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Inter-active debate of the occasion of the International Day of Democracy

United Nations, 15 September 2010

Remarks on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union

Democracy and Development - the Millennium Development Goals, democracy and parliaments

I wish to thank the organisers of this meeting for inviting the IPU to participate in this inter-active debate on the occasion of the International Day of Democracy. As you may know, the Inter-Parliamentary Union has a strong commitment to this anniversary, as September 15th marks the adoption, back in 1997 on the occasion of the 98th IPU Assembly, of the Universal Declaration on Democracy. This major policy statement, which formulates the basic precepts and principles of democratic governance, has been guiding much of IPU's work since then.

The choice of the theme for this discussion is most appropriate. Indeed, there is no denying that development and democracy go hand in hand. We all agree that both are mutually reinforcing and need to be promoted simultaneously. Ten years ago, when world leaders adopted the MDGs, it was clear that these would only be achieved if, among other things, better and therefore more democratic systems of governance were established and/or strengthened so as to create the enabling environment.

Democracy is based on the participation of all in the management of public affairs. Like every public endeavour, national development can not therefore be the task of a single individual, nor can it be left solely in the hands of the government. It requires the involvement of all stakeholders - government, parliament and parliamentarians, political parties, and civil society.. The diversity and inclusiveness of the policy process that is inherent in every democracy, undoubtedly enriches development outcomes. It ensures that these outcomes are commensurate with the needs and concerns of citizens and are sustainable.

As you will imagine, I would like to focus my remarks on the constituency that the IPU represents, that is parliaments and their role in promoting the twin objectives of democracy and development. Parliaments and parliamentarians, after all, have the responsibility to faithfully articulate the concerns and needs of their constituencies and, based on this, to establish the legal framework for these expectations to be translated into development strategies and outcomes. It is up to them also to

undertake oversight of the executive, to ensure that resources are used in the most optimum fashion and that governments deliver on their commitments.

As the Nobel Prize winning economist, Amartya Sen, argues: development requires that we move from the moral recognition of economic and social rights as human rights, to legalisation of these rights. Democratic parliaments are the theatre where this can happen, and where this is already happening, as in the case of India and Indonesia, where parliaments voted compulsory minimum expenditure on health and education for the budget, making sure that greater funds were allocated to these sectors.

You will allow me to address briefly a major challenge that democracy and development are facing today: corruption. Every year corruption takes away resources that should be invested in the well-being of the most needy. Corruption is an epidemic that affects us all, developed and developing countries. Combating corruption is therefore essential to ensuring that development will reach our populations and communities. The best soldiers against corruption are transparency and accountability. Obviously, strong and democratic parliaments can provide a robust response to corruption and promote that transparency and accountability.

The accountability of elected representatives and office-holders in general is another important component of this equation. As part of its work to promote parliamentary democracy, IPU – with input from many national parliaments – has formulated a series of guidelines and criteria on what it means for a parliament to be open, transparent, effective, representative of society in all its diversity, and accountable to its citizens. It has followed up with a series of activities, including advocacy and capacity-building projects, designed to help implement some of the main policy recommendations. The issue of accountability has been a central theme of IPU's own work over this past year, and member parliaments have been encouraged to take it up as they mark the International Day of Democracy this year. An inventory of such initiatives by parliaments around the world is available on the IPU website.

Finally, a point that we are trying to make, here at the United Nations and in other fora, is a very simple and basic one: namely, one of the best investments in world peace and development that the international community can possibly make is the investment in strong and effective institutions of democratic governance. It is therefore our hope that, in our common endeavour to promote democracy and development, special attention will be paid to the needs of parliaments, especially those in the developing world..

Today's meeting is taking place on the eve of the MDG Summit due to take place here in New York, in just a few days' time. We express the hope that world leaders will continue to place democracy and good governance at the forefront of their efforts as countries worldwide strive to meet the MDGs by the target date of 2015.

I thank you for your attention.