



**PARLIAMENTARY MEETING ON THE OCCASION OF
THE 6TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF NEW
OR RESTORED DEMOCRACIES**

Doha (Qatar), 29 October – 1 November 2006



SUMMARY REPORT OF THE RAPPORTEUR

Ms. Margaret Mensah-Williams, Namibia

1 November 2006

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen,

I have the honour to report to you on the proceedings of the Parliamentary Meeting which has taken place on the occasion of this Sixth Conference of New or Restored Democracies. In doing so, I wish to thank my colleagues who have entrusted me with this responsibility.

The Parliamentary Meeting was the second of its kind following the first Parliamentary Forum which took place in Ulaan Baatar during the 5th Conference.

Some 185 delegates representing about 70 parliaments attended the Parliamentary Meeting. It was presided over by H.E. Mohammed Bin Mobarak Al-Khulaifi, Speaker of the Advisory Council of the State of Qatar. On behalf of all the participants in the Parliamentary Meeting, I would like to extend our heartfelt thanks and appreciation to him for his strong leadership and effective stewardship throughout the proceedings.

At the beginning of the proceedings, the Speaker of the Qatar Advisory Council gave a keynote address in which he briefed participants on recent democratic developments in Qatar and explained ongoing and future reforms to make democracy a daily reality in Qatar.

Participants also heard reports from the Parliament of Mongolia and the Inter-Parliamentary Union on the implementation of the recommendations of the 2003 Ulaan Baatar Conference. The Mongolian Parliament had been very active in encouraging national implementation of the recommendations. It had also adopted or amended laws in order to strengthen the efficiency of the parliament, to improve the organization of elections and to help streamline the functioning of political parties. Furthermore, it had passed legislation to strengthen the independence of the media.

As for the Inter-Parliamentary Union, this global organization of parliaments had been very active in strengthening the capacities of parliaments worldwide, especially in young democracies and post-conflict countries. It had also worked to promote the participation of women in governance processes and secure gender equity in these processes. The IPU had also devoted attention to promoting the role of parliaments and their members as guardians of human rights and developing tools to help parliaments deal with issues that are at the forefront of global agenda. Furthermore, the IPU had developed democratic norms and standards relating to democracy. It had reviewed its guidelines on international election practice and procedure to take into account recent developments. In the implementation of a key recommendation of Declaration of the Ulaan Baatar Parliamentary Forum, the IPU had worked with parliaments around the world to identify good practice for the promotion of democracy by parliaments. It had recently issued a guide, which reflected good practice in some 75 parliaments across the world. The guide is now available in four languages and the Arabic version was officially launched during this Conference. On behalf of the participants, I would like to thank the IPU for its continuing commitment to promote parliaments as key institutions of democracy in our countries.

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Parliamentary Meeting then started off its proceedings with a one-day plenary debate on the overall theme of *Dialogue, tolerance and freedom of expression as the cornerstones of democracy*. While addressing issues related particularly to this

theme, participants also used the opportunity to review recent developments in their countries especially since the Ulaan Baatar Conference.

I am aware that I will not be able in the limited time allowed me, to do justice to all the rich statements that were made. However, I am sure you will allow me to point out some of the more salient developments. Participants repeatedly reaffirmed the key principles of democracy which include participation and pluralism, freedom, the rule of law and respect for human rights. The general consensus was that democracy is an evolving process. It is never complete and needs to be constantly renewed and nurtured. It should take into account the specific historical, social and cultural contexts of each society. It was nevertheless noted that the key principles I have just mentioned are non-negotiable. Furthermore, participants noted that there is no single model of democracy nor can it be imposed or imported wholesale.

Participants pointed to important gains that had been made in their countries with regard to the participation of women in the political process. Increasing numbers of women were being elected or appointed to high office including presidents, prime ministers, ministers, speakers and members of parliament. People were increasingly being empowered to participate in political processes including through the parliament and stronger ties were being forged between parliaments and civil society and the media. Gains had also been achieved in ensuring more equitable representation of minority groups and other disadvantaged segments of society and their mainstreaming into the political process. Many participants highlighted the increasingly significant role minority/political parties were playing in their parliaments in order to promote transparency and accountability. Participants gave concrete examples to illustrate the centrality of parliament to the democratic process. Parliaments were now also taking up new challenges and making inroads into hitherto neglected areas such as scrutinizing military budgets, exercising more control over the security sector and ensuring more transparent management of budget resources in general.

