

Democracy: is it an end in itself or a tool to be put at the service of humanity?

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Ladies and gentlemen members of the Forum,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here to speak on the subject of: “Democracy, is it an end in itself or a tool to be put at the service of humanity?” I wish to thank the Swiss Forum for International Affairs for organizing this working lunch around an issue that for me is close to home.

Before I go on to discuss the subject of democracy, I should mention that my presentation is premised on a personal bias, namely that parliaments are the key element. And to echo that, I would like to quote Philippe Séguin, former Speaker of the French National Assembly. He said: “While parliament does not guarantee democracy, there can be no democracy without parliament. Moreover, democracy is much stronger where parliament is free and effective.” I am sure you would agree that democracy implies the existence of a body that allows for free debate of the core principles underpinning life in a given society and the various choices available to the State and its citizenry, and for scrutiny of the work of the executive on behalf of the citizens.

Democracy can only be viewed from the standpoint of actual experiences, because everything changes constantly: democracy is a variable, ever-evolving concept, just like the society it serves. It is based on the political principle whereby all citizens are equal, their individual and collective freedoms are safeguarded, their empowerment is guaranteed and the need to devise institutions that cater to that. So while the core principles of democracy are easy to grasp, their implementation is a lot more complex.

That said, democracy is often called into question. Not least because of the increasingly closer relations between States and the growing challenges.

The fact of the matter is that globalisation has resulted in profound shifts in our world today. Most of the problems concern all of us, and States are increasingly working hand in hand to resolve a number of them. Acting alone serves little purpose. In many parts of the world, States have decided to gradually integrate their markets, as well as their economies and other state bodies. That inevitably entails surrendering, albeit minimally, part of their national sovereignty in order to form a common regional body. It is observed that some States are still reluctant to surrender sovereignty. At the global level, the cooperation between States takes a different form, in that there is no delegation of authority and that States are in principle equal within the international organisations they created for the purpose of addressing global issues. So sovereign States are still the nucleus of world order. Nonetheless, while States continue to take decisions that deeply affect people's lives, they are not the only ones to do so in our world today. Financial institutions, transnational companies, the media, civil society and a whole host of other non-state actors wield a great deal of influence. With the new means of communication, citizens are now in a position to influence the course of events and to demand more from leaders and decision makers.

As you are well aware, major changes are now taking place in our world today and formidable challenges, such as terrorism, climate change, depletion of the earth's resources, demographic imbalances stemming from migration and the persistence of poverty, plague the world and its development as a whole. The lack of quick solutions and instant results undermines people's trust in their leaders. The threats facing the world are exacerbated by new social and political challenges which include increasing pressure by the citizenry wanting its leaders to address its needs, concerns, petitions, strikes, demonstrations and acts of defiance. All those factors have an impact on democracy and peace, and it is only through dialogue that a durable solution can be achieved.

In such a new global society, how can respect for democracy be sustained and human dignity be put at the heart of social order?

Democratic regimes are based on the principle of separation – a term that I like better than balance – of powers. The role of the legislature is to draft and adopt laws, while that of the executive is to enforce laws and conduct national policy. It is therefore only logical for the executive and the legislature to work hand in hand on an equal footing in framing laws for the good of the people.

We observe, however, that more and more the spotlight is on the executive, and that could result in elected officials becoming mere spectators. We must do everything to ensure that Parliaments do not become mere rubber-stamping bodies, and must always be mindful that countries are called democracies thanks, amongst other things, to Parliaments. Democratic Parliaments, that is, Parliaments that are representative, effective and open, in other words, parliaments that are transparent, accessible and accountable to the citizenry. Parliaments that work for the good of the people who elected them. Parliaments that are committed to affording better, more secure and more prosperous lives to their people. Truly democratic Parliaments.

I would now like to highlight that such is the firm belief of the organisation that I have the honour to represent, namely the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Established in 1889, 130 ago years ago, it is the oldest international political organisation, and is among the defenders of democracy around the world owing to its political nature. Democracy is one of the most used, not to say over-used, terms in political discourse. A vital concept, it lies at the very foundation of people's lives in society and is the subject of much written comment and reflection. Even so, political leaders were yet to adopt any international legislation that defined its contours and scope until 1997, when the IPU adopted the Universal Declaration on Democracy.

The IPU's Declaration defines democracy as a universally recognised ideal which is based on shared values by the peoples throughout the world irrespective of cultural, social and political differences, and also as a goal and mode of government to be applied according to the modalities which reflect the diversity of experiences. In order for democracy to continue thriving, parliaments must operate in accordance with internationally recognised norms and the values of representativeness, transparency, accountability, accessibility and efficacy.

