Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

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Speech by Ms. Anda Filip, IPU Secretary General

IPU Global Parliamentary Conference on human rights
Protecting human rights in an age of disruption

Geneva, 12 November 2026

Excellencies,
Honourable Speakers and members of parliament,
Representatives of the United Nations and international organizations,
Distinguished guests, dear friends,

On behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, it is a pleasure to welcome you to Geneva for this Global Parliamentary Conference on Human Rights. The response to our invitation has been remarkable. The conference is fully booked, and many more people have expressed an interest in joining us. That is an encouraging signal. At a time of democratic and human rights backsliding in many parts of the world, the willingness of parliamentarians from across the world to come together and discuss how to defend these rights matters enormously.

I wish to thank the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies for so graciously hosting us over these two days. We are grateful for your hospitality and for the wider commitment to human dignity that our two organizations share. I am also delighted that the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, will join us tomorrow afternoon to deliver a keynote address. His participation will provide an important perspective as we consider the outcomes of our discussions.

Dear Colleagues,

We meet in turbulent times. Armed conflict, attacks on civilians, displacement and disregard for international law are testing the international order. Multilateral institutions face growing pressure, even as the need for cooperation becomes more urgent. In too many places, the space for peaceful dissent is narrowing. Independent institutions are challenged, journalists and civil society organizations face restrictions, and the protections that people have spent generations building can no longer be taken for granted.

The evidence is sobering. According to the V-Dem Institute's Democracy Report 2026, 44 countries were experiencing a process of autocratisation in 2025. Freedom House reports that political rights and civil liberties deteriorated in 54 countries last year, while improving in 35. These figures reflect different methodologies, but they point in the same direction: democratic and human rights protections are under sustained pressure. And this is not a challenge confined to any one region or political tradition.

Yet, democratic decline is not inevitable. Political choices can weaken institutions, and political choices can renew them. Decisions made by parliaments, one law or budget at a time, help determine that direction.

This year offers three significant reminders of why institutions and commitments matter. We mark 60 years since the adoption of the two International Covenants on Human Rights, 20 years since the creation of the United Nations Human Rights Council, and 50 years of the IPU’s own Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians. These anniversaries represent achievements built through political

will and international cooperation. They also remind us that treaties, standards and institutions must be defended, renewed and made effective by improving people's lives.

This responsibility is central to the IPU's work. Our Statutes expressly make contributing to the defense and promotion of universal human rights one of our objectives. That commitment runs through our work: strengthening representative institutions, supporting democratic participation, promoting equality and inclusion, and defending parliamentarians who are threatened because they exercise their mandate.

And parliaments have a particular responsibility. Governments may negotiate treaties and announce policies, but parliaments can turn promises into law, provide the resources needed to implement them, question ministers about results and insist on remedies when rights are violated. They can give a hearing to people whose voices are otherwise ignored. They can also ask the difficult question that should accompany every public decision: what will this mean for the rights and dignity of the people we represent?

That is why the IPU chose the promotion and protection of human rights as its priority theme for 2026. Through our *Bring human rights into focus* campaign, we have identified ten proposed actions, encouraged parliamentarians to become Human Rights Champions and used our Assemblies and meetings to build solidarity and secure commitments. This conference is central to that effort.

And I am pleased to say that our young parliamentarians have already set an example. At the IPU Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians in Samarkand in September, around 100 young MPs from 50 countries came together to reclaim human rights, justice and dignity. Their message was clear: ‘We will not be a generation defined by the erosion of rights.’ They called for greater youth participation in peacebuilding and political decisions, stronger protection against violence and discrimination, and human rights education in schools. They also pledged their support for our *Bring human rights into focus* campaign and urged parliamentarians everywhere to act. Their determination should inform our discussions here in Geneva.

And so, our programme today and tomorrow brings together several strands of this work. Let me highlight a few.

