

**SPEECH FOR MADAM SPEAKER AT THE 146<sup>TH</sup> IPU GENERAL DEBATE: Promoting peaceful coexistence and inclusive societies: Fighting Intolerance**

**Hon. President,**

**Hon. Speakers of Parliament,**

**Hon. Members of Parliament,**

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

We thank you Hon. President, for the opportunity to take part in this General Debate of the 146<sup>th</sup> Session of the IPU.

Our founding President of the democratic South Africa, President Nelson Mandela, said: “No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background or his religion. People learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”

This profound truth about humanity articulated by President Mandela, is so relevant and central today, as the IPU seeks answers to the exponential escalation of strife, hatred, conflict and wars that characterise our world. The chosen theme for the debate, ***Promoting peaceful coexistence and inclusive societies: Fighting Intolerance***, bears fundamental relevance to the work of Parliaments. In the context of democracy, parliaments should represent the aspirations of all their respective societies, united in their diversity.

It is this cardinal character of Parliament that makes it a true representative of the people and therefore the foremost defender of democracy and its institutions. As President Mandela urged the world to teach people to love as it comes naturally to our hearts, we parliamentarians bear the responsibility, as members of these premier institutions of our respective societies, to be these ***teachers of love***.

If the evaluative reports tell us that peaceful coexistence around the world is at its lowest ebb in 15 years, we must speak truth to ourselves by asking the unpalatable question: **how could this undesirable trend emerge and grow right under our noses as world parliamentarians?** We know very well that peaceful coexistence in societies is fundamental for human development, progress and prosperity, and therefore, we must hold ourselves accountable for these outcomes, and seek ways to arrest and reverse these trends.

**Honourable President,**

History has already shown us the reality we ought to accept, which is that, without unity and cohesion, societies stagnate and even regress as they channel their focus and energies towards that which divides them.

This is one of the biggest challenges we face in modern societies. Unfortunately, the problem is also compounded by those who have a deliberate agenda to perpetuate strife and divisions, in order to benefit themselves and their sectoral interest at the expense of other nations.

**Mr President,**

Given our painful history of both colonialism and apartheid, we South Africans know too well as our lived experience the devastating effects of intolerance, exclusion and systemic divisions.

After fighting against the polarisation of our society for over three decades, we learned that in order to save our society and focus on rebuilding a better future, we must stop the war and unite our people. We had to build the necessary conditions for us to stop talking past each other, to feel we all belonged, we mattered and can be heard.

We set an example for our people and the world, that intolerance is only borne from a feeling of exclusion and an unfounded fear of each other.

What we succeeded in doing was to at least convince our people that their country belongs to all of them, and that they should all take part in finding solutions to its problems. Once we did that, however, we realised that following the end of apartheid and the dawn of a new democratic era, the divisions of the past continued to define and impacted on our society and its ability to move forward.

This legacy of our past persists today in the forms of inequality, racism, racial and gender-based poverty and under-development, xenophobia and deep-seated mistrust of one another.

In the context of this topic, the situation in South Africa demonstrates that in its efforts to foster peaceful co-existence and cohesion, Parliaments should recognise the unique reality of the historic basis of divisions, intolerance and incoherence within our societies. In other words, we need to raise the bar in striving for peaceful co-existence and inclusion from the baseline of the country's historical causes.

For our part, our current efforts to fight intolerance in South Africa have been based on the following interventions, each of which I will briefly explain:

- (a) Creating platforms for dialogue and negotiation;

- (b) Establishing mechanisms for truth and reconciliation;
- (c) Amending or abolishing legislation that promotes intolerance through a democratically elected parliamentary assembly;
- (d) Ensuring Parliament serves as a platform for public debate; and
- (e) Parliament holds government accountable for implementing international human rights agreements, related laws and policies.

Dialogue and negotiation served as the base upon which drafting a new constitution for a democratic South Africa rested. Both the Interim Constitution of 1993 and the final Constitution of 1996 provide for a wide-ranging Bill of Rights. These rights remain the cornerstone of South Africa's democracy. Significantly, our Constitution cannot be easily changed. It is afforded special protection, as it can only be amended through a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly and a supporting vote of at least six of the nine provinces represented in the National Council of Provinces.

**Mr President,**

Parliament, as an instrument of government, is a product of political contestations for power. What it gives us is a combination of public representatives who are a microcosm of our society and not at all homogeneous.

As we have done during the time of our negotiation to end Apartheid, we must look at advancing the goals of our new society in an inclusive manner, making sure that even if the majority view must prevail, all views must be heard.

We also need to ensure that the concerns and fears of minorities are taken seriously and not dismissed simply because there is a majority view. Our policy direction must also take into consideration the interests of the vulnerable in our society, the women, children, the youth, people with disability and the aged.

Tolerance must also include compromises, and the realisation that if we are to be inclusive, there must be accommodation, to ensure decisions by consensus.

South Africans have learned a lot from the process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which strove to achieve reconciliation and supervise the granting of amnesty to those who had committed serious violations of human rights during the Apartheid years. This made it possible for us to move forward.

**Mr President,**

Achieving co-existence must not mean that we regress and undermine the attainment of the key goals we have set to move our country from Apartheid to one where there is freedom and prosperity for all. We believe that in order to achieve inclusion, we need to rid our society of the injustice and imbalances of the past. These remain and Parliament is acutely aware that these ideals must be attained.

Since the first democratic Parliament was established in 1994, a considerable number of laws aimed at dismantling apartheid and eradicating all forms of discrimination were approved by Parliament. New and amended pieces of legislation were put in place to enforce equality and prevent discrimination, such as the Employment Equity Act, the Promotion of Access to Information Act, the Promotion of Administrative Justice Act, and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act. In addition, the Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill is currently before Parliament. Introduced in 2018, the Bill seeks to provide for the offence of hate crime and the offence of hate speech, as well as for the prosecution of persons who commit those offences. Parliament's committees are considering the Bill's provisions in detail.

At the policy level, South Africa's Cabinet adopted the *National Action Plan to combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance 2019-2024*. The Plan commits all sectors of our society to the promotion and protection of human rights, and to raising awareness of anti-racism, equality and anti-discrimination issues.

**Mr President,**

Our Parliament is constitutionally mandated to serve as a platform for public consideration of issues, including dialogue against intolerance. We have sought to build an institution that belongs to all South Africans, "a People's Parliament". With this defining mission, we are, indeed, teachers of the love President Mandela passionately talked about and embodied.

Mr President, parliamentary oversight of the executive's implementation of international human rights agreements, related laws and policies remain crucial. The role of Parliaments does not end with the making of laws. We need to ensure that they assess the intended impact. To this end, South Africa commissioned a High-Level Panel to assess the impact of our laws on our people. The panel did not mince its words on the challenges we still face, and its recommendations continue to define the character of the sixth Parliament and our current efforts to remodel Parliament for the seventh administration.

As we cannot exonerate ourselves from the net outcomes and latent consequences of our legislative interventions, the IPU needs to take responsibility for undesirable trends in peaceful co-existence. This is a bold and commendable step.

**In conclusion, Mr President,**

It is also important that as Parliaments of the world, we work together to ensure that what we do to achieve peaceful co-existence in our respective societies is also done collaboratively to achieve peaceful co-existence amongst nations globally.

We need to ensure that in our dealings with each other, the pursuit of a just and equal society becomes our common basis to build a better world for all of humanity.

Peaceful co-existence will mean an end to wars of greed, an end to poverty and suffering, to forced migration and the removal of all barriers to a better quality of life for all. That should be the essence of an inclusive society and an inclusive world order.

**I thank you.**