

## **DOES THE UNITED NATIONS TAKE DEMOCRACY SERIOUSLY ENOUGH?**

**(Wednesday 24 October 2012, 9 a.m. - 12 noon)**

Democracy is one of the core universal values and principles of the United Nations. Indeed, no one can deny that, since its creation, the United Nations has made a significant contribution to developing the meaning and practice of democracy worldwide.

However, it is worth examining how prominently democracy features on the political agenda of the United Nations today, and how the United Nations as a system is operationalizing its work in support of democracy around the world.

On the one hand, one cannot help but observe that the annual agenda of the UN General Assembly – the main political and deliberative organ of the United Nations – does not include democracy in any meaningful way among the 170 items it considers each year. In turn, the UN Security Council - with a core responsibility for safeguarding international peace and security – has examined and taken decisions over the years on a wealth of issues, which include country-specific situations, women and peace, children in armed conflict, the rule of law and transitional justice in conflict and post-conflict societies, as well as the relationship between world peace and major factors such as climate change or the AIDS epidemic. The nexus between democracy, peace and security, however, has been systematically ignored.

In terms of UN operational activities, efforts to strengthen democracy are carried out through various branches of the United Nations. In 2005, the UN Democracy Fund was set up to help implement projects aimed at enhancing democratic practice, primarily in support of civil society organizations (CSOs). A Democratic Governance Group operates within UNDP, which seeks to mainstream democracy work into the regular activities carried out by UN country teams. The UN Secretary-General's 2009 [Guidance Note on Democracy](#) underlines the critical need for greater coherence and coordination within the UN system with regard to its democracy-related work. However, it is difficult to evaluate the impact of such policy guidelines in the absence of a strong mandate from the UN membership.

### ***About the session***

The purpose of the panel session is to enable participants:

- to interact with experts and senior UN officials about the place of democracy on the UN agenda; challenges at the political level; and how parliamentarians can help bring greater prominence to democracy in terms of the overall work of the United Nations;
- to analyse recent initiatives inside and outside the United Nations to enhance core elements of democracy, such as the rule of law, the integrity of elections, and open and transparent parliaments.

This panel session is intended to be the first in a process that will lead the IPU Committee on United Nations Affairs, in time, to formulate recommendations to the United Nations about improvements to UN policies and operations in support of democracy.

Particular attention will be paid to the following areas:

### ***Developing linkages between the rule of law and democracy***

The rule of law implies that no person or institution should be above the law, that the law should apply equally to all, without distinction based on social and economic status, and that everyone ought to be able to appeal to the law for redress. The rule of law is therefore a key pillar of democracy.

A [High-level Meeting on the Rule of Law](#) took place at the United Nations in September 2012, with the IPU convening a parliamentary meeting on this occasion. The High-level Meeting adopted a [Declaration](#) containing key principles and actionable recommendations on how to strengthen the rule of law both nationally and internationally, recognizing "the essential role of parliaments in the rule of law at the national level".

What is the significance of this High-level Meeting? To what extent will its conclusions be mainstreamed in the work of the United Nations? What can parliamentarians do to promote the rule of law at the national level and interact with the United Nations on this issue?

### ***Ensuring that elections are free and fair***

The IPU's 1993 [Declaration on Criteria for Free and Fair Elections](#) was one of the first efforts aimed at identifying normative principles in international law for free and fair elections. Many others have since built on these criteria, often on a regional basis. More recently, the IPU adopted a resolution on "[Providing a sound legislative framework aimed at preventing electoral violence, improving election monitoring and ensuring the smooth transition of power](#)", which makes a series of recommendations for parliamentary action. Meanwhile, the United Nations has provided support to elections in more than 100 countries to date, drawing attention to the challenge of addressing the political and the technical aspects of polls.

A recent Report by the [Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security](#) calls for national and international action to protect and promote the integrity of elections, as a major step towards achieving a more secure, prosperous and stable world.

What international action is called for? How will the Report's findings be used within the United Nations? What are the intentions of the United Nations, and the Global Commission, to follow up on the recommendations? What implications do they have for parliamentarians?

### ***Promoting open and transparent parliaments***

In its 2006 landmark publication [Parliament and democracy in the twenty-first century: A guide to good practice](#), the IPU defines 'openness' as one of the five core values of democratic parliaments. A new initiative drawing on work by the IPU and other organizations has led to the adoption of a [Declaration on Parliamentary Openness](#) - a set of principles developed by an international community of parliamentary monitoring organizations. The *Declaration's* launch comes as CSOs are increasingly seeking opportunities to engage collaboratively with parliaments to help respond to heightened interest among citizens in accessing parliamentary and government information.

What are the implications of the Declaration for parliaments? What is the potential for constructive partnerships between parliaments and CSOs in bringing parliament closer to citizens? What should the IPU be doing to further the development and implementation of criteria for democratic parliaments?