



EAST AFRICAN LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

REMARKS BY *HON. NOORU ADAN MOHAMED*, REPRESENTING THE RT HON. NGOGA KAROLI MARTIN, SPEAKER OF THE EAST AFRICAN LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY (EALA) AT THE 143RD IPU ASSEMBLY, WITH RESPECT TO THE *GENERAL DEBATE* ON 27TH NOVEMBER 2021, MARDID, SPAIN

- ***Mr. President of the IPU;***
- ***Madam Speaker of the National Assembly of Spain and host of this distinguished Assembly;***
- ***The Secretary General and the Leadership of the IPU;***
- ***Distinguished Speakers and Leaders of Parliamentary Delegations;***
- ***Legislators, Ladies and Gentlemen.***

- Madam Rt. Hon. Speaker, I am honoured and privileged to address this distinguished 143rd Assembly of the IPU on behalf of my Speaker, the **Rt. Hon. NGOGA Karoli Martin**, who, due to other engagements of work was unable to join us today. I also wish to convey his commitment to strengthening cooperation between EALA and IPU towards addressing global issues, including those which threaten democracy.

- It gives me great pleasure to address this Distinguished forum of the 143rd IPU Assembly, on the timely **theme**: “*Contemporary challenges to democracy: Overcoming division and building community*”. I take this opportunity to sincerely thank the Secretary General of IPU and his team for inviting EALA to this important Assembly and debate.
- At the outset, I wish to observe that there are many issues that are currently affecting the for global democratic recession or democratic backsliding in many countries. Many political analysts point to intensify partisan polarization, which “represents a genuine threat to functioning of democratic accountability” to exploit ethnic diversity or cultural diversity to gain power, which also may lead to “restrictions and unequal representation of ethnic minorities and diminishing the quality of democracy”, economic inequality which may constitute “economic roots of democratic discontent across new and old democracies”, and the rise of populism which challenges basic norms of democracy.¹
- **Ladies and Gentlemen**, most of the above-mentioned challenges to democracy are caused by misinformation and hate speech. I will therefore focus my discussion on the question on “*what role should parliaments play in protecting freedom of expression online and promoting a diversity of views while also countering disinformation and hate speech?*”

¹ Daniel Ziblatt, *Challenges to Democracy*, <https://scholar.harvard.edu/dziblatt/challenges-democracy>, retrieved on 25th November 2021.

- On the one hand, freedom of expression encompasses “free speech, freedom of the press, the right to petition government, and freedom of political association” and, as such constitutes a “necessary component of democracy” which plays “an informing and a legitimating” function.² Freedom of expression is protected by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and given legal force through Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights.³ It is therefore paramount for parliament (being an icon of democracy, to safeguard the right to freedom of expression. Parliament needs to ensure high standards of freedom of expression for the purposes of enhancing interaction between citizens and legislative powers that promotes parliamentary openness and transparency, ease access to public information, including electronic communication of parliamentary information, accountability, and citizen participation.⁴ This will certainly contribute to making parliament “ more representative, accessible, accountable and responsive to the needs of the people it represents.⁵
- On the other hand, misinformation and hate speech are currently on the rise as it is amplified by irresponsible use of the internet. ⁶ Data from Facebook indicate that there is an upsurge in content promoting hate and violence. In its last biannual Community Standards Enforcement Report (released in May

² Ashutosh Bhagwat and James Weinstein, Freedom of Expression and Democracy, <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198827580.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780198827580-e-5>, retrieved on 24th November 2021.

³ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), 16 December 1966, UN Treaty Series, vol. 999, p. 171.

⁴ SCOTT HUBLI & ANDREW G. MANDELBAUM, Introducing the Declaration on Parliamentary Openness, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/und-69>

⁵ SCOTT HUBLI & ANDREW G. MANDELBAUM, Op.Cit.

⁶ Richard Allan, **Hard Questions: Who Should Decide What Is Hate Speech in an Online Global Community?** <https://about.fb.com/news/2017/06/hard-questions-hate-speech/>

2020), the platform indicates to have deleted “a record number of hate speech posts with 9.6 million taken down compared to 5.7 million in the prior period”, and most of which were originating from organized hate groups.⁷ As the UN Secretary General observes “Public discourse is being weaponized for political gain with incendiary rhetoric that stigmatizes and dehumanizes minorities, migrants, refugees, women and any so-called “other”.⁸ There is recent concern that massive disinformation campaigns have reached debates in key decision-making processes, in a number of countries around the world.⁹

- In the East African region, we have observed internet shutdown during major elections period, mostly before the elections results are announced or shortly after they are proclaimed, in fear of electoral misinformation, proclamation of fake elections results and online hate speech or mobilization for violent protests against the elections results.
- **Ladies and Gentlemen**, the foregoing challenges to democracy call for enhanced parliamentary action to ensure effective access to the right information while, at the same time, countering disinformation and hate speech. To this effect, I am putting forward the following proposals: -

1. Parliament should use the opportunity of modern information technology to communicate the right information to the public.

⁷ [Niall McCarthy, Facebook Removes Record Number Of Hate Speech Posts \[Infographic\], https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2020/05/13/facebook-removes-record-number-of-hate-speech-posts-infographic/?sh=4bb6d0a23035](https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2020/05/13/facebook-removes-record-number-of-hate-speech-posts-infographic/?sh=4bb6d0a23035)

⁸ [UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, 18 June 2020, file:///C:/Users/EALA/Desktop/5WCSP/UN%20Strategy%20and%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20Hate%20Speech%2018%20June%20SYNOPSIS.pdf](file:///C:/Users/EALA/Desktop/5WCSP/UN%20Strategy%20and%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20Hate%20Speech%2018%20June%20SYNOPSIS.pdf)

⁹ <https://www.ipsa.org/wc/paper/misinformation-and-hate-speech-when-bad-becomes-even-worse>

2. Parliament should enact the necessary legislation to create a conducive environment for access to information by the public, including electoral information, information about political parties and candidates, and inclusive participation, amongst others. This legislation should aim at enhancing **accessibility and affordability** of the Internet and digital technologies (universal access and service mechanisms) so as to bridge the existing digital divide. Special efforts should be directed to expend connectivity in rural, unserved, and underserved areas as well as to specific groups such as women, the youth, the poor, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.
3. Awareness campaigns and sensitization on responsible use online media (including social media) and offline media should be undertaken and be directed to as many members of the public as possible.
4. Parliament should engage with other stakeholders from the media, private sector, political parties, civil society organizations, technical community and academia to build confidence and trust in the Internet and consensus about the right balance between the right to freedom of expression and the need to fight against populism, misinformation, hate speech and division in society.
5. International cooperation should be enhanced towards safeguarding democracy and addressing the root causes of the current democratic decay around the world.

- **Honourable delegates,** with these few remarks, I once again, reiterate our commitment to work closely with you all, to defend our shared democratic values against the threats of various contemporary challenges.

I thank you all for your kind attention and wish you fruitful deliberations.