Talking about democracy and the wellbeing of humankind without addressing peace would be an idle exercise. Parliaments play a key role in peace-building and conflict prevention through dialogue and diplomacy, and are also instrumental in re-establishing peace and promoting reconciliation in post-conflict situations. Founded on dialogue and the peaceful resolution of conflicts, the IPU stands ready to assist its members in regard to achieving lasting peace.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I said earlier, the world is currently undergoing profound shifts, and democracy is impeded by many a conflict. Recently, I spoke about the widespread floods which ravaged Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe, and also about the famine and drought which are once again, and I add once too many, spreading their tentacles across Africa. Those are the actual effects of climate change which are affecting the countries in the region in a visible and tangible way. Parliaments must be in a position to address those challenges, and the IPU stands ready to assist them in that endeavour.

Let us take the example of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) which are aimed at achieving international development by the year 2030. Realising the SDG's requires the establishment of an appropriate national regulatory framework. Parliaments must enact specific laws which translate the 2030 agenda programme of action into sound, enforceable laws. They must also ensure, through their oversight power, that governments enforce laws, national policies and strategic plans. Moreover, the government must report back to them regarding its action in that regard.

The 2030 action plan focuses on people, and the people are the core of its activities. Its implementation will therefore require making every effort to involve citizens by informing and sensitising them and also listening to their concerns and encouraging them to participate. It is crucial for Parliaments to engage citizens in active and productive dialogue in order to gain an understanding of their priorities and to assess the implementation of the SGGs on the ground. It is also through such dialogue that they will successfully address the people's expectations and devise realistic policies.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I said earlier, the challenges facing the world also include terrorism and migration. Poverty, social disenfranchisement and disregard for the civic rights create a breeding ground for extremist groups. Indeed, oftentimes, it is young people, i.e., the socially and economically disenfranchised, who are enlisted by violent extremists, while they strive to discover a purpose in life. Extremist groups take advantage of young people's frustrations, because they are unable to realise their true aspirations.

It is for parliaments to encourage young people to embrace the causes of peace, diversity and mutual respect so as to enable them to contribute to the fight against violent extremism instead of feeding into it. The legislative and political responses to the involvement of young people in violence and conflicts must not go beyond security and military considerations.

Education and employment and the involvement of young people in political life contribute to the wellbeing of society as a whole and play a key role in deterring them from involvement in violence and conflicts. The UN Security Council has adopted many a resolution, including resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security. Echoing the words of former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, I wish to reiterate that young people represent hope rather than a threat. We cannot continue to ignore poverty and underdevelopment if we are to succeed in fighting violent extremism.

The despair of the disenfranchised also pushes them to migrate. This can result in human catastrophes of the kind that reported in the Mediterranean with every passing day. In order to address that problem, it is important to take measures in regard to development, immigration and integration in order to channel the energies and idealism of those intending to migrate. I would therefore like to say that migration is not a bad thing, but rather that it is an issue which needs to be addressed in order to avoid much worse catastrophes.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Democracy is often said to be "government of the people, by the people and for the people". The people – a plural noun – comprises men and women, both young and old. By analogy, parliament must also be the sum total of the differences that form a nation in order to truly represent the people. In other words, parliament must mirror society, society as a whole, in its diversity; it must therefore be inclusive, that is, of women and men that possess the geographic, ethnic and religious characteristics, or hold diverse political interests and views. Without such diversity, there can be no parliament, and therefore, no democracy.

Such diversity implies women's involvement. To put it clearly, women represent 50 per cent of the population, and in some instances, a bit more. Yet, I am not in a position to say that one of every two parliamentarians is a woman. Having said that, things began to change in recent years and that trend is bound to continue. About 25 years ago, women represented a mere 11.5 per cent of parliamentarians around the world. Today they represent an estimated 24 per cent. So the numbers have doubled, but that is not sufficient. We are a far cry from parity.

Diversity also implies involving young people. As I said earlier, young people are the future. As all citizens, they are eager to be consulted, integrated and to work with their elders in building a society that affords them equal chances and greater justice.

Women and young people are crucial to the parliamentary debate which consists in helping citizens understand the meaning of the government's work, particularly where it involves major changes. It is a forum for the confrontation of ideas and alternative views. Lastly, it guarantees acceptance of the decisions taken in accordance with parliamentary democracy.

Preserving the role of parliament as a democratic forum, and by implication, preserving democracy, require being mindful of the functioning of the assemblies, their procedures and uses, as well as the people's perception of the work of parliament. Indeed, it requires an understanding of the role of the opposition and its specific rights and duties.

