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(c) Challenges facing parliaments today

The purpose of this paper is to inform the debate during the Fourth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament. It outlines challenges facing parliaments and makes recommendations based on the experience and practice of parliaments around the world.

Introduction

There is today a broad consensus that parliaments are necessary: virtually every State has one, in one form or another. It is a telling sign that when a country experiences a military coup d'état, parliament is usually one of the first State institutions to be suspended, because its deliberative role makes it an obstacle to the untrammelled exercise of power.

Parliament is the institution that represents the people's voice in government. It is the cornerstone of democracy. The functions that parliaments fulfill, notably law-making, oversight and representation, are fundamental to the legitimacy of government. If parliaments did not exist, they would need to be invented.

Since the 3rd World Conference of Speakers of Parliament in 2010, many events have demonstrated the universal attachment to democracy as a form of government, and to parliament as the central institution of democracy. The call for democratic institutions that would represent the interests of all citizens was a main feature of the uprisings that swept North Africa in 2011. Tunisia has drafted a constitution through an inclusive process that has set the tone for a new and vibrant form of politics in the country. In Myanmar, the transition from half a century of military rule is underway, with new spaces being created for freedom of expression and political action. Globally, the percentage of women parliamentarians has increased from 18.8 per cent in January 2010 to 22.1 per cent in January 2015.

Yet democratic transitions are fragile. Many examples show that when authoritarian regimes collapse, they are not automatically replaced by democratic institutions. Building a culture of democracy and political tolerance requires a long-term commitment. Transition is fraught with countless challenges, and extremist groups will often use violence to try to prevent democracy from taking root.

The paradox is that while parliaments remain a symbol of hope and the belief that people can have a voice in decision-making, they continue to face many challenges, in long-established as in more recent democracies.

This paper describes some of the most common challenges faced by parliaments today, though not necessarily by every parliament, or with the same intensity or at the same time. Some may face other challenges, specific to their own particular context. The challenges listed here are ones that considered relevant to parliaments generally at the current time. The paper concludes by sketching out some possible responses to those challenges.



Public scepticism

It is no secret that citizens do not hold politicians in high esteem. Survey data everywhere suggest that public confidence in the authority of parliament is low and falling. The reasons are multiple and can be difficult to unpack. They include the following.

- The competitive nature of politics means that there are almost always winners and losers, promises that cannot be kept and problems that cannot easily be solved. A toxic combination of adversarial politics, broken promises and a perceived inability to bring about positive change undermines public confidence in political processes.
- Media coverage generates and reinforces negative perceptions by focusing on the spectacular, theatrical aspects of parliament, which are more sensational than the debate and deliberation that make up the vast majority of parliamentary work.
- Public understanding of the role of parliament is generally limited, and even the most highly educated may struggle to distinguish what is the preserve of the executive and what is that of the legislative branch of government. This contributes to unrealistic expectations of what parliament and individual parliamentarians can achieve, and commensurate disenchantment when they are perceived to fall short.
- Citizens clearly expect their elected representatives to serve the public good and parliamentarians to be morally beyond reproach. Parliamentarians are arguably held to a higher standard in that way than other sectors of society. Instances of misconduct are magnified by the media lens, and a perception of unethical behaviour, even corruption, can spread to the entire political system.
- People question the relevance of parliament when they do not see what it does on their behalf. It can be difficult to demonstrate how the work of parliament is important to people's lives in concrete terms, and what life would be like if parliament did not exist.

At the heart of public scepticism, perhaps, is a judgment about parliament's capacity to perform its functions effectively and to **embody key democratic values**. Even without being constitutional experts, people have a sense of whether parliament can effectively influence the law-making process, hold government to account or debate opposing points of view.

The environment in which parliaments operate is changing, and in some ways very fast. **Much decision-making power no longer resides at the national level**, where parliaments can exert the most influence. Global financial markets increasingly shape our national policies, and international agreements can constrain a State's ability to regulate the economy independently. More decisions are taken within intergovernmental forums where parliaments typically have little influence – for example regarding the rules of international trade – and national politics are seen as powerless to influence developments.

The Internet, meanwhile, enables citizens to network and mobilize around issues even across national borders, in ways that are much faster and widely impactful than ever before. People are thus offered alternative forums in which to express their political views, largely bypassing – for the moment – political parties and parliamentarians.

