

**Opening remarks by Mr. Danilo Türk
President of Slovenia**

Panel Event on Parliaments and Challenges to Democracy

International Day of Democracy

Inter-Parliamentary Union, The House of Parliaments, Geneva

Monday, 15 September 2008

Thank you very much madam moderator for inviting me to speak,
Thank you very much to the IPU for organising this important event.

I would like to start by saying how pleased I am to have the opportunity to speak after we heard the message from former president Jimmy Carter whom all democracy promoters around the world know as a great advocate of democracy and as a practical man who helped organising elections and handling other sensitive aspects of democracy worldwide.

Our event is taking place as one of the early events following the proclamation of 15 September as the international day of democracy. We have to be aware that this happens as a natural conclusion of a process, which has been going on for about three decades now. Of course no conclusion in democracy is ever final and much will happen after this 15 September.

Thirty years ago the world was very different. It was then that changes started in countries like Spain and Portugal, followed by changes in Latin America, Eastern Europe, other parts of the world and as a result of all this we have seen a global transformation of politics, a global transformation of government. We have seen a truly transformational power of democracy and this represents a major feature of global relations today. Thirty years ago democracy was seen as an option, something considered as possible but not really necessary. All democracy was seen as something that has so many definitions that it becomes unclear what the true principles of democracy are. The last thirty years have shown not only the global importance of the concept and practice of democracy but also the fact that there are certain common principles and common techniques which constitute democratic government and which are important for all societies around the world.

In the United Nations, where I worked for a number of years, we were particularly proud of the electoral assistance. The electoral assistance division exists within the Department of political affairs of the UN Secretariat. Through its work we have discovered on every occasion how very sensitive political issues were translated in seemingly technical matters, how electoral assistance became a growth industry and how much easier it became to deal with elections than thought before this transformation happened. Let us just recall that United Nations was able to assist in technical sense in organising elections or other events of this kind in places as different as East Timor, the plebiscite or public consultation

of 1999, in Kosovo in elections, local elections in the year 2000 and several subsequent elections, in Palestine on several occasions, in Afghanistan, in Iraq in 2004 and in Peru in a situation of very sensitive transition in that country. In other words, the fact that it was possible to move to a phase in which sensitive matters of politics like elections became seen as fairly technical controversial than human rights, I think represents a very significant transformation of global proportions. It also represents a very significant change of role of the United Nations as essentially an intergovernmental organisation. That change has to be properly appreciated, it should never be underestimated and we should use the opportunities like the one today to think about the implications of this change.

We now know that democracy is global, that it happens from within each society, that it cannot be imposed from outside, but it can be assisted internationally. A fair question, that may legitimately be discussed on a meeting like ours, is whether this international assistance can go beyond the certain threshold, whether international assistance can become a critical factor in the establishment of democratic governance in a country. A question, which will certainly be with us for the time, for years to come.

Democracy is a very dynamic and very conflictual process. There is always a discussion whether democracy is in crisis and obviously the answer may be yes or no. There are always tensions between different components of democracy and we have to think about what the key issues of democratic governance at a given time are.

Let me in that context propose four themes, which I believe merits our attention today. Before referring to the four key issues I would like to explain that when I worked for the United Nations, I spent much time in meetings related to what we called new and restored democracies. That was a set of conferences, which started in the Philippines in 1988, following the changes in the Philippines. There were five subsequent conferences, all held in places where democratic transformation was recent and where there was a very lively interest in discussion on democratic governance. The latest amongst such conferences took place in Doha in 2006. I should add that the parliamentary aspect of democracy became gradually stronger within this set of conferences. The first conference where there was a special parliamentary segment was held in Ulan Bator in Mongolia in 2003 and in 2006 a similar arrangement was made in Doha in Qatar. But without going into details of this conferences I think that it is fair to say that this process, this entire process of new and restored democracies, articulated a list of issues which are central to the establishment and functioning of democracies globally today.

These four essential elements are: First, the understanding that democracy has to deliver. Democracy is a value in itself, but its actual test is in what it produces. People don't live out of love for nice principles, there have to be practical results and democracies have to meet the challenge of practical needs throughout their existence. Of course this is a very profound problem. If one looks at the theoretical literature – I am sure that professor Barber can tell us much more about this things – in the theoretical literature like books by Robert A. Dahl, he writes about the tension that always exist between economic needs and political democratic principles. He speaks about something he calls "antagonistic cohabitation". I find this expression very interesting because I can't imagine a long cohabitation between antagonists who are actually aspiring at destroying each other. So

he really tries to explain that there is this deep tension between economic need and democratic principle. And of course a result of that tension is something that people feel in a very real sense. Therefore, the question is how do democratic systems of our time produce economic advancement. Again, United Nations is important in this context, because UN was able to articulate a set of millennium development goals. So, at the global level we have a general definition of what constitutes progress, which can be measured. Measurement of achievement in the process of realisation of millennium development goals should be seen as a critical test for success of democracy globally.

