movements of civil society, can be involved in its work
- **accountable**, which means that there are opportunities for voters to hold members of parliament to account for their performance in office and integrity of conduct
- **effective**, which means that parliament's work, which encompasses not only domestic law-making and oversight but also the increasingly important realm of international relations, must be well organized to ensure that it serves the needs of the whole population

Photo: Ghana, Andre Ramasore (gallic.com)



PEOPLE

In a democracy, **people** play an active role in political and civic life. We express our will through regular free and fair elections. Voting in a democracy must be universal, equal and secret so that each of us can choose our representatives freely. Education and vibrant communications media are vital to be able to make an informed choice. But our role as active citizens does not end after we cast our ballots; we must be continually engaged in public affairs so that the government can be aware of and respond to our needs.

In a democracy, where all citizens are respected as equals, **women** have as important a role to play as men. While women make up just over

half of the world's population, fewer than one in five members of parliament around the world are women. Societies are more equitable and democracy is stronger when women participate in all aspects of political life.

The ultimate goal of democracy is to preserve and promote the dignity and fundamental rights of the individual, to achieve social justice, foster the economic and social development of the community, strengthen the cohesion of society and build a propitious environment for international peace. Democracy, development and human rights are therefore interdependent.

In a democracy, **human rights** are promoted and protected so that we all, no matter our race, gender, personal belief or style of life, can participate in formulating the laws and policies to which we are subject. These human rights include the right to express ourselves freely, to associate freely with others, and to choose our representatives in free and fair elections.

DEMOCRACY



Photo: Burundi, Nations Unies Photo/Martine Perret