Declining voter turnout is a widely-shared challenge. In most countries, legitimacy is conferred upon parliaments by elections, which give parliaments the authority to speak on behalf of the people. Where voter turnout is low, parliament's claim to be the most representative voice in society can be challenged.

Declining voter turnout has been a global trend in recent decades. Having remained stable at 75 to 80 per cent between the 1950s and 1980s global turnout for parliamentary elections has since fallen to between 65 and 70 per cent. Even more worrying, the participation of young people is much lower than that of the overall population. Research suggests that people who vote in the first two elections after becoming eligible to vote are more likely to vote in subsequent elections. It is therefore especially important to understand why young people are voting less than other age groups and to address the causes identified.

Unequal power relations between the executive and legislative branches of government

The executive's role is to implement the political platform on which it gained power, responding to, and trying to shape, the political events of the day. Since it is in the interests of the executive to pursue its goals with the least obstruction possible, parliament is often perceived as a potential hurdle that needs to be managed. The executive, in other words, seeks to keep the balance of power in its own favour.

It has various means at its disposal. In countries with parliamentary systems of government – in particular though not exclusively – the executive can exercise control over the members of its political party (i.e. the majority party in parliament), with rewards for faithful support and sanctions for dissent. In the most extreme cases, parliament can be reduced to a “rubber-stamp” of popular approval for executive branch proposals. Even in long-established democracies, many question whether the balance of power has swung too far in favour of the executive.

In a large majority of countries, parliaments have the constitutional **right to initiate legislation**, yet most laws originate with the executive. Parliament's law-making role tends to focus on the scrutiny of executive proposals, with limited opportunities for individual parliamentarians.

The executive also often **controls the parliamentary agenda**, including if and when bills are scheduled for examination, a power often hard-wired into the political system. When the ruling party has a parliamentary majority, even though parliament may formally sets its own agenda, control may remain in the hands of the executive.

Parliament's **power to hold government to account** lies at the heart of executive-legislative relations. And yet in practice, the members of a party in government have strong incentives not to challenge that government, such that the oversight function is typically left to opposition parties. Parliaments are therefore trying to develop systems that allow for effective oversight of the executive without the appearance of launching an “inquisition”.

Institutional capacity and parliamentary reform

Linked to the theme of executive domination is the notion of institutional capacity – the people, skills and resources parliaments need to carry out their work effectively. The human and financial resources available to the executive exceed those of parliament by many orders of magnitude. The executive also has significantly better **access to information** than parliament, and can largely control the quantity and timing of information made available to parliament: with regard to national budget preparation and execution, for example.

In many countries, the capacity of **the parliamentary administration** to provide effective support for the work of parliament – such as non-partisan research in the interests of informed decision-making – is limited.

Globally, according to data collected for the 2012 Global Parliamentary Report, a relatively small percentage of State budgets (an average of 0.49 per cent) is allocated to parliament. Significant variations can be observed: parliament accounts for 0.08 per cent of the State budget in Pakistan, compared to 0.75 per cent in the Philippines.

Parliaments face the challenge of keeping up with changes in society, such as the **use of technology** to solicit input from citizens on issues under debate. In all parliaments, even the long established and well resourced, there is tension between the need to evolve in step with society and the desire to preserve traditions and working methods often forged through decades of hard-fought political battles.

The model for how many parliaments still function dates back to the late nineteenth century. Parliaments tend to be rather conservative institutions, and change tends to be slower and less coherent than many people would like to see. Capacity for reform depends very much on political circumstances, which can provide opportunities for change but also incentives to block or delay it: for example, where electoral reforms might cost sitting members their seats.

Modern parliaments are increasingly attempting to become **gender-sensitive**. Beyond the simple presence of women in parliament, such efforts have included a more deep-rooted examination of parliamentary rules and processes to ensure that legislative work takes into account the needs of both women and men.

Political parties are a vital component of democratic governance. Parliaments represent citizens as individuals but also collectively, through political parties, to advance broad policy agendas. Parties serve both to focus electoral choices and to ensure that these choices are carried through into the work of parliament and the ongoing public debate. While not highly regarded by the public at large, political parties are indispensable to the working of a democratic parliament. Operating as they do in two spheres – government and civil society – they form an essential bridge between them.

