

143rd IPU Assembly

Speech for the General Debate on
Contemporary challenges to democracy:
Overcoming division and building community

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Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished parliamentarians,

It is a great pleasure and honour to be invited to speak on contemporary challenges to democracy on overcoming division and building community and to make a contribution to the important discussion you are starting today

I have worked closely with IPU in my different capacities in the past. As Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs at the United Nations, working with Kofi Annan, then Secretary General, we established channels of very intense communications between the United Nations and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. It was always inspiring for the UN Secretariat to learn from the members and delegations of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

As President of the Republic of Slovenia from 2007 to 2012, I have cooperated with the IPU of a number of occasions, especially on occasions devoted to celebration of democracy.

Today, I am speaking as President of the Club de Madrid, an organization of about 120 former Presidents and Prime Ministers, who have been democratically elected and finished their work as holders of public office. Now we are gathering to discuss today's important issues and to make recommendations and suggestions.

Twenty years ago, in the city of Madrid, twenty former Presidents and Prime Ministers came together under the leadership of the Brazilian Former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, giving rise to the creation of this organization.

For twenty years, Club de Madrid has been promoting democracy as one of the essential qualities of - not only national politics but also of multilateral cooperation.

We live in a world where global problems require global solutions. But global solutions require solid platforms. Democracy is a platform of fundamental importance for all states to communicate constructively and creatively to seek and find global solutions.

We, Members of Club de Madrid, do not currently have executive or other powers. We look at the world in a cautiously optimistic manner. We understand and appreciate the resilience of

democracy and its capacity for development and self-correction when necessary. Today, there are many situations which require self-correction.

At the same time, we understand also the danger of complacency. Democratic forces must never be complacent and, in particular, in times, when democracy is facing challenges like today.

Democracy is a value in itself and, as Madame President said in her opening remarks. There is no country in the world that does not claim to have one or another type of democracy. The Inter-Parliamentary Union is well-positioned to understand the variety of situations that exist, the importance of inclusive dialogue, and the importance of experience gathered over a long period of time.

Democracy is a value in itself, but it must also deliver. Democracies must demonstrate their ability to solve the problems as they emerge. Democratic performance and its capacity to deliver are tested daily. Today, at the time of specific difficulties, we have to be very careful and precise in defining the challenges of our time.

As the main challenges of our era, we see:

1. The rising of **authoritarian tendencies** around the world. Some commentators have even referred to an “epidemic of *coups d’état*”; a dangerous development.
2. The emergence of the **new information ecosystem** and the lack of an adequate normative framework for information management in the digital space.
3. The rising **income disparity and inequality** that is driving discontent and polarization within societies.
4. The rising of **political polarization**, which is fuelled by different ideologies, some of them known from the past, like nationalism, and political practices of today, such as hate speech and fake news.

Democracy remains, in these circumstances, the best hope and the best system of government, which has a unique capacity to balance between stability and freedom.

It is precisely in that balancing between stability and freedom where we must seek solutions for the future. In the Club de Madrid, we have looked at these problems and have concluded that, at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have to be particularly attentive to the emergency situations, which dictate new approaches and changes in politics, some of which have to be countered.

We, therefore, decided to establish a Global Commission on Democracy and Emergencies, which has worked throughout this year. We were very pleased to have your Secretary General, Mr Martin Chungong, as a member of this Global Commission. He brought into our deliberations the vast and varied experience of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

At the beginning of the Global Commission’s work, we decided that there are three cornerstones of democratic resilience, which have to be looked at in the times of emergency. First, the **mechanisms of democracy and fundamental rights**; second, **social inclusion**, sensitivity to social development and problems that exist; and third, effective **leadership and democratic culture**.

It is clear that a **sufficiently robust and legally defined institutional framework** is an essential condition for social cohesion.

It is also essential for the need and action to **remove the seeds of authoritarianism** from democracies themselves. Democratic societies have to actively respond to any sign of concentration of power, corruption, erosion of the rule of law, and other practices that diminish the quality of democracy.

Democracy should not surrender to **politics of polarization**. It is crucial that in the sein of the IPU Assembly, we look at polarization with particular attention. Democracy must not allow the participants in the political debate to use the “us vs them” rhetoric. There must be sensitivity to build inclusive discussion.

