



# INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

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## **International Day of Democracy, 15 September 2009**

Statement by Dr. Theo-Ben Gurirab

President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union

### ***'The world's citizens want more political tolerance'***

**UNDER EMBARGO UNTIL 15 SEPTEMBER, 12:00 GMT**

On the International Day of Democracy, there is huge popular aspiration across the world for more democracy, as the only system of government that can provide better advancement of peoples' fundamental rights and freedoms, more equitable distribution of wealth and greater security for themselves and their families. At the same time, many people are not convinced by the way democracy is working in practice. I would like to invite parliaments everywhere to reflect seriously on the challenges that they face as the central institution of democracy.

Today, the IPU releases the results of the first ever research it has commissioned on public views of democracy. The opinion poll conducted by WorldPublicOpinion.org has asked people in 24 countries representing 64% of the world's population about their perceptions of a key principle of democracy: political tolerance. Political tolerance means accepting and respecting the basic rights and civil liberties of persons and groups whose viewpoints differ from one's own. It is the foundation of democratic dialogue and political pluralism. The findings are encouraging, but also a source of concern.

- The research shows that there is widespread support for democracy, but citizens around the world have deep misgivings about the way political life functions in their own countries:
  - On average across the 24 countries, 86% of respondents consider that it is important that people should be able to express their political views, even when those views are unpopular. Only twenty four percent (24%), however, think that they are completely free to express their views without fear of harassment or punishment.
  - There is a widespread lack of confidence in the independence of members of parliament and their ability to speak freely on behalf of their constituents. The poll found that on average more than two out of three people said that only sometimes (37%) or rarely (29%) do legislators feel free to deviate from the official views of their party.
  - 58% believe that opposition parties only sometimes or rarely get a fair chance to express their views and influence government policies. The opposition in parliament is

a necessary and indispensable component of democracy. Its primary function is to offer a credible alternative to the majority in power. By overseeing and criticising the action of the government, the opposition works to ensure transparency, integrity and efficiency in the conduct of public affairs and to prevent abuses by the authorities and individuals.

- There are also significant concerns about the extent to which parliaments are representative of political and social diversity.
  - Although women make up only 18.3% of the world's parliamentarians, 49% of respondents consider that women are fairly represented in parliament.
  - Not surprisingly, women (45%) are on average less likely than men (53%) to consider that the current situation is fair.
  - There is wide variation in perceptions of how fairly ethnic, religious and national minorities are represented in parliaments. In several nations with significant indigenous populations, large majorities see these communities as not being fairly represented.

These findings hold generally true across all regions, all political systems, all age groups and for both men and women.

Parliaments as an institution and parliamentarians as individuals must be preoccupied with the gulf that separates public aspirations for democratic governance and vigorous public debate, and the widely-held perception of political life as a closed space where there is little room for dissent and real consideration of alternative policy options.

It cannot be good for democracy if its key representative institution, parliament, is held in low esteem. Some of the factors influencing public levels of confidence in parliaments are attributable to broader social processes which parliaments do not directly control. Yet there is still much parliaments can do to improve their public standing. Parliaments can take action to address these issues, by:

- Putting in place guarantees for the respect for the rights of the opposition and the ability of parliamentarians to speak freely without fear of harassment or punishment;
- Fostering political tolerance among citizens and political leaders through more education, improved communication, and, most importantly, upholding the highest standards of ethics in public life;
- Working with political parties to make parliaments more representative of the social diversity of the population;
- Monitoring public opinion on a systematic basis to detect areas of public disaffection with political life in order to be able to take rapid remedial action;
- Consolidating constitutional and legislative reform along the above lines.

I therefore urge all parliaments and their Speakers, Presidents and presiding officers to act decisively to enhance political tolerance. By doing so, they strengthen democracy in their country and make sure that the working relationship between government, parliament and the people that it represents is ever stronger, more transparent and inclusive.

Dr. Theo-Ben Gurirab

President

Inter-Parliamentary Union

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