



INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

5, CHEMIN DU POMMIER
CASE POSTALE 330
1218 LE GRAND-SACONNEX / GENÈVE (SUISSE)

TELEPHONE (41.22) 919 41 50 - FAX (41.22) 919 41 60 - E-MAIL postbox@mail.ipu.org
TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS : INTERPARLEMENT GENEVE

International Day of Democracy, 15 September 2011

Statement by Dr. Theo-Ben Gurirab

President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union

'There is a universal aspiration to live in societies based on the rule of law, fundamental human rights and democratic values'

2011 has the potential to be the greatest leap forward for democracy in a generation. Across the Arab world, popular aspirations for freedom and democracy have brought changes that were unimaginable only a year ago. The revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt have swept aside long-established rule and these countries have embarked on the difficult and uncertain path of democratization. These transitions are fragile. No one can say how much progress, and in what direction, will have been made when we gather again to celebrate the International Day of Democracy in 2012. But I am optimistic. The desire for freedom is a powerful one. Once unleashed, this is a force that cannot easily be stopped. Whatever the historical, cultural and other differences, the aspiration to live in societies based on the rule of law, justice, equality, human rights and democratic values, is universal. That remains the IPU's imprimatur.

"What do citizens expect from their parliament?" is the theme chosen by the IPU for this year's International Day of Democracy. Recent events only serve to illustrate its relevance. This theme is an invitation to dialogue. Some will say that citizens' expectations are generally unrealistic; and that they will inevitably be disappointed. I believe that it is healthy for citizens to have high expectations. Their expectations become a driver of change. Public pressure forces leaders to continually seek ways to improve democratic governance. The alternative - that people no longer believe that their voice can be heard, or that parliaments and politics no longer matter - is surely the biggest threat to democracy that can exist.

Citizens expect a lot, in particular from the parliamentarians that represent them. People look to their representatives to articulate and defend their interests. They judge their representatives on their ability to bring them social stability, economic development, health care, schools, jobs and basic infrastructure. Increasingly, people also expect parliamentarians to solve their personal problems, even to pay for their medical bills or provide similar services.

Working closely with citizens is an everyday reality for all parliamentarians. At the same time, we must be very clear that the principal functions of a parliamentarian are to represent the people by devising laws in the common interest and holding government to account. Parliamentarians are not service providers. They must not be seen as substitutes for the

executive arm of government or other local government authorities. Striking the right balance between being responsive to citizens' local needs and acting in the national interest is one of the most challenging tasks for any parliamentarian.

Parliaments have a fantastic opportunity to strengthen their relations with citizens and to create new forms of interaction. The radical extension of access to information via the Internet has seen the emergence of better informed and more demanding citizens. Society is changing, and parliaments and their members must change with it. This means finding new ways of communicating what happens in parliament. It also means finding new ways of listening to citizens and incorporating their voices into the work of parliament. As the central institution of democracy, parliaments have to exemplify the democratic values of dialogue, political tolerance and compromise.

So let us use this occasion to celebrate democracy! This year, the IPU is marking the International Day of Democracy in the world's largest democracy, India. We are taking this opportunity to draw attention to two of the required ingredients of democracy: gender equality and political representation. Elsewhere, parliaments around the world will be opening their doors on 15 September to men, women and children to engage them in debate about the meaning, principles and practice of democracy. I hope that the burst of energy in Tunisia, Egypt and across the Arab world will be a powerful reminder to all countries in the world of peoples' continual and deep-rooted yearning to have a say in the decisions that affect them. In other words, a desire for greater democracy. We, parliamentarians, the peoples' representatives, must not disappoint them.

Dr. Theo-Ben Gurirab
President
Inter-Parliamentary Union
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