



# INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

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**STATEMENT BY HON. DR. THEO-BEN GURIRAB,  
PRESIDENT OF THE INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION  
at the 17<sup>TH</sup> Meeting of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union  
*Doha, Qatar, 7-8 February 2011***

Honourable Speaker Mohammed Bin Mubarak Al-Khulaifi,  
Honourable Speakers and Presiding officers of Parliament,  
Honourable Secretary General,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

I wish to start by thanking you, Honourable Al-Khulaifi, for so graciously hosting us here in Doha. I am delighted to visit your beautiful country once again. I am also pleased to be back at the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union and to have this opportunity to renew my interaction with so many colleagues of Arab Parliaments.

I would like to start by saying a few words about democracy. In 1997, the IPU adopted a Universal Declaration on Democracy. That declaration remains as valid today as it was then. It underpins IPU's work to promote and defend democracy everywhere. It states very emphatically that democracy is a universally recognized ideal that is based on values that are common to people everywhere, regardless of cultural, political, social or economic differences. As such, the declaration says, democracy aims to protect and promote the dignity and fundamental rights of the individual, instil social justice and equality, and foster inclusive economic and social development. As a form of government, democracy is the best way of achieving these objectives in the best of the people.

Democracy is based on two core principles: participation and accountability. Everyone has the right to participate in decision-making and management of public affairs. Likewise, everyone has the right to access information on activities of leaders and governments, to interact with elected representatives at all levels, and to seek redress through impartial administrative and judicial mechanisms. Democracy requires accountability from representative institutions at all times. A parliament in which all components of society are represented and which has the requisite powers and means to express the will of the people by legislating and overseeing government action stands at the heart of democracy.

The Declaration affirms that democracy represents work in progress. It is a condition that is constantly perfectible. But there is no alternative to democracy. Current events in some African and Arab countries underscore this reality.

Elections must be held at regular intervals. They must be free and fair and be perceived as such. But their outcome must also be respected. Those elected may have control over power. But it is the people, and only the people, who choose their leaders. This means that leaders, like the outgoing President of Côte d'Ivoire who lost the recent elections in his country, have to step down and hand over power. Any contrary course of action undermines democracy everywhere.

The situation in Côte d'Ivoire contrasts sharply with the orderly transition of power in Guinea and the news that has reached us from the Sudan. The referendum in southern Sudan has been carried out peacefully and in accordance with the law. The outcome has been accepted and there is clear goodwill. I express my fervent hope that all the parties to this process will continue to respect their commitments and ensure a peaceful transition to new institutional arrangements. That includes good neighbourly relations and mutually beneficial cooperation.

But democracy is so much more than elections and referenda. As the Universal Declaration of Democracy says so very clearly, it is about promoting human dignity, fundamental freedoms, social justice and development through public participation and accountability.

Today, people in many countries are expressing their discontent. Demonstrations in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and in other countries in the Arab world and beyond are telling us that the people are not satisfied. They want more transparency, freedom and greater social justice. They demand fair play, jobs and the benefits of development. They want more opportunities and service delivery, less marginalization and corruption; in other words, more democracy; not less. Ignoring these legitimate demands of the people is unacceptable and self-defeating.

These are challenges that we are confronting today. They speak of reform and change now. Our parliaments have an absolutely central role in ensuring greater involvement of the people in public life. That is in fact the core mandate and very essence of any parliament in the world. Parliaments and their leaders must therefore be proactive in promoting social stability, peaceful dialogue and reconciliation in the interest of everybody. The IPU supports parliamentarians in these endeavours, and I hope that you will let us know your plans and how we can best assist. As Speaker of my Parliament I understand these challenges. We can no longer ignore these voices that are raised so courageously. And we must work to create more space for women to be heard.

Honourable President,

Two years ago, I had the honour of addressing your conference in Muscat. On that occasion, I spoke about the critical yet unresolved situation of the Palestinian people. Two years later, we have made precious little progress. That is a betrayal of trust. Self-determination and human dignity present all of us with a noble common cause. The Palestinian people are denied the opportunity to realize their right to self-determination and to live in their own independent State, like the rest of us everywhere. I therefore welcome and fully endorse the statements made on Palestine by both our host Speaker, Mr. Al-Khulaifi and the President, Mr. Zaanoun earlier during the opening session of this conference. I urge all the parties concerned to redouble efforts in support of the just cause of the Palestinian people. With international support, we saw the end of illegality in my own country Namibia and also the end of apartheid in Mandela's South Africa. Why not the same for Palestine?

In Oman I also spoke of what was then an emerging financial crisis. Since then the world has seen a multiplication of crises, financial, economic, food and energy security, climate change and horrific natural disasters. These growing challenges speak volumes about the urgency for us, as a multilateral community, to confront and collectively overcome them more forcefully, inclusively and democratically.

I firmly believe that the best support parliaments can provide is to ensure an open and transparent debate through dialogue and effective oversight. People everywhere depend on parliaments to make sure that their views and aspirations are taken into account and that governments and public institutions think of the people first. In this, both the UN and IPU as well as relevant regional bodies must promote multilateral solutions.

Last year, many of you joined me at the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Conference of Speakers of Parliament in Geneva. That Parliamentary Summit offered us a unique opportunity to develop an imaginative agenda for our parliaments. It is meant to help secure democratic accountability worldwide. I look forward to

continue working with all of you to ensure progress. In the same vein, we all appreciated the UN Secretary-General's presence on that occasion and his firm support in the spirit of partnership.

The parliamentary Summit also saw much discussion about the IPU. It is our only world organization of parliaments. In the IPU, we facilitate political parliamentary debate, dialogue and cooperation. We promote and defend democracy. We develop standards, disseminate information on good practices and build capacity. We defend human rights of members of parliament and promote respect for universal values, norms and principles. We work in support of gender equality and women's participation in political and public life. We assist parliaments in coping with a growing international agenda on sustainable development and in contributing a parliamentary dimension to the work of the United Nations as well as various other public institutions.

While we can all agree to this, we must continue further to develop the IPU. We made a significant start in Geneva last year; the debate must continue and I look forward to hearing your views and suggestions as we prepare a strategy for the future development of our organisation.

I thank you.