As I said earlier, in parliament the nation is sovereign. Parliament is the ideal place for democratic, free and uninhibited debate. It is therefore where the rights, duties and privileges of the opposition should be safeguarded. It is only through robust confrontation of ideas, as well as balanced, organised and thought-provoking debate that sound, considered decisions can be taken. Affording the parliamentary opposition more rights and means enables it moderate its criticism, thereby making it more constructive for the benefit of the citizenry, and encouraging it to refrain from resorting to obstruction. As a result, the citizenry has a better image of parliament as an institution and feels that it is represented, heard and understood.

As I said earlier, the opposition has rights, but I should also mention that it has responsibilities. The reason is because within a parliamentary democracy, the opposition also has specific duties. The opposition must consider the best course of action to adopt, i.e., whether to systematically oppose and criticise any and all government policies or mount a robust challenge on the merits, but in a more positive spirit of responsibility in the form of credible and constructive proposals. Needless to say, I advocate that the position of a responsible opposition ought to prevail where a democratic debate has taken place.

Evidently, legislating and conducting the legislative process must remain in the hands of the government and its majority. It is through the majority that the commitments endorsed by the voters can be implemented. However, that is not incompatible with granting the opposition specific rights in the legislative process, in particular with regard to setting an agenda.

It is my firm belief that it is in regard to the assessment of public policies and scrutiny of the government's action that the opposition can acquire genuine rights. As concerns such assessment and scrutiny, the law of numbers must be tempered in order to allow for a robust, democratic debate. In regard to that, the opposition is not simply a minority, but rather it guarantees the citizenry that Parliamentary fully carries out its oversight role.

Improving the environment in which parliamentary oversight, enhancing parliament's institutional capacity to exercise its rights of scrutiny, reinforcing the political will of parliamentarians to actually discharge of their oversight role, and thereby making parliamentary oversight more effective, are some of the actions to undertake in order to reinforce democracy and to satisfy the citizens' expectations in regard to transparency and accountability.

Ladies and gentlemen,

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As we speak, citizens around the world are demanding greater transparency and openness, as well as being involved in decision making. Such demands must not be viewed as a threat, but rather as a reflection of the people's need and desire to build together, participate, understand, and express their views. In the final analysis, they are testimony that people are able to deal with the current challenges. Moreover, responding to such demands further reinforces our democracies. It is also the best way to prevent democracies from attempting to adopt a silo mentality and to play identify politics.

Democracy does not occur in a void. It is the people who create democracy, as evidenced by the recent events in Algeria and Sudan. It is the citizens of those countries, both men and women, young and old, who brought down the regimes which they felt no longer represented them. It is for them to build a new democracy in their respective countries, a democracy that is more in tune with their aspirations. And in order to be anchored in democracy, they must choose new representatives through parliamentary elections. The advice I have for the prospective representatives is to act with transparency, because it is only way to build trust and to ensure meaningful representative democracy.

In those countries as elsewhere in the world, parliaments can do more, by affording citizens the opportunity to participate in the work of parliament, as that promotes democratic inclusion. In that way, parliament enables members of the public to gain an understanding of the both the legislative procedure and texts, and receives their expectations without necessarily mixing consultation with voting of the law by elected officials. You would agree that that is an enriching exercise for the law-makers.

I have highlighted some of the many challenges that democracy faces. By way of conclusion, I will try and respond to the question which was put to me at the outset, i.e. whether democracy is an end in itself or a tool to be used at the service of the people.

In light of what I have said, democracy is both a means of action that is crucial to safeguarding the rights of the citizenry, and an idealistic end that is driven by the continual strife for common good. In other words, democracy can nowadays be viewed both as an ideal and as a means of conducting public affairs. In line with the parliamentary perspective I have adopted throughout my presentation, I would like to add that parliament as the ideal representative of the people plays a central role in that regard and that supporting parliament enables it to represent all the components of society and endows it with the powers and the means it requires to express the will of the people, in all their diversity, to make laws on its behalf, and to hold the government accountable, such being the best means to consolidate democracy.

Parliament enable us, and should enable us to counter populism, isolationism and those seeking to undermine multilateralism whereas it has proved its worth.

Democracy is designed to put people at the heart of global and domestic governance, and to embody their interests and aspirations in their entirety.

As to whether democracy is under threat, I would say no, if by threat one means that it is bound to disappear. Its capacity to adapt, to constantly reassess, its resilience and flexibility have been proven over the years. It is able to meet the challenges it currently faces, provided that men and women, the processes, institutions and structures charged with keeping it alive remain mindful of the people's real aspirations and concerns. In that sense, democracy is not an end in itself, but a tool to be used at the service of the people.

Thank you for your kind attention.