



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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Parliamentary engagement on human rights: Identifying good practices and new opportunities for action

Seminar for members of parliamentary human rights committees organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in collaboration with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

**24 – 26 June 2019, Geneva
UN Palais des Nations, Conference Room XXIII**

Opening address
Mr. Martin Chungong
Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union

Ambassador Nazhat Shameem,
Dear President of the UN Human Rights Council,
Dear members of parliament,
Dear panellists,
Dear colleagues from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights,

I wish to extend to you a warm welcome to Geneva and to this seminar. I wish to thank the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for their collaboration in organizing this event, which is a further sign of our longstanding and fruitful partnership.

Let me put this seminar in a historical perspective. The IPU is the oldest international political organisation in the world. It was founded in 1889. The year 2019 coincides with our 130th anniversary and you are all kindly invited to celebrate this joyful occasion with us later today at the cocktail opening of our anniversary exhibition in this very same building.

The IPU started to address human rights issues in Lucerne in 1923; a Swiss member of parliament attending an IPU meeting called on the organisation to start addressing issues relating to democracy and human rights (he did not use the words human rights but if we look at what he said, that is what he meant). Since those early days, the IPU has in one form or another increasingly addressed issues relating to democracy and human rights. In those early days, it was a curious concern that prompted parliamentarians to want to focus on democracy. It was a feeling – as the Swiss deputy said – that parliaments were becoming too powerful, and there was a need to restore a better balance between the legislative branch, which in many countries tended to overthrow the government too often, and the executive branch. This is curious because in many ways, the reverse is true today.

The action of the IPU evolved considerably over the years in the area of democracy and human rights. The IPU was very much involved in the making of international law. There are quite a few of the international that saw the light of day in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s that in fact benefitted from the contributions of members of parliament working in the IPU.

In the 1960s, a decision was taken to develop a full-fledged programme to strengthen the parliamentary institution, and it was soon followed by a human rights programme. In the beginning, one of the preoccupations of the IPU was that a number of parliamentarians could not carry out their duties because the most fundamental of their and everybody's human rights were being violated: they had no freedom of speech, no freedom of expression, no freedom of association, in fact they could not work as members of parliament, and quite a few of them

disappeared, were assassinated or jailed. This led the IPU to set up a Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians. The Committee has dealt with over a 1000 cases in the last four decades and has in many instances been instrumental in securing the release of jailed parliamentarians. I am very pleased that the President of the Committee, Mr. Aleksandra Jerkov, is with us and that she will tell you more about the Committee's work on Wednesday.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our human rights activity has not ended there: over the years, the IPU has increasingly worked to strengthen the ability of parliaments to address human rights issues. I am very pleased that we are meeting today at the Palais des Nations and at a time when the UN Human Rights Council is in session. This demonstrates very aptly the important focus of our human rights work in recent years, namely the promotion of stronger synergies between the work done by UN human rights mechanisms at the international level and by parliaments at the national level.

Great strides have been made in this regard in the UN Human Rights Council, which has increasingly recognised that it is crucial to engage more systematically with parliaments. There is now strong consensus that without the direct involvement of parliaments many of the Council's recommendations remain a dead letter. Indeed, effective parliamentary action in terms of oversight, legislation, budget approval and the ratification of treaties is critical for the full national implementation of the Council's Universal Periodic Review recommendations as well as of its other calls for action.

Stronger recognition by the UN Human Rights Council of the work of parliaments also means that parliaments have to step up to the plate to help translate international human rights commitments into national action. To make this happen, the IPU, in collaboration with OHCHR, have embarked in recent years on a global awareness-raising and mobilisation campaign to familiarize parliamentarians with the work of the Council and to encourage them to play their part in ensuring better implementation of its recommendations at the national level.

These efforts have also confirmed one of our earlier findings, namely that parliamentary human rights committees are crucial to help ensure that human rights are given the attention they deserve and are mainstreamed in the work in parliament.

Indeed, the existence of strong and effective human rights committees sends an important signal that parliaments are serious about human rights. It also greatly helps to facilitate interaction between parliaments and other national and international human rights stakeholders.

It is our hope that this seminar will bring out many concrete examples in which your committees have been able to act in support of human rights. We hope that together we will be able to identify the building blocks for strong and effective parliamentary human rights committees. We also hope to discuss with you the challenges that you face in your work and to come up with concrete solutions to assist you, including in the area of stronger parliamentary involvement in international human rights mechanisms.

In our mind this meeting is only the start of a much longer engagement which we would like to have with you and your colleagues that sit on parliamentary human rights committees. I therefore look forward to being on this journey together in our common pursuit to help ensure that people, wherever they are, can fully enjoy their human rights.

Thank you.