



Inter-Parliamentary Union

For democracy. For everyone.

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IPU Statement

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Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to address this gathering here today. Thank you for this opportunity to share some thoughts with you at this critical moment in Thailand's history.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which is celebrating its 125th anniversary this year, was founded on the idea that political dialogue is the only path to finding sustainable solutions to the world's problems. Our Members come from 166 countries, with often very different political systems. Yet they share the belief that dialogue - even between parties with different perspectives - is necessary. Indeed, it is the only way to move forward.

Thailand is currently at a critical juncture. The past years have seen alternating periods of political stability and instability. Since the creation of a constitutional monarchy, more than 15 Constitutions have been drafted and adopted, each aiming to build an environment where all Thai people can live together in peace and harmony.

All countries strive to reach that objective. The question is how?

Today's meeting has an ambitious but realistic theme - “On the path to reform”. Reform is indeed crucial – it means learning from past experience; taking a critical look at failures; and identifying and building on good practices. It also means having the courage to implement strong new measures to address errors of the past and prevent them from recurring in the future.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The reality of the situation is that reform is difficult. It is not only about changing institutions and laws. It is also about changing mentalities and ways of working and living together, in mutual respect. It can be a powerful tool for progress but it will only work if it is given sufficient time and thought and if it is done in an inclusive and consultative manner. Reform will only be positive if it takes place in a climate in which all people can speak their minds and be heard, without fear of reprisal. Only then will reform respond to the aspirations of all segments of society and provide sustainable answers. So I commend you on your courageous agenda.

The roadmap adopted in Thailand is an encouraging first step. We are glad to note developments thus far in implementing the set objectives as it is important to honour promises, expectations and timelines. But the hardest part is still ahead of you – laying the foundations of truly democratic governance.

To help you meet the challenge, I would like to offer the IPU's experience and expertise. We have witnessed many countries in the throes of political transition in our history and both the positive and negative impact of these experiences.

The Parliament of Thailand attended the Inter-Parliamentary Conference in 1997 that adopted the historic Universal Declaration on Democracy. This represented a watershed moment in the IPU's history because it was the first time that State institutions from so many different countries had come together to agree on the constituent elements of democracy both as an ideal and as a form of government. The Universal Declaration is a bold statement to which all countries can aspire.

The starting point of the Universal Declaration, and indeed of democracy itself, is that the authority of government can only derive from the will of the people as expressed in genuine, free and fair elections.

Distinguished delegates,

Democracy is about respecting the rules of the game, which must be based on respect for human rights, are clear and implemented impartially. Democracy is therefore about accepting changes in power, listening to different opinions and interests and exercising power not only for the good of society as a whole.

Democracy requires strong institutions. Their role is to mediate tensions and maintain equilibrium between competing interests to enhance social cohesion and solidarity. Parliament is perhaps the institution par excellence in this regard. It is at the heart of democratic governance and lasting peace. The place of parliament in the new constitutional architecture should be a central part of the reform process in Thailand.

For more than 40 years, the IPU has provided support to parliaments in countries emerging from conflict and political transition. This experience, together with the wide diversity of IPU's Member Parliaments, has enabled us to identify clearly what we mean by a "strong parliament". A strong parliament is one that embodies key democratic values in its work. These key values are to be: representative of social and political diversity, to open and transparent in its working methods, to be accessible to the people and accountable to them, and to be effective in its legislative and oversight roles.

Parliaments put these values into practice in the way that is most suitable to their political and cultural context. But I believe that they provide a compass that clearly indicates the direction in which you should be seeking to travel.

The IPU has developed a tool to allow parliaments to evaluate their performance against these key values. Indeed, King Prajadhipok's Institute has used the IPU's methodology to assess the performance of the National Assembly in recent years, and to formulate recommendations for priority reforms that parliament should undertake. I hope that you will seize the opportunity to make good use of the parliamentary expertise that is available in your country, and that you will not hesitate to call upon the IPU to access the experience of other parliaments' reform processes.

Ultimately, perhaps, the key factor in the development of strong institutions is the political will to do so. The Thai people are counting on your leadership in this regard. It is important that the current process results in the creation of a strong parliament that has the power to effectively represent and defend the interests of all people.

One important function of State institutions is to serve as a system of checks and balances which prevent any single institution from exercising excessive power. Public accountability has to apply to all those who hold public authority, whether elected or not, and to all public bodies without exception. Overseeing the government and holding it to account on behalf of the people is one of the key functions of parliament. Parliament needs to have the autonomy, institutional capacity and political will in order to play this role effectively. It will be important for the Constitution of Thailand to provide for an adequate framework for these objectives to be met.

