



Opening remarks by Mr. Sergei A. Ordzhonikidze
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**Panel Events on Parliaments and
Challenges to Democracy**

International Day of Democracy

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House of Parliaments, Geneva
Monday, 15 September 2008

**Secretary General Johnsson
Distinguished panellists
Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen:**

It is a great pleasure for me to be with you to mark the first International Day of Democracy. Allow me, first of all, to thank the Interparliamentary Union for organizing this event to raise awareness of the challenges to democracy and the panellists for being here to share their experience and ideas.

In establishing this day, the United Nations General Assembly reaffirmed that democracy is a universal value, based on the freely expressed will of people to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives. Political diversity, reflected in broad-based participation of political parties, civil society and media organizations is essential for societies to prosper in the long term. The promotion of democracy, democratic governance and democratic institutions has therefore long been a major concern of the United Nations, and is mainstreamed across our activities for security, development and human rights.

As the General Assembly reconfirmed in its resolution, democracy does not belong to any country or region. The modalities may differ, but democracies share common features and basic principles: freedom of thought and expression, transparency, accountability and equality. The United Nations works closely with its Member States through a number of mechanisms, such as the United Nations Democracy Fund, to enable these principles to find practical expression in strong democratic institutions and processes.

It is highly appropriate that the first International Day of Democracy coincides with the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration proclaimed the right of every citizen “to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives”. Over the past 60 years, democratic governance and democratic institutions have become entrenched across the world.

But, as we celebrate these achievements in the empowerment of the human family, we must keep in mind that there is long way to go before the vision of the Declaration

becomes reality for all. I therefore welcome the focus today on the challenges to democracy. Democratization is a long and fragile process. The United Nations and the Interparliamentary Union can both play important roles in supporting Member States to build capacity for democratic governance to reinforce this process.

In our era of globalization, decisions made at the global level have a significant impact nationally and locally. And local challenges – from instability and conflict, to poverty and soaring food prices and the consequences of climate change – can often only be effectively addressed through collective action at the international level. Globalization holds the potential and the tools to empower people, and to promote democratic governance across the globe. Our shared challenge is to enable this democratizing potential to improve the lives of all people. Here, parliamentarians play a key role in linking the concerns of their constituencies to the international area. They can bring to their communities a better sense of how global issues affect them, and they can contribute to translating global commitments into national legislation and policies.

The close collaboration between the United Nations and the Interparliamentary Union is particularly important in this regard. Later this year, the Annual Parliamentary Hearing will bring members of parliament to United Nations Headquarters in New York for an interactive discussion with United Nations officials, Member States and experts. This is a valuable platform for integrating the views of the parliamentarians into the work of the Organization, and to sensitize them and their constituencies to global challenges under discussion in the General Assembly.

Parliaments and parliamentarians, chosen through free and fair elections, are the cornerstones of democracy. Parliamentarians are the voice of the people; they channel the aspirations and interests of the electorate and help to transform these into policy and legislation. But let's not lose sight of the non-electoral aspects of a pluralist democracy: the rule of law, an independent judiciary, respect for human rights, a thriving civil society and independent media. These elements are crucial to ensure that all citizens – no matter how rich or powerful they are – can be held accountable. And no matter how poor people may be, their voices can be heard and their rights respected. Parliamentarians have a decisive role to play in nurturing these – sometimes less visible but equally fundamental – dimensions of democracy. Reinforcing this broader democratic process is – to me – one of our main challenges.

I hope that this International Day and your discussions will provide us with both inspiration and practical proposals on how to confront those challenges to strengthen democracy around the world.

Thank you very much.