



Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue: *Working together for our common future*

Palais des Congrès, Marrakesh, Morocco
Marrakesh, 13–15 June 2023



Kingdom of Morocco

The Parliament

Description of Conference sessions

Concept note for the General Debate

Parliaments and religious leaders: Promoting dialogue, working together for our common future

Religion and belief are infused into the fabric of all societies. This begins with freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief as a universal human right that the different branches of government and civil society are tasked with upholding. It extends to how different religions or beliefs find expression in areas such as the constitutional text, sources of legislation, national values or the demographic profile of society. A number of policy areas have a religious or belief dimension where the interests and work of parliaments, representatives of religions or beliefs, and civil society often intersect.

While parliamentarians and leaders of religions or beliefs have different mandates, they share the common goal of working together for the well-being of their societies and communities. Parliaments work to promote and uphold the rule of law, human rights and justice. Representatives of religions or beliefs are influential community members and can have an impact upon how people participate in society in the exercise of their civic and political rights and how they view their allegiance to the State. They can also advocate on behalf of their communities.

There is great benefit to be had from dialogue between parliaments and representatives of religions or beliefs to build more just, inclusive and peaceful societies, and to jointly tackle common challenges. Where this dialogue does not exist, competing interests, rights abuses and social fractures can emerge.

The General Debate accompanies the two-track objective of the conference, looking at the role of interfaith dialogue in promoting rule of law, on the one hand, and peace and inclusion, on the other. To make the General Debate as meaningful, concrete and action-oriented as possible, speakers are invited to address the following questions:

- (1) What role can interfaith dialogue play in guaranteeing the rule of law and promoting peace and inclusion?
- (2) What good practices exist where parliaments are engaging with representatives of religions or beliefs and/or civil society to build more peaceful, just and inclusive societies?
- (3) What shared challenges to peace, inclusion or the rule of law are being faced by parliaments, representatives of religions and beliefs and civil society at the national, regional or international level?
- (4) How can parliaments cooperate better with representatives of religions and beliefs and civil society to address common concerns?

Session descriptions

General Debate:

Parliaments and religious leaders: Promoting dialogue, working together for our common future

Description

The General Debate will give parliamentarians, religious leaders, faith-based organizations and experts the opportunity to share good practices on how parliaments and religions and beliefs are responding to major issues that impact the rule of law, peace and inclusion. The General Debate will also be a platform to identify ongoing challenges at the national, regional or international level, as well as for speakers to make recommendations about how parliaments and religious actors could cooperate better to address common concerns.

Track 1 (The rule of law)

High-level panel 1

Working together for the promotion of the rule of law: Good practices and challenges

Description

Upholding the rule of law is a pre-condition for preserving statehood and guaranteeing the rights of citizens, including the right to freely exercise thought, conscience, religion or belief. The State is able to limit the expression of freedom of religion or belief for legitimate reasons, such as when certain expressions compete with other rights. Illegitimate limitations of the right to freedom of religion or belief also exist in many States. These often target marginalized communities.

This panel will focus on the role of parliaments in protecting freedom of religion or belief. It will explore examples of where religious freedoms have been limited or have prevailed vis-à-vis other rights, and the role and responsibility of legislators in reconciling competing rights in order to ensure that the rule of law is maintained, while guaranteeing that the rights and freedoms of citizens, regardless of their religion or belief, are upheld.

Panel

Religion and belief in different secular systems: Examples from around the world

Description

Broadly speaking, secularism describes a form of governance which aims to keep the State and religious spheres of authority separate and autonomous, both to guarantee the neutrality of the State and to protect religious institutions from outside interference. There are different cultures of secularism and models of interpreting it. These address areas such as where to draw the line between separating spheres of influence, understanding that, historically, religious and State institutions have been intertwined in many societies. There are also different attitudes towards religion and belief in secular systems: some view them as a public good and encourage their expression in public spaces, whereas in other contexts the State attempts to guarantee equality by limiting some expressions of religion or belief in public spaces. This panel will aim to highlight different expressions of secularism around the world and how they impact social cohesion in different societies.

Panel

Clarifying the relationship between the rule of law and freedom of religion or belief to preserve statehood and citizenship

Description

Parliaments are the guardians of the rule of law, human rights and justice in societies, through their key functions of law-making, budgeting, representation and oversight. There is a strong correlation between peace, justice and strong institutions, as reinforced by Sustainable Development Goal 16, and parliaments stand at this nexus. Religious actors can be important allies in promoting the rule of law; as influential community leaders, they influence how people participate in society, how they exercise their civic and political rights, and how they view their allegiance to the State.

In some contexts, religion and belief are also reflected in governance structures and so preservation of the rule of law also intersects with religious law. Challenges can emerge where there are tensions between secular and religious legislation or where faith-based rhetoric undermines the legitimacy and effectiveness of State institutions. This panel will showcase good practices where parliaments and religious actors have cooperated to promote the rule of law, and seek to address ongoing challenges.

