



Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

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Speech by Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General

Address to the Austrian Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights

Vienna, 7 June 2023

Dear members of Austrian Parliamentary Human Rights Committee,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I stand before you today with a message of urgency, but also of hope. We are here on the eve of a milestone - the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Born out of the ashes of conflict, the Universal Declaration is a testament to our shared human capacity to aspire to higher ideals, even in the face of profound darkness.

Yet, anniversaries are not only for celebration. They are also moments for reflection and introspection. So, today, let us acknowledge a difficult truth. Despite our progress, despite the promises we've made, the journey towards universal human rights remains incomplete. Our time has witnessed setbacks in the protection of human rights, prompting a pressing need for renewed vigour in the promotion and safeguarding of these fundamental freedoms.

And this brings us to a critical point. Parliaments, as the very embodiment of the people's will, must lead this charge. The principles and ideas enshrined in the Universal Declaration need to be more firmly and strategically placed on our common agenda. Our words must be robust, our actions, even more so.

I want to address head-on some of the global challenges that have arisen around human rights in recent years. One relates to an old misconception that has resurfaced and that appears to be gaining ground in some quarters. It is the argument that human rights are a Western construct, a product of a particular cultural and historical context. To those voices, I say this: the essence of human rights lies in the recognition of the inherent dignity, the inherent worth, the inherent equality of every single member of our vast and varied human family. It is not bound by geography or culture, race or religion, but universally applicable.

We must also confront the criticism of double standards in the application of human rights. We must take these critiques as a call for greater consistency, transparency, and fairness. It is about creating a stronger and more equitable system that does not merely preach human rights but practices them universally. This means that we have to be particularly mindful of how we respect human rights in our own countries as this in turn shapes how others abroad perceive our human rights discourse. We all know that no one is perfect. We can all do better when it comes to offering a life of dignity to those who find themselves in our territories. In this regard, I am aware that important and challenging conversations are taking place around the treatment of migrants and asylum seekers in Austria, in Europe at large as well as other places in the world. These discussions are complex, but they are vital, for they touch on the core of our shared human dignity. The outcome of those discussions and subsequent actions are crucial, also because they deeply influence one's international standing to speak out on human rights elsewhere.

Now, allow me to address another pressing concern of our times - the rise of authoritarianism. Some may argue that it offers a viable alternative to democracy, a shortcut perhaps, on the road to development and prosperity. But let us be clear. While different models of governance may have their merits, no system should ever trample upon human dignity, silence voices, or suppress fundamental freedoms. The mark of an enduring system is one where rights are respected, where voices are heard, where power is accountable.

In this broader conversation, the need to safeguard those at the frontlines of defending democratic norms and human rights standards – the world’s parliamentarians – becomes vitally apparent. Through the Inter-Parliamentary Union's Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians, we have a robust framework to safeguard those who stand up for justice and democracy, often putting their own safety on the line. Our interventions are crucial because we see that many brave women and men are at risk for merely exercising their parliamentary duties. Indeed, the statistics from the IPU Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians present a stark picture. Last year, the Committee was called on to examine the situation of 739 parliamentarians across the world who were facing arbitrary arrest, torture and sometimes even murder. Most of these individuals belong to the political opposition. In some countries their systematic targeting often points to a much bigger democratic and political malaise. It is therefore not surprising that countries like Myanmar, Venezuela, Cambodia, Türkiye and Yemen present the biggest caseloads before our Committee.

I should add that through the vigilant monitoring and the pursuit of remedies for human rights abuses against parliamentarians, our Committee not only protects individuals but also aims to reinforce the very foundations of democratic governance. It is crucial that we do this together and that parliamentarians who are at risk can count on our – and your - help. This is why the principle of parliamentary solidarity is so essential to the Committee’s success. If parliamentarians speak out about instances of abuse against their colleagues, wherever they are, we are much better placed to break the cycle of impunity and bolster the resilience of our institutions in the face of adversity. I am therefore asking you too to play your part in helping your colleagues in need across the world by raising their situations whenever you have the opportunity to do so.

Let me now turn to the general role of parliaments as human rights guardians. When parliaments prioritize human rights, they commit to eliminating systemic barriers and ensuring equal treatment for all members of society. By enacting laws that protect against discrimination based on race, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability, parliaments foster a more just and inclusive society. Parliaments play a vital role in enacting legislation that upholds freedom of expression, protects privacy rights, and guarantees the right to a fair trial. But it is not only civil and political rights that we should care about. Economic, social, and cultural rights should also be foremost on our minds. These rights, central to human dignity and shared prosperity, form the bedrock of any inclusive society. They are not aspirational; they are non-negotiable. Parliaments are uniquely positioned to promote these rights through national policies that ensure that economic growth, social justice, and cultural preservation align with the welfare of every citizen. Indeed, parliaments must take bold steps to protect workers, advance quality education, ensure affordable healthcare, and safeguard our diverse cultures.

Please rest assured that in taking on these responsibilities you can count on us as important allies. Indeed, with our support and that of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, parliaments have a crucial role to play in the work of the UN human rights mechanisms by helping ensure that international human rights standards have real, practical meaning at the national level. Each of these UN human rights mechanisms has a reporting procedure under which states have to report on the state of human rights in their countries. Parliaments can contribute at every stage of the reporting procedure – by helping with the drafting of the national report, the presentation of that report, and, crucially, the implementation of the recommendations at the domestic level. This engagement is pivotal in transforming international human rights obligations into national realities. For that to happen effectively the work of dedicated parliamentary human rights committees like yours is critical.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are facing unprecedented challenges today, which is why we have to double down on making sure that our democratic institutions are fit to stand the test of time.

Let me quote in this regard your compatriot, philosopher Karl Popper when he says: "Democracy is not a state in which people act like angels; it is rather a system in which humanity is given the chance to correct its mistakes."

His words are a great reminder that we have to do everything possible to cherish our democracies by allowing them to work to everyone's advantage so that human rights, freedom, equality, and justice are not lofty promises, but everyday realities. Indeed, it is time for robust action, for strong words to be matched by strong deeds. The IPU is keen to work with the Austrian Parliament, helping you navigate this path, helping you fulfil your role as the torchbearers of human rights.

Thank you.