



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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Speech by Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General

16th Plenary Session of the Asian Parliamentary Assembly The Role of Asian Parliaments in Strengthening Intercultural and Inter-civilizational Dialogue in Asia: Opportunities, Challenges, and Future Pathways

Manama, 26 January 2026

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear friends,

I am pleased to address the 16th Plenary Session of the Asian Parliamentary Assembly on a topic that has been a priority for the Inter-Parliamentary Union for several years, following the wishes of our membership.

In a fragmented and polarized world, it is essential to reinforce the bonds of culture, shared heritage and civilization that unite us. Asia's extraordinary diversity of cultures, religions and traditions is a strength, and Asian parliaments play a vital role in fostering cultural, religious and civilizational dialogue and diversity and in lawmaking to protect cultural heritage and uphold non-discrimination and freedom of religion or belief.

I therefore commend the APA for the topic of this plenary session, and its recent resolutions on promoting cultural and civilizational diversity, protecting cultural heritage, and advancing interfaith dialogue and harmony. The value given to upholding intercultural and civilizational dialogue resonates strongly with other Asian-led international initiatives, including the Interparliamentary Conference on cultural heritage in Baku; the International Parliament for Tolerance and Peace meeting in Phnom Penh; and the establishment of international days dedicated to peaceful coexistence, dialogue among civilizations, and combating Islamophobia.

Allow me to share a few reflections from the IPU's experience in supporting intercultural and interfaith dialogue for parliaments around the world, which, it might not surprise you to hear, has also been driven by Parliaments on the Asian continent.

Dialogue across cultures and faiths for peaceful coexistence has long been part of the IPU's work, not only as a value in itself, but as a practical tool for prevention, early action and conflict-sensitive policymaking. Parliaments and MPs play a crucial role in creating the legal and moral framework for a society to be more just, equal, and tolerant, and where cultural heritage and religious freedom are protected.

In recent years, our commitment to intercultural and interfaith dialogue has been reinforced through two Parliaments from the broader Eurasia and Gulf regions: the General Debate of the 137th IPU Assembly in St. Petersburg in 2017 focussed on "Promoting cultural pluralism and peace through inter-faith and inter-ethnic Dialogue". The General Debate of the 146th IPU Assembly here in Manama in 2023 addressed promoting peaceful coexistence and fighting intolerance.

These moments highlight the how fostering pluralism, respect and peaceful coexistence through dialogue are priorities for national parliaments.

The Manama Assembly was particularly inspiring since it led to a partnership with the King Hamad Global Center for Coexistence and Tolerance. With their support, we delivered an edition of our Science for Peace School in Jordan last year. Our membership has further benefitted from the King Hamad

Center's expertise on wide-ranging topics including promoting coexistence, countering hatred and polarization, fostering religious literacy, and harnessing ethical values for peace.

In 2023 and 2025 we organized, together with the Parliaments of Morocco and Italy respectively, two international Parliamentary Conferences on Interfaith Dialogue, which convened parliamentarians, religious and cultural representatives, civil society, the United Nations and other experts. These Conferences produced joint commitments from parliamentarians to harness intercultural and interfaith dialogue to prevent polarization and violence, foster peaceful coexistence and inclusion, and reinforce strong, rights-based institutions in full respect of the rule of law

Turning to the challenges: they are many. These range from lack of political will and budget constraints, to weakening social cohesion through growing intolerance and polarisation. Cultural heritage sites can fall victim to destruction, theft, neglect and environmental degradation. Sometimes the laws protecting cultural heritage and religious freedom are lacking, at other times, despite strong legislation, implementation, resourcing and enforcement remain weak. We are also living in a time of global disunity, in which fear and uncertainty can too easily overshadow dialogue, patience and mutual understanding.

Politics is never free from challenges, and parliaments, as representative institutions, have a particular responsibility to confront these challenges through dialogue, inclusive lawmaking and accountability, while striving to work for more peaceful and just societies. In the face of conflicts, the IPU continues to offer its good offices to facilitate parliamentary dialogue and diplomacy, and to support parliaments in the exercise of their mandates.

I remain open to dialogue on this and other areas where the IPU can support your work.

I conclude by thanking the organizers for this invitation and by recognizing the leadership of the Kingdom of Bahrain, as we prepare to mark the first International Day of Peaceful Coexistence in two days' time.

Thank you.