Panel

Legislators and religious leaders as bridge builders: Promoting rights and fundamental freedoms for more just and cohesive societies

Description

Both legislators and religious leaders can function as mediators within their societies: parliamentarians are elected by the people and have a responsibility to reflect and represent their interests and needs to ensure that parliamentary work is relevant and inclusive. Religious leaders are both trusted by and close to their communities, catering not only to their spiritual needs but also in many cases to their material needs, and also advocate for those needs in the public sphere. A dialogue between these two important social actors can lead to better informed parliaments doing more relevant work to uphold the rights of all. Religious leaders can further support this process by helping their communities understand parliamentary work and especially citizens' rights and how to access them. This panel will explore different ways that legislators and religious leaders serve as bridge-builders between different sectors of society, to promote the rights of all citizens. It will also consider paths for improved dialogue, while reinforcing the importance of keeping political and religious spheres of influence separate.

Track 2 (Peace and inclusion)

High-level panel 2

Promoting regional and global peace through intra-faith dialogue

Description

The world today is witness to many conflicts with a religious dimension which impact local, regional and even global dynamics. Many of these conflicts are intra-faith in nature, meaning that the conflicting parties come from within different traditions, confessions, legal schools or schools of thought of the same religious or belief community. Conflict lines can be theological, intellectual, cultural, ethnic, historical, political, geographical and economic, and conflict can be manifested directly or by proxy. This panel will bring together religious leaders, parliamentarians and experts with first-hand experience of intra-faith conflict to consider its impact on the political establishment and the specific contribution that parliamentary dialogue with religious actors can make in mediating sectarian conflict and promoting peaceful coexistence.

Panel

How can parliamentarians cooperate with religious communities and faith-based organizations to mobilize society for greater moderation, solidarity and inclusion?

Description

Approaching parliamentary work through a systemic lens in an attempt to make it more inclusive involves considering the broader set of actors and dynamics that influence parliaments. One such actor is civil society, which is an important bottom-up channel for the peaceful expression of constituents' interests, needs and perspectives. In many societies, faith-based organizations are active as service providers in the areas of education, social welfare and humanitarian aid, or through advocacy. They can complement or sometimes act as a corrective to the top-down institutional approach. Like other civil society organizations, they are an important agent of accountability for the State, acting as a litmus test for whether the duties towards citizens are being fulfilled and their rights met.

This panel will engage with parliamentarians and representatives of faith-based organizations to showcase different examples of dialogue or cooperation and how these have contributed towards society becoming more cohesive and inclusive.

Panel

Different mandates, common goals: Religious actors and parliamentarians as allies for promoting gender equality and youth participation

Description

Parliamentarians and religious actors, while having different areas of jurisdiction, share a common interest in building resilient societies, where all members feel included. Most parliaments and religions, however, fall short of promoting gender equality and meaningfully including youth. The global proportion of women parliamentarians stands at around 26%, whereas the proportion of parliamentarians under 30 is less than 3% (even though this age group comprises over 50% of the world's population). The fact that decisions are made by parliaments about the future, in which men and women will be equally affected and youth have the greatest stake, means this situation must be urgently addressed.

Religions have varying understandings of gender equality. In most faiths, leadership positions have been traditionally reserved for men, and women have less opportunity to participate in a formal manner. Regulations relating to gender roles also provide a barrier to gender equality. This is often countered with rhetoric reinforcing the fact that women and men are *equal* but have *different roles* to fulfil. Youth are often excluded from decision-making mechanisms within religious institutions, leading them to complain about being *on the menu*, rather than *at the table*.

This panel will consider avenues for cooperation between parliaments and religious actors to encourage gender equality and meaningful youth participation. It will also identify existing barriers and consider ways to overcome them.

Panel

Promoting trust and mutual recognition: Contributions of religious actors and parliamentarians to counter hate speech, incitement to violence and digital challenges to democracy

Description

Hate speech, disinformation, conspiracy theories and xenophobia are on the rise and often target communities on the basis of their religion or belief. The digital space has become an important platform for their expression: it provides a cross-border and often anonymous arena for exchange and even coordination of action, where misinformation is rife, media literacy weak and content moderation a constant challenge. Individuals and groups that use the online space to organize around common hate of religion or belief can threaten democratic principles and violate human rights. Parliaments are challenged to delineate the boundaries around freedom of speech and where it becomes incitement to violence, and find ways to translate this to the digital space. They must also identify the root causes driving hate speech that lie within their jurisdiction. This panel provides the opportunity to identify spaces for cooperation on this issue – which is both national and transnational – in order to promote a climate of acceptance and mutual recognition. The 2019 United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech is an important tool in this endeavour.