In spite of all this progress, participants recognized that a lot still had to be done in order to improve upon democracy and their parliaments' role therein. Participants highlighted some of these challenges. Many of the challenges are common to parliaments in both young and more established democracies. There is a persistent imbalance of power between the executive and legislative branches of government in favour of the former. Executives continue to dominate the democracy agenda and to dictate its pace. The process of ensuring equitable participation of women and disadvantaged groups needs to be quickened. Parliaments continue to face a crisis of legitimacy as a result of corruption and lack of accountability leading to loss of trust among the people. It was consistently stressed that parliaments should be citadels of transparency and accountability and that they should forge stronger ties with their constituents in order to design policies that are consonant with their aspirations. Parliamentarians should serve as shining examples of integrity.

Furthermore, conflict, terrorism and intolerance continue to hinder democratic progress in many young democracies. Many parliaments continue to lack material and human resources that are needed for them to deliver efficient service to their constituents.

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

One key issue that came up repeatedly in our discussions was freedom of expression as key to the effectiveness of parliaments and their members. It was noted, that unfortunately, in too many instances, members of parliaments were being victimized on account of the exercise of their legitimate rights as representatives of the people. I am sure I reflect the general conviction of our meeting when I say that we all confirmed the sanctity of the parliamentary mandate. While parliamentary immunity does not mean impunity, it is clear that it is only by enjoying freedom of speech and independence that parliaments and their members can serve their people effectively. It is only then that the will of the people can be fully expressed by their representatives. We have made a strong statement that once the people have chosen their representatives to act on their behalf through election processes that have been generally recognized to be free and fair, those representatives should be allowed to act in all freedom. This fundamental principle is at the very heart of democracy and must be respected by all countries in all regions of the world. You will therefore understand that our meeting unanimously called for the immediate release of the Speaker and several members of the Palestinian Legislative Council who are being detained by the Israeli authorities.

Another major point that came up for discussion was the effects of globalisation on the democratic debate at both national and international levels. Many participants noted that globalisation was moving decision-making from national to the international level. At the same time, international relations and the functioning of the international institutions responsible for such decision-making was far from democratic. Participants therefore called for a stronger role for parliaments in overseeing these decision-making processes in order to ensure that they are in conformity with the interests of the people they represent.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Participants had the opportunity to pursue more in-depth examination of all these issues in the context of two workshops which followed the general debate.

The first workshop focused on *Representation, accessibility, accountability and transparency to ensure inclusive decision-making*. Here, we discussed measures that ensure that parliaments and other state institutions are socially and politically representative, both in their composition and their manner of working. Needless to say we stressed the need for women's representation as well as that of minorities and marginal communities. Quotas and reserved seats were mentioned as some of the mechanisms that could help ensure such representation. We emphasized the importance of providing a fair opportunity to all parliamentarians to do their work. Here, we stressed the need for inclusive and impartial parliamentary procedures and the requirement to cater to the specific language, religious and cultural needs of certain groups. The minority/opposition parties should also be given adequate space in the governance structures of parliament. In some parliaments, it was noted, key committees such as the public accounts committee, are chaired by a member of the opposition. Pre-legislative scrutiny of legislation and the budget were cited as an important way of involving the public in the work of parliament.

Participants also stressed that parliamentarians should be able to act independently according to their conscience and not be hostage to any particular political party or group in society. They noted once again that the human rights of

parliamentarians need to be protected if they are to be able to protect and promote human rights in general.

In response to the legitimacy dilemma facing many parliaments, we insisted on the need to forge a relationship with the media that allowed for adequate publicity to be given to the work of parliament. Opening committees to the public is another way of promoting the transparency and accountability that is crucial to restoring public trust in the institutions.

Addressing ways and means of making our parliaments evermore effective, the second workshop stressed the need for parliament to be autonomous of the executive. There should be a strict separation of powers and budget must have control over its budget as well as material and human resources. Parliaments were urged to ensure that parliaments with the right expertise are appointed to the relevant committees. Members' capacity to deal with substantive issues need to be strengthened. The information resources available to parliament need to be strengthened.

