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## Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue: *Working together for our common future*

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Kingdom of Morocco

\*The Parliament\*

# Speech by Ms. Nazila Ghanea, UN Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Religion or Belief

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## 1. Introduction

- Excellencies, distinguished guests,
- It is a pleasure to address you at the opening of the General Debate sessions of this conference. Its title, '*Parliamentarians and Religious Leaders: Promoting dialogue, working together for our common future*' certainly gives a sense of the great potential for positive change that a space like this can facilitate.
- This potential is something of which I am reminded on a daily basis in my role as UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. As, indeed, are the tragic consequences which arise from the converse – that is the *obstruction* of dialogue, and Parliamentarians and Religion or Belief Leaders *working against* one another – especially when one considers the grave threats to our common future which we must now face together.
- It is right that in the current global context, there is much talk of crises on a scale rarely seen in our lifetimes, or perhaps even the lifetime of humankind: environmental disasters, global warming, armed conflict, radicalisation, and the erosion of legal standards are very real, very worrying trends. It is right that these issues occupy much of our time, but the scale of these interrelated crises risk giving us a sense of hopelessness.
- It is all the more important therefore to take regular stock, in a space such as this, of just how significant an impact our thoughts, words, and deeds – as Parliamentarians and Religion or Belief Leaders certainly, but also as academics, diplomats, researchers, business people, civil servants, activists, soldiers, civilians, family members, friends, strangers – can have on the enjoyment of the human rights of our fellow human beings: and this is the only way out of these crises together.
- It is with that in mind that the next report to this mandate to the General Assembly of the United Nations is dedicated to the enjoyment of freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief at the domestic level: bringing this human right back to the human experience of its enjoyment or violation, and emphasising not only the impact of legal frameworks, but the power of our attitudes, prejudices, kindness, and compassion in making this and all human rights a lived reality in daily life.

## 2. Challenges

- Through our ongoing communication with rights-holders, this mandate is reminded constantly of the interconnected web of actors on whom our human rights depend. For holders of marginalised religions or beliefs, threats can arise almost anywhere, and the oppression begins for many at birth. Indeed, for many it starts with a lack of access to maternal healthcare for women marginalised on the basis of their religion or belief. On that same basis, their newborn child may be denied recognition of their religious or belief identity on their documents, or even denied citizenship and all the rights that come with it.

- Discrimination of this kind follows rights-holders through the education system, where they may be denied education outright due to their identity, or coerced into conversion by individual teachers, school authorities, or the education system broadly. It follows them into the workplace, where they may be forced into demeaning work or unhealthy conditions due to their caste, or non-adherence to a dominant tradition. They may be subjected to harassment, bullying, or violence from employers or colleagues due to their gender or perceived sexual orientation; they may be arbitrarily forbidden from carrying symbols or dressing in accordance with their beliefs.
- For many, religion or belief communities, and collective activities such as worship or teaching can provide vital sustenance in the face of oppression: however, these activities too are often inhibited. Local authorities or relevant ministries often deny marginalised groups permission to establish places of worship; indigenous communities often find the territory with which they maintain a spiritual bond going back millennia subjected to land-grabbing efforts by states or private enterprises.
- What is worse, places of worship are often subjected to direct attacks, mob violence and desecration, often leading to the attempted murder of Religion or Belief Leaders or worshippers. My mandate has communicated on several alleged instances of this in which, far from offering protection, law enforcement and even government officials allow, encourage, or participate in the violence.
- Fear of repercussions from a prejudiced majority impacts even those who would wish to defend the rule of law and peace. This mandate has communicated allegations of lawyers abdicating their duty to defend clients accused of blasphemy or refusing to represent clients of marginalised faiths; judges have allegedly facilitated miscarriages of justice due to fear of repercussions should they defend the rights of the accused in accordance with their own laws.
- The climate of intolerance which motivates these situations is often aggravated by the architecture of the online environment, which encourages group-think and can accelerate the development of extremist views. In such an environment, adopting populist and intolerant views against widely disrespected minorities, such as those marginalised on the basis of religion or belief, can unfortunately become profitable at the ballot-box.
- Far from addressing the crises that we must collectively face, cynically encouraging or profiteering from this division brings us only to what Friedrich Glasl described as the highest level of his model of conflict escalation: 'together into the abyss'.

### **3. The Potential of Parliamentarians and Religion or Belief Leaders**

- Parliamentarians and Religion or Belief Leaders are better placed than most to counteract this trend, and it is through dialogue and collaboration that their potential can be maximised.
- It begins, of course, with ensuring that the legal order of which parliamentarians are the custodians is non-discriminatory, and that religions and beliefs are treated equally under the law. Ongoing dialogue is necessary to ensure that the constitutional and legal framework offers adequate protection to *all* beliefs, including non-belief, and including dissident minorities within belief traditions. Dialogue is fundamental to understanding the terrain in all its complexity, and this is necessary to ensure your populations in their diversity are respected: a key ingredient for peace.
- In the development and drafting of legislation, ongoing dialogue with religious and belief communities is of huge benefit – so much so, that our international human rights standards require us to involve minorities in public life *and* in all matters that concern them. The awareness of the diversity of perspectives and needs of religion and belief groups arising from this dialogue will help to ensure that nobody is inadvertently subjected to marginalisation. Similarly, expertise from religious and belief groups can be drawn on in review of legislative proposals, and parliamentary questions can be used to air their concerns and questions about government policy.

- In order to combat the everyday prejudice which can be exercised in impunity by civil servants at the local level, parliamentarians are well placed to develop laws and protocols to ensure that rights holders have effective avenues for redress and accountability. They can also, in collaboration with religious and belief communities, develop awareness-raising, educational and training processes for state functionaries including the judiciary, law enforcement, and municipal authorities in order to address the attitudes which are often the root causes of everyday violations of freedom of religion or belief.
- Religious or belief representatives and leaders, faith-based or secular organisations can also be powerful allies in the fight against poverty and in the pursuit of sustainable development: they should be engaged with in order to fortify intra- and inter-faith solidarity and to encourage support for sustainable development throughout society. The Faith for Rights framework, which we'll hear about more later, is one model which offers theoretical and practical tools to mobilise the ethical and spiritual foundations of religious or belief traditions in defence of human rights and peace.
- Both Parliamentarians *and* religion or belief representatives and leaders, through their public profiles, can be a vital bulwark against escalating hatred, extremism, and violence. This requires bravery and almost certainly means standing up for the safety and well-being of those with whom you may disagree on very fundamental issues. Yet keeping our disagreements, fervent though they may be, within the realm of dialogue is the perhaps the most fundamental demand of parliamentary ethics and human rights, and of course, fundamentally necessary to ensure peace.

#### 4. Conclusion

- This, in the current context, is easier said than done. As I mentioned, it is now often all too profitable to contribute to or actively participate in performative marginalisation of some kind – not doing so may appear to hand the advantage to those who are willing to take the easier path. As a result, there is much thinking and strategising to be done, so this is the challenge I leave you with: to make the most of this time together, in awareness of the collective potential contained within this space, and the real, tangible difference in the daily lives of countless people it can facilitate. Thank you.