Political parties also act as gatekeepers, determining to a large extent who can become candidates for electoral office. It also falls largely to them to ensure that opportunities are available for women and other sectors of society, including young people.

It is therefore important that parties have the capacity to develop policies in response to key challenges, so that voters can choose between a range of policy alternatives. This requires parties to be transparent in their rules and functioning. Political parties are weaker and less effective where based on personalities rather than policy platforms, and where powerful leadership trumps internal democracy.

A culture of democracy

As an ideal, democracy requires that members of society treat each other, and be treated, as equals. Underlying democracy is acceptance and respect of the other. Democratic life entails the right to and respect for differing views as well as dialogue as a solution to conflict.

Political tolerance is thus a vital element of democratic culture. It is the responsibility of all citizens, including political leaders, to practice political tolerance in their words and actions. Intolerance represents a threat to democracy since it discriminates against and may even silence certain parts of the population. Developing a culture of tolerance, however, takes time, and such ingredients as freedom of expression, civic education and pluralistic media reflecting diverse and critical points of view.

Concerns are regularly voiced about the **influence of money in politics**. This touches on many issues, from the financing of election campaigns and political parties to the impact of lobbying on decision-making. Ethics in parliamentary life is a matter of ongoing debate, and many parliaments have introduced codes of conduct for parliamentarians in an attempt to clarify the relevant rights and responsibilities.

The composition of parliament

Linked to both public scepticism and institutional effectiveness is the composition of parliament.

Historically, parliament has been a male-dominated institution in all countries of the world. That is changing, though at different rates in different countries. Only three parliaments have achieved gender parity. Another 10 have more than 40 per cent women. This is the result of changing societal attitudes about the role of women, but also policies, such as electoral quotas to increase the number of women in parliament. But for most parliaments, gender parity remains a distant goal. The global average for women's participation in parliament, as of January 2015, was only 22.1 per cent.

Few people would argue that the composition of parliament should mirror exactly the composition of society. But it is widely understood that a parliament in which one sector of society - older men - holds a disproportionate amount of power will struggle to be effective in representing the views of society at large.

The equal presence of women is a powerful symbol. So is the equitable representation of young people, minorities and other marginalized groups. Such representation brings a greater diversity of views to the decision-making process, and legislative outcomes more broadly aligned with the interests of all sectors of society. The presence of representatives from different social groups is also important. There is a growing trend in many countries towards the **“professionalization” of politics**, with people spending their entire professional careers, in different capacities, within the political domain, including as members of parliament. This reinforces public perceptions of a political elite cut off from the concerns of most citizens.

Conclusion: Revitalizing the model of representative democracy

Through its work in setting standards¹ and capacity building, IPU supports parliaments in their efforts to build strong institutions that are resilient as well as responsive to the people's needs.

Parliaments are keenly aware of the challenges they face. Many of the challenges are deep-rooted and extend beyond the scope of parliamentary action. Some will test the boundaries of what any political action can achieve.

In the experience of parliaments around the world, a wide range of responses have proven effective and can usefully be shared with all parliaments. Recommended actions to strengthen parliament and democracy include:

- promoting the development of democratic culture in society, and underscoring the importance of political tolerance in the parliamentary arena;
- investing more in civic and political education for children in schools;
- making concerted efforts to encourage people, especially young people, to vote;
- making a public commitment to the core values of a democratic parliament – one that is representative, open and transparent, accessible, accountable and effective – and putting these values into practice;
- ensuring that parliament is gender-sensitive in its rules, processes and legislative work;
- enhancing the power and ability of parliament to oversee the executive on behalf of the people;
- systematically monitoring public perceptions of parliament, seeking to understand the reasons for such perceptions and how they can be improved;
- adopting special measures to ensure the composition of parliament is more reflective of the composition of society as a whole, notably with regard to the number of women in parliament;
- insisting on the need for vibrant internal democracy within political parties;
- experimenting with new forms of public participation in decision-making and budgeting;
- providing more and better support to parliaments that wish to build institutional capacity, in line with the Common Principles for Support to Parliaments;
- democratizing the system of international relations, enhancing the role of parliaments vis-à-vis the issues that are high on the global agenda, and further developing the parliamentary dimension of the work of the United Nations.

¹ See for example *Parliament and democracy in the twenty-first century: A guide to good practice*; *Gender-sensitive parliaments* and *Common Principles for Support to Parliaments*.