Parliaments were encouraged to continue to harness the potential offered by information and communications technologies in order to improve upon their internal efficiency, including through better information flow and management as well as to streamline relations with outside partners.

Some participants pointed out that in some countries, parliaments are increasingly seen as service providers and are required to deliver development projects and facilities to their constituents. This might be a distraction from the tradition role of parliament and the right balance needs to be struck between the parliamentarians' desire to satisfy their constituents' immediate need and the importance of designing policies that in the long run provide welfare on a sustainable basis.

Participants felt that parliaments should endow themselves with strategic plans or mission statements which enabled them to implement sustainable development and reform agendas.

As I mentioned earlier, these are only some of the highlights of our rich discussions. I apologize to those whose ideas I have not been able to reflect in this report. Let me assure them that these ideas are not lost. They will all be considered as we work towards follow-up.

Ladies and gentlemen,

At the end of our deliberations we have adopted a Declaration and Plan of Action. Our Declaration reaffirms our common understanding of democracy, its principles and values as embodied in various internationally accepted instruments and practice. We stress the role of dialogue, tolerance and freedom as key ingredients of democracy. We assert the centrality of parliament to the process as a forum for promoting this dialogue and mediating between the diverse interests of society. We confirm the need for the quantitative and qualitative representation of women in all political processes. We also stress the importance of inclusive parliamentary processes which take into account all sectors of society, especially minorities. The Declaration welcomes and encourages the democratic progress achieved in the world, especially in the Arab region. We also pledge to work together and to assist one another in our common endeavour to promote democracy at both the national and international levels.

Our Plan of Action then provides a vision and a roadmap for parliamentary action over the next three years. In a way, it provides us with an operational tool for implementing the mandate we have assigned ourselves in the Declaration. It is founded on the premise that for parliaments to make an effective contribution to democracy, they must themselves seek to be democratic in the way they are structured and function. Much of the follow-up will therefore focus on how we can make our parliaments more representative, accessible, accountable, transparent and effective both at the national and international levels.

We have therefore decided upon a follow-up mechanism at the parliamentary level, which can effectively pilot activities and projects in pursuit of this ambition. We propose a coordination mechanism which will involve a mix of parliamentarians and parliamentary experts from all regions of the world. It will also include representatives of the host parliament, the Advisory Council of Qatar, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union, the three convenors of the Parliamentary Meeting. This body will provide substantive advice and support in designing tools and projects that will help to implement the recommendations in the plan of action. It can also play a prominent role in raising awareness, in all parliaments, including those not represented at this conference, of the recommendations we have formulated. Surely, the Inter-Parliamentary Union will be willing to use its global reach in order to promote this message and endeavour.

I am sure I speak for the entire parliamentary representatives present at this Conference, when I state that we would like to see a strong role for parliaments in the follow-up to this Conference. We are therefore proposing that the global follow-up mechanism for this Conference should include the three components of the ICNRD process: governments, parliaments and civil society. This would help to promote the integrated approach and foster the partnership that we all believe is beneficial for the advancement of the democracy agenda. Of course, we believe that the host government of this conference, that is the State of Qatar, should take the lead role in providing coordination and secretarial support for this follow-up. And if you allow me to put on my hat as a representative of the Inter-Parliamentary Union at this Conference, let me assure participants of our ongoing commitment to work for the realization of the noble goals of the ICNRD. We therefore look forward to participating in the follow-up process, if that is the wish of all participants.

As I conclude my report, I can confidently say that the message coming out of the Parliamentary Meeting is that *democracy must serve to empower the people*. It should translate into socio-economic and psychological well being for society as a whole. In short, democracy should lead to sustainable human development.

I wish to conclude, on behalf of the parliamentarians present here in Doha, by extending our heartfelt thanks to the Government and people of the State of Qatar for being such gracious hosts. We have enjoyed our stay here and you will agree with me that the success of this event can be attributed largely to the excellent conditions under which we have worked. I would like also to record our special thanks to the Speaker of the Advisory Council and his colleagues who have worked tirelessly with the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union in preparing for and organizing the Parliamentary Meeting. We look forward to pursuing this co-operation as we follow up on this Conference, so that when we next reconvene, we can confidently report to you on substantial and measurable progress in efforts to enhance democracy worldwide.

I thank you all for your kind attention.