



Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

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Speech by Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General

Geneva School of Diplomacy
Graduation Ceremony

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Dear graduates of the Geneva School of Diplomacy,
Dear faculty members and alumni,
Distinguished guests and members of the international community,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to have been invited here today to receive an Honorary Doctorate from this illustrious institution. In my 12 years as Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union – the IPU – I have had the privilege of receiving many honours, but I think this is the first time, since I graduated from my own studies, a little over 40 years ago, that I have had an academic honour bestowed on me. As I approach retirement – with my third and final mandate as Secretary General coming to an end just a few days from now – I will take this Doctorate as a source of inspiration, and as an incentive to return to my true passion, the world of academia and learning... now that I have a little more time on my hands.

But I also see this Doctorate as a recognition of the service I have given to the international community over the past four decades. I began my career in the Parliament of my home country, Cameroon, but an opportunity to serve the global parliamentary community soon came calling, and the IPU – and indeed Geneva – has been my home for the past 34 years. The IPU is the global organization of national parliaments, which for over 130 years has been dedicated to promoting peace through parliamentary diplomacy and dialogue. Almost every country in the world is represented among our 183 Member Parliaments, and I am proud to have led this Organization for the last 12 years, bringing the voice of parliaments – which, after all, is the voice of the people – to global affairs. In a world facing turmoil on multiple fronts, that voice is needed more than ever.

I understand that this Doctorate is being awarded to me in recognition of my contribution to international cooperation, multilateral dialogue and parliamentary diplomacy. By their very nature, these are not individual endeavours, so it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge and thank all those who have contributed to my work in these areas: my colleagues in the IPU Secretariat, who I often liken to the feet paddling below the duck represented by the Secretary General; my friends in our partner organizations and the diplomatic community here in Geneva and beyond; and of course the many parliamentarians around the world who have understood that their role begins at home with their constituents, but that they also have a place on the global stage. More often than not, I have found myself in the role of instigator or facilitator, but it is members of parliament who have really driven the process forward and made things happen.

Over the past few weeks, I have been doing the rounds of my colleagues in other international organizations to say goodbye, and it has been refreshing to hear just how respected the IPU is among the international community. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said himself how relevant the IPU is and acknowledged how parliaments can guide governments to engage with the UN system in a more constructive way. And my friend Dr. Tedros at the WHO recognized how parliaments can help deliver health for all and strengthen global health security.

I am sure that many of you here today are worried about what lies ahead, particularly in terms of finding your place in a highly competitive labour market. As someone about to leave that labour market, I hope I am well-placed to offer some advice to the next generation of leaders in global affairs, some of whom I am sure are here in this very room. As I have mentioned, the world is facing many crises: conflict, violations of

international law, challenges to multilateralism, pushbacks on democracy... not to mention our repeated failure to kickstart the 2030 Agenda and ensure true sustainable development for all.

With conflict raging in many parts of the world, it is perhaps inevitable that my first piece of advice relates to peace and security. The quest for peace was at the forefront of the minds of the IPU's founding fathers 137 years ago, and they envisaged a world where countries resolved their differences through mediation rather than war. The word "parliament" of course comes from the French verb *parler*, to speak, and the IPU was devised as a "parliament of parliaments", a place for parliamentarians from around the world to come together and engage in dialogue. But of course, talking – *parler* – is only half of the equation. We also need to listen. It is only through understanding the point of view of our opponents that we can begin to find common ground and compromise. Throughout my career I have witnessed first-hand – whether in meetings between parliamentarians from Armenia and Azerbaijan, the two Koreas, or even Israel and Palestine – that we have more in common than that which divides us. And it all starts with listening.

I am frequently asked why I am often pictured alongside people who are not usually seen together. One of the proudest achievements of my tenure as IPU Secretary General has been bringing together people with divergent views and encouraging them to speak, listen, and forge more positive approaches for their future relationship.

Many people have criticized the United Nations for not delivering – and in a way they may have a point. It is clearly time for a fresh start, for a revamping of the international architecture. The current international system has barely changed in 80 years. It is time for the United Nations to become more inclusive of a wider variety of stakeholders: civil society, academia and the scientific community, the private sector, and of course, legislative institutions. The purpose of this increased inclusion is not to usurp the prerogative of governments, but to enrich deliberations and make their outcomes more legitimate.

One upcoming opportunity for greater inclusivity is the forthcoming election of a new UN Secretary-General. I am pleased that my own successor as IPU Secretary General will be the Organization's first woman Secretary General, my dear colleague and friend Anda Filip. I strongly believe it is now time for the United Nations to take that same leap forward and elect its first woman Secretary General. My simple message to you all is: everyone deserves a seat at the table. Man or woman, young or old, rich or poor. Wherever you come from, whatever the colour of your skin, you all have something to give.

We are living in a world where democracy is repeatedly being challenged. Authoritarian regimes are rising and populism is finding fertile ground in many parts of the world. Hate is proliferating. Even in areas where progress seemed unstoppable, like gender equality, pushbacks are turning the tide. The best response to this is again quite simple. We must strengthen our institutions. We must bolster global governance and the rule of law. And parliaments are at the heart of this. Only parliaments can reflect the will of the people. Only parliaments can hold governments accountable. Working together, parliaments can also shape the future of the multilateral system. In the IPU's view, the parliaments that are best able to do this are those that are representative, transparent, accountable and accessible.

I think we can all agree that the high temperatures here in Geneva this week are a vivid reminder that the climate crisis has not gone away. It remains an existential threat to humanity. My advice here is: don't be distracted, don't turn away. We must lead by example, support the search for sustainable solutions, and engage on every level to secure a safe future for our children. Climate action should also be used as an opportunity to progress on other development fronts: we can all benefit from a cleaner environment, better health, more affordable energy, and more sustainable consumption and production.

The other major change we must face up to is technological evolution. There is no doubt that emerging technologies, perhaps most obviously artificial intelligence, are changing our world beyond recognition. In some ways, this is a cause for great concern: we must never lose sight of the social, ethical and environmental implications. But once these technologies are invented and made available, they are here to stay, and we must do everything we can to harness them for good. We must not just charge ahead blindly

– there need to be guardrails in place. But our response must be agile; we must adapt to and embrace the new reality.

Let me end on a note of hope. When the world pulls together, we can get through anything. The COVID-19 pandemic was a case in point. We showed that when we combine our efforts, we can succeed – on new ways of working, on vaccines, and on health resilience. It is now a matter of when, not if, we will face another major pandemic. But we have learned the lessons and we will be more ready than ever. Just last year the World Health Assembly adopted a wide-ranging Pandemic Agreement, helping countries to prevent, prepare for and respond to future pandemics. This proves that multilateralism can work. That inclusive, representative and democratic dialogue and cooperation can yield results.

So another piece of advice is: mobilize everyone. The problems the world is facing will not be solved by strongmen leaders, isolationism and protectionism. To steer the ship in the right direction, we need everyone on board. All of you here graduating today have great potential, but you will not succeed alone. Bring people along with you. Listen and learn from others. Believe in the power of dialogue and embrace strength in numbers.

One last remark: people often ask me how I got to where I am today, at the pinnacle of global diplomacy, from my humble beginnings in a remote part of Cameroon, and how they can achieve the same. The answer again is simple: dream big. The sky is the limit. Don't be overwhelmed by the intractable challenges that the world is facing today. Have hope and be optimistic but also have faith in the institutions designed to rise to those challenges.

Once again, I would like to thank the leadership of the Geneva School of Diplomacy for this honour, and I wish my fellow graduates every success in their future endeavours.

Thank you.