Democracy is based on the fundamental rights of the individual. Freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, including the right to organize political activities, are part and parcel of this set of fundamental rights. One of the greatest challenges to democracy today is the gap between citizens and their representatives. In all regions of the world, levels of trust are low, and participation in elections is falling, especially among young people. An active civil society is an essential component of democracy. New efforts need to be deployed to engage citizens in the political process at the local and national levels. I believe that the reform process underway in Thailand has to give people opportunities to have a say in how their country is run, and give them hope that sustainable solutions can be found.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Democracy also presupposes a genuine partnership between men and women in the conduct of the affairs of society. Globally, only 21 per cent of parliamentarians are women. Among some of the countries that have taken the biggest steps towards gender equality is Rwanda, which used the window of opportunity that followed a political transition to adopt measures in favour of a more equal representation of men and women in politics.

I note that only 6 per cent of the members of the National Legislative Assembly are women. I put it to you that one of the most important questions that you will have to address is how you will ensure greater equality between men and women in politics, as a step towards gender equality in society as a whole.

I would like to refer to what is, in my view, one of the most significant markers of democracy: the level of tolerance in society, where the existence of different political views is accepted as a normal expression of citizens' diverse opinions. Government and politicians have a key responsibility to display political tolerance towards their opponents. Political tolerance creates the conditions in which dialogue can take place. It also sends a powerful message to citizens that politics based on hatred or rejection of the other cannot provide solutions, whereas politics based on openness, dialogue and compromise is most likely to serve the interests of the whole of society. This culture of democracy needs to be nurtured, starting with young people, for example through an extensive programme of civic education in schools.

These are some of the rights and principles that the Universal Declaration holds to be essential in a democracy. In every country, there is always more that can be done to deepen and strengthen democracy. This is particularly relevant in countries such as Thailand which are undergoing a political transition. I would like to highlight the examples of three countries whose transitions are still ongoing and where the IPU has been active in supporting reform.

Tunisia was the starting point of the popular uprisings known as the "Arab Spring" in December 2010. The backdrop to the revolution was a young and highly educated population that struggled to find economic opportunities under an authoritarian political

regime. The outcome of the revolution has been one of the few positive examples of political transition in recent years.

Recognizing that the Constitution is a fundamental document that provides the long-term framework for society, an extensive constitution-drafting process took place in Tunisia under the guidance of a National Constitutional Assembly. The process involved many rounds of public information and consultation, as well as an understanding among the major political forces that they would abide by the rules of the constitutional process. At one stage, when it looked as if the process might be derailed, politicians agreed to form a government of technocrats to oversee the affairs of the nation until a new Constitution could be adopted.

After more than two years of preparation, that Constitution was adopted by a large majority of members of the Constituent Assembly in January 2014. The recent parliamentary and presidential elections in Tunisia offer further encouraging signs of how a country can come together in a spirit of dialogue and compromise while respecting the existence of political competition. Without prejudging the future or denying the challenges that lay ahead, the key lesson that we can take away from Tunisia is the inclusive nature of its constitution-drafting process that sets the foundations for long-term stability.

The second example is Egypt, which also saw popular uprisings against an authoritarian regime in 2011. The story there, however, is somewhat different. Elections took place in 2012, but the new government did not use its power to promote inclusiveness. The result was a second political transition that is still underway, as the country struggles to modernize its political culture while providing the stability and economic development that its people so desperately need. A valuable lesson we can draw from the Egyptian experience is the importance of building unity and consensus to represent the interests of all components of society, listening to both the ruling party and the opposition. Any recourse to limit opportunities for dialogue and compromise will only serve to entrench problems rather than resolve them.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The third example I want to share with you is the transitional process underway in Myanmar. After the long period of military rule, the country has been taking positive steps in its democratic transition, including the establishment of a dynamic parliament that is keen to play its role to the full. The lesson we can also learn from Myanmar is the need for the constitutional process to be owned by the entire population. It is crucial for the framework that is used to build the country to allow for all to participate and the Constitution should not be used to limit this in any way. The Constitution has to be seen as a document that will set the rules of the game over a long period and it should not be used for short-term political gain.

Distinguished delegates,

Every country has its own political, historical and cultural context. The situation in Thailand is unique, even if some of the questions that you are grappling with today are similar to those that have arisen in other transitional situations.

One thing of which we can be certain is that the solutions to the challenges facing Thailand can only come from the people of Thailand themselves. The path to long-term stability can only be the result of an inclusive process that takes into account the needs and aspirations of all citizens. It is your great responsibility to guide this process to a successful conclusion. As in Tunisia, Egypt and Myanmar, the IPU stands ready

to provide its support, in particular for the establishment of a parliament that embodies key democratic values.

I wish you the best of success in this critical endeavour. Thank you.