First, protecting those who defend rights in parliament. For fifty years, our Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians has worked across political and geographical divides to assist parliamentarians facing arbitrary detention, unfair trials, threats and violence. In 2025, the Committee examined a record 1,027 cases of alleged violations involving parliamentarians in 58 countries. Behind every case there is a representative whose ability to speak freely may have been taken away, and constituents whose voices may have been silenced. Through dialogue with authorities, missions, trial observation and parliamentary solidarity, the Committee has secured progress, including the resolution of individual cases.

But threats do not come only from the State. In a report this year, the IPU surveyed over 500 parliamentarians about intimidation and violence they face from members of the public. Seventy-one per cent reported experiencing some form of violence, online or offline. Women are often targeted in distinct, gendered ways, while parliamentarians from minority or disadvantaged groups may face additional risks. We need stronger institutional safeguards, support for those targeted and a political culture where disagreement never becomes a license for abuse.

Second, making international commitments work nationally. Recommendations from the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review and treaty bodies matter only if implemented. The IPU supports parliamentary engagement in these processes and has issued new guidance this year on the treaty-body system. Parliamentary committees can join national delegations to UN review conferences, follow up recommendations, scrutinize legislation and budgets, and hold governments accountable for progress.

Third, defending freedom of expression and responding to technological change. Together with UNESCO, the IPU has developed an online course to help parliamentarians understand and protect freedom of expression, including when confronted with disinformation and online hostility. On artificial intelligence, our Members adopted a resolution in 2024 on its implications for democracy, human rights and the rule of law; we have also issued Guidelines for the responsible use of AI in Parliaments. The challenge is urgent. Technology can expand opportunity and strengthen public services, but parliamentary scrutiny and legislation must not fall so far behind innovation that discrimination, surveillance or unaccountable decisions become entrenched. The effects on employment and the risks of increasingly powerful and autonomous systems demand serious democratic debate.

Fourth, ensuring that rights belong to everyone. Children's rights require more than declarations: they require protective laws, public budgets and opportunities for children to be heard. The rights of migrants require principled legislation and effective oversight, including when political debate becomes polarized. And the rights of persons with disabilities require full participation, not simply formal recognition. At our Assembly in Arusha last month, IPU Members adopted a resolution on parliamentary strategies to advance the rights and empowerment of persons with disabilities. This is an example of how our shared standards can become a programme of parliamentary action, including within parliamentary institutions themselves.

All these questions are connected. A parliament that cannot protect free expression will struggle to hear the voices of children, migrants or persons with disabilities. A parliament whose own members are intimidated cannot provide strong oversight. And a parliament that fails to examine its country's human rights commitments risks allowing the distance between international promises and daily reality to grow wider.

Distinguished Members of Parliament,

What, then, would I like us to take away from these two days? Not a catalogue of concerns alone. We know many of these concerns already. I hope we will agree that human rights must be treated as a responsibility of the whole parliament, reflected in legislation, budgets and oversight, not confined to a single committee. I hope we will identify practical ways to involve parliaments systematically in international human rights processes and to follow through on recommendations. I hope we will be clear that protecting parliamentarians, civic space and open debate is essential to protecting everyone else's rights. And I hope we will leave here with a stronger commitment to making parliaments themselves more inclusive, accessible and equipped to scrutinize new risks.

Clearly the IPU has a responsibility here too. We must continue to provide reliable evidence, practical tools and opportunities for parliamentarians to learn from one another. We must connect national parliamentary action with the UN human rights system, stand by colleagues under threat and help ensure that good intentions are followed by progress that can be assessed. We will listen closely to the experiences and proposals you bring to these discussions. Tomorrow afternoon, we will draw together the conference's conclusions and recommendations and consider how to carry them forward.

Just outside this plenary room, you will find a booth for our *Bring human rights into focus* campaign. I invite every parliamentarian to visit it and sign our commitment form. Choose one action you can pursue at home: a committee hearing, follow-up on an international recommendation, a safeguard for a colleague under threat or a step towards a more inclusive parliament. The IPU stands ready to help turn these commitments into action.

The challenges are serious, but progress is possible. I hope we will leave this conference with practical ideas, renewed determination and commitments we can put into effect.

Thank you.