The second one relates to the rule of law transparency and the need to fight corruption. Credibility of democracy depends on how effective it is in these matters. Obviously democracy is always underpinned by the rule of law. Democracy cannot exist in a lawless society, at least it can not exist for a very long time. But of course once the basic rule of law is established, there are tests of whether democracy will thrive. One of the tests is how effective it is in fighting corruption. This again are things that are difficult to handle and those where again international forums can be helpful. There is a UN convention against corruption and of course the application of that convention is among other things also an important test of democracy.

The third basic element is related to security. Here democracy is not without challenges. Security challenges for security of society are also challenging democracy. And these challenges can be of two kinds: first, they can be direct, in the sense that direct threat to territorial integrity and political independence of the country is obviously a threat to democracy in that country. There are examples of these kinds of situations. But I think we have to think seriously also about indirect threats. Terrorism obviously is a threat to security of societies and also threat to democracy in various countries. Counter-terrorism has to be designed as a set of measures, which do not weaken democracy. Here, I think, we can have a big discussion, given the fact that the importance of security considerations has grown so much in the last seven, eight years. The question of whether counter-terrorism and other similar security measures have produced the desired result of protecting society against terrorism without creating new dangers for human rights and for democracy itself requires real and critical discussion.

And finally, the fourth element relates specifically to post-conflict peace-building, where I think the world has learned the importance of democracy and democratic institutions for post-conflict stability. I understand that IPU is very actively involved in organising this experience into a set of prescriptions that would help in the future. The UN has also learned that following a conflict, stability of post-conflict societies depends on robustness of the institutions that are established. This is by no means an easy task and it usually starts with the timing of elections. Should elections take place soon and therefore create basis for legitimate government or is it feared that premature election will only exacerbate tension, given the competitive nature of elections. We have seen sort of dilemmas everywhere in post-conflict world, for example in Bosnia the elections were held very soon after the ending of war, but that led to the strengthening of the nationalist forces which actually generated the war and the question is, whether that was the wisest choice. That question has not received a full and final answer as yet, even now 13 years after the war was ended. So these are really profound questions and obviously the importance of

timing of different measures that have to be put in place in order to create stable democratic institutions is something that the world is still learning. The experience gathered is helping the international institutions to have proper timing, proper sequencing and more success in the future than was the case in the first years of experience with post-conflict peace-building.

These are the four areas or four themes in which the critical tests of democracy today take place. Obviously answers to these questions are different depending on the country, depending on the social situation, depending on political tradition, depending on political culture. Again we should not presuppose that democracy is something that has the same features everywhere in the world. We have factor in the political traditions and culture of different societies. In electoral assistance, for example, it is often discussed how strict the criteria for selection of candidates, formation of political parties and other elements should be. The obvious conclusion is that one has to be very realistic in factoring in the culture and tradition of the country concerned. All this has to be somehow factored in actual programming and projects related to strengthening or establishment of democracy.

Let me conclude by making a few remarks about democracies, which consider themselves as established democracies. Of course, I have always found the distinction between new and restored democracies and established democracies somewhat problematic, because no democracy is ever established for infinity and there can be set-backs and problems which are not easy to discuss internationally. We have just heard former president Carter speaking about the electoral system in the US, an established democracy. I think that one has to take this distinction with the grain of salt. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that in established democracies one of the critical problems today is, how does one organise democratic processes in a media-dominated society. We have to accept the fact that our societies, and that of course applies to both the established democracies and to new and restored democracies, although it seems to be more central in established democracies, media have their own needs, their own ways and of course politics has to take them into account. One of the factors which I find particularly intriguing is that in the media-dominated society political parties, ideologies and programmes have less of an attention that one would desire. There are other factors that play much stronger role, the way how political figures behave, the way how they fight their fights politically, and other media-generated elements. These elements are more important than the core policy choices and policy proposals that different actors in democratic process are pursuing.

Therefore I think in a media-dominated society we need a set of prescriptions on how to make the actual policy issues come through. Such prescriptions would help us in the future, and this is not an easy task. I once participated in the UN discussion with the global collection of TV networks. I criticised something that I call "infotainment". I said: "You know, TV is turning everything into entertainment and that dilutes the political questions, that dilutes policy choices and makes the whole democratic process more difficult." I thought that I had something important and something new to say, only to learn from major TV manager that this is very well-known, but there is a very little to do about it. He simply answered: "You politicians have to adjust to this reality and you have to know that as of now entertainment and news will mix, things other than policy choices will always be more interesting and then you simply have to be more imaginative. You,

the politicians, have to find your own ways of dealing with this kind of media reality, and we in the media will be interested to see what it brings." This forum today seems appropriate to introduce this question and maybe some of you may have interesting suggestion to make, maybe even some that I could use in my practice in the future.

Thank you very much!