Finally, it was necessary to ensure that **human rights protection** is understood as a fundamental prerequisite for a democratic society.

These are some of the basic ideas which have permeated the work of the Global Commission, and on which it has formulated a series of recommendations that will be included in its final report.

Parliaments have a central role, and have demonstrated that role at the time of COVID-19 emergency as well. They have shown important adaptability to the situation caused by the pandemic. There were very positive examples of increased **efficiency, transparency, inclusion and innovation**. And I hope that this Assembly will bring these practices to the fore in the discussion that will start today.

Several areas require particular attention, and that is where our **recommendations** are focused. Let me briefly mention eight among them:

1. **Review the legal and constitutional framework for emergencies:** When COVID-19 is over, it will be important to assess whether the country’s legal framework has a definition of emergencies that adequately reflect the critical tasks of the 21st century; and whether constitutional provisions for emergency declarations provide sufficient safeguards to mitigate the risk of abuse of emergency powers. This is extremely important and must not be neglected at the time of dealing with an emergency or in the period immediately after.
2. **The legal framework for emergencies must be clear, accessible and publicly available in advance.** Emergencies must be determined by law, and legislative powers are extremely important in such situations.
3. Our societies have to **be ready for future emergencies**, and **parliamentary oversight** over government action is essential. It is crucial that, particularly during emergencies, such oversight continues to exist and is sufficiently robust. It is also important to ensure that the parliament has an **emergency preparedness plan** that allows for flexible rules of procedure to continue working in emergencies.
4. **Embed digital technologies:** As we have heard several occasions during this Assembly, digital technologies have been used in many parliaments as an important tool to ensure the continuity of parliamentary work during the emergency of the current pandemic. Innovation is necessary and doable. Parliaments worldwide have demonstrated that digital technologies can help make sure that the parliaments continue to work, that the

legislative powers are not reduced, and that the issues of management and action needed at the time of emergencies are appropriately addressed.

5. **A new information ecosystem that serves the public interest** is needed. The legislative bodies of democratic states should consider adopting appropriate rules to limit monopolistic practices on social media companies. This task is not equally available to every country in the world, but it is an important priority for all.
6. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that there is a need of exploring **new mechanisms of participation**. One positive democratic development during the emergency is the growing appetite for civic engagement in decision-making and the growth potential offered by digital technologies to feed that appetite and empower civic participation. There is also a need to create new, wider channels for interaction between states authorities, parliaments, and civil society. The methods may differ from one country to another, but the need for such innovation is universal.
7. **To achieve a participatory democracy and inclusive representation** it is critical to enable the role of women, youth and other groups who have not been sufficiently represented so far. They have to have an opportunity to play an appropriate role. I was very pleased and encouraged to hear yesterday's evening a persistent emphasis on the strengthening of the role of women parliamentarians. Increasing the numbers, enabling the election and making sure that women parliamentarians play a proper role is necessary. And Madame President, if you allow me, I was particularly impressed by your energetic leadership of our discussion. This shows how important it is to have equality of opportunity for all, for men and women, and that women have the opportunity to lead.
8. **Explore new mechanisms of youth engagement:** COVID-19 has shown us that youth has to be engaged more in democratic institutions. The aspirations of young people have to be given better attention than in the past. Permanent consultation mechanisms with youth are necessary, and national institutions that exist for that purpose have to be encouraged. There are other ways to engage young people than formal consultation and participation, but the totality of these mechanisms have to be studied and developed to a proper level.

In Club de Madrid, we believe that this year of the pandemic has provided many openings for an in-depth discussion. For a discussion that will go more deeply into the pandemic experience and that will draw lessons from that experience for dealing with future emergencies.

The emergencies of the 21st century may be similar or even more severe than the ones created by the pandemic. Therefore, we all have good reasons to learn. And having said that, I must add that it is highly encouraging that the Inter-Parliamentary Union has taken this approach during the 143rd Assembly and has offered opportunities to the parliamentarians to discuss the issues of our moment deeply and in and provide guidelines for the future.

I wish you success in the 143rd Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. I wish you every success in your work; in the vital work of parliaments worldwide, and I look forward to furthering cooperation between Club de Madrid and the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

I thank you for your attention.