PARLIAMENT OF UGANDA

143RD IPU ASSEMBLY, MADRID – SPAIN (24TH TO 30TH NOVEMBER 2021)

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY; OVERCOMING DIVISION AND BUILDING COMMUNITY

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General debate in the Assembly

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Citizens' Engagement in Politics and Public Debate is paramount when it comes to addressing contemporary challenges facing the functioning of democracy. These include; Political turmoil in terms of populism, weakening of courts, surveillance, financial crimes, and lack of transnational solidarity.

Thus, Parliaments are expected to entail the views of the public and address their needs, so as to build trust in political systems among citizens. The Parliament of Uganda has undertaken several mechanisms, through which citizen engagement in Parliamentary business can be strengthened;

2.0 UGANDA CONTEXT

The Parliament of Uganda **developed a mobile application known as the "Bungeni".** It is aimed at enhancing public access to information and public participation in parliamentary business including: bill-tracking; e- petitioning, where members of the public are able to petition Parliament on any issue, and virtually propose amendments to bills at committee stage; as well as live streaming of live debates and other events at Parliament.

- The Uganda **Parliament has also increased its visibility on different social media platforms**. This has allowed Parliament to reach a huge audience, particularly the young people, in a cost effective manner. Social media can increase Parliament's public visibility, especially where it uses the social media to perform its oversight roles. Also, Social media provides

Members of Parliament with an effective channel through which to advocate for, and raise public awareness on issues requiring urgent attention, and by which to receive public information and feedback.

- The active presence of Parliament on social media will _ help to counter the flow of disinformation, often eroding democratic values, spreading anger and frustration, and diminishing people's trust in political institutions.

- Additionally, the Uganda **Parliament is currently developing a social media policy** to guide all its stakeholders in order to manage social media misuse.

- Further, the **Parliament of Uganda enacted the Local Government Act** which establishes a framework of engagement between the National Parliament and the District Local Councils. The MPs raise the issues on the floor of Parliament for government action. Such

engagements with the elected lower representatives, help to promote equitable development among districts there by reducing regional development imbalance with in a given country.

- **The Parliament of Uganda enacted the Political Parties and Organizations Act** which effectively legalised the existence of political parties. In effect, parties became free to organise their delegates' conferences and party primaries, to open branches, to solicit funding, and to come up with policies and party manifestos. The performance of the political parties is enhanced by a belief within them that there are fair electoral laws and institutions that can ensure free and fair elections.

- **The Parliament of Uganda holds, an annual Parliamentary Week** with a major aim of creating awareness about the role of Members of Parliament to

the public. Additionally, the Uganda Parliament conducts Parliamentary public outreaches from where the public is educated on the functions of Parliament.

3.0 WAY FORWARD

- **For citizens to have a meaningful engagement in Parliamentary business, they need to understand the work of Parliament.** Thus, Parliaments need to take deliberate measures to educate the public about the functions of Parliaments.

- **Governments should establish a well-functioning justice system and a rule of law that works for everyone.**

- **Parliaments need to ensure that there is a legal framework supporting other central actors in the democratic system to play their roles**. Independent judicial rulings on party petitions over

repressive laws should be made by the Courts of Law in order to help political parties in their struggles for the opening up of political space.

- **There should be focus on poverty reduction and inclusive, representative politics.** One of the most long-standing threats to democracy is extreme poverty. Efforts in fighting poverty should include improving access to public services through proactive developmental strategies, gender inclusiveness and tapping into global markets.

- The success of democracy depends very much on its **ability to deliver on development and other promises** it makes thereby meeting the expectations of the people.

- **Governments should ensure inclusive and sustainable human development for all.**

In the words of Nelson Mandela; "*an educated, enlightened and informed population is one of*

the surest ways of promoting the health of a

democracy"