



Inter-Parliamentary Union

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IPU Address

2018 Forum on Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law “Parliaments as promoters of human rights, democracy and the rule of law”

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IPU Secretary General
Chairperson of the second session of the Forum

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Excellencies,
High Commissioner
Vice President of the Council,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to chair the second session of the Forum on Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law. I wish to congratulate the UN Human Rights Council on the choice of topic for this second session, namely the focus on the role that parliaments play in promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

We are living in challenging times. Close to 70 million people, including 25 million refugees, have been forced from their homes, largely due to violent conflict. Democracy and human rights are increasingly under threat. Political discourse is becoming unpredictable and inflammatory, often guided by emotions on the spur of the moment. Societies are becoming polarized. The “us-versus-them” attitude leaves little place for tolerance, let alone understanding or sympathy for the “other” if the other holds different political opinions or looks different from us.

The spread of social media, initially hailed as the transformation that would bring us all together, has in fact produced new challenges to the way we discuss and understand one another. Some point out that the speed at which fake news spreads, its accessibility and increasing sophistication, the lack of transparency, the ease with which anyone can post anything anonymously, are posing a danger to democracies and its institutions and the very fabric of our societies.

How should we view these worrying developments, and what should we do, if we care about democracy, human rights and the rule of law?

I think any meaningful effort to grapple with today’s challenges needs to start with the recognition that democracies are not perfect and have inherent weaknesses and tensions. Democracies are often slow to react: this is indeed a challenge today as things are happening so fast, but this can be justifiably explained by the time-consuming, inclusive and consultative nature of democracy. It is unpredictable and messy too, but that is also part of the game.

Other weaknesses of democracy prosper when they can appeal to the darker side of human nature. Today the business model of politics and social media are becoming increasingly similar, seeking maximum engagement with ordinary people by drawing on raw emotions of anger and fear. In part thanks to disinformation and the micro-targeting of political messaging, people are alienated from each other to the point that minor disagreements suddenly seem insurmountable. Now not all tension is bad: as long as people acknowledge that differences exist but are willing to work together to find solutions, even if it comes with heated debate, this can in fact be a good thing.

This brings me to the arguments that show why democracy, if managed well, remains the only viable route for our people to come together in freedom around a common cause. Indeed, despite some of the challenging or, if you will, the inconveniences of democracy, democratic government remains the only system of government which allows for self-correction and accountability. And only democracy offers a platform for dissenting views to be expressed. This not only provides an outlet to “let off steam” and hence reduce the risk of violent conflict; it also safeguards everyone’s right to freedom of expression. What is more: democracy embodies the right of each of us to take part in the conduct of public affairs, which is a basic human right. Democracy therefore goes to the heart of the fundamental notion that we are all equal before the law and should all have the opportunity to chart the course of our respective countries.

Ideally, therefore parliaments should be a true reflection of society, meaning that half the membership is made up of women and that all segments of society, such as the youth, elderly and ethnic, national and religious minorities are adequately represented. True democracy requires majorities to respect the views and basic rights of minorities and to make a maximum effort to take their interests into account. In a true democracy, there is no place for “tyranny of the majority”, or a “winner takes all” mentality.

The effective response of parliaments to today’s challenges focuses on making their institutions stronger and more inclusive, with rules that are fair to everyone, and in providing a solid moral compass to take the national debate forward. Even though many citizens yearn for simpler times, MPs have the responsibility to rely on facts rather than emotions to make their case. It is crucial that MPs have an ethical political discourse and use data responsibly to inform policy and their decisions. The language they use is incredibly important. While we all agree that hate speech is not only morally but legally reprehensible, there is something much more insidious taking place in today’s political debate. Portraying your political opponents as “enemies that have to be destroyed”, “as idiots” or “traitors”, can only poison the atmosphere of dialogue we desperately need in order to work together. Parliamentarians have to refrain from using such language themselves and to call out those who rely on it for political mileage.

With the increase of partisan news reporting, as well as the rise of media which amplify misinformation, parliaments can do more to promote unbiased investigative journalism. They also have a duty to promote discussion and possibly legislation to define the role of social media platforms in addressing fake news and to help the electorate sort fact from fiction, in particular during election time. In parallel, parliaments have a crucial role to play in protecting freedom of expression, including that of their own members, so that they can do their work without fear of reprisal. In addition to safeguarding the space for political opposition, parliaments can also help create a conducive environment for civil society to flourish. Parliaments can also contribute to inculcating democratic values and the virtues of equality, understanding, tolerance and compromise in schools and society at large.

Parliamentarians have an important responsibility to ensure that political decision-making is not controlled by economic interest groups. In an age of instant gratification, politicians should take the long-term view, rather than focus on short-term results, even if it means selling a difficult message to voters that proves unpopular and jeopardizes their re-election. Indeed, at the end of the day, democracy is not only about safeguarding processes but also about obtaining outcomes that promote equality, respect and human dignity and that do justice to our responsibility to protect our planet for future generations.

It is heartening to witness many examples of positive parliamentary engagement where parliaments and their members have been able to make a difference in people’s lives. Parliaments have stepped up to the plate to address factors of potentially violent conflict. Likewise, parliaments are increasingly responding to the challenges that social media pose. They are also more and more engaged in self-reflection and action

to become more effective and more responsive to people's needs, including through the positive use of social media as a way to connect with citizens, opening up their doors to the public, publishing their work on line and seeking input from the public in real time. I look forward to hearing about many concrete examples of such good parliamentary practices during this Forum.

Increasingly too, parliaments are informed of and associated with international processes. And this is crucial. Indeed, agreements reached at the UN or through international treaties will have little practical effect in the real world if parliaments are not involved. The same applies of course to the work of UN human rights mechanisms. Here too, we see a promising trend of stronger parliamentary engagement and cooperation between the UN and parliaments.

This Forum is taking place as we fast approach the day on which, precisely 70 years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. This ground-breaking document was adopted at a time when the world had only shortly before witnessed, yet again, the horrors of war. The Universal Declaration served therefore as a beacon of hope, an inspiration to make the world a better place for everyone, as well as a stark reminder that peace should not be taken for granted. The values articulated in the Universal Declaration are enduring and are as relevant and topical today as they were 70 years ago.

In celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration at our recently concluded Assembly, our Member Parliaments examined their responsibility in upholding human rights. They were unanimous in their view that they have to use their powers to the full, through legislation, oversight or public outreach, to champion the rights of all persons living in their territories. Parliamentarians at the IPU Assembly were keen to reaffirm their commitment to the Universal Declaration, its underlying ideals and principles, and adopted a statement which clearly sets out what actions they intend to take.

I hope that this Forum will also bring out positive examples and experiences of parliamentary engagement on human rights that we can draw on for inspiration. It is also my hope that the Forum will help to improve synergies between parliaments and UN human rights mechanisms, as is already happening with the UN Human Rights Council and the UN CEDAW Committee.

It is crucial that we make these two days together as productive as possible. I therefore encourage you to think of concrete recommendations that we can take forward for action.

Thank you.