



Statement by

His Excellency Dr. Mohammad Reza Majidi, APA Secretary-General

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**General Debate under the Theme of: “Contemporary challenges to democracy:
Overcoming division and building community”**

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**Mr. President,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen**

It is a great pleasure for me to have the privilege of joining you here at this great assembly in my capacity as Secretary General of the Asian Parliamentary Assembly (APA). Like every one of you, I am also highly delighted that the deadly virus crisis and its devastating health impacts which has almost disintegrated our regular life cycle is gradually being relaxed. Indeed, this is a wonderful opportunity for all of us to regain our civil liberties after a period of deadly stress of deprivation in the aftermath of nearly two years of health confinement.

No doubt, the Covid-19 pandemic is the greatest public health crisis the world has experienced in recent history, posing an unprecedented challenge to contemporary democracies around the world for people from different walk of life. Emergence of the current critical situation facing the world as a result of the virus crisis goes to mark a momentous shift in the very essence of social and political structures of societies across the globe.

In fact, year 2020 is tightly tied up with coronavirus and its most deadly impacts on every aspects of human life. The year that deeply dismantled human regular life cycle leaving a gloomy image before all of us; a state of uncertainty, the vulnerability of which could be compared only to the time of war. We have faced this type of war when humanity across the world has not been able to get rid of its already established consequences.

**Mr. /Madam President
Distinguished delegates,**

The theme of general debate is a multifaceted issue which calls to be addressed in an all-inclusive manner once a critical issue like current global pandemic targets public health in every human society. It is interesting to note that as we cry for unrestricted freedom, with little or no accompanying personal responsibility, we embrace democracy only when it fits us, and flatly reject it when it doesn't. In other words, we haughtily support strict law-and-order mandates for others, but not for ourselves. Nonetheless, recent surveys suggest that most people around the world are indeed willing to sacrifice at least some of their civil liberties in the name of public health. To be honest, global spread of the virus served as a crash test for

governance systems and institutions at national and international levels on one hand and on the other, a unique opportunity for shared learning around the world.

Dear Colleagues,

To exercise this highly delicate task, one must think to what extent the established principles of democracy would be eroded. Or else, is there any possibility to contain the virus spread without touching citizen's freedoms. Are we allowed to let people go on their own under such a most tragic circumstances when the whole world is grappling with the horrific impacts of this deadly invisible enemy under the pretext of keeping democracy in place, or a balance should be struck between public health and civil liberties? To what extent citizens' liberties can be restricted to serve the common goods?

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of government in public health has come to the forefront of a national conversation. To some, there is tension between protecting the health of a population and respecting the rights of the individual. They say COVID-19 is a challenge to civil liberties. To what extent has the protection of the public welfare has been a pretext for governments to curtail or erode their democratic rights?

These questions have led to widespread controversies about whether democracies are being sacrificed at the expenses of public health? In general, democratic governments seek to be responsive to and take into account their citizens' preferences. The degree to which citizens agree with the rationale for legislative or regulatory restrictions on the liberty bears directly on their willingness to comply with emergency-response policies. And this question of compliance ultimately could determine whether a government's response succeeds or fails.

Therefore, in a more pragmatic vein, we should acknowledge that sound public health policy will be as respectful as possible of civil liberties, not just because that is what the law requires, but because that is the best way to get the utmost from public. Similarly, civil liberties must be frank about the fact that rights and freedoms have limits, as no one commit us to "dying with our rights on" in the face of a deadly pandemic. However, even if most people are willing to accept a temporary suspension of many civil liberties, there is always the risk that governments or interest groups will exploit the state of exception in order to seize additional power or advance their own narrow agendas.

Finally, let me conclude by saying a lesson is to be learned from this crisis; the crisis that we should perceive as a wake-up call for global leaders of the free world to sit together at the same table and agree on the protocols that will be followed during the similar scenarios in the future, scenarios that are already foreseen. **Thank you for your attention**