



Parliamentary Hearing at the United Nations

6-7 December 2012
United Nations Headquarters
New York



***A road less travelled:
Parliamentary approaches to conflict prevention, reconciliation and peace building***

Background

Today, we are witnessing an increasing number of conflicts brought about by unconstitutional changes in governments, disputed elections, incomplete political transitions, social tensions and inter-communal violence. The control of government and of natural and economic resources is at the core of conflicts, frequently overlaid by ethnic polarization, socioeconomic tensions and poor governance. Solutions invariably require comprehensive settlements that include a whole host of issues such as power-sharing, economic opportunities, constitutions, justice, truth and reconciliation, human rights, and gender equality.

The prevention and resolution of conflicts require the participation of all sectors of society in identifying and implementing workable and lasting solutions. Men and women, young and old, minorities, indigenous peoples, indeed all sectors of society, have something essential to bring to the process. What is at stake in all these situations is the need to forge a new sense of unity and cooperation within a country and to build a new kind of governance that promotes a sense of belonging. This involves institutions that promote dialogue and inclusive decision-making and allow for equitable participation of all in the governance of society.

An elected parliament that represents the full spectrum of society can perform a singularly important role in preventing conflict from emerging, helping to end conflict, and establishing stable peace through reconciliation and addressing the root causes of conflict. A recent example of the significance of parliaments is the prominence given to them in countries in transition towards democracy in the Arab world and beyond.

There is therefore always a need to provide for the creation or strengthening of a parliament that establishes the kind of legal framework that prevents the resurgence of conflict by rectifying injustices of the past. It is important, in the interest of reconciliation, to institute mechanisms that resolve inequities, guarantee equitable political participation and ensure fairer access to opportunities and resources.

Parliaments should therefore be viewed from the perspective of offering a forum for mediation, dialogue, inclusiveness and more balanced participation. However, parliaments in countries emerging from conflict and/or in transition towards democracy are often weak institutions, have been weakened by the conflict or simply do not exist. Quite often too, post-conflict parliaments comprise former parties to the conflict, and parliaments face the daunting challenge of having to mediate between the divergent interests embodied by these parties. External support to parliaments in a post-conflict environment should help them to address these issues effectively.

At the same time, the efforts of the international community in ending conflict and in establishing stable peace can be strengthened by effectively engaging parliaments in the processes.

The 2012 Parliamentary Hearing at the UN General Assembly will focus on this broad subject under the theme: *A road less travelled: Parliamentary approaches to conflict prevention, reconciliation and peace building*

Main issues

As a joint IPU-UN hearing, the event will consider national, regional and international dimensions of conflict prevention resolution, as well as peace building, through the prism of parliaments. Specifically, the hearing will consider three inter-related and underlying questions: how parliaments can play a central role in bringing about reconciliation or helping diffuse tensions between factions (political, ethnic, religious); how the United Nations can work directly with parliaments and parliamentarians to support the prevention/reconciliation efforts of the international community; and how the United Nations' own apparatus for conflict prevention and resolution, including key organs such as the Security Council, can be strengthened from a parliamentary perspective.

To make the debate immediately relevant to both UN and IPU members, it will centre as much as possible on specific country situations, or "case studies". The case studies will be selected so as to represent a number of regions (Europe, Asia-Pacific, Africa and possibly Latin America), and in such a way that each case would represent a different set of lessons for both national and international actors. This will include: success stories in which the parliament worked in parallel with a UN-sponsored initiative to help restore peace or assist with the transition toward democracy from authoritarian rule; cases in which peace gave way to conflict because of some inherent weaknesses in the political system, including the parliamentary institution.

A cross-cutting theme of the entire hearing will be the question of "feminization" of conflict prevention and resolution, and how both parliaments and the United Nations can work toward this goal and ensure that processes, settlements and the institutions set up to implement them are gender-sensitive.

Key questions for discussion will include:

- What are the optimal conditions and institutional requirements for parliaments to effectively play a role in conflict prevention and reconciliation? How can the UN and the IPU support such conditions, where needed?
- How can parliaments (and the IPU) support the UN, its missions in the field and its Peace-Building Commission and Human Rights Council?
- How can parliamentarians help mediate conflicts alone or in cooperation with the United Nations?
- How are parliaments to relate to transitional justice mechanisms and truth and reconciliation mechanisms?
- What do parliamentarians think of key reforms needed to ensure more democratic decision-making for conflict resolution at the UN?

Format

The joint Hearing will take place over two days, on 6 and 7 December, with an expected audience of up to 150 parliamentarians. It will consist of four sessions of three hours each.

To make the hearing as interactive and productive as possible, leading to fresh ideas and perspectives, an effort will be made to organize the various sessions in a more innovative way than formal panel discussions. This will include: debating one or two motions around a specific question, to be followed by an informal vote; roundtable discussions in which participants may be asked to work out a problem; and "fishbowl" discussions moderated by a journalist or independent expert.

As in the past, a short report will be produced and introduced under cover letter of the PGA to Member States under the relevant agenda items of the General Assembly.